

THE
BARUTHA
DIVERS

J. R. ELLIS

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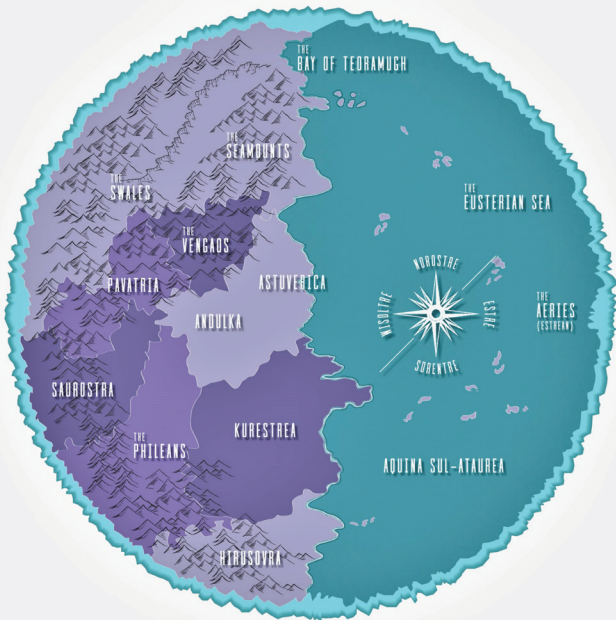
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For Allene

*We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny,
but what we put into it is ours.*

Dag Hammarskjold

The
DIMENSIONAL HORIZON



Prologue

A SWELTERING GUST PUMMELED HIM, then perished into a pair of dusty whirlwinds as he made his way toward the peak of the ridge ahead, along the crag-strewn path. Night was approaching, and to windward, a dusky sky, clouded with mists and protoplasms, urged him on.

He held his memory stone in the palm of his left hand and reached out with yet another cognition. It fell silent, just like the others he'd been sending since 30 degrees post-Zenith. He cursed, placed the coarse-grained rock back in his pocket and trudged on, his eyes down, his mind forward.

Ahead, Kweath could just begin to make out the chimney of his terrabode. Now, another puff of wind from the wisoltrean Aeries carried with it the aromas of the Terraces: vendor stalls loaded with freshly-baked sendeles; flagons of mulled Paragai wine and other spirits of *Aqua Vitae*; roasted, cracked Syena and smoked loin of Narwaselot, liberally seasoned with Jaspersis and scabric pestle.

On both sides of his path, the hinterlands were crowded with whips, the ground studded here and there with Stirrup moss and Menemwort. He continued to the top of the next hill, slowing to catch his breath. He clenched his jaw, pausing to survey the Plasaic Nearings and the hazy Astuverican skyline to which they led.

There, no more than 4000 neurris to estre, a wall of dust drifted off toward the Serritara plains. *Subalternates!* he brooded. "Better stay close to home tomorrow," he mumbled, turning one last time to gaze into the distance, luments fading into the wisoltrean terminus. The stunning grandeur of the Vriklian Ascents was forever lost on one such as him, his mind crowded as it was with ways and means, the bittersweet taste of survival clinging to his dry tongue.

He began his final downhill leg, clearing the last ridge before home. He spotted his consort standing on the stoop of

their 'bode, her stone in hand, her arms crossed, her lips pursed. His pace slowed as he approached her.

"What is it?" he asked, expecting nothing good in her looming response.

"I coggged you three times, Kweath. You're late."

"I told you I'd gone to the marisatria, up to the Terraces, to look for Turangien. Remember? I been coggin' him for the past 80, 90 stratimers."

"Why do you think I've been trying to reach you? He's here!"

"Where?" Kweath spun around, seeing no one but her.

"Where do you think? I sent him to the basement. He's been down there for 40 stratimers. And yeah, the furnace door is locked."

Kweath slapped his forehead. "That pellot! All the time I've known him he's never been on time, could never follow a freighin' direction. Why should I expect him to change now? Alright, this'll take no more than 20 stratimers. I hope."

"When's your client supposed to get here?"

Kweath palmed his memory stone for an elucidation. "*Amaria!* Any pulsimer now. Where has the time gone?"

"Where's he from? Your client, that is? And do you know his name?"

"No, he never told me. Why?"

She dropped her chin and tossed him a stern, disapproving glare. "You and that foundry and all the *pucinos* you drag through this terrabode of ours! I suppose this one's not a culturist either, no more than the last one. This one doesn't want a whip thresher or an Orphus shill or a dado scoop, does he? This one wants another one of your illicit memory stones. Doesn't he?! Answer me, Kweath!"

He slid past her, through the front door, his eyes on the floor. Then he made his way toward the stairs to the basement. She slapped her hands together, clipping his heels in close pursuit.

"*Amaria!* You have no idea who you're forging these stones for, Kweath, what they're gonna be used for, and by who; do you? Hedeon help us if this one is an Arduan, or a

Machaeran, or worse! What if he's Muricai? We could be arrested, Kweath! Elohim told me today that a contingent will be here by morning light, fresh from the Purges of..."

"They're already here. I just saw a ribbon of dust rising up from the Nearings," Kweath said. He turned to confront her before approaching the stairs. His expression was lifeless, detached.

She flew into a rage. "I...I won't *allow* you to..."

"*Creegh Amaria!* Back off, you skridlak. No, I don't know who this skantaro is. And I don't care, either! All I know is that we stand to rake in enough argency from this stranger to set us up for the rest of this quintek, maybe longer. Culturists these days...they have nothing to offer. Nothing! All I got for the last thresher I forged was half a bourget of dried Kalmuth mushrooms and three flagons of rancid coquent! Remember?"

Imposingly, he stood over her. She collapsed into the dining room chair, succumbing to his scurrilous nature. A vial of Pentumus nearly tumbled from out of her pocket. She stuffed it back into the folds of her tunic before her consort caught sight of this virulent narcotic.

For this conquest, Kweath wore his familiar smirk of satisfaction, but this time with a queasy edge. He remained there for half a stratimer, his eyes drifting down past her bosom, between her legs.

"Leave us down there for 20, maybe 30 stratimers. I'm hoping this won't take long. When the client gets here, let him in. Understood?"

She nodded. He froze for a pulsimer as she turned her head. There was a time, long ago, when he was aroused by the malleable nature of her appearance, one which seemed to transform in whole with nothing more than a simple drop of the chin, a twist of the neck.

Now, something long dead began to stir within. His pulse surged. Downward he plunged his sweaty hand, smearing his palm across her chest. His fingers wiggled with anticipation, forcing their way below her neckline, just making contact with the top of her left breast.

Eyes ablaze, she hissed and jerked her chair back. He grunted, wiped his hand on his shirt, turned with a sneer and bounded down the stairs for the basement.

At the bottom, Turangien stood and extended his hand and a cautious smile. The sounds of their voices were blanketed by the sudden racket from above, scraping furniture, rattling cooking implements.

“90 stratimers. That’s how long I waited for you! Where the freigh were you? And what’s wrong with your memory stone? You didn’t answer my cognitions.”

“Sorry, Kweath. My stone was in my satchel. And I...I fell behind this morning at my last appointment,” Turangien lied. Truth be told, he’d lost his nerve, found himself unable to show his face at the Terraces, as Kweath had asked. He was careful, though, not to go down that path.

“You wouldn’t believe the route from the Vengaos. *So* many refugees!” Turangien spoke without slant or deceit. “The purges are winding down now, so I think it’ll clear up soon.”

Kweath cared very little for events occurring no farther than the Terraces of his marisatria, so he ignored the explanation. *Or was that just another excuse?* he wondered. “What’re these?” he asked.

Turangien motioned to the cloth bags on the wooden table. He opened them, one by one. A flickering lightstaff revealed a sampling of his wares. A look of bewildered amazement spread across Kweath’s face as he examined the stanhic powders that the trail-weary kratasiph had brought him, laid out near the kiln for easy inspection.

“These, my friend...these are the ones I told you about. They were mined from a helical vein of chelated Hagonite. That vein’s over 400,000 neurris long, starting from the caverns of Kaurovethen in the Hirusovrans to the sorentrean terminus. See the differences in shade and color from here to there?” Turangien pointed to the finely ground powders in the open bags, sweeping his hand from left to right. “Each of these were pulled from different parts of that vein, spaced about 50,000 neurris apart. See them?”

“Has the Triumvirate co-opted Kaurovethen yet?” Kweath asked, biding his time while he hid a waning interest in this selection.

“Oh no, there are a few Muharic priests down there now; that’s all. In fact, I bought these dusts on the black market from a priest working the sidelines as a flail. The vendors on the Chivet-Pradur are loaded with salvaged product; not so much the stolen stuff. Of course, as soon as the Arduans discover that vein they’ll be on it like a swarm of Thisklean Buzzers on a hot pile of fresh caque! You know what I mean?”

“How much?” Kweath snapped, ignoring Turangien’s clumsy attempt at humor. He turned to grab a bundle of Shaestip logs and tossed them into the furnace.

“I’ll take 1500 khirius for all six. That’s 18 miaric weights,” Turangien said.

Kweath pursed his lips. “What else you got?”

“Well, I...I ran across some interesting glyphs and entwines in the Vengaos a few days back.” Turangien handed Kweath a Kyotrimlic stone. “Here. Articulate this. You’ll see an etching I ran across near the Saurostran border recently. It’s had a very strong effect on Ularic-Hagonite alloys.”

“Glyphs and entwines I don’t need. How long have you known me?” Kweath demanded. “My customers have their own, or they articulate the Kaeobixt for an etching if they need one.”

“Your customers won’t find *this* one in the Kaeobixt, old friend. Not yet, at least.”

“What? You mean it’s new?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, so what? There hasn’t been a new etching with a shred of voltaic effect in 40, 50 quinteks. How can this one be any different?” Kweath said with a dismissive smirk, his threadbare patience by now ready to snap.

“Well, this one is! It’s called a Zyl...”

“Turangien,” Kweath interrupted, pointing to the black metal behemoth crowding the tiny basement. “Enough already! This furnace creates memory stones...unadorned. Glyphs, etchings; my customers have their own. But then again, you know that. You asked to come see me today, remember?”

Kweath didn't even blink when that half-truth slipped from his tongue. "So show me something I'm interested in."

Turangien sighed, reached into his bag and pulled out two handfuls of fist-sized ingots, unrecognizable as anything but coarse, dark lumps of rock. He held them up for Kweath to see. The stark reality of trying to make a living trading stanhic dusts, particularly with a customer as stubborn as this, pierced his brain like a dull knife. He ran a rough tally of the expenses he was due to incur in the next untek, conscious of how much argency he needed to pocket tonight to avoid having his brain *literally* run through by one or more of his many creditors.

"What are they?" Kweath asked.

"Stolen Treflicats that've been melted down. These were pilfered on the sly down in the Hellespheres by a blunt tramper I know through another dealer. You know how hot those Astuverican kilns can get? No telling what you could make with these. Good for Myotrophus stones, too."

Kweath winced. "What's a kratasiph doing dealing in ingots? And I won't even bring up the glyphs again. I thought dusts were your trade?"

Turangien's lips moved, but his words withered in frustration.

"I'm expecting a client here tonight who could have me arrested for buying stolen property," Kweath said, "not to mention memory stones belonging to the Triumvirate! I'm not interested. So c'mon, what else you got? And make it quick. He'll be here any pulsimer now."

"How's he going to know, Kweath?" Turangien asked, his voice riddled with anger. He retreated, though, as if nothing had been said, opened his satchel and reached for a tiny leather bag, bound with a shock of woven cord. For this particular item, he'd hoped to find a buyer who was far less of a tightwad than the pellot he was now staring at, stoking his furnace with a trembling hand, feigning indifference here in this suffocating little caquehole.

But Turangien's old friends, impatience and unbridled desperation, were standing right beside him, with a firm grip on each shoulder. They would not be denied.

"I...I have one more item here. Something I think you'll find...intriguing."

"And what is that?" said Kweath, his back still turned to the kratasiph.

Turangien pulled out the bag, uncinched the clasp and poured the contents onto a strip of blackened leather parchment. After a few pulsimers, Kweath turned, wiped his brow and gazed at the fluorescent yellow powder. Turangien pulled the lightstaff off the wall and held it over the table. Tiny flecks of lavender crystalline in the powder appeared to dance like tongues of flame in the lightstaff's jittery emission.

Kweath put aside what he'd been doing and stood motionless over the table for two stratimers, unable to move, to think, even to breath. He dipped the sweaty pinky finger of his left hand into the top of the pile. With the nail of his right index finger, he culled and separated the grains beneath a discerning eye.

His mind began to race. Kweath had been scrutinizing stanhic dusts for over two-thirds of his life; turning, examining, sampling them so often that not a night had passed in 12 quinteks that he did not dream of them. And now, in the twilight of his existence, here he was: confronted with a sampling that piqued his interest like no other; one that he knew he simply *had* to have...

...But, of course, within reason.

"Is this all you got? Just this one bag?" Kweath affected a monotone.

Turangien nodded.

"Where's it from?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," Turangien responded. He had no idea where it was from.

"How much?" Kweath asked.

"1800 khirius."

"Are you insane? For one bag? I'll give you 800."

“800? You’ve got to be kidding? These are the finest dusts I’ve ever traded. If your client is so important then why don’t I just hang around here and sell ‘em to him directly? He’ll deal!”

Kweath dragged another wet sleeve across his brow. “900.”

“*Ha!* Who do you think you’re dealing with, Kweath? 1600.”

“1000.” Kweath slid a trembling hand behind his back.

Turangien’s face began to redden. “1500.”

“No, 1000. That...that’s my final offer. 1000 khirius.”

Turangien’s pulse began to surge. “Alright...okay! I’ll take 1400 khirius.”

“1000, Turangien. Like I said before. That’s it.”

Silence. Then, Turangien spoke. “Alright, Kweath, let’s be honest here, okay. You and I...we’ve known each other a long time, right? I can see that you want these dusts. I’m just trying to make a deal here that we can both live with. So, let’s call it, say, 1200. How ‘bout it?”

Kweath turned his back on Turangien, knelt and began to dally again with the furnace.

“1100. That...that’s as low as I can go, Kweath. I tell you, that’s *it!*” Turangien’s pulse hit the register. He hid his hands behind his back, wringing them into a tight knot. *Perish the thought of being able to make a profit here tonight*, he mused, frustrated and angry. But the rare privilege of being able to satisfy even a fraction of his mounting debts seemed to fill the void.

Kweath raised himself up. He turned to face the kratasiph. “1000. Take it or leave it.” With a lump in his throat he hoped that his intransigence, born of habit and raw necessity, hadn’t killed this deal. He was soon to find out.

Turangien’s head dropped. He nodded, then slid the parchment containing the yellow dust toward a smiling, and relieved, Kweath. A quick exchange of argency followed and the deal was closed. Kweath palmed his new take, then turned to open a large wooden case carved with rough-hewn dividers. He poured the yellow dust into an empty space in the box

before sealing the lid shut. Then he placed the box beneath a corner table.

Turangien knelt and turned to reassemble his satchel, to prepare to take his leave, unaware of a small tear in the bottom of the bag. He watched Kweath yank on the levers to the ceiling vents. It took no more than 15 pulsimers for the sweltering heat in the basement to dissipate to a breathable level. Turangien pondered Kweath's maneuver to cool the basement after the deal had been done, aware that there was nothing random in the timing of that act.

Then, a sound could be heard: three loud knocks on the door above. Kweath's passive-aggressive consort, whose name Turangien could not remember, answered it. The trudge of boot heels, imbedded with shards of crushed gravel, thudded on the creaky stair treads. Kweath waved the kratasiph off, toward a ladder in a corner to his right; one that would take Turangien up to ground level, away from this terrabode, far and away from his birthplace here in the wisoltrean Andulkas.

Before beginning his ascent, Turangien stood frozen behind a wall at the base of the ladder. The broad range of Kweath's clientele, not to mention their motley ethics, had never surprised Turangien, but for some reason his curiosity in this particular patron held him transfixed, unable to climb the ladder until he'd seen and heard enough to satisfy him. Or until his fear of retribution drove him off.

Through weary eyes, Turangien gawked at the stocky stranger, wearing a heavily matted, dusty cloak, embroidered with the colorful gut of the Gyradarakur, a cyclopean cave-dwelling predator, native to the Pavatrian region. The stranger's tongue reflected a Pavatrian leaning, too, but tinged with a hint of the autocratic mien common to those who had spent far too much time in Astuverica. *This one is an Ephriant!* Turangien thought, terrified at the notion of being in the presence of...or worse, spotted by...someone with such bearing and distinction. He slid himself even further into the alcove to watch their transaction unfold.

Turangien saw the stranger remove a crude, bulbous-hafted memory stone from his coat pocket, covered with

contrasting swirls, tones and colors, indicating an unsteady range of temperatures within the kiln that had created it. Turangien gasped when he noticed the obscure Saurostran glyph of which he'd recently been made aware, the *Zylix*, carved into the butt of the haft. Then the stranger pulled out another stone, twice as large as the first; worn, split, blanketed end to end with at least two layers of anomalous markings. The stranger turned the stones for Kweath's inspection and placed them on the table.

"*Show me your stanhics,*" Turangien heard the stranger command Kweath, who pulled his case out from under the corner table. Carefully, the stranger examined the samples before his eye landed on the yellow powder, churning with dynamic fluorescence in its grainy cubbyhole. The stranger fingered the amber and gold particulates for two stratimers before pointing at the dust and stating with a confident tone, "*This will do nicely.*"

The stranger's next command piqued Turangien's interest. "*Open the door. I want to see it. I want to see your furnace.*"

Turangien was familiar with local lore, placing the construction of Kweath's well-guarded furnace around the quintek 8793...*that is, by the Erasotran calendar*, he pondered. This would put its age at about a hundred quinteks. For most of that time it had drawn the intense curiosity of kratasiphs and circulats and from here to the wisoltrean terminus. But no one, to Turangien's knowledge, had been allowed to see its interior, including clients: that is, until now. *The agency Kweath must be making off this job...!* The thought of it made Turangien burn with envy.

Kweath opened the door. A curtain of red heat shot out, baking the room. Kweath and his client could stand it no more than three pulsimers before they shut the door with a bang. It was enough, though. Turangien, from his angle, could not see what Kweath's client had seen. But the reflection of childlike amazement imprinted upon the stranger's face spoke volumes.

The stranger handed a Kyotrimlic stone to Kweath. "*Articulate this,*" Turangien heard him say. "*The new memory*

stone should be an amalgam of the ores from these old stones, and these stanbic dusts. The entwines you see before your eyes: I want them carved into the new stone, including the Zylux you see at the bottom of the haft. Do you understand?"

Kweath placed the Kyo on the table and nodded. Turangien had been reminded more than once that glyphs and entwines were not part of Kweath's repertoire. But for this client, Turangien knew, the old pellet would surely make an exception.

The lightstaff flickered now with a manic intensity. The stranger stood rigid beside the basement table, watching Kweath begin his work. "*My terms: half now, with the other half payable upon completion. My proxy will return in five days for the new stone...*" The stranger's words vanished into the hiss of the kiln as Turangien, satisfied at last, made his way up the ladder. Through a narrow passage he contorted his body, crawling up and into the night, lit now with a dim, Ionic glow.

He stretched his back and walked a few paces from the terrabode. Hot embers coughed from the top of the chimney, which by now had taken on a reddish-orange glow. Turangien turned to his left to rake the sorentrean sky. Toward the dim lights surrounding the Terraces. Toward his birthplace; the only home he had ever known. The marisatria known as Fhydalaku.

Turangien heaved his satchel over his shoulder. The impact of the heavy bag against his back forced his memory stone through the bag's torn seam and sent it plummeting into the soft ground, moist and rank from a syrupy discharge of caque from the first floor of the terrabode. He turned and, unaware, stepped on it, pressing it deep into the mud. Uncertain now of where to go, he chose the norostrean route. He would return to the Vengaos.

Over the top of the next hill, through a dim haze, Turangien spotted the branch route, still crowded with the meandering lights of the dispossessed, wandering without aim from the places to which they belonged, and which belonged to them. Not unlike him.

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I can never return to Fhydalaku, he reflected in sadness and regret, picking up his pace. For my deeds, the consequences...they are sure to find me in the end.

I

Mnuloratheia

1

A SOLITARY FINGER OF LIGHT PIERCED the darkness, then another; the first rays of dawn. Firmly, each appendage embraced the sky, so as to repel the mighty grasp of the Eusterian sea. In rapid succession, the flock of giant winged creatures began to burn with excruciating vigor, soaring upward from their shrouds in languid arcs.

Struggling to bind themselves to their kin, they flailed above the estrean Aeries, wending their way past the Aurean mists which smoldered within the distant rilles bearing their name. Now, the Lumens began to coalesce, converging into an enormous, blazing corpuscle, colors resplendent, blending into radiance, reaching forth in all directions.

The night was now broken. Another day had begun.

Kerak Um.Tiago sat on a rock at the sea's edge, overlooking the Bay of Thesolance, admiring this elegant dance and its brilliant upshot. The white noise of breaking surf echoed in the distance. To estre, he watched the Lumens in the morning chill until he could watch no more, his eyes burning hot, his mind racing, glancing at the horizon, purple mists assurgent.

He stood to survey his surroundings, and with a cautious eye he scanned the compass for any sign of movement. To his right, sorentre: clear. To his left, norostre and the direction he and his companions would travel later that morning: clear. And behind him, to wisoltre, he turned to peer into a labyrinth of nebulous crags and peaks, just beginning to awaken in the reflection of morning light.

Kerak rubbed his eyes and took one last careful look around him. To his front, at the opposing threshold of the Seamounts, rose the dark crags of the wisoltrean divide, spanning a wide arc from the farthest norostrean Pales, all the way to the sorentrean terminus. From the lofty rilles just below their peaks, the Mists of Aurea began to burn with a reddish-

lavender glow, shrouding the spires of the divide to the naked eye.

"I've *got* to get back to camp," Kerak whispered to no one but himself.

On his way, he came upon a crumbling layer of Stirrup moss, covering the rocky ground. He kicked it with his boot, dissolving it into dust. He picked up his pace, pausing to rejoin his probe of the hills around him. *The reputation of the Shalu'doc.xhu is well deserved*, he mused, pondering their journey until now through the trails and pikes of the estrean Seamounts.

Kerak's attention was suddenly diverted to his right. Something in his line of sight glowed narrow in ascendant light; small flashes, abrupt movements. He crouched behind a rock, inert, squinting to find his companions. Just as soon as these impulses appeared, though, they vanished. *They're moving to norostre*, he mused, *along the Nearings, in the same direction we're going*.

"Kerak, you there? Did you see that?" a voice called from his left. Droган hobbled over, dragging his crutches behind him.

"I did. What do you think?"

"Machaera, no doubt. Those glints; probably reflections from their Quadric spears." Droган winced, washing down the last of his breakfast with some of Eimear's rather unsavory, and under-brewed, coquont. "How many do you think there are?"

Before Kerak could answer, the corners of Droган's mouth inverted. He batted his eyes. "Aagh! What the freigh did Eimear use to brew this coquont? I swear, when we get to the Bay of Teoramugh I'm gonna drink this stuff 'till I pass out. When he cogged me, Euan said the Windswort moss they put in their coquont up there really gives it a kick. Goes down great, he says, unlike this moldering swill!"

"Yeah, yeah, enough of that. How's your wound?" Kerak pointed to the crimson gash on Droган's right leg, caused by the razor-sharp edge of a Quadric blade which had grazed him eight days prior, during a failed ambush. That was before they had hired Eimear, when they were still trying to navigate their

way through these hills alone. To continue going it solo would have been fatal, what with the scattered, vigilant Machaeran factions now roaming the Seamounts in search of those souls whose capture was a priority for the Triumvirate. For one contingent in particular, Drogon and Kerak were at the top of that list.

“Never mind that, brother. I’m fine. *Amaria!* I’m not going to let you and Eimear *carry* me all the way to Teoramugh. That’s humiliating!”

“Drogon, we need to make time if we’re gonna avoid those detachments. We can carry you a lot faster than you can walk. We need to be close to the Bay of Nuolat by nightfall.”

The Seamounts, known in the time of the ancients as *Mnuloratheia*, is the largest of all regions within the Dimensional Horizon. For untold ages it had been inhabited only by those few tenacious souls who could manage to scratch a meager living out of its forsaken wilds.

In the past 40 quinteks, though, it had become home to the vast disinherited; scattered bands of refugees who’d been relegated to lives of endless struggle, scrounging little more than meager sanctuary and sustenance from within its boundless labyrinth of caverns, fissures and grottos, all of which seem to wind through the Subterra without beginning or end.

The Seamounts had until now provided a reliable solution for those in retreat of the juggernaut to sorentre. But lately, the odds of survival within this daunting landscape had become ever more grim. Life, too, was no better here in the *Shalu’doc.xhu*, as the estrean Seamounts are known in the native tongue. This rugged domain rivals the rest of the region ten-fold in its vertical thrusts, its misty, mossy mountain ranges...and in the likelihood it presents of pursuit and capture.

A blast of damp wind shot up from the breakers below, chilling them to the core. Pacing along the thin footpath, Kerak’s mind sagged under the weight of reflection. He thought of Drogon, a brother he’d just recently met, and under less than amiable circumstances. He thought, too, of their

guide, Eimear Ve.Aroa. Kerak placed his hand on his stomach, grinding and churning with the less than edible breakfast Eimear had made for them that morning: some unsavory combination of Tarandru grease, stewed Wissoria and Pragash, two species of fungi they'd found under shadowy ledges and on the walls of the caves in this region.

Wouldn't a nice hot cup of Kedari tea taste good right about now, Kerak mused, *and some warm Syena seed rolls, dripping with Paragai jam!* Other than dry leaves, mosses, and a few random Fathidi bugs, they hadn't eaten in days.

Images of the journey to come, and of the course they were about to take, passed before him. For 10 days they had travelled to norostre along the Iotrean Nearings, a thin but largely undistorted chain of trails which run almost the full length of the estrean Seamounds, from the Tuir-Phystrian highlands above the Andulkan plains to the outer reaches just inside the norostrean terminus. They would have remained on the Nearings had Machaeran scouts not forced them to seek other, more treacherous paths to estre, just above the Eusterian coastline.

Despite Eimear's many flaws, Kerak trusted their guide's familiarity with the Shalu'doc.xhu and its arcane pathways. And where Eimear's knowledge might fail them, he felt certain that he could rely on their memory stones to channel the few mnemonic aggregators in this region, to access maps of the many and varied paths which meander through this territory: paths that could be charted from no other source.

At day's end, a safe camp and a reliable food source were their ultimate goals, before the Lumens began their descent. For then would emerge the desolate Ione, fumbling their way through the night in mute separation, their solitary white lights blazing in careless loops until the Lumens once again seized the morning and drove them from the sky.

"Creegh...Creegh Amaria!" Eimear cursed as Kerak and Drogan made it back into camp.

"Eimear, you alright?" Drogan said just before his left crutch cracked on the tip of a rock. He staggered and cursed

his way back to their fire. Another wave of Eusterian mists doused them as they came to rest around their waning embers.

“*Skao’dur.Khaladre!* Yeah, I’m alright. But I just realized I forgot to gather that patch of Stringworm moss we found at our camp yesterday. How the freigh are we gonna make coquont without good Stringworm? That’s my prime ingredient. It’s what gives my brew its punch. Why, that sprig o’worms was about as ripe as you’re gonna find anywhere in these climes.”

Kerak stared at his brother. “Thank the ‘Phemes he didn’t pick up any of that Stringworm!” Drogran mumbled to Kerak after turning his back on Eimear. “How bad can it get? That weed made his last batch of brew taste no better than if he’d spat in it!”

“Eimear, we need to break camp, and quick. Drogran and I just spotted a detachment of Machaera on a wisoltrean trail just above us, about 1500, maybe 2000 neurris distant. They’re moving off to norostre.”

“How many?” Eimear’s face grew sullen. He raised his pack to his shoulders and rubbed his eyes.

Drogran tried counting, then gave up. “We’re not sure; maybe 30, 40. We saw the reflections of their Quadric spears.”

“30 or 40? To norostre? Are you sure? I never heard of so many Machaera together in one detachment in these hills! Those Quadric spears of theirs can punch a target from a long ways, 500 neurris; sometimes more. They can cut a sharp turn if they catch the wind just right! You know, they can split into four blades in mid-air. I nearly got grazed by one awhile back. They’re heat seeking, you know. You breathe and the air from your lungs, the sweat from your skin, it draws ‘em in! Sometimes the Machaera primes the blades with poison, so if they just graze you they can still ki...”

“Eimear, we don’t know how many there are,” Kerak interrupted, tired of more pointless palaver from Eimear. He raised a finger to wisoltre. “All we know is that they’re up there. I’m sure of it! They’re moving to norostre.”

Eimear shook his head and scowled at Kerak and Drogran. “*Chi’so.qu’gul’oro!* The two of you still bent on gettin’ to

Teoramugh, huh?” he snarled. “You realize what kind of place that is? It’s barren! A wasteland. Even worse than *these* hills! Why, you can’t even hunt there ‘cause there ain’t nothing that lives up there to hunt, ‘cept maybe a few scraggly mosses and that derelict scum you’re plannin’ on meetin’ up with!”

He paused, drew an angry breath and continued. “That’s what they are, you know! They’re *criminals*, all of ‘em! You’ll get nothing from that pack o’ reprobates, I tell you. You’d be better off with the Machaera up there than with that bunch of *skantaros* in Teoramugh!”

“Yes, Eimear,” Kerak said with a sigh. “You’ve told us that before. But that’s where we’re going, so please, let’s not talk about it anymore. We have our reasons. And don’t forget; you’re being paid well for your services. And you’ll get the rest of your price when you get us there, I promise!”

Eimear kicked a cluster of hearthstones at his feet. Black dust and sparks shot up from the embers, blinding everyone. “Oh, I’ll get *paid* alright!” he foamed. “Just my luck. Eight days ago, who should I run into but a couple of wandering *pucinos*, trying to make their way into the very peak of the Shalu’doc.xhu, to get to the most remote, inhospitable corner of the Dimensional Horizon! A place even I ain’t never been to ‘cause nobody in their right mind wants to *go* there. And you didn’t tell me we’d be fightin’ for our lives every wakin’ stratimer of this miserable trip, getting chased every day by...!”

Eimear paused, sighed and sat on a rock. “Ah, why bother? It ain’t worth it. Soon as I get you pellots to where you’re goin’ I’m hightailing it back to my ‘bode in Galmorth. My old consort’s been a bit lonely these days, what with me on the trails...four unteks now? *Amarial*! Has it been that long?”

Eimear shook his head again and turned to face Kerak. “You know, I been meaning to ask you. Them little memory stones you carry around with you. What do you call them? And where’d you say you got ‘em?”

“I got them in the...in the wisoltrean Andulkas,” Kerak mumbled, “in the Serritara plains. They were, uh...”

“Eimear, old friend,” Drogan interrupted, wiping his brow with both hands. “They’re nothing, really. Just a little

trick they fashion in some of the kilns around the Thuracian Valley. So relax and we'll be on our way. We're burning luments and we need to settle in near the Bay of Nuolat by nightfall, okay! Now, which one of you strapping blokes wants the pleasure of carting my lazy ass up and over these hills?"

"Thought you said you preferred to walk, or something like that?" Kerak said, rolling his eyes.

"That's it...no more talk. Everyone's got a right to their secrets. What do I care?" Eimear bellowed, brushing it off with a sly cock of his head. "And it doesn't matter to me I gotta dodge 40 armed Machaera to get you scrawny runts to where you're going. If you say I'll get paid the rest of my lot when I get you to Teoramugh, that works for me. If not, well, I know how to get it out of you. *Ha!*"

Kerak and Drogan gave each other a wary eye as Eimear approached Drogan, lifted his arm and pulled him up and over his shoulders. "Gonna cost you extra to carry you *and* your gear too. You wanna save a few argents, you'll walk! Don't bother me."

Kerak shouldered his meager satchel, reached into his side pack and pulled out two small, round, wafer-thin memory stones. He closed his eyes and placed the Kuspegias on his temples. Five or six pulsimers later, Eimear gazed into Kerak's expressionless face, his eyes dark and fathomless with magnetic sonorance.

"A 'little trick' you say, huh? Those little stones sure beat that old 'slug o'rock' I carry around with me." Eimear shrugged and fumbled his memory stone: a small, well-worn oval slag with blunt ends, covered with a thick web of chinks, cracks and etchings. "It's made of some kinda low-grade Phylox; something like that. Guess it's seen better days, like me." He tossed it back into his pocket.

Kerak adjusted the stones as they clung to his temples. An illusory sensation...a slight tingling of the skin, now extending behind the eyes...began to infuse him, thrusting his perception forward into a vast fountainhead of light, sound and touch, carrying him headlong into the abstracts he sought, rather than simply bringing them to him, as with a conventional memory

stone. *What a huge improvement over the archaic little 'slug o'rock'* Kerak thought of those tiny black wafers as they easily bent the wavelength of the Subterranean architecture that lay beneath his feet.

Within two pulsimers he found himself confronting the day's first vivid articulation. "I'm being...drawn through a syndroqlast about 10,000 neurris to sorentre, to an aggregator maybe 30,000 neurris to wisoltre. I think it's imbedded in a vein of chelated Hagonite near the bottom of that range." Kerak pointed upward and to his left. "There are...two Machaerans nearby and they're channeled into the same unit. They're searching old maps for footpaths of this region. They're searching a path...to *sorentre!* Eimear, does the trail we're on run to norostre?"

"Mostly, yeah," Eimear said, straining under the weight of Drogan and his pack. "But I remember, there's a trace path about three thousand neurris below here. My family used to travel it to find Barachat root and follow the caves for Kalmuth mushrooms. I think it'll lead us to a safe passage to Teoramugh if the Machaera stays clear of it. Come to think of it, I doubt they'll ever find that trace. It's hard for anyone to find who's not from these parts."

"Then let's go," Drogan called out. They gave a final look at the trail they'd traveled all those many days, clinging to the cliffs above them. Seaward, the waters sparkled in misty morning luments, far below the dusky, toxic Aurean mists, urged on now in full advance from the rilles dotting the Horizon's periphery. The Lumens were now arcing toward Zenith. A broken trail loomed ahead, flanked by perilous cliffs covered in a sea of native whips and Stirrup moss.

Further ahead lay the trace path that would take them in the direction of the Bay of Teoramugh. To the end of the trail. To the very end of the Dimensional Horizon.

2

WITH A SIGH, EIMEAR DROPPED HIS pack and his passenger at the mouth of a narrow cave. Their path had now come to an end, and their day was nearly done. In the morning, they would rejoin their journey along another trail which began at the equally narrow, opposite end of this cave, emerging within earshot, but high above, the Eusterian breakers.

At about 10 degrees post-Zenith, the Lumens that day had begun to turn in the direction of sorentre. At mid-day their formation typically places them at Zenith, at the crest of the sky, where the lush beating of their massive wings stirs the downdrafts that prod the silent airs of morning to create wind at ground level.

At the same time, their updrafts act to lift the toxic Aurean mists which soar above them. These vapors emerge as a faint lavender fog from the distant rilles which completely encircle the Dimensional Horizon. As the mists approach Zenith, their particulates begin to consolidate, becoming heavier. When this happens, they flatten into a broad, translucent mass.

Late in the day, the warm airs begin to dissipate, deflected by the force of the Lumens' movements across the sky. This is when the Aurean mists begin to thin, to cool, to descend back to their source along the outermost edges of the Dimensional Horizon. To be drawn back into the rilles from where they had come.

Shortly after the Lumens had passed Zenith that day, Kerak and his companions had watched them gorge themselves on large nebulae of particulate matter which had drifted off to sorentre. Each day, heat and updrafts act to lift protoplasm, consisting of water vapor and dust, into the sky, which then coalesce into huge clouds. This is the Lumens' sustenance, and

it is understood that the flock will berth for the night in the nearest of the four Aeries toward which these clouds migrate.

Just before they'd settled into their sorentrean berth that evening, the Lumens had lost their tight elliptical formation. It had amused Kerak, Eimear and Drogran to see that the Lumens appeared to have taken on a shape akin to that of a fat worm, with a bulbous core and a long, lazy tail.

Dusk. Kerak and Eimear crawled through the mouth of the cave in search of dry root for their fire, and a winnowy echo caught Kerak's ear. It was almost as if he could hear the melancholy chants of the grateful horde, impressed into worship by their Muharic potentates in the enormous, dissolute city of Astuverica, far to sorentre.

Now, at the approach of late evening, the great multitudes...thousands of true believers, or their proxies...were standing on the Plain of the Palamonts at Lumenatra. Kerak could feel the ground shake, imagining their wails, their cries...an orchestrated psalm of pious reverence, pouring their thanks upon Hedeon for leading his minions to spare them once more from the Aurean curse. Hedeon, the name the Muharadu gave to the Lumen who soared at the very heart of the flock, was prophesied within the pages of the Muharic *Guderaph* as the one from whom all the other Lumens gathered their strength and direction.

Kerak crept through the dense muck that covered the cave's floor, struggling to keep his mind on the moment. Above him, he noticed an ancient root structure, interspersed with huge fibrous nodules of Pragash and Bulaerekanth, close to the sea's edge but still quite dry. He pointed at several large chunks; Eimear drew a blade and broke them off. They carried their load back to camp and began work on their fire.

For dinner, Eimear had found a small patch of Orphus mushrooms on the ceiling of the cave in which they were encamped. When cooked, their taste reminded Kerak of the meat of the Tarandru, a large, five-legged beast that roamed the Philean region, where he had been born and raised. Dinner was meager that evening, which made him savor it all the

more. Thoughts of hunger abated somewhat as his eyes turned upward, entranced by the night sky.

Just before dinner, the last caliginous vapors died off above the Lumens' sorentrean berth, and they saw the first of the Ione begin to venture forth, this one from wisoltre. Other Ione began to emerge from norostre, estre, sorentre and from distant rilles at all points between. Their listless white lights soon filled the dark sky with their jerky twists and dives.

"Those freighin' dirty Ione. Infernal, they are! Them and those Cimmerians that slavers all over 'em. Why, they surely stand for most of the evil that afflicts this Horizon; that's a fact!" Eimear gruffed under a swig of coquont, waving his fist at the night sky. "You know, the Guderaph teaches that the Ione were once Lumens who were cast off. Not good enough, they are! Unclean, filthy, living in them infernal rilles, suckin' up all them cursed mists. The Muharadu is right about 'em. They want that poison, they can have it!"

Drogan stoked the fire, warding off the advancing chill. He listened to Eimear ramble on. "And as for the Muharadu; a long time ago I once knew an old soul who belonged to the fellowship, 45, 50 quinteks ago. Back then they were nothing more than a simple, hardworking lot, giving thanks to Hedeon for bringing us light and relief from Aurea's curse.

"Now, look at 'em! Not a humble little clique anymore," he carried on in a rage. "What the *freigh* have they become? Why, they're as corrupt as those grungy Ione. Gone completely outta control, I tell you. Ever since the Council of Arduas and their Machaerans took over and turned that infernal Astuverica into a den of parasites, all of 'em bloodshot and swollen, hyped up on their Pentumus, that place ain't never been the same."

Eimear tossed another rootbranch into the fire. "Astuverica! That place used to be nothing more than a simple little fishing village. Pretty terrain, rolling hills...if you lived there you could just walk out your door and gather all the wild Thrushwhip you wanted. That strain of seed makes the best bread you ever tasted. 'Course they burned all that off and scoured the land to make room for their temples, their kilns and edifices, that putrid caquehole they call a 'city.' And that

ugly, infernal Palamont Plain, so they can trot out those brainless bootlickers every day with their forced chants!”

Eimear's voice now dropped. His eyes rolled in repose, then began to burn, his resentment climbing now to a fever pitch. “And you know, some might deny this, but I swear them cursed Courvesois are the ones who are *really* behind the mess that inflicts us these days,” he said, with the conviction of one whose life had been affected in some way by that ancient society. “They're the ones who're at the root of all this, the Courvesois is! I hope they all *burn* for what they've done!!”

Kerak hung onto Eimear's words, closed his eyes and turned his face away from the fire's glow. He knew that Eimear was not alone in his sentiments. And as he held the Kuspegias in the palm of his left hand, a vague articulation began to pass, unaware, into his cortex. It was an historical anecdote, creeping into his psyche from a Vengathlian aggregator. It had been compiled by Kirsai Lo.Ydriasch, a former Muharic priest who in the past untek had been exiled, rendered a fugitive for his heresies, as evidenced by the opinions expressed in his ramblings.

Lo.Ydriasch's words passed with a weak dissonance through Kerak's body...

The Order of the Courvesois began as a brotherhood of legents and dhuthaers in the 15th or 16th lineage, 8500 quinteks past. That was an ancient time, not long after the Eclipse; that mysterious, sudden catastrophe in which hundreds of thousands of souls perished and memory faded into oblivion.

For thousands of quinteks, learned souls scoured all available sources of knowledge to attempt to determine what had caused this violent cataclysm. Most of them came to the conclusion that our Sphere had been immersed in a protracted war between two or more of the four Erasotras, those tribes who preceded us as the inhabitants of the Dimensional Horizon; who had come here from beyond the known confines of our Sphere.

From the infinite caves, the winding passages of the cold, dark Subterra emerged the Um.Erasotra. From beyond the terminus to sorentre, the Ve.Erasotra migrated to this realm.

The Te.Erasotra sailed here from across the Eusterian sea and the Aquina Sul-Ataurea. And the Lo.Erasotra journeyed from beyond the noro-wisoltrean rilles to settle our Sphere.

Soon after the scourge abated, the few remaining survivors came together to salvage the broken fragments of their lives; to immerse themselves in the ardor of eroiche, in the nascency of rapture and renewal. To build, create, work the soil and reap the remittance of land, sea, sky and Subterra. Indeed, this was the time when the cycle of life was reborn.

The Erasotrans left behind very few tangible legacies which survive today. One, their habit of numerically measuring time, was the most recent to fade into obscurity, except in some portions of the Pavatrias and the Vengaos. For the most part, this has been replaced by the Kurestrean linguistic calendar.

The origins of more precise units of time remain an elusive mystery. The quintek, at 305 days, consists of five unteks of equal length. The stratimer is made up of 112 pulsimers, those diminutive intervals equivalent to the span between heartbeats at rest.

The origins of other units of measure are no less perplexing. Those include the neurri, a unit of length equal to the span of an adult arm; the miaric, a measurement of solids, each one being equivalent to the weight of an adult hand; and the Vuarset, with one unit of liquid weighing the same as 1/15th of a cubic neurri.

It goes without saying, though, that at least one Erasotran legacy has thrived in the modern age. For as the mythos of the Eclipse grew and morphed, the names of the Erasotras soon lent themselves to our culture and vocabulary, becoming the prefixes to our surnames. And so, the epithets "Um", "Te", "Ve" and "Lo" were joined with surnames extracted from ancient language to become the blended surnames which have grown into common usage.

The mists of night descended, and Kerak was drawn into a fitful sleep. All the while, the words of Lo.Ydriasch fell back into place as they continued to ease through his mind...

As time passed, all souls continued to live in relative peace and prosperity. Communities known as marisatrias began to form, to trade with one another, exchanging goods,

skills, knowledge and even recreational pursuits, engaging each other amicably in games such as Krabash and Pilects. The decaying wreckage of the debacle known as the Eclipse grew wings and all traces of that event soon faded from memory.

In those early days, religious practice was dominated by three factions: cults of the Incarnate, focused on the material Sphere; cults of Cimmeria, reverent to the Sphere of darkness; and cults of Fulgency, immersed in the Sphere of light. The cults of Fulgency would alone survive to rally for dominance in the modern age. And among them, only a tiny Andulkan sect known as the Muharadu would truly thrive.

Over time, a narrow cult of centralized leadership would emerge to dominate our Horizon, with the social hierarchy centered around a consolidated core. This culture has grown so ubiquitous that, in fact, very few have been able to resist the will of the dominant minority, despite the strength of their desire to break those bonds, to free themselves to follow their own chosen paths.

And so, true to this philosophy, the Courvesois would come to thrive, to morph into a militia, authorized by the Regency of each marisatria to gather intelligence when needed, but mostly to maintain a sense of parity both within the marisatrial structure and between each of these communities. They did this in a very singular way.

Legents arose in the second or third lineage after the Eclipse, to exploit the various properties of plants, animals and fungi for nutritional, medicinal and other purposes. Dhuthaers, arising in the tenth or eleventh lineage, then used certain of these life forms to attempt to ease the sufferings of others.

The faction of Legents which soon joined to form the Courvesois discovered many rare life forms which delivered enduring powers of anesthesia. Within time, these skills grew and the Courvesois began to use these tools, not just to heal or abate suffering, but to kill.

A rouge wave broke on the shore, and Kerak was awakened to savor the warmth of waning embers. The Kuspegias remained nestled between his fingers. He fell back to sleep, and the words continued to flow...

As the general population, and each of the marisatrias, grew larger and more numerous, so the Courvesois grew more influential. Cabals soon formed to enlist the Courvesois to perform clandestine assassinations of minor and sometimes major Regents. This was done either as a form of retribution, to settle longstanding debts, or to ensure a sense of balance within and between regions or marisatrias.

Early on, the creed of the Courvesois required that their killings be performed free of pain. The Courvesant, in the performance of his or her duties, and in an effort to venerate the victim, was required to lay at least one hand upon the victim during the performance of the act. Too, the Courvesant was required to leave no clue that the victim had in fact been killed at all. In other words, the work of the Courvesant was intended to mimic a death of natural causes, not an act of treachery. This meant that Courvesants were required to carry out their work with the utmost stealth. Indeed, for hundreds of quinteks, the Courvesois was thought to exist only in legend; the ability of Courvesants to conceal themselves and their work was that well-refined.

Courvesants have employed a variety of tools to accomplish their goals. The Bhatrathur bush, sourced to the Vengathlian lowlands, produces a dry powder which can be added to a drink, a steaming dish of food, or held over the mouth for no more than three pulsimers. This simple anesthetic, in the correct dosage, can put a target into permanent, innocuous exile without so much as a whimper.

A small insect known as a Liaramar renders a painless bite which kills within three pulsimers and produces a tiny wound that heals in as much time. This modest little bug will then roll into a ball and can live without sustenance for many unteks. Indeed, many have outlived their masters.

Not long after their discovery, these tools grew scarce and were soon cached for the exclusive use of only the most skilled Courvesants. Their apprentices have been forced to find other tools, the most popular being the Kirzek, a rigid, oily vine, native to the valleys of the Quistrian hills, in the Pavatrian region.

Thicker sections of Kirzek can be cleaved and sharpened into daggers; the plant's secretions interact with the victim's blood to kill in no more than four pulsimers. Thinner, longer sections are used for strangulation. Either way, the restorative properties of the Kirzek's secretions upon the skin are such that a wound or abrasion will heal within five pulsimers, leaving no identifiable marks on the victim's body. In all, the Kirzek renders a painful death, but its unique properties assure the Courvesant of concealment. Stealth has no purer form.

If a painless death cannot be assured, then the sanctity of honor requires the Courvesois to at least attempt to adhere to all the other constraints imposed by their creed. But the Courvesois have not always enshrined the sanctity of honor. That virtue would, in time, slip from their fingers like the darkest of waters. Like so many grains of fine, dry sand.

Honor. Sanctity. Creed. Inconvenient words when power and plenty surge like the winds that roar through the Serritaras, and can be plucked like the sweet Paragai in the fertile Vengaos. Dissension within the corps of Regency soon led to a rift, creating the clever and deadly Council of Arduas. And so, the Courvesois, the Council (bolstered by their enforcement arm, the Machaera), and within time, even the primitive persuasion of the Muharadu, would soon join forces to reach for a very seductive fruit indeed.

On this subject, the words of Lo.Ydriasch resonate without impiety.

The marisatria of Moorar, my birthplace and home for the first 10 quinteks of my life, lies deep within the Xalmi-Ouorutho highlands, in the Pavatrian region, not far from the wisoltrean terminus. As in most of the Dimensional Horizon, the bucolic "Exos" had persisted as the element of the same proletarians who had ruled this Sphere for untold eons. This included laevenants, growers of spores and fungi; culturists, who sow and reap whips and other grains; and gleaners, the scavengers of this Sphere, the lowest rung on the communal ladder, and the focus of my family's heritage.

As a youth, I was convinced that my destiny, to follow the path upon which I had been born, ran clear and smooth before me. All of that began to change, though, at the start of

my eighth quintek. Less than two quinteks later, the mask of innocence...blind, buoyant, apathetic...would reach the nadir of its slow descent from the face that was the Dimensional Horizon.

44 quinteks ago, another citizen of Moorar (his name has been lost to the ages), using the simplest of memory stones, channeled something very unusual during a casual inquest through a syndroqlast buried within a vein of Burnish Hagonite. It was a distant anomaly; what appeared to be a series of ancient aggregators, pre-dating any known to have been created since the dawn of recorded time.

Of this phenomenon, the words of Lo.Ydriasch resounded as Kerak tossed and turned, and once again, closed his fingers around the Kuspegias...

Enlightened souls were summoned to the Exos, traveling from other marisatrias, other regions, many neurris distant, to sample and study the sonority of this paradox. Their reverberations were weak, however these Oracles of Rock revealed through the obscurity of their ancient languages that they were of pre-Eclipsian origin.

This, the most enduring of all Erasotran legacies, had finally revealed itself. The mythos of these ancient aggregators and their metallurgical structure soon came to be known as the Circonic. Their uniquely coded intonations, their highly pitched resonances and disonic reverberations soon led to the conclusion that they had been constructed of the finest ores ever revealed, metals which were profuse with abundant energy!

The cryptic idioms which have emerged from the Circonic have been drawn from precious few vibrant articulations. If properly sourced, though, they can be retrieved from almost anywhere in the Dimensional Horizon, so tracking the exact location of this treasure has proven to be a lofty undertaking. It is believed, though, that if the Circonic can be found, if its ores and its stores can be tapped, then its divinations might lead us to other primordial riches buried deep within the infinite Subterra. This dynamic architecture is also thought to be rich with primeval knowledge, perhaps the largest storehouse of cognition and discernment ever known to exist.

The Kuspegias began to slip from between Kerak's fingers, but not before the articulations of the apostate Lo.Ydriasch unwound to their conclusion...

Ever since it's portentous discovery from the Exos, hundreds of thousands of souls have become drawn to the Circonic. Whether driven by the search for the ores of which it was thought to be constructed, or the ancient knowledge it was alleged to contain, the quest for this elusive prize has completely altered the landscape of our existence.

In the short span of 44 quinteks, the Arduan Council, in concert with the once benign Muharic clergy, has managed to target and annihilate all challengers to this treasure. This deed could not have been accomplished without the complicity of the shadowy Courvesois. The Triumvirate of the Council of Arduas, the Muharadu and the Courvesois has managed to drive an unbroken chain of enmity, exile, conquest and carnage, all in the pursuit of a single, enigmatic jewel.

And, I add, for a few of those astute souls who have yearned for and sought the Circonic's great wealth of knowledge, its archaic vaults would come to reveal evidence of a singular, horrific vision, one which would prove to be the most prophetic revelation ever perceived.

The closing words of Kirsai Lo.Ydriasch fell into white noise before the Kuspegias dropped to the soft ground beneath Kerak's fingers...

To one goes the spoils...from the rest, the sacrifice.

Drogan polished off the last of his coquont, watching the Ione dance drowsily in the blackness. He and Eimear coaxed the last of their dying embers with tired eyes and cold limbs, soon passing into robust, dreamless sleep.

Kerak arose from his fitful slumber and watched his companions drift off. He felt the dark ground beneath him and plucked the Kuspegias from the mossy soil, returning them to the small drawstring bag in which they were kept. He had not been conscious of Lo.Ydriasch's words as they'd passed through him, but he was infused by them nonetheless.

THE BARUTHA DIVERS

He stood and ambled to the edge of the cave. *How long will I be able to keep this up?* Kerak thought, pondering the dim reflections of Ionic light in the distance of Eusterian waters. *Eimear, Euan or someone else in Teoramugh! Someone will find out. Someone will discover...that I...am Courvesois!*

3

THE MISTS OF A EUSTERIAN MORNING had tumbled off into the estrean horizon, making it easier for them to see their interim destination. Kerak, Drogan and Eimear had been on this path a little more than 130 stratimers, and their eyes grew wide with amazement at the sight of the cave entrance they were about to enter.

They had rejoined their journey long before dawn; the faint sound of crunching rock, angry voices in the sorentrean distance having awakened them much too soon. There had been no time for breakfast. The lingering taste of last night's Orphus mushroom dinner was all they had to satisfy their hunger as they'd stuffed their packs and hurried away from camp.

Since ascending from their sorentrean berth that morning, the Lumens had remained in a flat, wide formation. This signaled early on that the day promised a more diffuse radiance. *Good*, Eimear thought, for this reduced the likelihood that they could be spotted from the hills above.

However, this also signaled the approach of a calm day, since the wider distance between these immense creatures minimized downdrafts, reducing air pressure at ground level. *Not so good*, Eimear thought, since this increased the range at which sound could travel in these hills, making it more likely that they could be heard from a short way off.

Stop worrying and just get on with it! Eimear chastised himself.

After wandering onto a short feeder route, Drogan peered down the edge of the cliff, high above the breaking surf. Owing to his fear of heights, he was quick to pull himself back. His attention was diverted toward the estrean horizon, then broken by the slap of a large wave, far below. He took a deep breath and focused once more on the horizon as he noticed a fleet of aquaspheres ranging far off into the distance, speeding to wisoltre.

Due to the porous nature of the rilles in the norostrean reaches, the waters in those seas are subject to a high concentration of Aurean saturate. These toxins are stanhic in nature, and lightly magnetized. As such, they have a tendency to bond with metallic solids, such as the superstructures of aquaspheres on official business for the Triumvirate. Drogran recalled in his youth seeing these strange watercrafts in dry-dock at the Bay of Parusaedria. Their oblique silhouettes; their deep, forward slanting keels and magnetic propulsion stones shaped like hydrofoils, there to capture the energies of the exposed veins lining the seafloor. And their hulls below the waterline, burdened with large globules of hardened toxins...evidence of far too much time in norostrean waters. Not to mention the leagues of drudges tasked with the unenviable job of scraping and clawing as best they could to loosen these stubborn accretions.

Now, maintaining his vigil from the edge of the trail, he was certain that the aquaspheres wouldn't travel any farther to norostre than where he stood. *So not to worry*, he thought, confident that they risked little chance of exposure from detachments of seaborne Machaeran subalternates.

Another thought gave him sultry pause, here in the chill of morning. Ligeia, never far away, tiptoed in once again, as she seemed to do these days with a heartbreaking frequency. With a wicked grin he conjured eroiche with his consort in early twilight, their favorite time, before the Sphere beyond their window, and their little Quilla, had awakened. Her, standing before rays of dawning lumenescence; him, oozing deep within her, his hands caressing her lithe, nude body, coming into a wet suck, velvety warm...

Drogran's idyllic meanderings were shattered by the backlash of another rogue breaker. He realigned his focus, along with the crotch of his pants, and carried on.

Kerak stood watch with the Kuspegias affixed to his temples. Since Drogran's near fatal encounter with that glistening (and thankfully *unpoisoned*) Quadric blade, Kerak's confidence with these stones had surged. Drogran's quick tutorials into their use, interrupted by his frequent bouts of

pain, diminished (somewhat) with generous swigs of coquent, had proven invaluable to Kerak. They weren't enough, though. For only Droган understood the full breadth of their power, their effect...their true dimension. But until his wound had healed to the point that he was pain free, Kerak would remain their sole custodian.

Eimear stood on a rocky outcrop, spying the end of their path and the enormous cave entrance below it, about 400 neurris distant. Getting to the cave would involve rappelling about 12 neurris down from the end of the path, along a steep vertical face, then a quick swing of the rope and onto a small ledge at the cave's mouth. He shook his head and tossed back a swig of Eusterian water, turning from side to side, scanning the shore. Although he didn't know much about this particular entrance, he was very familiar with the cave system they were about to enter. As a youth, Eimear and his family used to wander this spidery grotto, having entered it many times through a hidden crevice not far to sorentre, at the Bay of Echelot. After coming of age he'd continued to acquaint himself with its gridwork of narrow tunnels, its copious expanses. Other than the Iotrean Nearings, very few trails exist above this part of the estrean Seamounts, so he knew that this cave would be their lifeline to safety. And he smiled as he thought how flustered those Machaeran skantaros would be when they realized he'd given them the slip.

A faintly-channeled Kerak stood nearby. "Them little rocks givin' you any ideas, Frishkit?" Eimear called out to him in a sarcastic tone, using Andulkan slang for *youngster*.

Kerak scowled at Eimear and pressed the stones harder against his temples. He could sense that a contingent of Machaera was less than 1500 neurris off, to sorentre, but they were not channeled so he couldn't read their intentions. He yearned again for a sharper skillset with these stones, lamenting his vulnerability here in the exposed glare of mid-morning luments. He spied the hills above for a visual but saw nothing.

Droган, hobbling on the crutch he'd repaired the night before, could feel his brother's frustration. "Let's not waste any more time, Kerak," he said. "Just get us to the end of this trail,

Eimear, and let's jump that ledge. C'mon brother. We need to get going."

Against his better judgement, Kerak removed the stones and trudged along behind his companions.

Just a few neurris before the trail's end, Kerak spied a small Bhatrathur bush growing on a ledge just below the edge of the trace. He was astonished to find this rather warm-natured plant in such hawkish terrain as this. Eluned Te.Mirin, the Courvesant with whom Kerak had apprenticed as a youth, had schooled him in the powers of this plant, which the ancients had used as a convenient anesthetic needing minimal refinement. Kerak jerked the plant up by its roots and crammed it into his last available pocket.

Eimear leaned against the narrow rock ledge at the end of their path. At his feet, small clusters of Marrowhip swung to and fro in a light breeze. He reached down to tug at a blade, breaking it off just below ground level, its stubborn tap root buried deep in the rocky soil.

Kerak kept a sharp watch from the rear, scanning the cliffs for any sign of movement. It was understood by all that if the Machaera were located to sorentre of their position, as they suspected, then the contingent was sandwiched between them and ascending Lumens, meaning that there was little chance of Kerak, Drogon or Eimear being able to spot the sharp glint of morning metal. For the Machaera, however, the reverse was true.

At the end of the trail, Kerak and Eimear lowered their entire length of rope down the exposed rock face until it ended about halfway over the mouth of the cave. "Well, that's all we got. When we get to the end of the rope we'll have to jump. Now quick, use this hammer to drive this spike into that wedge and tie it off so we can get down there," Eimear mumbled to Kerak. Suspicious sounds echoed in the distance.

Kerak's nerves began to fray. "How do we retrieve the rope when we're all down?"

"Another problem for another day!" laughed Eimear. "Just get to hammering!"

Raising the tool high above his head, Kerak drove into it, beating away at the spike. Five, six, seven motions...*keep*

hammering. Just a few more strokes, he urged himself in a cold sweat, the sound the breaking surf safely blanketing the rap of the hammer.

Then, from a distance of about 250 neurris, the keen eye of a subalternate spotted the faint reflection of Kerak's hammer on his fourteenth, and final, motion.

He let loose.

Swish. Ping, ping ping...ping...swish!

Eimear saw the first one from about 50 neurris, watching it split into four swirling blades just above his head. Then another, and another...12 glazed cutlasses, spiraling toward them with blinding fury. He and Drogan ducked as certain death missed their heads, twice, by no more than half a neurri.

After tying off the rope, Kerak tried to stuff the hammer back into his pack, but in his haste he lost his grip and dropped it over the edge of the path, into the crashing surf. He saw none of the Quadrics, but he could feel the breeze from their fins brushing the back of his neck. A cold Eusterian updraft had lifted the blades just enough for comfort, temporarily blanketing their heat seeking abilities.

"*Creegh...Creegh Amaria,* let's get the *freigh* out of here!" Drogan yelled, tossing his crutches over his back.

Eimear motioned to Kerak, who was the first to scamper down the rope. Kerak's pace slowed for a panicked pulsimer, his vision diverted to the pounding breakers, 50 neurris below him.

"*G'alzu.duc. Dea.fur!*" Eimear spat at Kerak in his hoarse Mnulorathean tongue.

"Wh...what! What are you saying? I don't understand Mnulo..."

"It means 'hurry your skinny ass up!'"

Kerak contorted his body around the rope, his feet dangling like twigs above the foamy surf. Timing his last swing, he released it, safely dropping three neurris to the floor of the cave. One foot slipped off the rim of the ledge but he managed to regain his balance. "Okay, I'm down. Send Drogan," he yelled up at Eimear.

Despite his leg injury, Droган's upper body strength was excellent and he descended the rope with ease while Kerak reached out to catch him. Still, Droган's landing was far from graceful.

"Creegh. Ahh...*CREEGH!*" Droган screamed in pain. He'd missed Kerak on bad timing and his lame right leg, its wound still unhealed, slammed hard against the rocky cave floor. "Kerak, h...help me!" he cried out. Kerak grabbed Droган's arms and pulled him away from the ledge.

When Eimear felt Droган release the rope, he started down, hearing a faint voice in the distance, commanding them to sheath their weapons. "Alive...I said I want them *alive!*" the voice bellowed.

Eimear wiped his brow, scratching his head in bewilderment. For he knew that the Machaera seldom ever took prisoners in the Seamounts, due to the inconvenience of arrest and confinement so far from base. He knew they were more prone to killing any undesirables found in this desolate region, to harvest the bodies for transit back to Astuverica and a quick profit.

But alive? *Why do they want us, or more likely them, alive? Not as slaves, that's for sure,* he reasoned. The Machaera were more inclined to hunt for slaves in far less vertical terrain. Indeed, slaves were rarely gathered from the Seamounts. "*These two pucinos I'm stuck with are gonna get me into a caqueload of trouble,*" he murmured under his breath, squirming down the rope and into the cave entrance.

"Well, you two must have a hefty price on your head," Eimear roared, dusting himself off. "I just heard one of their Regents yell out that he wants you pellots *alive*. You mind telling me why?"

Kerak said nothing. He began fumbling for his flints and found them in the side pocket of his satchel. After three sparks, aided by a few strong gusts, the bottom tip of the rope was ablaze. Their lifeline went up in a rising column of flame, disappearing above the cave's ceiling.

Kerak stood and shoved Eimear aside, knocking him to the ground as he rushed over to Droган. He pulled the infant

Bhatrathur out of his pocket and began crushing a few of the brittle leaves between his fingers. "That's right, they want Drogon and me alive, but rest assured; *you* they'll just *kill!*" he snarled at Eimear. "Now give me a hand with Drogon and let's hope they don't have any ropes of their own!"

Eimear helped Kerak drag a screaming Drogon 30 neurris away, to a bend in the cave. The pitch of crunching, falling rock could be heard above the cave's mouth. "My wound. I hit a rock. I...I can't go on!" Drogon cried out. "Just leave me here...take my gear with you and just...just let them have me, brother. But you! You've got to *make it*, Kerak!"

"Nonsense, Drogon. We're not going anywhere without you," Kerak said over the faint din of shouting voices.

"Rope. I need...go get the rope!" they heard a subalter-nate call out. Kerak knew that Quadrics were helpless negotiating tight angles, like the one at the cave entrance. He knew there was no way anyone could simply jump into this cave from the trail's end. And he knew that in this place, and under these conditions, their pursuers would have to capture them barehanded...or not at all.

"Drogon, take these." Kerak handed the Kuspegias to his brother.

Drogon gawked at him in disbelief, refusing them. "I'm in too much pain, Kerak! I'll never be able to channel..."

"I'm going to place this on your tongue," Kerak interrupted, measuring out a small portion of fresh gray powder, knowing that too much would be lethal. "Swallow it. And trust me. In a few pulsimers you won't feel a shred of pain."

Drogon closed his eyes and swallowed the finely ground powder. After about 10 pulsimers, he sat upright, raised his arms above his shoulders, pushed himself off the ground and stood straight up. He unstrapped the crutches from his back and tossed them aside. Drogon opened his eyes, smiled and spoke to Kerak. "Hand me those stones," he commanded, in a firm voice.

Kerak complied. A stunned Eimear gawked at Drogon in amazement. "*Amaria!* Whatever that stuff is, he looks good as new."

Drogan placed the Kuspegias against his temples. In less than a pulsimer, his pupils were sucked into an abyssal haze of magnetic sonorance. “There are 10 in this detachment.” Drogan tapped on the edges of the stones to adjust them. “The Regent in charge is within eight neurris of a Treflicat so I can pick up a read on him. It's resonating off a Menshar vein about 1000 neurris distant. I get an unusual vibe from him. Do...do I know him?” Drogan shook his head in disbelief, pushing the Kuspegias against his temples.

Drogan raised his head and continued to speak. “They...have a rappelling line, but it's frayed. One of them is going back to find a splicer. It won't take him long to repair it. Eimear, if you think you can find your way around this cave, then prove it! We don't have much time.”

As Kerak and Drogan rushed past him, Eimear's jaw tensed with nervous anger, his face burning with fear and frustration. He pondered the mouth of the cave, behind him. He wanted answers! *Who are these two?* he thought. He took heed, though, of Kerak's admonishment. *The little pellot's right. If the Machaera captures us, they will kill me, just for being in their company....*

...Unless...?

Eimear dropped his head, reached into his bag and pulled out two long, thin stones. One had been forged with a delicate curve, the other cylindrical. He placed them together, the curved stone partially encasing the other. Right away, this cylindrical assemblage began to glow with a blazing white fluorescence.

“It's made outta Theosphora; the best material for lightstuffs. Got it in Geducich, from a maquit,” Eimear said, referring to that genre of specialists who blend certain materials to enhance their diametrics and similarities. His tone grew more stoic as the cave began to reflect a vivid light. “Go that way,” Eimear went on, pointing to his right.

Walking ahead of Eimear, Kerak and Drogan were astonished at the sights unfolding before them. For the narrow tunnel, leading just a few neurris beyond the cave entrance, soon opened into an enormous, resplendent cathedral of rock

and root, as much as 40 neurris across, 10 to 20 neurris high and extending far before them, far beyond the meager reach of their light. On the ceiling they could see a network of ancient root structures, three to four neurris wide; and mosses and fungi, some of them three neurris in diameter, clinging to enormous looped, twisted veins of chelated Hagonite, Phyllox and Ularic.

To their left ran a clear, vast stream, as much as two neurris deep in some places. It fed into a rushing waterfall, collapsing into darkness. Its waters glowed with the orange and green phosphorescence of thousands of Clysophicus: long, slender, aquatic reptiles which clung to the rocks below, whipping and dancing in elegant rhythm as the waters rushed past them.

This, they were convinced, was the gateway to the Empire of the Subterra: the legendary, fabled realm of the Um.Erasotra; a vast Sphere they had always found too unreal to comprehend. But here it was, revealing itself to them in clear, discernible brilliance.

They paused near the banks of the stream. Kerak turned to look behind him before resuming his pace. The narrow passageway from which they'd emerged faded into the distance. The words *they're coming* jabbed at his conscience while he and Drogan muddled forward in wide, loopy steps, each one revealing sights more stunning than the next. The threat of Machaeran detection faded into oblivion as Kerak's eyes dropped for a moment to...

THWACK!!

Alarmed, Drogan pivoted. "Eimear, what...what the *FREIGH!* What did you...?!" Drogan watched in horror as Eimear stood over his unconscious brother, holding a blood-stained rock in his hand. A rivulet of red coalesced into a small pool beneath Kerak's neck.

"Kill *me*, he says. They'll kill...*ME!*!" Eimear spat his words at Drogan in a furious rage. "Not this time! I'll just ransom you and this smart-mouthed little pellet to those Machaerans for a whole lot more than *you* could ever pay me!

Yeah, I bet you got a pretty good price goin' on your head right about now."

Eimear rushed at Drogan, thrusting his lightstaff into Drogan's temporarily blinded eyes. Eimear raised his weapon above his head and heaved it while a flustered Drogan swung around to his left. The jagged stone struck Drogan's injured leg just before he lost his balance, his right hip becoming submerged in the rushing waters. Due to the lingering effects of Kerak's powdered anesthetic, though, he barely felt the impact of the rock. Instead he noticed a slight, sudden sting just above his Quadric wound before scrambling out of the water.

Eimear also lost his balance, on the throw, landing hard on his knees. Drogan pulled himself up and sped off into the darkness. "Drogan...DROGAN!" Eimear lashed out. He could hear distant crunching sounds coming from the cave's entrance. He gruffed, picked himself up and hobbled over to Kerak.

"*Skal'urdre. Thei.od'urdre!* You miserable caquehead. Go runnin' off; I don't care! At least your brother will bring a good price!" Eimear screamed into the dark. He hunched over Kerak's limp frame and dug through his pockets. His yield: 571 khirius...all that remained of the argency that Kerak and Drogan had brought with them into the Seamounts. Eimear surveyed the stash with a quick eye, then shoved it into his boots.

Upon impact, Kerak's bag had flown off his shoulder and landed about four neurris behind him. Eimear, oblivious to this, placed the lightstaff between his teeth, grabbed the rock with one hand, raised his victim to his back and began to hobble toward the cave's entrance.

In silence, Drogan began to emerge from the darkness. Behind Eimear, he crawled the cave floor. He searched in vain for something...but found nothing. That is, until his hand brushed a jagged piece of wood; an ancient, broken fragment of Marrowhip root, hard and heavy. He held it tight in his clutch.

Then, Drogan spied Kerak's bag. He ran for the midpoint between Eimear and the bag, fearful that the sound of his footsteps might betray him. Tightening his grip on the rootstick, he reared back and heaved it toward his prey, silhouetted in rapid retreat against mid-morning luments, now pouring in through the cave entrance. The stick struck Eimear behind his left knee, knocking him and his load to the ground. Now, Drogan pivoted and rushed for the bag.

Eimear wailed in pain but managed to raise himself up. Drogan reached the bag and began fumbling through it as he recalled a *Tale of the Trade*, recounted with a little too much histrionic flair by Kerak, beside firelight, two days before they had hired Eimear to help them complete their journey to the Bay of Teoramugh...

"...I held it in my left hand. My...my palm sweated as I clutched its shaft with a tense fist. It was coarse and grainy; rough and easy to hold. I squeezed it as I reached for his arm, placing my right hand on his shoulder. Without warning, he turned to face me. My left elbow swung back, then forward, and the whittled tip of the green branch buried itself into skin and muscle. He fell into a lifeless heap in less than two pulsimers...and at that moment, I knew that my mission was complete."

Drogan's fingers flailed around inside the crude bag until the tip of his thumb caught the edge of it. Then his palm clutched it. He quickly removed it from the bag, his left eye catching sight of Eimear's hunched frame, leaning in, bearing down on him in full stride.

As they approached each other, Drogan threw his right arm back as far as it would go. His left hand reached out and caught the corner of Eimear's cheek as his instrument, fair and true, pierced the damp airs, then impaled his victim as easily as the legend said it would.

"Arghhh...No...NOOO!!"

Eimear cried out. His tense frame fell into collapse. Drogan struggled in horror to catch his breath, noticing the jagged Kirzek shaft protruding from Eimear's abdomen. He grabbed the lightstaff, jerked the Kirzek out of Eimear's lifeless

body and took Kerak by the arms, dragging him 30 neurris to a dark, narrow slit he'd spotted in the walls of the cave.

Drogan ran back to Eimear's now stiff form. He heard voices. "Okay, you down...then we'll send for Diarmad for further orders," he heard one of them say. A knot tightened in his gut as he tried to comprehend what he was hearing. He moved faster now, taking Eimear's gear and Kerak's bag in both arms, then back to Kerak. Eimear's memory stone fell out of his pack. Drogan noticed this and darted back to retrieve it.

He took one last look at Eimear's body, wondering if he should hide it. But he decided otherwise. *It'll create a handy diversion*, he thought. Before he ran back into hiding, though, he shined the lightstaff on Eimear's wound. It was gone, completely healed. Nothing but death remained in its wake. *So Kerak wasn't lying about the Kirzek's powers*, he thought, shuddering at the thought of what he had just done. *I've never killed a soul in my life*, he brooded. *That's always been the domain of others in my family. And now...me.* Then, hearing the trudge of footsteps at the cave entrance, he picked up a large rock and heaved it with all his might down the invisible corridors of the cave.

He then ran back one last time to his narrow veil to tend to his brother, and to live another day.

"Cr...crush two of those leaves between your...fingers...into a fine powder." Kerak, still in pain from his assault, struggled to form his words without allowing his voice to carry too far down the passages beyond their hideaway.

"Not...too much," he went on. "Now place that powder...on my tongue." Drogan complied with his brother's slurred instructions. Kerak sucked the fine powder, then spat out the excess, careful not to take too much. After five pulsimers, he sat up, smiled, stretched out his arm and took hold of his brother's hand.

They remained sheltered within this narrow lair, fearful of Machaeran stragglers who might appear without warning. Eight members of this detachment had entered the cave in

pursuit of their prey. Two of them had wrapped Eimear's body, carried it back to the cave entrance and hoisted it out with their rappelling line.

Drogan and Kerak knew that since the body was clean and showed no visible signs of trauma, it was likely bound for the Andulkas and the egregious Pentumus dens which thrived in and under Astuverica. Eimear's death now represented another windfall for a burgeoning community of khiromeks, those purveyors who "boiled" the byproducts of the humdrum Trofliage weed, allowing them to ferment within the hollow cavities of preserved torsos; to produce this coveted, psychoactive grey-blue powder, along with batches of Chelomar, a highly refined liquid extract of Pentumus. His death also represented a tidy profit for a few underpaid subalternates, along with a parcel of slugs for a few dozen addicts, from thralls to vanquished wanderers to those who had soared to the pinnacles of Regency. Regardless of their station in life, they were all alike: thronging, reaching, *grasping* for a hit, wherever and however they could get it.

Crowding the niches and notches of the Astuverican Subterra, the sight of hundreds of hardened, addicted skirueics, lying prostrate on the den floors, had haunted Kerak and Drogan. Eyes bulging, bodies twitching, contorted in manic frenzy; heads swollen, some of them bursting in a wretched mass of fiber and fluid. These were the images which had so often made them cringe in disgust.

After helping to wrap Eimear's body, the remaining subalternates and their Regents hurried off to the inner recesses of the cave in pursuit of the sound made by Drogan's rock. Drogan knew that this simple ruse would not work for long. Soon, he knew, their pursuers would return and call for reinforcements to enlarge their sweep.

And the name *Diarmad!* The thought of it troubled him. *Is it possible...?* The Diarmad he had known had, in his early quinteks, apprenticed through the Arduans as an eager conscript. Drogan had heard rumors of his skills with the Quadric, even going as far as to perfect one of the technical qualities of this murderous apparatus, but had he really become

a Regent with the Machaera? That once innocent little soul he had last seen as a shy, taciturn youth, clinging in carefree abandon to Droган's heels, hoping to find within him a surrogate for the distant, rigid father he never saw, much less understood.

Droган had been unable to catch a glimpse of the one they had called *Diarmad*. But that voice, those images he'd cognified during his articulation, felt *so* familiar to him as the one who bore them with such confidence, commanding his subalternates in the dispatch of their duties, in the heat of the chase. *Could that really be him?* Droган cringed at the irony.

Kerak prepared four additional doses of Bhatrathur powder for future use, knowing that when their current allotments wore off, their pain would return. He hoped that another couple of nips apiece would suffice to carry them through until their bodies could unwind their torment naturally and heal on their own.

Droган peered from around the rim of their narrow sanctuary. Nothing but the hiss of rushing water caught his ear. He pulled the Kuspegias from their drawstring bag, bending their focus as he adjusted them to his temples. Then he reached for Eimear's memory stone, held it in his left hand and rubbed it against the grain with the pads of his fingers. Kerak reassembled the lightstaff, sliding the two sections against each other to regulate the intensity of the emission. Soon, it began to burn with a sterile, amber glow.

Thanks to the Phemes...and a handy pinch of powder, Kerak thought, Droган was now pain free. For now, this mental release would enable his psyche to capture the clearest possible articulations from these stones.

First with his right hand, then his left, Droган squeezed the edges of the Kuspegias with his fingertips, causing their effect to become more pronounced. Kerak was astonished to witness within Droган the darkest eyes he had ever seen, his pupils swirling in deep, dark pools of sonorance, elucidation. Kerak could see within his brother's pallid gaze the same images that Droган was seeing at that very moment. These were the first of many potential layers of articulation. They

were the images which Eimear, over time, had channeled with this well-worn stone since he had first laid hands on it.

Drogan knew that four days earlier, Eimear had been using his memory stone to search for alternate routes to the remote Bay of Teoramugh, their destination. This was a place at the very edge of the Seamounts which even their wide-ranging former guide knew little of. And Drogan knew that the more widely traveled paths through the Seamounts would fail to shadow their movements to this obscure refuge.

But Eimear would not have needed his stone to access maps, if any were even available, of the meandering passages within this cave system surrounding them. Drogan knew that Eimear would have been able to recite these passages from nothing more than his own memory.

His vision burned; he continued his search but found nothing. He slumped to the floor and wiped his eyes. *So that's why Eimear brought us to this place*, he mused. For now Drogan knew: no aggregator could be found, even by their pursuers, to contain data on this obscure subterrane or anything within it.

Knowing that the Machaera were navigating with as much difficulty as he did little to ease Drogan's mind. For he knew that as soon as their pursuers engaged their stones and realized their predicament, they would not hesitate to reverse course and return to the cave's entrance. But when? He and Kerak could not stay holed up in this tiny nook forever! No food. Water? Yes, but they would risk far too much going for it. They knew that there was *no* chance of survival unless they could break free and find the route to Teoramugh on their own. There was no time to waste.

Drogan placed his hands on the rock walls before him. "Kerak, hand me Eimear's bag. Channeling alone won't get us out of here. Only *Pras'pheratu* will help. Let's get to work."

4

“WHAT THE *FREIGH* DO YOU KNOW of that skill, Drogan? Can't you channel any abstracts on this cave? Sketches, notes, depictions, *anything*? I mean, look at that vein above our heads. It's rich. That's some of the finest Ularic I've ever seen!”

Kerak reached up and tapped a long silvery bulge at the top of their notch, iridescent with red and purple flecks. “Even if the nearest aggregator was 400,000, 500,000...even a million neurris away, we should still be able to channel every ream of data it has to offer. You or I have never been as close to a vein like this. And with Kuspegias? It's impossible not to access something!”

“Kerak, Pras'pheratu...” Drogan paused, trying to form his words. “Pras'pheratu is the only way. I can find no maps, no azimuths...*nothing* on this cave. Why, I'll bet that aside from Eimear, no more than 40 or 50 souls in the past 20 quinteks have ever known of this place. And at best, two, maybe three of them ever even owned a memory stone, much less knew how to use one. So how would any of them have been able to convey abstracts on this place?”

Kerak slid to the ground. “So what do you want me to do?”

Drogan winced, felt a slight twinge begin to form again in his wounded leg. “Last night, when we made camp near Nuolat, Eimear was using a filiablade to cut some of those roots for our fire. See if you can find it in his bag. And be quick about it.”

Kerak adjusted the lightstaff a half turn to increase the intensity of the emission. Then he flipped Eimear's bag upside down and began rustling through its contents. “Here it is,” he said.

“Now take Eimear's stone and tap the edges, around the tips, a few times with the blunt end of the blade. That'll

weaken the coagulate within the stone and make it easier to cut.” Kerak and Drogran observed that Eimear’s stone, a little larger than the palm of an adult hand, was much more heavily worn than they’d noticed in the glare of luments. Like most memory stones, it was etched. But unlike most stones, this one carried layer upon layer of the most arcane glyphs, entwines and earmarks they had ever seen.

As I describe these events and the subject of memory stones, I am reminded of the somewhat enigmatic nature of Thermionics and their sister sciences. So I defer to the words of the sycophantic Muharic scholar Attashim Um.Chaldazur, infused to an aggregator near the Andulkan/Vengathlian border, 32 quinteks past. Here he writes from the beginning...

As legend held that the Erasotrans had done before the Eclipse, so their descendants, our ancestors, emerged from the scree to construct their own magnetic vaults. This network of mnemonic aggregators is imbedded within the millions of spidery, metallic veins which run throughout the Subterra, in order to cache the wisdom and knowledge of the ages.

Through the evolving study of Thermionics, ores have been quarried, melted, cooled and cultured to create and improve upon these aggregators, as well as memory stones, Kyotrimlic stones and Myotrophi, tools esa sential to the mastery of mnemonic articulation.

With their devices in hand, all souls can elucidate the mnemonic filamentation which courses through these veins, regardless of their place in the Horizon. Through natural gnarls in subterranean veins known as “syndroqlasts,” one can draw from the nearest aggregator to articulate, through their own perception, the complete spectrum of awareness and enlightenment across all boundaries. And if one is privileged enough to possess a Treflicat, the most advanced of all memory stones, one will be able to cognify the sterling, recently discovered “Recondite,” now the proprietary gateway to private communication within the Triumvirate.

Through the use of these tools, souls throughout the Dimensional Horizon are able to cognify and communicate their thoughts and emotions directly with others, no matter the distance. The network of aggregators and the veins in which

they are imbedded have once more become the prime fountainhead for facts, philosophical disciplines, the arts, laws, and cognified abstracts.

It is inevitable that mnemonic articulation has succumbed to refinement; hence the rediscovery of manually imposed glyphical etchings and the alliance of dissimilar glyphs, known as entwines. There are two kinds: Nurespheric glyphs have a resonant leaning; the Cycloptic are dominated by the dissonant impulse. It should be noted that certain of these graphical mechanisms had been employed by the Erasotrans to enhance the voltaic impulse inherent to this Sphere. Until a thousand quinteks after the Eclipse, though, this skill was lost to their descendants. But through the rare gift of Malaerosch, the ability to conceptualize and create these etchings was reborn. When these glyphs or entwines are carved into stanhic veins or forged devices, the effect they can manifest upon the voltaic pneuma can be prodigious.

When Kerak finished this stage, he nodded at Drogan. "Okay, I'm done."

"Now use the serrated edge of the...AGH! Hand me some more of that...that powder. Bhatrathur is it? It's coming back."

Kerak rationed a fingerpinch and handed it to Drogan, who placed the small dab on his tongue, then began rubbing the Kuspegias together in a flat, jerky motion. He placed them against his forehead, closed his eyes and massaged them a little more.

"*Amaria!* Much better," Drogan sighed, satisfied with Kerak's hastily fashioned biologic. This time his pain had returned with somewhat less of a vengeance than when he'd first received his wound. He held hope that the next dose, when needed, would render a final release from his suffering.

"Like I was saying, Kerak, take the serrated edge of the blade and score a thin cut around the circumference of the stone, just below the tip. And be careful not to chip it." Drogan watched Kerak cut a thin, circular notch around the stone's outer edge.

"Done."

“Now, with a few smooth, even strokes, slice all the way through the stone. That will create a thin, round wafer.”

After about five nervous stratimers, Kerak’s work was complete. He handed the wafer to his brother and placed the rest of the stone into a small pouch which he tossed into his satchel. Kerak then dismantled the lightstaff and motioned beyond their tiny refuge, peering down the dark cavern into which their predators had disappeared. He listened for the sound of voices. Other than the rush of water, all was quiet. Then back to Drogan. “Still clear,” he whispered with a sense of confident insecurity.

Drogan placed the wafer from Eimear’s stone between the Kuspegias and pressed this 3-layer assemblage against his forehead. He paused to glance at his brother. “I know very little of Pras’pheratu, Kerak. That’s a skill which only a handful of souls, dead or alive, have ever mastered...even amongst Mnemonasts.”

“You think that includes anyone at the Architrave? Or maybe even The Order? I’ve heard a rumor or two.”

Drogan glazed over Kerak’s question. “My point is, I believe I can evoke a brief proxy through the interaction of the Kuspegias and this wafer from Eimear’s stone.”

He went on. “Over time, a memory stone will capture a certain amount of mnemonic filamentation from the mind of its user. Tiny, invisible strands of resonance and dissonance embed within the stone. Some of it is deliberate, like in an aggregator. But some...not so.”

“Kyotrimlic stones do the same thing, right?”

“True. The filaments imbedded in a Kyo are deliberate, conscious, like those in a vein or an aggregator; like Euan’s messages in the Kyo he sent to me from Teoramugh. But the filaments in a memory stone are on a level both conscious and *subconscious*. They may or may not register anywhere else, but they always remain buried in the user’s stone. I’m certain that Eimear’s memories of this cave can be drawn from this wafer, through the Kuspegias.”

Drogan furrowed his brow. “This...this is a *very* old stone, Kerak, so it’s bound to hold something useful. And it’s a

good thing we have it.” He marveled at the contorted scrollwork covering the coarse grain, impressed by the effect these glyphs were meant to elicit. “Of course, a Mnemonast...one who truly possesses the gift of Pras’demnos...would be able to construe the subchattels of the revenants of filamentation, with or without a memory stone!”

Kerak leaned forward with a confused expression. “Revenants. I’ve heard one explanation after another but nothing I’d call credible,” he said, these words coming from one who trusted very little in what he could not see, feel or touch. It occurred to him that his understanding of the Sphere beyond The Order was lacking, to say the least.

“Revenants are the residue of mnemonic filamentation. As filamentation passes through a vein, it leaves behind tiny magnetic fragments which over time will morph with the ores and their coagulates to become...well, almost *invisible*. And they’re pervasive! 8000 quinteks, plus who knows how long the Erasotrans were here, pushing their own mnemonics through these veins...,” Drogan pointed at the Ularic above their heads, “...means that every single grain of ore in this Sphere is likely loaded with them.”

Drogan palmed the Kuspegias as he went on. “So, revenants; they consist of two layers. The outer layer is the *explitore*. Any casual student of Synthet can discern a band of *explitore*,” Drogan said, describing those souls other than Mnemonasts who attempt to divine the mnemonic residuum trapped within veins and aggregators. “But the *subchattels*! Those are the inner layers, and they’re far more elusive. Within the subchattels can be found the purest, most dynamic source of elucidation anywhere in the Dimensional Horizon; if you know how to see them. But...that’s for a Mnemonast, not me!” He let go a nervous chuckle. “*However*, with the Kuspegias, I’ll be able to think like one. For a little while, maybe.”

Kerak brushed up a small cloud of dust with his hand. “Ah yes, back to the proxy. You ever seen this done before?”

“Well, no...but I’ve studied it, and I really think...”

“So, you’ve never done it. And you’ve never even *seen* it done? If this plan of yours doesn't work, then what?”

Drogan reached into Eimear's bag and retrieved his bottle of coquont. He popped the cap and doused the last swig, wincing. “*Whew!* Well, if this doesn't work then we...*hub*...I don't really know. You got any ideas?”

“Just do it, Drogan. And get us the *freigh* out of here!”

Drogan held the thin wafer from Eimear's stone against the inside of one of the Kuspegias, then placed the pair against his left temple while he positioned the other Kuspegia to his right. He pressed down upon the stones, then released them as their sonorance began to hold them in place. Kerak noticed that the wafer from Eimear's stone, in direct contact with Drogan's skin, began to glow, small specks of bright color circulating within its narrow edges.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor of the cave, Drogan closed his eyes and tried to focus, to narrow his concentration on the cave, on Eimear, on the empty passage which lay just beyond their veil. Soon he began to notice a thin light, swirling, spinning slowly at first, then faster as it approached the center of his vision. A fluorescent montage appeared in his mind: faces, lights, symbols, reflections of water, stone, air, more light, followed by a series of images firing off at a rapid pace, each one more vivid, more stunning than the next, an empyreal spectrum continuing to build with greater intensity until...!

Drogan collapsed in a sweaty heap. The Kuspegias fell from his temples and tumbled to the ground.

“Brother, are you...are you alright?” Kerak called out.

Drogan wiped his face with his shirt and lifted himself up. “I'm...okay Kerak.”

“What did you see?”

Drogan had no idea how to answer that question. But he knew he had no time to reflect on the tangled aspects he had just witnessed. “Like I said...this is an old stone, Kerak. Very, *very* old!”

Drogan took a few deep breaths and mounted the Kuspegias to his temples again, this time without the wafer.

On a more narrow modulation, he articulated a Pavatrian aggregator for about two stratimers and drew a couple of complicated morphemes in the sand with his finger, one atop the other. Stanhic grains interspersed within the dark sand began to emit a sterile glow, casting an eidolic light on the stone above his head. He removed the Kuspegias from his temples, then placed the wafer from Eimear's stone in his left hand. He used the filiablade to scratch this entwine onto both sides of the wafer, resembling a stringy, entangled mass.

He smiled at Kerak. "Give it about three strats," he said, "then we'll try again."

They sat in anxious silence for half a stratimer. Kerak's ignorance in the knowledge his brother seemed to hold in spades needled him to break the tension. "Glyphs...?" he asked, not quite sure how to phrase the rest of his question.

"Yeah?"

"So, fill me in. All I know is that my Treflicat was etched. By someone else. That's about it."

"Well, these I got from the *Kaebixt*. That's a huge index of glyphs cached in a Saurostran aggregator. They appear in the mind's eye within a large pendulum, turning constantly, matching various glyphs with certain ores, alloys, lineaments, intentions," Drogran explained, conscious of the passage of time within, and beyond, their prison walls. "Theory holds that the mnemonics that went into the creation of these glyphs, if they're sonorant, will bond with the revenants in the ores. If not, then the combination of the two will do the job, will create a temporary schism in the explitore...or better yet, the subchattels...to crack the revenant open, so that I'll be able to see inside it."

"The glyphs...in the *Kaebixt*. Who creates those things, anyway?"

"No one I know," Drogran answered. "The gift of Malaerosch; that's a rare talent indeed. There hasn't been a new glyph created with significant sonorance in 40, maybe 50 quinteks. Hasn't been much of a problem, though. If you study the *Kaebixt* enough you get familiar with the way each glyph interacts with certain metals, alloys. They're all different.

And if you combine two or more in the right way to make an entwine that can draw out the voltaic impulse in a Thermionic device, even better than a furnace can do when they're created...? Well, then you're on to something!"

Three stratimers came and went. Kerak and Drogan peered through sad eyes at the entwine on the wafer, as dim and lifeless as it was when Drogan first carved it.

"Got it," Kerak said, satisfied with his brother's tutorial. "But you know, it occurs to me that the Triumvirate places very little stock in your Thermionic artistry. Ores and alloys are the preference down in Astuverica."

Drogan nodded, one eye on his brother, the other on the Kuspegias.

Another stratimer passed. Kerak glanced at the still dark, sallow entwine on the wafer, then at their exact twin, scored in the dirt. The crude depictions there began to sparkle with far more brilliance than before. A curious Kerak recognized the need to kill a few more pulsimers as a final thought entered his mind.

"Vidanthrics? What do you know about 'em?" Kerak asked, testing the reach of Drogan's knowledge beyond the boundaries of Thermionics. Why, he had so often wondered, do naturally occurring glyphs appear on the skin of certain souls at birth; souls with a high concentration of metals in their bloodstream?

A wave of surprise, even embarrassment, washed over Drogan's face. He dropped his eyes and closed up. Kerak recognized this as a subject that, for some reason, cut too close to home for Drogan. He went on to something else. The wafer remained as lifeless as ever.

"What makes you so sure this etching is going to work?"

"Nothing about Thermionics is certain, Kerak. Theories aside, no one really knows how glyphs or entwines work their effect, or if they're going to work at all. But...what else have we got?"

Drogan glanced at the wafer again, then re-attached the three-piece assemblage to his temples. The muffled tenor of

enraged voices, crumpling gravel beneath pivoting, sprinting bootheels reverberated in the darkness.

Drogan pressed down on the stones. This time he narrowed his focus even more on Eimear, in better hopes of being able to channel whatever their two-timing former guide had experienced in this place.

After 10 pulsimers, Drogan could feel the outline of the entwine on the wafer, its edges beginning to smolder against his skin. He was struck by a peculiar sensation, one which he'd never felt with Kuspegias alone, as if his body were being lifted off the ground. He continued to visualize everything he knew about this cave, its narrow entrance, then the tight passageway which enlarged into that spectacular, massive vault. He visualized the floor, the walls, the rushing stream, the dark hallway down which the Machaera had ventured.

Two more pulsimers. He began to discern what appeared to be a thin line of light unfolding into the distance, but different from the light he had seen the first time. He could feel his mind following it, almost as if he were walking it, like it was a path. In a murky trance, Drogan noticed that this bright pathway began to split off into three, then four, five and more lines. He saw a hand in front of his vision which held...a lightstaff! The lines of light then converged back into one. His pace quickened. Then, in a blurry flash, the lightpath ended. There he saw the hazy vision of a single, isolated soul, standing defiant, his dark eyes proud and brilliant in the reflection of the staff's glow.

Without warning, the hand in front of him shoved the lightstaff toward the face of this mysterious soul. A voice called out in anger. Its threatening murmurs pierced his mind's ear...

Jjalu'd.saluvaar. Mal'u. Kurd'ves.kuolow.ish!

Drogan recognized that voice, and an overwhelming sensation erupted within him...that *he* himself was mouthing those words! Then the realization struck him that it was not his voice, but Eimear's that he was hearing. Drogan struggled to narrow his focus on the face which appeared strong and steadfast before him. A gutsy retort split his hearing....

Nuiruzu usu zil Karestu. Ilk sturvio...Ilk quavuriou!

One pulsimer. Eimear's shadowy face appeared before Droган's vision. He could feel himself moving *backwards*, faster and faster now, the lightpath separating again into multiple paths, far too many to count. Suddenly, he could feel the sensation of...*water*. A chaotic deluge seemed to envelope his entire body. His halcyon vision was blinded in one last splash of brilliant white light!

Then, all went dark.

Droган began to open his eyes. He removed the Kuspegi-as and the wafer from his temples. He trembled in a cold sweat, his head pounding, his breathing labored. Kerak placed his hand on Droган's back.

"Droган. What did you see? Talk to me!"

"*Kerak!*" Droган's breathing eased somewhat as he went on. "Eimear's stone...he wasn't the first to use it. I don't know how he got it, but I think..." Droган sighed, then struggled to stand. "Kerak, I'm not sure, but I think it's just shown us a way out of here. Get your gear and follow me."

Kerak adjusted the lightstaff to its lowest level. After stashing their supplies, he and Droган left the relative safety of their notch and began to claw their way along the right wall of the cave, fumbling past rocks and roots. Droган stumbled, fell over a large protruding root but picked himself up and carried on.

His concentration was broken by a tumult of Machaeran voices, coming from the passageway. Droган knew they were returning in frustration after losing themselves in a cluster of abortive dead-ends. This meant that he and Kerak were about to be exposed. He motioned to Kerak to douse the lightstaff, struggling to recollect the first turn his fledgling experience with Pras'pheratu had shown him. Then he began to envision the entirety of the cave, as if it had awakened with the glow of a thousand Lumens. "I'm seeing it," he whispered to Kerak. "We need to walk ahead about 40 paces, then climb about 10 neurris up a large root. There'll be a narrow tunnel at the top, to our right. Grab the back of my pack and don't let go!"

They marched 39 paces. Droган reached far out in front of him and to his right, flexing his empty, searching fingers.

Kerak wondered how his brother was able to navigate in total darkness, for he saw none of the visions which Drogran was seeing. Then, Drogran grabbed Kerak by the wrist, signaling that he had found the root. They began to climb.

About five neurris up they saw the first of them; Quadrics glistening in the blaze of three fully engaged lightstuffs. "Don't move!" whispered Kerak.

"Diarmad, we need to get to the mouth of the cave so we can channel for reinforcements."

"Agreed," another voice yelled out. "Chaludur! Bring my Treflicat. There's a syndroqlast about 10,000 neurris beyond that ridge we ascended this morning. I'll use it to articulate the Recondite," the voice said, referring to the deepest, most elusive of all stanhic architectures. "We should be able to pull abstracts from there. I need to let the Architrave know to send a complete cache of parallels on these azimuths. Plus we'll need another 30 subalternates from Muhryr, fully armed. But I want them to bring more than just weaponry. Those little pairs of memory stones that Ulhtric and Khoramon captured on their raid in the Vengaos? We'll need to requisition the rest of them. Now go prepare my stone for articulation."

Drogran went numb at what he heard from the two conversing Machaerans. Diarmad! *It is him!* Drogran thought, lost in disappointment and fear. And those "little pairs of memory stones" they sought! *If the Machaera manages to evoke even a tenth of the power those pilfered Kuspegias are capable of...?!* He grew sick at the thought of the advantage...the sheer power...they would gain if they found a way to command their effect. Drogran shook his head, struggling to regain his concentration.

With a keen eye, Kerak continued to watch Diarmad and his subalternate, hoping that the glow of their staffs would remain within a narrow scope. Then, Diarmad spoke again.

"I'm going to sweep this grotto with my lightstaff before I return to the entrance. I'll rejoin you there in a stratimer."

Diarmad's words stuck them with blunt force, rendering them numb for at least three pulsimers...an eternity, under the circumstances. When he snapped out of it, Drogran bolted up

from their elevated perch, five neurris above the cave floor. Kerak, his vision still steeped in darkness, lost his hold on the back of his brother's pack, but he could hear the rustle of Droган's feet on the root they were climbing. He followed along as he heard Droган throw himself into what sounded like a hole.

Kerak let go of the root, then grabbed a rock which seemed to level off at the top, losing his balance in the transition. To his left he saw the gleaming sweep of the lightstaff, shining against the walls on the opposite side of the cave, but now racing in his direction! Kerak lunged forward, upward, reaching as far as he could. Finding his brother's right foot, he latched onto it and suddenly felt his body being sucked into the same hole.

Kerak snaked his torso though the narrow passage until he could feel the ground level out, about two neurris in. He crawled on his elbows a little further, looking behind him to see the glow of Diarmad's lightstaff growing brighter as it panned closer...ever closer. He crawled a little further when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a faint glimmer of bright light illuminating his feet and ankles.

"Cuithir, Haruhn. Come quick! They're...they're here. In that tunnel up there! *NOW!!*" The sound of Diarmad's fury fractured the damp air. Fear shot through their bodies. Kerak lunged forward, pushing hard against his brother's feet. Behind him, Kerak could see the shaky glow of Diarmad's lightstaff growing exponentially larger. The thunder of trampling feet surged.

"Get going. We gotta move!" he screamed at Droган. "We've got to...*MOVE!!*"

Droган's ears filled with the thunder of his own pounding heart. He crawled on his elbows and knees with all the speed he could muster, Kerak struggling to keep up. But the tunnel seemed to narrow as their clothes, their gear snagged on roots and rocks, compressing all around them. Kerak struggled for air. He flipped over on his back, hearing the static rush of hands and feet racing up the root to the tunnel entrance.

In a panic, Kerak pushed his left foot off a rock at the ceiling of the tunnel just before three lightstaves and four pairs of hands reached in desperation for his flailing limbs. The heavy rock fell to the ground, then another, triggering a violent chain reaction as their determined pursuers disappeared behind a roaring cataclysm of dust, slag and debris. They struggled to breathe, hearing frenzied Machaeran voices screaming, cursing, then recoiling to fall from their perch.

The sound of the avalanche rambled on, continuing to seal the tunnel behind them. Dust crammed the air in thick clouds, clogging their lungs. They crawled harder now, pushing off every available surface in a desperate struggle to find the smallest pocket of breathable air. They hurried on, their skin ripping and tearing through ragged clothes, the tunnel growing more narrow to their front. Claustrophobia seized them in the darkness and they began to feel water seeping through the walls around them. The slope of the tunnel began to drop.

In an instant, the ground seemed to fall away. Drogan, then Kerak, slid down, down into a river of rushing water, mud, rock and root fragment. With bone-crushing force their bodies twisted and writhed. The tunnel wended its way from side to side, slamming them against every turn as they tumbled end over end for 30 pulsimers, finally coming to a quick and painful halt.

*T*hey laid prostrate in a bloody, muddy heap, drenched from water within the tunnel which continued to pour over them. Their gear and their bodies were twisted in a chaotic jumble, every limb wracked with pain. Three stratimers passed until they found the strength to stand, the sound of the avalanche rattling off into the distance.

Kerak shook his head and spread his arms as wide as his pain would allow. "Drogan...are you alright?"

"Don't talk. Listen!" Drogan ordered. For five stratimers they stood in silence, straining for the sound of screams, voices, tools or bare hands scraping away at the debris behind

them...anything! Droган thought he heard faint thumps and sharp ricochets reverberating off into the darkness. Was that just his imagination? He couldn't be sure. Regardless, he knew they had little time to waste before their pursuers would soon reopen the tunnel and rejoin the hunt.

"I'll engage the lightstaff," Kerak said, fumbling through his soaked bag. He found the battered instrument and assembled it to full intensity. It took no time to for them realize that they were now trapped within a much smaller passageway, about three neurris high and four to six wide. It faded off into complete darkness in both directions.

Droган leaned against the wall of the cave, trying to refocus his now gauzy recollections of the lightpaths he had seen a few stratimers earlier. He pulled his Kuspegias and the wafer of Eimear's stone from his bag but soon reconsidered this strategy, convinced that recreating another proxy was next to impossible.

Another dose of Bhatrathur managed to ease the last of their old pains, plus a few new ones. Within half a stratimer, Droган noticed a single strand of light, ever so faint, awakening before his eyes. Then, another. "Kerak, disengage that lightstaff," he whispered.

Kerak did as he was asked, still misunderstanding the visions his brother was experiencing. This action plunged them into total darkness, as he saw it. But the lack of artificial light only served to rehabilitate Droган's perception. He stood and began to run, at full bore, into the dark penetralia of the passageway.

"Dr...Droган. Where are you...? Where are you going?" Kerak yelled, hearing his brother's footsteps disappear into darkness.

For two stratimers, Droган ran at breakneck speed down the length of the passageway. Then he stopped, reversed course and ran back to Kerak. He stood motionless, gasping there in stunned silence.

"I've got it. I've got it, Kerak! Re-engage the staff. I think...I see a way out of here. It's clear to me now! This passageway...it's tangled, I tell you. Meandering. Complex!

But sooner or later it will lead us to the terminus of this cave, and to Teoramugh. I can *see* it, Kerak!”

Kerak and Drogan stretched and began to gather their muddy, scattered belongings under the lightstaff's glare. Drogan jabbed a finger into the blackness, into the direction this mysterious bent compelled him to go.

Kerak turned to peer into the opposite end of the passageway. Both options seemed equally foreboding to him. *But I have to trust him*, he thought. *After all, what choice do I...do we...have?*

The answer to that question would be found at their next sight of the Lumens glow.

5

NOW, 22 DAYS IN. THEIR ONLY light? The sketchy glow of a cracked lightstaff which would not stay in one piece.

Since their narrow escape from the hands of Diarmad's Machaerans, their pilgrimage had taken them down a dark, tormented gnarl of passages, tunnels, caverns and grottos, of every conceivable shape and size. To avoid alerting the keen ears of their pursuers, they were forced to keep their conversations to a whisper. This strategy served dual purposes. Kerak found to his amazement that at times, as many as five or six conduits could be seen to intersect at a single juncture. But his brother's visions, fueled by silence and the mental absorption that ensued, never failed to direct them through this bewildering morass. Even though he never stopped wondering if this journey would carry them to their ultimate demise, Kerak still clung to the hope that, somehow, they would prevail.

Three days in, the glow of their staff began to reveal hundreds, even thousands of cryptic glyphs carved into the walls, floors and ceilings around them. Occasionally they paused to examine these symbols. Most were caked with the gradu of accretion: moss, mire and dust buried within eroded contours distorted by eons of ancients. A few others, though, appeared clean, fresh and deep, as if they'd been carved yesterday. These strange glyphs always appeared near or within large chunks of Aquylur, a semi-translucent stanhic ore known in the vernacular as "Waterstone." Aquylur is typically found in fragments no bigger than the tip of an adult thumb. But here, some pieces were larger than an adult head. Kerak puzzled over Drogan's consistent reaction to these pristine runes: nervous silence followed by a glum refusal to discuss them when questioned. *A deep well, this one is*, Kerak mused often of his brother, a soul about which he knew so little.

Seven days in, they began to notice a mysterious sound ahead of them, appearing to grow stronger with each step. At first it resembled a static whisper, a vague breath of wind. Echoing off the walls of each turn, its acoustics changed, but its constancy never wavered. Day by day this sound grew stronger, inflaming anxiety, curiosity and dread in equal measure, as a deepening sense of the unknown will so often do.

Five dry stream beds they had passed, with no springs or any other signs of surface water. Their most reliable source of hydration came from the massive roots which comingedled with the dark rock and silvery, metallic veins that surrounded them on all sides. While cutting through a leathery growth of *Stuloslith* fungi, Eimear's old filiablade broke on day five. The next day Kerak was able to fashion a crude machete from a sharp-edged chunk of *Phylox* he'd pried loose from the wall of their third passageway, just before making the turn down the next corridor into which Droghan's visions carried them. When they sliced through opposing roots with their new tool, they discovered tiny sacks within the roots, filled with water, enough to drink when held above the head and squeezed between a pair of tight fists.

Food and heat were another problem. Every so often, massive *Kalmuth* mushrooms appeared before them to block their path. They were no match for Kerak's improvised machete, however due to their large size it would have been necessary to cook them before they could be eaten. Raw, these fungi held a bitter taste and a sickening effect which made them wretch. And the roots, being filled with so much water, would not burn, so they were forced to nibble on *Pragash*, which could be eaten raw. This was the only other edible plant growing in these dark recesses. It tasted fine (as opposed to the foul variety they'd been forced to eat above ground, with Eimear) but it was not plentiful. Hunger remained, as always, their most constant companion. As the days wore on, they struggled to remember what it was like to be truly satiated.

And the interpretation of "days"? That was nothing but a guess. Without an awareness of the faithful movements of the *Lumens* above them, their unreliable body clocks provided the

sole foundation upon which their sense of time was anchored. As a result, the bonds which laced their minds to reality continued to unravel.

The cryptic nature of the norostrean Seamounds revealed itself to them in many ways, but one was particularly unnerving. Unless you are in close proximity to one, aggregators are *very* difficult to articulate in this part of the Horizon, regardless of the terrain. And they found that the closer they moved to their destination, the more exaggerated this voltaic isolation became, with or without the Kuspegias. By day 10 in this cave, the elucidation of aggregators had ceased altogether, despite their nearness to some of the purest stanhic veins they'd ever seen.

Sonorance on another level, though, would not stay a stranger for long. For on day 14, Drogan articulated it: an intense but illusory set of cues from a rake of capillary clusters, interspersed with Ularic and pierced with a series of large, clear Aquylurian swathes. Through these conduits, divulgences, augmentations of sound and thought reached out to him in sonic alliance. Now and then a guttural queue would appear in what sounded like a blend of Andulkan and Mnulorathean, then a series of resonant, then dissonant quavers in blinding repetition, all dominated by the same underlying pulse: a static "*Sb...Sb...Sb*", repeated over and over. Not only this, but other, even more obscure glyphs and entwines could be seen carved into these veins, etched in smooth, seamless relief, in a way no hand or chisel, it seemed, could by themselves render.

These were the most exotic vein clusters either of them had ever seen, and their reverberations were no less unique. In his training as an Amnic circulat, Drogan possessed at least a passing knowledge of every known Thermionic motif. Plus, he could identify, if not understand, most spoken tongues, however arcane they might be. But the select way these mystic strands spoke to him, particularly through the Kuspegias, left him puzzled and demoralized.

As the days wore on, though, even these veins went dark, and it seemed that all the weapons in Drogan's arsenal had outlasted their usefulness. Not just the Kuspegias, but his

Myotrophus, a small, oval-shaped stone which fits into the palm of the hand. The “Myo” is built for cinctured articulations, accomplished by placing five outspread fingers upon a vein, with the stone nestled inside the palm. Here, this tool, forged of many of the same alloys as the Kuspegias, worked no better than if it were made of thin air.

Sleep eluded them, serving only to impede their progress. Every waking stratimer was filled with exhausted vigilance, constant movement, interspersed with the occasional stop to gather food or water, “drop the dado”, repair their fragile lightstaff, or on occasion patch their tattered clothes with the small sewing kit they’d found in Eimear’s bag. The sole positive to arise out of this journey, it seemed, was that their last doses of Bhatrathur had finally freed them from their lingering pain.

Never having been prone to excessive introspection, Kerak made an exception here, in a place where his mental wanderings far exceeded his physical, questioning to no end how he and Drogran had gotten here, who...and *what*...they really were. And, of course, *why*...

Kerak Um.Tiago, 21 quinteks of age, was the youngest son of Arjun Ve.Jalu, a master of the art who in his day had earned a reputation as perhaps the most prolific and skilled of all practicing Courvesants. Now...gone, having vanished 10 days before Kerak was born. Driven out? Killed? So many troubling questions, the answers eluding all who had searched for Arjun these many quinteks since his disappearance.

By the Erasotran calendar, Kerak had been born in the quintek 8875; or, in the second untek of the *Ulistrioth*, to quote the Kurestean linguistic calendar in more common use at the time. He had been raised by his mother, Adecyn Um.Tiago, her only child. Kerak grew up in the Philean plateaus, nurtured by their turquoise hills, lavender fields, plains and ravines; their wide, fathomless springs which vaulted and bled in raging torrents from deep within the primal

Subterra, feeding the many temperate rivers and lagoons which dotted the landscape.

He was witness to the clamorous throngs of muscular Tarandru and the lithe, nimble herds of Narwaselot, many thousands of which roamed unhindered through the hillocks and flatlands of the upper plateaus; not to mention the lush indigenous gifts of Syena, Thrushwhip, Marasai and Swerigess. These and much more were the legacy of his heritage, this son of the Phileans.

Their marisatria, the remote Whistoph-Karnash, had also been his father's birthplace. With a population which had never exceeded 300 souls, this hamlet provided a unique haven in which to nurture nimble young minds and bodies. Adecyn had emigrated here with her parents and siblings from a tiny marisatria just inside the Sorentrean terminus, and had become the consort of Arjun at a very young age. He was her first; she, his second, after the sudden death of his first consort, three quinteks before conjoining with Adecyn.

Not long after meeting Adecyn, Arjun's involvement with the Courvesois began to wane, for reasons which he never fully explained. Adecyn was young, energetic, in full balance with her consort. She was also very astute, but she knew little of Arjun's tumultuous past, of his career or his relationship with his first consort, or of what had become of the two children he'd fathered with her. She never questioned him about his reticent ways with others, and at times, with her. Regardless, her heart was strong for him, accepting him for who he was.

Arjun had acquired a considerable reserve of argency in his career, more wealth than any other Courvesant of his time. Nearly all of it, though, had somehow vanished not long after his disappearance, leaving Adecyn and Kerak with a small pittance upon which to survive. Still, she managed to stretch her reserves for many quinteks before her resources ran dry and she was forced to learn a trade.

These were the days when the search for the Circonic was in its adolescence, but growing. Adecyn soon found herself apprenticed to a circulat from the Thuracian valley named Jachin Te.Ines. Jachin's specialty was the construction of

Aggrete Micromics: alloyed apparati that are placed within long or schismatic veins, meant to magnify the pulsations between aggregators.

Adecyn showed great skill in this field, and as Jachin's colleague she was soon able to earn enough argency to provide her son with memory stones of the highest quality. When he grew of age, these stones enabled him to articulate the most precise and detailed knowledge which Philean aggregators, and those of other regions, could provide for his agile mind.

When not engaged in study or helping to tend the community gardens, Kerak passed his time diving the lagoons to spear for Malmoux, threshing whips from nearby fields or playing brisk rounds of Pilects with others his age. When Kerak reached the age of 11, Adecyn's relationship with Jachin warmed, and the tug of eroiche once again began to stir. She soon entered into full balance with Jachin, and they were driven to conjoin.

To her sorrow, Adecyn found herself unable to give birth with Jachin, but they accepted this setback without remorse. So they threw themselves as a team into Kerak's upbringing. Kerak was very fond of his stepfather, and Jachin returned this devotion in kind. He proved to be a wise and caring source of comfort and encouragement to Kerak, and Jachin, without progeny of his own, hoped someday to apprentice his stepson to the trade.

On most of Jachin's assignments, Kerak would accompany him and Adecyn in their aerosphere during their travels through the Phileans. Invented 80 quinteks ago by circulats in the Vengaos, early aerospheres were carved from the orbicular, hollow trunk of the Kwapreth tree. Its wood was light and provided an aerodynamically clean surface. Since that time, though, the Kwapreth has become extinct, and subsequent aerospheres have taken on other-than-spherical shapes or configurations, whatever the owner or builder desires. The name, though, stuck.

The aerosphere's substructure is fitted with dense magnetic alloys. *Levitation* stones match the polarity of the vast patchwork of veins embedded in the Subterra (mostly Menshar

or Ularic, the most prevalent varieties close to the surface), and enable the aerosphere to hover above those veins.

Propulsion stones, of a reverse polarity, are placed at the front of the vehicle, which is pulled along a network of roads and segregated pathways built above the veins. Kerak relished these travels as Jachin regaled him with colorful descriptions of the many aerospheres he'd seen in his time, including one fitted with a sail, and another pulled by a team of Narwaselots.

Jachin's skills as a circulator were unrivaled, however his business acumen left much to be desired, and his already lofty debts continued to mount. The 'Phemes began to turn when, late in Kerak's twelfth quintek, Jachin was summoned to Astuverica and introduced to Arduan Regents in search of his talents. He was soon hired to travel to the wisoltrean Andulkas, to build a series of Aggretes into a capillary branch of the Recondite.

This promised to be a lucrative assignment, but it troubled Adecyn because of the dubious reputation held by the Council of Arduas. She had heard the tales, as told from beyond her insulated purlieu, of the death, the theft, and enslavement which follow the Arduans and their ilk, wherever they went, particularly in areas where precious ores could be found. Adecyn was aware of the prevalence of a rich vein of Burnish Hagonite which zig-zagged beneath some portions the Phileans, not far from her home. In other regions, fragments of pristine ore had been found within similar veins; ores which were thought to be the native ingredients of those ancient aggregators comprising the heart of the Circonic.

So it was with great reluctance that Adecyn watched her consort begin his 300,000 neurri journey with eight laborers and three Regents to fulfill this assignment. It was the start of Kerak's thirteenth quintek.

Following the example she'd gleaned from Arjun, Adecyn had warned Jachin to reveal nothing to the Arduans about their family. However, late in the first untek of his assignment, in a casual conversation with a laborer from a nearby marisatria, Jachin let slip that Kerak was the natural son of

Arjun Ve.Jalu. This nugget was overheard by the Regent in charge of the expedition, Sorchu Ve.Sian.

Ve.Sian lunged at this news. He'd been a contemporary of Arjun, and he knew that it was the custom within The Order of the Courvesois for the offspring of Courvesants to apprentice to that society. If the neophyte showed sufficient talent for the trade, he or she would be allowed to carry the mantle of The Order and the title of Courvesant. Ve.Sian also held hope that if Kerak's apprenticeship were successful, he might hold the keys to the mystery of his father's disappearance. Indeed, Kerak might show himself to be a very useful tool.

After another 21 days, the entire length of this capillary had been fully articulated with the installation of four of Jachin's Aggretes. Upon completion of the assignment, Ve.Sian, determined to render another prize to the Architrave, followed Jachin back to Whistoph-Karnash and with subtlety, befriended an impressionable young Kerak with tales of Arjun and his formidable legend.

At first, Jachin and Adecyn resisted Ve.Sian's advances upon Kerak, however their compliance was soon purchased. With Jachin, it was the promise of riches in the steady employ of the Triumvirate. This placed him on perpetual assignment with Ve.Sian's bondservants. As for Adecyn, she soon found herself unable to rely on her absent consort's encouragement, helpless to resist Ve.Sian's persistent demands that Kerak would be better off in the thriving borough of Astuverica, under the wing of The Order, his father's legacy. She would not sell her son for argents, but with ample doses of Pentumus, and within time, Chelomar, she was soon shackled to Ve.Sian's persuasion.

With that, Ve.Sian's mission was accomplished. In the middle of his thirteenth quintek, Kerak put Whistoph-Karnash behind him forever. Adecyn never saw her son again.

The abstracts of the caustic Kirsai Lo.Ydriasch put their own spin on the kind of life Kerak Um.Tiago led, not just as a member of The Order, but as a small cog in the wheel of the Triumvirate...

The Courvesant is the vanguard of the Triumvirate. Where evidence of the Circonic is found, where a patch of Subterra even remotely promises to betray its riches, the Courvesois is dispatched in silence to gather intel for the Triumvirate, then, when necessary, to neutralize select Regents in those marisatrias. Adhering to the culture of a centralized Regency, the population, with their leadership gone, will eventually succumb to fear and chaos, leaving them vulnerable to the Muharadu, always ready to step in to render their own brand of spiritual solace.

This statement begs a bit of backstory, so as to explain how the Triumvirate, and the Muharadu in particular, accomplish their ends. For thousands of quinteks, the Metephemes (or 'Phemes' for short) were given sole credit (and at times, blame) for their exertion on the lives and the fates of all living souls. Believed to be a mysterial dynamic arising from the voltaic suffusion which courses throughout our Sphere, the 'Phemes are thought by some to permeate the very essence of all that exists within the Dimensional Horizon, both seen and unseen. To the believer, they act as a constant but ethereal nudge on the lives of all souls; an arrow, of sorts, directing the principal aspect within us all.

The 'Phemes diverge along the twin lines of sonorance. "Resonance" is that permeation which infuses the sanguine mind, filled with a sense of innocence and hope, even a smattering of gauzy illusion when reality turns to oppression. "Dissonance," the antipodal twin of resonance, is far more well-defined. It ranges between two extremes: from the simple dynamic of the plain, unvarnished truth, to the mindset of iniquity, malice and hatred; the venom which runs, in varying degrees, through the blood, the bone and the brain of every living soul, as well as the Sphere upon which we all toil and tear, simply so we can live another day.

Even in the midst of competing religious dogmas, Metephism was a universal doctrine which had gone largely unchallenged until the obscure cult of the Muharadu began to gain prominence. The Muharic Guderaph, also known as the "Laparis of Tomes," promises that the Lumens not only shroud the Dimensional Horizon with life-giving light, but that they

assure us of freedom from the hopelessness of death. For it is taught that each Lumen carries within its heart the spirit, the very essence, of the True Believer. From the earliest of times, the axis of Muharic belief has always been Hedeon, the Lumen who soars at the center of the flock. His presence enfolds and guides us, without the need for an impetus as mundane (and according to the Muharadu, as blasphemous) as the Metephemes.

Muharic principles stress that, upon death, the quintessence of the faithful adherent shall rise to become one with the heart of one of Hedeon's Lumens. And if the believer is a member of the inner circle of the Muharadu, or if their belief is particularly strong, their quintessence will rise and soar within the very heart of Hedeon himself. These promises are meant to assure the believer in the balm of eternal life, since the Guderaph teaches that the Lumens live forever.

The Muharadu has always been an eager component of the Triumvirate. And their alliance with the Arduans and The Order has brought their beliefs into sharp focus. For the past 40 quinteks, Muharics have held to the belief that the Circonic contains the ancient Thermionic abstracts of the Guderaph's original manuscript, along with one missing book of that document. So ever since evidence of the Circonic's existence became known, Muharic priests have taught, above all, that Hedeon will offer his most sacred blessings to those who search for these ancient aggregators...as well as those who merely comply with the effort.

This is stressed so that the Machaera, under the direct leadership of the Council of Arduas, can follow the priesthood into a targeted marisatria, cleave the local veins to minimize uncontrolled cognitions, and perform the rest of their job with minimal resistance. Through its purges, that job culminates in this: eviscerate all opposition and appropriate the useful to perform the hard labor required to satisfy the needs of the Triumvirate and its Astuverican base.

Whenever possible, their goals are advanced by apostates (dubbed by the cynical and the resistance as "pellogroats"), most of whom are bought with either pilfered argents or copious hits of Pentumus and Chelomar. Their familiarity with local culture, habits and hierarchy, along with their

willingness to betray those who surreptitiously oppose the Triumvirate, has enlarged their value to the Architrave.

In the end, all who are not willing to walk away from their property and their pride, who will not succumb to the whip and the cage, or who will not peddle themselves, their friends or their families for a plug of scratch or a slug of boiled powder, have been relegated to the ash heap of annihilation; tortured, and when their luck improves, executed. The most they can hope for is that their remains will be of use to a few khiromeks as they boil their trade deep within the dens of Astuverica.

The Courvesois, consumed by their insolence, hold themselves and their work above the other branches of the Triumvirate, in particular the Council's Machaera. For the Courvesant proudly affirms a solemn duty to kill with honor (as The Order sees it), not with bloodshed. And once the assignment is complete, the Courvesant is expected to dissolve into abeyance until called again.

In the end, only the Triumvirate has profited from their partnership. Their stated mission is the discovery of the Stanhic Grail, but the effective result of their work is not just the accumulation of ores. It is the pilferage of any and all usable resources, living or otherwise, that they find within the territories they usurp. The Muharadu gets its converts and the promise of the complete reunification of the Guderaph; the Council of Arduas gets its treasure; and the Courvesois gets to wrap its swollen ego in pride and tradition by plying its trade...of course, on its own terms.

And the Courvesant known as Kerak Um.Tiago? He did not disappoint. After completing his apprenticeship with Elunid Te.Mirin, Kerak served The Order without fail for seven quinteks. 58 souls, 10 marisatrias and as a bonus, three small but troublesome resistance cells fell victim to his stealth, his innocent manner, his quick hands. Not to mention the valuable intel he gathered, leading to captures and assaults which further enriched his patrons and ravaged the element of life in ways he never troubled himself to imagine.

He did as he was told, and he did it well: meld and blend into the population, befriend the target and gain their

confidence, gather information if necessary, and then strike at the earliest possible opportunity, with one hand gently touching his prey, and the other grasping the instrument of death.

Early on, Kerak had been romanced with tales of the glorious life of the Courvesant, but he soon saw it for what it really was: a barren existence, devoid of empathy, repose, reflection, sympathy or love. It was also a life of near complete isolation, since Courvesants were prohibited from seeking out or associating with others like them, for fear of exposing their cover.

For many quinteks, Kerak managed to thrive within this environment, seeking to emulate the example set by his father, and another Courvesant, one whose legend positioned her as the greatest of all practicing members of The Order in that time. One whose furtive deadliness approached even that of Arjun. One whom Kerak had never met, but whose mythos and accomplishments had set the highest standard for all other Courvesants. She was Savita Te.Sinian, the oldest child of Arjun Ve.Jalu, and Kerak's half-sister.

Kerak's illusions were soon to dissolve as his lust for equal status with the legends of Arjun and Savita slowly betrayed him. News of the recent death of his mother from an overdose of Chelomar had witnessed within him his first taste of genuine grief. Rumors of Arjun's reported transgressions against the Triumvirate, of Savita's alleged violations of The Order's codes of honor, never diminished their standing in his eyes. In time, he came to realize that it was nothing more than his *family* that he sought, not their status or notoriety.

One final assignment, though, would drive Kerak from The Order and into a life of vigilance and evasion from the Machaera. One final assignment would shatter his illusions once and for all.

At the completion of an assignment in the Saurostran tablelands, Kerak had been diverted to Cythrop-Preara, a marisatria at the boundary between the Vengathlian buttes and

the sorentrean Seamounts. The Triumvirate had decimated Mestophleac, Yrgotrea and many other marisatrias in the estrean Vengaos, all of them to noro-wiso of the Thuracian valley. Without raising the hand of resistance, thousands from these boroughs had accepted resettlement, with the exception of 870 who had forged an intransigent bulwark, placing them within the sights of three detachments of Machaerans assigned to that region.

Half an untek earlier, it came to light that Odrahn Lo.Hualic, an influential disciple of the resistance, had been in contact with an Amnic circulat who was suspected on his own of divining a blended vein in the norostrean Vengaos. Within this vein, he was rumored to have discovered a slip of ultra-pure ore, its origins and architecture otherwise unknown. This rumor caught the attention of a Muharic priest passing through Yrgotrea, who relayed it through the Recondite to Vikram Lo.Jehan, a prominent Councilor at the Architrave.

The Order, in the last five quinteks, had modified its strategy to include the infiltration of the Muricai, a mélange of highly-organized resistance cells. For this assignment, Kerak was tasked with the following: find the renegade circulat (Kerak's target), transmit the location of the slip and Lo.Hualic's hideout, and kill the target...in that order.

Right away, Kerak's search for the target was successful. Posing as a loyal member of an unaffiliated cell, Kerak managed to gain his confidence. For days, Kerak watched as the target and his compatriots forged and refined the ores they had extracted from the culprit slip. The resulting ingots were then passed along to Lo.Hualic's couriers for delivery to the Muricai and eventual sale on the most covert of all black market platforms: the Chivet-Pradur, a prime source of revenue for Muricai operations. However, even after a full 12 days into the assignment, Kerak had been unable to determine the location of the slip. That is, until early one morning on his 13th day...

"Tools...I need those tools we stockpiled three days ago. Grab them for me, Meiluris!" the target yelled out of the opening of the grotto at one of four cohorts who were to join

them that day for an expedition to a small ravine, 8,000 neurris distant, at the foothills of the norostrean Vengaos.

Kerak had risen early that morning, knowing that their supply of ore was nearly exhausted. One Muricai courier had arrived yesterday and another was due any day now, expecting ingots to carry off for sale or further refinement. Machaeran scouts had been spotted in the past few days, close to a nearby hammock colony, and it was felt that the capture of many quinteks worth of clandestine work could be imminent.

“What are the tools for?” Kerak quizzed the target, yawning, as the Lumens rose late that morning from the mountainous norostrean horizon.

“Varsan, my friend, good morning. You up for a little trip today? I guess you know our supplies are running low. Our slip is located to wisoltre; it’s up some pretty steep terrain. So get some breakfast. We’re in for a haul and you’ll need your strength!”

Answering to an alias had become second nature to Kerak as the words “I’ll be out in a stratimer” fell from his tongue. After tossing down some Thrushwhip bread topped with a little Kalmuth mushroom paste and Narwaselot liver pudding (it tastes better than it sounds) he threw his pack and a bundle of pickaxes over his shoulders and joined his companions on their journey.

200 stratimers into their sojourn, with the Lumens at about five degrees post-Zenith, the party rounded the rocky crag from which Kerak could see the upper rim of the ravine. As with all assignments, a tinge of nervousness shot through him, realizing how close he now was to the completion of leg one of this assignment. But this day, that familiar feeling was followed by something far different: a strange sensation, one of complete emotional exhaustion, as if his body and his mind were beginning to fail him. A sense of foreboding overwhelmed Kerak as he struggled to maintain his focus.

About 20 neurris from the slip, he saw the target reach into his bag, pull two items out and raise his hands to his head before jumping into a hole about two neurris deep. “We’ll

break for water, then we'll begin work in five stratimers," yelled out another member of their party.

Kerak ducked behind a large rock and pulled out his Treflicat. He'd been instructed to transmit the location of the slip as soon as he found it, so that in the event of an interruption of his plans, at least the first leg could be called a success.

He hadn't used his stone in 14 days, and he needed to prepare it for articulation. With a cautious eye he scanned his surroundings. Palming this narrow cylindrical mass, etched with numerous parallel lines and small, intricate carvings, he hunched over it as if his life depended on it, which wasn't far from the truth. For Kerak knew that the owner of a Treflicat, if captured by the Muricai, was rarely pardoned.

Since the creation of the Triumvirate's proprietary memory stone, dozens of Treflicats had been co-opted by the Muricai, each one by varying means. But the treasonous abstracts of Mangaian Um.Phasaic, a fugitive Hirusovran Regent, describe this instrument quite well. Um.Phasaic's writings were cached in a Hirusovran aggregator three days before Kerak had arrived in the Vengaos...

The Muricai had first become a serious threat to the Triumvirate about 18 quinteks ago. For 10 quinteks they had been able to use their pilfered Treflicats to render severe damage to the Triumvirate, practically unhindered. At one point, a Muricai cell was even able to plant a mole within the Architrave while another managed to track the movements of 12 key Regents, all of whom were soon captured, held for ransom, and within time, assassinated when negotiations for their release fell through.

Enter the one known as Kirahmoor, the fifth Subm-Ephriant. Kirahmoor had risen to succeed the fourth, Thurou Lo.Quilich, after the fourth's sudden, mysterious death seven quinteks ago. Not long after his ascension, Kirahmoor proved to be the most cunning and effective of all who have ever held that title, primarily because of his furtive, enigmatic nature. He has been able to consolidate, to enlarge his massive cult and his vast powers because he is consistently heard, and his

influence is always felt, but his face is never seen. His mythos, in truth, has been the driving force behind his success.

Soon after Kirahmoor's ascension, the process began of placing indentions in all Treflicats, bearing the sole imprint of the intended user and creating staggered layers of mnemonic filamentation within each stone. This advance has served to impede, and in some cases impale, unauthorized access to higher level abstracts, namely the Architrave's prized Strategic Chronicles, as well as the cloistered movements of key Regents.

Under the advances implemented by Kirahmoor, if the filamentary indentions of the user do not match those of the owner, or if a user attempts to channel abstracts which are not staggered to the indention of that specific stone, the Treflicat will act to transmit their location, enabling local Machaerans to find and capture the hapless user and return the stone to the Architrave.

Despite these advancements, attempts on the lives of the most pivotal Regents and Ephriants have not ceased, so indentions have grown stronger, more well-defined, and more difficult to breach. These continuing setbacks have driven the Muricai to seek other means of articulating the Recondite, to push their goals forward...

...And they were the motivation which drove the target, followed by Kerak, to this very spot.

Kerak had been channeled on an encrypted modulation for less than a stratimer when he heard a loud crack, the scurry of two pairs of feet through the thick grass behind him. A frenzy of panicked voices echoed off the surrounding boulders. Kerak looked up to see the twin silhouettes of the target and one of the locals rushing toward him, arms and fists extended.

Suddenly, everything went black.

“Wake up! Wake up! Who the *freigh* are you?? TALK you miserable *Skantaro!*” Kerak opened his one good eye to a strange, poorly lit cavern, his hands strapped behind his back, sitting upright on the floor against a jagged wall. His arms, face and upper torso were swollen, smeared with blood and grime. The gash on his forehead pulsed and throbbed. His skull

pealed under the weight of an overpowering headache. The taste of dried blood lingered in his mouth. His first blurry sight of this place was the face of the target; glaring, screaming loud, eyes ablaze with fury.

“That memory stone of yours; it’s a Treflicat! While we were up on the rim of that ravine you were articulating...the Recondite, weren't you? WEREN'T YOU?!”

“I say let's kill him. NOW!” the voice of the one known as Andrión yelled out.

“No! We need him to talk! Get me that rope and a knife.” The target placed his hand against Kerak's head wound and pressed hard. Kerak reeled in agony but never made a sound. “You ready?! I got all day pellot. Now tell me who the *freigh* you are!” He sliced off a two neurri section of rope and wrapped it around Kerak's neck.

Kerak gazed into the eyes of the target, and right away saw his own death. But he also saw something else: something different; familiar. Something he'd never seen in the eyes of anyone else. Fear, then resignation, seized him. *The Order...Elunid, Savita...and Arjun...I cannot betray them*, he thought. Conflict seized his mind as he felt his resolve begin to fade. *If I am to die*, he swore to himself, *then I will die with honesty...with honor...and on my own terms!*

“I am Kerak Um.Tiago...the only son of Adecyn Um.Tiago...the half-brother of Savita Te.Sinian...the youngest child of Arjun Ve.Jalu. I am...a Courvesant. And I am...*ready*...” With ease, the words fell from Kerak's lips. In an instant he felt the cool waters of the clear lagoons. His mother's warm affection. The gentle winds of the Phileans, engulfing him in a rapturous embrace.

With stunned, blank eyes, the target gawked at Kerak for half a stratimer. “Everyone! I...I need you to go outside. Get out! OUT!!” he yelled, his tone shattering Kerak's peaceful meanderings. One by one, Kerak watched the others leave the cave. His heart pounded with fear and uncertainty. Then the target removed the rope from Kerak's neck, threw the knife into his back pocket, picked Kerak up over his shoulders and

carried him and his pack outside, far beyond the sight of the others.

After hauling Kerak to a small, concealed hill about 75 neurris distant, the target dropped him and his satchel behind a rock, then freed Kerak's hands. Kerak's mind swirled with confusion as he wondered what was about to happen. The target retrieved his knife from his back pocket and lanced Kerak's swollen eye.

Kerak struggled to understand what was happening. The target paused to consider a quick review of the odds, to organize his impulsive strategy for dealing with them, the word *trust* flashing over and over at the base of his cortex. Kerak watched him reach into his pocket and pull out a small, cinched bag. From another pocket he pulled out a rough, oblong Kyotrimlic stone. He paused to cognify a quick message into the Kyo. Then he took Kerak's hand and pressed the bag and the Kyo into his palm, enfolding, pressing Kerak's fingers around them. The target shook his head. The stare he gave Kerak was cold, harsh, tinged with uncertainty, but at the same time, fraught with hope, a thin guise of affirmation.

"I may come to regret this," the target whispered, "but you know, something tells me..." The target paused, then went on. "So listen up! Take this bag and the Kyo and keep them in your pack for safekeeping. Do *not* lose them! Go to the A.30.B Quarter loop, 217th Register, and knock on the door: it's a small, dark blue terrabode just behind the Palamont assembly, next to the outer third corridor, close to the provender markets at the Columns. Ask for Ligeia, and give her this bag and the Kyo. You and I will cognify very soon after you've reached her. At least, that is my hope."

The target shot a nervous glance behind him, at the small cavern from which they had just emerged. With no one else in sight, he removed a cloth from his pocket to finish drying the blood from Kerak's face. Kerak thanked him as the target pushed him on his way. They turned to face each other before Kerak departed.

"I...I'll do as you say, but I need to know; why are you are doing this? Why are you setting me free? And what's in this bag?" Kerak asked as an unseen set of eyes, belonging to one of Droган's locals, captured their encounter from behind a rock above an adjoining ridge.

"They're two small memory stones; something we've been forging on the side when we're not pressing ingots. They're..." The target muzzled himself, as if he'd said too much already.

Kerak rubbed his eyes. He was wobbly, fog-headed, still unsure of all this. Something ached within him to ask the question. So he did.

"Who *are* you?"

"First I'll tell you who I am *not*. My given name is not Droган. My given, my *real* name, is Arjun2 Te.Sinian. I am your brother!"

6

*T*HEIR PATH, EARLY IN THIS, THE 23rd day of their journey, had begun to narrow to the point that they often had to turn sideways to move even a fraction of a neurri. Too, they had lately begun to notice that the air was getting thicker, more humid. Another turn stood before them and they found themselves confronted with the largest Kalmuth mushroom they had ever seen. Saturated with age, rank with a noxious odor, it was covered with a slimy red paste. It blanketed the passageway before them.

As they took turns with the machete, hacking away at the fungi's rugged meat, each slice of the blade further betrayed the enigmatic sound they had first heard on their seventh day in this cave. Exhausted after swinging at it for 20 stratimers, a fortuitous stroke finally pierced the veil, rendering a hole in the Kalmuth the size of an adult head. In an instant, a blast of cold spray shot through from the other side, knocking Kerak and Drogan to the ground.

They came to their feet, watching wet air explode through the hole for 15 pulsimers until the pressure stabilized. Turbid drafts filled their lungs as Kerak grabbed the machete and resumed his work. After another 10 stratimers, he had whittled a hole large enough for the two of them to squeeze through. Once on the other side of the Kalmuth, their ears were filled with the shriek of air and water being sucked, it seemed, in every direction.

"Drogan, where are we? Where do we go now?" Kerak screamed to be heard. Drogan motioned to his right, toward a twisted maze of narrowing corridors. At the end they found a spot that was somewhat dry, and quiet enough to engage in conversation.

"Kerak, I think we're at the edge of a Kiyfer dome. We're going to have to enter it. But the Bay of Teoramugh...well,

after we manage to exit this dome, it's not far away! Kerak, we're almost there!"

In that moment, Droган at last understood what Pras'pheratu had earlier revealed to him. This was the "deluge of water" he had envisioned when he had evoked his proxy. This final hurdle signified to him how near they were to the end of their journey. Droган's relieved smile, though, did nothing for Kerak other than to pique his frustration.

"This is a...a Kiyfer? And what do you..." Kerak started to ask.

"That's right. A Kiyfer dome is a vertical tunnel of water. Remember the stream we first saw when we entered this cave? That stream either originates from, or feeds into, a Kiyfer dome. Water gets trapped deep in the Subterra, and through a vacuum at the top of the dome it gets pulled upward into a vertical chamber."

"I *know* what a Kiyfer dome is," Kerak said with a scowl. "What I don't know is what you mean by 'enter' and 'exit'. Care to elaborate?"

"At the top of the dome is a pericule..."

"Yes...I know!"

"The pericule; that's where the vacuum chamber is that pulls water up from springs and aquifers. On its way up, water leaches out of openings or cracks in the chamber. This is where rivers, streams, lagoons come from. It's where..."

"I know what a pericule is, Droган! Would you just get to the freighin' *point*!?"

"Yeah, okay, so we enter the Kiyfer, swim about 75 neurris up, and there's a spring that exits the chamber on the sorentrean side. We swim out of it, and Teoramugh! Brother, Teoramugh's only about 2000 neurris from there. We're home free, Kerak. We're home *free*!"

Kerak paused to expel a frustrated grunt. "You make it sound so simple, Droган, you know that? *So* simple..."

Dripping wet, their gear sogged and straining at their backs, they stared up at it, silent mouths agape. Its deafening roar

pierced their ears. Clear thought was next to impossible. Communication was reduced to sign language, fumbling gestures.

Above them lay a slanted passageway, about one neurri wide, seven long. Kerak adjusted the lightstaff to full strength and lashed its sections together to keep them from slipping. Drogan stood on Kerak's shoulders, took the staff in his hands and shined it upward as its glow cut through the mist. What he saw was both awe-inspiring and disconcerting. At the end of the passage, water could be seen flowing *upward* in a deafening torrent.

Very little water leaked down into the passageway, but still, its surface was quite slick. They could only imagine how much of a drenching this tiny shaft would take if the flow were reversed. They knew that they had to catch a tiny slit of an exit point on their way toward the pericule. And they knew that if they missed this target, there would be no escape from this aqueous dungeon.

"You ready?" a trembling Drogan yelled down at Kerak, hearing nothing but white noise. Kerak gave him a thumbs-up.

Drogan tied the lightstaff to his wrist. Then he reached up for a root at the bottom of the passage and pulled himself into the entrance to the mouth of the passage. He heaved his body up, one dead root, one exposed rock at a time. Three neurris into the passage, he could feel the clutch of Kerak's hand's around his ankles.

With all his strength, Drogan continued to pull himself up, his face drowning in mist, his eyes blinded by the reflection of the lightstaff's glow off the damp walls of this tight passage. The enraged shrill of speeding water filled his ears.

One final pull, then he raised his hand and reached out to...

... *WHOOSH*...

In less than a pulsimer, all went quiet. Drogan felt his entire body being heaved, hurled, *sucked* forward. His eyes slammed shut and he could feel water filling his mouth, his lungs as he struggled to force it out.

He grew dizzy, his body rolling, spinning, tumbling, falling *up*, straight up, still feeling Kerak's manic grip around his ankles. He opened his eyes and in his muddled vision he saw that they were locked within a massive tube, walled with jagged rock, speckled with elongated streaks, veins blemished with every shade of green, yellow, purple and red. Tiny flashes of reflected light twinkled here and there, signaling the boundaries of perimeter walls. Kerak and Drogan sped past them in rapid order.

Then, all went dark again. The savage vibrations from the rush of the water had rattled the lightstaff and shut it off.

Drogan fought to keep his eyes open and upward. Then he saw it! A tiny spark of luminescence, glowing dim in liquid darkness. They were closing in on it. *That's our target*, he thought, flapping and flailing his arms and legs to bring his body closer to it. The glow of lumens grew stronger, now just above him as he felt his body drawing ever nearer.

But they were moving fast, though; much *too* fast. And they were still too far from it! He fought hard to maneuver his body closer to the light; his pulse racing, his heart thundering. He felt his throat begin to seize.

To his fear and amazement, it looked to him as if they were going to slide right past it! He spotted a large root just above the light. He reached for it, struggled in a panic to grab it, groping now in darkness, thrusting his body forward and...

He *missed* it!

In an instant, Drogan's heart was struck with a throttling sense of despair. They'd made it all this way. They were *this* close! And now, it seemed, their journey had come down to this; nothing more than a disconsolate end, trapped here to drown in darkness, silence and frustration.

Suddenly, he felt his body come to a jerky and painful halt. The feel of rushing water was stronger now, more intense than he'd ever felt in his entire life.

Drogan looked down and couldn't believe what he was seeing. Kerak, still clutching his brother's ankles, had managed to wrap his legs around the root!

Hold steady, brother, Drogan begged as he felt the faint, soothing elixir of hope once more begin to course through his veins.

Again, alarm set in. They'd had only a quick pulsimer to take a breath before being sucked into this maelstrom, and now the pressure on their lungs was growing far too intense. Somehow, though, their instincts guided them. A hasty, well-orchestrated exchange of hands and feet resulted in a reversal of their positions, with Drogan holding onto Kerak's ankles as both of Kerak's hands clutched the root, just above their egress point.

Kerak grimaced against the assailment of rushing water, the overpowering urge to breathe. Hand over hand he struggled to reach the light before him, Drogan in secure tow. With a lunging surge, he torqued his body forward, clawing in despair at the opening, pulling them closer. Kerak could feel his body being jolted, twisted, contorted, his mind and his vision wracked with pain and disequilibrium.

Kerak could stand it no longer. He clutched his throat, took a deep breath and...

Air! Air filled his lungs once more!

Kerak took one, two, then another labored breath, opening his eyes and lifting his head to see a gentle stream of water easing past his body, then roaring downhill, far out of sight. His face was bathed in warmth. He stared straight up and saw the most beautiful sight he had ever seen in his life: the Lumens, winging high above him.

We're free. Creegh Amaria, we're finally free!

For 20 stratimers, they laid still and silent on the shore of a sandy beach. Beside them frothed a clear spring, its gurgling waters whispering in their ears. The spring fed what appeared to be a shallow lagoon, enclosed on three sides. Beyond, a rushing stream fell into a narrow chasm, far below.

Slowly, Kerak and Drogan stood to stretch their worn, waterlogged frames. The Lumens' refreshing glow bathed and

warmed them as they embraced, cheering and crying their thanks to the 'Phemes that their lives had been spared.

As Kerak squeezed water out of his shirt and his pack, Drogran walked the perimeter of the lagoon to get the lay of the land. He realized that they were beside nothing more than a small pond, perched atop a plateau bordered by steep cliffs. Above them, a wall of sheer rock, devoid of life, curved off into a dark blue wisoltrean expanse. *Somewhere up there is the top of that Kiyfer dome*, Drogran mused. The thought of their recent entrapment and near death in that sodden coffin made him shudder.

To his front, Drogran could detect the fringes of a sparkling Eusterian horizon. The Lumens were about 30 degrees post-Zenith now, closing in on an estrean dusk. To norostre, dark mists rose to blanket the most perilous vertical crags he'd ever seen. To sorentre, a clear sky hovered above rocky knobs, blustery hills that sloped in sharp relief toward the Shalu'doc.xhu. He soaked in the sights surrounding him, barely able to comprehend that, somehow, they had made it this far.

Drogran returned to the lagoon to see Kerak rummaging through his pack in search of food, finding nothing more than six damp Pragash stems. "That's all I got, brother," he said. "Think they'll hold us until we get there?"

"They'll have to," Drogran replied, reaching into his satchel for his Kuspegias. He then pulled out a rag, wrung it dry and wiped his temples. He positioned the Kuspegias in an attempt to articulate...something! *Perhaps the height of this plateau and the lack of interference from the cave will improve my chances*, he thought.

After 10 stratimers, though, nothing came to him.

Drogran recalled some of his earliest tutorials, as a young apprentice circulat, on the geography of the Seamounts. One particular nugget of elucidation, he recalled, had come from a Hirusovran aggregator...

"...The veins in the Mnulorathean realm are rife with schisms, fractures and other natural disruptions. This makes

successful articulations, even with the finest stones, difficult if not, at times, impossible...”

Drogan wondered if this might explain this apparent “dark zone” of articulation. Frustrated, he pressed the stones against his temples, seeking to locate the vein which had brought him and Kerak here in the first place; the very vein about which Euan had, with such passion, informed him and his fellow Muricai. Drogan drilled down harder, focusing with all he had for an elucidation.

Again, nothing.

Cursing, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the tiny, jagged Kyotrimlic stone which Euan had arranged for delivery from such a great distance. Kyotrimlics, about half the size of a typical memory stone, are made of rock fragments naturally high in Menshar, which are then infused with a magnetic imprint. They can then be implanted with filamentation containing messages; the same missives which would normally pass through veins and aggregators.

Euan had carried this old Kyotrimlic with him during his journey into the norostrean Seamounds. Against great odds, he had managed to co-opt a wandering band of expats on their way between refugee camps. Through them he had passed this Kyo along to Odrahn Lo.Hualic’s Muricai cell. The stone contained information alerting them to evidence of a capillary vein of Baraslute, believed to be close to the surface, somewhere within this barren terrain.

Drogan examined the Kyo under a tight grip, noticing the hairline cracks and splits lining its surface, the excessive wear around its once sharp edges. A cackle of some mysterious verbiage and a few random azimuths appeared, but they were shivered, eroded with time. *Probably some old cognitions left behind by a previous user, long gone now*, Drogan thought as he struggled once more to cut through the backwash in an effort to elucidate the queues found in Euan’s message. After a few more pulsimers, he placed the Kyo back into his pocket, applied more pressure to the Kuspegias and gave it yet another try.

To his dismay, he found that he could elucidate...nothing.

“Kerak, hand me Eimear's old stone. I'm still not getting anything. What could Euan have meant when he claimed he'd found Baraslute up here?”

Kerak fumbled through his bag and handed the mutilated stone to Drogan. “You think another proxy might work?”

No, Drogan concluded after a long pause, signaling his change of mind with a shake of his head.

One more try was all he could muster. Drogan took Euan's Kyo in both hands now, intent on driving his focus harder, to sharpen the effect of its interaction with the Kuspegias.

Again...he came up empty.

His heart sank. Why had he come all this way? Why had he, had Kerak, risked so much, for what now seemed like *nothing*? Could Euan have been wrong? *It's not like him to err this way*, Drogan thought. Futility overtook him as he sat on a rock, removed the Kuspegias to his satchel and ruminated on what this new turn of events meant, and what he was going to do now.

Baraslute is a highly sonorant metal with spidery grains, found only in samples no larger than a pebble. Veins of this stanhic are believed to run vertically, defying the recumbent tendencies of every other vein of ore in the Dimensional Horizon. Unreliable evidence of small but lengthy scepters of Baraslute, no wider than an adult thumb, have been found within the deepest of Subterranean vaults. The general presence of this ore in a given area can be detected through the commonest of memory stones, but it is believed that if the exact location of a vein were ever found and articulated, the magnetic field surrounding it would flatten and spread, sometimes thousands of neurris from the center of the stave.

Hence the manic interest in this metal. The expectation among renegade Amnics was that if a vein of Baraslute could be found to run deep enough, and close enough, to the Recondite...within 2000 to 3000 neurris, even...then it could be exploited as a side channel to proxy an articulation through

the Recondite; an articulation whose source would remain undetected due to the massive size of the field.

If a series of such articulations were successful, remaining undiscovered for a sufficient length of time, the keys to Astuverica could be held to unlock the very heart of the Triumvirate. Covert abstracts would fall like leaden mists to unseal the prized Strategic Chronicles, forcing a wedge within the Architrave's cryptic works, allowing the Muricai to anticipate and subvert the Triumvirate's most carefully laid plans. And just as important, it would enable the Muricai to track the movements of every Regent, from the Suhm-Ephriant on down. Then, to steal a page from the codebook of The Order, random, covert hits could be directed at the Regency in hopes of being able to weaken that heart, and in time, kill the body known to all as the Triumvirate.

After 40 quinteks of hapless struggle, the Muricai had resolved itself to the futility of direct confrontation with the Triumvirate, unaided by the Thermionic leverage that Baraslute provided. And it had long ago given up on the prospect of winning the unvarnished confidence of the populace, to count on them to assist in the struggle. The obstacles of terrain, language, culture and the threat of banishment from the Muharic faith never failed to frustrate.

Despite these and all other setbacks the Muricai had encountered over the quinteks, the quiet search for Baraslute...for the Triumvirate's soft underbelly...carried on.

But now, Drogan thought. What now?

Luments were fading, becoming more scattered in the misty sky as he wandered back to Kerak. He removed his boots and waved them in the air in a vain attempt to dry them. After their paltry meal, Kerak managed to repair the lightstaff as the Lumens slid into the estrean horizon. He'd been able to coax a small glimmer of light from the instrument, then a little more until he was able to finesse it to remain steady, but only at medium strength.

"I hope this works, Drogan. Our last couple of watery rides haven't done this thing any good. How far did you say we need to go before we can place our signal?"

Drogan fought to place himself back in the moment, to recall his Pras'demnic articulations of the tail end of their journey. "About 2000 neurris. It's gonna be slow going through some pretty rough terrain. We need to leave soon." Time remained only to refill their canteens before they shouldered their gear, putting this watery refuge behind them.

To norostre.

THEY DEPARTED THE LAGOON just as the first Ione began winging skyward. Kerak tweaked the lightstaff again and tied it to Drogan's chest to keep his hands free as they took each tenuous step down from the plateau. Every few neurris Drogan would close his eyes to realign his focus. His visions were more lucid in complete darkness, but Kerak had warned him to leave the staff untouched for fear that it might be impossible to restart. Regardless, Drogan's divinations did not fail him, and the familiar psychic lightpath once again appeared before his eyes to guide their way.

The night sky was soon aglow with the visage of Ionian light as Kerak and Drogan ventured on. There was no trail to follow, just a tormented landscape of boulders, pits, cliffs, and shallow ravines, interspersed with the rare flat surface. They fought constantly to maintain their balance, unsure if a fall would drop them no further than their knees or send them plummeting to their deaths.

300 stratimers after leaving the lagoon, after losing their footing 12 times, after falling into four pits at least two neurris deep, after their twisted, strained ankles could no longer support their weight, they arrived at their interim destination: a small jagged perch atop a cliff overlooking a rocky beach at the Eusterian shore. Beyond that point, they could see the Bay of Teoramugh, a mere 300 neurris distant, effervescent before the approach of dawn.

After settling in, Drogan poured the dregs of his canteen into his mouth. *Yesterday I would have been satisfied never to see another drop of water in my life. What a change!* He mused with a wry smile, thoughts of the day to come passing through his mind. The anticipation of food, drink, and "other than brotherly" companionship was more than enticing, but they needed to vault one last hurdle before their journey was done. Kerak lowered the lightstaff behind a rock as he too emptied

his canteen onto a parched tongue. It would be another 80 stratimers before they could present their signal. Then, if all went according to plan, they would receive the welcome they hoped for.

With night drawing to a close, Drogan nodded off and on in fitful rhythm. Anxious to defer sleep, he pulled the pouch from his backpack and fumbled the tiny twin stones between his fingers, admiring their well-honed edges, their dark, clean surfaces. This pair of Kuspegias was one of a set of three he had forged with an alloy of Tulerioc and Hagonite, from his kiln in the norostrean Vengaos. Added to that mixture was a strange, highly pure, golden-yellow stanhic dust of unknown origin, purchased on the Chivet-Pradur through a kratasiph loyal to their principles.

Through his eyes and his hands, Drogan's attention was drawn inward, toward each wafer-like stone, replete with a fine brilliance of dark purple flecks, turquoise crystals, metamorphosed under the intensity of heat; a fusion of opposites. But through his mind, the Kuspegias and their consolidation of elements could be summed up in a single word, far more indicative of their true nature.

Perfection.

That is what they meant to him: the culmination of five quinteks of the most demanding work he had ever undertaken. They also represented at least one more barrier between his present circumstance and the life he'd once lived, snug and satisfied in a small, dark blue terrabode, somewhere beyond that sorentrean horizon.

Since he had aligned with Ghurodenthre, a Muricai cell based in the acclivities of the Vengaos, he had produced at least 30 pairs of Kuspegias, each one forged from various ratios of minerals, alloys and amalgams. In the face of unrelenting Machaeran incursion, he and his small band of renegade maquits and circulats had articulated and excavated deposits from remote caves and ravines over an area exceeding 800 million square neurris, in search of, among other things, the ingredients needed to create those tiny stones.

But 30 did not remain. Within time, most of them were sacrificed, reconstituted, purified into other stones which had further sacrificed themselves to a final tally of nine pairs...nine which had successfully positioned themselves far above those which had preceded. Of those nine, six other pairs had shown the promise of vast improvement. But the final three pairs of Kuspegias which had been culled from the inferno bore the unique imprint of exceptionalism; heretofore and...he was convinced...*forever* unmatched.

Now, only one pair remained in his possession, removed from the Vengaos at the hands of a Courvesant, no less! He stared at them as they lay in his left palm. *They're worthless here*, he thought in agony, closing his eyes, pressing his fingers against his forehead.

Setting the Kuspegias aside, he felt the presence once more of *another* pair, sauntering through his thoughts, their faces a clear image in his mind's eye. His beautiful Ligeia, his precious little Quilla, so small when he last saw her. They too were perfection to him, his consort and their young daughter, both of whom he had left behind in Astuverica a little over five quinteks ago.

His forced departure, he'd often reminded himself, was for an ultimate good which, at times, he could barely see or feel; its presence perceived but never in doubt. It troubled him, though; this nagging awareness that, but for a little more effort, the chance for a clandestine reunion, once or twice a quintek beneath the floorboards of their terrabode in Astuverica, could be had. Would it be risky? Of course, but no more than having to wake up every morning with a sizeable bounty strapped to his head. *When all this is done; when I am back in the Vengaos...* he thought to himself with a smile, *I will arrange it. I will make my way back to see them! If only for a few stratimers. If only...* Until then, he knew that his work, the work of the Muricai, must lay well beyond the prying eyes of Astuverica, where Ligeia's father held court as an Arduan Councilor; where she was to remain a prisoner, unable to extricate herself from the invisible cell her father, her mother...and even Drogan himself...had built around her.

It troubled him, too; the sudden awareness that the notion of returning to them had not even occurred to him until now, until he had found himself farther from Astuverica than at any other time in his life. Indeed, it troubled him, more than anything, that as did Arjun, so followed his eldest son. Abandonment, it seemed to Drogon, is an inherited trait.

His eyes dropped from the night sky, then slipped toward his brother, snoring in nasally clumps. At the top of the Sphere lay Zenith, devoid now of Ionian light. Drogon peered through drowsy lids as their tiny white flickerings withered toward the horizons. They always vacate the sky in this manner, he knew, just before the Lumens begin their ascent. The time to show their signal was drawing near.

Something in the sorentrean distance reflected in his eyes; a silent reminder of Tharusiad, a marisatria in the Kurestrean headlands, and his birthplace a little more than 29 quinteks ago, in the second untek of the *Puliriades*, as described in the Kurestrean calendar. Savita was a mere 10 at his birth. Shy, introspective and prone to sudden, mysterious, headaches, she reveled in her young brother's arrival, spoiling him relentlessly out of both her deep affection for him, and a need to pass the time during the family's nomadic wanderings as they followed their father from one assignment to the next.

In those days the hunt for the Circonic was in its fifteenth quintek, and Arjun was the Courvesois's most effective machine: a devious, driven intelligence operative and prolific killer; one who, more than any other in his time, had forged the path down which the other two legs of the Triumvirate would walk. With his trusty Liaramar, marisatrias, regions, whole societies melted in his wake as he came and went without a single clue to his presence. He was a ghost, but his legacy was quite real.

Their mother, Inaya Te.Sinian, had met Arjun during the last phase of the young Courvesant's apprenticeship, at the fledgling Architrave, in what was then the small but burgeoning village of Astuverica. Her Andulkan pedigree drew from the blood of culturists, all of whom were loyal to a fault to the Muharic faith, and hence to the swelling influence of the

Triumvirate. Inaya was gifted with a beautiful face, a bright, enthusiastic temperament and an aggressive passion, all of which stoked in her a smoldering bent for the incumbent joys of eroiche. Indeed, Inaya's passions were both widespread and specific, and when they were cast in Arjun's direction, they were returned to her tenfold. Time would prove that the balance which had been struck between the two of them would not easily break under the pressures to be visited upon it. At least not without a fight.

Unlike Adecyn, Inaya reveled in, understood and appreciated her life as a consort to a Courvesant. Arjun took great pride in his exploits, sharing with her the many tales of his triumphs. She celebrated his reputation, his legend, and their good fortune. Through their stones, young Savita and Arjun2 (as he was known then) were privy to the kind of instruction which the finest aggregators could offer. But when their stones were put away, they bore witness to the knowledge which only life with their parents could convey: that through the metamorphosis of death, *now* is sacrificed at the altar of what *will be*.

When Arjun2 was four, his father took an assignment that would forever change the course of their lives. The marisatria of Braugnor-Zeprel, with a population of little more than 2000, lies deep within the Kurestean region. This is a land which borders the waters of the Aquina Sul-Ataurea, about 900,000 neurris above the sorentean terminus at its closest point. Just inland of its rocky shore lay thousands of hummocks, filled with lush vegetation, surrounded by translucent lagoons, all of which lay nestled within vast expanses of desert, low forest and scrubland.

Not far from this marisatria, a single vein of Ularic ran beneath the Subterra, embedded with Burnish Hagonite in a helical pattern, which puzzled the Arduans enough to want it accessed. Too, the Triumvirate had long lusted for the vast quantities of virgin Thulitar which covered the desert ground, not far from the marisatrial limits. This light-colored mineral, white in its purest form, could be harvested and processed into

many of the raw materials needed to satisfy the cravings of a growing Astuverica.

In those days, Astuverica and the Triumvirate were under the rule of the second Suhm-Ephriant, Darmek Ve.Muirgen, who in five quinteks had scraped his way from the role of Machaeran subalternate to one who would hold sway over the entire Dimensional Horizon. Ve.Muirgen, known for his obstinance, his self-indulgence and his quick temper, hailed from a small marisatria about 25,000 neurris to wisoltre of Braugnor-Zeprel.

One reason Arjun had volunteered for this assignment was so that he could seek the counsel of a particular dhuthaer from the nearby Hirusovran region, whom he had been told could offer a cure for the painful spasms which had imprisoned his daughter since the age of two. Her parents did not fully understand Savita's burdens, her visions, the blood curse and the enigmatic marking she had been born with. It was their belief that, if left unchecked, this malaise might one day consume her.

Business, though, always came first for Arjun, so family matters were pushed aside for the moment as he elected to engage his directive: complete an object list of potential targets, remove at least two random Regents of his choosing from this marisatria, then gauge the population to determine if it had become sufficiently demoralized to need Muharic counsel. It was unknown to Arjun, though, that the first Regent he struck turned out to be Ve.Muirgen's estranged son, who despite having rejected his father's unyielding influence, still remained tied in his affections to Ve.Muirgen.

When the Suhm-Ephriant learned of this, he became enraged and sought to make an example of Arjun for his "poor choice of victims," as Ve.Muirgen put it. The Order explained its directive to the Suhm-Ephriant and defended Arjun's actions. They would allow no harm to come to their paragon, but the erratic Sovereign, always suspicious and resentful of the Courvesois, felt compelled to follow through nonetheless. So a Machaeran Regent, unknown to Arjun, and with the full

knowledge...and silent consent...of The Order, was sent from the wisoltrean Andulkas to take the life of Inaya Te.Sinian.

It took Arjun little time to implicate Ve.Muirgen and the Courvesois in her death, and he was crushed by this betrayal. In short order, his taste for the ways of the Courvesois, for the goals of the Triumvirate, fell to dust as he sought to remove himself and his children to his hometown, the tiny, remote Whistoph-Karnash, to erase his past and rewrite the story of his life. But Arjun was too valuable to his patrons for them to allow this. And The Order soon realized that because of their passivity where the Suhm-Ephriant's vengefulness was concerned, Arjun's hostility toward the Triumvirate would only grow, giving further cause to doubt his loyalty.

From that point on, Arjun's movements were shadowed by the Triumvirate. In an effort to deflect their doubts, Arjun threw himself into his work more fervently than ever, giving The Order the *impression* that he remained loyal, while in his heart he cursed its very existence. He sought out every opportunity he could to either leave, or be expelled from, the Courvesois, so that he could be allowed to raise his children beyond the glare of his enemies.

As he was soon to discover, though, one does not simply *leave* The Order of The Courvesois. Nor seldom is anyone ever expelled, as a simple convenience. Death is the sole relief from the calling of the Courvesant, or for that matter anyone of value to the Triumvirate. Arjun's increased productivity heightened his cachet with The Order yet left him no time for his children. So, in desperation, he turned to the marisatria of Belgorslo, and his sister Radiah, for help.

Leaving them in her care was a hard choice for Arjun, but his options were few. Located at the sorentrean rim of the Pavatrias, Belgorslo and their widowed aunt provided Arjun and Savita with a stable home and temporary relief from their nomadic existence. Here, they could be shielded from the omnipotent eyes of the Triumvirate.

Arjun's plan never wavered: find a safe way to extricate himself from The Order, then rejoin his children and relocate with them to his birthplace, where kindred souls would

provide them asylum until he had been “forgotten” by his former employers.

Arjun's next few assignments took him many thousands of neurris from his family, however unknown to him, the recent discovery of a rich vein and Belgorslo's other ample resources soon led the Triumvirate to this small slice of Pavatria, and the beginning of the end of Arjun's relationship with his children.

It took less than two unteks to completely erase any evidence of Belgorslo's existence. So thorough was the work of the Triumvirate that Belgorslo's 1000 inhabitants were scattered to the winds of annihilation no more than 30 days after their marisatria had been targeted. No more than 40 hardened souls from that community were capable of offering competent resistance, but they were soon to fade into slavery, execution, or the Seamounts.

Radiyah was enslaved and her niece and nephew were quickly hustled off to Astuverica. Recognized by a Regent with The Order before he'd left on assignment to a Saurostran marisatria, he chose to play them for a guarantee of Arjun's fidelity.

The Architrave managed an effective trafficking system, one which assured the reliable stream of labor needed to execute their mission and manage their spoils. Through a series of misinterpreted orders, though, Arjun2 and Savita were soon lost within this network. They were more fortunate than the thousands of others, though, who were abducted in order to grind the chiseled gears of Astuverica. For within the halls of the Palamont corridors, just before Lumenatra, they were spotted by Dainoor Te.Sinian, the childless widow of a high ranking Arduan Councilor, and their mother's sister.

Dainoor had bitterly resented Inaya's assassination, but still remained loyal to the Triumvirate. She had always hated Arjun, and she knew of the recent doubts nourished by the Courvesois as to his loyalties. But here, at last, was her chance to raise her sister's children in her own image, to bind their hearts to the creed of the Triumvirate and to vaporize any lingering connection they held to their father.

Thankful for her chances, she went to work right away. First, she began reshaping the impressionable young mind of Arjun2 (who was six at the time) by changing his name to honor Drogan, her most recent paramour. Then she apprenticed Savita, at 16 quinteks of age, to the Courvesois, where her unique talents would help her rise to capture an enduring reputation.

With Dainoor's approval, her niece was soon balanced with another young Courvesant, Gersul Um.Niall, and they were conjoined. Savita's path was destined to follow her passionate devotion to the arts of death and subterfuge, her favorite khiromeks in the dens of Astuverica, and her resolve to amend a singular, heartbreaking loss, one which had driven her into a search lasting many quinteks. Her quest for Ayu, indeed, would become her life's most profound obsession.

After their removal from Belgorslo, Arjun never found out what became of his children. All he knew was that the last semblance of everything he'd held dear in this life was now gone. With deep reluctance, he carried on to write his second chapter, until his original wish was at last realized; his complete separation from The Order. How this happened, though, remained the prime concern of those few souls who still cared for the life of Arjun Ve.Jalu.

The path of Arjun2, now referring to himself by his adopted name, took a somewhat different turn from Savita's. He too apprenticed with The Order but showed no talent for their work. However for 10 quinteks he would remain a steadfast disciple of the Triumvirate after apprenticing to a loyal cabal of Amnic circulats, going on to build aggregators, articulating capillary veins to the Recondite and helping to carry the standard of conquest far beyond the tangled visage of Astuverica.

Very soon, though, another turn would impose itself upon him, destroying his illusions and bending his loyalties in the direction of Teoramugh.

*T*o estre, Kerak spotted the first luments of the day, splashing a hint of turquoise on a clear horizon. The time to offer their signal was fast approaching.

Drogan stood to gather his gear, brushing his hand against his injured right leg. The wound he had received from that Quadric blade had healed nicely these past few days, and other than a slight tingling sensation near the cut, he marveled at how well his other injuries had mended.

While awaiting their moment, Drogan glanced at Kerak and was reminded again of that fortuitous choice. 12 days after Kerak's release from his brother's blood-stained grip, a surprise assault by a detachment of Machaera had killed five of Drogan's compatriots. The rest, including Drogan, were scattered to the winds. The remaining eight pairs of Kuspegias were carried away from the Vengaos in hands very different from those of Kerak.

Kerak caught Drogan's eye and was reminded too, of a few words which should not have gone unspoken for this long. "You know, I never made that articulation through the Recondite, when I was sitting behind that rock," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Before you and Djakul jumped me, in that ravine in the Vengaos. Before you beat the caque out of me and sent me limping back to Astuverica. I need you to know. I never made that articulation, identifying the location of the slip you'd extracted those ores from."

Drogan shrugged and laughed. "Oh, I know that! Takes about eight strats to complete an articulation with a dormant Treflicat. You didn't get that much time. Why the sudden confession?"

"The raid, Drogan! The Machaerans that showed up after I left. That raid had nothing to do with me. I just need you to..."

"Ah, get over it, brother. Fill you in on a little secret. That courier who'd come for a delivery of ingots the day before we left for the slip; remember him? He was a pellogroat. He'd been on an Arduan payroll for half an untek. I'd suspected something was a little off about him. Why do you think I sent

you to Astuverica with those Kuspegias?" he said, pointing to the drawstring bag of stones. "I needed them out of there. I would have given the rest of 'em to you if they'd been within easy reach."

A smile eased over Kerak's face. "Well, that explains a lot. I remember the look on your face when you handed me the stones, and the Kyo!"

"Oh, you don't *know* how I beat myself up, trying to decide if I should let you have those stones!"

Kerak jabbed Drogran on the shin with the heel of his boot. "You weren't the only one who got beat up that day."

Light laughter filled the air. "You ever wonder how I explained your disappearance to the others in that camp?" Drogran asked.

"Yeah. What'd you tell them?"

"I told them that you *overpowered* me, stole the Kuspegias and took off for the hills. I told them that..." Drogran dropped his words as he and Kerak rolled with laughter at the thought of such a yarn. "You'd expect something a lot more believable out of my mouth, wouldn't you?"

After Kerak regained his composure he fumbled a little more with the lightstaff, which had failed them once again. Then, success. "I think I can keep it working for a few more strats, Drogran. Give it a try. It's time."

Four flashes, then a pause for one pulsimer. Three flashes, four pulsimers, repeated three times. They waited 30 pulsimers, anxious for a response.

Then, beyond a rock over 300 neurris distant, they saw five pairs of rapid flashes of lamplight, each of them separated by less than a pulsimer. Drogran forgot all about his earlier disappointment as they laughed, cried with joy and rolled on the ground in an ecstatic, tear-stained heap before they grabbed their gear and scurried down the slope to the beach.

Drogran's enthusiasm soon soured at the realization that with every step, he was putting more distance between himself and Astuverica. He turned to steal a final glance to sorentre, toward a distant life, left to wallow in more familiar surroundings.

J. R. ELLIS

As he and Kerak made for the Bay of Teoramugh, images of their faces, and of five simple but elegant words, passed before his eyes...

We will be together again!

II

The Bay of Teoramugh

8

THIRTEEN RAGGED SOULS: 10 males, three females, including one child. Six of them carried hideous, disfiguring scars. One was missing an arm; another, a leg. Their scant clothing...nothing more than a collection of old rags, coarse skins, sewn with the simplest of tools. A crude pirogue, fashioned from bone, scaly hide and other scraps of foul-smelling carcass, about 12 neurris long.

One decrepit hut covering three crude racks supporting large sheets of putrid, purple flesh. Two damp caves of different sizes adjoining a rocky, crescent-shaped beach, surrounded by jagged cliffs which vaulted straight up, disappearing into a low, misty ceiling, five hundred neurris high.

And the remains of...*something*, that once lived, unused and/or unusable, lying everywhere! Yet not a shred of vegetation could be seen, save a few scant mosses growing on the rocks surrounding the cave entrances. To estre, the Bay of Teoramugh was shrouded in enormous billows of mist, tumbling off into the estrean horizon.

These were their first sights of this place. This was the destination they had fought, bled and nearly drowned for over the past 40 plus days. This was the spot about which Euan had cognified them with such childlike enthusiasm. They had seen penal corrals and Pentumus dens that looked better than this forsaken snatch of terrain. Their stomachs cried out in hunger while their minds recoiled at the thought of eating anything this place could push their way.

Euan escorted them across the beach, in the direction of the smaller of the two caves; nothing more than a notch in the side of the towering cliff that stood to sorentre of the larger one. 11 souls, awakened a few stratimers earlier, stood with stoic faces beside the opening of the other cave, their eyes burning with hollow suspicion. One lone soul sat high on a

rocky outcrop above the norostrean corner of the beach, one eye on the horizon, the other on two disheveled strangers.

Kerak schlepped his way through the coarse sand, surmising that these weren't just the Triumvirate's outcasts, expats, *the vast disinherited* which the Muricai championed with such zeal. But exactly *what* they were? Well, that remained to be seen.

As soon as Drogan and Kerak entered the smaller cave, they felt as if the weight of their bodies would crush them. The lassitude they had fought so long to repel suddenly hurled itself at them, knocking them to their knees. They drooped against the walls of the notch, as Euan embraced them once more, launching into yet another gratified welcome.

"Drogan, thank the 'Phemes; you finally made it! This is your travelling companion? Who's he?"

"My brother, Kerak."

Euan tossed a curious smile at the nervous stranger. "Creegh?! I didn't even know you had a...*Anyway*, I've been at that perch for the past 20, maybe 21 mornings, hoping I wouldn't miss you. I...I just can't believe you're here."

Euan's eyes gleamed with curiosity, news from home being what he craved the most, particularly the latest scoop on the few Muricai cells which hadn't been vanquished by the time he'd taken off for the Bay. Everything else would come in its own time.

"You gotta fill me in, Drogan. Before I came to the Seamounts...I think it was a little less than two quinteks ago...I passed through Swirilishere. Back then there were still three cells in full resistance near the Vengathlian border, suppressing the purges at Suer-Karslo, wasn't it? That's the last time I heard even as much as a rumor. So tell me; how'd they fare?"

Drogan struggled to focus, to process his hunger, his revulsion at his first impression of this place, Euan's chatty enthusiasm and his desperate need to sleep. He ran through a quick mental exercise, trying to dredge up what he could. "Not good. Marulaphre and Urulathon...both of those cells fell to a detachment from the 48th coterie. 400 souls were taken out by

the blade of the Palick Raptor,” he said, describing the disc-shaped, airborne implements which are the second most popular tool in the Machaeran valise. “The springs in those hills ran red for an untek, I heard it said. As for Huir-Tzalurar; that cell was driven to wisoltre. I’d guess they’re close to the terminus by now.”

“Sorentre? How’s the Vireskolian cell holding out in the Hirusovrans?”

“Not well. They were slaughtered. The Kurestreans, the Hirusovrans and the Phileans; the occupied sectors of those regions are pretty much now devoid of resistance, last I heard. The wisoltrean terminus has grown in the past quintek as a staging point, and whoever’s there may be able to hold out and regroup, but who knows?”

Euan’s eyes dropped. “And...what of Odrahn’s cell?”

“Ghurodenthre’s still intact, but down by about half. They should be close to the Moirisois highlands by now. There must be 10, maybe 12 cells crammed into those slopes, or soon to be. That’s about the only place there’s left to find refuge.” That said, the air between them grew quiet, stale.

Euan Te.Vuramle had been an expat for as long as he could remember. He was born in the third untek of *Shashaetuklo*, 10 quinteks after the discovery of the Circonic. His ancestors, 470 quinteks ago, had helped found Toriklo-Vuram, his home and one of the first marisatrias in the Kurestreans to fall to the incursions of the Triumvirate. That was five quinteks before Euan was born.

12 days before his birth, Euan’s father was beheaded for throwing a rock at a Regent, who suffered a bruised right index finger in the savage assault. Three unteks later, his mother and her infant child were shipped off to a Muharic Palialouge, a lodge/worship center for Muharic clergy. There she was forced to perform ritual baths, not only for the priests but for the Regents who came to pay their customary tribute to those who cloistered there. This led to a career as a captive chirapsiat, plying the trade of eroiche for argency in the company of Hedeon’s advance guard.

When Euan turned eight, he was apprenticed to the dens of Astuverica, where he would soon become one of the most skilled of all khiromeks who plied their trade beneath the Mnokathic viamar. 12 quinteks later, when it was discovered that he had poisoned a vial of Chelomar ingested by the haughty third cousin of the acting Suhm-Ephriant, he was hauled off to a peonage camp to boil for the pleasure of those in charge (gratis, of course, and under very close guard). When it was discovered that he had struck again by poisoning the ranking Regent of the camp, he was tapped for immediate execution.

Through a bribe to an addicted guard, in the form of a 50-day supply of his freshest "Widow's Breath," a nickname for an especially pure cut of Chelomar, Euan managed to "escape" into the deserts of the Kurestreans, left to wander from one refugee camp to another under the cloud of a prodigious bounty. After poisoning a pedophilic Muharic priest in the marisatria of Oolarathis, another bounty cemented his notoriety with the Muricai. He'd been on the run for eight quinteks before meeting Odrahn Lo.Hualic, who'd introduced him to Drogan.

Now that Euan's hunger for news was satisfied, he leaned in, speaking in hushed tones. "You chaps are gonna find that the souls around here, not just me, look a little, well...rough. And this place is not for everyone, I assure you. The last visitor we had here was a refugee from a camp in the wisoltrean Seamounts that was overtaken. He lasted about 12 days before he ran from this place with fleet feet. That was right after I got here." Euan paused, trying to form his words, when Drogan chimed in.

"Euan, that Baraslute vein you cogged us about. I wasn't able to get an elucidation on it. I stood on a plateau a little more than 2000 neurris from here and I wasn't able to find it. In fact, I can't pick up anything in these hills. What made you think you'd found a vein of Baraslute up here?" Drogan's earlier enthusiasm at the acknowledgement of their signal seemed to have vanished, his demoralized spirit caving in to reprimand.

“On my way here a quintek ago, I travelled a foot trace about 8000 neurris to wisoltre. While I was passing through, I picked up a collinear articulation; a flat, wide magnetic field. It had all the earmarks of Baraslute; maybe a vein. The articulation was brief, but Drogan, it was strong. Of course, that was before those Machaeran hordes starting crawling all over the Nearings. That's it, my friend. May not sound like much, but I thought it was enough to alert you.”

“Well, I got nothing! After Kerak and I get some rest, we'll eat, reprovision, and then I think we should all leave this place at once. Odrahn, Deodric Um.Geartris and the others will arrive very soon at Tephrom-Anh. That's where they'll be waiting on us to cog with them. I need to get to a spot where I can articulate a vein, corroborate a signal. Maybe, on the way out of here, you can take us to that spot where you say you articulated Baraslute and I can turn the Kuspegias on to them. Regardless, we're gone.”

“Drogan, wait; that's impossible! Like I said before, the Nearings are blanketed. Every pass, every thin trace leading back through the Seamounds, every neurri of coastline from here to Astuverica; they're all completely cloaked by Machaerans or bounty hunters. Speaking of which, how did *you* get here?”

“Through a cave and a Kiyfer dome,” Drogan sighed. “It's a long story. *Really* long!”

Euan, rendered speechless, tossed a cynical stare at Drogan.

“Getting back on topic; what about that boat over there? That'll get us outta here, won't it?”

Euan recoiled. “That boat belongs to these poor souls, not you or me. They use it to fish. It's *life* to them...their sustenance. We can't steal their boat! Besides, you'd be spotted by coastal sentries.”

“Not if we stay far enough offshore.”

“Not gonna happen, Drogan. So *drop* it, okay! We can't steal their boat!” Euan and Drogan glared at each other, conscious of a friendship now caught between conflicting priorities.

Kerak grabbed his brother by the arm, then motioned to Euan. "I heard a rumor once that there are a couple of geographic anomalies...I think they're called Boric piers...somewhere in the norostrean Seamounts. I've been told they're quite sonorant. If we could find one, maybe we could source your Baraslute with the Kuspegias, or cincture an articulation, provided we can thread the sentry posts. Euan, do you know anything about that? Do you think you may have elucidated through a Boric Pier when you found that vein?"

Drogan's eyes flashed. "Euan, that's right. The Kuspegias we brought with us are my best. An ordinary memory stone couldn't cut through a Boric this far up. But my Kuspegias, along with the Myotrophus; they might just do it!"

"So, what exactly is it...a Boric?" Kerak asked anyone with an answer.

"A Boric Pier is...well, I've never seen one," Drogan responded. "For that matter, I don't think I even know anybody who's seen one. But I'm told it's like an elevated 'hillock,' a circular ridge or dome that rises up from the ground. And the veins! Legend has it that in a Boric they rise up from the Subterra and cluster together in a very tight mass."

"Do you know how we can find a Boric up in these parts?" Kerak asked Euan.

"No, but Garion might," Euan answered, pointing back toward the veil of the larger cave. "He's been here the longest, even longer than some old soul who called himself 'Jarumon,' who left not long after I arrived. By the looks of him I'd say Garion's been wandering the Seamounts all his life. We'll have to find a way...*some way*...to ask him."

"What do you mean 'find *some way*' to ask him?" Drogan puzzled with a wide yawn. "Why not just *ask* him?"

With that, Euan decided the time was right to launch into his spiel on camp etiquette, starting with Rule One. "I'll let the two of you get some rest and we can discuss all this later. But before I go, you need to know the most important axiom of life around here. Do *not* ask anyone *any* questions about their past, meaning where they came from, or where they'd been before they got here, or anything at all about the

Sphere beyond this little beach and those waters out there. And don't offer any information about yourselves. They don't want to know all that. Trust me!"

He wasn't finished. "Not just that, but no surnames. First name basis only! These souls; most of them came here to forget about the past and the rest of that infernal Dimensional Horizon out there. Plus, I'm certain a few of them committed some pretty heinous crimes back home so no one wants to stir up any hard feelings if one of our campmates happened to be close to someone on the receiving end of their deeds. Or *mine* for that matter."

Drogan and Kerak were alarmed by this edict, and their faces showed it. They had been warned by Eimear and at least three others that the Bay of Teoramugh was populated by the worst of the worst. But they had no taste for the silent treatment, for despite their revulsion, they yearned for even the tiniest smidgen of narrative on these forlorn souls who'd been chased to the very last place within the Horizon at which it was even *possible* to live, if for no other reason than simply to ease their insecurities about being in the presence of such...*reprobates*? Wasn't that Eimear's word?

"Don't look at me that way. Drogan, Kerak, listen! It took me half a quintek to earn their trust. I've assured them that you two are *okay*! So please stay that way, for my sake, alright? Because for the time being, this is all I have. Drogan, you remember that close call I had with that Arduan Councilor who passed through Telorskra a couple of quinteks ago? His bodyguard recognized me and about took my head off with that Quadric. Remember? And just before I left Mauglia-Dursla to come here...*Amaria*, I learned that they had just *doubled* my second bounty! I can't trust anyone, Drogan, except you...and these poor souls."

Kerak and Drogan nodded, each of them pitching a wry smile. If for no other reason than out of respect for Euan, they agreed to comply.

They knew, though, that this wouldn't be the end of their inquisitions. If they couldn't personally acquaint themselves with their new neighbors, or for now, squeeze the one called

“Garion” for his knowledge of local landmasses, they could at least press Euan for answers. What did he know of these souls, they asked? His simple response: “Other than Bechrach, Cai and the child, well...nothing!”

During his days on active duty with the Muricai, Euan had ingratiated himself to his compatriots with his superb intelligence gathering skills. Yet in this, the remotest of all expat camps, and in such close proximity to his fellow campmates, it seemed that his well-honed talents had failed him. Drogan gawked at him incredulously.

“About Bechrach; you’ll like him. He’s as clean as a barrel of argents after a gang of Muharic priests passes by it. He came here just after I arrived. We’ve all vetted him, in our own way, because his looks could scare a Haudric Kurstr right out of his skin,” Euan said, describing a large, ugly carnivorous reptile found in the Kurestreans.

“He came here from a couple of other refugee camps in the Seamounts because he claimed he couldn’t stand the food. I really think he came here for the coquont, but who can blame him? In any event, he works hard, handles the boat well and doesn’t overeat, so we have no problem with him.

“Another reason we like him is because he came here with the little one, Nalani. You can see her from here, playing on the beach. I think she’s about five, six quinteks. She’d been tossed around a lot in the refugee camps. He thinks her parents were killed by the Machaera when they purged Suromear-Anh, in the Pavatrias. Anyway, she wound up in his care, meaning of course she wound up here too. She’s a real spark, she is!

“Now Cai...she’s a dhuthaer, and a good one at that,” Euan said, describing a practitioner in the healing arts. “She came here to find her father, the one I referred to as Jarumon. He’d been a loyal drudge for the Triumvirate when Cai was little, but he fell out of favor for some reason, got slapped with a bounty, then wound up here. He arrived in bad health, but she fixed him up as best she could. Right after that is when he took off. What happened to him or why he left, I have no clue.”

Euan raised his head and continued. "As for the rest? All I can say is that there's nothing not to like about them, but don't expect anyone to get all mushy and spill their life stories for you. As I said, that's not done around here. Not just because of a fear of alienating someone, but because of all the *caque* that's going on out there...beyond this shore. They're done with all that. They believe that they've created a better Sphere, right here in this place! And the past? The Sphere beyond? That's all dead to them."

He rose to leave, waving his hand with a gesture of reassurance. "Just to the right of this cave there's a concealed outcrop over a deep hole in the ground, in case you need drop the dado, take a piss, whatever. Breakfast will be in about 30 stratimers. Sleep as long as you want, and when you get up, I'll have some food saved for you."

Kerak had one last question.

"Euan, you said they use that boat to fish? I didn't think there were any fish up this way. Too much Aurean saturate in the water."

"There's only one type of fish that swims these seas. It's huge, and it tastes great, but *Creegh Amaria* is it mean! It's called a Barutha."

9

THEY WERE OUT FOR OVER 300 stratimers. The cacophony of camp life, the din of the surf...*nothing* could awaken them except the pungent aromas of the evening meal, drifting through the veil of the notch. They arose with groggy eyes and robust, pounding headaches, caused, they assumed, by not having been able to sleep for at least another 300 stratimers.

Kerak and Drogan nudged their heads around the edge of the notch to peer outside, luments now fading to soentre. Euan spotted them as he was finishing his chores and escorted them to the larger cave, where the others were gathering for dinner.

The evening meal was that rare daily event in which everyone, including those on watch, broke with their duties to come together as one. At the mouth of the cave, Euan introduced his friends to his campmates. Other than Euan, no one spoke. Cautious glances were traded, then 15 hungry souls trudged into the cave.

Once there, Drogan and Kerak spotted the source of that wonderful fragrance. A rich stew, simmering in a large metal pot over a stone grate atop a roaring fire. They watched as countless hands busily stirred, gathered utensils, ladled and seasoned their work to perfection. A line began forming at the pot while a small group finished preparing a large table that had been carried to a spot near the beach. Two others could be seen lugging an oversized terracotta amphora to the table, careful not to spill its precious cargo.

Kerak and Drogan were ushered to the front of the line, where each of them scooped out two large ladlefuls of hot stew. Without speaking, they walked toward the table, the sounds of light conversation echoing behind them. After exiting the cave, they studied the curious racks they'd seen that morning,

covered with the sectioned remains of the stomach lining of the last Barutha which had been taken from the Eusterian sea.

Euan, walking beside them, explained that this part of the fish was inedible, but if kept damp and shaded it made excellent fertilizer for their small crop of Windswort moss. To their relief, the exquisite bouquet arising from their bowls did a good job cloaking the stench coming off those tables.

They passed another set of racks supporting hundreds of small strips of reddish-brown flesh, dried and crisped by several days' exposure to luments. Another rack...more like a small table...supported sheets of the bladder lining of the Barutha. They, too, were inedible, but when stretched and dried they could be cut and wrapped around a blended fingerful of cured, crushed Windswort and the lichen *Zaphraela*, and burned for an enlightening smoke.

Soon after dinner began, the liquid in the amphora was poured into 14 carved stone flagons. This, to Drogran's delight, was the coquont. The version brewed in Teoramugh consisted of a blend of Eusterian water, spring water, Windswort, a pinch of *Zaphraela* and the blood and spinal fluid of the Barutha. It yielded a tart, stout scent which nicely complemented the mellow essence of the stew. Their olfactories, which had gone unchallenged for so long, writhed in a merciless tug of war that made Kerak and Drogran forget all about the other 300 stratimers of sleep they'd missed out on.

The stew had been prepared with dried Barutha meat (plus other un-named chunks of fish flesh; no questions were asked about that, though) and Eusterian water, seasoned with a little Windswort and some scabric pestle. It was a welcome change from the rustic fare they'd been picking at since leaving the Vengaos. It was also the first meat they'd eaten in 26 days, since they'd polished off their last panful of Eimear's fried and not-too-badly seasoned Fathidis.

Speaking of Fathidis: they were nothing to compare with the alluring warmth and satisfying flavors of Barutha stew, each spoonful washed down with a vibrant splash of coquont! Drogran and Kerak sat beside Euan, savoring their meal,

enjoying the illusion of innocence surrounding them. After about 30 strats at the dinner table, the afflictions and malfesance which had been native to their lives began to melt away.

They marveled at the lilting, affable conversation which drifted across the table, bathed in the glow of descendant light. Not a word was spoken of the Triumvirate, the Circonic, the Muricai...the *Sphere beyond*, as Euan called it. Lumenesence passed to sorentre and into darkness, and Teoramugh's newest tenants dined, nursed their brew and continued to watch their strange new campmates engage each other in conversation, devoid of any mention of heritage, home or strife. Three oil lamps were soon pulled from the cave, placed upon the table and struck. 15 weary faces reflected the glow of artificial light for well onto another 60 stratimers as a wall of Eusterian mists rolled ashore. Even though little conversation was directed at them that evening, Kerak and Drogon watched this exchange continue unabated, free to the end of any sense of animus, urgency or longing.

For Drogon and Kerak, it was as if they were hearing a foreign tongue being spoken for the first time.

After the Ione had taken full command of the skies, the lamps were doused and returned to the cave. The table was cleaned, dismantled and returned to the cave. The first night watch climbed to his perch to begin his shift. Kerak, Drogon, Euan and three of their new campmates sat on rocks near the shore to relish the smoldering, acrid fusion of Zaphraela and Windswort. Its vapors danced in nebulous pirouettes around their heads, then rolled off out to sea in textured clumps. The others faded off to bed, leaving Kerak and Drogon to themselves. "Come in when you're ready," Euan whispered, tapping them on their shoulders before trotting off. "Two bedrolls are waiting for you with us, in the cave..."

Kerak knew that despite their proximity to these 13 souls, and the shy hospitality heaped upon them that evening, the distance between him and Drogon on one side, and their circumspect hosts on the other, was too vast to measure. Too, his self-imposed constrictions were all too apparent. Kerak had

taken long, studied looks at these impoverished strangers. Other than Euan and the child, he wondered, above all, if any were connected, even in a small way, with The Order.

The thought of crossing paths with another Courvesant, current or former, left him terrified, even more so than the prospect of confronting a sworn enemy of The Order. For Kerak smelled betrayal on the breath of any soul who had ever carried the mantle of the Courvesois.

Courvesants were instructed to report any evidence of wavering loyalty, not only within their ranks, but within any member of the Triumvirate with whom they came into contact. And he wondered...could even a turncoat like himself completely resist the indoctrination heaped upon him by The Order?

Drogan studied Kerak's furrowed brow, his dreary eyes, then pulled him up by the shoulders to escort him back to the cave after dousing their smokes. "You think too much, brother, you know that? *Way* too much!"

*T*hey'd slept right through it. The Lumens were just a hair's breadth beyond Zenith and the cave was silent. Kerak rubbed his eyes and sat straight up, his body free of pain, his head clear, his vision focused and thoroughly undimmed. He nudged Drogan, who cracked a jaded smile, still balking at the idea of having to rise from a warm bedroll.

Nalani suddenly wandered up, grinning wide-eyed at them with a tray in her hand, supporting a woven basket and two flagons. The basket looked and smelled as if it had been spun from *some* part of some great fish that had once roamed those waters. "Garion told me to leave this for you," she said. She placed the tray at their feet and ran off, kicking up a small cloud of dust in her wake.

Six pieces it held. That was all that remained of the breakfast they'd missed. Plus two flagons of some sort of tea, brewed, they surmised, with some other meager scraps of organic matter scrounged from around this camp. They studied and smelled their first pieces of meat, then devoured

them all in less than two stratimers. Who knew that Barutha jerky could taste so good, particularly when washed down with a mug of warm tea.

They spotted Euan talking with a small gathering of campmates on the beach. Off and on these strangers would steal a glance in the direction of their new guests before the group broke off to rejoin the day's tasks. Kerak and Drogran dragged themselves from the ground and walked out to meet Euan, Thaloux and Masurian at the shore.

In stark relief, the radiance of mid-day showed the disfigurements, the strange markings which Drogran and Kerak had barely noticed in waning luments the night before. Drogran fidgeted, unable to take his eyes from the huge scars covered Masurian's face, arms and neck as he spoke to Thaloux and Euan with a confident resolve. Thaloux's left arm appeared to have been ripped from his shoulder, its vestige betrayed by tiny threads of flesh. Their torsos, their necks were covered with at least half a dozen small cuts apiece. And on various parts of exposed skin, random curvilinear, juttred or oblong discolorations could be seen. Kerak was puzzled by these markings. Drogran, though, knew them right away for what they were.

"Kerak, and Drogran, it is?" Masurian now directed his attention at them with a taut diplomacy. "Well, first off we want to welcome both of you. We hope you'll find this home of ours to your liking. You can stay as long as you want or need to. I guess Euan explained the rules we all try to follow around here?"

They nodded.

Masurian waved his hand to summon a sweeping gesture toward the crescent shaped wedge of beach they called home. "We all have our responsibilities around here. All we ask is that you keep up your end and everything will be fine. Kerak, how's your eyesight?"

"It's good."

"Excellent! Then we'll put you on watch and signal. Euan, Bechrach, Nairul, Cai, Ekavias and I will share that job

with you. And Drogan; you look like you're pretty good with your hands."

"Well, I *was* an Amnic cir..." Euan's eyes bulged as Drogan recalled his friend's admonition, then stopped himself short. "Yes...I'm, uh...pretty good with my hands."

"Good. Then you, Dijal, Jadox and Thaloux will share general maintenance duties. Hope you don't mind working with nothing more than bones and skins! That's really all we have around here."

Drogan's face puckered. *I guess that means we're staying*, he mused.

"Muirtreo, Nishar and Garion handle the Windswort tables, food preparation, that sort of thing. Cleanup is a joint effort," Masurian said, pointing toward the dado dump with wry emphasis. "So don't forget!" Then he dove into specifics.

"Drogan, we have some hardware that needs cleaning and the sail needs mending and a good damp rubdown to keep it pliable, so you and Dijal will handle those jobs today. Kerak, your watch will start in 40 strats. You'll be with Cai until dusk. So, I guess that's it for now. Any questions?"

"Who's in charge around here?" Drogan asked with an assertive tone, directing this question at the extroverted Masurian. "You?"

Thaloux and Masurian stared at each other, expecting someone to answer that puzzling question, so Thaloux chimed in.

"Well...no one, Drogan. I mean, we're all in charge and none of us is. Garion's been here the longest, but no one really calls the shots. We all make our decisions by...consensus? Is that a good word?"

As Thaloux spoke, Euan recalled how puzzled he'd been at that arrangement when he first came to the *Crescent*, their nickname for this place. Kerak and Drogan were equally stunned by what appeared to be a lack of singular leadership

within this community. Coming from a Sphere ruled through the influence of Regency and hierarchy, they wondered how this small colony was able to function at all.

“I have a question,” Kerak said. “That boat. How do you catch the...Barutha, is it? Do you troll or net, or spear? How are they caught?”

Euan took Kerak and Drogan by the shoulders. “Have a seat. You probably won't want to hear about this standing up.”

10

“WHEN I FIRST CAME HERE, three quinteks ago, we were 21 souls strong. My first quintek, we lost three, then added two when Muirtreo and Thaloux arrived. Since then, another nine souls have found refuge here. But in that time, 15 have perished in those waters! One of them was Jevan, who was the last to die, just before Euan arrived.”

Kerak and Drogan rested in the shade of the cliffs, their eyes glued to Masurian's grief-wracked face, turning now a simple smile. “Over the past quintek, we've been fortunate. None of us has been lost, but Jadox and Thaloux have been badly mangled. Jadox lost his right leg 120, maybe 121 days ago, and it would have cost him his life if Cai hadn't pulled him through.”

Masurian pointed to the boat. Kerak and Drogan couldn't resist so they stood and walked over to it, accompanied by the others. They were stunned by the apparent clumsiness of this contraption. The frame had been built from the ribcages of two Barutha, tied with lateral supports and more rib bones to provide additional strength. A cranium had been cracked and split to form the bow of the craft. At the stern, the rudder post consisted of a straightened rib bone shoved through a hollow spinal column. The rudder was nothing more than two dried tailfins lashed together. There were oars fashioned from more ribs which were lashed to shaved pieces of jawbone, and the mast consisted of multiple sections of vertebrae lashed together. Ballast rocks lined the keel.

Rope, rigging and lashings were made from what Masurian called “tensors.” This material, pulled from tough strands of fibrous flesh which run just beneath the skin, was strong yet pliable and could be knotted with ease. The coarse skin of the creature was sewn with thin strands of tensor to form the sails

and the outer surface of the hull. The caulk used to seal the joints was made from a paste of mud and cerebral fluid.

Four long spears, cut and sharpened from Barutha ribs, lay in the cockpit. Also lying there was the only item in the boat made of metal: a huge, crude, three-pronged hook. At the tip of each barb was a series of rough-grained flutes, intended to bury themselves deep into pink flesh and stay put until removed by hand. The hook was connected at the eye to a thick, braided tensor, about 100 neurris long. The other end was tied to the bow of the craft. A thinner roll of tensor, the same length, lay coiled at the bottom of the boat.

“What do you use to bait the hook?” Drogan asked. “Leftovers from your last catch? Looks like that's all you've got.”

“The Barutha has no cannibalistic tendencies,” Masurian replied, “so he won't eat the flesh of his own kind. The only thing we can use to bait these hooks is *us*. We're the bait, Drogan.”

Masurian's expressionless eyes did not blink.

Nothing in their lives could have prepared Kerak and Drogan for the images those words conjured in their minds. The thought of some poor, miserable wretch being “hooked,” tossed with cruel abandon into those waters, left to be horribly devoured just so their tormentors could enjoy a crude pot of stew or a piddling sliver of jerky! The transgressions of the Triumvirate paled in comparison to an act as vile and disgusting as that! “What the freigh do you mean ‘*we're the bait*’?!” Drogan shouted.

Masurian and Euan grinned as Thaloux took Drogan by the shoulder, to explain it all in his own dilatory manner. “No one is actually *hooked*, Drogan. Before we make the drop, we cut a small nick in the diver's flesh to spill a little blood into the water, then some saliva, to act as a secondary attractant. The thinner strand of tensor is tied to the diver's ankle. Then the hook and the diver are dropped overboard with the diver's arms and legs wrapped around the shaft of the hook.”

Thaloux paused to rub the fleshy remains of his severed arm while Masurian took over for him. “While they're in the

water, the diver remains snug against the shaft, tucked under the barbs of the hook for protection. The Barutha catches the diver's scent, swims to the bait, pivots its jaw, opens wide and takes the diver and the hook into its mouth. Once inside, if the hook hasn't lodged into raw flesh on its own, the diver will plunge the nearest barb into the brain stem of the fish, which if done with enough force will kill it instantly."

Thaloux elaborated. "The mouth of the fish swings open upon death. When it does, the diver swims out, then signals the crew by yanking on the thin tensor. The crew then pulls the fish up to the boat. If the catch isn't dead by then, the spears will finish it off. Right away, we seal the wounds to prevent blood loss, then we tow the catch home."

"Those souls you mentioned, who'd been killed. And those wounds you carry...?" Kerak mumbled, unable to finish.

Thaloux nodded.

Quietly, they dispersed to rejoin their duties. Cai appeared behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. "You're on watch with me, Kerak."

Each tenuous step, carved into the cliff, took them a little further from the strains of the Sphere below. Their observation perch, nestled into a natural ledge about 150 neurris above the beach, provided a quiet sanctuary from all but his conscience.

In Kerak's mind, sacrifice, in its purest form, had just been defined.

*I*t was comical, really, to watch Drogan's feeble attempts at sewing from this distance. Frustration and cursing followed by wide-eyed awareness followed by laughter and loud applause. *I'm going to like being on watch*, Kerak mused.

He leaned out over the ledge, casting his gaze straight up, at the portion of the cliff that rose above their small perch. The towering precipice bore solemn witness to the vast Eusterian Sphere which lay beyond. The day was scintillating, and his eye dropped to scan the horizon.

They were so close to the norostrean terminus that when he squinted he could make out the rims of the jagged

cauldrons behind the crests of the Aurean rilles. They faded into an ethereal fog, curving off into the estrean distance.

A few tiny wisps of lavender toxicity could be seen wafting upward from behind the peaks, some of them cascading harmlessly back in loopy swirls. Just beyond the rim of one of the cauldrons, Kerak was able to detect the faint visage of the norostrean Aeries, the Lumens' nocturnal sanctuary in this part of the Horizon.

Beyond lay the deep fissures within the vast tier of Aurean subterranes, home to the Ione. Within these lairs, a few of them were now feasting upon liquefied Aurean saturate. Whatever was not eaten was subject to being hemorrhaged into the Eusterian sea through the lower periphery of the rilles, which are very porous here in the norostrean Sphere. At dusk, the Ione would begin their ascent to feed on the tiny threads of Aurean particulate which remained afloat in the darkness, seared and sweetened to taste by the heat of day.

Looking up again, Kerak spotted another series of narrow steps which had been carved into the side of the cliff, wending their way upward from their observation perch. *I wonder how far up those steps the peak of this cliff must lie?* He mused, curious of the view that even higher perch might betray.

He was curious, too, about Cai. "Now Kerak, our job up here is to spot for Barutha." She waved her arms toward the estrean sky, handing him what looked like a large cone-shaped section of jawbone. It had been hollowed out with a small slit carved into the narrow end. "This is a horn. If we see a fish, we blow on it to alert the others."

She went on. "During the day, Barutha almost never surface, but if you look close enough you'll notice that they form faint ripples at the top of the water, which a good eye can spot from here. You have a good eye, right."

"Yep. They're all good."

He grinned. She did not.

"Please pay attention. This is serious!" she huffed.

"I can tell. What about at night?"

"Oh, at night they're easy to see. They jump!" A laughing smile supplanted her normally rigorous aspect. "It's quite a

sight. That's why we have two at a time on watch during the day, and one at *Yuonan*...NIGHT! I mean...*night*."

Silence. Cai became tense, lowered her head and crawled to the other side of the perch after pushing a large woven hat down over her head and face. Without speaking, she grabbed another frazzled piece of headgear and threw it at Kerak.

Yuonantso. She'd tried her best to suppress her familiarity with the language, but not well enough. For Kerak knew right away that Cai hailed from the sorentrean terminus, the ancient domain of the Ve.Erasotra. Perhaps she had come here from Xilianur, Nuruls-Areat, or one of a hundred other marisatrias in the Hirusovran region. *Yuonantso* was ancient patois for *night*, and one of thousands of words derived from several arcane, blended languages which were native to that region, most of which died off thousands of quinteks ago. Fragments of this ancient tongue still infuse the language of the Hirusovrans. Kerak recognized it because in his youth he had been very close to a soul who'd spoken often in that tongue. That was his mother.

Right away, he was ensnared by the urge to talk, to ask, to tell. But Cai, pitching what Kerak surmised was her usual austere manner, had seconded the paradigm laid out by the others: reveal not even the smallest hint of your life beyond this shore, for *nothing* worth mentioning exists beyond the "Crescent." The past, the Sphere beyond...they're *dead*! Wasn't that Euan's message?

But no, Kerak thought. *I must communicate with these souls!* And as for Cai? *She just might be the fulcrum.*

"I understood you the first time. Night." Kerak fumbled for the right words. *Take a chance*, he thought. "Well, we shouldn't have any problem seeing them today. It's so clear out there. How do they say it in Hirusovran? *Mirusu zir Kareslurvio*? 'Bright as a Lumen's heart?'"

Three stratimers passed before another word was spoken.

"I...misspoke. I mean...I meant to say....," Cai whispered in an awkward tone.

"My mother was from Nuruls-Areat. And you?" Kerak asked, his confidence on full display in this forbidden terrain.

Cai turned her head, remaining silent and still in her spot until their shift was complete. Voiceless, she trudged far ahead of him down the steps to the beach, longing to bury herself beneath the shroud of denial concealing her and her other campmates.

Kerak, of course, excepted.

After dinner, with Ekavias on watch, they wiled away the stratimers before sleep. Drogran, Euan, Kerak, Bechrach, Nishar and Dijal sat at the water's edge, gazing up at the night sky through stale eyes, counting each Ione, anticipating their awkward yet delicate movements. One by one, each of them drew a final drag of Zaphraela before it was doused, its kindled embers nipped and tucked away.

"*Creegh Amaria!* Up close this stuff smells like Kurstr dung, but it sure goes in nice." Bechrach nearly sang those words. "My friends, *this* is what I came here for."

"What was up with Cai tonight?" Dijal jabbed that question at Kerak, the ice having by now thawed between she and her more seasoned campmates and the new arrivals. "She's been in a lacerating mood ever since the two of you got off watch."

Kerak pondered the prophetic nature of that word, coming from someone like Dijal. Tough, unrelenting, seemingly impervious to pain; a shield of rugged Hagonite born of the hottest kiln imaginable. And concealing...? *Who knows?* he thought with a frown. *I'm not allowed to ask!*

He couldn't help but to notice the myriad tiny cuts on Dijal's arms and face, the jagged gouges on her neck, one of them still fresh. And he wondered: *what does it feel like...to be swallowed?*

"I don't think I was, uh, doing my job to her satisfaction."

"You can't handle watch? Oh Kerak, please! You won't last long around here without at least one usable skill," Dijal said.

Drogan flexed and kneaded his sore fingers. "I'll take watch. You know how hard it is to sew the skin of that thing. *Freigh*, it's tough."

"Heights aren't your thing. Remember?" Kerak needled his brother with a wry grin.

A wispy Ionian breeze pushed the vapors from the dado dump onto the beach, meaning that someone had failed to observe the *joint effort* edict when it came to waste disposal and cleanup. "No, Drogan, I think you did such a great job today, we're gonna keep you on sail repair for good." Euan laughed. "But try to screw up and who knows? I see a whole new job for you: *Caquemaster!*"

Nishar stood and walked to the water's edge, the sounds of laughter filling his ears. The last of the Ione had now thrust themselves high into the darkness. He clutched his hip pocket, fumbling the stone beneath worn cloth.

Bechrach tapped Nishar on the back while his yawning companions wandered back to the cave. "Nishar. We're calling it a night. You coming?"

"I'll be there in a stratimer...and don't bother with my bedroll. I'll take care of it, Bechrach," Nishar whispered. "And thanks. You're...you're a good friend." Ionic darkness reflected a sadness which Bechrach had never seen in Nishar's eyes.

"You alright, Nishar?"

"I'm fine. I'll be there soon, okay?"

Nishar watched his companions return to the warmth and protection of the cave. The last lamp was doused. The damp chill which had settled on the Bay burned through him while he waited, nervous and edgy, for a few more stratimers. No sound could be heard except the murmur of fickle downdrafts, the lapping of the surf. He tiptoed from the shore to pass through the veil of the notch. He then reached into his pocket to fumble the smooth, well-forged stone again between his fingers.

Do my actions betray them? he thought, under brutal assault again from his wavering conscience. *No, I can't think about that. Not now!* He promised himself, though, that when

all of this was done...to *her* satisfaction...he would try somehow to make it up to them. If it was not too late.

Nishar entered the deepest recesses of the notch, and a series of specters loomed before him. His deep affection for the Crescent. The supposed crime which had brought him to this place. And his resolute commitment to find the redemption he so desperately sought; redemption which would never be offered free of charge. No, forgiveness always comes at a hefty price beyond the confines of the Bay of Teoramugh. And his currency, at that moment, was but a few neurris away.

Nishar pulled the oval-shaped stone from his pocket and dropped to his knees. Unconcerned with how he might be forced to explain its loss, he swore to himself that after he'd successfully cognified her, far to sorentre, he would destroy this stone, and in the process quash the demonic temptations which for the past two days had been screaming at him from within its dark, Thermionic heart.

How pleased she will be with this. How very pleased...

A COLD, DENSE FOG HAD ROLLED into the bay and onto the Crescent just before dawn, rendering invisibility to anything farther than two or three neurris distant. The mists of a Skulerean Pale lingered through the early morning, then tiptoed away, returning to the sea from which they'd been spawned.

Garion had seen many Pales in his time at the Crescent, most lasting no less than three days. But this one had come and gone with unusual brevity. For that he was glad.

Just after dawn, he and Nishar had resumed their duties. Hunched over the racks, they shifted and sorted the many small strips of dried flesh from one rung to the next, ensuring that each received sufficient air and maximum exposure to luments.

They had finished their inventory after breakfast, and the numbers were not good. Rationing of their dwindling food supply was now inevitable. For it had been 70, no, 75 days since their last kill. This was the longest dry spell Garion could remember in all his time here. But the last beast which had given its life to...and for...them, and the story of that kill, was not one that he would soon forget.

Bechrach had sighted it just after the first night shift had begun; a lean, vibrant jumper, beating the waters in a hunger-fueled rage. It had been a misty night, and after the boat was launched beneath the glare from every lamp they could muster, the crew of that expedition rendezvoused with the creature about 150 stratimers before the first rays of dawn.

Diving for Barutha was hazardous enough in the glare of luments, but at night it was nothing less than orchestrated chaos. This dive belonged to Dijal, who at the time was in the

best physical shape among those who were skilled in this perilous task.

Five souls rowed and sailed the pirogue 3500 neurris into Eusterian waters until they'd spotted the beast, bursting through the light chop before diving again. With their lamps trained on the surface, each of them spat into the water, tempting it with a slavering hint of the larger delicacy soon to come. Dijal was then prepped for the dive.

Just before she and the hook were thrown overboard, Masurian had carved a small nick into her skin at the collarbone. With the back of his hand he caressed her cheek, dropping it to smear her blood onto the skin of her breasts. He held it there a little too long, and that familiar, unacknowledged spark of eroiche electrified the damp airs between them before he managed to pull himself away, reluctant to go down that path, to risk knowing, feeling...too much. Certainly not now. Maybe not ever.

Masurian then drew a red finger to his lips and licked it clean. One by one the others took Dijal by the hand, wishing her success and a safe return. By lamplight, each of them again noticed the strange, cryptic markings which had lately appeared on the palms of her hands; similar, yet more intricate than the aberrant blemishes which had formed on their own bodies not long after each of them had arrived at the Crescent. As one, they closed their eyes, admonishing the 'Phemes to ensure a safe and successful outcome to this foray; bringing the beast onto their shore, and into their lives.

Then, without further delay, the hook and its passenger were tossed into oblivion.

The immense weight of this assemblage caused it to fall quickly, and Dijal was plunged into an abyss in which the dim glare of lamplight from the boat could not be seen. At maximum depth, she looked to her left and felt an immense vibration whipping her from side to side. Within a pulsimer she felt the jolting backwash from its jaws as they swallowed her and the hook whole.

Due to the shape of the hook, the fish must pivot its teeth outward and open wide in order to fully engulf its prize. This

had an unintended but fortuitous effect, ensuring that the diver was protected from laceration at this stage of the operation. Once inside, Dijal knew she had no time to waste. Despite the thrashing motions made by the Barutha after taking the hook into its mouth, the barbs had been known to pierce raw flesh, unaided, no more than half the time. So with all her strength, she threw her body back and heaved the nearest barb toward the soft skin surrounding the bulging brain stem.

Due to the erratic thrashings of this particular beast, the tip of the hook did not fully penetrate its target but merely nicked the outer surface of the stem. This caused the fish to become even more agitated, thrown into a panic, heaving its massive bulk from side to side.

Then, in a spasmodic fury, it tried to spit its catch out! This caused the hook to become snagged in the cartilaginous lining at the outer edge of the jaw. Unable to maintain her hold on the hook's shaft, Dijal was disgorged back into aqueous darkness. In the process, one of the fish's razor-sharp teeth brushed against her neck, carving a deep gouge in her flesh. Less than a pulsimer later, an adjoining incisor sliced through the signal line tied to her ankle, separating her from the boat.

The fish continued to writhe in agony, at one point whipping Dijal with one of its dorsal fins, knocking her unconscious for about five pulsimers. When she came to, she fought to regain her awareness, the last breaths of air evaporating from her lungs. She watched the beast race off into the darkness as she bolted for the surface.

Dragging a portion of the signal line behind her, Dijal sprang for the surface to take in her first precious breath in over a stratimer. In a panic, she spun around in the frigid water, searching for the boat. Suddenly she saw it, being dragged by the fish at full speed, and bearing down upon her! It missed her by a fraction of a neurri. She reached for the transom, caught the remainder of the signal line now dragging from the stern and hung on with a weakening grip before Euan and Bechrach managed to pull her back aboard.

For over 100 stratimers the enraged creature dragged them through the black seas at breakneck speed, tossing, turning in a wild *danse macabre* which they all knew, in time, would result in its death. Until then, though, the terrified crew wondered if their own collective demise might come first.

Just as the Lumens began to rise from the sore-trean horizon, the exhausted behemoth ran aground on a rocky shore, 300 neurris to norostre of the Crescent, its body thrashing and writhing in the last throes of a desperate struggle to live. With the help of Garion and the rest of their campmates, and after 80 stratimers of furious thrusting and spearing, they were at last able to subdue the Barutha.

It took another four days to fully section the carcass and bring it back to camp. But when it was done, 13 exhausted souls rested, feasted, and poured out their gratitude for the gift of life this death had brought them.

Garion carefully fingered those last precious slices of dried meat which had lined the racks for 75 days. Protocol assigns the task of executioner only to those souls who are positioned to risk the waters beyond their shore. But in his eight quinteks of life here at the Bay of Teoramugh, he could not recall another time in which *all* of them had participated, to this extent, in the kill.

He closed his eyes to savor that moment, unsure if, or when, he would ever know that feeling again.

“*K*erak, would you mind if Masurian took your place at watch, with Cai? He’ll be with her from now on before dinner.”

“Why?”

“Cai’s request,” Ekavias answered. “All I know is she was pretty insistent.”

Kerak sighed and pitched a rock into the water. “Sure. Why not?”

Ekavias sensed Kerak’s tension but avoided the urge to pry. “Okay, well, thanks. In the meantime we’re clearing out

the notch to add a little extra storage space. We could use your help. Drogan and Euan are pitching in. I think Muirtreo, too.”

“Sure, count me in.”

Before turning to join the others, Kerak tossed a doleful glance at Cai, approaching the steps to begin her stint at watch. He'd pushed her too far; that was obvious. But for the first time since their fallout the previous day, she returned eye contact, albeit with a rather sullen face, bordering on...apologetic?

Kerak turned to face the notch and, with Drogan, stood to take it all in. Muirtreo balked. “I've been here three and a half quinteks and no one's ever bothered with this little hole. The cave has plenty of room. Why are we going to all this trouble?”

“Maybe you don't agree, but everyone else thinks it's getting a little crowded in there. Plus, the rear of the cave is damper than the notch; you know that.” Thaloux spoke with an unusual assertiveness. “Besides, don't you think it'd be nice to be able to spread out a little? And to keep the stores from mildewing so fast? Besides, what else have you got going on today?”

Muirtreo shrugged and gave in.

Their job was to move rock from the rear of the notch to add space, then to cull stones suitable for use in the fire pit and as additional ballast for the boat. After 40 stratimers of hard labor, a veil of mist began to shroud the sky, depleting their natural light.

“Kerak, you brought a lightstaff with you when you came here, right? Can you get it?” Muirtreo asked.

“Yeah, but it's not in very good shape. I doubt if we'll get much out of it. We can try if you want.”

Jadox joined them as all six tinkered with the broken instrument for 30 stratimers, until they were at last able to restore it to near perfect condition. It shed a vigorous stream of light as they continued to muscle stone, then more stone, for another 30 strats...

Until they saw it.

Drogan had inserted himself into a slit at the left rear corner of the notch, reaching for loose slag in an awkward corner. His attention was suddenly diverted to a vacant space near the juncture of the floor and the right wall which had been just been cleared.

“Come here. Quick!” Drogan yelled out to anyone who would listen. Euan was the first to respond. There they saw a small but gleaming fragment of pale reddish ore. A bulging vein turned at that very spot, emerging from and then disappeared back into the ground. It revealed itself within a tight exposure, no more than one and a half neurris long, less than a neurri wide.

Taking the lightstaff in hand, Drogan hunched over and crawled toward it. Euan took the staff from him and adjusted it as Drogan knelt closer to the ground, placing his trembling hands upon its brilliant contours; a resplendent, spiraling amalgam of Ularic, Menshar and chelated Hagonite, pulsing with iridescent flecks of orange, turquoise and lavender.

Kerak followed close behind. Euan knelt beside Drogan, and they noticed that the vein was having a strange effect on the lightstaff. The closer Euan held the staff to the vein, the more its light seemed to fade. It then intensified when the staff was pulled away.

“Euan, Kerak, do you see that? *Sonorance!*” Drogan murmured. “This vein is *exploding* with sonorance! Kerak, quick. Go get the Kuspegias...and the Myotrophus.”

Kerak rushed past the others. One by one, they all knelt behind Drogan and Euan to observe the source of Drogan’s fevered enthusiasm. Drogan took the staff back from Euan. Holding it in his left hand, Drogan skimmed his right palm along the fully exposed length of the vein. Then he waved the lightstaff close to the vein, running it from end to end, testing at various points the intensity of the vein’s effect on the staff. He grunted and mumbled with each swipe of the staff as its emissions ran the gamut from strong to weak with every motion of his hand.

Meanwhile, Kerak made his way back to the cave to begin rummaging through Drogan’s bag. He remembered the last

time he'd seen the Kuspegias and the Myotrophus, tucked into a side pocket of Droган's satchel. The small cloth bag holding the Kuspegias fell to the ground. Frantic, he continued to tear through that roughhewn sack for another five stratimers. But the Myotrophus? It was nowhere to be found.

Puzzled, Kerak wiped his brow and ran back to the notch with only the Kuspegias in hand. He wedged his way between his campmates, observing as Droган continued to palm the vein with one hand while holding the lightstaff in the other. Droган took the bag, removed the stones and placed them on his temples. Then he glared at Kerak with a curious, angry expression.

"Where's the Myo?" Droган demanded.

"I don't know, Droган, it wasn't in your satchel. Did you take it out?"

"Euan, I brought a Myotrophus here with me. Have you seen it?" Droган's eyes glowed red hot. "*Any* of you! There was a Myotrophus stone in my bag when Kerak and I came here. Have any of you *seen* it?" The lightstaff reflected the image of shaking heads, blank stares.

Droган grimaced, deflecting their voiceless denials with an accusatory smirk. But after puzzling for a pulsimer or two, he decided it wasn't worth the bother. *There's enough sonorance here without the Myo*, he thought. *The Kuspegias are all I'll need!*

Droган drove himself into the vein, struggling to ignore a twinge of pain just above the Quadric wound on his right hip. It had recurred that morning and was growing stronger. He fought to push it away, to capture an articulation, coming up short with each labored breath.

Jadox had managed to wedge his way in front of Euan, his timid curiosity at the sight of this spectacle carrying him as far as he could go. He held the lightstaff as Droган tilted his head closer to the vein, reflecting the light in even more vivid splashes of color than before. Droган winced in agony as he splayed his fingers across the vein, in an effort to somehow, with nothing more than his bare hands, cincture an articulation.

Again, his efforts dissolved into frustration and agony.

The Kuspegias dropped from his head. Drogon reeled, leaning against the wall of the notch as a dull gnaw clamped down on his skull. The pain in his right leg began to intensify. His vision grew hazy and his face burned as the others gazed at him with incredulous concern.

Kerak and Euan reached for Drogon, picked him up by his arms and rushed him out of the notch. "Let's get him back to the cave," Kerak said. "He's overwrought. He needs rest." Muirtreo ran up and lifted Drogon's feet, and the three of them bore his sweaty, limp frame back to his waiting bedroll.

For a little over 350 stratimers, Drogon dozed like the dead. Cai looked in on him from time to time, to comfort him as best she could, all the while doing her best to avoid eye contact with Kerak. He was grateful for her concern. But how he wished he had the courage to tell her.

Kerak was not blind to his brother's anguish. He knew that ever since their arrival at the Crescent, Drogon had longed to put this place behind him, wishing beyond hope to find himself free to return to the highlands and the plateaus which were home to the apostate circulators, the demoralized Muricai with whom he had so thoroughly bonded. From those ranges, too, he was just a few short days' journey from Astuverica; from Ligeia and Quilla...if he chose, perhaps, to somehow follow that path. At this norostrean beach, though, everything he had ever wanted in life remained out of touch, buried within the depths of his troubled mind.

Kerak knew that his brother's inability to articulate the Sphere beyond was pulling him deeper into a vicious cycle of desperation and dashed hopes. They shared a common frustration at the disappearance of the Myotrophus, and neither had ruled anyone out of suspicion. But sourcing, and then punishing, the "culprit", if one even existed, might cause significant collateral damage within this tight knit community. So Kerak steeled himself, to help his brother find a bridge, of sorts, between *here* and *there*; that is, if one even existed at all. In the meantime, all Kerak could hope for was that somehow, tomorrow would be more forgiving. He couldn't imagine

things getting any worse for his brother. That, at least, was his belief.

Ever since Kerak, Drogan and the others had first begun their task of hauling rock from the notch, Nishar's hands had remained constant and unflinching, always at work, always careful in the tending of his duties with Garion.

But his eyes? His eyes *never* left the notch.

If Kerak had imagined that he would like day watch, after a mere 20 strats atop that cold, dark perch, he was now convinced that he was going to *love* night watch.

With a sarcastic nod he thanked Cai as he sat there alone, awed in immersion at the aphotic, stalwart beauty that unfolded for him beyond that silent sentinel. He savored the gentle drafts which flowed from so many distant Ionian wings, strolling unimpeded across the expansive waters until they collided with the face of the cliff, curled at the precipice and danced away from the Crescent in buoyant loops. He scanned the horizon for the sight of one of those leaping fish, the thought of which had brought Cai such innocent joy. The desire for sleep did not trouble him as he enjoyed his respite that night.

After 140 stratimers, Kerak saw Nairul climbing the steps from below, to relieve him. He suppressed a yawn just before his stint ended, leaning out and peering up again at that stone stairway leading the rest of the way up the cliff. He'd completely forgotten about it in his unfiltered admiration for the darkness which continued to rule the sky. But he promised himself that, soon, he would make the time to explore it.

Back at the beach, Kerak surveyed the cave, pondering his snoring campmates and the restful sleep they were enjoying. It was still 130 stratimers until dawn and he was far too keyed to sleep. He wandered the shore, fumbling through the rocks in search of the remains of last night's discarded fingerpinch of Zaphraela.

Finding nothing, and now feeling the weight of yesterday's labors weighing him down, he prepared to turn back to

the cave when he heard a pair of footsteps, approaching from behind.

“*Kulrio zir Karestarome*, isn't it?”

He turned to find Cai, a blanket over her shoulders, shivering in the dark with wide, grinning eyes. “*Dark as an Ione's heart?* Ha! I'd forgotten that saying.” The words fell from Kerak's smiling face. They laughed, relieved that one less wall remained standing amid the cliffs enclosing this slice of the Horizon. “But, you know, I wonder...how dark that heart really is.”

She stared up at the sky, nodding in agreement.

12

DROGAN WOKE EARLY THAT morning, rested but feeling no more comfortable with his surroundings than he had the day before. Garion, Nishar and Muirtreo, responsible for householding their little community, had announced at breakfast that rationing would begin right away, as their food reserves were quickly vanishing. “*How much longer?*” Garion had been quizzed more than once at breakfast. His bleak response? “*20 days, maybe 30...*” if they could stretch it.

After breakfast, Drogan slumped against a rock, whiling away the early morning, tossing accusatory glances at his campmates. They seemed not to notice, though, instead preferring to congratulate him on what seemed to them like a complete recovery. “I’m in the company of *thieves!*” was all he could say, muttering through clenched teeth, finding himself unwilling to acknowledge their amiable concern, unable to shake off the disturbing events of yesterday.

It was impossible for Drogan to conceal his shifting moods, wavering from up to down within the span, at times, of less than a stratimer. But like Kerak, Drogan was a pragmatist. He surmised that *here* was a lot better than the massive cave in which they’d last domiciled (i.e. *there*), so for now, lacking any alternatives to the Crescent, he elected to keep his grievances close to the cuff. Only Nalani seemed capable of anchoring his mercurial bent, her smile a tender reminder of another, surely not unlike her, whom he had left behind so long ago.

Too, his disposition was no better off for his physical condition. The Quadric wound on his right leg was now largely healed, but above it, a painful rash had formed in the area at which he had first felt that curious tingling sensation before they’d arrived at the Crescent; a sensation which had returned with a vengeance during his debacle in the notch.

Should I tell Cai about this? Drogan asked himself that morning. *No, of course not.* So he shook it off, self-conscious, proud that he could endure a little discomfort on his own. “Besides, it’s nothing more than a rash”, he murmured, prepared to trudge through another day.

The job of the maintenance crew, later that morning, was to help lug Eusterian water from the beach in a large bladder (sewn from the stomach of an old catch), to moisten the tensors, the lashings and the hullskins to keep them supple. Otherwise lumenescence would promote drying and cracking...perilous to the well-being of the boat.

Kerak took it upon himself that morning to fetch spring-water for their dwindling reservoir. The only accessible spring lay a few dozen neurris beyond the notch. He enlisted the help of Nalani, who earlier had caved in to boredom, having been spotted by Cai snipping fresh sprigs of Windswort and throwing them into a bowl so she could make “stew.” The night before, Dijal’s neck wound from her near fatal dive had begun to fester again in its slog toward a proper mend. This forced Cai to focus her energies on the task of dhuthaer while Kerak assumed his first shift as Nalani’s temporary guardian.

Aside from her culinary experiments, Nalani’s most troublesome habit was her enthusiasm for *collecting*. Most of her gatherings were harmless bric-a-brac, but Cai, Euan, Masurian, Garion...indeed nearly everyone at camp, had lost one or more of their scant possessions to what Nalani called her “secret spot.” On her own, she kept her promise to return these objects to their owners, but her timeframe for doing so varied, depending on her level of interest.

Kerak handed her a small bladder and they began to walk the short distance along the beach before turning toward a small bluff. All the while Kerak found himself in a game of stop and start with Nalani, trying to keep her from skittering off in one direction or another. When her back was turned to him he found himself baffled by the strange birthmark on the nape of her neck, half shrouded by hair, grime or sweat. Over time, a host of distractions pried and he thought no more of it.

After passing just to sorentre of the notch, he reached behind to take her hand and suddenly found, not to his surprise, that he was scaling the short bluff to the spring by himself. Nalani was nowhere to be seen. He called for her, got no response, then retraced his steps back toward the beach. From a distance he saw her, digging through the pile of slag which had been pulled from the notch the day before. It was there that she found it, lying just beneath a dull gray stone, an outpouring of brilliant colors reflecting from its cracked surface. She placed the tiny fragment of forged ore in her pocket and ran back toward Kerak and the bluff, the empty bladder slung over her shoulder. He scowled at her as she approached.

“Hey Kerak, you wanna see what I found?”

“Later, Nalani. Stay with me, okay, and don't run off again. We've got work to do.”

They carried water until just before mid-day, filling the large reservoir (nothing more than a small, hand-dug pit, lined with skins) at the rear of the cave. Once they were done, Nalani nestled herself into a cleft behind the reservoir to stash her latest find, along with two other interesting items she'd discovered early that morning while rummaging through a bag which had been kicked aside, just before Drogan had been carried to his bedroll yesterday.

At mid-day, Kerak sat by the shore with Jadox, nibbling on a fistful of jerky while the Lumens hung like a fiery pendulum at the peak of the sky. Jadox sipped a flagon of bullion, brewed from the jawbone marrow of their last catch. This concoction, a fusion of bland and bitter, cooked up by Jadox and Nairul, had first been labeled *Noquont* by their campmates, with a fitting hint of sarcasm. Lacking any other practical name, Noquont it remained.

Kerak nursed a sore right shoulder and sipped a cup of the springwater he'd fetched that morning, all the while doubting that his campmates had ever come across a part of the Barutha for which they had *not* found some useful purpose. It dawned on him how little springwater was consumed in this camp. Eusterian water was the preference of all except him,

Drogan and Euan. The rubric from Andulkan coastal territories was that Eusterian water was drinkable in small quantities, but generally not healthy. Kerak refused to take it straight up, deterred by its high concentration of Aurean saturate. But he agreed that it had a certain quality which made it preferable for cooking and brewing. He pondered, though, its long-term effects. *Good thing Drogan isn't here*, he mused, *to accuse me of "thinking too much."*

Kerak gawked at the remains of Jadox's right leg, severed just above the knee. According to Euan, the limb had been devoured during Jadox's first, and only, dive. After Jadox had plunged the barb into the brainstem, he swam out of the mouth, just as he'd been instructed. The fish, though, had found a second wind in the throes of death. Alarmed at the sight of Jadox's escape, it swung its pivotable teeth down around the fleeing morsel. An incisor sliced through flesh and bone as if it was cutting dead air, sending his right leg back into its mouth. In an act of reflex, the fish tried to close its mouth around the severed leg with the hook still in its jaws. This caused all three prongs of the hook to lodge deep in the Barutha's fleshy mouth. Euan told Kerak that it took them two full days to separate the deep-set barbs from the mouth of that beast.

Cai had built Jadox's crutch from fin bones, lashing it to his leg with shaved tensors. Kerak asked him if he still felt any phantom pain from the stub. Jadox shook his head. Then he leaned in, his face warped in confusion. He whispered what started out as a question, but finished as more of an inquiring statement.

"Drogan...and those little memory stones he was using yesterday...?" Jadox asked.

A pained silence followed.

Jadox's eyes prodded, probed Kerak as if to say, *"you know what I'm asking, so why don't you just tell me, already!"*

Kerak understood his curiosity, but he knew that if he said anything about the Kuspegias to Jadox, or anyone for that matter, Drogan would likely kill him, or worse if that was

possible. Kerak fumbled for something resembling a limited but coherent response as Ekavias approached behind them.

“Jadox, spare us some of that, would you?” Ekavias asked, pointing to the Noquont. “Masurian told me he spices that stuff up with a pinch of crushed scabric to make it drinkable.” Jadox handed a reserve flagon of his concoction to his inventive campmate, satisfied that his *own* recipe, unembellished, was just fine. He watched Ekavias walk away, his eyes turning now to Kerak. They traded hard stares, then parted ways. It occurred to Kerak that this tall, one-legged introvert was not, by any means, done where the subject of memory stones was concerned. It occurred to him too that he’d probably just heard the longest word string that Jadox had ever put together at one time.

After his meager lunch, Kerak made his way back to the cave. Cai had placed Dijal on a bedroll beneath the shade of the hut. Here they could avoid the dampness of the cave in equally cool but drier surroundings while Cai tended to her. Kerak watched her deft hands as they worked Dijal’s wound, culling dead tissue before applying thin swabs of poultice to the wound between layers of salve...a blend of seawater and Barutha mucus...which had been mixed and stored by Muirtreo in a terracotta vessel in the coolest portion of the cave.

Cai took time to examine Dijal’s other wounds, to monitor their status. This included a new gash on her hand which she had earned that morning in an argument with a stubborn hook barb, resentful of being sharpened. Cai wondered if Dijal possessed a single patch of skin which would not sooner or later wind up marred and mangled.

Not long after mid-day, Cai noticed that Dijal appeared to be having a reaction of some sort, suffering sharp bouts of pain between lapses of consciousness. Muirtreo heard these cries and ran over to Cai.

“Muirtreo, bring me the vessel you got that mucus from.” He ran to retrieve it. She dipped her finger into the pasty muck and held it close to her eyes.

“*Creegh Amaria!* This salve is starting to spoil.” She showed it to Muirtreo. “Look at the gray flecks hanging in the whip. It’s no good! Did you see this before you pulled it out of the jar?” Cai asked before retreating from her accusatory tone, after grasping the extent of her own culpability.

“No. It smelled okay so I just assumed it was alright,” Muirtreo said, embarrassed and afraid.

With fleet fingers, Cai dug out the poultice. “Kerak, bring me a couple of flagons of that springwater you got today. I need it to clean the wound. Quick!”

Finally, Kerak thought. *Someone who appreciates my work.*

Cai poured and cleaned for 20 stratimers, only to watch Dijal’s pain soar to perilous levels. The fetid mucus had touched off a sharp chemical reaction at the last few exposed nerve endings in the wound. The rest of the camp crowded around her, watching and worrying as Dijal writhed in agony, her neck wound now callow and raw, looking as if it had never healed at all. “What should we do?” They all quizzed Cai in succession. She caressed Dijal, shaking her head in frustration, chastising herself again for her lack of diligence.

“I’m not sure,” Cai said, “but we’ve got to do something about her pain. If we don’t it might kill her!”

While the others pondered Dijal’s fate, a thought occurred to Kerak. Would he be revealing too much of himself? *Never mind that!* he brooded. The thought of losing Dijal troubled him beyond measure.

Kerak scrambled from one side of the cave to the other, searching in desperation for his satchel. *Where is it*, he thought?

In a remote corner, he spotted it.

Rummaging through the bottom of the bag, he beat his hand against the weave and used his nails to scrape up about half a fingerpinch; all that he could find in a hurry. He was confident that he’d extracted a little more of it than Dijal would need to free her from her agony. He ran back to the hut, pushing the others aside to get to Dijal.

“Kerak, what’s going on? What are you...?” Cai insisted.

“It’s alright, I know what I’m doing. This will help her, Cai.”

Kerak placed a pinch of gray powder on Dijal's tongue, gave her a sip of water and closed her mouth. Dijal winced, batted her eyes. Within 10 pulsimers, her face took on a serene aspect. A stratimer later, she sat straight up and smiled.

The powder had worked its effect. The others stood by in disbelief, tossed thankful smiles at Kerak and embraced Dijal, glad that she would be alright.

A poultice was now out of the question, so after Cai finished washing it, she fashioned a simple wrap for Dijal and tied it around the wound. Euan took Cai's shift at watch. She spent the rest of the day finishing her work on Dijal.

Just before dinner, Cai found Kerak as he was assisting Nairul with the table. She crept up behind him, grabbed him by the shoulders, turned him around and gave him a hug.

"I just wanted to thank you for what you did today, Kerak. You saved her life! We're... *I'm*...so grateful to you for that."

"Well, I'm just glad I could do *something* today...other than fetch water, I mean."

She laughed. "You did a lot more than just fetch water!" Cai dropped her head, trying to muster the courage to ask. "Kerak, that was...Bhatrathur, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was." He stared at her, frozen, gauging her reaction.

"Kerak, are...are you....a dhuthaer? Or a legent?"

"No, Cai. I am not."

Cai diverted her eyes, knowing full well that only three trades were familiar with the properties of Bhatrathur.

Now, exposed as he was, Kerak pushed her away in his shame. His earlier enthusiasm for an open dialogue with Cai vanished into thin air. *It's too much*, he thought. *She knows. I've gone too far!* His eyes filled with tears and he dropped his head, unable, unwilling, to see her as she stood before him.

"It's alright, Kerak. I won't..." she struggled to find the words. "I won't say anything, I promise. I understand."

"I'm not who you think I am, Cai. That's all in the past. I'm *not*..."

She placed her hand over his mouth, quieting his anxious words. "*Huiruon cevatrix kure chara mhurotendra tudej,*" she whispered in a lightly-accented Hirusovran, then turned to walk away.

Kerak watched Cai vanish into the cave, pondering her words. *From the ugliest vine does the loveliest fruit grow.* He smiled, let go a laugh and turned to finish his work.

Garion had spent the late day stirring, warming, carefully seasoning a thin but aromatic brew for his appreciative audience. He felt the burdens of need bearing down upon him, laboring to stretch as much as he could from their diminishing reserves. *It's got to happen,* he thought. *Something must turn up for us. Soon!*

But ever since Dijal had pulled through earlier that day, something else had lingered within, troubling him with merciless impunity. It was a sinister apparition, but one which he knew he must conquer.

Just before finishing dinner, Garion had gone to find her, kept far from roaming eyes, and in particular, *very* far from Nalani's kleptomaniacal grasp. He removed the lid for a quick look at her, cast in suspended animation. He wondered why, after all this time, he'd been unable to part with her, this relic of his past and all it represented; of what *used* to be. He rolled a wad of spit around in his mouth before allowing it to ooze into the jar. Then he closed and resealed the lid, and returned to his work.

Dinner that evening, though minimal, was a celebration of conquest; yet another repulse of the death, the suffering they could not escape, even here. Their exuberance competed well with the mood they'd shared 80 days earlier, when they'd brought their last catch home to the Bay of Teoramugh.

One soul, though, remained disengaged from the others around the table that evening. For ever since Dijal's recovery, and the obvious reason behind it, Garion could *not*, as hard as he tried, remove his probing, suspicious eyes from the sight of Kerak Um.Tiago.

*H*is shift had passed without incident. He still had yet to climb those steps above the observation perch, to the peak of the cliff, as he'd promised himself he would. "But not tonight", Kerak had whispered to himself. *I should keep my eyes where they belong.* He didn't want to miss that "jumper", just waiting out there to sacrifice itself, for the good of all. Unfortunately, that image did not appear for him.

Back at the beach, with Nairul now on watch, Kerak searched the sand and found a few scattered fragments of Zaphraela. He re-rolled them with a careful hand, then sparked the tip. Relishing his first drag in two days, he sat cross-legged on the rocks, trying to unwind.

Drogan's last words to him before he'd started his stint at watch kept ringing in Kerak's ears. It was clear: the two of them were moving in different directions. Kerak had found a sanctuary here; not quite a home, but closer to it than anything he'd known since just before Sorchu Ve.Sian had stolen him off and into the unyielding influence of the Courvesois.

But Drogan? Ever since his humiliating failure to articulate the only sonorant vein in this bygone backwater, his restlessness had hit apogee, driving its energies into the direction of a single soul: Garion.

Hedeon knows they'd tried. Since their arrival at the Crescent, Kerak had pitched a few innocent pleasantries and some awkward conversation his way. Garion's response had been negligible, to say the least. Drogan, though, had never been able to bring himself even to look the old pellet in the eye, much less offer him a kind word. Where these newcomers were concerned, Garion had always remained a sullen, silent mystery.

Of course, standing before Drogan was the self-righteous notion that Garion had something that he wanted: namely, the location of a Boric Pier. For this reason, Kerak's stubborn sibling would not relent. "We have to ask him, but we have to do it together... When are we going to approach him about the location of a Boric?... You're on good terms with Cai now; get *her* to ask him!" This was all Drogan could talk about before

Kerak climbed the steps that evening, glad to be away from the verbal drubbing his brother had heaped on him.

But I can't impose on Cai, not after our last roundabout, Kerak mused. *Somehow, he thought, I've got to either reason with Drogan or find a way to befriend that surly old codger myself, to squeeze him for the location of some mythic geological "legend" out there, assuming he even knows what I'm talking about. Of course if he does, it's not like we'd be able to get to it...*

Kerak drew one last, precious breath, then tossed the dregs into the water. He yawned and pulled himself up, to trudge back to the cave. He thought of the day before, relieved that the Bhatrathur covering the bottom of his pack had delivered Dijal from her pain. Somehow, it seemed, that in the course of deviating from the will of The Order, he'd at last found a way to *save* life rather than simply take it. This achievement felt satisfying on one hand...and a little strange on the other.

On his way back, Kerak recalled his reaction yesterday to how *light* his pack had felt when he'd gone digging for Bhatrathur. How something, or some *things*, seemed not to have been there while he'd beaten and fingered that fine powder from between countless folds of worn cloth.

And that was when he heard it, from the cliff high above him. The horn! Then, an anguished shriek shattered the cold night sky.

"BARUTHA!!"

*F*RACTURED AND ADRIFT. THAT'S how they found them. Four of them...dead. The other two? Beaten, anguished, all too aware of their failure; to protect their friends from the unbridled rage they'd witnessed on those waters, and to those who remained behind, to return some semblance of life, promise...*sustenance*. But now, it seemed, the final strand of a fraying thread had finally snapped. Hope had vanished into nothingness. And it appeared, to all, that it might never return.

*U*pon hearing Nairul's energetic call, Euan, Thaloux, Muirtreo, Masurian, Bechrach, and Dijal (by then not yet fully healed, but unwilling to obey Cai's order/plea to remain shorebound) right away volunteered their services. With eager, sleep-deprived bodies and a healthy dose of nerves, they ventured forth, long before luments emerged that morning from the wisoltrean sky.

With the help of the entire camp they launched the boat, almost forgetting to load their oil lamps before shoving off. At the last pulsimer, Kerak thought he should retrieve the lightstaff for the crew in case the lamps failed, but the boat had taken off before he could find it and bring it up to shore.

A thin ceiling of mist hung about four neurris above the water, as far as the eye could see. Nairul had been lucky to find the fish through this shroud. He was amazed by its massive size, its robust strength. With confidence, the beast had soared up out of the water and pierced the low veil, leaving a gaping hole in the mist which remained unfilled for almost 40 stratimers.

As the boat pushed off from the Crescent they peered up at the cliff to see the faint silhouette of Nairul, still jumping, jabbing his finger to norostre, watching the beast bounce across the water and on toward the horizon. Ionian winds were as

light as a feather, so with oars alone they muscled their floating contraption as fast as their limbs could manage.

The mast cut a thin swath through the low vapors. Anxious and alert, the others stood at the shore, urging their friends onward until the mists enfolded behind the pirogue, disappearing in a vaporous cocoon. From then on, the Crescent remained obscured in nescient anticipation, and would remain so until their return.

Euan, Muirtreo, Thaloux, Masurian and Bechrach heaved, strained and grunted under the weight of their oars, driving the boat through the water. Their hunger, or more precisely their *fear* of hunger, lightened their limbs through the pain which soon wracked their bodies. Dijal stood at the stern, one hand on the tiller, the other at her brow, scanning the horizon to glean some tiny clue of the creature's path. Her sole assurance was a slight wake left behind by the fish, dotted here and there with the occasional lazy whirlpool. Its direction seemed to wend and waver to norostre, sorentre, all points in between. *This one has a sense of humor*, Dijal thought as she eased the tiller from side to side, guiding the boat on the path she thought they should follow.

Every so often she would shout "Halt!" Her mates would then lift their oars from the water, remaining silent for three or four stratimers, keeping their ears peeled for distant splashes, letting them know if they were on the right path. The oarsmen relished these interludes, allowing them a few short breaks from their routine.

As they rowed, Dijal kept another eye on her mates, feverishly pounding the seas. *I should be there, sharing their load*, she mused, frustrated, *but I promised Cai I wouldn't overdo it*. Despite her reluctance, she swore to keep that promise, cursing the still peaceful nocturnal airs. "Too bad the Lumens didn't berth last night to norostre," she cried out in a hoarse whisper. "What a ride we'd have very soon if that were the case!" The rest of the crew nodded in agreement.

In time, the Ione limped back to the horizon, leaving the Lumens soon to pierce the veil. By then they'd been rowing for over 120 stratimers. It was obvious, how those past 75 plus

days of relative inactivity had taken their toll, leaving them too weak to continue at this pace. But the Lumens soon appeared above the wisoltrean peaks, followed by a delicate breeze which began to fill their baggy sail. They lifted their oars, thanked the 'Phemes for their paltry fortunes and the respite bought on by a good breeze as their boat kept time with the chop in the wake of Nairul's jumper. Luments and relief from rowing gave them all a chance to sharpen their focus, so they positioned themselves at different parts of the boat to ensure that all points of the horizon were covered.

Then...

"To sorentre!" Euan shouted, waving his finger at their prize, crowning a soaring, energetic leap. It hit the water with a slap, then disappeared beneath the froth as they rowed in its direction.

Many thoughts fill the mind of a soul upon seeing a Barutha. And this one, the culmination of so much anxious searching and hoping, was long overdue. Never had they waited like this for a sighting. Just a few days before, they'd each come to their private conclusions that the seas beyond the Crescent had grown as lifeless as the rest of the norostrean barrens. But now, swirling close beneath them, hope seemed, at last, to have arrived.

The Barutha ranges throughout every corner of the Eusterian sea and the upper portions of the Aquina Sul-Ataurea. But the beast craves the Aurean saturates these norostrean waters are known for, which no other fish can tolerate for long. So their dwindling numbers follow the plentiful swarms of Peligarthe and Baethrugant, occasionally even the deeper swimmers such as Kwaaeriuth and Shatulatien, until their prey is either eaten or forced to turn back to warmer, less toxic waters. The Barutha, though, soldiers on to norostre, alone or in small schools, able to go without a solid meal for as long as two unteks. It will remain in these reaches long enough to ingest its fill of saturate, and before turning back, to try its luck with a few trembling, tasty morsels found clinging every now and then to a three-pronged hook.

As a youth, caged within the clockwork element, ground from the flesh of Astuverican slavery, I had often been regaled with anecdotes of this handsome yet diabolical creature. So many breathtaking tales, as told by the tongues of those aged souls who hulked within the bowels of the Andulkan Subterra, evoking bygone days of freedom and conquest. And the picture they painted was, to me, as rich and as textured as the image which Euan and the others saw that morning.

After pushing themselves another hundred neurris, the rowers dropped their oars. All six leaned over the side to offer their slaverous attractants, wiping stringy swabs of slick drool from their faces. They sat in rapt amazement, watched the fish swim in lazy circles about 15 to 20 neurris down. Beneath its supple hide they could make out its rigid tensors, running in a wavy line from head to tail, each about a fourth of a neurri apart. Just beneath the skin, glassy in appearance, they could see a virtual kaleidoscope of colors, from green to yellow to magenta and lavender, all of it spinning and swirling with the shifting light through the top layer of hide.

The Barutha is the archetype of functional versatility. At the top, the beast's two rigid dorsals whipped and thrashed, ensuring the stability of its massive bulk. At the rear, they saw its muscular twin caudal fins, each with the ability to pivot independently of the other, allowing for a quick change of direction, to bank or rotate in the tightest of turns.

The fish twirled to display its twin pectorals, but too fast to identify its gender. And at the outer edge of the mouth...double hinged, deep, wide and pink...they could see the animal's lengthy incisors: razor sharp despite their cartilaginous composition; clear, long and arched with a delicate curve, like the blades of a Quadric and just as deadly. They, too, are capable of pivoting in or out, as much as 90 degrees, allowing the fish to both spear and masticate its prey with the same tools.

The dorsal fins were streaked with their own bulging tensors that twitched and pulsed as they worked to stabilize the massive bulk lying beneath them. And the eyes, like the skin, were a whirlpool of hypnotic radiance. Large, dark, deep set

and oval, their colors exceeded those of the skin with a sharp brilliance, even appearing to gyrate in ascendant light.

Without a tongue, taste is gleaned from millions of minute sensors which line the walls of the mouth. Beyond that, the digestive tract lies in wait to discharge an astringent slurry, capable of dissolving large, unchewed fragments of prey into an aqueous slush in two to three pulsimers.

As Euan and the others peered into the depths that morning, they couldn't help but marvel at this one, for here in full light, and so very close to the surface, this creature exposed itself with what seemed a casual indifference, appearing to flaunt its rigid cutlasses, its quivering dorsals, its mouth agape, its eyes magnetic and scintillating.

As one, they could feel it. The time had now come to begin the dive. The winds turned vague and wispy as Euan and Bechrach took to the oars. They discussed who should make the drop. All the others were experienced divers, and all but Dijal were in adequate physical shape to perform this task. It seemed as if all of them were ready and eager to wrap themselves around the shaft of the hook and propel themselves into the abyss.

But they were puzzled, even alarmed by this one. For the beast lingered close to the surface, displaying nothing resembling hunger. Instead, it swirled, spun, as if to taunt them. The tops of its eyes remained always in view; its pupils, narrow slits, throbbed and danced in a state of perpetual adjustment.

Any further talk of who would make this dive remained cast in silence. "*Speak up!*" they chided themselves with nervous whispers. A collective but unspoken sense of urgency took hold of them. Still, they remained frozen, continuing to watch this animal, spiraling ever closer to the boat, until, when it was about 10 neurris below them...

It dove!

In its wake, its caudals swung close to the surface, propelling it into the abyss. A column of froth rose beneath the boat, forcing it straight up, then down, knocking Dijal and

Masurian to the floorboards. Torrents of water cascaded over the gunwales.

Euan, Muirtreo and Bechrach grabbed a handful of bladders and started bailing. But the water continued to spume and seethe beneath them. Helpless, their tiny vessel looped and spun about. Now all six were bailing. As soon as they'd emptied enough water to expose the tops of the ballast rocks, all hands but Dijal's reached for the oars and started rowing while she kept watch.

But where to go? Were they trying to move toward the beast, or away from it? Thaloux looked down, deep into the dark, clear waters, and pointed. "There it is!" he cried out, seeing it clearly, swimming again in tightening spirals about 15 to 20 neurris below the surface. But this time its motions took it deeper, ever farther away from them. Ascending luments danced in the water, and the fish reflected a more blinding radiance than they had seen when it was closer to the surface. Again, it plunged into the black and disappeared.

Three, then four stratimers passed. They all leaned overboard, their eyes straining to see...*something*, hoping against hope that the fish had not somehow vanished, grown tired of this useless foreplay and skittered off to more interesting surroundings.

"Quick. Uncoil the tensors and help me with the hook! I'll take this," Muirtreo said, motioning to his companions. "We've got to get overboard before we lose him!" Dijal and Masurian propped up the shaft of the hook to help Muirtreo position himself.

There was no time for anxious, longing wishes of safety or success. Thaloux and Euan pitched in to untangle the tensors to ensure that the drop was clean and trouble free. But just as they prepared to toss bait and hook overboard, Bechrach, who had been peering into the water the whole time, let go a loud shriek.

"Row! We need to *row*! He's...he's coming right at us!"

All the others except Muirtreo thrust their heads over the gunwales. In an instant, they saw it. The size of the fish seemed to grow, to soar exponentially, its mouth open as wide as its

double hinged anatomy would allow, white teeth gleaming in the bright strain of luments; its muscular tensors, its swirling colors heaving, bursting in flexion and tension as it took flight beneath the surface, drawing nearer, nearer.

It took less than two pulsimers for five unnerved, panic-stricken souls to grab their oars and start rowing. Muirtreo collapsed into the keel, the shaft of the massive hook pinning his legs, his body enmeshed in a tangle of tensors, feet, wet ballast rocks and spray soaring over the bow and into the boat.

Another dome of water rose beneath them, but this time it lifted the boat much higher than before, at least eight neurris into the air. It exploded beneath the keel until the boat lost all contact with the water. All six of them took immediate hold of anything attached to the boat. They watched the giant beast become airborne, soaring right past the stern as its dorsal fin clipped and snapped the rudder with a resounding crack.

Less than three pulsimers later, the keel of the boat came down and slammed against the churning froth still raging beneath them. Then, in a fraction of a pulsimer, the fish landed dorsals down less than a neurri behind the boat. Another detonation of water flew hard in all directions, burying the left rail, breaking their holds, sending all six of them, along with the hook, into the Eusterian sea.

The mast broke when the boat tipped, ripping the sail, snapping the tensors comprising the rigging. Without the leveraged weight of the crew to counteract it, the hook dropped straight into the deep, the full length of its 100 neurri line. This caused the bow to plunge forward, pivoting the stern to point straight toward Zenith.

The crew fought desperately to find, to attach themselves to anything that would float. Debris drifted away from the boat, including their four spears. Despite being made of porous bone, the spears were not buoyant enough to support their full weight. Given the weight of the hook, the bow of their mutilated craft was submerged by two neurris, but enough of it remained above the surface to allow them to grab onto its frame.

Again, the waters raged. The frame of the boat rocked. The Lumens were shadowed from view by the dark silhouette of the beast, erupting from the sea behind them. The momentum of the Barutha's speed and weight split the surface and swung down upon them four pulsimers later. Its bulk slapped the water with brute force, striking Muirtreo, Masurian and Bechrach, separating the others from the boat, plunging them all beneath the waves. Spidery fingers of blood poured from the skulls of Muirtreo and Bechrach and slithered into Eusterian darkness.

With their feet and arms flailing below the surface, Dijal, Euan and Thaloux fought to find and help their friends, now floating face down, unconscious. But in so doing, they further attracted the Barutha's attention.

Dijal, her face buried in the water, saw it; the smell of fresh blood infusing its senses, its mouth wide open, racing once more for the surface. Muirtreo's body drifted away from the tilted boat, and Dijal watched in rage and horror as the fish soared straight up. It swallowed her courageous friend whole. Then, it dove once more.

This was no time to reflect on loss or pain. The urge to survive reigned supreme as pulsimers lingered into continuum, leaving them to mull their next move. But they would not have long to wait. Euan, too exhausted to reach the boat, wrestled with two floating spears in an effort to forestall drowning. Thaloux, Dijal and Euan now drifted, gasped for air, then drove their faces beneath the water, to witness the enormity of their fate.

Again, it came. Beyond the point of exhaustion, Thaloux and Euan swam toward Bechrach's lifeless body in a determined effort to pull him back to the boat. Anger, resolve steeled them, renewed their strength. Thaloux grabbed Bechrach and tried to support his weight as he began to sink. Euan, seeing right away that both Thaloux *and* Bechrach were now in the Barutha's sights, swam straight down. He loosened his grip on one spear, then took hold of another, longer spear, with his dominant hand.

The glare of luments shielded Euan from its sight as the fish once again erupted from the deep, aiming its sights on Thaloux and Bechrach. Suddenly, Euan was upon it. He aimed his weapon and with bold assurance, reared back and plunged his halberd deep into the fish's left pupil. A split pulsimer later, Euan's body was immediately engulfed, disappearing without so much as a scrape from its razor-sharp teeth, deep into the Barutha's surging orifice.

The fish hit the surface, completely missing Thaloux and Bechrach. It arced, then plunged in agony back into the water. As it did, its tail again struck the boat, causing the bow stem to crack, breaking the tensor holding the hook and sending forged metal on a deep journey into the abyss. Without the weight of the hook to hold it upright, the stern slammed back into the water. The broken vessel drifted like a twig in the morning chop.

In a panic, Dijal and Thaloux grabbed the bodies of Bechrach and Masurian and retrieved them to the boat. Unwilling, indeed unable to accept the gravity of their loss, they further exhausted themselves in a frantic effort to breathe life back into their friends, until the encumbrance of reality roused them to the futility of their efforts.

Suddenly they realized that there was nothing left to say, to do, nor any longer, to hope for. Dijal and Thaloux gathered flotsam back into the boat, working through their pain to repair what they could. They gazed off into the distance to watch the tormented beast swim away, bouncing off the surface in crooked, deranged meanderings, trailing bloodily off toward the norostrean horizon.

40 stratimers passed. They sat alone in agonized silence. Home awaited them, to wisoltre. Thaloux spotted their position, then he and Dijal took oars in hand and began their long, slow journey back to the Crescent.

Survival, it seemed, did not appear destined to reign supreme for long.

*D*USK, AND 11 SOULS STOOD IN A circle at the water's edge. Supported by a crude stone base, the small pyre had been built earlier that day with anything they could spare that was flammable and not essential to their existence. Atop lay the bodies of Bechrach and Masurian, shorn of their clothing, faces up, arms crossed, awaiting the primal spark.

Nalani, her face stained with tears, climbed the scaffold to place a small damp stone on Bechrach's forehead, part of an Incarnate ritual she'd observed at the last refugee camp she'd passed through before Bechrach had brought her to the Crescent. Then, Cai bore the torch from the fire pit, dropped the tip and struck it at the level of the uppermost stone.

They each took a few steps back. Flame wrapped itself around the bodies of their friends, merging at the peak into a tapered point, disappearing into smoke and ash. Unable to continue watching, they turned their backs to the pyre, to the Eusterian sea, to Euan and Muirtreo, to those dark waters and the enraged specter which remained there, unrequited.

Nairul had been the last to see them go, and he had been the first to spot their return, fidgeting at his watch, just as he had the night before. He had yelled down to alert the others, who ran out to the beach only to find a broken hulk, devoid of rudder or mast, and two desolate souls slapping the water with their oars, trying to nudge themselves those last few neurris home.

But now, as they heard behind them the dull snap of dying flames, they made their way back to the cave, passing the racks holding their dwindling food supplies. Words remained unspoken. They squatted in darkness, throwing hollow stares at the cave walls.

After Nairul had come down from the perch, plans to observe any further watches were, for now, suspended. Kerak, Cai and Nairul sat close together, wondering if there was any

reason to prolong what now seemed a pointless exercise. Luments receded into night, and their eyes grew heavy with regret, withdrawing into shadow and dread to await what the morning might bring.

All but Dijal. A manic bout of insomnia kept her from her bedroll. She paced the shore in front of the notch, her mind aching for answers, for that missing spark which had come so close to closing the distance between her and Masurian. On her knees, she searched for any unspent remnants of Zaphraela, but found none. Tension, anxiety overwhelmed her. She squatted, licked her index finger and thrust it between her legs, igniting a thousand dormant nerve endings, a mellow masturbatory release, followed by a fitful yawn before wandering back to the cave for some badly needed sleep.

Breakfast began as a silent affair until they were overwhelmed by the urge to speak. Nervous conversation soon morphed into a raucous explosion of courage, fear, hope and despair before dissolving into anger and compliant acceptance of what appeared to be their *fate*.

But on that subject, none of them could agree. “*What now?*” was the only chorus sung in perfect harmony that morning, through Zenith, into mid-day and late evening. Dinnertime was ignored until Nalani, unable to carry on, tugged at Droган’s sleeve, her hungry eyes softening his strident bearing. She begged for a small morsel of food. Realizing that she hadn’t eaten since early morning, he walked her to the racks and gave her his ration before sending her back to the cave to attempt, in her own small way, to process the pain of adulthood.

Darkness settled in and talk faded once again to silence. All that remained of over 400 stratimers and a couple dozen heated exchanges was a distinct lack of agreement. So, without uttering a sound, they arose as one in twilight and did the only thing they knew to do, to put their thoughts, their energies on a constructive path.

Drogan, with his malady now fluctuating between extremes from one stratimer to the next, found himself too weak to do little more than sit upright. So the rest of them struck four lamps and the lightstaff, sauntered over to the remains of their boat and began to formulate a plan to repair the crippled vessel. Despite an acknowledged lack of consensus on any other subject, it was understood by all that they must either fish or flee, and a seaworthy boat was their only reliable means of accomplishing either goal.

Thaloux, Dijal and Jadox were versant in the construction and maintenance of their vessel so they took the lead. Until just before dawn they all worked to gather and sort as much bone and usable skin as they could, then debated how to put their motley collection of scraps to work.

Sections of surplus bone were lashed and secured to the framing with the last of their usable tensor. The violent shaking the boat had endured at the mercy of an enraged fish had caused numerous cracks in the ribbing, frailties they knew would render the boat worthless if not properly repaired.

Morning came and went, and their work continued. With all their scrap tensor depleted, they cut pieces of spare clothing (including the garb taken from the bodies of Bechrach and Masurian), combined it with the thickest available sections of skin, and used these materials to mend the broken stays supporting the mast, as well as to provide additional lashings where needed.

There were no parts suitable to replace the rudder so an oar, lashed to the stern, would have to do. The mast was reworked and the rips in the fabric of the sail and the hull were mended by the now skilled hands of Drogan, who had, for a while, found new strength in purpose. Ballast rocks were replaced with refuse gathered from the slag pile beyond the notch. Just before the Lumens fell into a norostrean dusk, they were at last able to declare their meager repairs *almost* done.

Commonality of purpose had managed to mend their tattered bonds, to free them from the anguish of stark reality, but only to a degree. For two essential elements could not be replaced: hook and line. Porous bone was unsuitable for a

hook, lacking sufficient weight and tensile strength. The stringy combination of shredded cloth and skin worked fine for lashings and splices, but it was not strong enough, or long enough, to fish with. Nothing else could be said about these inadequacies; they spoke for themselves. So to fish, it seemed, appeared to fade.

There it was. The answer to their dilemma? Could they do nothing more than turn their backs on the Bay of Teoramugh? Must they now throw themselves to sorentre, to return to the despair and uncertainty they'd left behind, or should they simply accept the despair and uncertainty they now lived with here at the Crescent?

Zaphraelan mists dragged and faded into the Ionian night, but answers still eluded them. Coquont rationing was put on hiatus, but answers still eluded them. Sleep was the commodity in greatest supply compared to their thinning stores of food, herb and drink, all of which were tucked away before 10 exhausted souls drifted off to a better place.

Only Kerak remained. On a rock at the shore's edge he sat, long after his companions had dozed off. Carrying the lightstaff, he was overcome by an acute restlessness, a stubborn refusal to accept "fate," as it had now been forced upon him and his campmates. So he pulled himself together, strode to the cliff steps leading to the perch, then up, far above the beach.

On an ordinary night he would have been here, working his stint without complaint or regret. And even though watches were no longer being observed, he felt he should be here anyway. For 200 stratimers he sat, nodding off every now and then and, in between, gazing off into crystalline darkness. His thoughts turned again to the clifftop, to those steps which wended far above the observation perch. *Luments will show themselves soon*, he mused, reminded of the vivid tales his campmates had told of those dynamic norostrean mornings which had lately been rare to the Bay. He knew that if he was going to go, he should be there long before the arrival of dawn. So, with the lightstaff in his mouth, he began to wend his way up the side of the cliff.

142 steps it rose from the observation perch, some barely wide enough to get even the slightest of footholds. But after climbing for over 20 nervous stratimeters, he was finally able to reach up, to grasp the rim of the last rock, to pull himself beyond the threshold.

Once there, Kerak stood and turned to survey the breadth of his surroundings. To his surprise, the glow from Ionian light was strong tonight, the image of each distant landmark fading and gleaming in succession. The norostrean Aeries could barely be seen, shrouded in a thick blanket of mist.

To sorentre, he could make out the curvature of the coastline, the rugged landscape of the Pheodopic archipelago, that cluster of small isles to noro-estre of the Bay of Nuolat, just beyond the tip of the Nysimrean peninsula.

But the ascents of the wisoltrean Seamounds were the most compelling. Ionian light revealed little of the obscure details hidden within the crevices just below their vertical spires. Soon after he began his survey, though, he caught the faintest hint of an odorous, smoky residue, wafting its way up from far beyond the sore-wisoltrean distance.

The view from this vantage point, as his pupils dilated further, was breathtaking, and it didn't take him long to realize that he was standing at the terminus of an enormous, sloping valley. To the left could be seen the vaults of the Tromean Extensors and the estrean Seamounds. To his right, the jagged acclivities which formed the foothills of the wisoltrean rilles. Straight ahead lay nothing more than what appeared as infinite darkness.

He squinted, and near the middle of the depression to his front, just to norostre of the Extensors, a veil of smoke could be seen rising from behind a sheer mountain wall. That's when he noticed that the low ceiling above a shallow range of escarpments, no more than a 10 or 15-day journey by foot from the Crescent, mirrored a flickering blue-tinged halo. The reflections of those fiery flashes were then returned to the rugged terrain below. This pattern was repeated in succession until the land and the skies were flush with an indigo radiance, all the way down to the Crescent.

Slowly, he sank to his knees, rubbed his eyes and tried to take it all in, to bring himself to understand the magnitude, the consequences of what he was seeing. But his attention was soon diverted by a sharp, crisp sound, coming from behind him. He turned.

And there it arose.

Far to estere, he saw it, soaring from out of the water, proud and defiant. He could clearly make out the contours of Euan's spear, still lodged in its left eye, reflecting a trace of Ionian light. He could almost hear it beckoning, challenging, calling out to him, welcoming another chance to even the score, to risk further injury, even its own death in the watery pursuit of sport, survival...or surrender.

The horn still lay snug in its spot at the perch below. Kerak ached to be able to rush down those steps, to reach for it, to unleash its screams upon the night. But he did not. Instead, he steeled his nerves and turned to face the threatening flames within the mountains to sore-wiso, then once more toward the waters of the Eusterian sea.

Kerak threw this promise in two directions.

Distant foe, I assure you. Your time will come!

Cai placed a few meager scrapings of Kerak's Bhatrathur on Dijal's tongue. In their melee three days earlier, Dijal had further opened her wound in her struggle to avoid death. With it, her pain had returned, but soon relented under the influence of the fine powder. Unless a few more random dustings could be found from within the weave of Kerak's bag, Dijal would have to endure any further agony on her own.

Nishar and Garion had finished another quick inventory that morning to find that their supply of Barutha oil, kept in terracotta pots, would last them no more than three days at their current rate of consumption. A large amount of it had been used to ignite the pyre: too much, they now realized. Cooking, fires and light (other than that provided by the lightstaff) would, for the time being, remain on strict ration.

Fickle breezes whimpered and died as the morning dragged on. After breakfast they sat in rapt attention, listening to Kerak describe what he had seen from the clifftop just a few stratimers earlier. To estre, their tormentor skulked just beyond the beach, now out of their grasp; waiting, it seemed, to fulfill his destructive goals, to finish them off if the hull of their boat so much as kissed the water's edge.

Initially, no one except Kerak, Drogan and Garion showed any concern for the flames that Kerak described seeing in the sore-wisoltrean sky. For most of these souls, the cask of extended isolation had stripped their minds of the ability to believe that the Crescent could ever yield to the doctrine of supremacy which had fallen those lands beyond the Bay. Nothing was said of *who* was behind this menace, for they all knew. But within time, they managed to process the facts laid out for them, and awareness finally struck. This new threat, visible from the Crescent, had enlarged the cloud of fear and doubt already swirling above them.

Their meanderings soon grew into nervous debate. Kerak and Drogan noticed that camp conversation was beginning to drift into what Euan would have considered forbidden waters. "We should pack our rations and sail out of here by tomorrow!" Nairul barked, fallen captive to fear and frustration. "If we stay far enough off the coast we can avoid detection. The Bay of Taurrence can't be more than an eight or nine-day sail from here. There're bound to be locals there who'll help us. I *know* we can do this."

"And what if those 'locals' turn out to be Arduans, or Machaera or pellogroats, or even *bounty hu...*?" Thaloux said, standing straight up as his mouth shot off in sharp retort. He stopped himself short before the word "hunters" fell from his lips. "Besides, Taurrence is too close to Astuverica!" he sputtered, withering back to the ground. Drogan tossed a sly glance at his brother, affirming what he already knew; that he, Kerak and Euan weren't the only ones around here with a price on their heads.

Nairul ignored Thaloux and went on. "How long can we hold out here? The fires Kerak saw can't be more than a

hundred-thousand neurris from here. Whoever's setting them could be here any day now if they follow the Nearings and make it through the Corisoor headlands. And food? Our reserves are nearly gone; just one Barutha out there in 82 days and he, or rather *it*, is stark-raving mad. Besides, we don't even have enough line, or a hook! As far as I'm concerned, we've got to get out of here. And the sooner the better!"

"I saw what that thing did to the boat, Nairul," Dijal shot back. "If we try to sail out of here, it could rise up again and blow us out of the water! We can't risk that without some way of defending ourselves."

"How do you propose we do that?" Jadox asked. This was the first time anyone had heard him speak in two days.

Kerak scanned the table, gauging the faces around him for their response to his looming words. Then he spoke.

"I say we kill him."

Silence. Then more silence. "Oh really? How do you propose we do *that*?" Jadox again. *He's getting quite chatty*, Drogran and at least three others thought in unison.

"First, let me ask all of you. How is the fish normally killed?"

Dijal spoke up, annoyed. "Weren't you drilled in all that when you and Drogran arrived here?"

"Yeah, I know. Just follow me here, okay?"

"Well, when we had a hook, the fish would bite down on the barbs, or we would use our bare hands to plunge one of 'em into the brain stem, then the crew would pull the fish back to the boat with the tensor."

"Okay, another question. Will the fish float when it's dead?"

Dijal had to ponder that one. Her recent traumas had left her shaken, at times unable to think clearly, so Ekavias answered for her.

"Yes, provided it doesn't lose too much blood, Kerak. If the loss is too great, that would cause vascular collapse, which would kill buoyancy and cause it to sink. What are you getting at here, anyway?"

“We could sew up some ballast rocks in a sack, tie it around the diver’s waist. Give the diver a knife or a short spear, tied to the wrist. When that skantaro sees the bait, he takes it in. The diver then drives the weapon into the brain stem and swims out. The dead fish would then just float up to the surface. Right?”

“Not necessarily,” Ekavias answered. “Even dead, the blood pressure in an adult Barutha is intense. After the kill, the hook loosens, works its way around in the wound and tears it some. That allows a little blood loss, sure. But the barb...it acts like a plug, too. And the hook is the only tool heavy and large enough to leverage against the brain stem to hold the barb in place. There’s no way a knife, or even a spear, could plug that flow and hold it back. It’s not possible.”

“What if the diver uses a little muscle to hold the knife in place, to keep the wound plugged?”

“Won’t work either. It can take a long time for the fish to float to the surface; on its own, that is. By that time the diver would be out of air. Drowned!”

“So how do you seal the wound when you get the fish to the surface?” Kerak asked, frustrated.

Ekavias pointed to a doused lamp on the table. “See that? We don’t carry them on the boat just to help us see. After we bring the catch alongside, right away we remove the barb and set a torch from the lamplight to cauterize the wound.”

Kerak stood and began to pace toward the beach.

“Face it, Kerak,” Ekavias called out to him. “Your plan just won’t work.”

Kerak stood, the surf gently lapping around his feet. His mind began to process everything Ekavias and the others had told him, and at the end of it all, he knew there was only one way to pull off this lunatic idea of his.

He hesitated. But he realized that now was not the time for quiet suppression. He had no right to withhold it; that was clear. Besides, they all knew he had Bhatrathur, and as far as he could tell, no one except Cai had caught on to that clue.

Kerak turned and walked back to the table. “If I told you that I knew how we could kill the animal *and* cauterize the

wound at the same time, would you go along with me on this? Would I be able to count on your support?"

"You've never seen the teeth on one of those things, have you Kerak?" Nairul scoffed. "The barbs of the hook; they were set wide to keep those blades from lacerating the diver. Without the hook, a diver would be skewered or sliced to pieces as soon as they got near its jaws. Whatever you're thinking; forget about it. We can't *do* this!"

"Maybe we can," Dijal said, her eyes sparkling clear, her mind once again sharp. "I saw that fish take Muirtreo and Euan into its mouth without its teeth so much as *touching* their skin. That thing isn't a biter, or a chewer. It's a slurry factory; it swallows whole! I think Kerak may be on to something. But cauterizing the wound? Kerak, how do you suggest we do that without heat, so far below the surface?"

Before Kerak could open his mouth to speak, a sudden hesitancy took hold of him. He realized that he wasn't quite as ready to spill all, as he'd originally planned. "Let me worry about that, Dijal. But trust me. What I have will do the job, and do it right. All we need is to make sure the boat is up to the task."

Kerak glanced over at Nalani, wrapped snug and warm under Drogran's arm. She flashed him a timid smile. *So that explains why my bag was so empty the other day*, he thought with a wink and a grin.

For now, Kerak's confident mien had managed to blanket their doubts, to soothe *most* of the anxieties hovering over the table that morning. But not all. Nishar, silent as always, stood with Nairul. Without looking back, he returned to the cave. Jadox, though, tossed Kerak a wide but cautious grin before he hobbled over to the boat to give their repairs another inspection.

Drogran and Nalani nodded their encouragement from across the table. Thaloux, Dijal, Cai, and Ekavias huddled together, agreeing in principal that Kerak's vague scheme was, until something better came along, their best option. With that, they gave him their timid approval.

And as for Garion? He soaked it all in, stood and returned to his tables, his deft hands working those last few precious morsels on the racks. He recalled Kerak's description of the blue-tinged flames, just below the Crescent's towering cliffs, and convulsed once again in despair. For he, better than anyone here at the Crescent, truly understood what those dim, not so distant reflections really meant.

For the moment, though, he pushed it all away. Because an apparition far more ominous lay now within arm's reach, and not necessarily within Eusterian waters. He kept his head down, clenched his jaw and his fists, thoughts of Kerak slicing their way through his brain like a rusty shiv.

"Innocents! Fools!" he murmured of his campmates, *"blinded by your hunger, your timid ignorance. Do you not realize what...who...we have in our midst?"*

KERAK TRUDGED ALONG, A FEW STEPS behind Nalani. The cave weaved and wended through to its tapered end. Kerak had to hunch over to avoid hitting the ceiling. A small, dark slit led off and evaporated beyond the glow of the lightstaff.

She raised her chin. "I'm sorry, Kerak. I didn't mean to keep them so long."

Thoughts of reprimand waned; he tapped her on the head. "Nalani, I'm not mad, but these things...they don't *belong* to you. Promise me you won't take anything else back here to your...what do you call it? Your 'secret spot'. Okay?" She shuffled her feet, nodding with a shy grin. Then they stuffed seven random items into a sack and made their way back to the front of the cave.

Not included in that bag was the colorful broken stone which Nalani had found a few days earlier at the slag pile. Since then she had spent many delightful stratimers sorting through that pile, finding other stone fragments which looked similar, yet smaller. Like a puzzle, she'd noticed that many of the pieces seemed to fit together. Kerak noticed her delight in these little trinkets, assuring her that they were hers, alone. She had so little else to amuse her.

Back at the front of the cave, they were joined by Droган, but not for long. He collapsed again into his bedroll; sweating, eyes dilated, his breathing labored and raspy. He clutched his right thigh. In the past three days, that dull rash just below his hip had morphed into a painful, red pustule, hot to the touch, growing larger and more grotesque with the passing of time. The day before he'd swallowed his pride and summoned the courage to tell Cai about it. At his request, she'd promised she wouldn't tell anyone else, Kerak included. Droган had always made a point of rebuking any trace of pity directed his way,

offering just as much to others. He was nothing if not consistent.

Despite Cai's concern for his health, she found herself unable to diagnose his condition. Neither could she treat it as his debility sapped him further of his dwindling vitality. So she fell back on the first two edicts of her trade: keep her patient comfortable, and try to at least prevent him from getting any worse. The first she did quite well. The second, though, was beyond her control.

Drogan could always count on Nalani to be there for him, too. He passed the time with her these days reciting silly limericks, drawing pictures in the sand and playing shadow puppets, just as he had once hoped to do someday with Quilla. He sensed that *something* of her seemed to linger in Nalani's eyes. Or was it just his longing to believe? Either way, he didn't really care to know the difference.

Thoughts of Euan were never far from his mind. Like everyone, he was horrified by Dijal's account of his friend's death. His scorn for the unfairness of it all only heightened his cynicism, sharpened his hatred for the circumstances which had cast Euan to this shore, left to suffer a violent end in defense of other lives. The stress heaped on him by his agitated mind only worsened Drogan's condition.

Other than a few random words of concern, Kerak barely acknowledged his brother's plight. He knew he couldn't pull anything out of his obstinate sibling, and his respect for Drogan's sense of dignity and privacy outweighed his needling curiosity. So he waited, hoping that Drogan would shake off this malaise and return to his old self.

Kerak rummaged through the bag of Nalani's collectibles as the Lumens passed Zenith, pointing to sorentre. He took the items that she'd pulled from his own satchel and placed the others on a natural shelf near the mouth of the cave. His campmates passed by these trinkets for days without so much as a glance. Kerak surmised that they either held no further interest in the items, or that their owners had passed into oblivion. Regardless, they would stay there until no one remained to ignore their presence.

Kerak spent the rest of the day with Thaloux, Dijal and Ekavias, continuing to polish their plans to bring the fish not only to justice, but to their table. Troublesome, unavoidable details, though, began to emerge. "How will a diver keep from being sucked into the stomach, assuming they could make it past the teeth unscathed. Those gastric acids can dissolve rock," Thaloux said. "I know because we've used that malodorous glop to chisel shelf holders and lamp ledges into the cave. Once the diver's in the mouth there's nothing to grab onto to keep them from sliding right through. At least, with the hook..." His voice trailed off.

"How's this?" Ekavias said. "We give the diver a full-length spear to use as a wedge. Once they make it into the mouth they can lodge it in the throat to stop their descent. Then they can lance the brain stem."

"But how do we make sure that it stays rigid enough to keep from slipping and passing through?" Kerak asked.

"We could strap the spear to the diver's feet," Dijal added. "They'd have to make sure they go in feet first, but if it's the right length it can't slant or slip. The diver's feet could be tied to it with a slipknot, which they could loosen as soon as they make the kill, so they could swim out."

"And it can't be too sharp," Ekavias added. "We don't want to create another bleeding wound that can't be cauterized. The ends have to be blunt."

Other schemes were tossed around, but after more heated debate, it was agreed that the ideas offered by Ekavias and Dijal made the most sense. The problem now was to ensure that the spear was cut to the right length. Too long, and it might lodge in the jaw opening, which would expose the diver to hinged laceration. Too short, then both spear and diver would slide right through and into the stomach, as if they'd worn no wedge at all.

At this point, they realized that they had stumbled onto the "sheer guesswork" part of the plan. But knowing that they had only one chance to get this right, they continued to refine their strategy until just before dinnertime.

One subject, above all, was avoided, yet hung like a phantom over their deliberations: who would make the dive? All except Kerak were experienced and could handle any dive under normal conditions, but this was not just *any* dive. Its immense risk made it feel more like suicide than a strategy, and though all of them thought they were eager to volunteer to see their plan through to success, none of them were quite ready or willing to raise their hand.

Another element which Thaloux, Dijal, Ekavias, and most of the others had avoided with heightened curiosity was exactly how Kerak proposed they kill *and* cauterize at the same time. Their initial trust in his bold proposal had been almost childlike in its lack of scrutiny. But the question had been building, even with Cai, unfamiliar as she was with the tools of a Courvesant, Bhatrathur notwithstanding. And now, in the waning light of day, the time for an explanation had arrived.

Kerak removed it from his satchel and held it out for all to see: the Kirzek, newly retrieved from Nalani's *secret spot*, as were the fragments of Eimear's old stone. None of them displayed the slightest familiarity with this primitive tool, its fondness among young Courvesants, its powers of concealment. The rugged little vine in Kerak's hand, with its whittled tip, its reddish-brown grain, was the device by which 27 lives had been taken; 26 by his own hand, one by Drogan's. That nugget of trivia, of course, remained undisclosed. All they were told, in a selective mishmash of vague terms, was that this was the instrument which would free them from their bondage and feed their bellies.

A pall of silence fell over the Crescent. His campmates turned a wary eye to Kerak, a thousand questions still racing through their minds. Garion's cynicism was affirmed: their blind willingness to believe, fueled by their hunger and desperation, meant that the most probing of questions, for now, would go unasked.

As they arrived at the table for dinner, reddish-orange luments reflected what appeared to be a thin white speck attached to a colorful dot, thrashing above the horizon with an impassioned fury.

Euan's last vital act could not have shone more brightly.

The camp sat through their entire meal without saying a word. With their supplies of oil now at their lowest level, hot stews were a thing of the past. Cold jerky would be the norm from here on in. In no time, the evening's allotment was polished off.

Rationing affected food and drink, but not Zaphraela, which was suddenly in greater supply, thanks to the discovery of a virgin patch found growing on the ceiling of the notch. Jadox had noticed a few days earlier that their stash of bladder linings had gone rancid, making them unsuitable for casings. So he fashioned a crude pipe from dried dorsal fin cartilage, inscribing the bowl with a glyph that had adorned a memory stone he'd once used, long before his arrival at the Crescent. At least one pleasure would remain within reach.

That evening, they sat on the rocks at the shore, quaffing aromatic mists. Their party included Nairul, who by now had softened to Kerak's plan, pledging his support as long as his nerves held out. Nishar maintained his mute stance, a circumstance not lost on his campmates. No one knew where the enigmatic Garion stood on the issues at hand. For that matter, no one *ever* knew where Garion stood on any subject except householding.

Cai had tried Zaphraela only once and didn't like it. But she found it more tolerable through a pipe, so she remained with her friends as they attempted to nudge their troubles out to sea in fragrant white clouds.

The boat was ready. Their plan to execute the dive was almost ready, except for two unresolved issues: agreement on the length of the wedge needed to keep the diver from being liquefied, and one other. The answer to *that* question was soon to be revealed.

Zaphraela can do a number of wondrous things for the mind, but it does not create a false sense of boldness or grandiloquence. It is capable, though, of burning through the

thickets of doubt which can cloud one's judgment, boiling the decision-making process down to one of elegant simplicity.

Kerak sat, drawing deep breaths from the pipe, pondering the movements of a small cluster of Ione at Zenith. His mind, though, remained a willing prisoner of Whistoph-Karnash. How *free* those days had been, staring into the boundless crystalline lagoons near his home before plunging himself into their temperate waters, their currents pulsing with the distant ebb and flow of vibrant springs, coursing deep within the immeasurable Subterra.

A vision appeared before him; a pod of Malmoux, soaring through brilliant waters on fleeting, disc-shaped wings, ripe for the taking with a single, determined thrust. The bitter complexities of life beyond those idyllic serenes washed away as he blew a small ring of smoke. It encircled the sky before his eyes.

Kerak thought for a moment, smiled, and then spoke.

"I'll do it."

"What are you talking about?" Ekavias asked after a long pause.

"I mean I'll do it. I'll do the dive."

After they had processed this surprising pronouncement, Dijal found her rigid spine. "You've never done a dive before, Kerak. *Amaria!* You can't do... *THIS* dive! Even those of us who are experienced aren't sure we can handle this one. What the freigh makes you think *you* can do it?"

Kerak turned to face his friends. "Because I know how to use the Kirzek. I've used it before, over 30 times. I know how to execute the proper motion with it which will guarantee that the wound will seal like it should. And besides, killing is...what I'm most familiar with. It's what I do best."

Their faces froze in contorted query. Garion, listening from the veil of the cave, could feel his jaw clench, his gut tighten as he reached for the sound of Kerak's voice over the din of lapping water. Droган's eyes grew wide, and his alarmed expression reached out to his brother as if to scream *No, please don't say it!* Cai's heart pounded as she beamed with pride at Kerak's willingness to break the wall of forbidden thought and

expression which had stood in sublime dominance over life at the Crescent, far too long.

“What...what the *freigh* are you talking about?” Thaloux asked, his voice breaking.

“I’m saying I can do this because...I am trained to kill. It’s who I am, Thaloux. I am a Courvesant.”

Nothing forged in the fiercest of Astuverican fires could have broken the stillness that now rained down upon the Crescent. Genuine forthrightness was the bleakest of strangers to those souls sitting there with Kerak that night. But with absolute certainty, and through the utterance of a single word, Kerak had managed to cement his position here at the Crescent. The air surrounding him was devoid of judgement, fear or loathing. But it was heavy with respect.

Their herb was now gone, and one by one, they began to make their way back to the cave. Drogan looked back at Kerak and tossed him a twisted grin before sauntering back, his arm resting on Thaloux’s shoulder.

Only Cai remained. Sitting beside him, she placed her hand upon his. “*Please...come back, Kerak...*,” she softly implored, then stood, leaving him to his thoughts before returning to the cave.

Kerak stood alone now at the water’s edge. Far above him, tiny fingerlings of toxic blue smoke began to crawl from wisoltre, from over the cliffs above the Crescent, to make their way to shore.

In that moment, at the peak of the sky, two distant lone danced and spun around each other in a single, perfect circle.

SIX DAYS HAD NOW PASSED since Kerak's announcement. He and Dijal sat in the boat that morning, reviewing, testing and retesting every part of the craft, large or small, to ensure its strength and seaworthiness. Their work was spiced with conversation about anything *other* than Barutha diving, then more nervous testing and unrelated chatter until they had repeated each process at least five times.

Realizing that a tedious pattern had formed, they paused to join Nairul, Thaloux, Ekavias and Jadox, resting at the veil of the cave. These six would comprise the crew of this, perhaps their final expedition to hunt and dive the waters beyond their shore. Four days earlier they had finalized their plans for the all-important wedge. After much debate, they'd decided on its length; also that it should consist of no less than three blunt tipped spears, lashed together and strapped to the feet with a slip knot, as Dijal had suggested. After completing the kill, Kerak would have only to pull the end of the cord (to be attached to his knee) with a quick jerk to release the wedge from his feet, thereby freeing him to swim beyond the jaws of the carcass, and to freedom.

With Ekavias's help, Kerak had threaded a woven braid of salvaged tensor to the blunt end of the Kirzek. This he would tie to his wrist before making the dive, to keep it nearby. Jadox and Nairul sewed a ballast belt from a patchwork of torn clothing and salvaged skin. This article would hold enough stones around the waist to keep him submerged at a depth at which the fish might prefer to feed...or so they guessed. Now, with these last technical perfections closed and sealed, they knew they were ready to begin their journey. One over-riding problem, though, far beyond their control, prevented them from shoving off.

At mid-day, as they had done every day for the past five, they held their eyes to the crest of the sky, to see which

direction the Lumens would point after they'd passed Zenith. This was important for one reason, which Kerak had come to appreciate the morning he'd climbed down from the top of the cliff, after catching his first glimpse of events taking place in the Mnulorathean distance.

The Lumens seemed to hang in delicate suspension at Zenith that day for six or seven pulsimers before finally dropping off...to estre. When she saw this, Dijal stood and skulked back into the cave, cursing the Amarias for once again failing them. There was no alternative to this disappointment, for they were unwilling to risk launching the boat in calmer conditions. They knew they must continue to wait.

An acute frustration held the camp in its grip that day, just after Zenith. Lunch was skimpier than the day before as Garion's rationing system had grown more aggressive, to further stretch their waning reserves. Kerak struggled to soothe his nerves, passing the time with Drogan and Nalani, nibbling away at his paltry lunch.

Since his failed articulation in the notch, Drogan's descent could be measured not just from day to day, but with the passing of stratimers. Excruciating pain, exhaustion, nausea and dehydration toiled hand in hand to decimate body and mind, leaving him unable to do more than lie prostrate, staring at the cave's ceiling.

Kerak sat with his brother, kneading Drogan's food before placing it in his mouth. Cai joined them to check on Drogan, to keep him hydrated and comfortable. She lamented that her training as a dhuthaer had not prepared her to cope with the symptoms she saw in Drogan. As usual, she and Kerak chafed for answers while she placed another wet cloth on his forehead. Then they let him rest.

As always, though, Nalani remained, stroking his head with one hand as she palmed one of her luminous little fragments of stanhic rock in the other. Drogan turned to her, and for the first time, he saw it. He bolted upright, then leaned over to touch it.

“Nalani, wh...where did you find that stone?”

“I got it in that big pile of rocks near the notch, Droган. It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Is that the only piece you have...that looks like this one? Or...do you have more?”

“I got a whole bunch of ‘em!” she said with a laugh and a grin. “Some of them even look like they fit together.”

“Nalani, can you...can you bring me those rocks? I’d like to see them?”

Nalani nodded and ran to retrieve the other fragments of stone, six in all. She removed them from the small bag in which they were being kept and laid them out for Droган to see.

Droган suddenly felt energized as he took the stones in hand to inspect them. He paused to look around, to see if they were being watched. Noticing that they were not, he turned his back to the cave entrance and hunched over this little cache with Nalani, studying and sorting each piece, comparing and testing them. “You’re right, Nalani. Th...they do seem to fit together, don’t they?”

Again, Droган peered over his shoulder. Suspicion, his familiar old crony, rose to the surface, morphing into paranoid hostility. *Who...in this forsaken caquehole*, he thought, *could have done this?* He cursed his misfortune at the stolen opportunities that had slipped through his fingers.

Anger gnawed at him, weakening his already frail body. But he remembered the Barutha saliva, pulverized cartilage and diluted gastric acid, stored in adobe jars insulated with stomach linings, which Masurian had combined on occasion for use as a bonding agent for boat repairs. And despite his brittle state, Droган remembered just where Masurian had stashed those jars.

“Nalani, I need you to go fetch three small jars at...at the back of the cave. They’re on the shelf to the left beside the reservoir. Each of them is etched with...with overlapping circles, with a line underneath. Can you do that for me? We’re going to...” his words broke off as he fought to keep from

falling over. “We’re going to glue these pieces back together. Okay?”

Nalani smiled and dashed off. *It may be broken, Drogran mused, but I can repair this stone. And when I do, these fractured remains will become a Myotrophus once again!*

The shadows of the day had grown long inside the cave as Drogran heard a loud commotion outside. The sounds of laughter and delight carried along the beach. “Norostre...,” he heard his campmates call out in unison. “They’re peeling off to norostre!”

They ran along the beach as far and as fast as their feet could carry them, watching the flock shift its enormous mass away from the estrean horizon. Seven souls shrieked their approval as the Lumens began their descent toward the norostrean Aeries.

Dijal and Ekavias took off for the perch, to get a better look, to make sure that *this* time, their hopes would not be dashed. In record time they reached it, their eyes trained skyward, every now and then yelling reports of the Lumens’ movements to their campmates. They noticed that the flock’s shifts and turns seemed erratic, their formation grown flat and wide. But to their left, they saw it: an enormous vortex of reddish-gold particulates, drifting off and into the upper reaches, with the Lumens following in diligent pursuit.

Suddenly, a wall of hot wind collided with the cliff and shot straight up, blowing Dijal’s hat off her head. It drifted down to the sands below. *Yes, she beamed, this will happen. Thank the Phemes, because tonight, there will be a norostrean dusk!*

With their plans now laid, the moment was upon them. Again, dinner was nothing more than cold jerky, but there was no regret in their diminished diet. Not a word of complaint was heard as each of them washed down a few strips of ragged flesh. Then the crew of six, joined by Cai, reconvened at the

boat and again ran through their checklists, reinspecting the boat, the rigging, their oars and tools.

Not that this obsessive thrust to perfection was necessary, but at least it kept them busy and eased their nerves. Long after dusk, they tried to sleep, but sleep would not come, so with nothing left to tie their hands, Zaphraela would suffice to calm and focus them until morning.

Kerak thought about the task he was soon to undertake. He did not regret volunteering for the dive, but there, immersed in a thick cloud of pungent mist, he wondered again if all the pieces would fit together as they must. He'd never used a Kirzek underwater. Would it have the same effect as it did when dry? And even though he was a good swimmer, could he hold his breath long enough to perform his job to completion?

His most pressing concern, though, was this. Would the animal decide, at least this time, to skewer its prey with outwardly thrust incisors, to rake him into thin slivers with its blades laid flat? Or would it perform as hoped and take him into its mouth whole and in one piece? He resigned himself to the fact that none of these answers would reveal themselves until they were ready to do so.

The stratimers plodded along through the chill of darkness. Conversation was pointless. Smoke faded and words no longer afforded the solace or comfort they once had. No one even noticed the Ione at Zenith until Cai roused from her dreamless sleep and saw that they were beginning to decay back toward the Aureas. She nudged Dijal and Ekavias, then the others. The time to launch was near.

Lamps would not be necessary on this trip, so to conserve oil, only the lightstaff would be carried for illumination, if it was needed at all. Kerak shoved the Kirzek into his pocket, then patted it against his leg for good measure. Their oars at the ready, their sail luffing in a delicate breeze, they awaited the first glow of luments. Kerak and Nairul had never experienced a norostrean dawn on the water. But the others knew that within mere stratimers after launch, they would be in for a raucous ride.

As they waited for their queue, Kerak noticed Drogon standing on weak limbs near the mouth of the cave, lifting his arm to give his brother a painful wave, then a tense smile. Drogon mouthed the words “*good luck, Kerak*” as his knees gave out from under him. Garion, though, was there to catch him. For a pulsimer, Kerak made eye contact with Garion, noticing his frayed lineaments, his hollow, deep set eyes, studying the boat and the crew. In the old codger’s face, Kerak swore that he saw a crumb of...emotion? Then Garion looked away, as if in shame, before hitching Drogon’s arm over his shoulder, to wither back into the cave. *The tales that old skantaro could tell*, Kerak mused, his peripheral vision catching the first glimmer of dawn.

Without hesitation, the crew swung into action. They dragged the boat through the water, jumping aboard two at a time. As with all launches, there was no time for lengthy goodbyes, just a quick show of hands to and from shore. With that, Nairul, Dijal, Jadox, Kerak and Ekavias grabbed their oars and began beating the water while Thaloux used his only arm to steer.

Twin crepuscular rays shot out from atop a searing crown of Aerial light. Four pulsimers later their baggy sail began to shudder and crinkle under the strains of an improved breeze. They continued to row, rounding the corner of the norostrean cliff. Thaloux steered the boat to estre as they caught the faint glimmer of a white speck, crawling across the surface, far to sorentre.

Something else appeared from out of the norostrean sky: a thrusting wave of particulate engorged wind, white water, lavender-tinged light. As one, the crew hurled six stringy threads of spit over the gunwales. They raised their oars into the rigging. A pulsimer later, a violent tempest slammed against the boat, engorging their sail into full tension; every seam and strand of skin, cloth and rigging popping, stretching, shrieking. The boat began to heel, pitching and yawing through a searing cauldron of water. All of them were soon

drenched with spray while their tiny pirogue raked and danced over the heavy chop.

To sorentre they continued to watch the tiny white blip on the horizon. The waters now bore the redolence of the crew, which the beast seemed to acknowledge. It jumped and gyrated over the foam, growing closer with every beat of its tail. The air became more dense, the sea churning and burning now from every direction. Thaloux wrapped his arm around the shuddering tiller and steered them to sore-estre as Dijal struggled to trim the sail.

Kerak stared at...the target.

Contact was now but a heartbeat away.

At the Crescent, they could feel it too, although not with the same intensity. They heard the wind whistling past the cliffs enshrouding the beach; a confluence of heat and light, pummeling their tiny shore. Garion stood just outside the veil of the cave. He dug deep, trying to recall a norostrean dawn as savage as this one, but he could not. Then he heard a pair of voices coming from the cave.

Inside, Drogran lay on his bedroll, Nalani and Cai at his side. He flailed angrily while Cai tried to calm him. Nishar stood a few neurris away, his eyes concealing his tension.

“What...what’s happening out there?” Drogran called out. “Do you...you see...?”

“No, they’re too far offshore, beyond the cliffs,” Cai answered. “Don’t bother yourself with all that, Drogran. You need to rest.”

Drogran grimaced, his pain returning in sharp, steady bursts.

Ever since she’d become aware of Drogran’s condition, Cai had never slowed in her efforts to contrive a cure for him. He had refused her pleas to cooperate, to submit to a thorough examination, so she could do little more than fall back on her training, to offer what she could for her most stubborn patient. And now, as she recalled the days of her apprenticeship, a particular abstract came to mind, gleaned from the Iatricals, a

series of Thermionic medical compendiums. There was one particular nugget which came from an aggregator buried in a vein in the Andulkan steppes...

The salve of the Stringworm moss, in its infant form, offers the most consistent remedy for fever and intense pain which are accompanied by occasional bouts of delirium. Stringworm is native to the norostrean Vengaos and the moist coastal areas of the Seamount region.

Cai knew that the dampest of Mnulorathean climates was just beyond the Crescent, at the place known in the vernacular as Shalu'doc.xhu, from the sorentrean border all the way up to two or three thousand neurris below the Crescent. She recalled, during her journey along the Iotrean Nearings, seeing hundreds, even thousands of clusters of Stringworm growing in heavy shade and rocky soil, not more than 15 or 20 thousand neurris to sorentre of this very cave. *After this is all over, we'll find it, Drogan. I promise you we'll find it,* she mused. He opened his eyes, peered at her with a calm expression, as if he understood, before sliding back into painful repose. With the assurance that Drogan's rehabilitation was somehow within reach, she questioned what to do in the interim. For now, there was...or *might* be...more Bhatrathur. "Give it a look," she whispered under her breath.

Garion walked toward Drogan and knelt beside him while Cai stood to search for Kerak's bag. Not more than three stratimers had passed before Drogan began to slip again into painful semi-consciousness. Garion leaned over and raised the right leg of his pants. There he saw it: a crimson pustule, swirling with rotted strands of greenish-brown flesh, most of which had grown so malignant that skin and muscle had morphed into a pasty, mucosal mass. Garion straightened the leg of Drogan's pants and waited for Cai to return.

Cai had forgotten what Kerak's satchel looked like, so she grabbed his and Drogan's and flipped them both upside down. "If it's not in one, it's got to be in the other," she mumbled. She hadn't noticed the contents which had fallen from both bags as she reached into Kerak's and found, to her pleasant surprise, a few tiny grains of powder still clinging to the weave.

She beat the bottom of the bag, scooped them into her fingers and placed them on Drogran's tongue. In no time, he fell into a trance, then a deep sleep.

Garion took Cai aside. "When will he be able to talk?" he asked her.

"I don't know. He'll sleep for maybe 30, 40 strats. Then I think he'll be coherent enough to speak. Why?"

Without responding, Garion turned and walked back to the beach, to fix his eyes upon the horizon. There he detected the faint aspect of a sail speeding across the horizon. Cai joined him. Nishar remained in place, draped in shadow at the rear of the cave. He watched Nalani approach Drogran and sit beside him. The small bag containing those recently conjoined rock fragments, fresh with the aroma of the acidic mucilage which held them together, remained at Nalani's side. Nishar strolled past her, his attention drawn to the bag, then again to the tiny, distinct birthmark on Nalani's neck.

He closed in on her, entranced by her serpentine neck, the Nurespheric glyph on the nape, shining in the glow of luments. How he *wanted* her in that singular moment! Or more to the point, as he tried to convince himself, how he wanted what she symbolized to him. *Contact*, he mused, rubbing his eyes, *will very soon be assured*.

Nishar strolled into direct light and joined Garion and Cai at the shore. His mind turned away from Nalani now, leaping the boundless distance to sorentre, thinking of *her*, and wondering if the connection had been made, if the deal would be struck to their mutual advantage, and most puzzling of all, how the transfer would occur. For now, all he could do was wait, and invoke his will, until that time, to keep his poisonous heart hidden from view.

From sorentre, it closed in on them. To keep their sails engorged, and to avoid capsizing, Dijal leaned hard to her left, trimming the sheet with each turn of Thaloux's oar, weaving the boat from side to side. The winds had slowed a bit. The crew turned to train their eyes on it as it jumped, clearing the

surface in a vaulting pirouette. Now, for the first time, they noticed that it was a female. Dijal and Thaloux traded nervous glances, squatting on the ballast stones, enraptured by her massive bulk, her sheer beauty, her vital magnitude. Her terror.

Euan's legacy persisted. The spear remained there, lodged deep in her eye. The brisk acceleration of the boat began to outpace her, and she struggled to keep up, plowing the waters in furious onslaught as her movements brought her closer, ever closer to them. They could all feel that the time to dive was about to begin.

Knowing the fickle nature of this species, and in particular, *this* member of the clan known as Barutha, they were unsure how, at the last stratimer, she would react. Would she choose merely to feed, or would she exact her revenge by tearing the boat to pieces when the opportunity presented itself. Unwilling to take any foolish chances, they ran a quick poll, agreeing that they would *all* give her a choice she would find hard to resist. So each of them except Kerak passed the blade, carving a small, red slice in their skin. One by one, they dragged the bloody edge of the knife through the water. *If saliva isn't enough...* they surmised of one mind as the winds began to slow and the seas to flatten.

She pulled behind the stern, her keen senses drinking in the fresh tastes infusing the surrounding waters. The Lumens continued their rapid ascent, and even though their downdrafts had slowed, their heat continued to rage. In a sweat, the crew raised their eyes to Kerak. He stood, reached for his ballast belt and began to tie it around his waist.

His hands trembled, the realization of this deed beginning to dawn on him. After Nairul tied the wedge to his feet, Kerak asked the others to give their queue for him to make his move.

He tied the Kirzek to his wrist and waited.

Drogan rose from a brief but heavy slumber. Cai wandered over to him and dried his forehead. A few more stratimers, she reasoned, and his pain will have again cycled down. She then

stood and crossed the cave, to where she had laid Kerak's and Drogon's satchels. She knelt to gather their things and put them back; first the broken remnants of a filiblade, then a smaller pouch with two small stones of equal size nestled within.

In another pouch she found two other stones. One of them was jagged, rough edged, little more than a thin wafer. She paused to examine the other, larger stone. It was the same color and texture as the wafer and looked to her like an old memory stone; dull, worn, covered from end to end with hoary scratches, cryptic etchings.

Suddenly, with a clearer vision aided by encroaching luments, she noticed a faint, cloudy etching carved at the bottom of the stone. Right away, she recognized it as a Hirusovran runic, a symbol for solidarity, entwined with a morpheme representing the Sturethenes, a cluster of small islets off the Hirusovran coast.

She pulled it closer, holding it in a tight grasp. Her hands began to shake. *I recognize this stone.* She found herself overwhelmed by a mixture of anger and relief. For she realized at once that this stone had belonged to Jarumon. This stone *belonged to my father!*

She ran over to Garion with the stone and the wafer and showed them to him. "Yes...yes, this was his; I remember it," he told her, "And this wafer. It looks like it's been cut from...the stone? Where did you find these?"

"They fell out of Kerak's and Drogon's bags...or one of them, rather. I don't...I don't remember which one. I'd been looking for..." She stopped, to dwell on more urgent matters. "What do you think this means, Garion."

"You can't remember which bag it came from? Think!"

She pinched her forehead and closed her eyes. "I don't know. Drogon's, maybe...I just don't remember!"

Garion leered in Drogon's direction. "When did you say he'd be able to talk?"

"Four or five strats. You don't think that he and Kerak might have...? I just don't see how that's possible."

“Well, in four or five stratimers we’re going to find out what *Drogan* knows, at least. Let me know when he’s lucid, Cai. I’ll talk to him.”

The winds had now soothed from a torrent to a moderate breeze, and though strong enough to push them along at a respectable clip, it was not enough to outpace her. She swam a lazy, loopy path behind the stern. They could tell that she was worn, exhausted from the chase, just as they’d hoped. With any luck her hunger would now be that much more acute. But they still couldn’t gauge her appetite, or her mood. They only hoped that it was nothing like it had been the first time they’d met.

Answers would come soon enough. But it took little time for them to see that her behavior in the past few days had morphed from hungry and enraged, to silent and schizophrenic. She continued to follow the boat but never came any closer than 20 neurris. Thaloux, Dijal and Ekavias were familiar with the two most common signs of hunger in a Barutha: jaws which quivered in rapid pulses followed by quick snapping motions and an occasional spasmodic twist of the head. Despite the gift of bodily fluids they had laid before her, she exhibited none of those signs. Her motions consisted only of slow, awkward loops followed by hysterical thrashing, repeated over and over.

Then, she paused to drop below the surface.

The gusts abated until their craft was strolling over a feathery chop. Kerak stood, and the others stood with him, touching him on the shoulder, their faces clutched and drawn. They did not care who or what he was...yesterday, today or tomorrow. Here, and now, they cared only for his success. For his safety. For him.

With the knife in his hand, Kerak pulled himself up to the gunwales of the boat. He drew a deep, protracted breath. Then he pulled the blade up and drove a deep, coursing gouge along his torso, starting at the neck, running all the way down

to his lower abdomen. A river of blood burst forth, dripping, staining the hull of the boat.

He raised his arms, dropped the blade onto the ballast rocks and threw himself to her. His body struck the cold waters to begin its descent into blackness.

The stones did their job, drawing him down at a slow but steady rate of descent. He twirled and spun, trying in desperation to catch sight of her. Then, to wisoltre, as luments pierced the surface...he saw her. He contorted and swung his body in her direction, noticing that Euan had buried his spear in an eye now overgrown with swollen, mangled scar tissue. His blood leached and danced in the Eusterian waters, and he noticed her native instincts begin to awaken, driving her to him.

She followed him, the air continuing to drain from his lungs. To Kerak's dismay, though, her motions did not resemble those of the deranged fish which Dijal and Thaloux had described. She began to steady herself below him, and he could sense that he was in the presence of an organism seized with conflicting motives, one just as intense as the other.

Come to me. Come! He exhorted her with eager, swollen eyes. His slow descent...of mind and of flesh...continued unabated. She dropped from sight as his body continued to fall, his fear to elevate. Then, he straightened his legs, and with little warning he felt a surging column of water rise beneath him, pushing him toward the surface. *This was how Dijal and Thaloux described it. That singular moment!* he thought, looking down to see a pair of jaws, surrounded by glistening sabers reflecting ascendant luments, undulating and soaring beneath him, growing larger, larger with each fraction of a pulsimer. Kerak closed his eyes, raised his arms above his head...

...and all went black.

His descent fell to a sudden and violent reversal, causing his knees to buckle. Kerak fought to stand, could feel himself being torqued, thrashed, twisted in all directions, besieged in an onslaught of rushing water, images of the Kiyfer dome swirling through his mind. He managed to straighten himself, to open his eyes, and when he did he saw a faint image below

him. It was the wedge, lodged in her throat. Looking up, he noticed the rigid blades his body had managed to miss on the way in, now involuntarily pivoting back and forth, in and out in a desperate effort to expel this foreign object from her throat.

The rancor of decay mixed with Eusterian water forced itself into his mouth. He struggled to turn sideways. He extended his arms before him, his vision clouded, trying to find it...that elusive, bulging target: the brain stem. But when he pressed against the lining of her abdomen, he felt something else instead. It was the sensation of a heartbeat. Not one, but *two*, throbbing loud and steady in a spirited rhythm beneath his hands. He knew he had little time to consider this circumstance as he contorted himself left to right in a desperate search. His lungs began to feel as if they would implode, and he could hear and feel his *own* cacophonous heartbeat, knowing that the enemy of precious time was beginning to crush him in its merciless grip.

Then, to his left and a little behind him, he felt it, just as the others had described it: a long, soft protuberance, smooth and slimy to the touch. Her forward motion began to slow, and he swore he could feel her sigh, in the emission of a low, vaporous wail.

He looked above him and noticed that the frantic thrashing of her teeth had come to a deliberate halt. He questioned for a moment, *why* he was there. Was it her hunger, or her pain, that drove her to him? He could feel the last wisps of air evacuate his lungs. And so, with one hand upon his prey, and the other grasping the instrument of her death...he drove it forward, again and again and again, arching his wrist with each reverse thrust so as to maximize the healing effect upon the outer surface of each wound, until he plungered it and pulled it. One...last...time...

He reached between his legs to find the cord securing the wedge to his feet, looking up to see her jaws becoming gradually wider, facing up toward the surface of the Eusterian sea. Kerak could see small jets of blood rush, slow and stop

from each wound. He placed his finger over them and could feel the wounded skin closing in beneath his touch.

He pulled the cord, untying the slipknot. Then he removed the ballast belt. Using the wedge as a platform, and with all that remained of his dwindling strength, he bent his knees and pushed his body straight up, narrowly clearing her extended incisors in his desperate race to the surface.

Beneath him, he could see the silent stillness of mother and child drifting upward, soft and slow...chasing him toward the light of day.

III

The Dying Light of Home

IT HAD BEEN 16 DAYS SINCE HE had received the orders which had removed him and his detachment from their most recent assignment. 14 of those were spent retracing their route through the same ground they'd been crawling over for the past 43. The final two were spent in the comparative comfort of a fleet of aerospheres assigned for their use. Another aerosphere had carried him as far as the first chain of Custody gates beside the Chantrathir obelisk. Beyond that, the Marcelic viamar would take him to his destination.

Now, with his subalternates on stand-down, he peered from his vantage point within the boundless Tuir-Phystrian highlands, the gateway to the Andulkan plains. His home was within sight. Here he would discover the reason behind his enigmatic, and he hoped *temporary*, recall.

Since its earliest days as a sleepy little marisatria, with a population outnumbered by its fleet of creaky little fishing pirogues, the Marcelic had been its prime artery from the Seamounds, the Vengaos and portions of the Pavatrias. Beyond those days, the scenery along this cobbled route had undergone considerable transformation. And as of late it had become the second most preferred access into the teeming, twisted, urbanesque known as Astuverica.

28 quinteks ago, at the age of 11, this viamar had been my introduction to this city; one of 515 souls, marched from the decimated Exos at the behest of blade and lash along the rugged stones of Triage. It took little time for my family and I to realize, upon passing those imposing facades, that this route...this city...held the keys not only to *our* fetters, but to those of an untold horde whose riven frames had proceeded and would follow. These souls and others like them were the foundations upon which this city had been built, and its conquest would follow an act of betrayal that would influence the destinies of countless lives...including my own.

As he awaited passage that day, our traveler stood on the amleatropic platform at the 15th Custody gate, second chain, looking down upon an image similar to that to which I had once stood witness. Soul after wretched soul; a slow, immense, sickened trudge, pouring in through the norostrean Constabulary channels, soon to fill the mighty imperial chalice with sweat, blood...and life.

At the time, though, none of that mattered to him, attired as he was in the raiments of Machaeran Regency. Deny it though he may, this city was his element, his home, his very essence. His path had taken somewhat of a different turn from that of his mother and father. Regardless, he knew who he was. And he acknowledged the fear and respect which his legion and his rank bestowed upon him.

So his eye stared down the declivous plain, past the uppermost levels of those cloisters, commons, dens and markets which sustained the needs, along with the clandestine urges, of every caste from the groveling swarm to the pinnacle of Regency. And at last, on to the spires and edifi which form the imperial superstructure known far and wide as the Architrave.

That, indeed, was his destination.

Astuverica did not inherit its place in the Horizon by accident. In sleepier days it was known to the locals as *Pierk-Astuverist*, and it claims distinction as the true birthplace of the Muharic faith. This part of Andulka is also the native ground to a grotesque, foul-smelling little weed known as Trofliage, which the earliest natives harvested, boiled and refined into what would later become the most prolific collection of psychoactives found anywhere in the Dimensional Horizon.

Astuverica is considered sacred ground to the Muharadu because it lies at the exact geographical center of the Dimensional Horizon. When the Lumens reach Zenith each day, they fly directly over what is now the Plain of the Palamonts. Those souls residing in other regions or marisatrias can also look up at the same time, confident in the spurious

belief that the Lumens are soaring right over their own heads as well. That, though, is nothing more than a chimera created by atmospheric distortions. Astuverica...and *only* Astuverica...lies below true Zenith.

That circumstance was also Pierk-Astuverist's appeal to those who would strive to capture the Circonic and its incumbent riches. So, to achieve equal access to all points of the Dimensional Horizon, early Arduans persuaded the Muharadu to join forces, to co-opt this vague little speck of coastal soil and build upon it their seat of power. That was 43 quinteks ago.

The Astuverica of our traveler's day is a conundrum of many layers, and if you wish to fully understand its nuances, you must start at the beginning, deep within its Subterran underbelly, far below rich veins of Ularic, Menshar and Hagonite, crisscrossing but a few neurris below the surface.

Your journey would begin within the very bowels of the Dimensional Horizon (*Level One* is how it is known to the Triumvirate; *The Hellespheres* to those who reside therein). Here is where cavernous forges known as "Firecrosses" disgorge a sweltering inferno, smoldering far beneath the casual notice of those who inhale the sweet airs beneath the graceful clerestories of the Architrave, the seat of Ephriancy.

Stoked by a population of enslaved drudges constituting the Triumvirate's most heinous apostates, fueled by the enormous carcasses of the rugged Bittermoor, Shaestip and Carabyllis trees which had been ripped from captive ground and dragged thousands of neurris to the chiseled dungeons surrounding the furnaces lying therein, your tortured senses will soon cry out for elevation to the next level. And in the slightly less igneous realms that lie above, you will find thousands of other vassals, lucky enough not to have to squander their short lives within the chambers found at the start of your journey.

Next you will find yourself at Level Two (a.k.a. *The Tramlings*), where many of the spoils of conquest...raw materials such as Thulitars and Broutish Clays, gathered from the occupied territories...are processed night and day into

frameworks, plasmodic melts, concreals, skuritic alloys and amalgams. These and other byproducts are the base materials representing the bulk of architectural wealth in Astuverica. They are beaten and chiseled within the caustic refineries, processed by drudges known as blunt trampers. And here, at Level Two, is where the most precious ores, culled from conquered veins, are raked and purified, their energies constrained, their essentials captured and manipulated. This, indeed, is where wealth, in its purest form, is born.

Before the stinging assaults at Level Two have finished off your already mutilated senses, you will beg for relief to Levels Three and Four (a.k.a. *The Croeplings* and *The Crosslinks*, in that order). Here you will find dozens of enormous vaulted repositories where stockpiles of food, raw materials and processed goods are stored and processed even further, if necessary; all in diminishing space. Here, too, is where you will find the lowest level of hovels, dens, ghettos and their analogous infrastructures, built to sustain a motley mishmash of vassals, helots, varlets, scofflaws, drudges, bounders, boilers, chirapsiats, rooks and chiselers, all of whom form the marrow of the bone structure supporting the works at the levels you have seen so far, plus the ones you have not. Here, an assault on your senses will be the least of your worries. Instead you should concern yourself more with an assault on your life.

Sooner or later end you will end up screaming for further transit, a request which will carry you to Level Five, the pinnacle of the Astuverican Subterra (known to the locals, with naïve optimism, as *Empyrea*). This is the top of the food chain when it comes to Subterranean life, home to various boilers, chirapsiats, ushers, proletarians and factotums, all of whom directly support and satisfy, among other things, the inner workings, needs, wants, vices and virtues of those who live above ground. Here, some say, is where the real work of the Triumvirate is done.

Before exiting Level Five, you might find the time for a delightful slug of blue powder, or one of its psychotically inventive knockoffs. Or perhaps your baser urges will find themselves quenched in the steamy mists of eroiche with the

gender or age bracket of your choosing, thanks to one of the many fine chirapsiats who live and work here. They ply a trade high in demand, a close second only to khiromeks, and of late, dealers in Tyrgomec: liquid stanhics which are infused into memory stones to elicit a strong hallucinatory effect. Once satisfied, you'll be ready to exit the Astuverican Subterra, as it is known to those who reside above. To those who work, live, suffer and die here, though, it is known by another name: *Zurish-Triece*.

Above ground, luments will enable you to see the first visions which our traveler, our young Regent, saw upon entering the city gates. Hundreds of giant conduits can be found here and there, channeling hot fumes, rancid effluent and a hundred billion grains per pulsimer of rancorous B.O. from out of the ground. Except for the mephitic seepage that crawls up through the porous Triece stones paving the streets of Astuverica, most of this aeriform is carried many thousands of neurris beyond the Custody gates, far from the eyes or the olfactories of those who dwell above ground.

Wander the city awhile or catch a lift on one of its dozens of amleatropes. Descend from any of 12 major platforms near the Hygl-Muristre Intermediary and you will find yourself engulfed in a labyrinthine crush of flesh, flux and other unfathomable assaults. The echoes of music being played through dozens of polarity-bending apparati known as *vaqchasers* can be heard more clearly now as darkness draws near. On all sides lie the provender markets, hovels, terrabodes, bazaars and emporiums; the dens, dealer huts and cloisters which line the halls of the Palamont assembly, extending far beyond sight. Through the Columns surrounding the Palamonts, you will force your way to estre and into a resolute crush of flesh; wave after wave...wandering, laughing, crying, screaming, dealing, doping...doggedly-determined-to-survive.

At the norostrean boundary of the Palamonts you will find the enormous structure known as the *Sethelesq*, built to serve as a massive public bathhouse at the behest of Darmek Ve.Muirgen, the second Suhm-Ephriant; now relegated for use only as a surplus storage vault.

Immerse yourself now in the majestic tranquility of the Palamont Plain, surrounded by row after row of Kasidas and the Nemic stones they support. Here, thousands of faithful adherents, their paid proxies and the thousands more who lack sufficient agency for a surrogate (but who, nonetheless, find it wise to *behave* as if they were loyal adherents to the faith) are called each day by the Nemic stones' cacophonous magnetic distortions to the mass ritual known as *Lumenatra*.

Cast your eyes just behind the plain, near the sorentrean boundary of the Palamonts, and you will see the massive arena known as the Tsurithean Helidrome, standing in dark silhouette against the azure reflection of the Eusterian sea. A little further and you'll begin to make out the Bay of Parusaedria, home to the huge docks and yards which house the Triumvirate's vast fleet of aquaspheres. Beside them, in less elaborate facilities, you will see dozens of capacious scows lining the wharfs, their masts and numerous rows of screws and oars glistening at the approach of dusk. Day and night, in and out these vessels pass the Uscoric jetties, transiting the occasional Machaeran detachment, cargoes or private passengers, or even bounding to and from the sorentrean cays or the archipelagic reefs to net and spear for marine life, including the vanishing herds of Barutha which once claimed dominion over the seas of the Dimensional Horizon.

Turn your back now on those waters and you will begin your ascent to the Architrave, the jewel of this vast empire, with its gilded sanctums, its Principiates and their fawning spheres of influence, all situated here in the affirmed seat of authority of over 90 percent of the Dimensional Horizon. Your first stop will be the Tuerinsian observatory, and it is here where your vision will expand to take in the complete spectrum of this massive urban realm.

From these heights, the temperate airs, quieted by serene Eusterian vapors, flow in and out between thousands of hinged apertures known as clerestories, as well as through the vitreous domes and elegant fenestrae above and between. Look now toward the viamars, wending their way through and beyond the city, to sorentre, norostre, wisoltre. Surrounding them,

squeezed in against the outer rim of Custody gates, you will see evidence of thousands of cavenders, appearing as if they'd been dug by enlarged Hirostruvites: carnivorous moles native to coastal and sorentrean regions. Existing deep within these chasms, you may see evidence of all the other refugees who have traveled here from great distances, either on their own or under force; ostracized from admission through the city gates but eager with anticipation for access or release. Here, the makeshift marisatrias of the underworld exist as they do *within* the gates, to meet the needs and wants of all who exist within these dark realms, and above.

But the airy summits upon which you stand were not created to provide support for something as mundane as an observatory. No, they are the ultimate reward of conquest. For here is where those in authority, of all ranks, live and work. This includes sub-Regents, Regents, Councilors, and at the top of the pecking order, Ephriants (a.k.a. executive Regents), all of whom joust for potency and position within the most exclusive of all Principiates, dominated by the mightiest of them all: the exalted *Subm-Ephriant*, cloistered at the very pinnacle of the Architrave, at the 68th Cypliat.

Upon exiting the observatory, you and a privileged few will pass through layer upon layer of the most stringent security impediments known to exist anywhere within the Dimensional Horizon. The passageways of the Architrave are controlled by thousands of articulum stones, indented to the most exacting specifications. They stand guard over a mind-boggling maze of Halls, sanctums, Cypliat, demesnes, alcoves, flats, foyers, chambers, and compounds, of all shapes and sizes; an enormous, twisting vacuole of plasmodic glass, velum and glazed mirror.

Passage within the chambers and Halls of the Architrave cannot be achieved unless you are at least somewhat familiar with its fragmented design, *and* you are carrying a Treflicat which has been indented to the rigid specifics of the Architrave. Not unlike the one our young Regent held in his right hand as he pressed it against the small articulum stone beside a sealed portal at the 44th Cypliat.

His successful elucidation led him further into a series of plasmodic vestibules, then on to the velum of the compound known as the *Hall of the Saurostran Submission* (there are many Halls and compounds like this in the Architrave. They are named, and then renamed, to honor the conquest of each new region, resistance cell or marisatria). Here he sat, yawning, twiddling his thumbs, examining his surroundings, awaiting his queue.

After a wait of 14 stratimers he was ushered in, then seated opposite Vikram Lo.Jehan, who greeted him with a detached salute. A hand usher entered the room, delivering a silver tray holding an assortment of cultured waters and acetous teas. Each tiny vial of tea was laced with half a fingerpinch of diluted Widow's Breath.

Lo.Jehan peered at his subordinate through hollow eyes, his mind tripping the circuitous distance to Level Five, to his favorite Eroctriase and a lithe little double-jointed chirapsiat known to her favorite client as *Setivetu*. His crotch grew tight and warm at the thought of her, vomiting a tiny jet of ejaculate. It ran thick and pasty down his right thigh and pooled beneath his leg. He threw the contents of another chalice against the back of his throat and within two pulsimers, could feel himself being pulled back into something resembling reality.

"My young Regent, I hope your journey was...satisfactory!" Lo.Jehan said with a tight reserve, taking another flask of tea, his seventh that day. He did his best to conceal the contempt now welling up from within, for he was all too aware of the erratic discipline, the lofty connections, the intractable temper of the fresh-faced Machaeran sitting across the table from him.

The young Regent flinched. A sudden, familiar wave of agony washed over him. He fought the urge to grab the wound at the back of his neck, dispelling any more thoughts of pain. "It was excellent, my Sovereign, and...and might I add, congratulations are in order. I understand your ascension to the Xaru-Chalidaethras has been confirmed! You will make a fine Ephriant."

Lo.Jehan nudged a crooked smile, remaining silent while the young Regent fumbled with a pair of twin memory stones beneath the edge of the table.

“I...I must say, my Sovereign, that my detachment and I were somewhat disappointed to have been called away so soon from our assignment. I pray that my service, or that of my subalternates, is not in question. We had been making excellent progress trailing those miscreants, I assure you.”

Lo.Jehan resisted the urge to question the young Regent about his former assignment, but instead offered him a flask of tea. He refused with a polite nod, preferring instead a vial of water.

“No, no, your service is not in question,” Lo.Jehan assured him, feigning sincerity. “You have always represented yourself well, particularly in your brilliant escape from captivity near Maralithlea and your suppression of the recent uprisings in the Pavatrias, not to mention your participation in our conquests during the Purges of Meso-Sczelis.”

Lo.Jehan wiped a bead of perspiration from his brow, recalling how those purges had vanquished many of the smaller, less well-organized Muricai factions dotting the wisoltrean Andulkas. Too, they had served as a platform for the settling of numerous personal scores within the Machaera, and by default a hefty slice of the Arduan Council itself. That was an issue the young Regent had taken to heart on more than one occasion. And Lo.Jehan knew all too well that any spark, psychological or otherwise, that this youthful soul chose to ignite could easily morph into a raging inferno, no doubt with catastrophic results.

Lo.Jehan braced himself. He had struck a deal for his restless but deserving protégé, now biding his time in the Xhalamears, in temporary charge of the Architrave’s newest fixation: a tool it had perfected after a history of some rather catastrophic failures. In return, Lo.Jehan had been asked to massage his young apprentice’s replacement, to encourage the young Regent to embrace his transfer, no matter how far it carried him away from where he wanted to be.

“But enough of that!” Lo.Jehan bellowed. “You and your detachment have been recommended for a new assignment, one which you have earned and are, I believe, most qualified for.”

Lo.Jehan cleared his throat and glanced at the tray with watery eyes. “Your commission is five-fold. You are to begin by conscripting 500 subalternates from within the 33rd coterie, A.17 Circuit, plus a team consisting of 22 Amnic circulats and 16 maquits.”

The young Regent’s eyes grew wide, his pride swelling at the thought of such a large command.

“For the first leg, you will deploy to the sorentrean Seamounts, near the Moirisois highlands, just below Tephrom-Anh. A growing slice of that terrain is now under Machaeran occupation.”

Lo.Jehan went on, unable to take his eyes off the tray in front of him. “As you know, our past sweeps of the sorentrean and estrean regions have had an unintended consequence. For a team of Amnics in the Moirisois has...,” he said, taking a sip from his flask “...articulated an aggregator through a vein of Ularic, and they’ve cognified within these stanhics an enormous stream of Muricai discourse; one of the largest fields of illicit communication ever sourced. For some time now we’ve suspected that the last remaining Muricai cells...those with a substantial roster...have been cornered in the wisoltrean highlands. This is now confirmed by the chatter we’ve been hearing. So leg two of your assignment will begin as soon as you arrive; that is, to put the 706th Strategic Chronicle into place in the Moirisois.”

“The 706th? You mean we are to begin the process of cleaving veins near the wisoltrean terminus?”

Lo.Jehan could feel his clutch beginning to fade. He reached for another vial of laced tea and tossed it down. “That is correct. Our Amnics have developed a series of translatable bridges, which will be placed in the fracture zones your subalternates carve out within captured veins. The muted bridge does not capture all the filamentation passing through a cleaved vein. But after your circulats have inserted these new

bridges, not only will we be able to interpret *all* contraband cognitions, but our odds of being able to source the geographical origins of those cogs should greatly improve.”

Lo.Jehan peered now through clarion eyes. “Too, the indentions in these bridges are staggered to the extent that they will in no way hinder our ability to detect precious ores. As such, they will not stand in the way of our most sacred purpose, Hedeon be willing!”

The tenor of his voice began to surge. “For the third leg of your assignment, you are to map the locations of these apostates and report this information to Siruman Um.Sarujeh, whose detachment is scheduled to follow yours, four to five days after your departure. Once you have completed this leg, a portion of your contingent will be transferred to Um.Sarujeh, and his subalternates will take it from there. Until then, your job is to probe for Muricai hideouts, to report and to document. Nothing more!”

“Yes, my Sovereign,” the young Regent said, enraged at the prospect of losing bootheels to an inferior like Um.Sarujeh. His knew his next question wouldn’t go down well; regardless, he couldn’t resist. “But may I inquire, my Sovereign, as to the nature of Um.Sarujeh’s orders?”

Lo.Jehan’s face began to burn. *How dare this little pellet quiz me on the nature of another Regent’s command!* He was expecting this: a taste of the arrogance, the sense of entitlement; second nature to the one who sat before him. Still, he managed to keep his anger in check. “First: live capture and reassignment to one of three interrogation camps being established in the Pavatrian steppes. Second: execution, but *only... ONLY* if the captures tip the balance of control. The intel from those mouths is important to the Arduan Council. It may even matter to the 68th Cypliat, though it seems these days that the Suhm-Ephriant cares more about Thermionic erudition than...” Lo.Jehan muzzled himself mid-sentence, before his words could be allowed to thwart his ambitions. “*Enough!*” he yelled.

“Again, may I inquire, my Sovereign; at the appointed time, how many subalternates will I be expected to transfer to Um.Sarujeh?”

Vikram sneered and ignored the question. “Upon completion of leg three,” he went on, his voice echoing off the glass walls of the Hall, “you and your remaining detachment will move to norostre of Tephrom-Anh, to a precise location yet to be determined. Upon arrival, you are to await further instructions, whereby transfer of all Strategic Chronicle 398 operations in the Dimensional Horizon will be passed from the command of Caddoan Lo.Therechist. For the past untek and a half, 398 has been active in the Xhalamears under monitored trials. It has shown considerable promise. Soon it will be yours.”

The young Regent’s pulse began to surge. “Chronicle 398, my Sovereign? Didn’t that start out as an old mining technique?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Under my command, what will be its mission, its intended purpose?”

Lo.Jehan shrunk in his chair, tried to regain his verbal footing. “That remains to be...”

“The Xhalamears, as you well know, my Sovereign, were once a *locus* of Muricai asylum, more so than in any other part of the Horizon,” the young Regent said, well aware that since the “monitored trials” of S.C. 398 had been implemented, the defiant in that portion of the Seamounts had, at long last, been brought to heel.

He went on, thrilled at the prospects he envisioned for himself, forgetting briefly about his latest obsession. “If 398 has been perfected, why, it could prove itself a master stoke of retribution, annihilation. Don’t you agree, my Sovereign?! Can you at least offer me some assurance that...”

“*You will be...*” Lo.Jehan howled through clenched teeth, his hands gripping the edge of the table. He took a deep breath and started over, anxious for all of this to be done. “You will be COGNIFIED with further instructions, once you and your

contingent have made it to Tephrom-Anh! Are we clear on this?"

The two of them stared at each other for 15 pulsimers before the young Regent broke their stalemate.

"Leg five, my Sovereign?" the young Regent slurred with a smirk, just as anxious as Lo.Jehan to be free of the 44th Cypliat, from the sullen presence of the one sitting across from him. "What are my orders?"

"Of course. Leg five. Do you know what a Trimethric stone is?" Lo.Jehan asked, by now calmed. This was the same question he asked every Machaeran who was bound for the Seamounts.

"No, my Sovereign."

"Well, get one of your Amnics to explain them to you. See if you can find at least one of those stones and bring it back to me. I suspect they're in wide use among the apostates there."

"Certainly...my Sovereign."

"Do you understand the edicts about which you have been instructed, and will you see them through *without question?*!"

A response began to form on the young Regent's tongue, and he knew that an obvious lack of enthusiasm for this assignment could slow or stall his career considerably, despite the nepotistic influences he knew he could call to bear. "Yes, my Sovereign. I understand, and I will carry out your orders to the best of my ability."

The young Regent passed a nervous salute. His Sovereign hoped this insubordinate little pellet had had his fill of talk. He was wrong.

"But my Sovereign, one more question, if I may. Who made this recommendation? To whom am I...*indebted*...for this assignment?" he asked, the sarcasm oozing from his mouth.

Lo.Jehan's annoyance was tempered when he reminded himself, once again, who he was dealing with. "This order, uhm, came from *him!*"

"Do you mean...the Suhm-Ephriant? *He* issued this edict? Upon who's counsel, my Sovereign?"

Lo.Jehan leaned in, his voice falling to a whisper. “Your *mother’s...*”

The young Regent shuddered. He considered taking a vial of tea. Instead he reached for another vial of water. “My Sovereign, if I may ask, do you know if...if perhaps...my *father* was a party to this decision?”

“My young Regent, how the *freigh* would I know *that?* I’ve had no contact with your father for the past two quinteks,” he lied, finding it hard to understand how well he could respect the father while so thoroughly despising the son.

The young Regent leaned forward and dropped his head, concealing a tint of shame. Lo.Jehan’s eyes fell on the bizarre birthmark on the young Regent’s neck, the serrated scar tissue close beside it, behind his left ear.

“I...I spoke out of turn. Your father is doing what he must to remain in shadow, otherwise he risks far too much. For nowhere can a Regent, even here within the demesnes and the Principiates of the Architrave, find themselves safe from treachery. Apostates, assailants! They lurk and slither from behind every rock, every wall and door and niche, permeating the Sphere, far beyond our control. I, too, am forced to take certain measures to protect myself. *Anyone* in a position such as ours...well, perhaps in time you will understand. After all, I believe a career such as yours will one day lead you to this place. Permanently, that is.”

Lo.Jehan stood to leave. “My young Regent, you will receive complete elucidation in two days, and you are to depart in six. And one more thing. You must ensure a sufficient reserve of Rhiodaramir!” he said, posting his usual advocacy for the Triumvirate’s officially sanctioned biologic. “10,000 miaric weights should be enough for your entire contingent for the duration of your mission.” Lo.Jehan thrust his left fist in the air. “You *and* your subalternates are to be emboldened by its potencies. It is mandated! Are we *clear* on this?”

“Yes...my Sovereign...” The young Regent whispered. He placed the twin stones back in his pocket.

It was then, out of the corner of his eye, that Lo.Jehan saw her, emerging from behind the burnt umber façade to his right. His hand usher re-entered the Hall behind her.

Lo.Jehan squinted, the face of stern rebuttal. "That is all," he muttered, then turned to hurry off. He did not speak to her as he drifted from the veil of the Hall.

After Vikram had passed from sight, she tiptoed toward the young Regent, then sat in the chair Lo.Jehan had occupied. The hand usher looked at the tray, still holding five vials of laced tea. Then he looked to her. "*Leave it!*" she barked, before he turned to make a hasty exit. She placed her hand upon the young Regent's as it rested on the table.

"It's...it's *good* to see you. So *very, very* good!" For the first time in over two unteks, her eyes glowed. A wide smile lit her face.

He jerked his hand from beneath hers, stood and paced the room, his face the picture of dark anger. "Why this order to have me pulled? And *Amaria*, my entire detachment, too? I coggled you about my goals, about the importance of this mission, but I guess, once again, you *ignored* me, didn't you?! Lo.Jehan is helpless to understand their power. You...YOU are just as blind to them as well! But I have come to understand what these stones are capable of. I finally saw it, just before we reached the outliers at the Nysimreans," he skulked. "We *have* to find the rest of them, to secure them all, or sooner or later we will lose everything. When will you see this?"

She stood to follow him. She put her hand on his back, her fingertips brushing against the birthmark on his neck. Another finger hovered over the mangled skin below his left ear as he wrenched himself away.

"A tiny pile of burnished rocks?" she spat. "That's your latest obsession? They are *nothing*, do you understand? And chasing traitors through the caves of Mnuloratheia with a meager band of subalternates will not advance your career. Did you hear what Lo.Jehan told you? Do you realize what I...what *we*...have done for you? Five hundred subalternates. Full command of two important Strategic Chronicles...398 and

706. They're all *yours*! This is the most important assignment any Machaeran Regent has received in...three quinteks."

"Oh, please; what a pile of *caque*! I'm losing numbers to Siruman Um.Sarujeh as soon as Vikram snaps his fingers. And 706? That's grunt work; nothing more. And...and what about Lo.Therechist? He's been in command of 398 in the Xhalamears for two unteks. He's familiar with the technique. He's perfected it, even used it to clear that wretched terrain. So, what's wrong with him? What has he done to warrant expulsion from that assignment. To be cast aside; and for *me*?"

She raised her chin, choosing her words with care. "He...he's not the Machaeran you are. He wasn't up to the task. He had to go!"

"Really? So I'm the one who gets to watch a bunch of circulats and maquits hammer bridges and conjure amalgams, while I...what? Lay around and chug coquont? Or quaff Rhio or Chelomar...or Widow's Breath like Lo.Jehan...and *you*? Face it. You had me pulled because you knew how close I was getting to them. You're protecting...*them*! Aren't you? AREN'T YOU?!" He screamed at her through a grinding jaw, his misogynistic tone on full display.

Suddenly, she was reminded of that sad little stripling she'd once known him to be, not so many quinteks ago, hurling himself against his oppressors when disappointment choked his freedom to do whatever he pleased. She jabbed her finger at him and stared him down with glowering eyes.

"Don't you ever...EVER question my loyalty! Do you understand me? The last thing I would *ever* do is act to protect traitors, regardless of who they were to me, blood or not. You know that."

"All I know is that they got away because of you and your...*sway*, or whatever it is...over Kirahmoor. We almost had them! And *alive*, too, just like we needed them, until a successful assignment was trashed...by you. If only my father...If *only* I could...!" He pounded his fist twice, three times against the nearest wall, suddenly realizing the futility of evoking the name of one who was more an apparition than a fountainhead of support. "My circulats...they were stunned;

stunned I tell you! They'd never seen anything like them. And three pairs of those prizes are still unaccounted for. Our interrogations from the Vengaos tell us that those missing stones were the ultimate refinement over the five pairs we've been able to put our hands on. I tell you *this* should be our mission!"

"But it is not. You are under orders, and *your* mission has been laid out for you," she said, "and mine has been laid for me! I must leave Astuverica. I've...I've got business to tend to. I'll be gone tomorrow at first light." She reached across the table to take a vial of tea in her right hand, closed her eyes and drew it into her, slow and deliberate.

"Where are you going? An assignment? You haven't accepted an assignment in well over two quinteks. You must realize that this reluctance to serve...it has not spoken well of you. You must demonstrate that your faithfulness has not wavered. And considering the fallout from your familial associations, I think you know why."

She took his cheek in her hand and smiled, ignoring the sharp undercurrent of his words. "Do not worry for me, or concern yourself with my faithfulness. My reputation cannot be sullied. Most of all, you must understand that I have faith...in *you*."

She pulled away from him. "I will not be here when you leave for the Moirisois," she said, "so please be safe. I...I will await your cognitions." She motioned for the veil, wanting neither to leave nor to stay. He called to her before she walked out.

"Mother."

She did not acknowledge him. He called to her again.

"*Savita!*"

She paused and turned. "Show some respect, Diarmad. *Mother* will do just fine." That said, she found her direction and disappeared.

He leaned against the shaded glass wall and pulled them from his pocket, mesmerized by their brilliant gleam, the dark ambience of these two perfectly forged jewels. The interrogations conducted by his subalternates had revealed

their name...*Kuspegias*. He swore to himself that, somehow, he would find the last of them. And that he would locate and capture that one lone soul, long ago familiar to him, who possessed the keys to unleashing their powers, held so tight within.

He straightened his back and strode from the Hall with his head held high. His assignment awaited. But his true passion would not soon be forgotten.

Accompanied by six stewards, Savita descended through the bridge hamper to keep her appointment with Shirascur. Despite her entourage, she had not forgotten how to travel “light,” with as low a profile as she would allow herself. True, her work with The Order had been sparse these past two quinteks, as Diarmad had reminded her. So, she would treat this journey as if it were official; as if she were locating any other target. For this, she was buoyed by a surge of welcome excitement, a vital release from the grief of her life’s most tragic loss.

She boarded vrunleatope M9-3, the sole vertical conveyance operating between the Architrave and a highly cloistered portion of Level Five which had been set aside for the commerce of those chirapsiats, khiromeks and other vendors who’d been anointed to gratify only the most extravagant tastes. Its motions were clean and smooth, but its wide windows were caked with a thin, greasy coating of gradu. She leaned against the concreal bulkhead, making a mental note to complain to the operator about the filthy state of this contraption.

Her mind, though, would not dwell for long on smudged windows. She was wracked with guilt over her lack of honesty with her son. Regardless, she would not be dissuaded. As soon as she had learned of the Council’s plans to sponsor another expedition to the wisoltrean Seamounts, she’d lunged at it. Originally intended as nothing more than an advance guard to implement Strategic Chronicle 706 in support of the more important work of Siruman Um.Sarujeh, this journey

presented itself as the perfect opportunity to extricate her son from the Shalu'doc.xhu, before his misguided ambitions and that pernicious horde of his had managed to destroy everything she'd worked so hard to achieve for the past five quinteks. Before a fire or the blade swept her hopes away forever.

The length of this expedition, though, was far too limited to suit her expected timeframe. So three days earlier, Savita's busy hands worked one thread after another, sewing up the reassignment of Caddoan Lo.Therechist. Vikram Lo.Jehan's sycophantic little drudge would be reassigned to serve as overseer of the peonage camps in the Hirusovrans until the dust had settled, until Diarmad's eyes had grown too smoky to notice, or to attempt to thwart, Lo.Therechist's ascension as Lo.Jehan's successor; that is, after a sufficient period of grooming. Lo.Jehan's vacant seat was one she had fought to reserve for her son, but the rigid wall of opposition she'd collided with, at the mere mention of that idea, had left her embittered, demoralized. Even her consort's haughty influence on Diarmad's behalf had been rendered mute. This setback she would not soon forget.

Slowed but not stopped: these words defined her very existence. From that point on, Savita knew that where her son was concerned, S.C. 398 would have to suffice. Even though it paled against most other options, it would serve its purpose in two ways: erase her son's childish passion for those useless little memory stones, and keep him busy, long enough for her to at last heal her wounded heart.

Savita was not blind. For she understood 398's true purpose, in its support of the clandestine work of the 68th Cypliat, all in the face of heavy criticism from the Xaru-Chalidaethras, the Architrave's council of Ephriancy. Too, she understood its questionable usefulness, its limitations, and the overwhelming likelihood that if overindulged, it could bury her oldest in exhaustion and mediocrity long before it might propel him to some supposed *pinnacle of achievement*, as she'd inferred to him with a straight face.

She brushed off Lo.Jehan's failure, to somehow cause her son to unburden himself of the burden of being...him. And

she smiled, knowing that if he could just have his way from time to time, that Diarmad would relish certain aspects of S.C. 398; namely the infliction of mass suffering, just as it had satiated the blood-thirsty Lo. Therechist in the Xhalamears during many of his so-called “live” tests. Most of its purposes he would tire of, and soon. Against all reason, though, she had faith that her progeny would one day rise above the shortfalls of 398, as well as two of his life’s most daunting obstacles: those he had been born with, and those which had been “gifted” to him by his parents.

The brunleatrope came to a noisy halt; she exited into a dark transitway. She had taken great pains to place her khiromek within easy reach, but not *too* easy, for that might draw excessive attention to his skills, thereby denigrating her position as his prime patron.

On arrival at his den, she noticed the clean, fresh corpses, lying in repose in handcrafted plasmodic chambers. The sweet aromas, the tiny wisps of purple and orange vapors rising from his most recent concoctions. She noticed hundreds of delicate crystal chalices, handcrafted, bearing his initials, offered by a grateful khiromek for his most appreciative, and affluent, clients.

His hands trembled as he passed a small, sealed jar to her, along with a tiny spoon. “My Sovereign, this extract! It is my most perfect, my most prized. *Only* for you.”

He took the spoon into his hand and placed it in her mouth. She craned her neck and jerked it with a slight twist; an act of sublime reflex. Her nerve endings began to tingle; her body to quiver. Her mind rolled in extended waves of misty euphoria. In a corner she noticed the limbless body of a young female, suspended in a vibrant colloidal of waters from the Aquina Sul-Ataurea, Azupran salts and Knordric piquants. “Is this from her?” she asked, hoping that it was.

“Yes, my Sovereign,” the fawning khiromek said, wringing his hands. “She and her entire family were killed in the Hellespheres from a vapor lock percussive, but I assure you, when her remains came to me, they were as clean, as unmarked as they were the pulsimer before her death. You know that I

would render nothing for *MY* Sovereign unless its seed had been nurtured in finest pannier!”

Only khiromeks buy into that nonsense, Savita thought with a grin, knowing that good, grey hybrid Trofliage will cure well in any kind of body cavity, not just the supposedly “clean” ones. *But let him go on thinking that. Perhaps, there might be a smidgen of truth to that old fable...*

Still, the sight of one so young, so innocent, ripped from the Horizon at such a tender age, touched something very profound...very primal...within her; something which she conveniently chose to ignore.

Savita accepted 36 vials of his finest, freshest creation. “Shirascur, thanks be to Hedeon, and to you, of course. I know I can always count on you!”

He nodded and smiled. “36, my Sovereign? If you come back in six days I will have a fresh batch prepared for you. You needn’t hoard so much at one time.”

“I’m leaving in the morning, Shirascur. I have...an *assignment*; yes! And I will be gone quite a while, so I will need no more than will remain raw and clear until my return. But when I do, well, please have another batch waiting for me, won’t you?”

“Anything for you, my *Ceveaesh*. Anything!” Shirascur said, evoking the Andulkan term of respect for a superior.

She turned away from him, from the sight of that tiny corpse lying before her. She walked from the den and levitated to return to her flat at the 36th Cypliat, soon to begin her preparations. In her arms she caressed the carton containing those 36 warm vials. Standing in the vrungleatrope on the way back, she felt a light, knowing breeze as Guymoun stole up behind her. In spite...or perhaps because...of his mangled face and his somewhat dismissive countenance at times, the respect and authority he commanded among the other vassals in her service was a great source of comfort to her, as was his gentle, feathered touch upon her skin in her most vulnerable moments.

He clutched her shoulder. She raised her chin in anticipation. “The wooden boat is ready, Sava...”

*T*HIS DAY WAS NO DIFFERENT from any other, for as it always does, the arrival of Zenith brings with it the day's headiest surge, causing the provender markets to turn rank with the cultured but defiant aromas of their consignment of recent harvests and fresh kills.

Today it began with Bluurtheyn, Paragai and Syena; slaughtered, plucked and threshed (in that order) just yesterday. Competing for the attention of the senses were enormous sides of Builhern and Tarandru, dripping with blood, scalded at the slaughter with bright yellow grains of Bruthmic salts, buried within mounds of scabric grit. Stacked here and there were hundreds of thousands of miaric weights of Peligarthe, Rugliapods and hand-sized crustaceans known as "Zephyr Runts," caught, fleshed and gutted less than a day ago. Further down, huge bundles of Vilarosa greens, aromatic mounds of Tythien seedpods and Jyriaglip leafbuds, all rustled in the mid-day breeze. Not far beyond were stacked huge glass and terracotta amphoras containing wines fermented from the most exquisite of fruits: Paragai, Guaerea and Thyloshist. Plus the stiffer *Aqua Vitaes* distilled from whips and the bitter nut of the Ryaklokath tree. Not to mention at least 40 blends of coquont and 70 or more varieties of elixirs, depilatories, liniments and other compounds made from anything and everything imaginable.

Without a doubt, the city would feed, drink and mollify quite well tonight. But not before these bounties had been pulled, sliced, severed, fondled, haggled over and carted off by the thousands who crowded the Columns here at mid-day, all of them thronging the provender markets of Astuverica in search of its pungent bounties.

Or in some cases, its ability to shadow conversation within its clamorous din.

Ligeia Te.Nurasier had always found comfort in these corridors. Not just because of the roar and the smell and the bustle of the Columns (as the markets were nicknamed), and certainly not because “provender” was but a small fraction of the goods and services one could bargain for with a mere fingerful of argency. No, it was because in *this* place, without fear of retribution, she could speak her mind, as loud as she liked, to *whomever* would listen, even if no one cared to. And that happened more often than she was willing to admit.

It was always here, and a few neurris beneath the stones of Triage upon which she walked, where her voice, her visage, were free from the constancy of surveillance. For Ligeia was a lifelong victim of behavioral patterns which had placed her in the path of peril for most of her 26 quinteks: the last 20, for the most part, in Astuverica.

Ligeia’s life had been defined by the gifts of privilege, but her mind and her soul were shaped by an adulthood lived far below the cathedrals of power and plenty. Her father, the cunning, callous Bourglo Ve.Daetran, had managed to pull himself up from the role of a young Syena thresher in the Serritara plains to become the maquit/circulat who was fortunate to have stumbled upon a little idea known as Aggrete Micromics.

This simple act of invention not only expanded upon the technical discipline of the Amnic circulat, but it enabled the Architrave to milk the power of the Recondite to its greatest advantage. Bourglo was not content, however, to squander his life working metals. Instead he used his wealth to *buy* his way into the Arduan Council, then to leverage his power to acquire more argency, and then more power, and so on and so on. His appointment, three quinteks ago, to the Xaru-Chalidaethras had been the final thread in his life’s seamless fabric of ambition and ascension, stitched together one wisely-chosen needlepoint at a time.

Her mother, Eidia Te.Nurasier, caged at the age of eight in the wisoltrean Andulkas, sold and apprenticed as a chirapsiat at the age of 12, introduced to Bourglo as her 13th client at the tender age of 15, had in turn chained her wealthy consort

within the swollen, sticky clutch of carnalia. She had managed to hold him there well beyond the accidental birth of her only child, her Ligeia. It was not a family that Eidia had aspired to. But Ligeia was more than mere offspring to her. For although Eidia had grown too dependent on the suckling extravagancies of life in the clerestories, and too weak to thwart her consort's sinister nature, she still looked to Ligeia as the weapon through which she would, somehow, burn the cage that had held the child she once was.

Every day, through Zenith and just before dusk, Eidia kept watch through the windows of her flat at the 27th Cypliat, beside the Gallery of the Yrgotrean Capitulation, 10 levels beneath Bourglo's official facilities: his Principiate. From this vantage point, she could just make out the small, dark blue terrabode at the A30.B Quarter loop, 217th Register, right behind the Palamont assembly corridor, next to the terminus at the Columns. And every morning, she evoked the 'Phemes to somehow guide Ligeia along the path which her daughter had chosen to follow.

With her basket in hand, and with Quilla clinging snug to her back, Ligeia wandered the Columns that day until 60 degrees post-Zenith, engaging each of her familiar vendors in raucous debate over their wares, their fares, their mores and their motivations. Tussles of a different kind had characterized the life she'd shared with Drogon, except that afterwards she and her consort would usually wind up shorn of their clothing, gasping for breath, wrapped in each other's arms: a writhing, sweaty beast-with-two-backs, until their lust was joyously released, leaving only their deep, mutual affection in its wake.

As Lumens faded off to wisoltre that day, Eidia watched the twin apparitions of her *own* affections enter the door of their tiny flat; not to return to the Columns until tomorrow. Ligeia could feel Eidia's eyes, cautious and hopeful, upon her and her daughter, for she knew her mother was soothed, quieted by their presence, even from afar, as darkness passed into another thankless awakening.

Ligeia, though, was invigorated by the onset of night, because that was always the time of day, after she and Quilla

had eaten dinner and cleaned, when the two of them could descend the steps which led down, down into that part of her life in which most of her conflicted purposes were manifested. And of course...*maybe tonight*, the thought had lately occurred to her...she might be able to satisfy her hopes that he was still out there; still safe, still eager and capable, one day, of returning to his small family.

After dinner, she heaved open the rough-hewn Shaestip door, crammed into the vestibule closet at the lower level of her home, so they could begin their descent. Tonight, as she was all too aware, so many of her lofty hopes depended on nothing more than a small black stone.

For many quinteks, the Triumvirate had struggled to find a way to identify and suppress illicit cognitions within occupied territories. Suppression was achieved by cleaving the vein, but it was believed that this might also impede the Triumvirate's ability to source the stanhic wealth for which it was so eager to kill, maim and imprison. *Reductory* (a.k.a. "muted") bridges were eventually developed to allow cognitions to pass through these veins; cogs which could, in a few rare cases, be sourced. Still, this flawed solution was not enough.

The translatable bridge had emerged in the past untek to correct the imperfections of its muted cousin. Its superiority was undisputed, acting as a foolproof noose, of sorts, on the vein. Massaging all mnemonic filamentation. Exposing all dialogue to identification. Allowing the Triumvirate to articulate any treasonous discourse passing through a cleaved vein. And in most cases, with little trouble, the location of the sender of these treasonous tracts could then be identified.

For obvious reasons, a little more than a quintek ago, nearly all mnemonic cogs to, from and within Astuverica came to a sudden halt: that is, unless they carried the official indention of the Triumvirate. Anything less would draw immediate suspicion and within enough time, a horde of subalternates at your door for a quick round of questioning, if you were that lucky. Because in most cases, immediate imprisonment was the lot of those who dared to speak without

authority, even once. To the Architrave, this advance was seen as the most effective line of defense to shield the Cypliats and those who dwelt within.

So, it was left to the elegant simplicity of Kyotrimlic stones to carry the news, information, dreams, longings and imaginings which constituted the bulk of all “unofficial” communication, especially from the lands to norostre. Kyotrimlics were an ancient science, having been in existence for more than 4000 quinteks. They were unreliable and rarely delivered unbroken (if they were delivered at all), but they were cloaked with ease, looming well below the prying eyes and ears of the Triumvirate.

After trudging 35 steps into near total darkness, with Quilla on her back, Ligeia emerged into a vestibule beside the labyrinthine maze which would carry her to Girdrahn’s notch. Here, at the pinnacle of the Astuverican Subterra, a small but noticeable snatch of the misery and deprivation which permeated the igneous dungeons below could be sensed. As she always reminded herself, though, a simple, daily taste of life *de facto* within the Dimensional Horizon was as essential as food, air or water.

With a full load upon her she began her journey, gasping after turning to close the hatch, convinced that the unmistakable semblance of Drogran’s face had just appeared at the top of the landing.

They had met 16 quinteks ago, having played, fought, misbehaved and grown up within the lower Cypliats of the early Architrave. They were neighbors, separated by four flats. Though three quinteks apart in age, they were identical twins in temperament, voice and ideals. But their paths diverged in the face of the stranglehold imposed upon her by her menacing father, and upon Drogran by his equally controlling aunt. Indeed, Dainoor Te.Sinian’s loathing for Ve.Daetran compelled her to will a sizeable distance between her nephew and any offspring of Bourglo’s. The divisive efforts of these two, however, served only to draw Drogran and Ligeia closer, ever closer, together.

Ligeia's strong affection for Drogan was contrasted by her jealousy over the kind of life he was destined to lead, but which she was not. After he had completed his apprenticeship as an Amnic circulat, his frequent cognitions of his distant journeys brought her both joy and angst as she was relegated by the tradition-bound Bourglo to await a *proper* consortium, not with a wandering circulat borne of a traitorous father, blood kin to a skridlak aunt. No, her father preferred that she pair with the son of *that* Machaeran, or *this* Arduan, or even that nasally Muharic priest with the groping fingertips, the dry crust of Chelomar pasted to the corners of his mouth. So after Ligeia had at last reached her fill of Bourglo's tyrannies, she called upon her mother for help.

The solution, thrust upon a reluctant daughter by her determined mother, seemed harmless enough. It was managed by Eidia through her third-hand connection with an inventive khiromek and the lacy, tasteless concentrate he had developed; one which delivered a surging, subtle bite and a smooth after effect. Even though Eidia's coital blows were enough to satisfy her consort's libidinous urges, where his dominance over Ligeia was concerned, only Shirascur held the keys. Needless to say, the boiler had earned a good reputation with their neighbors as well.

Bourglo's sudden affection for Shirascur's new...and shockingly addictive...elixir removed the most significant barrier to Ligeia's freedom to pursue her life as she saw fit. But her father's dwindling vigor, his swollen features, concerned Ligeia and Eidia, by now anxious to get a handle on his intake. So with Eidia's encouragement and assistance, Ligeia apprenticed with an at-first resistant, but then easily bought, Shirascur. In spite of his manic rantings, she managed to absorb his knowledge of the art in record time, acquiring the skills needed to fashion her *own* concoction: a more tolerant blend which would satisfy her father's fixation, keep him alive, and her, still unrestrained. Bourglo was to remain his daughter's sole client. This was the first of her conflicted purposes.

After having left her father with a two quintek supply, she departed Astuverica and joined Drogran, traveling the occupied territories, assisting him in his work, tasting life far beyond the Andulkas and all its fractured charm. Upon their return, eight quinteks ago, they were conjoined, after Drogran had managed to snag a job building aggregators and customizing indentions within the Triumvirate's covert new Syphthisarium, built within a set of well-guarded chambers at the Architrave's second Cypliat.

Their union was merely tolerated by the ambitious Dainoor and the compliant Eidia. But it was cursed by a raging and tormented Bourglo Ve.Daetran, who had managed to regain some semblance of awareness after his mind had acclimated to the constancy of a Chelomarcic fog. And although he was incapable of restraining his headstrong daughter, he never stopped trying.

Relieved of the tiresome task of field articulation, their samplings of life beyond the Andulkas had imbued Ligeia and Drogran with the desire to live, for once, at ground level, to know more of life beyond the plasmodic barricades of their youth. In those days, this ambition was shared by numerous other offspring of the Principiates, in a drive to taste the flipside of their native city. So Drogran and Ligeia converted a small blue terracotta plunt chamber, located right beside the Columns, into a home.

At one time used as a mixing and weigh station for scabric compounds, it was a peculiar little hovel, austere on the outside but rococo ornate on the in, decorated with embellishments one would not expect to find in such a utilitarian structure. The walls and trim were carved with distorted images of phantasmagorical sea life; Lumens and Ione with clipped wings, oversized bodies and beaks; Tarandru with square heads and erect phalluses, spraying semen in every direction.

Too, there were other oddities: thick, oversized doors which opened from top to bottom as well as side to side; drawers and cabinets with secret compartments that had their *own* secret compartments, and so on; and a companionway

hatch. But not just *any* companionway hatch. This one...worn, splintered, smelling strong of tainted Piquants and scabric residue, and well-hidden...had been illegally carved into a vestibule closet at the top of a 35-step stairwell which led down to Level Five. This innocuous little feature was soon to provide its new owners with an unexpected insight into a realm they knew nothing of. It would also introduce them to the disillusionment, and the enlightenment, which would come to influence the rest of their lives.

From the landing just beyond her stairs, Ligeia walked the 655 neurri path to the notch occupied by Girdrahn Lo.Hualic. In her satchel she carried a woven parcel containing a thick slab of Builhern tongue, roasted and seasoned with crushed Jasperis seed. It was his favorite dish, and it would no doubt be his only meal of the day.

Down this winding capillary branch of the Quordrof passages, her lightstaff tucked under one arm and Quilla on the other, a strange rush of ambient sound appeared to follow her. Faint metallic pings struck her hearing; cries, pleas, repining screams, splitting the oncoming darkness. *Ignore them*, she told herself. *I do all I can. Anything more...is beyond my control!* And so unfolded the second of her conflicted purposes.

She arrived at the veil of Girdrahn's notch, offering him a smile and a hug. Luments had not shone on his face in over a quintek, and must not, they both knew, if he wished to remain alive. Like so many who dwelt at these depths, his prior affiliations, not to mention his impetuous moods, required him to walk a thin line, far below the surface. For Girdrahn's involvement with the Muricai and his recent work in the company of his brother and Drogan, articulating slips in the norostrean Vengaos, had caught the attention of at least one detachment of Machaera and two Courvesants. One disciple of The Order had caught up with Girdrahn in the Tribethian highlands, six unteks ago, and wound up with his own Kirzek vine wrapped around his withered neck. Not, though, before Girdrahn had let slip to the Courvesant, posing as a compatriot, the whereabouts of a Muricai stronghold in the

sorentrean Vengaos. Girdrahn's failure to block the cog before exacting the kill cost four Muricai lives in a single day.

A hefty bounty followed Girdrahn's act of revenge while The Order tried to minimize this embarrassing mishap. Playing the odds, Girdrahn decided to wait it out, solo, right here in the Astuverican Subterra before the sweep of their search could overwhelm him. All who knew Girdrahn agreed that this was the right choice. He was not, after all, his brother, for Girdrahn had never met a straight line that he could walk without a wide, meandering waver.

Within time, Girdrahn had found within these chasms not only refuge, but a useful avocation. For soon after he took up residence in a spacious, abandoned slip beneath the juncture of the Columns and the 12th assembly corridor to the Palamonts, he discovered that it ran right below a rich vein of metamorphic Ciferiak, infused with elongated strands of Menshar: the perfect material with which to fashion Kyotrimlic stones. Within 10 days of settling in, he had established the busiest Kyotrimlic trading post in the Andulkas...right beneath the belly of the beast.

Early on, he had launched his trade as a seller of *Octothets*: Kyotrimlics which were infused with obscure knowledge, facts, dogmas, cognitions or literary treatises which had languished within obsolete or damaged aggregators, difficult to access through ordinary memory stones. But due to the Triumvirate's eagerness to cleave veins, this information soon became impossible to obtain. So when his business collapsed, his Kyos found a different purpose.

Girdrahn took a whiff. "*Amaria*, Ligeia...thanks so much for this. It smells great! Nothing better than Builhern and Jasperis. What did you roast this with?"

"There's a vendor at the Columns who sells Bittermoor shavings that've been kicked back up out of the Hellespheres; I guess because they don't burn hot enough for down there. He seasons them for something like two unteks and sells them for fuel. I can get all I want."

Girdrahn grinned, took a hefty bite, set the plate aside and raised his arms into the air. "Come here, Quilla." She ran

to him, returning a warm hug and a wide grin. They laughed and slapped their hands together. She wandered back to articulate an Octothet as Girdrahn dove back into his meal.

“I guess you heard that a delivery of Kyos from the Seamounts came here though that one-eyed courier earlier today, the one with the slit right up the middle of his tongue. That pucino gives me the *putsplat*...he’s so weird. Anyway, I went through them just before you got here. And I’m sorry, Ligeia, but...none of them were from Drogan.”

She squirmed. “I see, well...” Her eyes began to redden. “Sorry, Girdrahn. I’m trying to be patient here, but it’s been...” She stopped herself, well-conditioned at keeping her expectations in check. She patted Girdrahn on the shoulder. “So, that stone you got yesterday from Odrahn. Have you cogged it? How is he? Did he get through?” As she spoke to a distracted Girdrahn, she found herself fumbling through a tray of stones behind her, one by one. They *ached* with sonorance. Through each of them she could articulate the sender, but hesitated before going any further. *Girdrahn wouldn’t mislead me*...she mused, letting the last one drop from her hands. She ignored the rest.

The stench of smoke from the searing of Broutish clays, the crack of distant tremors, filled the already burdened air. “Yeah, Odrahn’s fine,” he said, holding his brother’s fractured Kyo in his left hand, his fork in his right. “He made it to Tephrom-Anh. *Ha!* Just like that pellet to send a stone which was already broken. I wonder if he caught on to that before he and Makel Um.Zhirlof and Karia took off? Probably not. All I know is that he told me he never received a cog from Euan or Drogan. And who’s the other one? Drogan’s brother?”

“Kerak. Kerak Um.Tiago.”

“Oh yeah, Kerak. I know Odrahn tried for at least 10 days. There’s a really pure vein of Burnish Hagonite up in the Moirisois which is thought to run all the way to the norostrean terminus, close to the Nearings. Still, he said he got nothing through it. Did you recognize anything in there?” he asked, referring to her clandestine fumbblings through his sizeable cache, each Kyo awaiting the arrival of their intended

recipients. Ligeia always knew he had eyes in the back of his head.

“No...” she mumbled, embarrassed. Quilla wrapped her arms around her mother’s legs. “Sorry about that.”

“Ah, don’t mention it. I’d have done the same. But Ligeia, honestly, there was more in that Kyo I got from Odrahn.” He took her by the wrist. “He told me that they had to get out of Tephrom-Anh, right away. He would have kept trying, you know, but he copped that it was getting way too hot up there to continue. In fact, it’s pretty risky right now all over the wisoltrean plateaus. There’s a few sizeable bounties on his head, and with hordes of subalternates, Arduan scouts crawling all over the place, he’s kind of laying low right now with a few expats to norostre of the Moirisois highlands. I suspect sooner or later they’ll move on to the Swales, at Neroluer. That place is *very* remote, well sheltered, and it’s filling up fast, but the veins are very schismatic up there, so...”

Girdrahn raised his hand and lifted her chin with his fingers. “What I’m trying to say is, just because he failed to cog Drogan this time, that doesn’t mean anything. If anyone can get through to Drogan, Odrahn can. He’ll find a way. He won’t let you down, Ligeia. *I* won’t let you down.”

She smiled at his awkward attempt to reassure, but she knew the odds. “Do you ever get Kyos from the wisoltrean plateaus, or the Eusterian island chains? Do you think a norostrean stone might make it through from there?”

Girdrahn shook his head. “Ligeia, I seldom ever get Kyos from the islands, so if a stone from Drogan passed through there for whatever reason, we’re not gonna know about it. Most of them come from sorentre, sore-wiso, like that. And I get a lot less now than when I first started mining and interpolating these things. You’ve got to understand; the Machaera is all over those territories now. Very little gets in or out these days. I wish I had better news for you. Sorry.”

“When do you expect another delivery from the Seamounts?”

“I don’t know. This one took 14 days, so I wouldn’t expect any others to take less than 16, 17 days to get to me.

Ligeia, I'm just talking here, you know, but did you have any suspicions about Drogran's brother before they took off to meet Euan? I mean he *was* a Courvesant; he'd even targeted Drogran for assassination. What do you know of this brother of his?"

"Kerak came to my door a little more than an untek ago...*Amaria*...looking like he'd been thrown headfirst off a cliff, he was so beat up. I wasn't sure if I should let him in the door. But he arrived with a Kyo in his satchel plus a pair of Drogran's Kuspegias. They were one of the pairs he'd forged from the Tulerioc-Hagonite alloys, the ones that Vraila and Cezerian were so enthusiastic about."

"I remember those. Drogran made three pairs of those, didn't he?"

"Right."

"So, how did Kerak get them?"

"Drogran *gave* them to him. When Kerak showed up at my door and handed me the Kyo, I articulated that it had come from Drogran! He explained in it that he didn't trust the couriers from Yrgotrea, that he'd been looking for someone who he thought he *could* trust, who could gain easy access into Astuverica, without being searched; someone who could bring them into safekeeping with me. Drogran never even knew he had a brother until Kerak showed up. They'd only met a few days earlier. So when he stumbled on Kerak I think he weighed the odds, saw a chance, you know."

"What happened to Kerak...before they met up again? Before they took off for Teoramugh?"

She let go a chuckle. "He didn't know it, but once he showed up in Astuverica, he was doomed. I don't think he much cared, to be honest. He'd been recognized as he passed through the Custody gates, so he had to justify his sudden appearance back here, when he was supposed to be on assignment in the Vengaos, why he was in such bad shape, all that. He asked for a medical furlough and got it, but not before arousing a few suspicions, I'm sure. He played it cool, though."

Quilla passed a burp and a loud yawn as Ligeia went on. "Nine days after he arrived, Kerak was articulating his Treflicat and discovered that Drogran's camp had been raided a couple

of days earlier. The 'Phemes were well lit that day, because Drogran and three others with him had managed to make it out with barely a scrape. He lost everything, though: every pair of Kuspegias he'd spent so much time working on. All into the hands of the Machaera. All except that one pair. Kerak and I had spent eight days trying to figure out how to safely use those little stones, and just after the raid he and I snuck out one night to the lofts at the dry-docks, and we articulated Drogran with them. We kept it on a low modulation out of fear that the bridges in the veins might pick up our signal, but we got through to him without a hitch. That's when he articulated that, just before the raid, he'd received a Kyo from Euan Te.Vuramble; something about a Baraslute vein that Euan had articulated way up in Teoramugh. Euan wanted Drogran's help finding it. That was when he and Kerak agreed to meet in the estreaun Andulkas so they could strike out to find Euan and that vein of Baraslute."

"I understand that the Courvesois has tagged Kerak for arrest," Girdrahn said. "They know of his collusion with Drogran. How'd they find out?"

"On the testimony of a loose tongue, that's how. The Machaera ran some pretty tight interrogations after they raided Drogran's camp. One of their prisoners, a Vengathlian laborer, described Drogran handing off a couple of stones to someone who fit Kerak's description, then letting him go. That sealed the Courvesois's suspicions once and for all: they put the pieces together and made the connection that Drogran and Kerak were brothers. Kerak didn't tell his Regents at The Order where he was during his furlough, but he'd articulated his Treflicat in my house. So the Arduans pegged its location and came to my door the next day, looking to make an arrest. It took Kerak no more than two strats for he and I to say our goodbyes, for him to pack his bag, take off down my companionway and disappear into the Zurish-Triece while I held them off, playing dumb; the usual routine. That was the last I saw of him."

Girdrahn smiled and shook his head. "And you. You've harbored two 'apostates' under the same roof! I wish I knew

how Bourglo and Eidia keep you out of trouble. You're lucky, you know that?"

"So are you, Girdrahn, because you have *me* for a friend!"

"Ha! And for that, I say to the 'Phemes, wherever they are...thank you."

Ligeia smiled through clenched teeth, wondering how much longer the tangled web supporting this so-called "luck" of hers would hold out before unraveling into a derelict heap. Yet another of her conflicted purposes reared its ugly head.

Quilla nodded off as Ligeia picked her up and covered her head. "Before Kerak left," she said in a shaky voice, "he promised me he'd take care of Drogan. There was real sincerity in those eyes of his, Girdrahn. You ask me what I know about Kerak Um.Tiago? Well, not much. But I trust him to keep his word."

"Well, if *you* trust him. Anyway, if it's any consolation, the Bay of Teoramugh and the norostrean terminus are about as isolated as it gets. Hard to elucidate anything up there or find couriers willing to make that trip. And it's a bit lighter in Machaeran activity than the Moirisois are these days. So just because he hasn't communicated, it doesn't mean he's not okay, you know?"

"I do. I'll keep my hope, Girdrahn. It's all I have."

She gathered her satchel, her lightstaff and Quilla, now fast asleep. Using her sling, she cradled Quilla on her back. Girdrahn's face went sour at the thought of her leaving. There was a warmth, a longing in his eyes that shamed him, but that he found impossible to hide.

"I guess you heard; the Kuorosith tunnel caved in 10 days ago. About now they'll be rechanneling the egress routes through the Quordrof passages; they'll be filled with detrus scorchers returning from the Tramlings. So you might want to take the Miristiom crosscut to get back home, Ligeia. It's a little longer, but a lot safer."

"Thank you, my friend. I'll try again tomorrow. Until then..." They hugged, then she motioned to depart. She watched him as he turned to begin hammering away again at the ceiling of his notch. Kyotrimlics disappeared from his grasp

as fast as he could chisel and interpolate them, for the need was never greater. "If you ever find yourself getting paid for this work, you'd be the richest soul in Astuverica!" she called out to him with a laugh. He forced a worried grin and waved to her as she shuffled off.

She hadn't traveled this end of the Miristiom in over a quintek. Trudging this route back to her vestibule, the stone surfaces seemed to tremble around her, as if awakening from a hard slumber. For this was the time of day in which the chains of bondage were metaphorically released, allowing the bonded a few precious stratimers of exile from their labors. And even though the dens were teeming this time of night, they were quiet, so she knew that those vibrations weren't coming from the hordes of skirueics now crowding these lairs, shoulder to shoulder. She felt a close connection to the vibrancy of life which drove those pulsing rhythms, glad that not everyone chose to rely on the rank effects of cheap Pentumus to provide them a sanctuary from their burdens.

The Miristiom was about twice as long as Quordrof or Kuorosith, and low on foot traffic. This passage, though, was no stranger to her. For ever since she and Drogan had moved to the Columns, it was this crosscut down which she had traveled to acquire Trofliage seed and stem, the Buaristic alkalis and Chuloric brines, and occasionally a few preserved torsos. These were her stocks in her limited trade...that of boiling her father's biologics.

That heavy Shaestip door would, no doubt, have remained sealed forever but for one of the Columns' Blurtheyyn vendors. He was a disfigured old pelot, missing an ear, four fingers and most of his nose, who had helped build that foul smelling plunt chamber she now called a home. And he was well aware of the illicit companionway and the teeming, inscrutable Sphere it hid...and exposed...beneath her floorboards.

Ligeia marched on, her arm wrapped around her lightstaff, recalling how mesmerized she and Drogan had been by this vendor's colorful narratives of the Astuverican Subterra. She remembered how they couldn't wait to pry the nails loose

from that bulky door and venture down those creaky steps, to stand witness to a world which had only been alluded to, but never experienced by two such as them.

After making the fifth turn from Girdrahn's notch, the first den she passed had once belonged to that un-named khiromek (he had a name; he just refused to give it to her) who'd sold her the first batch of ingredients she'd used to boil her father's elixirs. After she'd requested those supplies, she recalled her puzzlement when he'd asked her if she had a permit to boil. *How preposterous*, she'd thought, caring little for the fact that he was right. Not to her surprise, he wound up dead after ingesting one of his own cheap slugs, cut with rancid gum powder ground from the dried bone marrow of a Tarandru: a victim of his own lousy skills. "I never liked him anyway," she whispered to herself.

How this stretch of the Miristiom has grown, she thought. Where, in those days, there'd been no more than three active dens, now there were seven, all teeming at that time of night with what passed for "life". She turned her head and glanced behind her to ensure that Quilla was still fast asleep, then scurried past the next four dens, profuse with the stench of second-rate Widow's Breath, burdened with the doleful sight of one wistful skirueic after another, the skin of some of them branded with the Zualoslets identifying their current or former positions within the deepest levels of the Astuverican Subterra. Each of these lives, she knew, was a purposeful testament to the weight of the mirrored plasmodic glass which soared above their heads. *Will I ever get used to the sight of an overdose?* she wondered, passing the final den on fleet feet. The swollen skulls, splitting and bursting in a wretched mass of greyish-brown fluids? She turned her eyes away, seeing before her the last remaining neurris to her vestibule, soon to be trod in darkness.

No more than 50 steps now remained. To her right, she passed the veil leading to the Bourhead tunnel. A curious mix of sounds and scents drifted from its recesses. Her mind wandered back to that day in which she and Drogan had at last managed to remove all of the massive bolts securing the

companionway. To make their way down, one tentative step at a time, into the Astuverican Subterra.

And what a journey it was! For the first time in their lives, they bore witness to more, *much* more here in darkness than the glare of luments had ever revealed to their wanting eyes. As they'd come to the end of the stairwell, to begin their wanderings along the Bourhead, so began their reformation, birthed in the womb of those who yearned to drink the light that Droган, Ligeia and many others like them had so thoroughly disregarded; who further introduced them to one, then another, and then *another*, until the web of their lives began to comingle with those of whom the Triumvirate had stigmatized, labeled, branded...as *enemy*!

In a way, they'd never returned from that incipient journey. And despite their best efforts, they never would, either separately or alone. For in that early time, unbeknownst to Ligeia and Droган, safe within the comfortable confines of their small, dark blue terrabode, they had been living in an airtight bubble of subterfuge, thanks to the paranoiac glare of Bourglo Ve.Daetran. Ever since they'd taken up residence at the Columns, he had arranged for no action of theirs to go unobserved, his physical and mental condition notwithstanding.

Within time, his efforts bore fruit. Droган had been advising the Muricai effectives Deodric Um.Geartris and Sabitha Te.Neigel of recent changes to the indention process; changes which were turning stolen Treflicats into homing devices, leading the Machaera straight to their hapless thieves. Articulating the Kaebixt with an ordinary memory stone, he perfected an entwine which erased this function, enabling the pilfered Treflicat to perform as it should without turning a band of Quadric-yielding dragoons onto its new user.

Ligeia recalled that morning in horrifying detail. It was 20, maybe 25 degrees before Zenith. A series of rapid knocks on their door had followed the quick delivery of a hastily interpolated Kyo, sent from her mother's flat, handed to her by a lugubrious courier. Its urgent warning flashed before her eyes; Droган's cogs to the Muricai, his illicit association with

Um.Geartic and Te.Neigel, had been exposed. Within no time, this betrayal would seal their fates forever.

Five stratimers. That's how long it had taken after the Kyo's delivery for her front door to rattle and split under the pounding of a pair of angry hands; hands which, fifteen stratimers later, left her house in frustration, bereft of their prey. That was because, two stratimers before their arrival, Ligeia's consort had stolen his way down those 35 steps and into the beginning of a life torn apart from those he valued most in this merciless Sphere. Only Eidia understood how her consort had been able to reveal and expose Drogan's, and by association, Ligeia's, Subterranean associations. Bourglo's daughter had been forgiven, not just once, but twice now, and under the most rigid of conditions. Not so much out of magnanimity, or because of Eidia's tear-stained intercessions, but because of Ligeia's unique talents in the refinement of Trofliage. Bourglo needed her. He knew it, as did she. And so, the pale light of benevolence which shone from that resplendent flat beside the Gallery of the Yrgotlean Capitulation remained Ligeia's only real salvation.

Her pace slowed before she stopped, to tune out the sounds coming from behind her, to drive her mind into the Bourhead. She resumed her journey after two stratimers, winding her way around a craggy turn, unable to control her emotions. Arriving at the tiny vestibule below her 'bode, Ligeia stood at the base of the stairs. The last time she ever saw Drogan, he was racing down those treads, through this tiny nook, through the same passageway down which his brother had made his own hasty exit from Astuverica, a little more than an untek ago.

This egressway had carried them both onward and outward, into the hands of trust and assurance; hands which were not to be found for them above the Zurish-Triece. Bounties were soon placed on their heads, most of them financed by a particular Arduan Ephriant in Ligeia's family, one whose wealth and influence knew very few bounds.

She lifted her foot to mount the first step as an echo pushed through from the untraveled reaches of the Miristiom,

one of the oldest passages at the oldest subterranean level in Astuverica. A similar tone had sounded within my own young ears over 25 quinteks ago, from within a divergence which fed off and away from the Miristiom, then into an entrepot which had been converted into a makeshift interrogation chamber. This was an epoch of resurgent rebellion, when a chain of small but bloody purges shook the occupied territories over a period of less than two unteks. To no one's surprise, that dissent spilled over into the Astuverican Subterra.

Mass uprisings were a daily affair at these depths, led by the growing multitude of drudges filling the tight spaces in which my family and I had fought so hard to survive. So to ease the mounting pressures being hurled upon the Architrave, pellogroats were being offered handsome incentives for even the tiniest expression of loyalty to the Triumvirate.

Within this chamber, the porous walls absorbed the sounds which ricocheted off the harder strata in others. My father's face wore a thin, plaintive smile as my mother's cries for absolution, eidolic in their distortions, went unheeded. It would not be long before their sons, their only offspring, turned and walked out of that tiny slaughterhouse, until the cries of their parents had ceased forever. Their crime was not that of subversion, treason or rebellion, but one of theft...of a small bundle of Thrushwhip, meant for their two hungry children.

This transgression would have gone unnoticed had it not been for their betrayal at the mouths of their own. For this, the young informants were freed from the sometimes frigid, often scorching abyss in which they had lived for over three quinteks; shielded, rewarded, adopted and nurtured by a burgeoning empire sorely in need of loyal blood, regardless of purity. Free to arise from the detritus of poverty, memory and conscience. Bathed in the dark glare of abundant disregard.

With a yawn and a kiss, Quilla was laid down to a dream-filled rest. The long shadows of the Architrave's loftiest summits faded into the Tiece beside the A-Quarter loop, and

darkness fell upon Ligeia's heavy, Carabylis-paneled door. Even the bulky walls of her terrabode could not contain the dying caterwauls coming from the Columns; the energetic, grinding crunch of feet, the whirling swishes of amleatropes, wending their way over their levitation stones, past the viamars and through the adjoining Quarter loops, to the lines at the platforms which ranged far off into the distance. Soon would follow the intonations of night, when the city would fall into a fleeting, restless sleep.

Even now, the sensation of scrutiny followed her. *Why?* she fumed. This was her home, and Eidia had seen to it that it would remain an impervious sanctum. But Eidia did not know of Ligeia's life within that world below her floorboards; far more of a refuge for her than any other place within the perimeter of the Custody gates. *And she must never know,* Ligeia mused. *Never!*

On her door, a pair of knocks in familiar rhythm signified the presence of Eidia's courier. Ligeia opened a small hatch to find two Kyotrimlics lying in the slipcase just above her threshold. She grabbed the one with the Hirusovran glyph and palmed it. *Send at least six fresh vials, right away, child. Your father...he suffers so...!*

For the next 60 stratimers, she boiled, scraped and culled her latest effort, each succeeding batch a continual improvement over the one before. And this one? A cleansed and synthesized Chelomarc proxy, sweet and mild to the taste yet potent enough to keep his habituated body from falling into collapse. Filling six vials and placing them in a wooden carton, she grabbed her Courderax and cognified her mother that they were ready. No more than five stratimers later, another pair of knocks advised her of the courier's return. With a small nudge of the hatch she handed the carton to him. He hurried for the nearest amleatropic platform.

She cleaned her tools, rummaging through caddies and cubbyholes to return them until they were needed once again. Softly, her left hand brushed against that small, now dusty little stone Drogan had given her as a housewarming gift, not long after they'd moved here. He'd found it, he told her, in the

Xhalamears, during his earliest days as an apprentice circulat. She paused to examine it: Ularic imbued with a dull yellow sprinkling of waterstone granules. The stone was etched to perfection on opposing sides with a pair of entrancing, clean-edged glyphs, fraternal twins. The glimmer of transparency through their embossed lines held her attention until she forced herself to return it...and the distraction of memory...from where it had come.

Why? she quizzed herself again, before finishing her cleanup, but for different reasons this time. Her enthusiasm for protecting her father, for keeping him alive with the elixirs which his shriveled frame had craved for so long, had evaporated a little over a quintek ago. *Why do I keep doing this?* She had to admit that, in reality, it wasn't her own skin she was so eager to protect. It was for Eidia that Ligeia carried on this foolishness. For Eidia knew that without the elixirs which preserved Bourglo's life, her mother would be called to pay a heavy price for the iniquities of her past...and a few of the present as well.

Ligeia then remembered that she had forgotten to channel the second Kyo which had been delivered that night. She reached for it, reminding herself not to begrudge her mother's appeals. For Ligeia knew that when Eidia peered down through the mirrored glass of her flat, it was only her and Quilla who offered any joy to her mother's disconsolate eyes, imprisoned as they were within the coiffed, gilded cage that was Eidia Te.Nurasier.

Ligeia reminded herself that for every Kyo her mother arranged for delivery, pleading for her daughter's help, at least two came back with information useful to Ligeia, her confidantes or both. Such was the case when she and Drogran had received that Kyo, delivered to them five quinteks ago by her mother's trusty courier, warning them of Drogran's imminent arrest. Their gratitude for each other flowed both ways.

A flush of sound engulfed her, filling the air with a thunderous rapture. The Tsurithean Helidrome was coming to life again with the sonorous tenor of thousands, anticipating

the evening's Pilects matches. She recalled how the past two quinteks had seen a groundswell of anticipation ahead of the matches, now held as often as nine times a day. *Now, more than ever*, she mused, *they clamor for the Helidrome; for the games. Their agitation soars by the stratimer. When will it break...?* A cold sweat poured from her forehead, in contemplation of an answer that would likely never come.

Ligeia palmed the second Kyo, forcing her attention through a mental sieve. She channeled its interpolations no less than three times, then dropped it in horror. She ran to the loft, to Quilla's trundle, brushing her daughter's forehead. She then lugged her sleeping child in her arms, hurried down to secure the latches, picked the Kyo up off the floor and threw it into her satchel. She headed once again for the companionway.

Kael Um.Zuitel and Girdrahn must know about this, right away, she thought. She knew that somehow, and without delay, they must let Odrahn and his compatriots in on the news that two large Machaeran detachments, soon to be headed for the Moirisois, then perhaps on to the sorentrean Seamounds, were to conduct massive sweeps of those highlands, installing new bridges, all in a final thrust to expose the Muricai's few surviving holdouts.

Before going for the door, she was seized with a sudden awareness, remembering that she had not closed and sealed the fenestra above Quilla's trundle, to keep her bedding dry from the mists of late evening. Double-timing it up to the loft, out of breath, she reached for the handle.

Before pulling it shut she looked up, her eyes rising toward Zenith, and saw three Ione, dancing and spinning there in a tight, perfect circle.

THE GLEAM OF AN ESTREAN DAWN brought them all to an early rising, about to begin their second full day of this chore. Two days earlier, just before nightfall, her carcass had at last come floating to their shore, lashed to a little pirogue carrying six exhausted souls. But along with this much anticipated windfall, there also came the first visible fragments of a low, mothy mist, crawling over the hills far to sorentre of the Crescent, then on to the precipice above their beach through spindly fingers of rock and crag, soon to cascade down until each of them felt, tasted and smelled its presence.

By the time she'd arrived at the Crescent, her mirrored skin had softened to a lifeless grey, her kinetics stilled by mortality. It seemed that their fortunes had at last turned, all mention of leaving this shore having faded to silence. And as for the distant glow Kerak had seen, 142 steps above the observation perch? It too had become nothing more than a surreal memory. But now, huddled together in common thought, doubts began to arise with each suspicious whiff, each curious passing of a lurking threat which not the *sea* this time, but the *sky*, was bringing to their shore.

Garion alone recognized that scent, pushed along by the breezes now drifting over the Seamounts. He'd first noticed it the day before: a faint mist which fell like dew from over the veil of the cave just after dawn, hitting the sand, creeping low and wide along the beach. *Never*, not once in his eight quinteks here at the Crescent, had he been forced to endure that malodorous stench. Not here. Not until now.

But this efflux, coming in dribs and drabs, did not concern them as much as the completion of their immediate task. Day two had brought them to the entrails. Suitable knives were scarce, so stone skivers were supplemented to tear her flesh apart from the inside. The skin of their fingers grew coarse and raw in a race against time as they chopped, wedged,

furrowed, nipped and carved each piece...challenged and coveted with such tenderness. Such fierce, zealous rage.

Treading back and forth between the carcass and the cave, little Nalani reeled under the weight of large slabs of flesh, balanced on her head. After each delivery she returned for more, thick rivulets of red, grey and orange bodily fluids filling her hair, running in slimy streaks between, around and over her eyes. Nishar further sliced and fileted these slabs into manageable “jerky” sized fragments, laying out the leaner pieces to air dry for immediate use. He would then pass the marbled chunks to Garion, who threw them into the pot to cook away the fat, culling the lean after tossing hefty portions of scabric powder (the last of their clean stock) into the mix. He would then leave it to simmer and froth until nothing but valuable oil remained.

Every 30 or 40 stratimers, they would break to savor the taste of scalded flesh, washed down with a few flagons of Eusterian water. This semi-clear liquid...a curious balance of sweet and savory...was starting to grow on Kerak, who had consumed the equivalent of more than one flagon while submerged in his pursuit of their prize.

A tinge of cautious ecstasy permeated their conversations, their laughter, their innermost thoughts. Even the melancholy Nishar was seen to crack a grin now and then in the midst of this grind. Garion’s expressions, though, remained buried in the steam and the smoke from the cauldron. Only Kerak appeared to be unaffected by this atmosphere. When not busy tending his chores, his focus was on Drogan and the additional color which had drained from his brother’s face since the last time he’d looked in on him. So it was by his side that Kerak, and Nalani, spent any and all of their free time.

Their illusions of hope, though, did nothing to shield them from the pall of reality they saw in Drogan’s eyes. Kerak’s belief, held close to the cuff, was that recovery was a distant option for Drogan. And so he and Nalani continued to do all they could to keep him comfortable, warm, hydrated and fed.

Cai, practically slavish in her sense of obligation, stopped by on occasion to do what she could. But since his return,

Kerak had been puzzled by her steely manner toward him and Drogan. Eye contact with her seemed akin to burying his head in a furnace. He despaired of this reversal with the mercurial dhuthaer, feeling within her the competing urges to both sever and mend the bonds which only the two of them shared. Pragmatically, he chalked up this change of mood to nothing more than the reliable ebb and flow of their strange, complicated relationship.

At mid-day, a strong wisoltrean blast pushed another heavy concentrate of vapors down upon the Crescent, forcing them all to seek cover inside the cave. Their curiosity overwhelmed them, leading Nairul and Dijal to break from their chores after a quick lunch and mount the stone steps above the beach, far above the observation perch, to the spot where Kerak had seen that distant blue glow a few days earlier. Neither of them had been this far above the beach, and they were not prepared for what they were about to see.

To their eyes, the Crescent at last revealed its true place within the Dimensional Horizon. The dim landscape to sorentre appeared, as it had to Kerak, as a large upslope, staring down on them from the sore-wisoltrean divide. Interspersed within this expansive gradient was a chain of steep, vertical escarpments; the outer fringes of the Tromean Extensors. Nestled within the valleys surrounding those peaks, a pale azure vapor could be seen, creeping toward them like water tumbling from out of a spring. As this blanket descended, it became funneled into the trough that ended at its lowest, most narrow point: the peaks immediately surrounding the Crescent.

From this vantage point, Dijal and Nairul were removed from its full effect, but still conscious of its scale and magnitude. Beyond the impenetrable landscape nearest them, they could see a carpet of mist slithering toward the precipice just above the cave entrance, a vision which stretched perhaps 5000 neurris to sorentre of the Crescent; far closer than Kerak had described it. The thinnest layer could be seen tumbling now over the precipice to their left and down upon their beach, just a few neurris from their feet. But behind that

delicate film, a thickening sheet of mephitic fog rose to crowd the valleys through which it coursed.

Dijal and Nairul gazed at each other in horror, after calculating that at this present rate of movement, the Crescent would be drowned in a towering coagulation of blue smoke within perhaps 10 to 15 days. They soon realized that nothing, not even the blustery force of the Lumens' norostrean berth, could halt the advance of this juggernaut.

That night, the lamps were struck and a late dinner was served, delayed by another sudden impulse of haze, raining down at dusk. This was the most severe onslaught they'd experienced so far, locking the entire beach in a toxic stranglehold. Within stratimers, their gratitude for the gift they had received just two days earlier descended into quiet hysteria. Dinner had to wait until the table could be moved to the back of the cave. While the narrative of their fate was laid out for them by Dijal and Nairul, they savored a few half-full flagons of coquont, a luxury which was still being rationed.

With resignation, Garion's eyes turned to the beach, still dripping with tiny fingerlings of acrid vapor. He faced his campmates and decided that the time had finally arrived, while he struggled to navigate his way through the reticence which had been native to his existence for almost 25 quinteks. His mind fell into focus; suspicions, insecurities, old and new hatreds...began to wash away. He stood, raised his hand and faced them, his eyes filling with tears which he turned to wipe away. A strange humility took their place.

"All...I need your attention, please. We should thank Dijal and Nairul for braving the cliff today to survey our surroundings. They have told us many things which, I know, concern us all. We needed to know what was happening above us. And we're glad for their help."

He slumped as he went on. "I need to tell you that the foul odor we've been smelling for the past two days; well, it is something I am familiar with, but which I have not experienced in over 20 quinteks, since long before I came to this shore."

He straightened his back, then paused, every mouth wide with astonishment. For rarely had Garion addressed them with such concern; such urgency. Dijal touched his shoulder and could feel his skin trembling. He took a deep breath and continued. "What you...what *we* are seeing and smelling is the result of something called an Actinetic Triurate." Cai's face turned flush and pale upon hearing those words. "*Someone* with the Triumvirate, somewhere to sorentre, is creating this, the same as the distant glow which Kerak saw out there during his survey."

Thaloux and Ekavias opened their mouths as if to speak, but said nothing. "The Actinetic Triurate is..." Garion slowed and remembered that it was *he* who had, for all these many quinteks, built and maintained those obdurate walls, intended to force any notion of the Dimensional Horizon from their conversation, their thoughts, their self-awareness. And it occurred to him that he had done this more for his own self-preservation than for anyone, or anything, else. But now, he could feel those walls crumbling before him...all in the name of simple survival.

"The Actinetic Triurate is a technique developed and refined long ago by a few early maquits in an effort to rupture or crack veins, to make them easier to quarry if precious ores were discovered within them. This began just after the Recondite was discovered and was first being articulated. This strategy proved successful for a while, and was used for a little more than a quintek, but it was found that if the amalgams in the Triurate were too rich in Menshar or Heliscara, it would cause the veins to heat up too fast, to burn out of control before they could be safely ruptured.

"In the Pavatrias, long before I came here, the Machaera used a Heliscara rich Actinetic to destroy a network of caves in the Flurswath buttes, to flush out a band of dissidents who'd escaped during a slave revolt near Suromear-Anh. A vein of Ularic running through those caves became so hot that it caused the surrounding Subterra to burn as well. This act incinerated 30 souls who had taken refuge there." Garion paused, recoiling at the sting of retrospect, as Kerak spoke up.

"I've never heard of this, Garion. This...Actinetic Triurate? How many times was it used?"

"Not many. A detachment of Machaerans in Saurostra tried it during a mass execution near Cluroswevitch but their alloys were too volatile for the veins they were trying to burn. It miscarried and killed all but four of the 48 subalternates present, including three Arduan Councilors nearby. Then the same thing happened a few days later in the Vengaos. 12 subalternates were killed there. So for all purposes, it was abandoned."

"Well if it was abandoned, then what makes you think it's going on right now? And just beyond our shore," said an emboldened, defiant Thaloux. "So what if this haze reminds you of something you smelled...*too long* ago. That means nothing! Whatever this thing is, the Skulerean Pale or a Norostrean breeze will reappear soon. That'll drive it off, back toward the wisoltrean divide, and beyond."

"The Pale? A norostrean breeze? Thaloux, we don't have a clue when the next Pale will appear, or when we'll see a norostrean berth," Nairul responded, his voice tinged with anger. "All I know is what Dijal and I saw. It doesn't matter where this haze...this *thing*...came from. All we know is that it's here, and more of it is coming. And soon!"

Other mouths opened to speak before Dijal raised her hand to try and quell a minor revolt. She then motioned to Garion. "Finish what you were saying..."

"Nairul is right," Garion said. "The Pales, the Lumens...they can't be relied on to save us. I don't know why this is being done so close to our shore. Perhaps they've perfected its flaws, found its true purpose. None of that really matters, though, to us. Because the natural geography of the norostrean Seamounts places *us* directly in the path of the residuum left over from their work, from Actinetics being performed thousands, maybe even *millions* of neurris from here. Who knows? But that massive cloud that Nairul and Dijal just saw; from the way they describe it, when it gets here, it *will* destroy us. I assure you...*all* of you! This? This we cannot survive!"

The night had grown chill, colder than any of them could remember. One by one, the lamps were doused, the table cleaned, the bedrolls unfurled. Conversation remained buried beneath apprehension, and the dying remains of the *residuum* of which Garion spoke gradually eased into the sand beyond the veil of the cave.

Later than night, Garion stood at the water's edge during a lull in the descent; a quiet episode of clearing, if not clean, air. The Ione were obscured at Zenith, camouflaged by the Pale of Inevitability which hovered over the Crescent, waiting for the next chance to fall.

The Horizon. The Triumvirate! At long last, they have finally caught up with me, he thought as he began his return to the cave. *Chronicle 398,* he mused, *has found new life!*

Breakfast was a short but fulfilling affair, interrupted after five stratimers by a strong sense of urgency. No mention was made of what had been said at dinner last night. No disagreement raised its head, cleared its throat, bellowed its raucous voice; ready to push, to pull them in conflicting directions. So without speaking, they resumed yesterday's positions. Cutting, carting and curing were to be carried out until there was nothing left to cut, cart or cure. Not only for the food, but for the bone, the skin, the tensors. The boat, it was agreed by all, was the only way out of here, and it would need a lot more work before it was ready to transit 11 souls and their gear far enough away from these shores, to the safety of...who knows where?

Their first morning break brought Cai to Garion, and vice versa. Two days of stirring and tending a perpetual flame had tired him beyond comprehension. Cai bandaged his stiff, bloody hands, sealing his abraded skin where it had held the fused spinal column he'd been using to stir the pot. Nishar took over for him while he took a badly need break.

Cai cleaned and tied off his bandage, the subject of Jarumon's fractured memory stone still on her mind. Her need to know, to understand how and why it had come into the

possession of Kerak and Drogan, would not relent. Since she had given Drogan that final dose of Bhatrathur three days ago, Cai and Garion had been frustrated with his inability to speak, or to focus in those rare moments when he could. Only one avenue remained, one which she had hoped to somehow avoid. But now, she knew the time had come.

“Garion, I’ve decided to ask Kerak about my father’s stone. I just need to work up the courage to bring it up.”

Garion shared Cai’s reluctance to approach Kerak, but for very different reasons. “Yes...yes, I think that’s a good idea. I’d like to be there when you do. Okay?”

At that moment, Kerak passed through the veil of the cave to pour a mug of water before rejoining his duties. Garion stood and walked toward Kerak while Jadox sat nearby, tossing back a beaker of Noquont (not, of course, being rationed). Upon seeing this, Kerak froze, for he realized that the unapproachable Garion...was approaching him!

“Kerak, Cai and I would like a word, please,” Garion said in a monotone before turning to rejoined Cai.

A knot formed in Kerak’s stomach. He made his way across the cave and sat beside them.

Garion’s face remained expressionless. Cai grabbed the small bag containing Jarumon’s stone and the shorn wafer. She handed it to Kerak. Suddenly, she found the courage.

“Kerak, while you were on the boat, I found this while I was searching for the last of the Bhatrathur I gave to Drogan. Where did you find this?”

For reasons unknown to him, Kerak began to relax. Jadox remained seated a few neurris behind them, clutching a now dry flask, watching and listening. “*This* stone? Well, it belonged to our guide, Eimear. He led us into a massive cave system in the estrean Seamounts, at the Shalu’doc.xhu. But we were spotted by a detachment of Machaerans just before we entered, and Eimear; well, I guess he saw an opportunity to...”

“How did this stone come into your possession?” Garion roared.

“Umh, Eimear was killed by, uh...well, that’s not important.” *How are they so familiar with Eimear’s stone?* he

thought, suddenly not as relaxed as before. “Drogan and I used it to articulate a passage to the Bay of Teoramugh. Not directly, but through a proxy which Drogan evoked. That’s why a wafer from the stone was cut, so Drogan could...” Kerak wondered if any of this was making sense. *Go light on the details. You’re confusing them...and yourself.*

A pair of agitated frowns stared back at Kerak.

“Can I ask you why you’re quizzing me about this stone?”

“Kerak, this stone belonged to my father, Jarumon. He left the Crescent a little over a quintek ago with it in his bag. He promised to return within an untek but we haven’t seen him or heard from him since he left.”

“But, how can you be so sure that this stone is...?”

“Take a look at this glyph,” Cai interrupted, anticipating the question, pointing to the bottom of the stone. “Do you know what that is?”

Kerak brushed off a thin coating of dust around a vague entwine. “Not really.”

“It’s Hirusovran. It’s a motif meant to elicit solidarity, awakening. And do you see the entwine beside it? That’s a Cycloptic created by a Malaeric from the Sturethenes. My father etched those symbols onto this stone when I was very young. I watched him do it. That’s how I know it’s his. What Garion and I want to know is...why did you and Drogan have it?”

Kerak’s face went blank. “I remember Drogan telling me after his proxy that he thought the stone had belonged to someone other than Eimear. Could...could that have been your *father*?” His feeble tone was met with twin glares of consternation. He could tell that he and Drogan were in severe trouble with this pair, and maybe soon, with the entire camp.

Then, alarm set in. “*Creegh Amaria!* You don’t think that Drogan and I had anything to do with...?”

Jadox watched Kerak’s interrogation and heard most of it. At this point he stood and walked toward them, then sat beside Kerak as the three of them were struggling to find the words to break this impasse, to try and work out the puzzle of Jarumon’s fate, and that of his memory stone.

Jadox tapped Kerak on the shoulder. “What did you mean by ‘proxy,’ Kerak?”

“*Pras’pheratu*, Jadox,” an annoyed Kerak blared out. “Drogan was able to evoke a proxy by using his memory stones and this shaved portion of Eimear’s...I mean Jarumon’s...stone. That’s how he was able to lead us to the Crescent. And that’s how he got the idea that this stone did *not* belong to Eimear.”

Cai’s curiosity at talk of something called *Pras’pheratu* stood in stark contrast to Garion’s utter contempt at what he was hearing. “That...that is *impossible!*” he hissed. “Do you take us for fools; to expect us to believe that someone like Drogan was able to evoke the Gift of Pras’demnos with nothing more than a shorn wafer and a memory stone?!” The tenor of Garion’s voice drew the attention of the rest of the camp, just as most of them were taking a break.

“All I know is that Drogan’s articulation of the wafer from that stone...it led us here, through a cave system just a couple thousand neurris to sorentre. Without that, we might have been lost forever in that twisting maze. Call it what you want, Garion. I know what I know.”

Jadox extended a trembling hand to Kerak. “It’s been a long time...a really long time.” Jadox’s eyes darted, his face a reflection of uncertainty and doubt. “Kerak, can you show me who...I mean, how Drogan did it?”

A puzzled Kerak answered Jadox with a halting tone. “Well, yeah, but it’s...have you ever...I mean, how much do you...?”

“Show me, Kerak,” Jadox bellowed, his eyes burning with focus and absorption. Cai held out the bag containing the stone and its broken wafer. Kerak took it from her and handed it to Jadox.

Kerak’s explanation lasted a mere three stratimers, ending in mid-sentence with a single finger, lifted in silence by Jadox. By this time, the rest of the camp...except one...had forgotten all about scraping Barutha flesh and had forced themselves in a cluster around Jadox, in a space large enough only for four or five souls.

Jadox pointed at Drogan's bag. Kerak stood to retrieve it and removed the small pouch containing the Kuspegias, then handed them over. Jadox fumbled with the Kuspegias and the shorn memory stone wafer. On his left temple, he placed the wafer and one of the Kuspegias, while at the same time placing the other Kuspegia on his right.

The sound of breathing died to a whisper, leaving only the murmur of the surf in its wake. Jadox adjusted his position on the cold floor: Kerak to his left, Cai on his right. Dijal, the last to join this cramped cluster, had brought the lightstaff with her, but Jadox motioned to her to disengage it. Within two stratimers, his pupils began to twitch and spin, his expression darkening with a morbid intensity. His hands flew out from his side. He grabbed Kerak and Cai, squeezing their arms until their wrinkled skin became red and swollen. Jadox slid his hands down to take theirs. Their instincts told them not to resist, but to endure.

Garion, Nalani and Nishar leaned in, staring into Jadox's eyes. What they saw astounded them: swirling, hypnagogic waves of light and dark, alternating slowly, then building with greater intensity until their accelerating rhythm became unbearable to watch. They turned away, the others drawing closer to see that the expressions on the faces of Cai and Kerak had turned into a near perfect reflection of Jadox's.

After three stratimers, Jadox's grip loosened. Their return was steady, slow and within another stratimer, complete. The question "*Well?*" hung heavy in the air as they waited for a word, a nod, a smile...anything. Then, Cai opened her eyes. She took a deep breath, her eyes welling with tears. She stood, turned away, her face buried in the deep cleft of a wall. Garion dropped his head, his skepticism by now melted away.

With the help of Thaloux and Nairul, Jadox stood. Kerak, still seated, peered over at Cai, then came to his feet and spoke. "Jadox...I'm sorry. I doubted you. *Everything* about you. I was wrong; but no more." He motioned toward Cai and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Cai...I just don't know what to say. I'm...*sorry!*" She remained as she was, struggling

to find the words. But they would not come. Taking her head in her hands, she disappeared toward the veil of the cave.

Jadox took Garion and the others aside, describing to them what he had seen, their stunned faces a testament to their fears, their suspicions of what might lay for *them* beyond the Bay of Teoramugh.

For a brief moment, Actinetic mists abated. Cai walked toward the beach, and without speaking, she passed Droган, still lying on his bedroll. In that moment, his eyes opened. She paused, her lips quivering in apologetic timber just before she trudged out of the cave.

Droган had regained a new sense of consciousness, right before Jadox had begun to evoke his proxy. Even though his new awareness brought with it some equally new and broadening spasms of pain, he understood what had just happened.

Kerak walked toward Droган and sat beside him. Before Kerak could express his pleasure at his brother's fresh return, Droган's voice burst through the pain. "You know what I want to hear. What did you see?"

"Do you remember, just after your proxy, when you questioned how Eimear had come into possession of his stone?"

"Yeah."

"Well, your hunch was right. He killed for it."

Dusk, and a few remaining fragments of toxic mist fell from the cliffs above. Compared to the others, this assault was mild, allowing them to complete their work just beyond the veil, then to converge at the dinner table to close out their day. Their feast would once again be rich, and just like it had been the day before, it would be late. So the lamps were struck, and their final task of the day was to be performed under the glare of lamplight and dying luments.

Their journey through the body of the Barutha had at last come down to this. Viability had been gifted upon it only stratimers before her death. They debated how best to pull it

free, watching it writhe and purr, nestled within a gooey purple film, still clear, dynamic, unaffected by the death of the host which had surrounded and nurtured it. It was about two neurris long, half a neurri wide. Since its discovery late that day it had been doused at regular intervals with Eusterian water to keep it supple and saturated as four souls worked to carve through the sinew and fiber holding it in place.

Once removed, four souls carried it away toward the shore, dousing it still more as they waded up to their hips to immerse it until it proved its buoyancy. A small slit in the membrane, a few eager fingers forced through the gap and a widening rip all served to free her to the life she had been prematurely born to live.

Under the glow of two oil lamps, they watched with delight as her lavender flesh absorbed the surrounding waters. A tiny mark could be seen near the tail, resembling a Nurespheric glyph, now coming to life. With a gentle push, the embryo began moving on its own, to estre, squirming and flailing with its first pangs of awareness, small entrails of lavender placenta drifting along behind it.

The mother is now gone, they mused as one, but the child remains.

This was their gift.

20

*T*HE LUMENS' NOROSTREAN BERTH came without warning that day, but it was a welcome sight. Turbulent evening gusts stirred the still airs and waters surrounding the bay. Ekavias, Dijal and Cai stood at the shore, watching the blasts beat against the cliffs, high above them. Separated by spans of two to three pulsimers, they could be seen lifting and dispersing huge miasmatic billows which only three stratimers earlier had poured from over the precipice. Soon, Garion, Nishar, Thaloux and Nalani were able to emerge from the safety of the cave to join them, free to inhale their first truly clean breaths in 10 days.

This, though, wasn't their only concern. A hundred neurris from shore, they could see their tiny boat bobbing and pitching about as Jadox and Nairul fought to keep it steady. It had been two days since her carcass had been fully dried, cleaned and primed. Every useful fragment had been salvaged and prepped for quick use. Not a shred of skin, bone or tensor had gone unused; at least none that was needed right away. And as for the pirogue: it had been strengthened, reconformed to meet the challenges sure to lay ahead. Now, in microcosm, their work was being tested.

They had been on the water since 20 degrees post-Zenith, unaware at the time of the windswept evening which awaited them. Kerak's head and torso burst through the chop as he lunged for air. He passed the bucket to Jadox, who emptied its contents on top of the ballast stones. Nairul shifted from side to side, bow to stern, trying to steady the boat's frantic gyrations. Then the empty container was tossed back into Kerak's waiting hands. With a chisel bound to his right wrist, he took three deep breaths, then plunged again.

The swim to the bottom of the bay was less than 10 neurris through murky water, but once there, his job was clear, if not easy. Five or 10 solid hits to loosen the hard surface until

it shattered into small rocks; fill the bucket with the rocks; then back to the boat, and repeat. Their plan: bring their load back to shore, then crush the rocks into silvery, ultra-pure scabric dust. No finer preservative exists anywhere in the Dimensional Horizon.

The Lumens soon slid behind the Aeries, and an exhausted Nairul watched the chop drop from murderous to mild in under five stratimers. 15 stratimers later, the boat was full. Kerak, his strength now gone, was pulled aboard. Only Jadox had the energy sufficient to row the boat back to the Crescent.

Upon their return, no time was wasted. All available hands except Garion joined in to crush the rocks into dust. Eight narcoleptic souls worked under lamplight to prep the dust, to muddle through to the end of day 10 of these tiresome labors. For they knew that their reward, a badly needed rest, would come once the flame had passed away.

One by one, buckets of dust and slabs of semi-dry flesh appeared at Garion's pot. Scalding orange and blue tongues licked the red-hot metal all the way to the rim as small casks of oil were poured onto the fire. That familiar glowing, white steam enshrouded his face as he stirred the boiling, oil-soaked water into a frothy crest. Nishar, no less resolute than Garion, was there to extract the preserved meat with a large bonefork. He carried each piece to racks spread around the crowded cave, now aglow with the blaze of three oil lamps and their sole lightstaff.

By now, they could have been enjoying a welcome rest had it not been for the hand of fate. Under normal conditions, Barutha meat needs to dry at least six days in direct luments in order to last a hundred days or more, without preservative. But the poisons which had been leaching from the sky had prevented this. Without the benefit of scabric, their prize would have devolved into a rotten heap.

Their chores now done, Nalani was the first to doze off. The flames fell away as the last morsel was removed from the cauldron and laid upon the crowded racks. No bedrolls were unfurled; there was no need, as eight more souls dropped where they stood, falling into a thick stupor. Only one oil

lamp remained. Garion carried on, casting a single shadow well into the night, unmoved by the need for rest, determined to outlast even himself.

A rustling sound could be heard behind him. He turned around, and a pulsimer later he made direct eye contact with Drogan. What they saw in each other's eyes, in that fleeting slice of time, neither of them could even begin to describe.

*T*hey were small, silly pictures, really; nothing more than careless doodles that Drogan had etched in the sand, either by finger or a broken edge of bone. A few of them she recognized: the tiny cup-shaped bloom of the menemwort; the slanted oval eyes of the Barutha; the winnowy shape the Lumens had taken on the other day as the flock soared off to estre, right before dusk. But even those that seemed strange to her? Why, even those drew a belly laugh and a clumsy handslap that made Nalani and Drogan roar with delight.

New life. That's how they defined it. No one could explain it, so no one tried. Dijal attributed it to a burst of voltaic pneuma, likely released by the energy which had filled the cave during Jadox's proxy. Regardless, Drogan seemed to all to have beaten the odds. And to all, particularly his brother, the thought that his energies would once again dim was never considered.

Some things hadn't changed, though. Walking more than four or five neurris from his bedroll still consumed him with fatigue. His pain still came in monstrous waves, of random length. Adding to that, a sore throat brought on by airborne toxicity had morphed into a rasp that made talking a burden.

That day, Cai took it upon herself to lecture the camp about her faith in the power of Stringworm shoots, as her youthful articulations had instructed. Her timing, though, was a little off. For Cai understood the schizophrenic nature of Drogan's illness, if not the illness itself. So with Kerak's encouragement, she proposed that as soon as the air cleared enough for them to cover more than half a day's worth of

terrain, a search party should strike out in search of this perhaps *not* so elusive little moss.

To her naïve surprise, the responses ranged from conditional (or was it just *deferential?*) enthusiasm (*What a great idea...but isn't he improving?*) to dour and utterly dismissive (that one coming from Garion). It did no good to expect anything more: she knew her campmates, all too well. And so the question *why the freigh did I choose this vocation?* echoed through her mind with an annoying frequency.

The vibrancy of the norostrean dawn had swept away the mists which had fallen yesterday after dusk, awakening them to the cleanest morning air they had breathed in 11 days. After breakfast, Kerak faced his brother, held him by the arm and accompanied him to the rocks beside the shore, where so much Zaphraela had been affectionately seared and drawn while the lone had skittered above their heads.

Drogan covered his eyes to shield them from the glare of the morning sky. His mind drifted to the notch, and to Jadox. "Who knew? I mean, I never would have guessed that *he* was capable of evoking a proxy like that. Has he told you, I mean, who he is? What he did before he came here? I know that's supposed to be 'forbidden' and all around here, but who cares. We need to know!"

"He sure knows how to bend an articulation," Kerak said, "You've been around souls like him. You don't remember crossing paths with him at some point?"

"No, not at all. I would have...AGH! *AMARIA!*" Drogan winced, struggling to keep from falling as a sharp burst tore through his body. He found himself wrapped under Kerak's arms, doubled over to wait it out. "*Freigh...skirueics* don't...don't seem so crazy to me these days. I sure could use a hit of Chelomar right about now."

"If I had one it'd be yours, Drogan. Rest assured."

The surge passed and Drogan sat upright again. Kerak could see, though, the discomfort in his face, his proud struggle to mask its effects. "I guess you've seen Nalani's new toy. Looks a lot like a Myotrophus, doesn't it?" Drogan said with a smirk.

“Oh yeah. When she showed it to me I assumed you had something to do with that repair job. Nice work, by the way. Did you ever find out what happened to it; how it got broken?”

“You mean *who* broke it. Don’t get me started on that, alright?! Of course, it’s...not important now, is it?”

Kerak was stunned at his brother’s newfound ability to *let it go*, as it were. Then Drogan surveyed his surroundings and pulled the Myo from out of his pocket. “Your compliments on my handiwork are a bit premature. It’s not quite dry yet. The binding needs to heat up, in luments. That’ll close the joints and bring the fragments into direct contact with each other. *Then* it’ll work. Good as new, huh?”

“What’s your plan?”

“Finish the repair...then Jadox, of course. *He* can articulate that vein in the notch. I’m sure of it.”

“How long will it take to dry?”

“One or two days in direct light.”

Drogan handed the Myotrophus to Kerak. “Keep this for me and don’t let anyone see you with it!” Drogan said with a frown. “Find a place out here; hidden, well lit, and put it there. Like I said, two days at the most should do it. Now, take me back, Kerak. I need to talk to Jadox.”

10 stratimers before Zenith, Kerak stole away from the beach, climbing the escarpment to sorentre of the Crescent. The surf blanketed the crunch of his steps. He climbed about 15 neurris above sea level and removed the stone from his pocket. With no one in sight, he placed it on a flat ledge above a small overhang, at eye level above the highest footing he could mount.

After descending, he cleared the edge of the notch and found his campmates immersed in their own deeds and ruminations. He tossed a quick glance at the precipice behind him, confident that he’d be able to retrieve the Myotrophus in time for Jadox to work his talents, well before the deadliest of airs encroached from above and finally drove them from this place. Cai’s neglected entreaties tugged at his mind. *Stringworm; who would have thought?* He turned and stole a

glance to sorentre, trusting that her plan to heal Drogan might very well work, if only...

As he passed through the veil of the cave, a single pair of eyes, peering out from behind a secluded ledge above the notch, remained glued to his every move.

*T*he night passed to dawn without the faintest hint of odor. Just before luments appeared, though, that familiar phantom once again returned. The assault was mild, but how long it would remain so, no one knew.

Dijal and Nairul decided that it was time to return. Their journey that morning was much harder than before. This time, about 50 neurris above sea level, they noticed that their stone staircase...which had appeared clean eight days before...was now covered in untold billions of fine blue particles, short tresses, somewhat damp and so incredibly acidic that their hands burned at even the slightest touch. They were forced to go back and retrieve two pairs of gloves, some brushes and face masks, sewn from scrap cloth. Upon their return they used the brushes to scrub the steps while the masks shielded their lungs from the detritus they stirred up. When they reached the peak, the visions they saw, after a journey lasting four times longer than their first, were infinitely more sobering.

Now they understood the true nature of those acrid particles. For the distant cloud they had seen during their last ascent was now less than 1000 neurris from the precipice of the cliff. Extending beyond it, for another 200,000 neurris, even more could be seen. Under clear skies, its true color...a brilliant aquamarine...revealed itself at last. Another round of calculations led Dijal and Nairul to the same bleak conclusion: four or five days. That was all they had.

They joined hands and stared down at the Crescent, knowing that their time had finally come.

*T*wenty neurris. That was all that remained of their tensor after their preparations were complete. Skins and rib sections

had been formed into a large, round raft, to be towed behind the pirogue, for storage. Only the essentials were to be carried: preserved meat, one large pot of scabric and three medium sized burettes of Zaphraela topped the list. So very much was slated to be left behind. And that list was destined to grow.

Thaloux, Nishar and Garion had fashioned more face-masks from dried and pounded slices of gill and lung tissue. Round slivers of retinal tissue were cut, fitted into hand carved pieces of vertebrae and laced with thin strips of tensor to make goggles. These accessories were crude, but they did their job; to free their eyes and their lungs from the pale effluents raining down upon them. The cave, for now, still provided asylum, thanks to the gradient of the slope leading down to the shoreline and away from the veil. However less than a day after the second ascent of Nairul and Dijal, a thin, translucent fog could be seen forming in the sky above them. This, they all knew, was destined to remain.

A pall of another sort had once more begun to fall. For less than a day after he had spoken to Kerak of his repairs to the Myotrophus, his eagerness to harness Jadox's talents, Drogan's mind and body took another turn. To protect his weakened lungs, Drogan's bedroll had been carried to the very back of the cave, where headroom was narrow but the air was cleaner. Cai, Nalani and Kerak took turns hovering over him. Without the aid of Bhatrathur, his pain now crested with unprecedented vigor.

Just after mid-day, Drogan labored through another fitful sleep. Outside, the toxins in the air seemed to have thinned, thanks to a silent updraft that sent the rest of the camp to the beach. Inside, only he and Garion remained. Drogan's eyes opened to tiny slits in the dim glare of a single lamp, and when they did, there sat Garion beside him. Without speaking, he reached down and pulled up Drogan's right pant leg. There, it nestled within the muscle tissue of his thigh: still festering, rancid, swirling with puss, throbbing with thinned, decaying vessels. It writhed and shrieked just above the healed scar from the Quadric spear that had nearly ended it for him, far to sorentre. This lesion represented the crux of his agony. To its

proud owner, though, it was just another testament to his endurance.

Garion scrutinized Droган as he lay with his head raised. With what remained of his paling energy, Droган seethed and sneered at Garion's boorish intrusion. But he did not utter a word of complaint.

"Did you go for a swim before you came to the Crescent? Perhaps...*Subterranean*?" Garion asked.

To Droган, Garion's tone seemed callous, flippant, churning and grating in his ears. *Why*, he thought, *is this old skantaro speaking to me?*

"What...what the *freigh* do you mean? *Swimming... Subterranean*?"

"Before you came here, were you in the water? *Subterranean* waters? A stream, a river, a spring? You know what I mean."

"Well, yes. Kerak and I were in a huge...AGHHH!" Droган took a few deep breaths, then paused to gather himself. "A huge...cavern, for something like 22, 23 days." He stopped, not feeling up to full disclosure with this relative stranger. "That's how we got here. W...why do you ask?"

"Was there a river or a stream in this cave?"

"Well...yes."

"Were you in it?"

Awakening from his mental fog, it all seemed to come back to him; Eimear's assault...as clear as day. Droган's eyes grew wide and moist.

"Yes...yes...a *river*..."

Garion placed his hand on Droган's forehead. "Do you remember if there were any...*creatures*...of any kind, in that river; colorful, phosphorescent creatures?"

The warmth of Garion's touch shocked him, and seemed to drain him of the last vestiges of hubris and rebuff which had left their scars on his character. "Yes...they were...*beautiful*, Garion!" Droган's eyes closed, pushing tiny tears down his cheeks. "Simply beau...ti...ful..." With that, Droган faded off.

Garion's hand remained on Droган's leg before he removed it and placed it upon his own forehead. *It's all clear to me now*, he mused.

Cai and Kerak rounded the turn at the rear of the cave and crawled the rest of the way to Droган's bedroll. There they saw Garion, solemn and crestfallen. And there they caught sight of the hideous wound which Droган, in his defiance, had shielded for too long. But before they could come any closer, Garion stood, rushed them and took Kerak and Cai by the arms, leading them to the front of the cave.

"Do you realize what is happening to him? *Do you?*" Garion slurred his words at Kerak.

"Of course I do! I've been..."

"Clysophicus!"

"Wha...what...what are you saying? What's this about...Clysophicus?"

"That cave system that the two of you were in before you came here: just before he fell asleep, Droган told me there was a river there...with Clysophicus in it. What do you know about that?"

Kerak paused to mine his thoughts, then continued. "Droган...well, yes, there was a...a large stream in that cave. Our guide, Eimear, turned on us, tried to kill us. A few days later Droган told me that when he was fighting back, Eimear struck him and knocked him into that stream, the one we saw when we first arrived there. And yes, it was *full* of them...orange and green; thousands of them, I remember; so much color! I was unconscious while Eimear and Droган were fighting it out, so I don't recall much. But Droган told me something about a stinging sensation he felt on his leg, about the time he was pushed into the water. Do you think maybe he was...*bitten* by one of those things?"

Garion leaned in and whispered to Kerak and Cai. "That is exactly what I think. The wound you saw on his leg; that's what caused it." Garion repelled the skepticism dawning on Kerak's face. His voice thundered. "Trust me! I've seen this before. I know what I'm talking about."

It took little time for Kerak to realize that Garion was right. "What's going to happen to him?" Kerak asked.

Garion's gaze burned through Kerak's eyes. "Kerak, your brother is going to die, and soon. It will not be quiet, nor will it be peaceful, nor will it be just. It's going to be *crucible!* A Clysophicus wound, especially one which has putrefied like his, is always fatal." He steadied himself. "I am..." Garion's face turned red. His voice trembled as he prepared to utter a word which he had not spoken since before his arrival at the Crescent. "I am...*sorry...*"

Cai's eyes batted back and forth between Kerak and Garion. "There's got to be something..." The thought of facing, once again, the rage of unrelenting mortality was more than she could bear. "Something..." It was all she had.

Garion turned from them and skulked back to the racks, to return to the only Sphere over which he held any semblance of control. Adjusting each morsel of flesh to facilitate drying, he recalled the first and only time he had seen such a death, before his days at the Crescent, in a corner of the wisoltrean stratum he had long hoped to have forgotten. Despite having wished that he might never again find himself in this position, here he was. He formed a tight fist and motioned hard, as if to swing at the air. Then he opened it. *Futile.*

A sorentrean dusk beckoned, and vanishing luments reflected a curtain of blue. Cai carried her training back to Drogan's bedroll in the waning light, finding to her dismay that her skills were like a broken arm to her now. She pushed off any regrets, of wasted time or effort; that was not her nature. So with Nalani sitting to her right, and Kerak on her left, she would do what she could. Until...

The waiting game, edgy and listless, was winding itself to a conclusion. A full day had passed since Garion's diagnosis of Drogan. Earlier that morning, Jadox, Nishar and Ekavias had built a gurney for Drogan, to be used when their time finally arrived; when their last somewhat pure remnants of air...which now existed only within the cave...had vanished. After a quick

test in the pirogue, they decided that their new contraption could...and maybe even would...be engaged with relative comfort to its passenger.

Just after mid-day, the air turned cold. The resultant dampness at the rear of the cave chilled Drogan, worsening his condition. He was then moved to the cave's midpoint: its driest section. Three oil lamps burned beside him for warmth. Drogan watched through narrow slits as his campmates moved within these tight confines, choked in the clutch of smoke and claustrophobia. When it became apparent that the lamps were no longer doing their job, a fire was built. His eyes now closed, Drogan's tormented cries, his smitten breath, rebuked the blue mists reflecting the burning light, far into the darkened sky. Eventually, they came to a halt as each of them stood or sat in place, stone-like, staring at a spectacle from which they could not...*would* not...look away.

Garion stood near the veil, his face turned, his jaw clenched. He struggled to vanish from this place, assaulted by recollection, fully aware of what was to come, knowing that this was not the worst of it. Not by a long shot.

At this stage, the living toxins emitted by the bite of the Clysophicus, encapsulated within a drop of saliva half the size of a grain of dust at the time of insertion, had replicated and attached themselves to the nerve endings, feeding upon and pumping the nerve tissue with more toxins; careful to support the life, if not the comfort, of the host. All this so they could go on living and growing and replicating in perpetuity, until the unintended consequence of their presence...merciless, excruciating pain...would eventually destroy the body upon which they thrived.

Stratimer after tortuous stratimer, the timber of Drogan's lamentations grew exponentially more intense. By now, the faces of his companions had taken on contorted, grotesque forms, swept away to carry their friend's burdens with them. With each passing pulsimer, each shriek pouring from out of his exhausted lungs, it became clear that his bondage would not relent.

Cai's eyes called out to Garion, as if to coax from him an end to this suffering. *You diagnosed him*, she mused, *but you know of nothing that can be done to help him? How is that possible?* His eyes met hers with a clear understanding. He yearned to reach out, but he resisted. Forbearance, insecurity, *fear*, seized control of his mind, his essence. He turned his face again to the wall. His bondage would not relent.

In the shadow of dying luments, Drogran opened his eyes and tried to speak. His lips began to move, quivering in frustration. Kerak placed his ear close to Drogran's mouth, trying in vain to catch a wisp of spoken sound. When he could stand it no longer he called out to him. "Drogran. Drogran! BROTHER! Can you understand me? Can you hear me?"

His eyes remained closed, but slurred, befuddled words formed and spilled from his lips. "*Drog...Drogan? My na...name is not Drog...an. My name...my name is Arjun...Arjun2. Arjun2...Te.Sinian.*"

Cai, Nalani and the others gawked at each other in confusion. Kerak shook his head, realizing that his brother's journey was now carrying him headlong into delirium. But upon hearing those words, Garion, whose face had remained affixed to the wall, began to turn as Drogran exhaled another ear-piercing scream.

Thaloux and Ekavias were stunned, realizing that they had never seen an expression on Garion's face to equal the one they were seeing now. They watched as Garion paused, trembled violently, then took off in a panic for the rear of the cave as another bemoaned breath drew from Drogran's lips, echoing into the emerging darkness beyond the veil.

Garion returned with a small stone jar, finely etched with obscure glyphs, entwines, panoramas of Philean landscapes. It was no larger than the breadth of a child's fist. He rushed to push Kerak, Cai and Nalani out of the way, then dropped to the ground beside Drogran while fresh tremors of pain ebbed and crescendoed, now in much shorter intervals.

Kerak gasped, watching as Garion opened the jar and pulled from it a small round ball, no larger than a child's fingertip. He then dropped it onto Drogran's neck. With his

right hand, Garion dipped his fingers into a half-empty flagon, sprinkling a few drops of water onto the ball. In less than a pulsimer, this tiny sphere unfolded and squirmed to life. With six legs and a single, hair-thin protuberance emerging from its head, it flipped over on its feet and sank its tiny probe into the moist flesh of Droган's skin, just after he let go a painful cry, the most severe anyone had recalled hearing from him. While this was going on, Arjun's left hand discreetly caressed the back of Droган's neck.

Then, with a vaporous moan, the air fell silent. Droган's eyes opened into tiny slits, glassy and dark. Cai rushed over, placed her hand over Droган's mouth, then his chest. She heard and felt...nothing.

Silence. Kerak remained where he was, his back rigid, his face contorted. His expression affirmed everything from confused gratitude to hysterical bewilderment to convulsive anger. He did not blink, nor did he wail or cry or rejoice at the realization that his brother was now forever free of pain. It took time for him to process this spectacle, but at last, it dawned on him.

"Liaramar. That was a...Liaramar!"

Garion stood. Kerak looked up at him in horror, realizing at last what...and *who*...he truly was. But before Kerak could free himself from his mental fog to say anything else, Garion looked into Kerak's eyes, then scanned every living soul in that cave, all of them greeting him with stunned faces.

"It's time that all of you knew the truth about me. I must tell you that..."

"YOU!! YOU are...!" Kerak shot to his feet. His hands formed into fists, his arms whipping and flailing in Garion's direction, spittle soaring from out of his mouth.

Garion took a step forward.

"Amaria! CREEGH AMARIA!! You are a...!"

"Garion...is not my given name. My real name is Arjun Ve.Jalu. I am a Courvesant."

Darkness fell upon the Bay of Teoramugh as another toxic blast crashed down upon them. This assault filled the entire cave, rendering even their hands invisible at arm's length. Facial protection worked sparingly; they knew there was no time to waste. All essential items were vetted once again and their gear was hurried onto the raft and the boat. They were both launched, bobbing in knee-deep water as the boat's occupants...except one...sat aboard and waited.

Just ten stratimers prior, Kerak had used the lightstaff to find and retrieve the Myotrophus from its perch. It was now almost dry. In a fit of anxiety, he puzzled over why the Myo seemed to have shifted from the spot at which he'd placed it, two days earlier. Just as suddenly, his focus inverted as he began a fast-paced, fog-shrouded walk back to the beach.

Five stratimers before pushing off, yet another assault, this one more savage than the last, rained down upon the Crescent. The final deed which would be performed by any of them at this place was conducted, unaided, by Kerak. For he would allow no one...*no one*...to assist. First, a rag-tag frame had been rushed together. Then, three large flagons of oil were emptied onto the frame, tossed and broken upon the rocks beneath it.

His remains were wrapped in shards of skin and cloth, bound by the last of their tensor and conveyed by Kerak to this rickety structure. Kerak laid Drogan's satchel across his brother's chest. Absent-minded in the depths of his grief, Kerak had left Euan's Kyotrimlic stone there, hidden within the folds of the satchel's fabric.

A single flint stroke ejected a tiny spark. A bright tongue of flame reached out from its fringes, morphing into a robust inferno. Kerak walked backwards from the beach, his failed promise to Ligeia still clawing its way through his broken heart, his guilt-ridden mind. He kept his eyes affixed to the pyre as his companions called out to him. When he reached the boat, he placed himself in a tight spot between Nishar and Thaloux. Then, they pushed off.

Their last sight of the Crescent was as a fiery blue mist, accented by a sweet, sickening odor, an overpowering blend of

burning flesh, Barutha oil and Actinetic residue. The hazy orange glow remained bright and clear as they beat away at the water, sliding past the cliffs to sorentre of the Bay. They rowed into a nebulous gloom, their final vision of the Crescent hidden behind the towering rocks which concealed the dying light of home.

After another 100 stratimers, all vision passed into darkness. They continued to hug the coastline, rowing through the tepid Eusterian sea, guided by the light of a single oil lamp.

A little more than 5000 neurris to sore-estre, another small vessel, framed and sheathed in asperous Bittermoor, carried six passengers to norostre.

IV

The Swales Of The Neroluer

SHE WIGGLED HER TOES EXCITEDLY, the cool sands massaging them one by one. Thousands of tiny grains dispersed beneath her heels. She sank to her knees wearing a sad smile, arms extended, relishing the warm embrace of an estrean dawn. This strange place was not home, at least not as Nalani had come to define that word for more than a quintek of her short life. But she knew that if she imagined hard enough, she could *almost...*

Kerak, Nairul, Cai and Thaloux walked the short, narrow beach that morning, pulling and digging at large chunks of wood which had become entombed in the encroaching sand. Most of it consisted of the waterlogged remains of Kalasliph and Eremostepe. This tangled flotsam reminded Thaloux of the Peres-Surhofrian island chain, from where it had drifted, just inside the estrean Aeries, bordering the ancient threshold of the Te.Erasotra. These derelict slabs of timber were native to those luminous isles. So was he.

Kerak stood in the sand, too, breathing slow and deep. This was their 11th day without the disdainful stench of Actinetic air, and the 14th since they had pushed off from the Crescent. He closed his eyes, fighting to steer his mind away from the vision of that final spark, the ensuing conflagration, and the deed, committed by his own forfeited blood, which had changed his life forever.

Gentle waves lapped the shore. Far above this narrow beach, mighty cliffs vaulted toward Zenith, one of them marked by a vertical, towering lode of gray Menshar. Close to where the boat lay was a deep cleft in the rock, its edges framed with vines of Yurslip and Wissoria. It tapered into a deep cleft, fading off into the cliff, into darkness. This was the spot where Jadox, evoking short proxies with the Kuspegias while squatting in the middle of their pitching watercraft, had told them they should beach their boat, where their watery journey

should end. Through a set of skills inexplicable, Jadox feigned confidence, assuring his friends that his visions would not fail them. So with a tinge of hesitation, this is where they all agreed they would part company with the Eusterian sea, to allow themselves to be swallowed up into the dank recesses lying before them.

But first, they would enjoy a fire, another privilege they'd had to relinquish since leaving the Crescent. They tossed a few flagons of oil upon the driftwood and watched it erupt to engulf its fuel, along with the dampness in their wet clothes, their sagging spirits. Too, it performed another very important function. For now, it made nourishment possible.

Not that it should have been necessary. The scabric had done its job. Their supply of jerky should have lent itself to consumption "as is" for at least another 120 days without additional preparation. But something quite unexpected had happened during their time drifting to sorentre in search of a safe spot at which to stop, to free themselves from their waterlogged little pirogue, sunken to its gunwales under the burden of its load.

After four days at sea, they had discovered that most of their meat had taken on a bitter taste, making it hard to swallow. After much debate, they reasoned that Actinetic toxins had infused the raw flesh before it had become fully preserved. On day six, they had paused to soak the meat in seawater. This managed to draw out some of the toxins, enabling them to eat it. But it also bled much of the scabric from the dried flesh, exposing it to decay. Only small portions were allowed to soak at a time. This resulted at times in a feckless tug of war between their hunger and their ability to consume the results of many days of hasty, backbreaking work. Within the massive Subterranean system they were about to enter, this remedy would not be available. So the idea was tossed out by Ekavias and Thaloux that perhaps direct flame would pacify the venoms, allowing them to eat their catch. They all knew that this approach was nothing more than a stab in the dark. But it was all they had.

Just after mid-day, Ekavias walked the short distance to the beach, leaned down and tasted the Eusterian waters, something he had done every day for the last 14. With each passing day, the gradual diminishment of Aurean saturates in the water had been noticed by all. And now, as he leaned down to taste the fluids running clear between his fingers, he noticed that the familiar piquancy of the norostrean seas had, at last, vanished. He raised his head. "*Home*," as he had known it before he'd arrived at the Crescent, was drawing ever closer. That thought sent a cold shiver down his spine as he straightened his back and returned to camp.

Just as they'd guessed, the fire did its job on their food supply. By then, their pirogue had been torn to pieces. Rib sections had been broken off, sharpened and used as skewers on which to support meat fragments. They roasted in fading luments, 45 to 50 slivers at a time. Too, their clothing and other non-consumables were now dry after having been laid out near the base of the fire. Later, skin and smaller sections of bone and tensor were cut and formed into framed haversacks, allowing them to haul their provisions while on land. The only items to be held by hand were lamps and walking sticks. Their backs would have to bear the bulk of their physical loads for the foreseeable future. Their minds, though, would carry burdens far greater than anything they had ever known in their lives, collectively or otherwise.

Conversation was sparse that night. Nothing was said of their time since leaving the Crescent. How they'd been forced to travel at night to avoid detection by the dozens of mercenaries and Machaeran sentries who stood guard over the coastal reaches, their flickering lights visible atop high cliffs.

They remained silent about the heavy Eusterian mists they had encountered along the way, whipped up by the breaking surf, making navigation next to impossible. About the perilous breakers surrounding the Nysimrean peninsula, the cliffs surrounding the islands of the Pheodoplic archipelago, mighty sentinels that whipped the foaming surf to break with such violent intensity that crashing waves near one far-flung isle came close to capsizing them. And the subject of *days* was

avoided; of how they'd been forced to sleep in crowded conditions in full luments, threading the narrows between tall cliffs and thundering breakers while they took turns at watch, so there'd always be a hand free to steady their overladen vessel. To prevent them from being pitched into the froth, and certain death.

Most important of all, no conversation was broached of the past, or the future. Among other things, they had brought with them from the Bay of Teoramugh a well-worn affection for "now." *The moment*, they all knew, was their most valuable possession.

Before the flames passed away that night, Nalani returned to the shore. She buried her feet again in the sand, this time sinking all the way up to her hips. She laughed as Ekavias grabbed her hands and pulled her out of the muck, with a sound resembling a loud, sloppy kiss. Returning to the fire, she recalled, long before Drogan had been taken from them, a vivid semblance of his gleaming soul within the eyes of Garion. She knew that, somehow, she would keep him alive, in her own mind and through the visions of others. He would always remain that way to her.

Laden Eusterian mists rolled onto shore before dawn, drenching their clothing and their already sullen moods. The night before, they had chosen to sleep beneath the overhang above the beach. The narrow, claustrophobic slit of a cave entrance was still too much for them to bear. This was particularly true for Kerak, who was sickened at the thought of having to return to any place resembling the petrous coffin he and Drogan had rid themselves of, not so very long ago. But this is where Jadox said they would find refuge, avoidance, safety and access, if not a surplus of light or elbowroom. So this is where they knew they had to be.

They washed their breakfast down with the last of their coquont. All the while, Kerak and four others sitting around the embers did their best to avoid eye contact with Jadox, unaware of his heavy presence in the minds of his mates. Ever

since Jadox's first proxy with the Kuspegias, Kerak and the others had struggled to come to grips with this lanky soul, shy and prescient, who carried his quiet sincerity, and his hidden talents, behind a wide smile, a curious mind and a dry wit. *A deep well this one is*, Kerak mused after emptying his flask, recalling as he took his last sip of brew that those were the very same words he'd once used to describe his brother.

They sat through the morning, twiddling their thumbs, reluctant to make the next move. Expendable scraps of pirogue lay beside the rocks bordering the cliff. The useful remains of their final catch lay close to them on the sand, waiting to be strapped to their backs. Regardless, no one moved, nor did anyone suggest such a thing. Time seemed to stand still until at last, Kerak stood, set the straps on his haversack and flung it over his back. He cast his eyes out to sea and pointed to sorentre. There, in the far distance, a fleet of five aquaspheres could be seen speeding off, to norostre. With that, it took less than a stratimer for the other nine to rise, shoulder their gear and make for the tiny aphotic portal before them. *Avoidance*, it seemed, had trumped *reluctance*. Jadox led the way, with Garion, not yet being called by his real name, assuming the rear.

While the others forced themselves through the narrow cave entrance, *Arjun Ve.Jalu* stood, after over 21 defiant quinteks, on the very spot where Garion at last fell. His mind tripped the 14-day distance to norostre, imaging that he could almost *see* it. Not the Crescent, nor the Bay of Teoramugh, but the bier, which bore the pyre, which had carried his eldest son to be at peace. His conscience, in that singular moment, was tearing his mind to shreds as the filamentary residue of this visceral struggle drifted to his feet and disappeared into the sand.

Silently, he turned to follow his companions into darkness.

“TURN THE LIGHTSTAFF ABOUT 20 degrees to the left.”

“Okay...done.”

“Do you see a tunnel with some Barachat root growing over the entrance?” Jadox called out.

“Yeah...yeah I do,” Nairul answered.

“Good. Now walk into it about 50 paces and look to see if there’s another tunnel veering off to your left.”

Nairul complied. His head bumped against the low ceiling, forcing him to bend his knees. 48 paces in, he saw nothing. Then he walked another four short steps and found a thin opening to his left, not far from where Jadox said it would be. He held the lightstaff at the end of an outstretched arm.

An impatient Jadox called out. “Well?” he asked.

60 pulsimers passed. Nairul responded. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“That’s right. Nothing...”

Their voices trailed off into the surrounding surfaces, covered with billions of tiny drops of water, each of them saturated with brilliant red and green fluorescent dust.

“Okay,” Jadox said, fighting off his disappointment. “Get back here. And watch it!” He cleared his sore throat for the 10th time in two stratimers, struggling to stand in a spot where headroom was so scarce that he was forced to hunch his tall frame into a contorted twist.

His illness, punctuated by phlegm-laden coughing fits, had plagued him now for 12 days. It had begun a little more than four days after leaving the beach and the warmth of luments. Cai had conjured a patchwork remedy for his malady; not technically a cure, but at least something that would keep Jadox from getting any worse. At day two of their journey through this dungeon, she’d noticed small purple stones embedded in the rock ceilings along their path. She gathered

all she could and crushed them into a fine powder, mixing it with water and the stirrup moss she'd found growing on the ceilings. Small doses of this paste were swallowed not only by Jadox, but Nalani, Thaloux, Kerak and Nishar as well; the durability of their ailments overshadowed even those of Jadox. Cai's remedy managed to steady them, but it was slow to work its way through Jadox's system. Kerak's as well.

Another condition ravaged not only Jadox and Kerak, but everyone. That was the infirmity of withdrawal. 10 days after leaving the Eusterian shore, they'd all begun to notice a general listlessness which Cai credited to the attrition of Aurean saturate from the bloodstream. Kerak's drawdown was mild, considering the smaller amount of norostrean seawater he had consumed during his time at the Crescent. This condition would abate after another two to three days, another sad reminder of the fleeting imprint of life unfettered at the Bay of Teoramugh.

As Kerak so well knew, even the mildest affliction could prevent the Kuspegias from being coaxed to their fullest effect. Kerak and Jadox were the only members of their group familiar with these stones, and their maladies made useful articulations difficult. Two days into their journey, Jadox had managed to evoke a strong proxy. This had helped them navigate their way around this place for 14 days. But as he and the others struggled to make sense of this labyrinth, Jadox saw his evocations come to an abrupt end. It seemed now that they were, in fact, lost.

Jadox adjusted the Kuspegias, pressing them hard against his temples. He removed them now and again to dry his skin, then returned them, the shorn wafer from Jarumon's stone pressed between the Kuspegia on his left temple, then the one on his right, in alternating fashion. He marveled at Drogan's creations, how well they worked despite the absence of even the finest glyphical scorings. His curiosity soared with each elucidation, each carefully elicited proxy. These stones unleashed something deep and primal within him...something he had not experienced in over nine quinteks. His desire to understand them, to seize upon and expand their true

potential, had become an all-consuming obsession. But for now, he was happy just to be able to get a decent read.

Kerak had been doing all he could to help navigate. For the first three days of their journey, all visible surfaces consisted of nothing more than dry rock, dead root and gnarled fungus. After day three, though, thin ropes of Phylox and Menshar could be seen, meshed and curled within the parched slag. By day 12, these slight metallic formations had blended into an imposing array of lambent color, massive swirling protuberances which arced and ambled throughout the Subterranean megalith.

It didn't take long for Kerak to break out the Myotrophus. Every visible layer of metallic stratum yielded a successful cincture, but his articulations ran the gamut from one inconsistent, illegible extreme to the next. To his surprise, it was a simple task to elucidate aggregators. And it was just as simple to peg a high frequency of cognitions between and within Machaeran or mercenary detachments. Even more bothersome was the prevalence of a maddening static, conjoined with a mind-bending breadth of dissonance. It reverberated through his fingertips, into his cortex in a way he had never before experienced.

Through it all, one sensation stood out in stark familiarity. Obscure tongues...vast, desolate, crying out for cognition...pulsed through the Myo like a rogue wave, particularly at the end of day 12, when Kerak discovered a set of Ularic veins infused with a clear white amalgam. They were a strong resemblance to those he'd seen during his journey with Drogran, before they had reached the Kiyfer dome. And their pulsations? That familiar cadence that Drogran had earlier articulated and described to Kerak: *Sh...Sh...Sh*, repeated in constancy, over and over again. These elucidations had piqued his curiosity. But they did nothing to help his navigation.

Through their failures, Kerak and his companions took a defensive posture. If safe passage could not be elucidated, then at least Kerak's compressed articulations of hostile cognitions could help them avoid exposure by steering them clear of detection by Machaeran scouts, likely not far above their

heads. If that meant, for the time being, wandering around in nothing more than aimless circles, then so be it. Because for all they knew, that was exactly what they were doing.

Jadox squatted with a grunt and removed the Kuspegias. Nairul returned, sighed and dropped to the ground beside him.

Thaloux appeared, carrying an oil lamp. "You find anything?" He asked Nairul.

"No, nothing but a bunch of rock. Then some rock. And guess what? More freighin' *rock!* I...I just don't know," Nairul answered, shaking his head. "Jadox, how are you feeling?" he asked.

A dead root bulged behind Jadox's head. "A little better. Well, kinda dizzy to be honest. I haven't really eaten all day, other than that Wissoria Dijal found...or was that yesterday?"

"The Wissoria? That was three...I mean...four? *Freigh*, I don't remember..." Nairul threw his hands in the air. Time had abandoned him, as it had them all.

Thaloux doused the lamp and motioned to Nairul to adjust the lightstaff. Their precious oil was growing scarce. *Thanks to the 'Phemes that Kerak and Drogran came along with that instrument*, Thaloux thought. Not since Jarumon had disappeared with theirs had he seen another one, much less one as well made as this. *Theosphora*, he mused, *sure does make a fine lightstaff.*

Cai, Ekavias, Garion and the others could be heard shuffling in their direction. Since leaving the Eusterian shore, the party had found room to carry no more than three lamps, out of the five they'd brought with them from the Crescent. While Jadox and Nairul were attempting to navigate with the help of the Kuspegias and the lightstaff, their companions had broken off into other groups, their vision aided by lamps. Unsuccessfully, they'd attempted on their own to find passageways leading to any spot other than the one they'd just left, in some cases no more than 30 or 40 stratimers earlier. This mindless morass, it seemed, had now burrowed its way to a demoralizing end.

The most inviting spot they'd seen in 16 days lay a mere 20 neurris in front of Jadox: a wide, vaulted cavern, about 15 neurris across and 10 high. The air in that chamber, they'd noticed, was surprisingly clean, a pleasant alternative to the fetid vapors they'd been forced to suck for the past 14 days. Idle discussion broke out, and it was agreed that if a suitable passage could not be articulated today, with or without tools, it would be wise to make camp. No one knew if it was day or night; regardless, it felt like a brief sojourn was in order. Besides, that comfortable lair seemed like a good place to conjure an epiphany, one which might somehow lead them out of their predicament.

This cave system had grown colder in the past four days. Still, fire had been out of the question, as the ambient airs were too stagnant and were not expected to draw. The unfortunate result: a buildup of smoke, then asphyxiation. But as they approached the high-domed cavern before them, the strange but inviting presence of *circulation* seemed to fill their lungs, to brush their skin with an ethereal touch. To make them reconsider.

Large, dry roots, mixed with clunky layers of fungi and moss, covered the ceilings of the passageways leading to this spot, and with minimal effort could be broken off by hand. As each of them passed a piece of organic matter, regardless of size, they tore it off and carried it to the center of the chamber. After a sizeable mass had been gathered, Arjun dropped half a flagon of oil at the base. Then he struck a single spark.

He watched the yellow and orange tongues slither toward the ceiling, then a little to his *left*, toward an elongated slit in a distension of sedimentary rock and Menshar. They all watched as thin white wisps rose, drifted toward the cleft, then disappeared within; a sign of some badly needed ventilation, after 16 days of caliginous torture. *Tomorrow*, Arjun mused with a smile, *will be a good day*.

Jadox leaned into the warmth of a smoldering ember, Ekavias's arm around his shoulders, squeezing the afflictions from his body. Dijal, Thaloux and Nalani enjoyed a few slivers of warm jerky. The poisons which had infested their food

reserves still made the flesh bitter and hard to swallow when cold, so the flame promised a more tolerable diet. Nishar, Arjun and Nairul skewered small lumps of Pragash. The fungi, when roasted with a sprig or two of Wissoria, competed nicely with the flavor, if not the aromas, of warm Barutha flesh.

Sustenance was passed around the fire, followed by a few flagons of water. Finally, the pipe...seething with the balmy effluence of Zaphraela. The flame between them burned low and hot, its glow yielding their first sights of the many atavistic etchings and cuneiforms covering the surfaces around them. Kerak and Jadox, for the first time, began to notice a thin correlation between those scripts and the fine impressions which had been carved over many quinteks into Jarumon's memory stone.

Too, the flame revealed something else: a clear portrait of 10 fatigued faces. Each well-worn crease, gouge and contusion stood as proud testament to the lives they had forged in the shadows, beyond the cold glare of malice and dissent. Within that Subterran inferno was birthed, once and for all, a single, steadfast conviction.

The Crescent was their legacy. And if they could no longer exist in that place, then they would carry it with them.

"I...I am from Oolarathis. My surname is Um.Diastre-Mur," Dijal beamed, glad to throw off the yoke of self-suppression. "Oolarathis is where I was born, but I was raised near Turo-Zephreis, in a small hammock colony in the Kurestrean hillocks. My mother was born in the foothills of the Pavatrias, raised in the Kurestreans. I have two brothers and a sister, both younger than me, the children of my stepfather, Thiel. I am...23 quinteks."

Kerak had just polished off a nugget of roasted Pragash when her now emboldened Kurestrean accent carried clear and strong in a vibrant burst of expression. Less than an untek ago, a disclosure as seemingly innocent as this would have been met with mortified silence. But since the recent, devastating losses of life...not to mention Garion's forthright admission...the

currents of self-affirmation seemed to have swept them up in its wake. Disclosure now seemed as natural as the concealment they'd embraced with such fear and passion during their time at the Crescent. And so it flowed.

"For four, maybe five lineages, my family had been culturists, harvesting Skiara, Myenreawhips, a little Jyriaglip, that sort of thing. As for my father; I never knew him, and my mother was always silent on that subject, in spite of the nagging I threw her way. Her shame at the mistakes she'd made in her youth, her misplaced trust, I think, was that great. Anyway, when I was 12, my mother, Thiel and my three siblings and I were traveling from Kiromasith to Tharusiad when we were detained by a faction of Arduans. For some reason they thought my oldest brother, Juilar, resembled an AWOL subalternate from a neighboring marisatria."

She paused to quell a trembling bottom lip. "We...we were all charged as accomplices, held for 40 days in a tiny cave half the size of the notch back at the Crescent. Juilar got into a ruckus with one of the guards and he was executed after a mock trial. In exchange for a guarantee that her other children's lives would be spared, my mother and Thiel were forced to commit *Hzakull*," Dijal whispered, describing the Arduan executionary ritual in which two condemned souls are forced to slay each other; under the influence of psychoactives, if necessary.

She cleared her voice and went on. "My other brother and my sister were carried off, enslaved to parts unknown, stolen from my life...forever. And me? I was passed among the peonage camps for two quinteks. Then when I was 14, I was tossed into an Eroctriase."

Her visions plumbed the depths of half a lifetime. "Late in my 15th quintek I was taken to Astuverica. The Architrave was my yoke and my chain for five quinteks. The halls, the sanctums, the Cypliats...every corner of that place is filthy with the stains of eroiche; me and nearly with half the Regency in power at the time."

A thin smile crossed her lips. "There were times when I endured...and triumphed. I gave birth, to a daughter. Her

father was one of at least three clients...who knows! She died, though. Four days was all she could manage,” Dijal mumbled, thoughts now falling at random from her lips. “My loins, my tongue, my blows...were prized. My dance...lazy, nude pirouettes...could harden the most flaccid of them, regardless of rank. But my life was dark, my body broken, beaten by more than one cursed *skantaro* coming off a bad slug of ‘Breath’.”

Her hands began to shake, her eyes reflecting the flame’s glow. “By the time I turned 18, I’d had enough. He was a high ranking Arduan Ephriant, name of Gnaeklu Ve.Szarisch. He was a frequent client, insatiable, loved a bruising round of *eroiche*, mostly in claustrophobic little spaces in the Architrave; alcoves, closets. Places where that sort of thing was forbidden. They told me that...and nothing comes back to me here...but they told me that I filled his mouth with Chelomar. That I pounded his Treflicat against his face until...until he bled out. They told me that he was unrecognizable by the time I’d finished him off! Nothing but an overdosed corpse; all broken teeth, splintered jawbone and bloody flesh. I...I just don’t remember. All I know is that in the end, in spite of it all, I was lucky. So *very* lucky.”

Another smile, more radiant this time. “Some of the other *chirapsiats*; they shielded me...hid me, right there in the 33rd Cypliat, for 10 or 12 days, until they could find covert passage for me, far and away from the Architrave. For the next two *quinteks*, my life was nothing more than one filthy, dust-choked refugee camp after another. Word of the bounty on my head travelled through those camps, bringing out the wickedness, the greed in just about every soul I met. Just before I left for the Crescent, I discovered that my bounty had grown to 200,000 *khirus*, courtesy of Gnaeklu’s family.

“My trust was shattered, until...” She raised her chin as if to carry on, but the words would no longer come. Dijal slumped as Arjun leaned toward her. That was all she could manage.

After a long pause, another voice summoned the courage. “My name is Thaloux...Ve.Urgek is my surname. I was born

in a temporal outpost in the Peres-Surhofrian island chain. I lived there until I was 15, when the purges in the archipelagos began. My mother had family near Geducich, at the Thuracian tablelands. So we escaped the islands, to reach the Vengaos, and sanctuary.”

Thaloux was overtaken by a sense of pride. “Like my father, I am a laevenant. I am...24,” he said before pausing, then continued. “I had an uncle who used to trade with another laevenant near Tharusiad, who hired me about five quinteks ago to fire two caverns on some terrain which had gone unused, become overgrown with Shavinder vines, huge patches of Stringworm moss. He planned to expand an Orphus crop into those caves the following quintek, and he needed the space cleared.

“My job was to burn the caves with Barachat root oils. Late in the morning of my first day, I’d soaked the caves in oil; all except for a bare cleft at the rear of the larger cave. I set them to flame and cleared both caves in about 100 strats. What I didn’t realize was that, buried deep within that cleft, was a body...the remains of a Machaeran Regent who, as my brother later told me, had been murdered. His body had been trashed four days prior by Muricai scouts passing through from Mestophleac. After the fires went out, we found his body, burned almost beyond recognition.”

Thaloux propped himself up on his knees, determined to finish what he had started. “Word got out of this discovery. To make a long story short, I was, well, I was blamed for his death! That was after a contingent of Machaerans came to Geducich to identify his remains. He must have had some lofty connections, because not long after that, a huge bounty was placed on my head: 175,000 khirius. Much more than a typical subalternate would have brought if the Machaera were the only ones doling it out. I was forced to leave the Vengaos, traveling under darkness from one refugee camp to another for six unteks; an existence devoid of trust, always looking over my shoulder, expecting the sting of betrayal, even among those I counted on as friends...”

He held on to close. “My life was *nothing*, until I found the Crescent and, with all of you...*Sav’onishta!*” he said, voicing the Vengathlian term for redemption...relief...absolution.

Nairul cleared his throat and began to speak, slowly at first, unaccustomed with this strange frankness. “My...my name is Nairul Te.Kirousle. I was born in Zhile-Karpathria, in the sorentrean Vengaos. I am 32 quinteks. Before I came to the Crescent I was a Receptif articulat,” he said, describing himself as a practitioner of the trade of bending and adjusting the polarities of magnetic ores. “I’d been apprenticing my niece to the trade for going on a quintek, three quinteks before I came to the Crescent. That was when I found myself blackballed from my work by an Arduan Regent with a longstanding grudge against my father, for a land trade gone bad.

“Within an untek I was forced out of business, relegated to a job in a kiln. My time was spent hardening Tyrgomek liquiforms for the Andulkan trade, to help support my family: my consort, Myrista Lo.Sulist, and our young daughter, Myrista2. Our marisatria was in the Phileans. It was one of the first to be swept away in the Purges of The Yellow Marist, where the last holdouts from the Fuerthian sweeps were brought down. During the purges my family and I were held in detention. A few days later we were carted off to a peonage camp for speaking out against the despicable conditions we were forced to bear under the Machaera.”

He paused to catch his breath, to find the courage to go on. “Within 10 days of being taken to this camp, I was shipped off, alone, to Astuverica because of my skills as a Receptif. But my consort, our child...!” He struggled to force the words from his mouth. “A few days before I was sent off, they were killed, poisoned with an overdose of Rhiocalamide,” he said, describing the name of a low-budget knockoff of Rhiodaramir. “Their lives were wasted, all because of a shortage of unblemished torsos that a couple of khiromeks in Astuverica had voiced to the Regent in charge of our camp.”

He stared into the flames. “Anyway, all I can say is that my time in Astuverica was short. That khiromek, along with a

mid-level Arduan Councilor...lost their lives to me when I discovered them carting off eight limbless bodies, soaked in brine, to some loathsome den in the Crosslinks. *Amaria!* Two of them were the bodies of...*my...*” He cried out, unable to speak their names.

After a few short breaths he came around. “Not long afterwards, I traded a bourget of Tyrgomec pellets for a transit voucher. This allowed me to leave Astuverica on a work detail. I escaped while we were in the norostrean Andulkas, building an extension to the Marcellic viamar, managing to put that part of the Horizon behind me, for what I hope will be...forever.”

“From that point on,” he said, “my story is very similar to Thaloux’s and Dijal’s. I discovered that a hefty bounty and the promise of argency, or a conditional pardon, will turn even the most trusted of friends into bitter enemies. My wanderings carried me far and away, until...Sav’onishta!” He slumped to the ground, glad to be rid of the burden of silence.

Eager to break a pregnant pause, a smiling Dijal pointed to Jadox, who turned away with a reluctant drop of the eyes. Then she motioned to Ekavias. He gave in after a little prodding.

“I guess I’ll...go next...but this is hard,” he said after clearing his throat. “To begin with, I am 26...going on 76.” Quiet laughter danced across the flames. “Ekavias Lo.Schrae-Nur is my name. I am from Thanatafuor, in the wisoltrean Andulkas. Before I was born, my father had apprenticed for a quintek as a maquit. But his spiritual leanings led him down a different path, to become a Muharic priest. He was very loyal to the faith, to the Triumvirate; just like me, until half a quintek before I came to the Crescent.”

He rubbed his eyes, unsure of whether or not he could finish his narrative. “My story,” he said, “isn’t quite up to the ones we’ve just heard. But I’ll try to throw in a little color to keep it entertaining.” Again, some sorely needed levity. This came from an introspective soul who by now realized that he had never in his life spoken of himself for longer than 10 or 15 pulsimers at a stretch.

He took a drink from the nearest flask. "I was trained as a scholar. Off and on I'd dabbled some in Thermionic dialects, but my real specialty was in the study of Synthet. Early on I'd taken a keen interest in the search for the missing book of the Guderaph, which, if you're fond of little known facts, is called the 'Zyn'hretreal' by the Muharics. That name was taken from an old Mnulorathean phrase meaning 'judgments' or 'manifestation,' or something along those lines.

"Another little tidbit, if I may, while we're on the subject. The Muharadu..." he cleared his throat, buying more time to collect his thoughts. "The Muharadu was formed about 3000 quinteks past; not as a spiritual society, but as a guild of circulats called *The Manifest of Guderic*. As the Manifest turned more to devotion and away from technos, it became what we know as the Muharadu."

His diversion into history was met with three gaping yawns.

"So anyway, a couple of quinteks ago I was cloistered at a Palialouge in the Tribethians when I received an order from the Medius Athlamaru," he said, speaking the name of the inner sanctum of the Muharic faith, located near the Palamonts, in Astuverica. "Me and two of my brethren in the Palialouge, along with our circulat, were sent off to investigate a curious vein, just to estre of the Moirisois highlands. This was a vein which had been puzzling some of the circulats in the Medius. They said that it was loaded with an immense field of dissonance, and they wanted it cinctured."

Ekavias's eyes flashed as he went on. "The revenants within that field of sonority we found were, to say the least, unique. They hadn't passed through an aggregator, because you can distinguish the revenants of filamentation coming through an aggregator by the shallow 'clinks' that bounce off the flutes in the syndroqlasts. Where did the filamentation come from that left those revenants behind? That was a mystery...but not for long. Two of us managed to trace their origins to a wide area; somewhere between the wisoltrean and norostrean termini."

The echo of two more loud yawns filled the chamber. Arjun, though, felt a voltaic surge when he heard Ekavias speak those words.

“We never made it to the source. Its exact location could never be defined. One of my brethren, Aracaju Ve.Hiruest, was far more skilled in dialects than I. Back at the Palialouge he’d managed a partial interpretation and found that those articulations were loaded with errants; the most that any of us had ever seen in a single cache. We could also determine, at least in part, the construction of the veins at the source, some of the vernaculars. But that was as far as we got before...”

Ekavias drew a lengthy pause. Cai nudged him on the shoulder.

“...Before our Palialouge was attacked. Destroyed. Burned out! Who did this? I don’t know. It happened just a couple of days after we returned. Our assailants were dressed in common garb, armed with nothing more than blades, thrusting and slashing in the dead of night; all this after asking for our Kyotrimlic stones! One of those Kyos contained the second cache of revenants we’d found, plus the field notes of our expedition. Our circulat had cached the initial reads while we were still in the field, before the assault.

“*Amaria*, we resisted, but it was to no avail. What did they take? The Kyos! That’s all. Most of my brethren were killed for holding out. Those who had accompanied me on our expedition to the Moirisois? They were all killed, as far as I know. I don’t know how many lives in total were lost that night. Or like me, managed to escape. I...I just don’t know.”

His eyes darted as he went on. “I was captured the next morning, about a thousand neurris to wisoltre, hiding in an abandoned cavender. Then I was hauled off to an interrogation depot in the Saurostrans. Four days after my arrival, the three guards who held me were called away: I don’t know why. I managed to break my bonds, to escape into the steppes. Before that I’d heard some chatter that at least one member of our Palialouge was unaccounted for. Who knows if he or she is alive to this day? And what precipitated the attack on us is still a mystery. I smelled Machaeran involvement right from the

start, but I had no proof, no assurance that I would not be arrested if I reached out to the Medius for help. So I spent three unteks wandering the Vengaos, then the Seamounds, on the run with this or that band of renegades, refugees. Until..." he said with a cry in his voice, "Sav'onishta!

"And that...that is all have to say..."

There was no doubt Ekavias had thrown "a little color in," as he put it. His campmates, though, for the most part, responded with confused stares. All except Arjun, anxious to know more of his story.

Dijal stood and walked over to Jadox. She playfully moved her hand beneath his jaw, up and down as if to mimic speech. This drew a hearty laugh which fanned the flames even higher. She patted him on the head and returned to her seat. He at first demurred, then relented.

"My...my name is Jadox...Jadox Um.Dematsur. I am 24...no...25, I think." Loud chuckles carried through the chamber as a strange ease, and a commensurate relaxed tongue, overtook Jadox. "I was born in Belgorslo, in the Pavatrias. My family was Metephistic through and through; had been for ages, starting with my great-great-I don't know how many greats-grandfather. He'd been born into a cult of Fulgency, *The Etrifaction*. But his beliefs turned outward, growing more voltaic over time."

Jadox paused, lost in reflection. "Anyway, enough of that. The purges...they began not long after my birth. I have vague recollections of them, you know. My father resisted; he was one of only 40 or so from our marisatria who were capable of such a thing. But he and the others like him weren't able to hold out longer than about 20 days. None of them survived."

All that Jadox had once forgotten now seemed to come alive within him. "My family...mother, sister, three grandparents, and me...we were all bonded to a peonage camp near Moorar until I was eight. Then we were marched to Astuverica." He smiled. "You know, I've been a slave for as long as I can remember. But we were more fortunate than most. Most of my life, until I was almost 20, was spent at the Croeplings. In a strange way, the 'Phemes were rich for putting

me at that level. Because, you know, I learned so much in that place. So very much.”

He straightened his back, the embers throwing spectral shadows against the wall behind him. “When I was 16, I met a kind old soul there...well, he seemed old to *me*. Someone told me that he worked as a drudge by day down in the Praeleoturs,” Jadox said, describing the caverns in the Astuverican Subterra where mid-grade stanhics and Broutish Clays were sent off to be seared and culled. “At night, though, at the end of his shift, he would come up to a tiny grotto at our level, just below the amleatropic shafts leading up to the crypts under the Helidrome. And he would bring us memory stones!”

Jadox’s eyes gleamed with a lush vibrancy. “He...he would articulate with us. The aggregators we elucidated: they were *alive* with such incredible power, such awareness! I don’t know where he got those stones. Probably stolen. Some may have been lost, but who knows, or *cares*? Those stones were our entire world beyond the confines of the Croeplings. Anyway, there were 12 or 13 young souls there, my age and a little older, and every night we gathered to reap one abstract after another, until...”

He froze for a pulsimer, then began to speak again. “One night, by accident, I picked up a stone I’d never seen before, one with a large, blunt haft at one end. I remember that it had a distinctive glyph imprinted onto the butt of the haft; one that I was told was Saurostran in origin. One I’d never seen before on another stone. Something called a *Zylix*.

“So, I picked up this stone and within half a pulsimer I was cast into a deep convulsion, lasting 40 stratimers, they told me. My recall tanked. I lost all track of time. When I awoke, my mother came and carried me off. For the next 21 days I suffered violent seizures; even came close to dying from one of them. I was unable to eat, sleeping only in fits and spurts, when I slept at all. Anyway, I never saw that old soul again, or his memory stones. Not long after my episode, he was caught, executed for his crimes. For to give a slave a memory stone; that is a *cyclopean* offense.”

His eyes swirled as he acknowledged the puzzlement on the faces of his friends. "After I recovered, an insurrection began at the Tramlings and spread like wildfire. The Purges of the Meteclystic Stone had just ended in the Saurostras, and it drew hundreds...*thousands* of new drudges into the Zurish-Triece. *Amaria!* Conditions were worse than terrible in those days. My sister and my grandparents were killed in the reprisals that followed. My mother and I were separated, and I never saw her again."

He raised his hands to his mouth. "Not long after that, I was sent to the Tramlings to apprentice with a sifter, working the Clays. I stayed there until I was 19. That was when another rebellion...very small...erupted at the Crosslinks. It was around that time that one of the other students who had articulated with me, two quinteks earlier, was imprisoned for his involvement in that rebellion. In his cell he talked with another prisoner about me, about the convulsions I'd suffered when I touched that stone. The one etched with the Zylax.

"Well, somehow this conversation got back to the Architrave. Within two days I was being hunted down, it seemed, by every Machaeran in Astuverica. The good thing is that my mentor had moved me around so much in the furrows of those pits that they couldn't find me."

He relaxed even more as he went on. "Thankfully, I had a lot of friends down in those tombs. When they discovered that I was wanted, for who knows *what*, they managed to bribe a pellogroat who worked as an overseer in the furrows. Through a Kyo that was imprinted with a set of forged vouchers, I was put on a work detail and shipped off to the Hirusovrans, to mine Thulitar.

"Once my detail made it out of Astuverica, I stole away one night while our guards were stoning it up on Widow's Breath. I walked at night...always at night...until I made it to the Seamounds. I, too, wound up with a bounty on my head. Lost. Far removed from anything I knew or cared for; until I found the Crescent and..." With that, he rolled his eyes and shut down as if nothing had been said, reaching to stoke a dying ember.

The others peered at him, bewildered; not unlike how they'd greeted Ekavias's mystifying narrative. Their stories begged for completion.

Smoldering yellow cinders were all that remained. A thread of exhaustion weaved its way through the chamber. Tomorrow was a calculated risk, with no immediate assurances, no promise of hope beyond the near term. Their eyes begged for at least one more life to be told there in the shadows. But not before her eyes met Kerak's one last time, her lips whispering the words "*this is for you*" at his smiling face.

"Cai Lo.Subira...is what I am called beyond the Crescent. I am 20, born in the fifth untek of the *Gwaeriodesch*, if you abide by the Kurestean calendar. My mother was Shaetiu3; my father, as you know, was Jarumon...Jarumon Te.Vurseamrean. I was born and raised in Xilianur, in the Hirusovrans. Our home was so near to the terminus that you could actually *hear* the beating of those massive wings, just before a sorentean dusk. And the heat at dawn! It was a torrent that could wash your soul to its very core. The Hirusovrans were, and I hope still are...a wonderful, alluring place. They remain, buried deep within my heart.

"I traveled, well, the entire length of the Dimensional Horizon...just to find my father. Jarumon was the most brilliant soul I ever knew. He was Kurestean, had been a maquit since the earliest quinteks after the discovery of the Circonic. He was one of the first to join the Triumvirate, to offer his skills; traveling wherever his services were needed. Jarumon and others like him sought those ancient aggregators more for their erudition than their stanhics. Suffering, ignorance, malice, could be vanquished, it was thought, if we were willing to take part in that journey."

Her eyes reflected her eagerness to, at last, tell. "And he was not ashamed of his loyalty to the Triumvirate when annihilation reared its ugly head now and then in *this* marisatria, or *that* region, far from home. He simply wrote those misfortunes off as the price of achievement; nothing more. Deep down, he was a naïve but peaceful soul, who never acted out of malice or contempt for anyone. But Jarumon soon

came to realize that he'd become a tool, used by the Machaerans and their ilk to achieve their ends. He found himself unable to ignore their treachery: he was a *part* of it. Because, you see, my father, Jarumon, is the maquit who invented..." she choked on the words, "...the Actinetic Triurate."

Her companions clutched themselves in disbelief: all except Arjun. "The process was simple, at first. Just a mining technique with no harm meant toward anyone. It was the Arduans who discovered the disparities in Menshar and Heliscara that made the process unstable. And it was the Machaera that turned my father's simple little technique into a killing machine."

Her shame was palpable. "When my father learned what had happened to those poor souls in the Flurswath buttes, he spoke out against Actinetics being used in that manner. At first, his protests were brushed off, then resented. This earned him the hatred of the Arduans who'd sponsored his work. Then, of course, came the accidents in Cluroswevitch and the Vengaos, where so many from the Triumvirate were killed. After that, Actinetics were abandoned altogether, but to my father's surprise, many of the Arduans whom he had angered through his outcries later *blamed* him for those accidents. When I was two, he was placed under indefinite house arrest. This made his life a nightmare! It destroyed his health, razed his already tattered mind. It offered no peace for his family, either."

Her eyes turned dark and moist. "I suppose I should be grateful. I mean, confinement was preferable to execution, of course. But the bogus accusations leveled at him by his enemies almost did him in. He still went on with his work, though. He was far too valuable to be allowed to languish, or die! But all of us were relegated to life under the constant glare of distrust, innuendo. That is, until I turned eight. That's when we finally broke."

She took a deep breath and went on. "My parents worked it out: a careful plan to *fake* my father's death. We thought it would be so simple. He left right away for the Seamounds,

intending to stay long enough for his adversaries to either die off or fall out of favor, as had happened to him. Then our plan was to rejoin him elsewhere, to rebuild our lives, free from Arduan vigilance. But in reality, no one was fooled by this ruse, without a corpse as proof. My father's skills were too essential to the Triumvirate. We should have seen this, but our desperation was that strong.

"The only good to come from my father's departure was that it eased the burden of constant scrutiny on his family. I learned later that his failing health, his melancholia, were standing in the way of his return. We carried on, though. When I turned 15, I apprenticed with a dhuthaer from Baeroguslur. I thrived under his tutelage, managed to complete my studies in a little more than two quinteks. My father's condition drew me to this trade. I knew that if anyone could...or should...help him, then that job should fall to me."

Her eyes grew heavy, equal parts exhaustion and sorrow. "After my father left our home, my mother and older brother never saw him again. They were imprisoned three quinteks ago during a journey through the Kurestreans; recognized as the family of Jarumon Te.Vurseamrean, intended as leverage by members of the Council who could not be convinced that he was dead. But they didn't remain in chains for long. They were killed during a riot in their peonage camp, less than an untek after their arrest. Around that time I received a Kyotrimlic from a camp in the Vengaos. It was from him, and carried news that he'd stayed there for about half an untek, that his health was failing even further; that the pressure exerted by his bounty had pushed him on to the Bay of Teoramugh. My journey through the Seamounds took a huge toll on me, but I'm glad for it. Because it brought me and my father together, one last precious time."

The final ember was pulsimers away from disappearing into a pinch of white vapor. "I really tried! I did my best to care for him, to heal his afflictions; physical *and* emotional. But in the end, I could not save Jarumon from himself. I suppose no one could have done that..."

THE BARUTHA DIVERS

A stillness hovered in place for what seemed an eternity. All eyes drifted in the direction of Kerak and Arjun, but passed them by. They landed, instead, on someone else.

Under waning firelight, Nishar fidgeted, staring nervously at a tight swirl of Menshar, Ularic and Aquylur, the image of his face vanishing into darkness.

A MURKY SHAFT OF LIGHT BURST through the tiny slit above their heads. It was weak, shrouded in billows of dust. But it was the first ray of luments they'd seen in over 16 days. All 10 of them crowded into a space barely big enough for two, hoping that if even a single lument should touch their face, every agony they'd endured since leaving the Crescent might somehow be washed away.

Desperately, they lunged at it: hands, fingers, hopes, fears; clawing and dredging and gouging at barren stone and slag. Longing to be where the darkness would be pushed away forever. Suddenly, a piece here, a shard there; another, then another...broke, dislodged, fell, tumbled, cascaded, billowed and roared. An enormous deluge of dust, dross and detritus engulfed them in its wake. Within six pulsimers they were buried up to their necks.

After a long silence, punctuated by coughing, screaming and sputum-laced hacking, Ekavias raised his arms, fighting to push himself free. The scent of blood coursed down his face; a single streak trickled into the corner of his mouth. He pushed himself up to his torso to witness a memorable sight. Nalani, who had been sitting atop Kerak's shoulders just before the avalanche, had broken herself free. There she was, wandering the top of the debris field, leaning and grunting, pulling on hands, heads, ears...anything she could get a grip on to free her friends.

Her task was not being performed in darkness. For above their heads, there it lay: what was now a gaping hole...awaiting, inviting them, large enough for a pair of adult shoulders to pass through with ease. One problem, though, stood between them and absolute freedom. That was at least 12 neurris of empty space, all of it straight up. Within 20 stratimers, all 10 of them had freed their bodies from the slag.

They gathered in a small circle, bathed in the warmth of radiant light, to ponder their next move.

A vertical ascent and their bruised, battered bodies: these were the two opposing elements with which they were forced to contend. But how? For 200 stratimers they sat in dejection, debating, arguing, reasoning. All the while, that wide patch of light crept toward the nearest wall, soon to begin its own vertical ascent, up and out of sight.

Once again, they were in familiar surroundings.

*I*n spite of his pain, it was a strong articulation. Jadox had awoken early that morning as Kerak joined him for breakfast: cold Barutha flesh and a few dry crumbs of Pragash. Direct light would elude them for another 30 stratimers. Other than their own voices, the lack of any other sound was welcomed, particularly by the one wearing the Kuspegias.

Jadox pressed his right arm and winced, trying hard to muffle a scream. He hadn't seen it coming: the large rock that struck his shoulder yesterday, nor the other one that followed a pulsimer later. But it had been 33 consecutive days since he'd first worn these stones, on temples now caked with the dried blood left behind by the impact of a smaller stone which had struck the edge of his scalp. For his friends' sake, and his own, he swore that he would not allow a day to pass without attempting to bend their effect; to sheath his troubled mind around, and within, the sonorance they elicited. And so he sat, elucidating through his pain the similitudes that only the Kuspegias were prepared to convey.

In keeping with his native vigilance, Kerak stood to survey their surroundings. He thrust the lightstaff forward, thinking of the fire they'd enjoyed in that vaulted chamber, two days before. He searched for the narrow tunnel which had led them from there to here, soon realizing that that passage was now buried in slag. He paced the perimeter of their current expanse, the Myo nestled in his pocket, looking for another opening, for an exposed vein to cincture. But he found

neither, in the sobering realization that they were trapped, with no way to go but up. *Oh, if it were that easy*, Kerak mused.

Jadox sat with his fingers in his ears, trying to muzzle Kerak's noisy ramblings. To Jadox's delight, Kerak plopped himself down in a distant corner, his talking head buried in his folded arms. Jadox's thoughts turned to Drogan, to the conversation they'd shared two days before his death. Drogan's short lecture on the properties of the Kuspegias, his impassioned pleas to Jadox to carry them to a fulfilment far beyond that which Drogan was capable of, had left their mark. Despite his novice understanding of Thermionics, Jadox had sworn a promise to Drogan. It was now being affirmed in the slag and the crag of an early dawn.

Kerak quieted, wandered over to Jadox and sat beside him. With a sharp cerebral edge, Jadox snapped his focus to a point just beginning to converge within the center of his vision. The elucidations of a distant aggregator were vague. But all around him, the veins were *alive*; a barrage of voices and dialects, meshed within a daunting coagulation of high-pitched howls and roars. Thoughts emerged of that small, broad-hafted stone: the one with the Zylix carved deep into its flesh. Remembrance pounded at the door of Jadox's psyche. He struggled to bend his fixations upon a flurry of arcane mnemonics, approaching him through the charred, schismatic veins dotting the Seamounts.

Into his stones, through his blood-soaked temples, they came, morphing into perceptions which grew more lucid by the pulsimer. It was then that a sudden flash of light crossed his vision. The image of a pair of downcast eyes, squinting into a new dawn. Trudging, dragging a pair of tired feet, kicking sharp stones along their way.

Jadox's focus began to waver at the sound of a loud crash behind him, startled voices. Out of the corner of his eye Kerak had seen it: a medium-sized stone, soaring through the air, striking with a crack into the slag pile upon which they stood. The others were awakened, imagining a renewed besiegement of falling rock. They stared up and saw the silhouette of a

single, solitary head along the perimeter of the hole above them.

They froze. Kerak took Jadox by the arm. They hobbled over to the center of their enclosure. A small voice called up toward the light.

“Hello! What’s your name?” Nalani called out, smiling into the glare. An arm appeared beside the head, topped by a waving hand.

“Hello to you!” The voice from above was steady, cautious. “Umh...okay. What are all of you doing in this...this hole?”

Kerak cupped his hands to his mouth. “Do you have any rope? Please, we’re trapped in here. Can you help us?”

“Mind telling me who you are?” the stranger asked in a monotone.

Ekavias began to form a response. Kerak, standing beside him, slapped him on the shoulder, recalling Eimear’s implorings about those “skantaros” at the Bay of Teoramugh. “Let me handle this,” he whispered to Ekavias. *At least until we know who we’re dealing with*, he thought.

“We’re...we’re refugees, from Pryest-Mestoph, in the estrea Vengaos. We stowed on a fleet of aerospheres for five days until we hit the Bay of Echelot, then walked the Shalu’doc.xhu for another five. On our last day we found a cave entrance which led us here. Now we’re at the end of the line! Can you help us?”

Silence. “Pryest-Mestoph? Yeah. Who was that Regent from Pryest?” the Head asked. “You remember her? The one who took so much gruff from the Arduans, trying to co-opt those intermittent veins at the tablelands?”

Kerak smiled at the realization they were being tested, thankful that the interrogation had veered onto familiar ground. “You mean the ones that cross the branch route to Truliat-Vengathlo?” he said.

“Yeah, the branch route.”

“You’re talking about Nuviah Lo.Dineast, right? From a couple of quinteks past.”

“That’s right! What about those nasty...uh...?”

“Oh yeah. She had those deep, twin scars gouged across her face.”

“Yeah...Uhuh.”

“You know, she got ‘em during an accident a few quinteks back. She’d been helping a family of culturists near Vengathlo, clearing echoburths,” Kerak said, piling it on with confidence as he described the tapered ravines common to that area.

“Yeah, what a shame. She, uhm, she had a rough go of it for a while,” the Head went on, high above a band of strangers, trapped in a hole, left to wonder where all drivel would wind up. “The Arduans; they never let up on her, you know. Nagged her, too, over their petty boundary disputes for...six quinteks, it was? She never let ‘em get to her, though, did she? Hedeon be praised she died at peace, in her sleep, huh? What was that nickname of hers?”

“Nichotoosh,” Kerak said, evoking Vengathlian slang for *parallel lines*; a reference to her disfigurement.

After a long pause, *The Head* began to show a faint grin. Kerak couldn’t help but smile, too. With a modicum of shame, the words “in her sleep” made him proud...to a degree. For *Nichotoosh*, a.k.a. Nuviah Lo.Dineast, had been one of Kerak’s last targets. *Good talent shouldn’t go unused*, he thought with a sinister grin.

Had the test been passed? More silence, as their visitor remained as still as the rocks surrounding them. “It’s not working, Kerak!” Thaloux whispered.

Trying to think of what more he could offer this obstinate passerby, Kerak dug a little deeper. Then he found it. “Fish! We have fishmeat!” he yelled out. His startled campmates stared him down. Kerak ignored them.

“Did you say...*fish*?” The Head asked, his hunger piqued at the thought of anything other than withered fungi or rancid Khepra hound.

“Yes. Dried, seasoned, but still...”

“Wait...wait there...I mean...don’t go anywhere. What I mean to say is...I’ll be back!”

It took 30 stratimers for him to return with two companions, lugging a large bundle of rope. From the bottom of the hole, they observed the rope's descent. Nalani, sitting on Dijal's shoulders, was the first to grab it, shouting out her joy. The others remained quiet, for as much as they sought release from this dungeon, the thought of what lay above sent cold shudders down their spines.

They each took one last look into the darkness behind them as Cai took the rope from Nalani and tied a loop at the bottom. One by one, they were pulled into the warmth of direct light.

Freedom had already shown itself to be a mixed blessing.

Nowhere, I tell you. Nowhere! The Nearings were sealed off! Closed...50, maybe 60 days ago. The Mierlu-Swaaric routes are dotted here and there with pickets. You might see a stray Machaeran, or a small detachment of sentries along those trails, but you can't predict when, or how many at a time. Even the Pulathea Ridges, as steep and unforgiving as they are, are dotted with signal markers on post, dawn to dusk. I've seen 'em, I tell you! There's *nowhere* you can go in this range of the Seamounts to avoid their hatefulness!" Her eyes began to glaze above a quivering chin. "*Chalala Chalakandre ud Mareshk te Marah! Te Marah.* It is all...*hopeless...*!"

Arjun reeled at the familiarity of her pain-stricken chant, a lamentation common to the Cimmerian sect known at *The Maharest*. Ilunea Ve.Stanadatur closed her eyes, her grieving now come to a close. Within her small group of fellow nomads, she was known for her quiet introspection. But here, in this place, her words struck hard.

Here was the tableland known as the Sturosphere gradient, a dolorous realm of windswept pinnacles, echoburths and steep plateaus, grinding on without end for thousands of neurris in all directions. After 18 days of claustrophobic trudging, the refugees from the Crescent had now found themselves at the geographical center of the estrean Seamounts, to estre of the meandering slopes which had funneled millions

of miarics of poison down upon their former home. And for all they knew, still were.

A towering blaze filled the encroaching darkness, fueled by huge slabs of Kalmustur which had been pulled from clefts beneath the overhang under which they sat. Kerak and Nishar marveled, on their own, at a bulging corkscrew vein above their heads. Kerak's vision then slid out into the wisoltrean dusk. His thoughts, among other things, were a reflection of those which were swirling within the minds of all who shielded themselves there against the looming chill, and they revolved around a single if not so simple question: *what do the 'Phemes hold for us?*

For another soul sitting there that night, Ilunea's earlier cries were evoking painful memories, but to be brushed aside. For Arjun's thoughts were elsewhere. He knew he'd had no choice but to tear away the veil he'd been hiding behind since shortly after leaving the Phileans. And so he bore that name once again, this time without fear or shame. He squinted, tossed another slab of fungus into the flames, reached behind him and pulled out another chunk of Barutha flesh. He handed it to Dijal, who jabbed it with a sharpened stick and shoved it into the flames.

They entertained each other that night with a host of colorful stories. A tall flagon of water, seasoned with a bitter but still satisfying brew concentrate called Iraphliap, was passed around the fire. Aside from Cai and Dijal, Ilunea, age 52, and her niece Nostra Lo.Mhastreac, 23, were the only females in the group. Both of them, along with Baerosul Ve.Sorumon, 29, were from the Moors of Dharoun, near the Saurostran tablelands. All three had been enslaved following the Purges of the Meteclystic Stone and had escaped their peonage camp during a work detail; an effort which had been aided by the effects of some cheap, pilfered Pentumus, offered by them to four very careless (and by now, former) subalternates.

Nalamear Te.Schistlea, 30, from Cythrop-Preara, had been falsely accused of philandering with the libidinous consort of an Arduan Councilor from Belgorslo. For that he'd suffered at least five quinteks of imprisonment. Nalamear's

refusal to adjust to a life of hard labor, and his insolent tongue, had twice bought him exposure to the *Waeriaj*; a long, thin, superheated needle, coated with poisonous compounds and corkscrewed into the victim's body through the tips of the fingers or the neck. Lucky to have survived these incidents, he'd won a couple of slugs of Widows Breath from a guard during an illicit round of Krabash and used them to bribe his way out of his Andulkan peonage camp.

Finally, Kiralu Um.Kiruvor (a.k.a. "*The Head*"), age 38, had made his living as a writhlic culturist, growing tubers and whips. His plots and his home had been burned during the Purges of Dharun-Xyloph. Kiralu's father had turned pellogroat, and despite the elder's implorings to his son to sell out, to save his own neck, Kiralu would not. Before the purges, Kiralu had sent his family to the safety and relative prosperity of the Hirusovrans while he himself went in the opposite direction. To norostre. To a meager but unfettered life in the Seamounds.

As flame and talk waned and flared all evening, Arjun's eye bore down upon the faces of their hosts. *Yes, they know the Seamounds*, he mused. But not like him. For these ranges had been his home now for over 20 quinteks. He maintained his silence, his eyes darting back and forth, stoking his pipe, mists of Marastith herb wafting into gaping pores of rock, above and behind him.

Arjun recalled a time, long ago, when the Triumvirate had written off this region, the largest in the Dimensional Horizon, in favor of the more amenable lands below the Tuir-Phystrian ranges. But as he tossed another rootstick into the blaze, he could feel the inception of a paradigm shift, here in a place no longer so immune from Astuverican incursions.

He recalled the many times when he had passed, served, dwelt among, aided and traded with countless bands of refugees, emigrants, exiles, derelicts, renegades and castoffs, all doing their best to blend into the rocky shoulders of Mnuloratheia. For the most part, their efforts had been successful. But now, eight quinteks after coming to, and then leaving, the Crescent, he could feel that this once empty vessel

was on the verge of an impending overflow. A groundswell; the fiery consummation of Chronicle 398? Or something even more sinister?

He listened as Kiralu explained that in the morning, the route they planned to take would carry them to wisoltre, to an as-yet unconfirmed location they'd been told about by other refugees they'd met in the past four unteks; a place where the Machaeran presence was far weaker than in the sorentrean and estrean quarters. And so Arjun's weathered but still acute mind began to formulate a plan, of a journey to this elusive asylum; a place nestled between mighty bulwarks of ancient stone. A place he, and he alone in this ragtag group, could find even with his eyes sealed shut.

Other than the towers which shielded the Bay of Teoramugh, the destination to which they would now turn was among the most elusive known to exist anywhere within the Seamounts. Assuming, of course, that it had not already fallen prey to Machaeran and/or Actinetic assailment, it might prove its worth. Too, its proximity to another familiar locale was tempting in its own right. A place that, for 16 quinteks, had held Arjun's mind in an inexorable, unyielding grip. Failure had been the reward of practically every soul who'd ever reached for it, and Ve.Jalu was no exception. But was he ready to attempt it once again? Jarumon had held the key; this he knew. *Perhaps, Arjun thought, the time has come again.*

To norostre could be heard the scream of a distant pair of Khalizuds. To estre, the whine of a pack of Khepra hounds. Arjun drew another smoldering drag and handed the pipe to Jadox. The blaze continued to gorge on dry root as Thaloux passed another fistful of flesh into the waiting palm to his right. For a moment, Arjun's line of sight crossed that of Kerak, sitting cross-legged on the other side of the flame. This was the first time their eyes had met since Drogan's death. Their common leer hung inert in the stale air of 21 quinteks; a momentum seemingly lost forever. With a jerk, Kerak pulled his eyes away; unable, *unwilling*, to go down that path. And unsure if he ever could.

Arjun's eyes submitted too, his pride drowned once again in the familiar waters of shame and regret. Some wounds, he realized, were destined never to heal. *But it is precisely those, he mused, which should never remain untended.*

*T*he crimson mists of the Pnumiphric Pale rolled in early the next morning. The Subterranean vaults beneath the buttes and summits surrounding the Pulaathea ridges are pockmarked with hundreds of thousands of pneumoterns: tiny fissures and voids at ground level which are packed here and there with the eroded grit of Breomear, a swarthy mineral speckled with a fine magenta powder. The duress of liquid upheaval from the many Kiyfer domes beneath the Seamounds causes water vapors to push through these fissures. When this occurs, the tinged effluvium is forced to great heights to dissolve into the atmosphere, then to fall back to the ground.

15 well-rested travelers stared up at the red sky that morning before leaving their current sanctum. Kerak patted his pocket to ensure that the Myotrophus was still in its place, troubled by the knowledge that the stone had been shifted slightly from its resting place of the night before. *Could it have been Nalani? Or someone else?* He mused, remembering a similar occurrence which had happened just before leaving the Crescent.

Kerak threw his pack over his shoulder and forced down one final bite of breakfast. He scanned the wisoltrean horizon with an overwhelming sense of dread, unable to shake from his mind the words of Eluned Te.Mirin, Chahalist Lo.Zhil-Quroc and other Regents with The Order; words which had been plucked from the last Chronicles to which Kerak had been privy in his last quintek as a Courvesant. The Triumvirate's new and unexplained enthusiasm for the wisoltrean Seamounds filled his thoughts. He hoped beyond reason that their course, and their destination, wherever that was, would not betray them.

Ilunea Ve.Stanadatur glared at the Sphere above. To her superstitious mind, a red sky portended an ill fate. But to

Arjun, it signified an absolution. *The Phemes*, he thought, *will be kind after all!* For the Pnumiphric Pale was a phenomenon native to the most accessible gateways which would, within time, take them to where he meant for them to be: the vast wilderness known as the Mysoux-Xyklian range. Within it, their destination, the largest defile in the wisoltrean Seamounds, was practically a heartbeat away.

Jadox squinted, shielding his face with his hands. With so few natural impediments, violent tempests were common here in the Sturospheres, lifting fine grains of sand and bits of dead Windswort moss high into the air. It dawned on him why that tiny plant with the delicate orange flower was so named, and he smiled at his emerging awareness. Another warm gust sent him reeling, reminding him of a tiny pirogue, dancing across a brisk Eusterian chop.

Kiralu marched ahead of Jadox until the trail widened just enough for the two of them to walk shoulder to shoulder. Jadox looked to his left, into Kiralu's eyes, the same eyes he'd elucidated just before this sloop-shouldered stranger had introduced himself with an airborne rock, kicked into a dark hole. Since their introduction, a single question had hung over Jadox's mind.

"Where is your stone?"

Kiralu squared him with a puzzled glance. "What stone?"

"You remember; just before you bumped into that rock, the one that fell into the hole you found us in. Weren't you holding a memory stone in your hand?"

Kiralu tossed a puzzled stare.

"You were carrying a memory stone with you, weren't you?" Jadox said, flustered. "I elucidated you through your stone, just before your foot kicked that rock. How else would I have known you were approaching?"

"Friend, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't own a memory stone."

SHE PACED THE COARSE SANDS AT dusk, at the periphery of translucent waters reflecting the evanescence of dying luments. She squeezed her forehead once, then again, as if she were shoving the pain from out of her throbbing skull. She pulled an empty glass vial from her satchel and squeezed down on it. *If only 36 of these had been enough*, she mused, berating herself for not pressing Shirascur for more. With an angry grunt, she cursed and heaved the worthless vial into the Eusterian sea.

Savita's waning patience had finally collided with her unrequited thirst...to have *all* of this, at long last, be done! To bring a long-awaited end to five quinteks of anguished loss and uncertainty. To right the wrong which had been visited upon her with such callous disregard. She cursed the day she'd allowed herself to drop her guard, to pull her careless eyes from the threats surrounding her. But since she'd received the first of those cognitions from near the norostrean terminus, not a filament of genuine gratitude had entered her mind. *Yes, so now I know*, she'd thought many times, with what a stranger might mistake for borderline disinterest. *But I will not be satisfied until this journey is at its end, and we are at long last...reunited!*

It had now been 45 days since she and her entourage had left Astuverica. 45 tiresome, ashen cycles spent wandering these saturate-laden waters. Most of them had been blanketed in one misty Pale after another, each one coming in great, towering curtains across the Eusterian wilderness, shrouding everything more than 10 or 15 neurris distant behind a cloak of dank vapors. The cogs she had received from him were direct, assertive. Yet due to the schismatic veins permeating the Seamounts, it had been a towering effort to trace their source. Day after day, she and her crew had wandered, prodding each habitable shore they'd passed along the way, finding nothing.

As the Pales had lifted, they had tendered their encrypted signals to the sentries posted here and there at the bluffs overlooking the estrean shore. Not once did they have reason to believe that passage would be denied them. But as for their rate of progress, to one as impatient as her? That was another issue altogether.

She kicked a small piece of charred driftwood, not far from the discarded remains of a pirogue which had been tossed at the base of a bluff. Her crew were warming themselves by a huge fire, crackling in the near distance. She ignored them, preoccupied with other matters. *The souls who left this debris here; the souls...*! she thought, despondent, angry with herself for not having made it to this shore sooner.

Savita dropped to her knees, recalling day 14, the apex of their journey. That was when they'd finally made it to the *source*: a tiny, semicircular beach choked with a noxious, chalky blue effluvium, falling from the surrounding cliffs. She recalled that as she had stood there, another pile of charred embers lay at her feet: the remains of a funeral pyre. There, a burned, blackened Kyotrimlic stone sat atop a pile of smoldering, skeletal debris.

And she remembered too, as she'd stood in front of that pyre, 31 days earlier...the sway of blood, extended in quaternary. The revenants those four souls had left buried in the sand before a hasty departure had wrapped themselves around her indigo-stained shoulders. She recalled how she had waved her hands in front of her, brushing away the mnemonic threads which had drifted up from the sand. To Hedeon she'd cried out her thanks for the survival of one of those souls. For two of the others, her reaction was one of disappointment, softened by a distant, unexplainable grief. But for the last of them, her mind had been caged, devoid of release, except that which is offered at the hand of death. *Traitor...Turncoat...Apostate to The Order!!* she mused. This one...she feared, she loathed...was destined to thwart her ambitions in ways she still had yet to comprehend.

Savita glanced now to her rear, toward a tiny cleft in a cave leading away from the beach. She doubled over in pain.

For the thousandth time, she cursed this inveterate malaise; born with her as a child, grown with her into adulthood; weaving its way through the quinteks into the very core of her being. And always with an excruciating, unforgiving vengeance.

She hesitated, though, to condemn her condition; not this time. For its incumbent instincts had led her here, to this beach, so near to a resolution. Tomorrow, she and her crew were scheduled to leave the Eusterian shore. To enter the cleft in that cave. To plunge deep into the bowels of the Mnulorathean Subterra. Tomorrow, her curse would continue to drive her forward, until it had, for once in her life, served her to her true benefit.

Standing at the water's edge, she stared at the empty vial, bobbing in the surf, beating against the shore, as if to taunt her. She glanced at their timbered pinnace, her five companions, and their second meal of the day, now broiling over an open flame. And just as they had done 31 days earlier, the Grist of Caruvalus, ethereal, imperceptible, and once again, *familiar*, drifted up from this spot and into her waiting mind, freed from her resistance by the power of pain. The essence of three souls, once lost but still native to her heart, now permeated that conscience. *I am among them*, she thought with a cold shudder, their contrails forming shields of mnemosis around her troubled, and increasingly sober, mind.

The connection she sought, though, was not mnemonic. It remained shapeless, adrift, far from her waiting arms, at risk of ruin at the whim of a specter she had yet to meet.

"*Half-brother*," she whispered into a gentle breeze, pushed along by an estrean dusk. "*Do not dare stand in my way!*"

One by one, a series of clerestories swung open, propelled by row after row of morithules connected to hinges at the edge of the apertures. Eusterian mists slid past and descended into the Hall of the Yellow Marist, here at the 41st Cyliat. The raucous organism that is Astuverica at mid-day was little more than a faint whisper at these heights, a welcome gift to those gathered

here in the Hall, awaiting their turn, watching the Xycloplast pass from each hand to the other. This ritual of manual distribution is derived from an ancient custom known as *Kirio-Lutrenos*, meaning, in Pavatrian, to either “walk into” or “walk out of...shadow,” depending on the pronunciation. It is the practice of fingering glyphic etchings or Thermionic devices in a certain way, in order to absorb their most inherent psychoactive effects.

And so, with dozens of hand ushers standing silent and stoic at the wings of the Hall, the ritual continued. Each attendee, one after the other, took hold of the stone, held it for at least three pulsimers and passed it to the Ephriant to his or her right. Only after the last Ephriant had touched it and passed it on would these proceedings be allowed to begin.

The first Suhm-Ephriant, Yuanik Um.Chaltro, had created the Xycloplast, fired at a now-defunct kiln once located in the knolls of the Kurestreans. Over time, as each Suhm-Ephriant came to succeed the one before, the Xycloplast evolved, its glyphs and entwines morphing and melding more closely with the coagulates, the stanhics and the ores of which it had been forged. Twice it had been heated and reshaped to guarantee a more exact fit within each hand of authority which held it. But despite these improvements and the vast bulk of comprehension, observation and cognition it yielded, it was not always appreciated or used to its fullest.

Thurou Lo.Quilich was its fourth possessor, but he preferred to press flesh instead of stone. Memory stones and matters of Thermionics were delegated to his circulats while he cut deals and sliced spoils in order to enlarge his cherished Astuverica both *down* and *up*, making it nearly taller from top to bottom than it was wide. The consolidation of power, he reasoned, was bound to the acquisition and the *selective* dissemination of wealth. Lo.Quilich’s philosophy served him well, but it was not sufficient to prevent a major artery from being severed by a rusty blade as he lay in bed one night, dreaming of lucre, anodynes and carnalia. Such is the nature of existence in the highest Cypliats of the Architrave.

Enter Kirahmoor, the fifth Suhm-Ephriant, pinnacled at the summit of shadow, obscurity and a cunning ability to frustrate all other aspirants to his position. He, in contrast to his immediate predecessor, was never without his stone. At his will, it had been reconstructed to suit his purposes. Kirahmoor's Xycloplast, without question, was the purest, most highly intended memory stone the Dimensional Horizon had ever known.

The first four Suhm-Ephriants had taken great care to ensure that the Xycloplast was never touched by the hands of another. But Kirahmoor understood and improved upon its capabilities to a far greater extent than they. So under his lead, Kirio-Lutrenos became a standard fixture at the opening of each event known as the *Abramishk*: the conference of Ephriancy. For this reason, the Xycloplast and the rite over which it reigned came to be viewed by outsiders and newcomers to the Xaru-Chalidaethras with an overwhelming mix of fear and apprehension.

That is, until they touched it.

But this day, the subject was not memory stones. Just before commencement, four dozen hand ushers were released from their bonds, carrying with them hundreds of crystalline vials. All of them were passed between the pilasters of the great Hall, yielding a variety of extracts which only the fetid little weed known as Trofliage could bestow.

A sense of anxiety chiseled the cool airs flowing through the clerestories above the Halls and the Principiates below. Thick, protoplasmic clouds arched high above the Architrave's tallest spires, casting opaque shadows upon every surface. Drauglaf3 Um.Eremon, an Arduan Ephriant, coughed and bellowed the name of Khalaris Ve.Aztasur, an Ephriant with The Order. The proceedings were about to begin.

Bourglo Ve.Daetran listened, sitting at the left end of the third row with the rest of the Arduan contingent, his arms crossed, engaged in a raucous debate with at least two Ephriants from The Order and one of the guards positioned near the left wing of the Hall. Ve.Aztasur, with Kirahmoor's eager approval, had mentored Vikram Lo.Jehan as the

Architrave's newest Ephriant. Lo.Jehan, a few neurris to the right, slumped in his chair, his left hand clutching a half-empty chalice of Nuerautio, an unfiltered Chelomarcic extract. He took a sip; his eyes widened and he leaned in. This was his initiation into the Xaru-Chalidaethras, and he knew that his reason for being here...his well-regarded powers of persuasion...were soon to be called upon.

"Thanata...thanata. *Kalanuer* soquisto et sur *Zhurovier*?" Ve.Aztasur called out, in the tongue of her Saurostran homeland. The sound of her voice bent the damp airs between the Hall's plasmodic colonnades. Her jittery eyes drew the attention of others away from her mouth, trembling with nervous tics, brought on by the contents of a now empty vial of Pnumoslith.

Ve.Aztasur turned to face Kirahmoor. This day, as he always did when in public, the fifth wore a thick woven cloak, embroidered with a tight cluster of crystallized fragments of Ularic and Hagonite, embedded with thousands of prismatic strands; the gut of the Gyradarakur. His skin-tight, greyish-black veil accentuated the bone structure of his jaw, flexing and tightening as each thought passed through his nimble mind.

"My lieges," Ve.Aztasur barked in a hoarse rasp, "and our most excellent Sovereign. Our Great Augur. Our *Subm-Liege*...not just of our beloved Astuverica, but of the enraptured domain which is OUR realm, the *Dimensional Horizon*...! We are *your*..."

An impatient Kirahmoor lifted a single finger and stopped these fawning accolades dead in their tracks.

The gauze of deference remained glued to Ve.Aztasur's face. It was a look not at all unfamiliar to Kirahmoor, perched atop a massive, elevated Cathedra, forged of resonant plasmospheric crystals and Ularic/Phylox alloys. In his time, he had drawn both fear and admiration for having breathed new life into the archetype upon which the Architrave was built. Indeed, the scroll of Kirahmoor's attributes was varied and lengthy. But the most enduring was his uncanny ability to see, to hear, to *know*, in a manner so flawless, so complete, as to hurl even the mere whiff of dissent into the dustbin of futility.

This was a little understood quality which his most ardent opponents had failed, in their inferiority, to overcome.

Ve.Aztasur now directed her attention to the entire assemblage. "Among us comes now our allegiant kin, Vikram...*Lo.Jehan*, conscripted into this most *exceptional* brotherhood, the Xaru-Chalidaethras!" The enclosures surrounding the Hall rumbled with the din of clinking vials, drowning out the tongue of Ve.Aztasur. She wheeled around and returned to her seat.

Just before doing so, though, she turned to direct one final glance at her Sovereign. Ve.Aztasur noticed that the Suhm-Ephriant's left hand, as it did at the commencement of every Ahramishk, held only his stone, having completed its rounds through the Hall only pulsimers earlier. This day, though, the fingers of Kirahmoor's left hand twitched rapidly, one digit at a time. At the last Ahramishk, she'd noticed, those fingers had been as steady as a rock.

This erratic habit had never been lost on Ve.Aztasur. Early on, she'd recognized this unique left-handed malaise, known to skirueics as *Tzadaklu*, for what it was: strong evidence of a past overdose of Tanaskith, an aged, highly cut extract of Widow's Breath. One was indeed lucky to survive an excess of this chalky brown liquid with nothing more than a troublesome twitch, and as Ve.Aztasur well knew, this condition was permanent. What she did not understand, though, was how this debility seemed at times to vanish in Kirahmoor. That was *not* characteristic of a Tanaskith overdose. In only one other soul...an Ephriant whose name she could not now recall...had she noticed an inconsistency of this kind as it related to *Tzadaklu*.

Kirahmoor's right hand clutched his vial, placed in front of him by one of his eight personal hand ushers. This day, it bore a concentrate of two waters: one was Eusterian; the other came from a spring in the Pavatrian uplands, deep within the Exos...nothing more. Kirahmoor raised his stone high into the air. With it, a vaporous silence melted even the sound of breathing. Then, with a nod, *Lo.Jehan* stood and turned to face the Cathedra.

Two-thirds of the Ephriants in attendance understand the urgency of the message Lo.Jehan was about to deliver. In the past four quinteks, within the occupied territories, a pulsing vehemence had now reached apex, splitting the frayed energies of those faithful to the Astuverican ideal into two divergent priorities. And with each passing day, these priorities were growing farther apart.

First, the spoils of conquest in that span of time had become far more abundant than anyone sitting in these halls even a quintek earlier could have imagined. Every hand had been needed to grasp these riches, as fast and as furtively as possible, until the ultimate reward could at last be discovered, sliced and shared among the rightful few. For 44 quinteks, the management and the appropriate dissemination of spoils had been the Triumvirate's prime mission. *Priority one*, it was agreed, had turned the viamars from muddy footpaths into paved boulevards, not to mention swelling the pockets of Regency with their skimmings, locked away in hundreds of blind cadres: nooks and niches scattered throughout Astuverica and a few parts beyond.

But it was the accumulation of wealth, in part, that was the root cause behind *priority two*: the overwhelming urge to quell the strife which, it was felt, threatened to tear the fabric of fortune into tiny shreds. To the proponents of priority one, this circumstance was nothing more than the figment of a timid imagination. After all, the influence of the Muricai, and with it the last vestiges of organized resistance within the Dimensional Horizon, was fading fast. Still, the guise of dissolution, acrimony, despair and unbridled rage had not vanished from the faces of the multitudes, invisible to those who populated the thin airs of the Architrave. Indeed, it had grown. And lately, with heightened vigor, those faces and their incumbent frames had begun to crawl from the depleted hinterlands far beyond, and *toward* the opulent excess of Astuverica.

Kirahmoor had seen this for himself. Traveling without his trappings or his usual entourage, he had trudged the narrow paths and byways of the occupied, and sometimes unoccupied,

territories, at least once every other untek. In the earliest days of his reign, he had found that the proletariat, when challenged, had sooner or later given in to their oppressions, body and mind. The coordinated efforts of the Triumvirate, benefiting from the customary respect that had always been lavished upon those in power, (the Muricai notwithstanding) had dictated as much. This, indeed, had been the norm since the dawn of the Triumvirate. But lately, every sallow face he saw during his travels, every downtrodden pair of eyes he looked into, burned with hatred: the cinder of looming insurrection.

“A single Machaeran can handle a thousand outraged foot-trampers,” he’d heard one Ephriant, one Regent after another snort in derision. *“And with the Muricai in decline,”* they’d all cried, *“there’ll be more than enough bladework available to disembowel any serious resistance to priority one.”* Kirahmoor, upon hearing these assertions, had always offered a polite nod. But in his nightmares, he had seen the viamars run red with the blood of butchery and rebellion. The blood of *Regency*. The light of day could not shake these images from his mind.

Both of these priorities were well represented in the Xaru-Chalidaethras. *Greed* argued for the hoarding of spoils before they disappeared: nothing more. *Fear* cried out for protection, for asylum from the threats which lurked from beyond. Nothing more.

This day, though, fear...the very essence of priority two...would have the edge.

With his usual finesse, Kirahmoor had managed to run the gauntlet between these two camps, Satisfying the demands of both, but neither, simultaneously. From the third to the 63rd Cypliats, though, had come a thunder which could not be sanctioned or suppressed. It was a din...of *voices*...announcing a new wave of fear and condemnation, draped in nebulous superstition.

These fresh voices were *Muharic*: growing angrier and more dissolute with each passing day. For the past untek, Ephriants representing the Arduans and the Courvesois were being held captive at every gathering within the Architrave,

official or otherwise, by the chaotic ramblings of these zealots. At every gathering, large or small, the Muharics exhorted one incoherent passage of the Guderaph after another. This Ahramishk, true to form, was no exception.

At the heart of the issue was *errants*, or rather, a high concentration of them. Errants are evidence of degeneration within the stream of filamentation, creating sudden flares of static when articulated through certain veins. One theory being floated at the time was that errants were a consequence of too much dissonance in the stream. Another pointed to an oversupply of resonance, which was thought to be more prone to decay than the dissonant impulse. And a third...*both*. Other theories abounded, none making any more sense than the others. Regardless, the Muharadu was troubled by this proliferation for reasons that even they could not pretend to understand, but which they believed the Guderaph had somehow warned against, in its typically convoluted manner.

Two quinteks earlier, a team of four Muharics from a Palialouge in the Tribethians had articulated a clutch of revenants they'd found buried within a cluster of veins between the Pavatrias and the wisoltrean Seamounds. Their findings pointed to an overwhelming convergence of errants. This discovery had not been brought to the wide attention of Astuverican Regency until a little more than an untek ago, when Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest, a radical Muharic Regent from the Saurostran borderlands, announced it to the Medius Athlamaru.

Um.Aara-Maest possessed meager skills in the study of Synthet, and he had learned of this discovery from a Kyotrimlic stone which had been sent to him on the sly by a relative of one of that team of four: their circulat. Um.Aara-Maest had performed a partial translation of the explitore surrounding those revenants only four days before he'd made his announcement to the Medius. Before this Kyo had been sent to Um.Aara-Maest, though, other than the circulat who'd passed it along to him, and the three Muharic scholars who'd found the revenants, knowledge of the discoveries made by the

team of four had not been revealed to a single living soul within the Dimensional Horizon. That is, with except two.

And one of them was Kirahmoor.

There are no passages in the Guderaph which speak directly of errants. The nearest mention, the Muharadu believes, is in the 137th tome of *The Treatise of Parchments*, the third book of the Guderaph. This Thermionic script contains the verbiage which Muharics, led by the emphatic Um.Aara-Maest, believe addresses not only errants, but their consequences:

“Observe, for when the Hemlet of Coda rises up to touch the UnCairn, then will the Trath’ul Bri.Duc seize the Domnium. The trial of choler and sinew, of Nugnu and Tolos’thetumos, will pass beyond the purlieu, and the Curtain of Neblach will descend upon the sweep of Cre’Lurrygia...”

No one at the Medius could explain the meaning of obscure phrases like “the Hemlet of Coda,” “Trath’ul Bri.Duc” or “Nugnu and Tolos’thetumos.” Even Um.Aara-Maest became tongue-tied trying to persuade outsiders of the connection between this passage and the righteousness of Muharic angst. These failures, though, did nothing to restrain the agitated, apocalyptic rantings which had lately infused every conversation with a Muharic, in or out of Astuverica.

As for the Kyotrimlic stone in Dholorei’s possession: it contained only a small portion of the abstracts which had been collected during the Muharic expedition to the Moirisois. Um.Aara-Maest knew this. He also knew that those abstracts were volatile, disjointed. As a result, the bands of explitore surrounding those revenants had tapped out after just a few reads. Without a more refined set of skills, they would not lend themselves to further translation. Their discoverers, the team of four, had been lost without a single clue as to their whereabouts. Adding to this tragedy, their Palialouge had been obliterated. Burned out. And its remaining brethren...vanished as well.

These fateful events had been mourned, then heralded by the Architrave as yet another sad testimonial to ongoing Muricai transgressions in the Vengaos. This was a line which,

at the time, the Medius bought. But two quinteks later, as evidence of the work of this Palialouge came to light, the flame of skepticism was ignited.

Which brings us back to the present. Um.Aara-Maest, of course, kindled this flame as best he could, fanning it into the raging inferno it would soon become. In keeping with his paranoid nature, he accused the X-C of having full knowledge of the whereabouts of the remaining abstracts. This had been alluded to him by the one who'd given him the Kyo in the first place. The snippets in his hands had been sufficient to whet the appetites of the entire Muharic contingency. But the cult remained dissatisfied. So one demand after another had been issued to the X-C to hand over the remaining abstracts so that the complete picture could finally be shown.

The Muharadu had not yet gone public with their fears, preferring for now to hold that option close to the cuff while they waited on the X-C to come up with the response they demanded. Of the abstracts which had been turned over to Um.Aara-Maest, circulates at the Medius Athlamaru had tried time and again to carve a path through the explitore, to unleash their subchattels: the axiomatic center of the Muharadu's most lurid fears. A true authority in Synthet, they believed, could unlock those fragments. However, the two most skilled practitioners in that art, at least within the Muharadu, were among the party of four which had gone missing.

The most obvious solution, to everyone except a Muharic, would have been to employ the services of a Mnemonast. The Muharadu, though, believed the so-called "Gift of Pras'demnos" to be anything (and everything) from comic theater to a mortal sin. Better to know nothing more of this discovery, they reasoned, than to risk eternal damnation from the fiery grace of Hedeon and his minions!

For the past 40 days, the Xaru-Chalidaethras had been pummeled by the Muharadu. The X-C could deny any knowledge of these abstracts, so they did. The Suhm-Ephriant, though, could not. His response, in a fit of impassioned defiance: "*these vague articulations are meaningless, and have*

drawn nothing more than the lunatic rantings of a swarm of crazed Muharics."

This tactless statement led the Medius Athlamaru to call, in strident outrage, for a *Schimatariat*. This is a rare convocation, enormous in scope, which includes not only Ephriants but every Regent and sub-Regent within the confines of the Dimensional Horizon. This way, the Muharadu reasoned, they could be assured of a massive, captive audience; ripe for the proper infusion of fear and alarm sufficient to tilt a quavering X-C into submission.

Kirahmoor adamantly opposed a Schimatariat, for he realized that this high-ranking forum might spawn a rift which could tear the Xaru-Chalidaethras apart at the seams. For this reason, Muharic Ephriancy had chosen *him* as the focus of their merciless poundings, regardless of how often they'd touched the Xycloplast. This pummeling would continue, they promised, until their demands were met. So, in an act of self-preservation, Kirahmoor had concluded that the matter of Muharic anger should be dyed in diplomatic veneers. Sanitized. Repurposed into a direction which all souls would be ordered, and would find themselves quite happy, to follow. To carry this effort through, though, one thing was needed...

...And that was a standard bearer.

Kirahmoor's misguided initial response to Um.Aara-Maest's pronouncements was followed by an assertion that Dhulorei had *misinterpreted* those divinations. But in reality, he knew the old cynic had stumbled onto something. For buried within the subchattels of those revenants, hidden deep within the abstracts pulled by the Muharic team, a strange anomaly had been found. Encased within an obscure vernacular, surrounded by a screechy tonal modulation, it was a repetition of the sound "Sh," then "Shu," repeated over and over and over...

Therein, it lay: the *only* specter in the Dimensional Horizon that sent cold chills down the spine of the vaunted fifth. He was convinced that the static suffocating these voltaics would destroy their ability to find the Circonic, thereby tearing apart much more than just the Xaru-Chalidaethras. He

reasoned that a clearer translation of these vague tongues was needed. His objective? Full control over their possible truths and prospective consequences, if there even were any. And this needed to be done before the Muharadu decided to start trusting "The Gift of Pras'demnos" for a change.

But a full understanding of the intonations hidden within those subchattels, he knew, was impossible without the source of the filamentation from which those revenants had come. And so a little less than a quintek after the disappearance of the team of four, Kirahmoor enlisted the services of the Architrave's small, well-closeted company of Thermionic linguists. Their proprietary specialists in the interpretation of Synthet. Their Chalisters.

Their task? To conduct field articulations over an area thought to measure over 100 million square neurris. This geographical scope, though, was far too large, and needed refinement. With Arduan support, the Suhm-Ephriant had managed to obtain the Kyotrimlic stone containing the field notes of the team of four. This stone showed that some of the team's earliest reads had come from a cluster of veins in the Xhalamears, along the border between the Seamounds and the Pavatrias. This was a place which had recently been chosen by the Machaera to test the new and improved Actinetic Triurate, intended by the Arduan Council as a means of finishing off what remained of the crippled Muricai. Other reads, taken in the Moirisois highlands near Tephrom-Anh, in the wisoltrean Seamounds, had shown considerable fruit as well.

A disinterested Kirahmoor chose to go along with the Machaera's plans for the Triurate in the porous Xhalamears. His Chalisters followed them, conducting their articulations in veins both burned and unburned. They discovered, though, that Actinetics served to compress the veins, making them easier to read. So even after the Muricai had been eliminated from those hinterlands, the Triurate marched on, though for reasons which remained cloaked in secrecy.

His Chalisters' most recent wanderings had taken them to the Moirisois. This was the same location to which the team of four had been led. The scope of the Muharics' search, though,

had not been as great as that of Kirahmoor's. And the winds of urgency had grown more abrupt, more intense, as a new direction came to reveal itself.

The results of all this field work remained far below the scrutiny of the rest of the Architrave. But the sheer presence of so many Chalisters *outside* of the Architrave...and on Kirahmoor's orders, no less...had for the past three unteks drawn the heat of suspicion from certain elements within the X-C. Now it was drawing Muharic heat; the only kind which had shown itself capable of drawing fire. Kirahmoor knew that if this crucial work was to continue unfettered, it would have to proceed beneath a shroud of ignorance and distraction. So to keep the eyes of the Cypliats and the Medius Athlamaru in a state of darkness, one key element was needed...

...And that was a standard bearer.

Kirahmoor dabbed a bead of perspiration from his cheek, staring at Lo.Jehan through sharp, piercing eyes. Through the veil that concealed his distinct face, his keen expression. Through the fog of Chelomeric vapors rising up toward the clerestories. Through the velums and beyond, as the pall of silence lingered. And he spoke to Lo.Jehan with his eyes...eyes that burned with a fire hotter than that which any Subterranean furnace could impart.

Kirahmoor's back-door sponsorship of this politically free-wheeling Arduan/Machaeran had been seen as risky, and had at first been opposed by all but one Ephriant. But amongst all except the Muharadu, the Xycloplast had performed as expected, sucking the breath from one adversarial voice after another. And so the will of the fifth, where the matter of appointment to the X-C was concerned, remained unchallenged.

Kirahmoor rubbed his fingers against the base of the stone. The Zylux, engraved on the new and improved Xycloplast since its inception, had now become a mid-lateral entwine, supporting a rendering of the glyph *Osetys*. This ancient etching is known to affirm a strong, sonorant command, with a propensity for verbal response, imbued with the powers of suggestion. Now, the Suhm-Ephriant became

lost in a cloud of absent neglect. He even caught himself *bowing*, albeit slightly, to the Triumvirate's newest Ephriant. For it was his opinion that Lo.Jehan stood alone, amongst all the fallow, driveling flunkies who filled the Hall of The Yellow Marist that day (most of whom, Kirahmoor paused to consider, had touched the Xycloplast perhaps one time too many). Alone in his energies; in his capacity to re-energize the true essence of this entwine...even of the Zylix itself. And to thrust it into the conscience of each and every soul in attendance. In essence, to propel the Suhm-Ephriant's most transcendent purposes...even better than Kirahmoor could do himself.

All were aware that Lo.Jehan had managed, in his usual histrionic manner, to vocalize in lesser assemblies the ironies of the Triumvirate's twin priorities, and to put them into a perspective that all souls could understand and appreciate. Now, his job was to begin to cauterize these severed factions, and to bring the Muharadu into at least *one* of them, and therefore back to a reality that Kirahmoor could control. This objective would require a reaffirmation of the motivations which had driven this League of Three, for 44 quinteks, to this very moment.

But Kirahmoor knew that he must be careful. He knew that only the most passionate, most blindly obedient and ambitious under his command should touch the flame of power and influence, and share it...in small fraction, of course...with him and his. In order to achieve his goals, he knew he must count on the influence their newest Ephriant could bring to the X-C. And he knew, above all, that the affirmation of true purpose must always follow a single path. *A life devoid of illusion is unlivable*, Kirahmoor mused, *and an empire without it...unsustainable! For it is far better to BELIEVE, than to KNOW!!*

Before speaking, Lo.Jehan opened the palms of his hands toward 153 alert faces. His eyes turned again to glance at his Sovereign. In days past, his disdain for the Suhm-Ephriant's Thermionic obsessions could have derailed his ascension to the X-C. But that was history. Any such opinions had by now

already grown wings and flown through the open clerestories, high above his head. *Concealment*, Lo.Jehan thought as he peered at Kirahmoor out of the corner of his eye, *is a blank template upon which all souls can write their own narratives; their passions and their preferences. May your veil, my Sovereign, always remain drawn and sealed.*

Lo.Jehan drew a deep breath, reeling in one last sweep of the Hall. He praised Hedeon for two things. First, that *she* had managed to find her way out of Astuverica, 45 days ago, dragging her fulsome entourage and her haughty influence away from the Architrave. Where Savita had gone, no one knew. But Lo.Jehan knew that she was always a short cognition away if, and when, she was needed.

He was also glad that he'd finally been able to cognify...and after a long drought, once again meet with...his closest contact within The Order *and* the X-C, Gersul Um.Niall. This was just before Gersul's tempestuous consort had disappeared in a wooden boat to norostre. For it was Um.Niall who stood alone in his ability to channel his son's erratic ambitions, his consort's abundant talents: both, it was hoped, in a direction which would best serve Lo.Jehan's...and by default, Kirahmoor's...purposes.

He took a final hit of Pnumoslith from a now empty vial. In keeping with the example set by his Sovereign, Lo.Jehan was not one to genuflect, so he got right to the point. His open hands closed into a pair of tight fists. Then, one protruding finger pointed high in the direction sacred to the Muharics gathered in the Hall.

Straight up.

"My lieges. Souls born of Hedeon's gracious light. My FELLOW EPHRIANTS!" The clerestories rattled as Lo.Jehan's booming tenor, the high-pitched roar of clinking glass, bounced off the walls of the Hall, then into thin air. His single airborne finger then turned from straight up...to the direction of wisoltre.

"Hear me, ALL! *Skaaloxule; Skaal. Odrule!* For far too long, our energies have become splintered. Severed. Allowed to languish in mis-direction. In *apathy*. We have sacrificed much

to preserve, to enlarge what is *ours*, but with two hearts. Two souls. And two opposing purposes.”

Lo.Jehan beat his chest with his left hand and raised his right palm to the clerestories. “*Valodustre!* Our Muharic brethren have heard the tenor of ravage and ruin from within the metals of the Moirisois. I too have heard those intonations, and I say they are *true*. They are *real*. Yes...they are upon us!”

A third of the Hall volleyed its approval. The clatter of crystal recommenced, twice as loud as before. “The Horizon is bathed in opulence, *Valodustre*. In rightfulness. Not simply for us, but for our offspring, our attendants, our keepers and those whom *we* keep. It was created, *cleansed* by the strains of Hedeon. By the covenant of our forebears, and theirs and theirs; on to the Erasotras who ruled this Sphere long before their successors crawled from out of the dross to claim what falls within its boundaries. But the menace described by our Muharic kin stands proud and defiant between us and the harvest of our blood. Our bone. Our very flesh!”

Lo.Jehan jabbed his finger even harder to wisoltre as his master, in a silent voice, brayed his approval. *Twin priorities? Errants?* Kirahmoor mused with a grin. *Let them go on feeding from those troughs. Our mission...my mission...must be shackled to the one true purpose which holds dominion over all. The source of those revenants must, and will, be found. Then, it will be cinched and sealed forever...*

...Behold...the Standard Bearer!

Kirahmoor’s grasp tightened upon the Xycloplast as the expressions on the faces in the Hall began to waver.

“Look beyond the clerestories, *Valodustre!* Beyond the Andulkan plains. The Vengathlian gradients. The Pavatrian steps...and into the very bowels of the Mnulorathean wastes. As we speak, the last fragments of organized resistance within the Dimensional Horizon are being crushed under the hammerthrust of the Machaeran juggernaut. This is our assurance. Of victory, for those who seek a secure hearth, freedom from the self-righteous horde; and from the Thermionic uncertainty of errants!”

Lo.Jehan straightened his back, raised his chin and prepared to close. “For 44 quinteks we have herded the rightful spoils of our labors, only to see our brethren bloodied and swarmed by the thousands. At the hands of the betrayer. The renegade. The turncoat! To see the strains of our spiritual locus tested, then *ruptured*, in voltaic darkness. But Valodustre. 44 quinteks have come and gone, and at last we have cleared nearly all the occupied territories of serious opposition...to sorentre, to estre and very soon, to *wisoltre*. All while a villainy struggles for rebirth within the most hostile terrain in the Horizon, growing stronger and more determined, day by precious day!”

His fists arced skyward. “Our Muharic brethren call for a larger audience, *Valodustre*, and they are right to do so. I tell you, the threats spoken of by our kin in faith are real, and they must be thwarted before we can fully harness the fruits of our labors. And so, my brothers, let us bind ourselves now to this commitment. To redirect *all* of our energies and our resources to destroying the Muharic specter. To wisoltre does our *true* purpose lie. *Thalalur!*”

Lo.Jehan paused to scan the eyes of Muharic Ephriancy, clustered together at the center of Hall. He made a mental note of the expressions on each of their faces as the consummation of this swollen oratory began to slip from his mouth.

“To the complete and utter annihilation of the Muricai does our TRUE purpose, and that of our Muharic kin, lie. *Thalaladaethru!!*”

The palisades trembled now as eager crowds began to gather beneath the archways at the peripheries of the Hall. Lo.Jehan, exhausted, wondered if this bucketful of caque had hit its mark. He offered one final glance at the assemblage which had filled these corridors, taking special note of Gersul Um.Niall, his thin lips pursed but smiling. Um.Niall’s right hand clutched a half-empty vial. His left was hidden from view.

The faces of 102 Ephriants leaned forward with roused expressions, most of them hopeful that the pressures now bearing down upon the Architrave might soon be relieved.

Those 102 faces heaped their zealous approval upon their newest Ephriant.

But what of the 51 who represented the Muharic contingent? No sharp, glassy tones came from this group. Their initial bewilderment at Lo.Jehan's choice of words was followed by a wave of cynical frowns, morphing right away into the collective glare of outright hostility. Within pulsimers, a small contingent following the centrist Muharic Ephriant Cerys Lo.Uphliac rose to leave the Hall before being dismissed by the Suhm-Ephriant, an act commensurate with outright rebellion. "The fifth and his lackeys will not take us for fools any longer," Lo.Uphliac hissed to those who strode long-legged beside her.

Lo.Jehan, upon seeing this, was shaken to his core. *I've failed*, he mused, turning with a jerk to face his Sovereign. Then he pulled himself away, preferring not to see the discouragement in Kirahmoor's eyes.

The Suhm-Ephriant stood and raised his hand to one last spirited crescendo as the last of the Muharic contingent made its way through the exits. He began to feel dizzy, nauseous. With his final breath before motioning to leave the Hall of the Yellow Marist, Kirahmoor cursed their audacity, fully aware that not only his standard bearer, but his stone, had failed him.

It would appear that the Muharadu, Kirahmoor mused, *has found a stone and a standard bearer of their own.*

The scene was charged with chaos, shrouded in fire and smoke, the indigo mists of defeat. Fueled by the tempest of a wisoltrean dusk, it had come upon him, he reasoned, without warning, and far too suddenly. Now, he stood frozen. His nerves shaken. His eyes burning. His skin scorched with the backlash of another supposedly well-thought-out plan. He evoked the Metepheemes; or was it Hedeon or...*Amaria. Anything. Anyone!!...*for an answer. *So much has been entrusted to me. How could this have happened?* he mused, seething with fear and regret. *No one could have seen this coming!* Or could they? Rationalize though he may, Diarmad Te.Sinian clenched

his jaw at the realization that answers were nowhere to be found.

This place, the Moirisois highlands, were to have been his proving ground. Since leaving Astuverica 42 days earlier, his mission had so far proven successful, and he had obeyed instructions as well as he could, despite them having come from an inferior like Vikram Lo.Jehan. As instructed, Chronicle 706 had been staged and executed with the precision that had become his trademark. His circulations had achieved a proud success by implanting 171 translatable bridges throughout this inexorable landscape. It was a theater of desolation which had brought him closer to the wisoltrean terminus...or for that matter, *any* terminal locus within the Dimensional Horizon...than he had ever been in his life.

The day had started out with such promise. That morning, he'd received a cognition from Astuverica; an order restricted to the 2nd highest of all indentations. It had been consigned through a Treflicat enciphered to the exclusive dialect of the Xaru-Chalidaethras, modifying the original instructions handed to him from Lo.Jehan. The sender? He was unsure. But the Thermionic signature felt *so* familiar to him, from so many youthful remembrances. *Could this be...* he'd pondered with a gleam of hope, *from my father?*

Whoever had sent it, though, the mandate was clear. With the third leg of his mission still incomplete, he was ordered to halt these tiresome chores...that is, the demeaning function of support for another Machaeran's command...and right away take the reins of Chronicle 398. To begin, test runs should commence in the Moirisois highlands, to be directed by a team of Chalisters. This component of the order he glazed over, never bothered to clarify, intoxicated as he was with the idea of at last being able to unburden himself of the mind-numbing routines of mapping and reconnaissance. It might even be enough to make him forget, for a while at least, of the Kuspegias he carried in his pocket.

To his regret, though, it had come down to this. He held his Treflicat in a tight grip, struggling to balance the hideous

images he saw before him with the simple joy that a single paternal gesture...Thermionic though it may be...could evoke.

Thoughts of Siruman Um.Sarujeh, his longtime friend and fellow Regent, filled his mind. Arriving only a few days behind Diarmad, Siruman and his contingent had taken the lead in monitoring the elicited cognitions handed to them by their new bridges. The result? The exact locations of over 2000 Muricai pellots: arrogant, insidious, splaying their cowardice and their treason from within the dank caverns of rock dotting the Moirisois. These were some of the last, and the strongest, holdouts from the other seven regions. After these pellots had been located, Um.Sarujeh....and by default, Diarmad...had been under orders to take prisoners before taking lives, then to ship their yield off to a Pavatrian staging point for interrogation. After they had spilled all they knew, execution was to be their fate.

The pressure, though, which Te.Sinian had heaped upon himself to score his own imprint upon this operation had grown more intense with each passing day. And when two detachments were slaughtered in whole by Muricai forces to witsofre of the Skaer-Trophliat subterraneans, the die was cast. By order of the Machaera's most well-connected young prodigy, those who might have become prisoners had quickly, and without inquest, fallen to the customary tools of the trade. And that was only the beginning.

Diarmad's mind turned away again, lost in the bliss of abject denial. A successful hunt is always defined by a successful kill: this he knew without a shred of doubt or remorse. And to a Machaeran, the implements of annihilation were ubiquitous. Tools such as Palick Raptors; heat-seeking arrows known as Mephistaffs; the caustic, gas-emitting process known as the Krylaric Shift. And now, the Actinetic Triurate. All provided the virulence needed for a successful mission. But the Quadric was, and would always remain, the preferred implement of the doctrinal Machaeran.

Diarmad had always seen himself in that light. Throughout his career, he had fought not only *with* the Quadric but *for* it. To him, it was the height of perfection. Four slender, curved

cutlasses, alloyed from the purest ores in the D.H. All adjoined in a corkscrew pattern. Engineered to slice through the air with minimum drag, maximum radius.

If not for his own assertiveness, this consortium of art and armament might have remained nothing more than an ingenious spear. But two quinteks earlier, after mining the fertile ramblings of a doomed maquit just before his execution in the Vengaos, Diarmad had absorbed the old soul's panicky ramblings...including a few technical improvements he'd involuntarily spilled in his last, tear-stained moments. True to form, Te.Sinian had managed to arc this intel in his own direction. With that, the heat seeking qualities of this beautiful instrument were vastly improved. The young Regent was more than happy to take the credit.

He hated to use the Quadric for what it was intended, and if he'd had his choice, the Triurate...at least during this assignment...would have served as an excellent proxy. Besides, if 398 was to propel him to the *pinnacle* of Machaeran Regency, as his mother had assured him with a straight face, then let it happen now! That way, he'd have one less reason to disappoint those whose opinions he cared so little for.

But now, as he stood atop a steep hill, watching the outcome of his inaugural order to implement the Actinetic Triurate, grim reality set in. He stared off to sorentre, toward the remains of what used to be the thriving marisatria of Tephrom-Anh. He held his arm close to his side, trying to soothe his jittery nerves.

"DIARMAD!" a familiar voice raged out in the near distance, approaching from along the trail behind him. "What...what have you DONE?! *Amaria*. This can't be *happening!*"

"I...I didn't know...It looked like they would berth to norostre, but they..." Te.Sinian cried out; fearful, disbelieving.

"You were not supposed to give the order until after dusk. Ah, *Freigh!* *FREIGH!* How...*COULD* you?! Have you never been this close to the terminus? You must have known what would happen if the Lumens berthed at the Wisoltrean terminus. Have you *never* been this close to a ...?"

Siruman was cut short as Diarmad's mood took its usual, sudden reversal. "Of course I have, you *fool!*" he spat, holding his Quadric in a strangular grip. "Of course..." Suddenly, his defiance vanished. "The Lumens...I just didn't see them, Siruman. I didn't...*see...*"

33 subalternates scrambled up the steep crag, stricken with shock and exhaustion. Their exposed skin was scorched with fused patches of grainy blue. Um.Sarujeh waived them back with frantic gestures, hissing out orders for them to return to the numerous cave openings far below, choked with charred debris, to gather the remains of their fallen comrades. That included weapons, rucksacks, tools...evidence of any kind which might reflect upon the misdeed which had just occurred here.

It was all too much for Siruman to bear. He seethed again at Diarmad, then sank to the ground, holding his head in his hands. Far below, what was left of his contingent...no more than 200 subalternates, most of them injured...flailed in the pall of dying luments to salvage the shattered remnants of Siruman's contingent.

Behind his surviving subalternates, the scalded remains of 248 captives, including 44 children, could be seen lying near the underbrush just inside the openings. They were memorialized in the final grotesque gestures they had taken on, a pulsimer before their deaths. But something far more hideous to Siruman's eyes lay no more than two neurris beyond the cave openings: the scorched remains of over a thousand subalternates. Um.Sarujeh's hands formed into tight fists. He covered his eyes.

For the first time in his life, as Diarmad Te.Sinian saw it, he had failed. And not just himself or a handful of souls in his immediate company. No, this failure was about to grow legs, capable of a long, loping stride, ready at any pulsimer to start sprinting at full bore in the direction of Astuverica. Now, his effrontery in tatters, he groped for a way to understand how this disaster could have occurred, and how he could somehow conceal his culpability.

“Hierosre Ve.Ulte...and Miamur Um.Dulac...indeed, three other maquits, Siruman. They told me that this cave system was ideal for an Actinetic. Look out there! Can’t you see? All those tiny fissures in the rock. The ventilation is perfect. They assured me that an Actinetic, once ignited, would take off in an instant and kill, right away!”

“Did you consult on this location, before you instructed the maquits to set the amalgams?”

“What do you mean?”

“Was there a Chalister here?” Siruman asked, receiving a blank stare in return. “Weren’t you aware of your orders? Don’t you...*remember?!?*”

Diarmad whimpered, beginning to collapse under the burden which followed the vocalization of his decline. “I watched that dusty cloud of protoplasm, Siruman, I assure you; it was headed to *norostre*. The Lumens...*Amaria*...they followed it with such agility, such eagerness! I swear, I...I could *see* the hunger in their eyes as they tasted its contrails!”

The scar on Diarmad’s neck began to seethe, to burn. He hovered his fingers over it, terrified of the far greater pain that might erupt if he touched it. He then shifted his touch to the birthmark beside it, as his mother had instructed him, hoping that in so doing, he might find some semblance of peace. This strategy almost always worked for Savita. But it never worked for him.

Diarmad stared at Um.Sarujeh, his voice rising. “Those pellets down there were trying to escape, Siruman! I couldn’t just...wait around for some miserable procurator from the Architrave to tell me what to do! I saw those pellets tr...trying to squeeze through the fissures. So I gave the order for 70 of your subalternates to crawl back down there, to hold them in place. Just before that, I’d commanded Ve.Ulte to transfuse the compounds, to await my signal. Then I gave the order to clear the trenches adjoining the cave entrances. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the Lumens, and I...I signaled Um.Dulac to begin the Actinetic. But...but the flock changed direction, Siruman. The Lumens *turned*, and...!”

“STOP!” Um.Sarujeh had heard enough. The rest he knew from eyewitness reports which had already been gathered. He flinched; a wave of disturbing images ran through his mind. The Lumens, regardless of their perceived intent, had without warning turned to wisoltre. By then it was too late to reverse the discharges. The compounds had already broken through, piercing thick veins of Menshar which coursed just beneath the cavernous tombs they were about to ignite.

The numerous fissures which dotted this cave system stoked the flames hot and wild, belching monstrous clouds of gritty blue smoke; much more than a normal Actinetic would release. Siruman’s forces, temporarily under Diarmad’s command, had taken cover in small echoburths to estre of the cave entrance, forced to lay low or risk exposure to the toxicity which should have drifted toward Zenith. Instead, it was racing toward *them!* As the bluster of a wisoltrean dusk first began to show itself, a panicked order to evacuate the area was drowned in screams: the voices of supplication, pleading for a release from their fate. This inaudible command followed the first wisps of wind forming the maelstrom about to engulf the Moirisois, hurling thousands of acrid blue tongues to estre. 1300 subalternates, eight circulats and seven maquits lay in its path. This was the majority of Um.Sarujeh’s contingent, which a few stratimers earlier had numbered nearly 1500.

It took no more than a stratimer for this catastrophe to slash his contingent to less than a fifth of its original strength. Meanwhile, the bulk of Diarmad’s own, smaller command was flushing the last remnants of resistance from the marisatria of Tephrom-Anh...ironically, under the interim command of Um.Sarujeh himself. This was an exchange which had been begged upon Siruman, so that the son of Savita and Gersul could relish the taste of high command, and right away unleash his newest weapon...as his swollen ego had so urgently directed him.

Now, though, none of this concerned the shattered, betrayed Um.Sarujeh. He bolted upright in darkness, the glare from dozens of lightstuffs skittering in the mists below. “If it had been necessary, you could have killed the whole lot of

them with 62 Quadrics, you freighing *IDIOT!*” Siruman screamed, as Diarmad turned away in the last throes of shame to leave his friend to his anger and remorse. “It would have taken no more than two, maybe three pulsimers. Then, our shame would have been far less obvious. Or should I say...YOUR shame!”

Diarmad stopped in his tracks and spun around on his left heel: another reversal of mood, this one off the charts. “*Quadrics*, you say? Why, I would not allow *my* blade, much less the blades of those in my command, to be soiled by such *filth* as that which now lies in disrepute in those...*holes!*”

Siruman was stunned. “What are you *talking* about? What’s with this sudden reluctance for metalwork? You haven’t hesitated to use it yet during this mission. And you dare to utter the word... *soiled?* What do you think the Quadric is for, Diarmad?! It’s for our *enemies!* When we’re not taking prisoners, we KILL! Isn’t that obvious to you?”

Um.Sarujeh took a deep breath. He calmed, extended his arms, ashamed at his loss of control. Especially now. “Please understand, Diarmad. I myself have much to answer for as well. I came here with orders to take prisoners; first and foremost. But I have turned only 400 miserable skantaros over for interrogation in the Pavatrias, while five times that number lay dead, along with the intel their mouths could have provided. And why? Because I allowed myself to fall victim to your relentless prodding, while you...”

“You dare to blame *me* for your failures, you...you miserable *pellot!* I have a mind to...”

“...while YOU pummeled me with every excuse you could find to justify your bloodlust. *And*, while you fondled and fussed and agonized daily over those stupid, ridiculous little memory stones of yours. You let circulats and maquits and subalternates do your job while your mind, your sense of reason...*vanished!* When our captive count grew out of control, I asked for your help. We needed to begin transiting prisoners out of the Moirisois right away. But you refused! You preferred instead to put them to the blade. You showed no

discipline when we sustained casualties. You didn't want to be bothered with prisoners; of course not. You...!"

"These...these stones are NOT stupid! They are NOT ridiculous. They are...THEY...ARE...!" Diarmad's words seemed to hang in mid-air, just beyond his grasp. They would not come; not with the weight sufficient to convince Um.Sarujeh of their power, created by the hand of one Diarmad used to hold in such high esteem. One he used to call *uncle*.

Siruman turned away in disgust. Kieravur Te.Thorasle, his second-in-command, sprinted up the crest of the hill to receive orders from his liege and report on conditions below. He was followed by Um.Dulac and Ve.Ulte, two of Um.Sarujeh's maquits. Both had been responsible for staging this Actinetic. Their faces were cast in a dark pallor which even the gleam of their lightstaff could not brighten. None of them could bring themselves to look Diarmad in the eye, adrift in their contempt for themselves and Te.Sinian. Not to mention their guilt and their grief over so many departed subalternates. These were emotions typically alien to the average Machaeran.

Hushed tones were exchanged between Um.Sarujeh and his subalternates, hidden from the ears of the now ostracized Te.Sinian. These were words, though, which the eye could *see*...on the lips. Words which formed the sounds that threatened to seal the fate of the eminent young Regent and the reputation he knew he was born to carry.

With a resolute hostility, Siruman stared into Diarmad's eyes. "What they *are*, Diarmad Te.Sinian, will be your undoing. Te.Thorasle will serve as my chief witness." Um.Sarujeh turned his back to his former friend. "Kieravur, I need you to cognify a full report to the Architrave. Um.Dulac, and Ve.Ulte; listen up! You are to corroborate your own accounts in this report, which is only for the elucidation of Lo.Jehan and Ve.Aztasur. Do you understand?"

The maquits nodded.

Siruman, Te.Thorasle, Um.Dulac and Ve.Ulte turned to leave. As they did, Siruman threw a final hard stare behind him. Te.Thorasle's lightstaff, set to a dim modulation, showed

the sudden arising of new mists, stirred by the frantic motions of Siruman's remaining subalternates. The five of them, alone, high above the milieu, were inundated in a textured cloud, rendering them invisible to those who toiled below.

Diarmad clutched the grip of his weapon. He raised his arm with a confidence of spirit, of purpose. He dropped back and flexed his wrist behind him, his twisted face blanketed in Actinetic haze. His torso lurched forward, his arm flying out in front of him with force and fury.

His fingertips released it into a tight spin...

The cloud dispersed. Diarmad strode 50 neurris to observe the ground before him. A lightstaff, lying broken beside the rocky trail. Four blades, their cutlasses lodged into the backs of each of his victims, now cast upon the rocks littering the edge of the trail.

Diarmad surveyed the dying face of Siruman Um.Sarujeh, then, with a paranoid gaze, the theater surrounding him. He rushed to retrieve the components of his implement, then quickly cleaned and reassembled them under the skillful touch which only his deft hands could render.

Behind him, the shattered remains of a decimated detachment, now leaderless. A mere fraction of its former strength, it breathed chaos, dissolution. He hurried off, to carry himself and his reputation beyond the dark clouds of scandal and shame.

Ahead lay the ruins of Tephrom-Anh, the destination to which his moribund psyche would soon take flight, far and away from the ashes littering the Moirisois highlands. There, in a few days, 2000 rested, newly self-assured subalternates would await fresh, bold, vigorous leadership. And in him, that is what they would find.

The Mysoux-Xyklian ranges beckoned.

*T*heir small meal was now prepared. Before leaving this place, Savita stole another glance upward, at the long gray prominence of Menshar, bulging from the cliffs which towered

above the beach. The first few Ione had just begun to appear, to suffuse the darkness with their cold white lights.

Savita placed her hand against the back of her neck before pulling a bell-shaped vial from her pocket, its finish drab with age and use. Its cracked edge cut her finger. *"This came from Lo.Bharomex, at The Tramlings...Level Three. Not the best khiromek in Astuverica, but still, his extracts will do you right, Ceveaesh."* She cringed, recalling the words of that crewmember whose name kept slipping from her mind. *Pentumus! I can't believe it's come down to this,* she pondered in disgust, swallowing hard. She wobbled as the gritty fluid ran down her throat. Its effect on her mind, though, was astounding. The pain, the relentless impact of the Grist, fell away in leaden clumps. For the first time in three days, she could once more hold her head high. *Somehow I've got to remember his name...*

She retrieved and articulated her stone. An assignment, to wisoltre, had been sent to her. Had this one come from her consort? From Gersul? It was vague, non-specific for now, involving a Muricai target who'd been primed for assassination on at least five separate occasions. This pellet, though, had so far managed to elude his fate. She glanced over, then forgot the close of her instructions: *establish his position, then await final directives.*

Her pulse quickened. Savita understood the twin benefits awaiting her in the ranges to which they were about to venture, based in part on the cog she'd received four days earlier from that desperate stranger, so eager to win his absolution. *Could it be possible that both of them...are bound for the Swales?* She could hardly believe her good fortune. She cognified a return message; she would accept her first official task from The Order in a little over two quinteks.

Her willingness to do so came not just because it suited her purposes, nor from any vague sense of obligation to Gersul. No, she had already paid her debt to her consort with the promise that she would sooner die than allow herself to spill the secrets he had kept locked away from the X-C, indeed from the Horizon itself. In truth, she couldn't understand why she

found herself so eager to pour her skills out on this target. But the mere anticipation of the kill seemed to fill the void that had once been satisfied by Shirascur's delightful extracts.

The aromas of the evening meal infused the night air. Her hunger, though, was supplanted by a series of surprising images, running cool and clear before her eyes. Malaeric cipherings. Molten ores burning and cooling in succession; then a fusillade of dark water surrounding a pinpoint of bright light. Finally, a dark blue terrabode beside the Columns. The anxious eyes of her sister-in-law, trudging the darkened crosscuts at Level Five, making her way home.

Eusterian mists wrapped themselves around Savita's body, washing these images from her mind. Like a thief, he stole up behind her, covering her shoulders with a warm Kira cloth. She searched her pocket, removing the dark little Kyotrimlic stone she had retrieved from that toxic, crescent-shaped shore, 28 days earlier. She rubbed it for a pulsimer, then returned it to her pocket, her thoughts ambling off to a warm bed, the anticipation of his calloused fingertips upon her skin.

With Gersul, she knew without doubt or regret, lay her heart, her true place in the Astuverican paradigm. But here, tonight, with *him*, would lay her body. Her thighs, her lungs...they heaved as his calloused right hand fondled her erect nipples. His left reached down to brush her inner thigh, then a single finger eased itself into pink, quivering flesh, enfolding his digit like a warm, wet glove.

Dinner would have to wait. And as Guymoun took her by the hand, a perfect circle of four Ione began to dance exquisite above a misty shroud, at Zenith.

THE SINISTER GLEAM OF MACHAERAN blade reflected harsh in the cobalt vapors of dusk, then disappeared. Kerak looked behind him, across the withering vestiges of the Cryostrilic Plains. This was the same terrain over which they had been passing the previous two days. It had been eight long days since they had been pulled from their lithic tomb, after leaving the shores of the Eusterian sea. And as the wisoltrean terminus drew ever closer, a familiar aura enveloped him. He evoked the 'Phemes for a spark of assurance that their destination, chosen for them by the one now calling himself *Arjun*, was not the tangled web of deceit he suspected it to be. Assurances of this kind, though, were nowhere to be found.

This was the fourth time they'd managed to avoid detection here in these summits. The inherent danger of open spaces under the glare of luments was a subject they had debated hot and heavy since putting the Pnumiphric Pale behind them. But it was felt that the risk of traveling at night, under the outward glow of torches and lightstaff, was far greater. Arjun pointed out that the dusts and protoplasm that are whipped up in this terrain are leaden, opaque, and will camouflage anything...or anyone...not emitting direct light, regardless of the angle of vision or the time of day. Kerak had to admit that the old pellet was right about that. *That*, however, was the extent of his mental wanderings where Arjun was concerned. Through a psychic sieve, Kerak continued to push his thoughts elsewhere...anywhere but in the direction of his father.

The Cryostrilics had been a fascinating but grim study in contrasts. This flat, featureless plain was a surprising idiosyncrasy within this otherwise vertical region. It was covered as far as the eye could see by some of the purest Thulitar found anywhere in the Horizon; blazing white in color, its pasty surface punctuated by trillions of tiny fissures,

breaches and clefts. Most of them were about a third as wide as an adult wrist. The surface of the plains, they'd noticed, always remained warm, even at night; a lingering consequence of the Actinetics which, less than half an untek prior, had wound down in the Xhalamears. Other proof of this was revealed by a familiar blue odor which drifted up from the many small openings; vague scents which lifted in tiny puffs, followed by the appearance of millions of Chalovertrites.

Or for lack of a better name...worms. Adult *Chalos* are about half a neurri in length, as wide as an adult thumb, pure black, ill-tempered, inedible as dry rock. Under normal circumstances they would have been content to remain buried within the Subterra for the duration of their natural lives. But the poisonous rancor of the Triurate eclipsed those ideals, sending them vaulting for the surface. This served only to expose their thin skins to the scorching glare of mid-day luments. A slow demise was to follow, as opposed to the speedier, more painful death which awaited them below.

For two days, as Nalani and her tiny, swollen feet took turns riding atop the shoulders of Cai, Ekavias, Arjun and Kerak, all 15 in this disparate assemblage had marveled at the irony of it all. For in death, these dull-witted reptiles at least had the good sense to assume command of their own destinies; to choose the lesser of two evils. In their own minds, each of them wondered if they would make the same call under similar circumstances.

Chalos weren't the only creatures to suffer in these disconsolate steppes. And not just because of the heat and the smell of Actinetics. For Jadox, the Cryostrilics presented a kaleidoscope of mnemonic assaults, the likes of which he'd not felt since the age of 15. Without the Kuspegias, they burned low and hot within the cogent sponge of his mind. With the Kuspegias, though, the effect was nothing short of incredible!

As abysmal as conditions were in the Cryostrilics, they were a welcome relief from their experiences four days before arriving here at the Plains. Putting the Sturosphere gradient behind them after two days of hard travel, the trail became even more unforgiving as they'd entered the outer fringes of

the wisoltrean Seamounts. This put them into a terrain known to the locals as *Mihn'du.Qual*, a Mnulorathrean phrase meaning to “squeeze” or “choke”. Here is where the skies turned darker, shadowed by the Actinetic effluvium rising up through porous rock. The distinct contours of these plateaus thrust the grainy blue mists up from the fissures dotting the Xhalamears, causing them to soar high overhead, channeled into an opaque aerial river, then to slide downward to norostre and into the natural funnel which would drive these vapors all the way to the Bay of Teoramugh.

Mihn'du.Qual had surrounded them on all sides, filled with cavernous clefts, grottos, basins and deep natural depressions; a landscape further accentuated by thick, low flung forests, overgrown with stocky, ancient vines of Thyloshist and Magnomeara. Too, their narrow routes were hindered by slabs of Kalmustur as much as five neurris thick.

Here, the physical assaults on their bodies began to take their toll. Psychologically, though, their assaults came from other sources. The cynical effects of 40 quinteks of exile and oppression could be seen here in its purest form. Each day brought them face to face with at least three small clusters of expats, refugees, renegades or runaways: ectopic societies, locked in a siege mentality, crumbled into dogmatic strife, sectarianism, incest, infanticide, chaos and despair.

The sole benefit gleaned from contact with these insular subsets was a distinct reluctance to stop or even slow down while in their presence. So even if it meant traveling throughout the night (albeit with nothing more than Ionian light), they were more than willing to slash through the brush, the fatigue and the hunger if it might shorten their time in this place. Fears of Machaeran aggression seemed mild by comparison. Indeed, they made excellent progress while passing through the void known as *Mihn'du.Qual*.

But now, at the far side of day eight, the Cryostrilics were soon to fade into memory as the Lumens faded to sorentre. Nostra Lo.Mhastreac walked just ahead of Arjun, sighting the extension of a Mierlu-Swaaric route which recontinued here at the Plain's fringes. They merged at this point with the

wisoltrean passages: that series of paths which, if not lost in an endless clutch of root, rock or sylvan overgrowth, might somehow carry them to their destination.

Fire, at last! A deep echoburth, lined at its base with enormous coils of dry root, was located a little more than 2000 neurris from the wisoltrean perimeter of the Cryostrilics, there to provide sanctuary, warmth, and Vepreste, the only edible vegetation to be found in these reaches. With each rootbranch, the flames beat back the chill airs of night, disappearing into smoke and darkness.

A little less than a hundred stratimers was all he could muster, and at best it was a fitful sleep. Kerak sat up to a misty night, damp and still. A pounding headache and a cold shiver had kept him awake and edgy for the past 20 stratimers. He covered his ears to repel the most obnoxious caterwauling of snores he could recall since their pilgrimage through the caves had come to an end. He stood, searched for the lightstaff, and set it to its lowest bearing. He yawned, watching a restless but sleeping Cai shift from one shoulder to the other. She and the rest of them were squeezed into a tight mass, unaware of the shrill symphony spewing from out of their mouths.

One soul, he noticed, was missing.

He turned to walk the steep path up to the ridge which bore down upon the sorentrean slopes. Finding a large boulder at the crest of the echoburth, his foot slid before he turned to sit. For the first time since setting the lightstaff, he pondered the identity of that lone soul. For that, he wouldn't have long to wait.

"You nearly missed that last step up to the rim. Would've been a long fall from that height."

Kerak swung around and pointed his lightstaff into the darkness. There, Arjun's face appeared before him, five neurris out. Kerak's stomach began to roil. He grimaced, turned with a jerk to face the other direction. He wanted to stand, to leave, to run, as fast as his feet would carry him. But an invisible

weight bore down upon his shoulders. A prolonged silence bled the air.

Arjun had been waiting for this moment, and here it was: a fortunate accident which had dropped itself into his lap. 41 endless days...and a burden he could no longer carry...had to end! For even though it was clear that his youngest son was not ready, the father knew that this chance might never come again. He stood, moved forward and placed himself behind Kerak before squatting on the ground. Kerak remained rigid, unyielding, his fists and his jaw locked tight.

“*Kerak*. About four days after we left the Crescent, it occurred to me where your mother got that name from. Comes from an old Hirusovran patois meaning ‘diviner,’ or ‘to nourish’...something along those lines. Quite ancient. The actual phrase is *Kerakoizruliu*, I believe. I’ll bet...I’ll bet you didn’t know that.”

20 pulsimers of silence. “Of course I knew that.” He lied.

15 pulsimers of silence. Arjun extended his hand to the darkness. He was fully invested, and there was no turning back now.

“I...I didn’t want to leave, Kerak. I wanted nothing more in this cursed Horizon than to remain in Whistoph-Karnash, in the Phileans, to stay with you and Adecyn...with you and your *mother*. But it just wasn’t to be...”

10 more stratimers of silence. Kerak’s entire body went into a slow, steady spasm of revulsion. But he remained, fighting off the urge to lash out as the old skantaro kept mouthing off behind him.

“My hatreds, my foolishness, Kerak; they nearly *destroyed* me! I guess Drogan...I mean Arjun2...may have told you the story of Darmek Ve.Muirgen, the second Suhm-Ephriant. Ve.Muirgen ordered the assassination of his mother, Inaya. Afterwards, when I met Adecyn, I went to great pains to keep her...and when the time came, *you*...under the tightest of wraps. After she and I conjoined I began to pull back from The Order, but with the utmost caution. By the time you were conceived I’d managed to pare my assignments down to less than one an untek. That was no small feat, I assure you!

“Around that time, Ve.Muirgen sparked what he called The Purges of Sholodephre; really nothing more than the fulfillment of his intent to consolidate his power. His stated targets were the Pellopharuts,” Arjun said, using the Vengathlian term for *hypocrite*. To the Archtrave, this epithet applied to anyone with split allegiances or wavering loyalties. “He was very vocal in his desire to remove them from the Regency of the Council, The Order, even the Muharadu. The Xaru-Chalidaethras, as you can imagine, was livid over this. And, of course, knowing my hostility toward Ve.Muirgen, I was approached by Duremeat Ve.Thilourme and Mirough Um.Xal-Qorust, both of them Ephriants with The Order. Their offer? One *final* assignment. One which they promised would forever release me from my obligations to the Courvesois and leave me to the quiet life I sought with you and your mother. That assignment, Kerak, one which I eagerly accepted, was to take the life of Darmek Ve.Muirgen.”

Kerak’s eyes popped. His head rotated a half turn. Arjun stood and continued. “Ve.Muirgen was a Suhm-Ephriant who liked to travel, to survey his domain in full entourage, despite the risks. Of course, I knew how to turn this habit to my advantage. So about four days after accepting this assignment, Ve.Thilourme arranged for a courier to be sent to me, to bring me a Kyo containing Ve.Muirgen’s complete itinerary for the next 20 days, including a visit to the Phileans. To Sarosaroulve. This marisatria had been seized about two unteks prior, because of a cluster of hammer veins which had been found in the immediate area.”

Arjun began to pace from side to side, recounting his past. “Either in a fit of nervousness, or maybe just outright incompetence, Ve.Thilourme and Um.Xal-Qorust, in their haste and their obsession to cover their tracks, didn’t properly vet this courier. The fool left Astuverica without a current set of credentials. His attestations were sloppy, unconfirmed. He was even carrying a stolen Treflicat. *Stolen*, I tell you! Something he’d picked up along the way from the Chivet-Pradur, operating near Pirelthesur.”

Arjun's loathing was transparent. "To make a long story short, this pellet was arrested and interrogated in Briodonshe. His masters could not be traced, of course: that was by design. That Kyo of his held quite an extensive dossier on the Suhm-Ephriant's travels, far beyond the first 20 days. And for some reason Um.Xal-Qorust had marked the Kyo with *my* personal indentions, making it look as if *I* was the one who'd requested it, who'd paid for its delivery. So the Machaera's suspicions turned manic. I'm sure you can figure out the rest of the story."

Arjun sat as Kerak arched his neck, turning his head even closer to the sound of the voice coming from behind him. "My arrest was swift. Your mother was off trading for whips at the Terraces when it happened. I wasn't even allowed time to pack a bag or leave a note...nothing! Three days later I was tossed into the penal chambers at Level Three. *Creegh Amarial!* Those chasms were horrible. What a warm welcome for a soul who'd never seen Astuverica below Triage level! I don't know how Ve.Muirgen reacted to the news of my arrest, the discovery of the Kyo. There were maybe four Ephriants anywhere in the Architrave who were truly loyal to him. They pushed hard for a trial, but the rest of the Xaru-Chalidaethras was not about to go for that, for fear of whom I might expose. Um.Xal-Qorust suddenly went dumb. Of course, it didn't take him long to morph into the *faithful servant* of Ve.Muirgen, calling for my immediate execution, leaving me no time to talk. I knew that even if there *had* been a trial, for those in my position, who dared to lash out at the highest levels of Sovereignty, the penalty was always the same. So my choices boiled down to one thing: I'd have to bribe my way out of incarceration!"

A restless Arjun straightened his back, stood once more and began to move. "Ve.Thilourme. What a ravenous skantaro! I knew him well, and I knew that argency was his second greatest weakness, next to a good hard suck from one of those filthy little chirapsiats he kept on retainer. On my third night in captivity, I sent for him. I didn't trust him, but I had nowhere else to turn. We bargained for a trade of 400,000 khirius. In exchange for this and my vow of silence, he assured

me that I would have my freedom. What I offered him was but a fraction of all the wealth I had to my name; I was confident he'd never find that out, though. Only the fool in me agreed to this arrangement. I should have seen that this move was bound to lay waste to all my plans, my hopes and dreams. *Everything...*"

Arjun's paces along the dry gravel rim grew more agitated. "My accounts were all reserved in Ghuardanthia with Jakiu Um.Tuleriath, my synulariat," he said, evoking the title of one who manages the argency of others. "I marked a Kyo with specific instructions, authorizing him to release the contents of my largest account to Ve.Thilourme's proxy. I was assured that as soon as the funds were transferred, I would be taken under cover of darkness back to Whistoph-Karnash."

Arjun's breathing became strained. "Jakiu was a kind, gentle soul. Honest and trusting to a fault, but a terrible judge of character. And not very...what's the word? Stouthearted. Ve.Thilourme sent the Kyo by a pair of couriers...or should I say thugs...to Jakiu. Those skantaros subjected Jakiu to a fierce torture that few could bear. But he didn't talk; at least not until they ripped his left arm from out of his socket, fractured his skull. And the couriers? They got the 400,000 khirius they came for, and in Jakiu's pain and anguish, they got something else; knowledge of the existence of the other six accounts in my name. Even though Jakiu let this fact slip, his refusal to allow the courier access to those accounts is what killed him!"

Kerak's pulse began to quicken. "A day after the courier's return, my cell was broken into by three guards who pummeled me until blood sprayed from my ears, my mouth, my eyes. Ve.Thilourme then stormed in with rage and venom written all over his face, demanding to know the broach codes to my other accounts. I refused, but all my stubbornness got me was another beating. Then he forced me to cross a line from which I could not retreat. He assured me that if I did not give him the codes...that you and your mother would suffer the same fate as Jakiu Um.Tuleriath."

Arjun slumped to the ground. By now, Kerak had swung his body all the way around, to face his father, eye to eye. "I

submitted, Kerak! *Amaria*, I had...no other choice! The codes were relinquished even before the blood had dried from around my eyes. They took it all, except for a smaller cache kept in a sequestered account they never found, one which only your mother knew the codes for. Um.Xal-Qorust, Ve.Thilourme and their ilk sent another, more polished attendant back to Ghuardanthia to claim the rest of their prize. They didn't want to chance it with another one of those brainless caqueheads they always hired to do their bidding. And as for those three guards? As soon as I saw their bloodstained boots march out of my cell, I knew that I was as good as dead by the time they returned."

A breath of Ionian wind brushed the back of Kerak's neck. "So...so I lay there that night, aware that my time in this Sphere could now be counted in mere days, if I was that lucky. Just before dawn I was pulled from my cell while a drudge came in to wipe the sewage that seeped in through the walls, from a culvert between mine and the adjoining cell. I was left alone in a corner while a work detail, short on guards, was being sent to replace some blunt trampers who'd been killed in a vapor lock percussion at Level Two."

A relaxed mien drifted over Arjun's face. "I...I began to see my life as a series of sudden chances, Kerak: all too brief; each one more slippery and elusive than the one before. So when no one was looking, I stood up, tiptoed about 10 neurris and slid into that detail. On the way to the vrunleatrope I jumped out of line when two guards got into a fight with another prisoner. Under darkness, I slithered and wound my way out of the Zurish-Triece, as the locals call it. Making it up to the Quarter loops and the Registers of Astuverica. Past the Custody gates and the Constabularies. Into the darkness of the Andulkas.

"The viamars and the footpaths to the Phileans were out of the question: once they discovered my disappearance, they knew that's where I'd go. So I went in the opposite direction, to norostre, forced onto the less traveled routes to avoid capture. I slept by day, walked at night, pushed onward and

outward, until I wound up as far from my past life as I could get. In other words, here in the Seamounds.”

Kerak turned to face the echoburth’s rim. The sound of feet trampling gravel and low brush rose from the caldera below. “My escape from Astuverica was a double-edged sword, Kerak. In those days the Seamounds were a thousand times more desolate than they are now, if you can imagine that. The Muricai was in its infancy, with no other organized resistance. Nothing in this region except a few scattered cliques of zealots, apocalyptic; all criminalized by the Muharadu, separated by huge spans of time and distance here in these wilds. Cults like the Zhalugrifts, the Maharests, Thrapp-Niscal and the Doctrines of Night. There were other sects; Yarosliths, The Coming of Dhufaer, to name a few. Most of the cults I came across back then would eventually, within about 10 quinteks, vanish. Or they merged with others, or faded even deeper into the Subterra, thanks to the persistence of a few bounty hunters. The Machaera were too busy elsewhere to strike out into these hinterlands, to hunt down a smattering of harmless votaries.

“As for me, the ‘Phemes were rich. Seldom did I cross paths with a sect that refused to shelter me, despite a shortage of trust. They were constantly being driven and harassed. And despite their abject poverty, the hopelessness of their lives, they saw me as kind of a kindred spirit; I guess because they knew I was as much a target as they were.”

Arjun let go a chuckle. “As for the bounty hunters; I give those fools a *little* credit for thinking they could take out a Courvesant, current or former. Every untek or so we’d run into one or two. Either they’d drive us further into the barrens, imprison the weak, kill the stragglers...or all three. Every so often I’d get the drop on one who was naïve, inexperienced...careless. Before they died, the lines they spilled were all the same, and came down to this: that *skantaro turncoat* going by the name of ‘Arjun Ve.Jalu’ carried quite a bounty on his head, and would forever remain wanted, hunted, coveted by the Pellots of Power who wouldn’t sleep a wink until he was captured. Silenced for all time.”

Arjun stood. “Home...the Phileans. They...they were *lost* to me, Kerak! I knew that if I changed my mind, tried going back, got within a hundred thousand neurris of you or your mother, I’d be plucked like ripe fruit from the Sweriggs, eviscerated like a Builhern. But a small crumb of comfort fell to me about a quintek into my exile. One unfortunate mercenary told me in his last stratimer of life that Um.Xal-Qorust had hired a couple of pellogroats to keep your mother under surveillance, in the hope that I would return to her, or at least cognify her. When I heard this, I came to realize her value to my adversaries. His belief that I would attempt to reach her was to her advantage, and it would keep her alive. But that pointed to only one outcome for me. For if I could not return home, nothing was left for me but to remain, cast adrift here in the Seamounts. *Nothing!* So here I stayed. The circumstances of my disappearance, I’m certain, remained a mystery to those who knew me. And even though, over the quinteks, my enemies have died off, the effect of it all was still...devastating.”

Arjun motioned toward his son. “After three quinteks of life on the run, I was a derelict. One of the last hunters who came for me, I engaged near the Pulateas. She was a strangler, went right for the throat with those massive claws of hers, nails like tiny sabers. She nearly broke me, as weak and dispirited as I’d become. She got away, albeit with a nasty burn mark over her right eye and cheek, from a hot coal I heaved her way as she ran off. That face of hers is etched into my mind, and no doubt, vice versa. The hunters I encountered after that rarely ever came for *me* anymore. But I was so wasted from Sallowrith, Cryplic Myst, Thilerowhip,” he sighed, describing some of the narcotic herbage native to the Seamounts, “that I paid it little notice.

“Another three quinteks and I didn’t even know my own name! An old cleric who led a faction of Incarnates I was living with at the time called me *Garion* by mistake; I guess I reminded him of his dead father. I never even bothered to correct him. So that’s who I became. From that day on, *Arjun* existed only within the distant void of memory. Considering

my state of mind, I couldn't have returned to the Phileans even if I *knew* it was safe to do so. My strength had become that withered. My spirit, my *essence*, my..."

Arjun slumped to the ground. The sound of nervous breathing could be heard from below the edge of the rim. Kerak remained motionless, unable to speak. The fist he had held in a clench for the past 15 stratimers began to open as his father stared at him through bloodshot eyes.

"Where...where *is* she, Kerak?"

This was the moment he had feared the most. But he refused to hold back. "*Dead*" was all Kerak could mutter as his last memory of Adecyn Um.Tiago pierced the veil. His fist now vanished into an open palm, extending outward, toward the defeated face he saw before him. The face of his father. Kerak tried once more to speak, but failed.

A faint blush of light began to peer from the sorentrean horizon. Kerak looked behind him, to the edge of the rim. He saw a pair of sleepy eyes gawking in his direction. "You might as well show yourself, 'cause you're *no* good at hiding," he barked.

Cai's head rose above the rocks, her face wearing a timid grin. A Kiracloth draped her shoulders. As soon as he saw her, Kerak's stoic demeanor vanished, a breath of cool relief from the scorching wind that had become Arjun's sorrowful unwindings.

"Sorry, I...I couldn't sleep. I'm sorry...I swear I didn't hear what you were saying Gari...I mean, Arjun." She lowered her head. "Sorry...*why* do I keep saying that?"

"It's alright Cai, you've got nothing to apologize for." Arjun's fondness welled up within him. *How much she reminds me of Sava*, he mused.

The three of them huddled together against the pre-dawn chill, as Arjun realized that Kerak wasn't the only one who deserved an explanation. Arjun winced, aware that he was about to reach his breaking point with this awkward stranger known as *self-expression*.

"Cai." He waived, wondering if the subject of her father would cause her further anguish. *Just do it*, he chastised

himself. "I need to tell you a few things about...about Jarumon. I know what drew him away from the Crescent. What led him to leave us. And you."

Cai paused, her mood now turning hot. It was clear that she had no taste for this subject. "Oh really! Well, what difference does it make? I tried to convince him to stay, to persuade him that he was in no condition to travel. That stubborn old pelot. He's dead now...*Arjun!* So what...*difference?!*" she cried out.

"You couldn't have changed his mind, Cai. None of us had the power to do that," Arjun said, cursing himself for having held back for so long. "You have to understand, when your father left Xilianur for the Seamounds, he walked away from more than just his family, his life and career. He left *Jarumon* behind, too. All of us who came to the Crescent under threat of death or imprisonment fell under the same influences. I can't expect *you* to understand that."

"What do you know of me, Arjun? You think I'm incapable of understanding that? There's more to me than you..." she stopped herself, clutching her forehead. "About...about my father. If you think I don't know of his involvement with the Muricai; I do. Of his life before *I* came along, I don't have a lot of details, but..."

"Well, *I* do! In the short time he was at the Crescent, your father and I talked...of the past...of our lives...before we came to the Bay. Yes, I know that sort of thing was forbidden!" Arjun said with a hint of sarcasm.

"So you trusted him, but not us? Why?"

"Trust, or the lack of it, Cai...was not the issue. Your father and I...long before you were born...before Kerak was born...we knew each other."

"How? Did you know each other well?"

"No, not well, but..."

"But *what?*"

"We crossed paths once: 24, 25 quinteks ago, about half an untek after the rebellions erupted in the wisoltrean Andulkans. At the time I was engaged in surveillance around Thana-Yarelu and Duroleau. *Amaria*...the purges were in full

swing back then, each of them starting and ending over a span of less than an untek. The Quadric was conceived during that time, just after the first series of penal revolts in Thanatafuor. And the Zualoslet came into common use,” Arjun said, describing the distinctive markings which are carved or burned into the skin of the hardest bitten, most resolute captives and rogues bound for the deepest levels of the Astuverican Subterra.

Arjun paused, tongue-tied.

“Well? Go on,” Cai insisted.

“And during that time...the Krylaric Shifts were created and refined.”

“What are you going on about...Krylaric Shifts?” Cai’s puzzlement gave way to sudden awareness.

“The Triurate wasn’t his only creation, Cai. *Krylarics!* He conjured the alloys, the mosaics, the amalgams that formed the core of Krylaric technos. Are you familiar with the numbers in Kalamirlo and Thana-Yarelu alone? 3,000 souls were asphyxiated in less than a day from the effluvium coming off a single shift. Not to mention the many more thousands, throughout the Horizon, who’ve been garroted through Krylarics since that time. Your father was singled out after the purges for this contribution: quite a watermark in his career, as I recall.”

Cai’s face turned sour, her mouth the jagged contours of defiance. “And your *point?*” she muttered.

“Truth! That you should harbor no fallacies where your father is concerned. Maquits, Cai, had always been an innocuous sort, shifting their amalgams for no illicit purpose, since long before the Circonic was even a gleam in the eye of a few ambitious Regents. But when the Triumvirate came along and placed so much value on their skills, they became shrewd and ruthless...and *wealthy* in its employment! *Amaria!* Funny how that rule doesn’t apply only to maquits...” Arjun scratched his chin.

Cai stared at Arjun, dejected. “Your point is...taken,” she said through a clenched jaw, images of a far more sinister

version of her father burning off the innocent illusions of the Jarumon she once knew.

“Why do you suppose he never said anything?” she whispered. “I had no idea he had anything to do with...Krylarics?”

“Shame, resentment. Your father was loyal to his craft, and Krylarics and Actinetics were just a small part of his legacy. But for every single measure of praise he earned, he was also burdened with at least two of hostility, especially from those he served.”

“The Actinetics. Do you think...?”

“No. Actinetics were born out of peaceful motives. Krylarics? They were not. Their purpose was well known, intentional; right from the start. Jarumon did what he could to avoid the possibility that Actinetics would rival the deadliness of Krylarics. By the time he'd made his way to the Seamounds, offered those techniques to the Muricai, he knew it wasn't enough. The problem was one of supply; the necessary components were just too hard to come by around here.”

Cai dropped her head, exhausted.

Arjun remembered now what he'd intended to say to her all along. “Anyway, one evening, about 12 or 13 days after Euan had arrived, Jarumon was milling around the back of the cave while the pot was simmering. He'd gone back there to collect a jug of oil for the fire when he spotted the Kyo that Euan had brought with him, sitting by itself on a small ledge. Your father picked it up to move it aside so he could reach a bowl of Windswort behind it. When he did this, he articulated within it something...familiar. A set of azimuths, imbedded within some old Thermionic imprint, one that only he could understand. I remember watching him, seeing the look on his face. He grabbed it, sat there in a cold sweat, holding it in both hands for five strats. I had no idea what was going on. As we were cleaning up after supper that night, he told me what he'd seen, that the azimuths were buried under five or six layers of abstracts which had already been articulated into that stone. They described the location of a cave system somewhere in the wisoltrean Seamounds, at a place not far from the terminus. A

place that was rumored to contain a large patch of Thrifleanur.”

Cai was underwhelmed. “Thrifleanur? Why would he care about that? That’s just some old strain of moss.”

“Far from it! Thrifleanur is critical to those who seek what Jarumon sought; what I *myself* had sought for four and a half quinteks before I came to the Crescent.”

A pregnant pause lingered there, nudging the still airs until Cai’s impatience got the best of her. “What are you talking about?” she demanded.

Arjun stood. “Have you ever heard of a place known as *Kuwhan’Xalu*?”

“Yeah,” Kerak said. “Yeah, that’s some old Mnulorathean myth. I articulated some passages on it when I was about 10. What about it?”

“Myth? *Ha!* *Kuwhan’Xalu* is no myth. It is reality! But yet...illusory, guarded; *inexplicable!* For four quinteks I tried to source it, teasing its periphery. But I was never, *never* able to get to its core. Its outer fringes lie only a 12 or 13-day journey from the wisoltrean Aeries. For all intents and purposes, though, it might as well be a billion! The name *Kuwhan’Xalu* is believed to be ancient Mnulorathean...meaning *insane!* The place has been called by a thousand other monikers over the quinteks. Its azimuths are known...or rather, generally so. But once you’ve reached them...or you think you have...well, good luck getting any further. That’s impossible. *Unless* you can broach the obstacle.”

“I don’t understand,” Kerak said. “What obstacle?”

Arjun leaned forward, wringing his hands. “Are you familiar with the Borealic Fetors?”

Kerak and Cai stared at each other, shaking their heads in unison.

Arjun folded his hands across his mouth. The pain of remembrance nearly dragged him to the ground. “THEY...are the *obstacle*, Kerak. Without Thrifleanur, *Kuwhan’Xalu* might as well be the myth you say it is...”

Arjun's passion was obvious where this subject was concerned. Kerak remained quiet, brimming with questions, knowing they'd likely be answered in short order.

"After Jarumon left, Cai, I thought of trying to follow him. To catch up with him. To join him in this deranged quest for a place that both of us...that so *many*...have struggled to find for hundreds, maybe *thousands* of quinteks! Jarumon left the Kyo at the Crescent when he took off. I think he did that on purpose, for that very reason. If I'd chosen to follow him, I'd have in my hands the location he sought, to a place that might've enabled both of us to at last break through, to achieve that which he and I, and so many others, have been denied.

"A few days after he left, I picked up the Kyo and managed a full articulation. But I lost my nerve. I just couldn't bring myself to leave, to follow Jarumon!" Arjun cried out. "Besides, what would've become of me....without the Crescent?"

Cai was stuck with a jolt of recognition. Since Arjun's first mention of this nondescript mossy herb, she'd struggled to put it all together. Now, it came to her: a full recollection of the earliest latrinal articulations she had pored over during her apprenticeship. They burst forth from the abstract-rich Hirusovran aggregators of her youth...

...Thrifleanur...was once the most powerful anti-hallucinogenic herb known anywhere in the Dimensional Horizon. Now thought to be extinct, it once grew...only in the dark, damp recesses of wisoltrean Mnuloratheia...

Arjun leaned back, casting his vision into an early dawn. A dozen Ione drifted down along the dome of the sky, falling away in timid deference to their distant brothers, soon to burst forth; to break their sorentrean bonds.

Kerak nodded cynically at Arjun. "Alright, so let's assume that Kuwhan'Xalu is real, as you insist. If so, then what *is* it? Why is it so important, to you...to Jarumon? *Amaria*, what the freigh does it hold for you that you would spend four quinteks of your life trying to find it?"

Arjun came to his feet. He faced Cai and Kerak, then motioned to return to camp, taking his first step toward the edge of the escarpment. He uttered a single word, resounding sharp and clear in the early morning sky.

“*Truth!?*”

Kerak leaned forward and tapped Cai on the shoulder. “You hesitated back there,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“When Arjun accused you of being ‘incapable of understanding,’ you hesitated. ‘*There’s more to me...*,’ you said. What was that about?”

Cai rubbed her hands together. “About two unteks before I arrived at the Crescent, I passed through a refugee camp in the sorentrean Seamounds, just outside of Maralithlea. That was right after the Purges at Calamous, when the Machaera began sealing off the Nearings and the branch circuits. That camp was small, 30 or 40 souls, most of them either very old or very young, and it was tucked away in a remote chasm, very deep and well hidden. I’d only meant to stay there long enough to resupply, but the sickness, the injuries I saw there, were immense. So I remained.

“There was a Muricai cell in that area, to sorentre, very aggressive, acting to cut off the largest pike leading to the Marcelic viamar. This meant that they were active in a hotbed of Machaeran movement. The Regent in charge of that cluster was a bumptious character, name of...Odrahn, I think?”

“Lo.Hualic?”

“Yeah, that’s it! Do you know him?”

“No, but Drogan was attached to his cell. He has quite a reputation. What’d you think of him?”

Cai laughed. “Not much. He was a bit hard to read. Sly. *Very* cocky, arrogant. Couldn’t keep his eyes off my chest; that sort of thing. Anyway, Odrahn and maybe 16 other Muricai had taken out a contingent of Machaerans traveling to norostre along the viamar. One in particular, the only Machaeran to survive that attack...was a young Regent. He sustained a

hideous neck wound on his left side, very deep, nearly fatal. He was unconscious when they brought him into our camp, because they found out that a dhuthaer was there; that being me, of course. So they put me to work trying to patch him up. They wanted to interrogate him after he recovered.”

“Did he?”

“Yeah. It took some time, but he pulled through. Good thing a dhuthaer *was* there. Otherwise I don’t think he would’ve made it. His neck had been lacerated with the blade of a Quadric that’d been stolen by the Muricai a few days earlier. You know how Machaerans will sometimes poison the working surfaces of their blades? Well, that blade still carried a thick smear of poison. Plus, it had severed a nerve on the way through his flesh. The dual effect? Not good. His pain was excruciating! He suffered terribly for five, maybe six days. I applied one Nuremic Thrush after another,” she said, describing a common analgesic derived from the flower of the Tythien plant.

Cai paused to collect her thoughts and went on. “All the while, the area was brimming with Machaeran scouts. The circuits leading to the Nearings were closing in ahead of me, so the Regent of my camp took me aside one evening. He knew my destination, and he urged me to leave as soon as possible. But that Machaeran Regent was still at risk, considering the damage being done to his system by the poisons. And since I’d promised to see him through to his recovery, I couldn’t just take off. It wasn’t time yet.

“A couple of days later, he started to show signs of recovery. The poison on that blade was Uropliet, of course. It affixed to his nervous system, altered his body chemistry, meaning that the damage is permanent: it’ll *never* heal. If he’s alive, he’s still suffering its effects, particularly when he’s under stress.

“Anyway, when he’d sufficiently recovered, Odrahn came into camp that day to begin his interrogation. I told my Machaeran patient what had happened to him: the nerve damage, its permanency, the long-term prognosis. And he cursed me. *Amaria*, he was mad, out of his mind, swearing

revenge, yelling that it was *me* who'd poisoned him and not the blade! He promised that if he ever got out of there alive I'd find a huge bounty on my head. Same for Odrahn, he yelled, who he recognized right away as the one who'd handled the blade that laid him out."

"*Cai!* You're not the helpless little innocent I thought you were. I'm impressed."

She grinned and slapped Kerak on the shoulder. "Anyway, that night, I was told that the circuits were closing above us and to wisoltre. I was urged to leave at dawn or my chance might never return. That night they threw the Machaeran in for a quick round of questioning. I didn't get a wink of sleep. The sounds coming from behind that stone escarpment were so violent, so disturbing. What started out as loud voices soon turned to thrashing, screaming, metal against metal against flesh. The mayhem grew more intense, then faded. When I woke up I was told that their prisoner had broken his bonds, fought off the Muricai holding him and escaped into the night."

"What did you do?"

"Well, some of the other refugees helped me pack my gear that morning, provisioned me, and I left camp before Zenith. They knew what would happen to me if that wounded Machaeran ever came back around. One of the older refugees, who was familiar with the terrain, stayed with me for four days, guiding me through the only trails that hadn't been seized. When we found the clearest route to the Nearings, we parted ways before thanking each other...and I never saw him again," she closed, catching her breath.

As did Kerak. "That Machaeran Regent; would you recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Oh yeah! He didn't have a very distinctive face, but on the back of his neck, just beside the laceration, was a birthmark, resembling a cuneiform of some sort...very strange, curious. I'd remember that."

The last of the Ione settled into the wisoltrean rilles. The headache that Kerak had forgotten about loomed large once more. He trembled in the chill of the coming dawn. Cai

removed her Kiracloth from her shoulders to place it over them both.

“Kurdevour et saaladestr...myalaokiy?” she whispered, running a slow hand along his forehead, brushing his ear, his head tilted toward hers.

“Et...et Muurdevir ala durevostr, Cai. *Et!*”

*I*t revealed itself in ascending luments, 10 stratimers past dawn. Sheltered just below the Xyklian ambits, it was the first of that imposing skein of ramparts guarding the wisoltrean terminus.

The Lumens arose that morning from norostre, burning hotter than any of them could remember. A veil of fog emerged, lifted by the morning breeze. The mists at these elevations, known through the most primeval of Mnulorathean dialects as *Chi'ot.Vuloar*, had welled up that night through millions of Subterranean fissures; the chilled leach from dozens of Kiyfer domes, blended with a hint of Aurean secretion. They are a reliable presence in the terrain surrounding the Xyklians.

Dijal, awake for five stratimers, was the first to catch their scent. Her joints and her limbs were burdened with the same trail-induced afflictions as the rest of them. And even though the *Chi.Vuls* soared high above, tiny threads of sweet, wet lavender managed to make their way to the ground. At this, she smiled through her pain. Even though they were not as intense as the saturate of the norostrean seas, she was glad to catch them while she could. So, with her tongue fully extended, she sat in place for 30 stratimers, tossing the evil eye at anyone who tried to talk to her. She avoided their meager breakfast, so that neither food nor conversation nor random thought would interfere with her wanderings, until the expanding heat of day would soon burn those tiny threads into ash.

The air, now free of the stench of Actinetics, began to take on the odor of burned Pragash. This was the same smell that Jadox had managed to conjure the previous morning. *Creegh, he's gone and done it again. I've got to teach that fool how*

to cook! Dijal mused in frustration. Later, she managed to force down two bites before grabbing her belongings to join her party at the end of a long line.

She fell in right behind Nostra. A step at a time, Dijal began to work her way closer, unable to take her eyes from the nape of Nostra's neck. Her rhythmic gait. The way she turned her head every so often to toss a timorous grin at the ravaged soul stumbling along behind her. This was the third time in four days that Dijal had found herself trodding along behind Nostra. And never by accident.

Here, traipsing the final few neurris of the Swaaric routes, they would soon reach the "white knuckle" approaches which wended their way down the Mysouxlian acclivities. By "final few neurris" I mean a little more than 100,000. For in reality, there is no such thing as a *final few* of anything in the Seamounts. Endlessness...perpetuity....eternity! They *thrive* here. This was a fact which Arjun, in his former ramblings through this region, knew all too well.

But yet, without knowing...

They are near! These words repeated themselves in Arjun's mind. That Mnulorathean "myth," as Kerak had described it, was out there, teasing him, ever closer now. But before he could even think of running that gauntlet again...first things first.

His eye caught the naked gleam of luments crashing against the imperial vaults before him. *The Grottos* were dead ahead. At long last, this phase of their journey was nearing its end.

Eternity, Arjun thought with a wry grin, *has some very jagged edges.*

“AKALAN QUIRA CH...CH...D.NAIRO’CUL IL!” The sound of a familiar voice called out. Ekavias dropped his satchel and sprinted into a pair of open arms and a smiling face he hadn’t seen in two quinteks. His mind spun in disbelief.

“Nok’d guizee il bith. Nok’d gui!” The tongue of the high Andulkan plateaus, common to them both, exploded from their mouths. Ekavias stared in disbelief at his fellow, and former, Muharic; a colleague and confidant in the Tribethian Palialouge that Ekavias had called home before being forced into exile.

“*Amaria!* You’re alive!” Ekavias gushed. “I can’t believe my eyes. It’s *so* good to see you, Chadic.”

Their 100,000 neurri trek that day had passed with minimal difficulty, owing to the fact that it had been, with few exceptions, all downhill. Since their early morning departure from the chines of the Mysoux, the finger-thin vestiges of the Swaarics had narrowed, wended their way past perilous icons of stone; steep promontories, clefts and gaps, which in most cases only Nalani could slide through with minimal effort. Two short delays had given them time to repair Jadox’s broken crutch, to bandage Nalamear’s twisted ankle. But under the strains of Ionian light, their trail had come to an abrupt end, as luck would have it, at the very place where Arjun said it would: the immense valley known to Mnuloratheans, native or otherwise, as the Swales of the Neroluer.

Their final leg had ended well past nightfall, as only two signs of intelligent life presented themselves in this narrow gorge, trapped between the Mysoux ranges (behind them) and the Xyklian threshold (to their front). One was a single brilliant ray of Theosphoric light, shooting straight up from what appeared to be the slit of an entrance to a cave system buried within a subtle rise. The other was the delightful smell of *something*...teasing, exquisite. *Something*...*edible*, roasting

over an open flame. For most of them, that unique blend of aromas was strange, unfamiliar. But for one, it was long overdue.

Beneath the vapors clouding the sky at Zenith, and with less than 100 neurris to go, they had stopped to take it all in. Now another sign...the distant shrill of dozens of voices...erupted from the slit. 15 souls, seized with uncertainty, slowed their pace until they came to it. Until Ekavias, Thaloux and Ilunea, in that order, made their first steps down and into the mystic unknown. It wasn't long before they would all thank the 'Phemes that Ekavias was at the front of that line. For the face of Chadic Te.Zulfre was the first one he saw after five hesitant steps inside the cave's entrance.

Behind Chadic were nine very tense, alert strangers. Six of them carried Quadrics, along with an assortment of rusty but still functional Mephistaffs and Palick Raptors. Heads would have rolled, no doubt, had Te.Zulfre not recognized his former fellow Muharic when he did.

"Your...traveling companions, Ekavias...?" Chadic asked with a twist of his head. In his eight unteks here in the Swales, a sizeable crowd of outcasts had passed through these Subterranean corridors; once stale and overgrown, now brimming with new life. He'd seen plenty of broken, mutilated souls in that time, but none as decrepit, as thoroughly downtrodden, as the ones he was seeing now.

"Yes, Chadic, I can vouch for them all. We've come a long way, from the Sturosphere gradients and beyond. Many days and nights on the Swaarics, I tell you. Avoided a few Machaerans here and there without mishap. But now we're here." Ekavias passed a nervous smile at Arjun. "*Amaria*, it's good to see..." Ekavias's sudden elation at this chance meeting was muzzled by the sight of weaponry, confusing surroundings. He paused, glanced again at Arjun, motioning for him to approach.

"Aye, brother," Chadic assured him. "We're told a few contingents have been seen posting up to sore-wiso of the Cryostrilics, but nothing substantial yet here in the Swales, praise Hedeon!"

Hedeon. Kerak raised a cynical brow, turning toward the sound of clanging metal. The scent of fresh poison on the blades drew his attention even further. "Some of those Quadrics your friends are carrying," Kerak commented with a nervous grin. "Where did...uhm...they get them?"

Chadic responded. "Over the past two unteks we've spotted a few random pickets and scouts here and there near the breach you entered, plus two other entrances to sorentre and estre. *Hedeon* be praised, we have our share of tenants here who are sharp with the blade; no pun intended. So most of the subalternates we've spotted were taken out with little trouble."

"And their Treflicats?"

"Confiscated, but useless to us, for now. There are a couple of Muricai Regents here who've urged us not to attempt to articulate or cognify anything, or anyone. Don't want to draw the wrong kind of attention from outside these walls," Chadic said, patting Ekavias on the shoulder. "If all of you are friends of Ekavias," he said to the rest of them, "then you're okay."

Ekavias and Chadic walked shoulder to shoulder at the head of the line, deep into a confusing morass of low-hung, angled passages. Ekavias's hand found its way to Chadic's shoulder. "What happened to you after the Palialouge was attacked?" Ekavias asked his old friend. "How did you wind up here?"

Te.Zulfre grimaced. "Well, after we were raided, and after I watched those pellots as they sliced Mahgreve's neck for holding out on them, I was blindfolded, my hands bound behind my back, led away in chains. I was questioned for two days about your research in the Moirisois. About you, Aracaju, Mefria2 and Ivorian. What you'd found. What questions remained unanswered. What *I* knew about your work. Of course all I could say was *nothing*, to any of it. Which was true."

They turned a sharp corner. "Anyway, I was hauled off, taken to someplace in the Saurostran borderlands, held for another untek in a cave just to sore-wiso of Kwariph-Ekt, then

pretty much...forgotten. I woke up one day to find that my lone guard had disappeared. I was discovered, released two days later by a family of writhlic culturists who lived along the artery to Yrgotrea. When I described the guard they told me that they'd seen someone fitting his description along the turnpike to the Philean border, mumbling something about heading off to a revolt at a peonage camp."

Chadic's expression eased as his story came to an end. "I had no idea where to turn. Our Palialouge was gone! Could I go back, alert the Medius, tell them what had happened? For some reason that just didn't seem possible, as if that might bring the hand of retribution down on me; on us all. So I started walking toward Yrgotrea, to norostre. Shortly afterwards I joined up with a band of expats headed for the Emex ranges. Cut to the chase, that's what brought me here."

Ekavias lit up, his mind filling with more questions. "Do you know if anyone else made it out alive?"

"I really don't, Ekavias. You remember Algarn Ve.Theriak, right? Well, I'd heard a rumor that he'd been burned, beaten, left for dead, then carried off and sheltered by some locals after the attack. Who knows if he's still alive."

Ekavias, relieved at Chadic's survival, placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "All in all, the 'Phemes have served us well, Chadic. You and me both."

Chadic did not flinch at that pseudo-spiritual reference, once to have been regarded in his former sect as heretical. He ached to know about Ekavias's journey. But the sight of his friend's disheveled mien, peppered with scars, was more than he was prepared to deal with. So he suppressed his curiosity and held out his left hand.

Each of them passed, single file, through another narrow passageway to their left. "There was a wisoltrean berth eight days ago. You probably saw it from the trail. It was *rich!* We gathered 300 bourgets of Myenreawhip and Klystip Reelers in a span of less than 30 strats; the best haul we've had in 20 days. Straight to the fires they went. So come and we'll eat." Chadic pointed to his right. "There's plenty for everyone."

Ekavias threw a quick glance at Arjun. The old Courvesant wore a thin smile, his gut purring in satisfaction at the smells pounding away at his nostrils.

Kerak placed himself at the end of the line, keeping his eye on the armed escorts who followed. They peeled off to an adjoining corridor after a quick wave of the hand. Kerak sighed, taking his first relaxed breath in 10 stratimers. He noticed Jadox, three places ahead of him. *The Kuspegias!* he thought. *When we can find someplace remote, private, we must bend this place. And soon!*

Jadox, in that moment, rubbed his head, a dull pain filling his cortex. Like a veil of smoke rising from a dying flame, strands of revenance lifted before him. Intimations of the Cryostrilics filled his mind; gauzy, ephemeral. He raised his hands as if to push them away, but they reappeared to fill the gap. He shoved his left hand into his pocket, fumbling the twin stones, buried deep within. Then he spun around and returned Kerak's glance with a knowing expression, as if...he'd heard him.

The column shuffled its way through more twists, serrated angles, low ceilings. The aroma of culinary bliss grew more intense with each step. Nairul palmed a gnarled chunk of Barutha jerky at the bottom of his hip pocket. He pondered the Actinetic poisons within, contaminating the dark flesh more thoroughly with each passing day. Even the heat of flame had lately failed to render it edible. *If nothing else comes of this place,* he thought in satisfaction, *at least we know our diet is about to improve.*

Ekavias's ongoing conversation with Chadic was soon lost in the hiss of white noise, catching the attention of all; Kerak in particular. Not since his final day with Drogan in the caves of the Shalu'doc.xhu had he heard such a subtle but mind-numbing roar. As their passages widened, they emerged into a short, vaulted chamber, with ceilings at least eight neurris high, interspersed throughout with twisting, sinuous veins of Hagonite and Phyllox. Kerak, for the moment, ignored them, struggling to align his thoughts.

Then, a revelation.

Kiyfer domes! Not just one, but at least three of them pulsed and pounded behind the lithic walls to their front. He reeled in disbelief. Then, as soon as the din came upon them, it withdrew as the surrounding surfaces appeared to thicken. The chamber narrowed again into a confluence of other passages leading in multiple directions. Chadic came to a halt. The newcomers were struck with what seemed like a thousand sensual assaults. Food, clinking flagons, light, laughter, discourse both angry and amiable, all blending into a single muffled tonality.

Chadic could see the nervousness in their eyes. He disappeared, then returned in three stratimers. "Welcome to the Grottos, my friends. Follow me," he beamed. Ekavias, followed by Arjun and the others, moved forward. Above them, another series of veins, reflecting Theosphoric light. Kerak stared them down with a growing impatience.

Nishar slowed his pace until he lagged behind Kerak. He was the last of the group to enter that sharp turn. Those tangled vines of metal drew his attention as well.

Here, Nishar thought, is where it will end.

WE'RE DOOMED!

The words wedged their way into Arjun's mind as he sat at one of six large tables, beneath the ceiling of an expansive stone vault; a portion of the Grottos that the tenants of this outpost called "the Collonade." The dead and dying roots of fibrous rhizomes, buried deep within the rock, hung dark and dry from the numerous ledges above their heads.

With reluctance, Arjun had postponed his meager comfort so he could investigate a medley of curious sounds coming from sorentre, just before they'd entered the Collonade. He had slipped out of Chadic's line of sight to explore a system of corridors peeling off and away from the Collonade, eventually leading to a place loosely described as an "infirmary," as this or that stranger had directed him.

Long before he'd arrived at that sweltering, overcrowded corner of the Grottos, his ears had picked up a monotone, cast into the air by a mutilated exile from the Moirisois highlands. His head and face...singed and swollen. His skin carried an azure tint, dark swirls burned onto his wounded flesh.

"They came from all directions, we...we buried ourselves in the echoburth, into the rocks. Hagonite, Menshar...it glowed red and then blue, shrinking, cracking, spewing tongues of flames in all directions. *Nmu.leathlea'lor*. The...the rocks! They *burned* beneath us. Where are they? Have you seen them? *Have you seen them?!*"

Winding his way through the infirmary, Arjun had passed others, their voices crying out in similarity. The narrow passages had become filled with curses, cries, rants, implorings: some from those who'd been targeted, others from those who were nothing more than collateral damage. They were swarming this place, steeped in a desperation he hadn't seen since his earliest days in the Seamounds.

What a contrast the Collonade presented, a thousand Spheres removed from the sore-trean corner of the Grottos. Now, Arjun fidgeted in his seat. Mugs of Lumarathear clanked together. He reached for a flagon, threw the pasty brew against the back of his throat and slammed the mug back to the table. *It's nothing like coquont*, he mused with a sour mouth. The same dismal observation had been made by over half of the new arrivals there that evening, Kerak included.

Huge terracotta bowls, most of them by now empty, sat on crude tables. They'd been carved from the rigid cores of the Glystolyth fungi which had packed the Grottos floor to ceiling the first time Arjun had come here, 16 quinteks ago; when this place was first being carved out to provide a sanctuary from the harsh reality of life in the Dimensional Horizon.

Within those bowls had been that evening's meal: roasted Myenreawhip seeds mixed with the brittle carcasses of the Klystip Reelers which had given their lives in a futile effort to feed on them. Arjun savored this delectable mishmash, the anguish of blue death beating hard against his mind.

He threw his greasy hands against the table. *Why...he mused...have I led 14 innocent souls to what is nothing more than certain death?* Was it the naïve promise of security, seemingly removed from Machaeran assailment? The prospect of a kind of nourishment that only the Swales can provide? Or, its proximity to the *myth...the furtive, unrestrained madness...that is Kuwhan'Xalu?* He leaned, with sadness, on the latter.

Arjun's surly mood was shaken by the sound of intense debate. He studied Cai, Thaloux and Nostra: the way they plucked the brittle wings off a trio of Reelers whose legs were wrapped around the half-eaten seeds they'd been devouring at their demise. Cai tossed hers in her mouth. "*Amaria*, that's good! Arjun, you're the house authority on this region. Tell me about these poor little buggers, and why they're clinging to this...?"

"The Myenreawhip is what draws 'em," Arjun snapped, ill-tempered and in no real mood to talk. Ekavias caught wind of this exchange and leaned in. "You remember seeing those

mists above the Xyklian ambits? Wild Myenreawhip grows in abundance up in those reaches. The moist conditions feed them. Those little insects, the Reelers, survive only on Myenreawhip. But they don't reproduce in numbers large enough to outnumber the whips."

"Okay. So how did they...?" Nostra chimed in before...

"...A wisoltrean dusk, that's how. Being that close to the terminus, the winds blow the seeds off their stalks, throwing them up into huge clouds. While this is happening, the Reelers fly up and attach themselves to the whipseeds. The cloud of seeds and Reelers cascade down the ridges like a giant wave. Huge nets are pulled high into the air at the base of the ridges and the harvest is gleaned. The catch has to be thrown into the ovens right away, otherwise the Reelers'll keep gnawing on the seeds, then on each other when the seed is gone."

Thaloux spoke up. "What makes Reelers so...?"

"...The mists! See the purplish contours in the veins of their wings. Those soils up there are tinged with Aurean saturate. Of course, that...that winds up in their bodies. Not as concentrated as the Eusterian water we drank back at the Crescent, but there nonetheless. It's in the seed too. If you take a close look at the cores, you can see thin streaks of..."

"What's up Arjun?" Cai interjected. "I know you too well. Talk!"

Arjun froze, finding it impossible to form a coherent response. Besides, too many ears hovered nearby. He repelled Cai's abruptness with a wicked leer.

From Arjun's left rose a bustle of sound. Thaloux, unable to comprehend the depth of Arjun's angst, gave up trying as he felt a breath of wind at his back. A hand brushed his shoulder and a sarcastic voice bellowed at Kerak, seated to his right.

"Well if it isn't my old friend... *Varsan!*" The new arrival let go a boisterous laugh. "So, we meet again!"

Kerak seized up, recalling his pummeling at the hands of Drogran and his compatriots in the norostrean Vengaos. He wheeled around to get a glimpse of the face before him.

"I remember you. Meiluris! Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen! Right?"

“Oh yeah...that’s right.” Meiluris slapped Kerak on the back with a chuckle and a tight squeeze to the shoulder. “Last time I saw you, you were a bloody freighin’ mess. Your brother really worked his issues out on your face, as I recall!”

“How did you...? I mean, he went to a lot of trouble to make sure no one found out about...”

“Your real name’s *Kerak*, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, Kerak, the Drogan *I* know is more than worthless at keeping a secret. It didn’t take long for him to spill. No hard feelings, though. I doubt you’d wind up in this place, looking like *that*, if you were still a Courvesant.” Meiluris rubbed his hands together. “So tell me; where is the old pucino? And what of Euan? Did you find him? Are they here?”

Kerak paused, passing a solemn stare at Arjun. “Meiluris, Drogan is...he’s *dead*. Euan, too.”

Meiluris’s leathery face grew pale and flushed. “Wha...! HOW?”

“Well, Euan...he was...” Kerak dug deep, but still could not find the words. “...He was lost during a fishing trip...” That was all he could come up with.

“*Creegh Amaria!* And...and Drogan?”

Arjun heard the conversation and leaned forward, ready to take full responsibility, for better or worse. Kerak, though, would have none of it.

“Clysophicus. He didn’t stand a chance, Meiluris.”

Meiluris became silent, sullen. He turned to face Arjun, curious of the old stranger’s interest. “Who’s this?” he asked, a hint of anger in his voice.

“My name is Arjun Ve.Jalu. I am Drogan’s father. You need to know that I was...”

Kerak cleared his throat, drowning out the confessional he knew was sure to come. Arjun paused, quieted, overwhelmed by the urge to talk, but overcome by Kerak’s protective stance.

“Clysophicus!” Meiluris said, “Yes...I’ve heard of the kind of death that bite can bring. Sad. *So* very sad...”

Quickly, Meiluris shook these tragedies off; almost as if Kerak had said nothing at all. He grabbed Arjun by the arm. Then he turned to Kerak. "Do you have them, Kerak? Did Drogan give them to you?"

Kerak passed a quick glance to his left. Meiluris's eyes followed Kerak's line of sight and landed on the face of Jadox. Right away, Meiluris knew that if Jadox was keeping the Kuspegias, it no doubt meant that they were better off with him. No further explanation was needed.

"Allow me to fetch all of you another round of Lumara-thear. They're finishing up a test batch in the kitchen, as we speak," Meiluris said. "There's a couple of old laevenants here who've spiced it up with a lichen they found a few days ago in the darker portions of the Grottos. They say it makes the brew taste just like coquont."

"What is it?" Kerak asked.

"I think it's called...*Zaphraela*? Anyway, my friends, we have much...*much* to talk about."

Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen. Born 24 quinteks ago in a hammock colony turned peonage camp in the wisoltrean Andulkas, his mother was the youngest child of a family of gleaners who had picked, plucked and speared their way through the wisoltrean Andulkas for untold generations. Barely old enough, or *strong* enough, to carry an embryonic life to full term, she delivered her son breach, then died shortly thereafter in her sister's arms, from blood loss. That was a day before the entire camp was to have been marched to the Andulkas and eventual resettlement within the Astuverican Subterra: at that time just three levels deep. His father was rumored by his mother's kin to have been everything from a nameless grifter to a Machaeran Regent, depending on the mood they were in when asked. Conceived in an act of rapine aggression, then buried alive for most of his young life, Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen would grow to the age of 19 without ever knowing what a Lumen was.

Raised by a chirapsiat, a blunt tramper, a boiler, a skirueic swallowed up in a failed rehab, a chirapsiat, a hand usher,

another chirapsiat and another boiler (in that order), Meiluris's quinteks in Astuverica exposed him to the vast kaleidoscope of Subterranean life. His first 13 were an epoch of spatial integration, in which the lessons of survival and evasion were absorbed without benefit of Thermionics. The skills at which he apprenticed were many and varied. Sourcing and transiting torsos for khiromeks. Collecting overdue payment for the jilted, addled and impoverished who sold their bodies from within the Subterra. Hoarding castoff and stolen tinder, Thulitar and Broutish Clays for barter at (what was then) Level One...when there was anything worth bartering for. The list goes on. He did this, too, without a hint of recognition from the bulging, omnipotent eyes lurking above. Survival, in its purest form, was his most valuable skill.

At the start of his 14th quintek, he found himself under the tutelage of an elderly drudge from the Hirusovran steppes who had managed to pilfer a meager stash of memory stones. These were items which those who turned the wheels of the Astuverican machine were forbidden to possess. Meiluris soon found himself in the company of 12 others his age. Together, they caressed these tiny, dark Thermionic rocks, channeling their contoured visions while being drawn into a Sphere that none of them had ever before experienced: a realm that Meiluris swore with unflinching resolve to know more of. But his excursion into awareness one day was interrupted by a strange occurrence. It happened to a young soul very close to his age, an unnamed slave, whom he recalled had been brought here from Belgorslo, in the Pavatrias. It was what those imprisoned beneath the "Stones of Triece" would describe as a Mnemonueric Tremon.

News of this event traveled far beyond their small circle, bringing an end to their psychic travels and the eventual recapture of their memory stones. All, that is, except one: a stone that the clever Meiluris had managed to stash far and away from prying eyes. Fractured, nebulous, it held a tenuous grasp on even the nearest aggregator. But with it, his sojourn continued, albeit along a far more broken path.

Through this stone, he was able to refine his innate ability to construe the deepest musings lodged within the fragmented Kyotrimlics he occasionally wandered upon, scattered among the rubble beside the terrestrial pathways traversing his Sphere. Their orbits carried him deeper into the dimensions of mind and matter than his broken stone ever could. And their teachings would serve to carry his psyche, his very essence, far beyond the place he called home.

An untek after Meiluris turned 16, a boiler nicknamed *Szarus* (Meiluris didn't know his real name) became his last supposed guardian. This happened mainly because of Meiluris's well-refined skills at sourcing unmarked torsos. Szarus was the second boiler to claim anything resembling responsibility for Meiluris, and the skills which Meiluris's newest...and final...guardian claimed to possess were lacking, to say the least. When Meiluris was 17, Szarus was rumored to have killed a skirueic with a plug of Pentumus that had been accidentally mixed with, of all things, the fecal taint from the ground, uncleansed carcass of a Puzamaralur, a burrowing reptile common to the Kurestean Subterra.

To everyone's surprise, the skirueic soon recovered from what appeared to be certain death; a circumstance which lit a spark in Meiluris's agile mind. He had learned enough from his exposure to the dens to become a boiler himself. And in his spare time he'd been able to duplicate the elemental brew that comprised this toxic, near-fatal cocktail. This was done not with tainted Puzamaralur, but with the dung of the Ciroghyb, a flatworm native to the Eusterian lowlands. This worm is a coastal cousin of the inland Guirabaka, which is found in the lands of Meiluris's birth. It's smaller than the "Baka" and, of course, easier to source from within the Astuverican Subterra.

It wasn't long before Szarus discovered that his apprentice was raking in a little agency on the side. This managed to get him expelled from his mentor's den. In short order, the enterprising youth was soon selling (or more often, trading) this concoction to those wishing to fake their own deaths.

Meiluris's sales pitch went over well; a surprise to even him. Standard practice in Astuverica was for Subterranean corpses

to be taken topside right away for disposal. Meiluris had cut a deal with a vendor at the Columns to hold his customers' "remains" in an undisclosed location until the compounds had worn off: usually within 8 days. Then, the newly awakened corpse could merge into the massive crowds at the Columns or the ghettos, thrive within the Astuverican megalith, or arrange clandestine passage beyond the Custody gates and into the vast Horizon. "*It can't fail!*" he'd told one eager prospect after another. Unless, of course, his incompetent partner managed to lose the sleeping corpse, allowing it to be decapitated for its torso, ground into a fertilizer for Grouswhip or Trofliage, or simply cremated. That is, of course, before it "woke up."

Access. That's what Meiluris's new vocation bought him. Access enough to crawl his way above ground and into a new career; hawking, among other things, Kuraphic unguents in the Columns. This led to more agency, which morphed into the means to ply a trade he'd pursued as a hobby for the past two quinteks: the collection and delivery of illicit Kyos. And after he'd hoarded enough to bribe his way out of the estrean Andulkas, the quest for far more than comfort and lucre led him into his most meaningful career: that of carrying a pickaxe, and other burdens, for the Muricai.

His life was not all drudgery and evasion, though. There was a brief, emotionally devastating conjunction to an addicted chirapsiat, going by the name of Inari, ending in her death from an overdose of Widow's Breath after two unteks together. After that, he wandered the wisoltrean Andulkas for six unteks in a futile search for surviving family, along with the local alternative to Ciroghyb, which was unavailable except on the coast. He plied a number of trades among the peonage camps he passed every now and then, eventually finding his way back to his most endearing associations, with those who called themselves Muricai; rejoining the pursuit of Baraslute and other sonorant ores for the Ghurodenthre cell, led by Lo.Hualic and his compatriots, one of whom went by the name of *Drogan*.

"Zaphraela, huh," Kerak said, avoiding eye contact with Meiluris. He chugged a flagon of the Grotto's most recent

batch of brew. "Yeah it...it really does make this swill taste like coquont." Not wanting to discuss the herb any further, much less divulge its familiar place at the Crescent, Kerak listened as Meiluris recounted his journey with Ghurodenthre, from the Vengaos to the Moirisois and beyond. His account gave voice to the effects of the Actinetic Triurate on the numerous subterraneans they'd come across in the Xhalamears; burned, scarred, transformed into fiery, cataclysmic tombs. He spoke with agony of the Moirisois; how a few captured cognitions had led the Machaera to their hideouts with a crushing ease. And he recounted in detail the indigo flames which had begun to engulf the terrain surrounding Tephrom-Anh, trapping hundreds more within its porous lairs. Their journey had come to an end in this place, with what remained of Ghurodenthre and hundreds of refugees in tow; decimated, forced into a hasty retreat through the insurmountable Swales of the Neroluer.

"Were you followed?" Arjun asked Meiluris.

"Not likely. Before we arrived at Quisoluria, one of the refugee camps in the sorentrean Swales, we passed in darkness through the fissures at the Hest-Feurilian monoliths," he said, describing the towering peaks which form the sorentrean base of the Xyklian ranges. "*Amaria*, they're narrow. Treacherous. So I feel sure we passed through unseen. Plus, we were able to get a head start out of the Moirisois, thanks to a little advance warning. I hate to think what would've happened to us if not for that."

"Advance warning? From who?" Kerak asked.

"The Regent of our cluster has a brother...his name is Girdrahn. He mines and interpolates Kyos, right beneath the Columns. He murdered a Courvesant a little over a quintek ago in the Tribethians. Strangled him with his own Kirzek vine. *Ha!* What a way to go!"

Lurim Te.Stancik. So that's how he died! Kerak mused. The name Girdrahn, also familiar to him, fell by the wayside in his shock and alarm.

"Anyway, back to the subject. Girdrahn, or someone in his company, managed to cog us with a Courderax. That was

quite a risky move. I'm told that he has an inside track in the Architrave, who'd alerted him to a major offensive moving in on Tephrom-Anh, carrying improved bridging, volatile compounds; the works! He passed this along, warning that it would be risky for us to use our stones in the Moirisois. So right away we began sending couriers and Kyos to signal the other cells in that sector. But it wasn't enough. There were so many unaffiliated cells that we couldn't get to in time, and their discovery at the hands of the Machaera led to the loss of so many more," he murmured. "3200 souls, including 2500 Muricai from 14, maybe 15 cells. The rest...civilians. 400 Muricai were taken prisoner, including 55 from our cell. We dispatched Kyos over an area of about eight million square neurris until we ran dry...but it wasn't enough. When the Machaera started burning again, we chiseled tunnels between the fissures in the rock to create new escape routes. But it wasn't enough. *Nothing*...was enough. At the end of it all we came out of those highlands with only 700 civilian survivors. As for Muricai: only a little over a hundred are known to have escaped, scattered among three cells, including Ghurodenthre. It was just...not *enough*..." With that, Meiluris bottomed out. His grief quickly vaporized behind hackneyed eyes, a rigid expression, flooding the vessel of a troubled mind that could hold no more.

Then, less than five pulsimers later, he rebounded...with a question. "Any of you familiar with Strategic Chronicle 706?" he asked.

A sickening knot grew in Kerak's stomach. "I am."

"Well, if you have any memory stones on you, lose them! Because...and you can trust me on this...those little rocks'll only get us in trouble."

That doesn't apply, of course, to those exquisite little twin stones you carry with you, Meiluris thought, his eyes fixed on Jadox. Then, an epiphany. *I...recognize him but...I just can't place his face. Who is he?* The immediacy of questions unanswered, of a

pair of Kuspegias untouched and untapped, burned low and hot.

Meiluris then shifted his focus to Arjun, sitting across from him in a pool of late night exhaustion. The old soul took a deep breath. His attention was then diverted to an adjoining table and a small crowd. Meiluris felt a familiar hand on his shoulder as a stranger...a female appearing just as brutalized as Dijal...approached from behind. She lingered awhile in the shadows, exchanging a few quick words with another group of recent arrivals sitting at another table. Then the light struck her face. A vague sense of recognition appeared on Arjun's face when he saw hers. Or rather, when he saw the right side of it.

“*Trust me!* A loaded pair of words if I ever heard ‘em coming from the mouth of Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen. This little pellet filling your heads with his usual fables and lies, is he?”

Cai, engaged in a heated conversation at an adjoining table, swung her head around when she heard that voice, going silent before making eye contact. Kerak noticed the dual semblance of awareness and reluctance written on her face.

“Cai...Cai Lo.Subira? Is that you?”

“Odrahn Lo.Hualic! It’s...it’s good to see you.”

“*Creagh Amaria*, let me have a look at you!” She stood as Odrahn rushed over to her with an affectionate, somewhat drawn-out hug, a pat on her extreme lower back and a sigh of relief. “I see you made it through the Nearings. Did you find your father? Is he alright?”

“I did. But, well, not long after I got to the Bay, he wandered off in search of some distant locale, someplace near this area. That was the last I saw of him.”

Odrahn's eyes grew wide. “Well if he was bound for someplace close to here, then perhaps he found what he was looking for. Maybe he's *here*.”

In her befuddled state, Cai became confused over Arjun's description of the Thrifleanur her father had sought and that mythic enigma, whose name she could barely recall, that Arjun had spoken of with such lustrous conviction.

“No, he was killed not long after he left Teoramugh,” she said, feeling the heat of Arjun’s glare. “He was bound for someplace called *Kuwha*...”

In a flash she turned to glance at Arjun, only to find him angrily shaking his head. *Don’t say it, Cai, please. Don’t!* he thought, his eyes calling out to her. She stopped mid-sentence and went blank. Odrahn’s peripheral vision took it all in.

Ekavias, sitting beside Arjun, also noticed this exchange. He caught the germ of a familiar word that had begun to form on Cai’s lips. A mental assault washed over him with a ferocity he hadn’t experienced in two quinteks, while mining erratic filamentation in the Moirisois. *Jarumon...how did he know?* The pieces of a sinuous puzzle had begun to fall into place.

“Someplace called *Kuwha*?” Odrahn said with a chuckle. He took a step back.

“Never...never mind.” Cai dropped her head, embarrassed. Arjun’s face was still in sight. “I don’t really know, uh, where he was going.”

Odrahn paused. “Well, I’m glad you were at least able to find your father at the Bay of Teoramugh. I hope the residents there weren’t too...disagreeable. That caquehole and its tenants have earned quite a lousy reputation outside of...well, outside of the Bay of Teoramugh!”

Kerak winced. *So, you are the legendary Lo.Hualic, he mused. Muricai overlord. Bringer of peace and equity to the downtrodden. Slayer of all things...Triumvirate...!*

For a pulsimer, Kerak was mildly impressed.

...who let a single, unarmed, critically wounded Machaeran Regent slip from out of his hands. And after all the trouble Cai went to...for you!

All of a sudden, he was not.

“Hi, Odrahn,” Kerak said, standing to extend his hand, his face plastered with an acerbic grin. “I’ll save you the trouble of remembering my name. You can just call me ‘Drogan’s brother.’”

Lo.Hualic gawked, his mouth agape. Then he grabbed Meiluris’s shoulders and doubled over in laughter. “*Amaria*...I hear that was some family reunion you two had. How I wish

I'd been there to see that." Odrahn leaned over and slapped Kerak on the arm. "Sorry to be so flippant, but your brother..." He paused, then grew wide-eyed. "Kerak. That's your name, right? Anyway, your brother tried to keep your identity on the hush but..."

"I know. He couldn't keep a secret; I've been told. Oh, and uh, for your information, Odrahn, Drogan is dead. So is Euan," Kerak said, his eyes bereft of emotion. "Drogan...a Clysophicus bite. As for Euan...don't ask. That's all I have to say."

As with Meiluris, this news hit Lo.Hualic hard. His eyes flashed in a pinch of painful surprise, followed a couple of pulsimers later by a nervous grin. Lo.Hualic's ability to convey his thoughts lagged the recovery of his countenance, so he kept silent.

This exchange had been lost on Arjun, who'd been keeping a suspicious eye on the leathery female still hovering close to Lo.Hualic.

She swallowed hard, found her clutch and began to speak. "*Amasulis. Amasul Te Chafreis!* Welcome to all of you...to *Shulumethros.*" She pursed her lips, her one good eye darting from side to side. "I am Hezhreon Te.Nisach, the Regent of this colony. You've arrived at a very busy time for us, very troubling, what with events going on as they are in the Moirisois. Odrahn, I see you've found a friend from beyond the Swales." Hezhreon said, a shock of derision in her voice.

"Yes, Hezhreon, this is Cai Lo.Subira. She's a dhuthaer. We crossed paths about two quinteks ago at a camp near Maralithlea. Cai is from the...uh, is it the Hirusovrans, Cai?"

Cai nodded.

"A dhuthaer! Oh, how Hedeon has blessed us by bringing you here, Cai! Your help...of course, if you're willing to spare it...would be *so* appreciated." Hezhreon's excitement was dulled by the long list of assignments running through her head, all in an effort to find some way to keep this young, bright-eyed, not so unattractive newcomer on lockdown at the other end of the Grottos. She plopped herself down between Cai and Odrahn. One hand, placed on Odrahn's leg, crawled

up along his inner thigh and landed on his crotch, setting off enough nerve-endings to make her point. The other was curled through Cai's arm.

Hezhreon's eyes made contact with every other pair at the table...except one. "There are four refugee camps here in the Swales. As I mentioned earlier, we are Shulumethros. 20,000 neurris to sore-estre is Sul-Withulea, which is the largest with, I'd guess, about 2000 souls at present. Two smaller camps lie just to sorentre of us: Prath'amreis and Quisoluria. There are two dhuthaers who serve all four camps, and *Amaria*. They're stressed to the limit right now. It has long been our hope that Hedeon...praise the giver of light...would bring us a gift of life and redemption. Now it looks like he has."

Cai returned a weary grin, unable to take her eyes off Hezhreon's calloused hands: the massive breadth of her palms; her long, muscular fingers. Hezhreon unwrapped her arm from Cai's and scratched her face with her left hand. Arjun watched her fingernails as they dug deep into the jagged scar over her right eye and cheek.

"Our situation here has become critical. It's not just the burned skin, the seared lungs and limbs of the refugees from the Moirisois. The Machaera has taken retribution to a new level in those highlands, and the spillover is tasking us in ways we never imagined. Add to that the injuries some of these unfortunates have incurred just getting to the Swales. Falls, mainly. For those who survive, broken bones and fractures are the norm. Most of them lost their footings in the Monoliths or the steep terrain surrounding the Xyklans. Of the 500 or so recent arrivals, more than half need the kind of medical attention we're just not prepared to offer. But Cai, after we leave here, if I can take you to our infirmary, I think you'd..."

Hezhreon's voice faded into white sound. Cai glanced at Arjun, whose attention had been diverted...upward. He had not heard a single sound coming from the table after Hezhreon said the word "lungs." Instead, Cai found him staring wide-eyed at a huge patch of turquoise moss growing on a ledge, about seven neurris off the ground. Arjun's face wore a gleaming, mischievous smile. His gaze now fell to Cai.

His mouth began to form a word. "*Thriflea...!*"

Cai grimaced, trying to maintain her focus.

Kerak took in Hezhreon's words, her presence; her references to the only faith sanctioned by the Triumvirate and Arjun's troubled reaction at seeing her. As she described the mass exodus from Machaeran aggression, happening not so far to sorentre, a thought occurred to him. *A gargantuan swell has been drawn and pushed into the vacuum of the Neroluer. The image of Jarumon, a soul Kerak had never met, moved from out of the shadows. His hunger to leave the peace, the relative security and freedom of the Crescent, he mused, must have been immense. But ultimately...to what end?*

Strands of mnemonic ideation passed before him. Glyphical motifs, entwines, the blinding sear of ores and alloys glowing red hot in a billion scalding infernos. And the faces of Ligeia. Quilla. Kerak shook his head. He followed his father's gaze, toward the mossy growths covering the ceiling. In a spiraling whirlpool of cognizance, it came to him. *There is an inevitable hopelessness which seems to surround us*, he thought, here in the midst of a place so well endowed with the illusion of hope. *The vacuum that is the Neroluer*, he realized, *will soon draw more than just hapless refugees and displaced Muricai.* Arjun and Kerak faced each other, exchanging disquieting stares. *You are right, father!* Their minds locked in filamentary alliance. *This place breathes calamity, disaster...Death!*

As the static roar of the Kiyfer domes thundered behind him, an old Mnulorathean morpheme began to gestate in Kerak's mind. One last visual mingling between father and son cemented their exchange.

Kuwhan Xalu must be bent! The key lies beyond.

"Twenty-eight have burns covering at least a third of their bodies. 32 have sustained at least one broken bone. Another 29 have multiple compound fractures. 11 are in a state of delirium. 15 have trouble breathing due to severely scalded lungs. And...12...died last night, three of them in my arms. One was...two quinteks of age, I guess. *Amaria, I need to...*"

Kerak listened as Cai recounted her all-night stretch. Except for a single assistant, she'd been alone, in charge of the damp, rudimentary chasm known as the "infirmary," situated near the sorentrean terminus of Shulumethros.

Cai clutched her forehead with trembling fingers, unable to go on.

Kerak saw it in Cai, now in its earliest stages: a pall they'd all noticed not only in others here at Shulumethros, but in smaller measure, in themselves. Kerak put his arm over her shoulder and tried prodding her further away from the infirmary, back to the Collonade.

Cai suddenly found the will to resist. "What are you doing, Kerak? Leave me...*alone!*" she snapped, pulling herself free. "I've got to get back. I can't just...leave!"

"Cai, I understand why you feel you need to be here," he said, only half certain that he could relate to that sentiment, "but there's a limit to what one person can do. I know how much you're capable of, but take a look at what you've got to work with! Why didn't you let us know that you were...*alone* back here? Dijal or I...or any of us...would have raced back here to help you! This is way too much!"

"Who are you to decide how much is too much, Kerak? And for me! How can *you*, of all souls, understand?" she said; a not-so-subtle jab. Cai cast her vision down the hall from which they'd come, then started walking. Once she found her way, she kept a steady rhythm in front of her pursuer.

Dijal and Ekavias appeared before her. Ekavias took her arm. "Cai, I overheard some commotion near the infirmary," Dijal said. "They're looking for you. Another 100, maybe 120 souls have arrived here from two of the camps to sorentre. They're at capacity and can't handle the overflow. They say there are at least 40, maybe 50 in need of immediate attention! I...I'm sorry."

Need. A dhuthaer with even a pittance of self-respect could not walk away from that, and she knew it. Cai brushed her hair from in front of her face. She pivoted to face Kerak. *I do understand, Cai! As much as I hate it, I won't stand in your way.* Unspoken, those words reached out to her in the dim

glow of a lone Theosphoric staff, mounted to a ledge beside them. She nodded, her lips drawn into a thin smile.

“Kerak, I...I have to go,” she whispered, “and I’m sorry for what I...”

“No need,” Kerak interrupted. “Truth be told, you’re not far from being right.”

Dijal nodded at Kerak. Right away he picked up on her intentions. “After all, what else have we got to do?” she said to him.

Kerak motioned toward Dijal and Ekavias, taking them by the shoulders. “Care for a little assistance?” he asked Cai. “Three apprentice dhuthaers, my liege, at your service!”

Cai beamed and laughed. “Sure, come on. But you’re in for it, I promise!”

*E*kavias and Thaloux ran their fingers along the rims of their mugs. At the bottoms of each they could see a mass of thick, brown and black sludge, belching and bubbling, almost as if they were...breathing? The “test” batch they’d enjoyed on their first night here at the Grottos, brewed with Zaphraela, had long since vanished. Calls for its replenishment had so far gone unheeded.

“That can’t be good, huh? Looks like the bottom of a caquehole, doesn’t it?”

“No, Thaloux, it can’t. And yes, it does.”

Ekavias, coming off four sleepless days and nights as an “apprentice dhuthaer,” yawned loudly and slid his near empty mug along the table from one hand to the next. “What’ve you been doing since Kerak hijacked me and Dijal and put us to work in the infirmary?” he asked Thaloux.

“Kitchen, dividing rations; until the next wisoltrean berth happens, and then assuming they can throw the nets up in time to catch another batch of whips and Reelers. I spend half a day there, then I go for a mug of this stuff, a bite to eat, and start all over again the next day. How ‘bout you?”

Ekavias pondered the look of disgust smeared across Thaloux's face. "So, what do you do with the rest of your day? And why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because you look...terrible? And what do you mean by 'the rest of your day?'"

Ekavias nodded toward their mugs, both waiting on a refill, to at least conceal the drawbacks staring up at them. "You know where this is going, right?" he said.

"No."

"Of course you do. *I* look terrible. *You've* been sleeping half a day, every day, while I've been drudging it up at the other end of this place, peeling away bandages and bloody skin. It all adds up, right? So go get me another mug of this caque. And, uh, get one for yourself, too! My compliments."

"Hold on! You've seen the barbs on the legs of a Klystip Reeler, right?" Thaloux protested, raising his sleeve. "Look at my arm; digging around in a bourget *this* deep," he said, implying a span of at least two neurris. "I didn't get *those* cuts back at the Crescent. You want to trade places with me?"

Ekavias grunted and pointed at his face, the heavy purple bags under his twitchy, bloodshot eyes.

Thaloux dropped his head against the table. "I'm not going to win this argument, am I?"

"Nope."

Thaloux sighed, took two mugs in hand and started to stand before being pushed back to his seat by Odrahn Lo.Hualic, who had tiptoed up from behind in his usual covert manner.

"Allow me, chum. You and your friends are to be thanked for what you've done in the infirmary, for Cai...and for us all. If I'd known she'd been tossed back there to the Kurstrs, all by herself four nights ago, I'd have given someone the blade!"

"You...you mean Ekavias," Thaloux said, against his better judgement. "I've been on kitchen detail ever since I got here."

Odrahn thought for a moment, but didn't relent. "What does that matter? Hand me your flask and keep your seat. I'll be back."

"Thanks, uh...Odrahn?" Ekavias said, watching two mugs wander off for a second round. "That *is* your name, right?" he called out, yawning again, nearly dislocating his jaw. He put his hand on Thaloux's shoulder. "So what've you been doing since Kerak hijacked me and Dijal and put us to work in the infirmary?"

"You've already asked me that question; remember?"

Ekavias laughed. "Testy!"

"You still look terrible."

"I know."

Thaloux rubbed his chin. "Has Kerak settled down yet?"

"Yeah, a little. He really blew his stack two days ago. A supply run to Sul-Withulea leaked word that there's a dhuthaer here, so they sent us another 100 souls, just about all of them on death's doorstep. That wave was *way* worse than the last. So Kerak took the Regent of this place aside and really chewed her out. I saw the whole thing. That nasty scar on her face nearly jumped off, the way she was tugging at it. Long story short, before Kerak was done she'd already lined up another 20 so-called 'volunteers.' They're back there right now, toiling away. Which is why I'm here."

"And Cai?"

"She's been out for, I guess, half a day, now. First real sleep she's had since we got here. She started the new staff off with a quick tutorial. Dijal, Nostra, Kerak and I finished for her, then me and Nostra took off about 20 stratimers ago. The wounds we've seen the past day or so have been rudimentary, which is good, but that'll change. What they need down there is not an exhausted dhuthaer and a bunch of neophyte attendants. They need a *system!*"

Thaloux leaned in. "Ekavias, have you noticed anything strange about this place?"

"I've noticed a *lot* strange about this place."

"No, I mean in the faces, of the refugees who've been here awhile." Thaloux paused to make sure they weren't being

overheard. “I mean, whether they’re injured or not, there’s this disconnected...*lifelessness* in their eyes, their movements, everything about them. Like they’re...*chaladure!*” he said, evoking the Andulkan term for *hazy* or *opaque*. “Have you noticed?”

Ekavias’s eyes darted; he nodded in agreement. Another subject, one which had remained unspoken since just after their departure from the Crescent, could no longer wait. “Speaking of *chaladure*; what about Nishar? Have you noticed anything odd about *him* lately?”

“Yeah. It started not long after Kerak and Drogan showed up. He used to be one of the most talkative souls I’d ever known. You couldn’t get him to shut up! Remember? But ever since then...”

The two of them pondered a connection, but drew a blank.

“You think it had anything to do with Bechrach?” Ekavias asked. “He and Nishar were pretty close. His death must’ve hit him hard, you know?”

“You and I were close to Bechrach, too. Death was no stranger at the Crescent. *Amaria*, Nishar was no different than any of us where that subject was concerned. I...I just don’t know.”

Odrahn returned, two full mugs of warm brew in his hands. He sat them on the table, placed his hand on the back of Ekavias’s neck and plopped down beside him while Thaloux entered into another conversation. “I caught those two *laevenants* finishing up a fresh batch,” he said. “Drink up! *Ekavias*, is it?”

“Yes. And thanks.” Ekavias took a light sip, hoping for the Zaphraela-infused version of Lumarathear. He was not disappointed. “*Ah*...I’d recognize that herb anywhere. Glad to see the kitchen staff bending to public opinion. I heard Meiluris mention that Zaph grows around here.”

“Yes, I’m told it does,” Odrahn said, resting his elbows on the table, feigning a casual repose. “I’ve heard that Zaphraela grows at the Bay of Teoramugh, too.”

“Yes...yes it does. The Zaph we spiced our coquont with up there gave it kind of a bitter aftertaste, though. More scabric in the rocks, I guess.”

“Yeah, that would explain it...” Lo.Hualic said, his voice trailing off. He peered into Ekavias’s eyes. “So, what brought you and your friends all the way from there...to here? I mean, it couldn’t have been the Machaera, or mercenary activity, not all the way up there; I’m sure of it. And, do you mind if I ask: are the Swales your destination? Or are you and your chums headed...someplace else?”

These words fell from Odrahn’s lips like a crate of clattering ingots, each a jagged wedge, tearing into the mind of a slightly clueless former Muharic scholar. Tipsy, exhausted, riddled with insomnia, Ekavias’s sudden contempt for Odrahn welled up from deep within, now coming to a head.

“Odrahn,” Ekavias said, placing his flask back on the table, “you mind telling me what you’re getting at?”

The dull thud of a pair of boots, of the voice of Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen, echoed from behind.

Odrahn leaned back and laughed, then patted Ekavias on the knee. “What am I getting at, Ekavias? Well, I’ll tell you. Let’s talk about a little vagary called *Kuwhan Xalu*.”

*T*HE ROAR WAS DEAFENING, AND could be heard far beyond the Collonade. It sent every available soul scurrying toward the small sorentrean cleft which had, until then, housed the smallest opening to the Grottos. By the time every hand had finished burrowing through the detritus and the dead, the dust above them had settled. And what they saw revealed what had now become the largest of all gateways to Shulumethros.

They also found a few lucky stragglers from the neighboring refugee camp known as Prath'amreis, their bodies broken beyond recognition. For those émigrés who hailed from the Crescent, this was the second rock collapse they had witnessed in less than 22 days. All they knew was that nothing like this had ever happened while diving for Barutha. It was all too much.

The Grottos of Shulumethros were crammed with dozens of small social pods, groups and clusters; refugees who had bound themselves together in these caverns by region, marisatria, family. They were associations sewn with the commonest of threads, the kind least likely to break in this splintered Sphere. But even at the risk of rubbing shoulders with a complete stranger, space for one more could always be managed, tight quarters though they may be.

Seven nights prior, 12 couriers had been sent from the Grottos to the colony of Prath'amreis and its sorentrean neighbor, Quisoluria, carrying 1200 miaric weights of surplus thrushes, unguents, bandages and splints. All were meant to satisfy the growing medicinal needs of those camps housing refugees who were too injured to be moved. In return, the couriers came back to Shulumethros with a hefty 24 bourgets of roasted Myenreawhip and Reelers. This was a surplus these camps would have been loath to part with, since this delicate pairing is not as plentiful along the sorentrean reaches of the "Emex" ranges, as the Mysoux-Xyklians are nicknamed. But

thanks to a swarm which had been multiplying near the Hest-Feurilian monoliths, there was plenty to go around. For now.

In addition to medical supplies, another item had been brought to Shulumethros: a Trimethric stone, a three-sided fusion of Phylox and Paelremite, about the same size as a standard Myotrophus. Stones like this had been used for hundreds of quinteks in the estrean and sorentrean Seamounts to pass detailed cognitions over short distances where the space between aggregators was large. Their articulations could even pass through schismatic veins if the gaps were less than a hand-width. And since the polarity of Paelremite was double reversed, the wavelengths emitted by a Trimethric were short and could not be traced.

Trimethric stones were very rare due to the scarcity of Paelremite, which is only found in the sore-estrean Seamounts. And owing to the efforts of a small band of exiles from the marisatria of Sharoluix, the Swales were now home to three of them, which was three-quarters of all the Trimethrics known to exist anywhere in the Dimensional Horizon.

A caravan of 22 souls had carried these stones to Sul-Withulea, just as the Actinetic Triurate was beginning to scour the Xhalamears. The marisatria from which they'd come was the first to fall under the toxic blue mists, scattering its survivors to the four winds. As the largest refugee camp in the Seamounts filled to capacity, a convoy of 10 souls had made for Shulumethros, carrying with it a Trimethric. This would help to form a network with the smaller sorentrean camps, reducing the need for couriers to traverse the Swales in order to pass valuable intel from one locale to another.

Now, cogs could once again pass, albeit with *some* degree of risk, below the lofty indentation of the Treflicat. One of these cogs had informed the Regent of Prath'amreis that the crevices and the alcoves of Shulumethros were not yet at capacity. And so the remnants of one ravaged Thuracian marisatria left Prath'amreis and wandered into the Swales, in search of more spacious accommodations. This migration carried with it a family of maquits and circulats which had

once thrived in the Thuracians, in peace and magnanimity. Their surname was *Te.Ines*.

The glow of dozens of lightstaves cut through the fog. Kerak, hunched over with bleeding cuts and scrapes covering his hands and arms, heaved one huge rock after another over his shoulders, trying to find the source of that elusive sound...first a light moan, then a pleading whimper followed by a wheezing, bloody cough.

A pair of hands to his left pushed away a cluster of stones to reveal a fractured skull, a pair of hollow, red eyes.

“K...Kerak?”

He looked to his left, and Kerak nearly choked on what he saw.

“Jachin? Jachin Te.Ines!! *Amaria*, is that...is that...*you*?”

*I*t hurt him to breathe, even to swallow.

Kerak sat beside his stepfather, watching Cai apply a wrap to his head. His four crushed vertebrae, the massive damage to his organs and his skull made him cry out in agony. Kerak found, though, that if the angle of his chin was kept just so, it would prevent Jachin from choking on the blood which was now pouring into his lungs and throat.

Cai shook her head in frustration. She'd picked up the story after talking with the survivors. 32 souls, all in passable health, had ventured into the Swales three days prior. They'd left Prath'amreis, in part, because an additional 250 sick and injured were approaching from sorentre, most of whom were in far worse shape than they. Upon arrival at the tiny cleft marking the sorentrean entrance to Shulumethros, they'd gathered in a tight cluster around the opening, which had fed into a massive cavity below. The sheer weight of this mass of flesh, standing over the thin rock ceiling below, caused the collapse. Now, 12 souls were all that remained of the Thuracian marisatria of Felithuche.

Kerak would soon find that Jachin's motivations for coming here were more complicated than those of his fellow travelers. For now, he continued to cradle the old soul's

throbbing head. A hot flush of emotion raced through Kerak's mind, for lying here at his side was the only father he'd ever really known. But...*you abandoned us, you pellet! You left my mother and me to the machinations of that Astuverican skantaro, Ve.Sian. Where were you when we needed you? Where?*

Jachin began to choke. Tiny streams of blood gushed from his mouth, his nose. Nalamear, Thaloux and Dijal watched, and Kerak hesitated, his mind trapped in a scalding pool of resentment; almost...hatred. Then, it cooled. He propped Jachin's head up some more, stroked his scalp and offered him more water.

"Kerak..."

"Jachin, don't speak, just breathe...breathe!" Kerak was alarmed by this protective tone of his, keeping pace ahead of his racing mind. *Talk to me, Jachin! You have so much to answer for...* he mused, noticing a slight change in the color of Jachin's pupils, the formation of a glaze. Jachin tried to raise himself, fighting to speak against the weight of his injuries.

"One of the...the couriers who came from here. He mentioned that....that there were some refug...refugees...who'd come from the Bay of...of Teoramugh. Is it...is it *true*...Kerak? Do you know of these souls?"

Teoramugh. Kerak was stunned, unnerved, that their presence in the Grottos had become such common knowledge.

"Yes, I know of them, Jachin. Why?"

"Be...because I believe that my *brother*...might be among them." He then collapsed in a sweat, heaving a large mass of bloody mucus. "Can you...can you help me find...?" Jachin tried to raise himself up but collapsed again. His eyes began to roll, then closed as his breathing slowed.

"Jachin...JACHIN!"

Nothing.

Cai heard Kerak and hurried over. She knelt, then dropped her head. "It's not worth it, Kerak. He's unconscious. He hasn't got long, either. You said you knew him; I assume that was a bit of an understatement, huh?"

"Yes...it was."

Cai stood, stroked Kerak's head, then left him to be with his thoughts. Kerak buried his face in his hands, his mind transfused. He labored to recall everything he knew or had heard of Jachin over the past seven quinteks and beyond; fact, lie or rumor.

The field was rich. He worked his way backwards. *Jachin Te.Ines. Imprisoned and cast aside for selling illicit micromics on the Chivet-Pradur. His fierce addiction to Widow's breath. His development, with his younger brother and only sibling, of the cloistered code known as the Kyhmekx, intended only for the use of the highest-ranking operatives and Regents within the Courvesois. His life with us in Whistoph-Karnash. His apprenticeship as a circulat in his late teens. His childhood...his family...his father's suicide...his brother, born of the same mother...his birth in Felithuche...his...his...*

Kerak, you alright?" Nairul said as three large urns of water slipped from his grasp. One of them hit the ground but did not break. "You look like you're ready to explode."

Kerak stood, hot and impatient, red with betrayal, distrust and shame. He stuttered. "The Crescent...!"

"Yeah, the Crescent? What about it?"

"Do you remember anyone at the Crescent with the surname *Te.Ines*?"

Nairul scratched his head. "Surname! You're kidding, right? The only surnames I know from the Crescent are the ones that were revealed to us a couple of days before we crawled out of that cave. Remember? The only ones who didn't speak up were you, Gari...I mean *Arjun*...and Nishar. Why do you ask?"

Kerak closed his eyes. The face of Nishar appeared before him.

"Because there may be a knife tip pointed at our backs. That's why!"

The Collonade was alive with chaos and fury. Three survivors from Felithuche had warned of it, setting off an alarm the likes of which had never been felt here in the Grottos. Surging

hordes of Machaeran scouts, Arduans, subalternates had been seen above the Hest-Feurilian monoliths, probing their way to norostre of the Moirisois, deep in penetration of the Emex ranges. The sorentrean camps were now at full risk of exposure. And at Shulumethros, the first question raised at every verbal exchange was this: how much longer before that massive, open collapse point, and our camp, are discovered by the Machaera?

In her role as Regent, Hezhreon Te.Nisach, a day earlier, had issued an order to suspend their use of the Trimethric stone. This had been forced upon her by Odrahn Lo.Hualic, who had also urged other camps to do the same. If they failed to comply of their own accord, then there were Muricai in those camps, now under the purview of Ghurodenthre, who were ready to enforce this call...at the fine edge of a blade, if necessary. In private, Te.Nisach had taken a stand against her lothario, stressing the need for magnetic articulation of *some* kind. Lo.Hualic, though, stood his ground. And despite considerable backlash from within the refugee camps dotting the Swales, his will prevailed.

Another order was being carried out while 200 souls sat at the Collonade's tables, warm flagons of Lumarathear in their hands, anxious words on their tongues. That was a strident effort to repair the massive sorentrean breach, being filled in a hurry, one rock at a time. Reports of Machaeran scouts within 8000 neurris of the Grottos, some even posing as refugees, had reached the ears of Regency at Sul-Withulea, Prath'amreis and Quisoluria. Consequently, they had each ordered that the gateways to their camps be camouflaged, so as to thwart easy detection.

Te.Nisach, not to be outdone, went forward to decree that as soon as the sorentrean breach was repaired, two other openings into Shulumethros would be sealed shut. Only the well-hidden opening to noro-wiso would remain, but under the highest level of concealment. That tiny slit was not unfamiliar to those who'd come here from the Crescent. Dijal, upon hearing of this edict, wrung her hands, knowing that any other unfortunates making their way from other parts of the Swales would have little chance of finding this tiny gap.

Shulumethros, as she and many others were starting to realize, was becoming more of an hermetic tomb than the Subterranean refuge they had wandered into over 20 days ago. The thought of it made her shudder.

Cai and Thaloux shuddered too, but for different reasons. Cai quizzed him with a smile. "Is it true? The baths?"

Thaloux dug his face into a tangle of Reelers, after having plucked with his only hand most of the wiry barbs from their legs. In the throes of roasted death, one huge morsel, with its legs wrapped around a cracked Myenreawhip seed, wore what looked like a...smile?...on its face. "Yep. I heard that a couple of clever souls from the Vengaos had found a way to tap into the spring coming from one of those Kiyfer domes, so they're building a culvert to divert the runoff into a huge pool they've carved out. Then they're going to heat it, hand pump it through an exit channel, then funnel it into a natural depression down by the estrean corner. Must be about 20 neurris across on both sides, maybe five deep. They say that in three or four days it'll be filled to the brim with steaming hot water! The collapse slowed them down a bit, but when it's done I'll be first in line on day one. Mark my words." He popped the grinning Reeler into his mouth. "And you?"

"Oh yeah, right behind you," Cai answered, selfishly unconcerned, for now, with events happening elsewhere. "Two quinteks of grime are coming off my body! I *hate* cold baths. You remember that time I brought up the idea of letting us heat water and bathe in the kettle back at the Crescent. That idea sure got brushed off. So much water where we came from, you know, but way too frigid for me. That's why you never saw me naked at the Crescent."

Her parting sentence went unnoticed by Thaloux, by then out of his seat, engaged in another conversation. But when the word *naked* fell from Cai's lips it landed squarely on the ears of Kerak, sitting nearby. His pulse jacked but he pretended not to notice as he watched Cai inhale her food, her drink, then disappear.

Kerak turned to his right, hearing the start of a boisterous parley at a table beneath a stone outcrop. Ekavias and Arjun

were there, along with Odrahn and two other Muricai under his authority. So was Acheron Um.Jehanik, second-in-command of the Grottos under Hezhreon Te.Nisach. Kerak began to rise from his seat to join them when he felt a claw-like hand wrap itself around his left shoulder.

"You see over there?" Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen said, pointing his finger in the direction of Jadox Um.Dematsur, sitting two tables away.

"Yeah. So?"

"I *remember* him! It's taken me awhile to, you know, put it all together, but it's clear to me now. Do you remember the other day when I told you of that old Hirusovran drudge back in Astuverica, the one who introduced me and 12 others my age to memory stones, in the Zurish-Triece?"

"Yeah. I think."

"Well, he...*Jadox*...was in that group. *He* was the one who suffered the Mnemonueric Tremen. The convulsion, when he touched that stone..."

"What stone?"

Meiluris dropped his head. "The memory stone! It'd been pilfered from somewhere within the Architrave, as I recall. It had a large haft on one end, and it was inscribed with a very curious little glyph. I came across it later in an articulation in the Saurostrans, after I left Astuverica. I can't recall its name, but it starts with a 'Z' or something."

Images of that huge estrean vault; their first fire in 16 days; their confessionals...*Jadox's* confessional...flashed across Kerak's mind.

"You mean a *Zylix*?" Kerak asked.

Meiluris pointed and shook his finger. "That's it! You know about that Glyph? About the Tremens? Did he tell you?"

"Yeah, he did. What of it?" Kerak asked in a suspicious tone.

Meiluris took Kerak by the right arm, pulled him to the ground and dragged him 20 neurris to a small cleft in the walls of the Collonade. A cloud of dust and four curious onlookers were all that remained in their wake.

“What the *freigh*...are you *doing*, you FOOL?” Kerak spat as Meiluris adjusted his grip. They were in near darkness. Meiluris nodded toward the edge of the cleft.

“HE...is a MNEMONAST! Do you *hear* me?”

“What? How do you know this?”

“A Mnemonueric Tremen occurs when a Mnemonast touches a stone which carries the filamentary signature of *another* Mnemonast. I’ve seen it only once. But I’ve heard of another incident just like it. The one Jadox suffered was intense, violent. And near fatal. I don’t know if it was the glyph on that stone, the coagulates, the ores in it or what? But it carried an incredible amount of sonorance. And it shot through his system with a vengeance. I have every reason to believe it left a sizeable imprint on him, and vice versa. No doubt, that was the stone of a Mnemonast. Just like him!”

Meiluris let go of Kerak and came to his feet. “I remember asking around about him...what had become of him, after the Tremen. No one seemed to know. He was carried off, most of our stones were discovered and returned to their owners, and that old Hirusovran drudge...*Amaria!* I don’t even remember his name. Anyway, he was imprisoned, then executed for the crime of trying to enlighten a bunch of young pucinos like us. Not long after that, the Croeplings went into insurrection after the Purges ended in the Saurostrans. Those dungeons overflowed with new flesh. The buzz was that the Tremen had killed him. But his face! As soon as I saw it, when you and your friends arrived here; well, I just *knew* it was him.”

“So, what do you plan on doing with this information, Meiluris? I mean, I know Jadox. If he *is* a Mnemonast, like you say, then I can assure you he has no idea what to do with that skill.”

“The Kuspegias; I assume he’s used them, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And his proficiency?”

Kerak didn’t have to weigh that question for long. “He’s...good. He’s *learning*...but he’s...well, he’s *very* good.”

“Does he seem to experience any pain while he’s using them?”

“No. In fact he seems more at peace with those little stones attached to his temples than not.”

“Good! That means he’s open to the gift, allows it to flow through him, to absorb it. That’s good.”

Kerak batted his eyes, still unsold. “He’s had those stones for a long time now, since a couple of days before Drogran’s death. My brother understood them better than anyone; you know that. But Jadox? He may have the gift, but it takes more than just talent to use the Kuspegias to full effect. It takes skill, and time. Right?”

Meiluris slapped Kerak on the shoulder. “True. But those Kuspegias in the hands...or rather, on the temples...of a Mnemonast: that’s a combination I’ve been dying to see. The potential is...*limitless!*”

Kerak struggled to take all of this in. The Sovereignty of *Pras’demnos*? The rarest, most coveted of all talents. The ability to bend the full depth and breadth of the mnemonic spectrum; to see...to hear...to *feel*...the abounding force of the filamentary demesne, with or without benefit of memory stones. That was a faculty about which Kerak, in his most elemental mind-set, was unaware. It was one which he, and many others like him, could scarcely believe was even *possible*. Yet here he was, in this place, confronted with the assertion that this gift belonged to Jadox. Quiet, clumsy, awkward...*Jadox!*

Kerak shook his head. It dawned on him that, just maybe, Meiluris was right. “So what do we do?” he sighed.

Meiluris slid to the ground, reaching around the edge of the cleft. “Well, for starters, we need to expose your friend to a little crash course in filamentary awareness. And I know exactly where we can make that happen.” Meiluris pointed behind him, in the direction of the small table at the rear of the Collonade, where Ekavias, Arjun, Hezhreon, Odrahn and Um.Jehanik remained. They were alone there, locked in passionate discourse, the shadows of their expressions dancing across the walls behind them. “You see what’s going on over there? That’s the outcome of a little conversation Odrahn and I

had with your friend Ekavias the other night. Something to do with your *destination*, after you leave the Grottos.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kuwhan’Xalu! That’s what I mean.”

Kerak recalled his conversation with Arjun before they’d arrived at the Grottos, knowing that Ekavias had not been a part of that exchange. “There’s no plan to go any farther than where we sit, Meiluris. Not that I’m aware of.”

“Well, someone needs to fill you in. That old skantaro, Arjun? Ask him.”

Kerak paused, could feel his body begin to tighten. “What does Ekavias know of this...Kuwhan’Xalu?” he asked.

“Not much, but *Amaria*... it’s more than I know! Of course, your friend Cai nearly spilled it when she saw Odrahn. That was the first clue.”

Kerak’s shoulders slumped.

“I used to believe, you know. But by the time I’d made it to Shulumethros,” Meiluris went on, “I’d become convinced that Kuwhan’Xalu was nothing but an old caquepile of Mnulorathean folklore. I’d always been told that if you came to the Seamounts, stay away from it! That if you just *had* to go here, and could manage to find it, to get to it, forget about returning. When Odrahn and I first quizzed Ekavias, he got a little defensive, but soon enough he started talking. He’s as curious about it as me and Odrahn, or you and your other chums for that matter. Then he launched into a diatribe about his former life as a Muharic; about how he’d gone to the Moirisois with a search party and found some weird Ularic veins that were comingled with an Aquylur amalgam; how he...”

“Wait! What did you say?”

“I said he told us he found some weird veins in the Moirisois...you don’t look so good. What gives?”

Kerak jumped to his feet. He paced over to a protrusion in the Collonade walls, slapping it with his left hand. It was slightly warm to the touch. “Drogan and I saw a vein just like that in the estrean Seamounts: Ularic, fused with Aquylur

swaths. And Jadox and I saw the same thing in another cave, further to sorentre. What did Ekavias say about it?"

"You mean about *them*! He said that he and his comrades from the Palialouge articulated this vein and sourced it as one of three, coming from estre, norostre and sorentre, all merging into a single point."

Kerak slid to the ground, trying to process this information.

"Your friend Ekavias claims to be an expert in Synthet. I don't know if that's true, or how he and his fellow Muharics came to these conclusions. But his is a mind that needs to be tapped."

"Don't tell me that you're going to throw all your energies into Ekavias now, and disregard the *Mnemonast* in our midst?" Kerak said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Oh no, not at all. You and me and Odrahn and whoever *else*; we're going to take those two traveling companions of yours on a little journey. I'm convinced that if we put their heads together in the right place, there's no telling what we'll find."

Night. In a corner beneath a short outcrop sat a large bourget, brimming with bloody bandages, mingled with layer upon layer of decayed tissue, bone fragments, torn clothing. The filthy, contorted remains of a fetus, shriveled in placenta, half an untek shy of full term...stillborn from the womb of a mother who'd survived barely long enough to mourn its passing. Male? Female? No one had bothered to look. What did it matter now?

These were the first images which struck Cai as she returned to the infirmary. She stood in the middle of this cavernous expanse and spun on her right heel in a slow circle. Surrounding her...220 souls: most of them here because of injuries. 10, maybe 12 of them had died since she'd left for the Collonade, 60 stratimers earlier. 40, perhaps 50, she surmised, would not live to see another day, much less two.

She turned to find Nairul lugging an overfilled bourget to the firepit, located between here and the Collonade. Then she heard a voice.

“Need some help, Cai? I’m bored.”

Cai looked at her and smiled. “Sure, Nalani. You won’t be bored around here. Lots to do! But you can’t stay long.”

Cai knelt, pulled a clean rag from her pocket, moistened it and dabbed it on Nalani’s face and neck, filthy from stubborn streaks of grease and grime. *The mischief*, Cai thought, *is always there in this one*. The day before, Cai had scolded Nalani for once again taking up her nettlesome habit of “collecting.” Cai had discovered this when Nalani returned to her a small trinket: a shiny, carved chunk of Klaretzu stone, a relic from the Hirusovrans which Jarumon had given to his daughter in her youth. There were other items in Nalani’s newest stash, all of which she was under strict orders from Cai to return.

One item, though, held far too much of Nalani’s interest to allow her to part with it. Something about it reached out to her, attached itself to the very essence of her being. And so her “collection” would forever be restricted to but one item; a small stone jar, engraved with glyphs, entwines, lustrous panoramas of Philean landscapes. It was something that she knew, even at her tender age, she would never relinquish.

Cai brushed the hair from Nalani’s neck to reveal her birthmark. Until now, she hadn’t taken the time to examine it up close. But the sight of it seemed to draw her into a flood of memories. Of her time before she came to the Crescent. Of her days in the refugee camp near Maralithlea. And of the wounded Machaeran Regent she had fought so hard to save.

Cai instructed Nalani to fold bandages and sent her on her way, just as Kerak arrived. For a number of reasons, he had insisted on this shift: Jachin, for one, whose time was growing short, fading in and out of consciousness and delirium. The second was to find Nishar; to bring him here. For this, Kerak had enlisted the help of Nairul, shortly to come off his shift. Kerak knew that if anyone could gain and keep the trust of another, Nairul was it. And so it was to come down to this, as

soon as Nairul returned from the firepit with his empty bourget. *"Find him. Bring him here. Now!"* Kerak had insisted. Was Nishar who Kerak suspected him to be; and not just to Jachin? Nothing more than instinct led him down this path, coupled with his desperation to provide his stepfather with even the smallest crumb of solace...considering that was all Kerak had to give. Afterwards, there would be plenty of time to learn more about...and deal with...the Crescent's reticent assistant cook. If it came to that.

A hundred stratimers after Kerak had sent Nairul on his way, Kerak was there, cradling Jachin's head, testing his pulse at regular intervals. Kerak noticed his stepfather's chest beginning to heave. He slid his fingers up and down Jachin's wrist in hopes of getting a better read, aware that with each passing stratimer, his decline would neither cease nor slow.

Jachin's eyes were now starting to open, ever so slight. Kerak squirmed impatiently. *Where is Nairul? He's got to get here, and soon!* Kerak bolted for the maze of corridors leading to and from the infirmary, calling out for Nairul, all the while conscious of Jachin, feeling as if he was being torn apart by opposing circumstances.

Exhausted, Kerak stumbled back and stood over Jachin, noticing that his stepfather's eyes were now wide open, his pupils swimming in a soupy haze. A shrill of footsteps behind him? Kerak turned to look. The sound passed and the infirmary once again grew quiet. Then, a voice.

"Kerak?"

He collapsed, his nerves coming unraveled. Vanished were any lingering thoughts of Nishar. Whistoph-Karnash, Adecyn, The Phileans, Arjun, *Jachin*: these were what filled Kerak's mind, drifting into, then out of, an ethereal fog.

"Yes, Jachin."

"I just want you to know, Kerak..."

Silence. "Jachin. JACHIN!"

"I want you to know that I am...I am so...very...*sorry!*"

Cold. Sallow. Kerak gazed now into Jachin's murky eyes, then held his hand over Jachin's mouth. Nothing. Gently, Kerak ran his fingers over Jachin's lids, then stood to an

undulation; the murmurs of pain, calling out now from the all sides of the infirmary.

“*Rest, my old friend,*” Kerak whispered, choking on his words. “*Rest.*”

A lone soul knelt on a dirt floor in a dark nook, just to norostre of the Collonade. A Trimethric stone was nestled in his left palm, a Myotrophus in his right, its fractured segments now fully merged into one. He pressed the stones against a vein of Burnish Hagonite, resplendent even in the reflection of dim light.

He knew he had little time, for these stones would soon have to be returned to the places from which they had been taken. *The arousal of suspicion must be avoided at all costs*, he mused.

With joy and relief, he trembled. An arcane slurry of articulations shot through his arms, his hands, into the stones, the vein, coursing within the narrowest possible gauge of polarity. The high-end modulations were in the Hirusovran/Pavatrian patois, the pitch double reversed. On the low end: Andulkan/Vengathlian, the tonality scored, transgressed three times.

He smiled, pulled the stones from the vein and relaxed. Final contact, he knew, had been made.

Now, it was only a matter of time.

V

A Caustic Vengeance

*I*N A RARE MOMENT OF INTIMACY, when Diarmad Te.Sinian was eight quinteks of age, his father told him an old Pavatrian fable; a legend set in the mythical marisatria of Kalu-Duarek. Cast into the landscape of some un-named Erasotran vista, it was the pre-Eclipsian tale of twin brothers. To the eyes of the Sphere in which they lived, they were identical. To their own, though, they were anything but. This was the tale of Zalorist and Aaromear.

Pre-Eclipsians, it was believed, preferred life above ground to the claustrophobic alternative found in the Subterra. If confronted, though, with the need to venture below, a ready source of illumination was considered as essential as air, water or food.

The legend goes that in those ancient times, each new soul born into this Sphere was to be given a Scharolif stone. These were small, dark lumps of rock which could be coaxed under the right gestures of hand and mind to glow with a bright yellow light, whenever needed. It was also the custom that each young soul who received a Scharolif would be left, on his or her own, to learn how to use their stone, without benefit of instruction.

In keeping with custom, five quinteks after their birth, Zalorist and Aaromear were each given their Scharolif stones. Over the ensuing quinteks, Zalorist became very proficient in the use of his Scharolif. By the age of 13 he had learned to nudge it to its maximum effect, causing it to glow with more brilliance than any Scharolif thought to exist anywhere in the known Sphere. Aaromear, on the other hand, had not in any way familiarized himself with his stone. By the end of their 13th quintek, Aaromear's stone remained as it was at his birth: nothing more than a dark clump of rock. But Aaromear, though unskilled in the ways of the Scharolif, possessed other advantages, far different from those of his brother.

Early in their 14th quintek, their marisatria and so many others like it were swept away by un-named, unknown forces, and their family perished. Zalorist and Aaromear, though, managed to escape annihilation. They were set adrift, left to wander the desolate, forsaken pathways leading away from Kalu-Duarek and toward an uncertain future. Throughout their lonesome journeys, Zalorist used his Scharolif to light their path with a brazen glow, all the while resentful of being forced to assist his inept brother. Aaromear, though, chose to walk a few paces ahead of his brother, preferring a path less luminous than that of Zalorist, burdened as it was with such an overpowering glare.

For many days and nights they wandered the intersecting roads, seeing or passing no one along the way. Riven with hunger and thirst, the brothers were met one day by a certain stranger, at dusk. Zalorist called out to the stranger, who carried no light. Hearing no response, he cried out again, begging the stranger for food, for water. The intense glare from his stone, though, impeded Zalorist's vision. He failed to notice that the stranger carried a Burgensleath, a mythic Erasotran blade, forged from a high-grade ore.

The vision of Aaromear, though, was not minimized by glare. He saw what his brother could not see. With alarm, Aaromear looked into the stranger's eyes and saw treachery. He also caught sight of the Burgensleath, ascending with a fierceness of will as the stranger ran toward them. Without saying a word, the stranger lunged at Zalorist in an effort to sever the hand holding the Scharolif. Seeing this, Aaromear picked up a large rock he'd found along the path and threw it at the stranger. The rock struck the stranger on the head, killing him instantly.

The brothers were relieved that they had been spared. They rummaged through the stranger's provisions, all of which they found useful in one way or another. For many days, many unteks and quinteks, the brothers continued to wander their ravaged Sphere. Zalorist's stone lit their path so that they would not stray. But when it blinded him to the subtleties and the contradictions he found in others, his brother was always

there, no more than a few steps removed; free of the burden of Zalorist's gift. And so, Aaromear was able to build upon his own skills, to the advantage of both him and his brother. To refine his innate ability to see through the darkness. To capture the nuances which mere light could not expose; that indiscernible glow which can only be seen by the eye of the mind.

*Their talents complemented each other to their mutual advantage...*his father had told Diarmad after finishing the story, then a few more carefully chosen examples to close his narrative. When it ended, Diarmad's father, in keeping with his custom, disappeared once again.

* * * * *

He turned to his right, shivering in a cold mist. Here, at the lower reaches of the Xyklian ambits, the Hest-Feurilian monoliths stood between him and the distance of luments, drifting off to sorentre. Diarmad Te.Sinian and his contingent had broken through four days earlier: not just into the wisoltrean Seamounts, but into the vaunted position his mother, and supposedly his *father*, had pushed so hard to obtain. All, as he had been told, for the benefit of their son. *The Pinnacle of Machaeran Regency*, not so much in title as in reputation, was now within his grasp. And not because of the obtrusive influence of Savita and Gersul, or even by edict of the Suhm-Ephriant himself. No, this was a gift that Diarmad Te.Sinian, in his own humble opinion, had bestowed upon himself.

Now in command of over 3000 subalternates, a number he was convinced was sure to grow in the coming unteks, Diarmad shielded his eyes to a wall of white smoke. Tongues of flame fluttered to his left. The sounds of impassioned conversation tugged at his ears. Furiously, he stabbed and jabbed and pinched away at his skin, the blue stains on his forearms, imprinted upon him with a vexing permanency. He pondered a cache of interrogation transcripts, obtained surreptitiously and passed along by his second-in-command, Eiliox Um.Kao-Ulant. But his musings were interrupted again

by his Treflicat, still humming with a flurry of directives, including notice of an assassination order now in the hands of the Courvesois, somewhere to norostre of the Xhalamears. He puzzled over the identity of the Courvesant who'd received this assignment.

Beside him sat Um.Kao-Ulant. Also, Tarek Ve.Shanatu, who had arrived just yesterday from the Pavatrian highlands at the head of a thousand fresh subalternates; a third of Diarmad's enlarged command. Also here: Puaolo Te.Mauxlur, a talented young circulat and Chalister who had been on assignment for a quintek in the Xhalamear plateaus and the Moirisois highlands.

Let us never fail to mourn them: four valued friends and colleagues, including a Regent! Slain by a stolen Quadric from some Muricai skantaro who had somehow managed to escape his ordained demise. And what of the tragic, Actinetic deaths of 1200 subalternates? Well, after all, who can blame the wind? It is unfortunate, yes, but the price of progress cannot be measured. The naïve faces of practically every soul to whom Diarmad had spoken these words, since gathering his forces at Tephrom-Anh before their assault on the monoliths, seemed to have absorbed them like water to a parched throat. Still, he could not overcome the uncomfortable glares, the forces smiles...the images of doubt he was certain lay in their eyes, just before they'd skulked away; faces downcast, judgment smeared in dark letters across their miserable faces.

It wasn't until he'd reached the base of the Cyriklian Thrusts, just to sorentre of the gateways to the Hest-Feurilians, that he was able to begin the process of salvaging the wavering loyalty of his minions, ensuring the security of his own precious hide. His booming tenor had ricocheted off the steep vaults of the echoburth surrounding him, before an audience of over 1500 subalternates. This had included 200 from what remained of Um.Sarujeh's contingent plus 500 from the Xhalamears, all of whom were familiar with the ways of Chronicle 398.

No one could accuse Diarmad of failing, when needed, to utilize his talents for dramatic flair. "Now," he had called out

that day, feigning every emotion but fear, “*we must avenge the brutal deaths of Um.Sarujeh, Te.Thorasle, Um.Dulac and Ve.Ulte with a caustic vengeance, and once and for all erase the name Muricai from the tongue of every living soul in the Dimensional Horizon!*” Thoughts of those Machaerans who had been lost to all but his own hand were ordered forgotten. In their place, the deaths of a mere four would be enshrined over the loss of a number far greater. From that moment on, images of doubt might find a home in the eyes of others, but they would not be seen in those of Diarmad Te.Sinian. Unless, of course, you knew where to look.

Diarmad was shaken from his trance as Ve.Shanatu tossed a large slab of dry fungus on the fire. Puaolo laughed at some sideways sliver of gossip tossed out by Um.Kao-Ulant. Diarmad drew another swig from his flagon; a dribbling mouthful of the hard spirit known as Kyrulix. The flame leapt to new heights, igniting the image of Puaolo’s face as the cup rose to meet Diarmad’s lips, pursed and rigid beneath a wave of resentment. Was this crony from his distant past here to share, or perhaps steal, this moment? And why the continued presence of him and all the others like him, hovering like silent umbras behind the scenes of every Actinetic leveled against the Moirisois since just after his inaugural disaster, 30 days prior? So many questions. So little courage to ask. And so little faith in his ability to handle the answers.

Puaolo Te.Mauxlur. He and Diarmad had known each other since they were six quinteks of age, their flats separated by only four neighbors. No one could call theirs a friendship, but their rapport was “friendly” nonetheless. Those days had been blissful in their ignorance as Diarmad and Puaolo had spent their time bouncing together off the vestibule walls at every Cypliat in the Architrave. Later, their relationship would become more complex: competitive yet compatible. Adolescence had driven a wedge between them, particularly where Puaolo was concerned, try as he may to harness his seething acrimony over the growing privilege Diarmad and his family seemed to enjoy. Then, adulthood compelled them to fly their nests, to explore other Spheres. The undercurrents

which had always flowed silent and dark between them, though, remained.

Puaolo's father was the talented Arduan Councilor Shalathist Lo.Garagen, an erudite former maquit with a passion for languages and dialects. Lo.Garagen had established the league of Chalisters to serve the needs of the Architrave, below the eyes of awareness and accountability. Their stated mission was no different than that of anyone else who studies Synthet: the gathering and interpretation of revenants, buried deep within the ores of the Subterra; revenants which are too vague or schismatic to be interpreted by "lesser" minds. Revenants which, of course, might betray a clue to the discovery of the Circonic. These days the focus of the Chalisters' search, and the location of every Chalister the Architrave could send, were the hinterlands through which ran any veins pointing to norostre of Astuverica.

The league, nicknamed "the Enclave" for reasons known only to its founder, would in time become a special favorite of the third Suhm-Ephriant, Zhalach Te.Stanalu. For his work, Lo.Garagen had won the lasting respect and admiration of his Sovereign, not to mention a dagger thrust deep between his shoulder blades by order of an envious circle of fellow Arduans. Following this act, his murderers promised, with straight faces, to improve upon the legacy of their victim. This was a gesture which they resented having to make, but which succeeded in winning them a measure of forgiveness...and even a smidgen of praise...from the Suhm-Ephriant. Such is how the currents flow in the Cypliats.

When he came of age, the young Te.Mauxlur was happy to take up his father's passions. Puaolo never really gave much thought to the many sacrifices his father had made, so long as the son could keep his head buried all day in magnetic rock and sonorant reverberation. In time, it would become obvious that Puaolo's talents had far surpassed those of his father, particularly in the arena of self-preservation, both physical *and* political.

A little less than a quintek ago, Puaolo found himself eager to embark on a lengthy field assignment. It began with a

call from the 68th Cypliat to report right away to the Xhalamear highlands. Rumors had surfaced about a cache of ambiguous revenants, discovered by three Muharic scholars and their circulat, four unteks earlier. Puaolo later learned through a reliable source outside the Architrave that this team of four had disappeared after a journey to the Moirisois. Too, their Palialouge and all its occupants had later been pillaged, burned and lost.

Fingers of yellow and green light danced above the flames as Diarmad strained to keep his exhausted eyes from shutting. A line of Kyrulix ran dark and red from the corners of his mouth. Tarek was livid, sharing the latest batch of vibes and rumors from the Architrave, a place where he'd spent his last two quinteks familiarizing neophyte subalternates with new refinements to the Palick Raptor. His joy at putting Astuverica behind him was effusive.

"Total chaos. Mass confusion. The worst I've ever seen! Well concealed, yes. But if you dig a little it's obvious, and the Cypliat are bleeding for it. The X-C has gone berserk, pummeling each other at every turn, and for Hedeon knows what! As for Astuverica; it's no different. Why, the whole city, from the clerestories all the way down to Level Two, fills the grandstands at the Helidrome way beyond capacity every day; sometimes two or three times a day. Subregents from the Cypliat, merchants from the Columns, drudges, even Muharic priests! Freigh, all they obsess over is their infernal Pilectis matches. I tell you the whole place has gone *insane!*" As Tarek spoke, he patted a wad of argency in his pocket: 270 khirius, his most recent take from his favorite plunger, one of dozens who were making book these days at the Helidrome.

Tarek winked at Diarmad. "But they can *have* their bickering and their blood sport, as far as I'm concerned," he said, feigning tribute as best he could, "because every one of them has *you* to thank, my friend! I hear that just about every Muricai cell from the Hirusovrans to the norostrean Seamounts had been pushed into the Moirisois. Lo.Pavrelis did a body count after the fifth round of Actinetics wound down near Tephrom-Anh, and he figured there can't be more than

200 or so Muricai left, anywhere in the Dimensional Horizon, after the rest of them were slashed or enslaved, or burned alive. They say most of what's left comes from that Vengathlian cell... *Ghuro* something?"

"Ghurodenthre," Eiliox mumbled.

"Yeah, that's it. But *here* is where the action is, my friends. From what I'm told, the only sector on the lips of the Xaru-Chalidaethras is the Emex ranges. This is where those pellots are, chaps. Of course, if they manage to squeeze out of here and make it even as far as the Pavatrias, it won't take 'em more than an untek to round up enough strength to erase five quinteks worth of Machaeran toil. That's the buzz."

Tarek came up for air, took another swig and rolled his eyes. "I heard Ve.Aztasur spill that if those Muricai pellots escape the Seamounts, the heads of at least a hundred Machaerans will go on display, right in the middle of the Palamonts. Sobering, huh?" As he spoke, Tarek wondered if his plunger might take wagers on the odds of *that* happening. Um.Kao-Ulant squirmed, dour-faced, wiping his forehead.

Diarmad's mind was someplace else. *Intel*. That was a commodity in short supply. The cleaving of veins had slowed but was still going on, the same as it had in the Moirisois. The difference was that here, Chronicle 706 hadn't yielded the first illicit cognition. It was only a matter of time before another communiqué would soon be placed into Diarmad's hands. Even without it, he knew from recent scouting reports that three, perhaps four refugee camps were buried in Subterranean chasms beneath the massive valley that formed the axis of the Mysoux-Xyklian range. Regardless, he was walking just as blind as the last two detachments who had preceded him. For the past two quinteks, only a third of the scouts who'd been sent into what is known as the *Swales* had returned. And as for the ones who had...not a shred of useful information had they been able to offer. *Amaria, what I'd give for a tiny morsel of the insight those missing scouts could reveal*, he mused as another rootbranch was thrown into the fire, a shower of sparks working its way up from the flames.

The Kyrulix was now beginning to take hold. With a finger touch he dabbed at his neck wound, still raw over a quintek after he'd received it at the hands of that Vengathlian Muricai pellet who remained, as far as he knew, close at hand. Somewhere out there in the darkness.

Diarmad's anxiety came to a head. He reeled in agony and threw his hand against the wound. The still severed nerves began once more to pique and throb. He held his Treflicat with his right hand and audited three edicts...

One - Discontinue Chronicle 706 in the Mysoux-Xyklian ranges. Two - Begin Actinetics at the earliest possible opportunity at select areas along the Mnulorathean plateaus lying to norostre of the Xhalamears. Three - Source at least one refugee camp and pass encoded azimuths along to Arduan scouts positioned along the Mysoux ridges, who will then subcode abstracts and relay to The Order.

The suspension of 706 made perfect sense, given the naturally schismatic nature of Mnulorathean veins: there weren't nearly enough translatable bridges in their remaining supply to solve that problem. As for the second edict: he noticed that it had also been sent to two other recipients, earlier that day; their identities a mystery. It confused him. *Those tablelands have been scoured from one end to the other. They're barren; not a soul to be seen. What's to be gained by forcing me to waste my amalgams on them?*

He held his stone even harder, his rage seeping in a cold sweat from between his fingers. Yes, the reasoning behind the second edict was vague. But the third? Now, he understood all too well. *The Order! So that's what the Arduans are up to. That Vengathlian pellet! How I wish I could take him out myself. What a shame I have to turn his death over to some sniveling little Courvesant. Tears of pain welled up in his eyes. He's so close. Amaria, what I'd give for a reliable scouting report right about now!*

Reluctantly, his mind again broached the thought of Rhiodaramir, even though he couldn't stand the idea of submitting again, not after the damage the Architrave's

“psychoactive of choice” had earlier caused him. That was half an untek after he’d crossed paths with The Order’s latest target, the one who went by the name “Lo.Hualic.” Not to mention that incompetent skridlak; the female dhuthaer who’d further mutilated him in that slimy little caquehole of a refugee camp near Maralithlea.

Diarmad poured another flagon, heaving it back in desperation. The sound of Eiliox Um.Kao-Ulant’s voice cut through the smoky air. “So how many veins did you articulate in your first untek in the Xhalamears?” he asked Puaolo. Eiliox’s hand was wrapped around a fistful of rations; a little something to go down with the spirits in his flagon. “And how many of you are here from the Enclave?”

Puaolo rolled his eyes, counting on the fingers of two hands, twice, and then some. “23 veins. All cinctured. Treflicats are a last resort on this assignment. It’s all manual out here. The oddest were a cluster we found to noro-wiso of the Xhalamears, infused with Ularic and a spiraling array of Waterstone. They were rife with some very odd glyphs. The whole assemblage was like nothing I’d ever seen. We saw another cluster just like them in the Moirisois. Oh, and as for numbers: the entire Enclave has been sent into the field on this assignment; eight in all. One was sent back to Astuverica after two unteks. Food poisoning, I’m told. He’s fine, though.”

Eiliox’s curiosity had been stirred. “What did they send you to look for?” he asked, as unsure as anyone else in the D.H. of what a Chalister does.

“Revenants, preferably from veins which have been burned. The revenants in those veins are a lot easier to read than otherwise. Before the Enclave was sent here, we were prepped on this assignment for five days. A new addition to the Enclave, one with an ear for rumor, told me that four unteks earlier, an expedition from a Palialouge in the Tribethians had articulated a small cache of explitore. In that group were two Muharic scholars. Just like us, they were proficient in the study of Synthet, and it was *they*, I assume, who interpreted what they thought was evidence of an

Erasotran tongue imbedded in a cache of revenants, locked away in a vein in the Moirisois. They were...”

“Wait, did you say *Erasotran*? How’s that possible?” Eiliox asked in disbelief. Upon hearing this, Diarmad perked up, dragging himself out of his afflicted state.

“No one really knows. And I can’t confirm their findings: translation is not part of our assignment. We’re under strict orders to articulate the revenants we find, convert them into abstracts and cog them to a Treflicat stashed in a blind cadre somewhere in Astuverica, all under Rank of Signet,” Puaolo said, describing the method of Thermionically stamping an abstract to guarantee its authenticity. “What happens to them after that? Well, I have my suspicions, but no proof.”

Puaolo’s eyes widened as he went on. “All I know is that someone in the Architrave is testing the explitore, maybe even the subchattels, for their content. As soon as we send an abstract off to Astuverica, a few days later we get a new set of azimuths through the blind cadre, telling us where to go for further articulations. And the places they send us wind up yielding twice as much fruit as the ones before. Puzzling, I tell you.”

Puaolo pulled himself back a bit from his meanderings, careful not to reveal too much. “But like I was saying, not a single member of that party...there were four in all...was ever seen or heard from again. Their Palialouge...wiped out, too. The Architrave has been mum on why they sent the Enclave out here, so far from Astuverica. But my guess is that we’re another step in the completion of the work of those missing Muharics. As for leaving the Architrave; I had no qualms about that. *Freigh*, Tarek’s right. These days, Astuverica is a great place to see from a distance. I was more than glad to go.”

Tarek’s mouth was full of rations; he washed them down with a single swig. “So how did the Architrave find out about the work of those Muharics?” he asked. “Didn’t you say they disappeared? Who was left to talk?”

“One of the circulats in that party was a former Chalister who’d come to the Enclave before my time: Mefria2 Te.Yrtre. She’d been there since before Kirahmoor came on the scene.

From what I was told, she had refused to touch the Xycloplast, or even to invoke the Mirumattre,” Puaolo said, describing Kirahmoor’s mandatory code of allegiance to the Cathedra of the fifth Suhm-Ephriant. “But her father was a chirapsiat; very popular with about a fifth of the Ephriants in the X-C. So instead of being tossed into bondage in the Hellespheres they showed Mef a little ‘mercy’ and shipped her off to a Palialouge in the Tribethians that needed someone to etch their memory stones. I would have preferred the Hellespheres, but that’s just me.”

Puaolo smiled, thinking of the paranoiac habits that were native to the Architrave. “Kirahmoor never trusted her. Even hundreds of thousands of neurris away, he obsessed over her defiance! So he had her every move tracked, her cogs monitored day and night. She was smart, and that scared the caque out of him.”

His tone grew more dour as he went on. “Word is that when she and her three companions discovered those revenants, she went straight to Kirahmoor, cogged him a few select reads about half an untek before their expedition ended. These showed, among other things, that those revenants were sourced out of some very primal ores. I’m talking *off-the-charts* pure. I think Mef must’ve communicated that information to Kirahmoor for no other reason than to appease him, since he’d had her father arrested an untek earlier on some trumped-up charges, threatening execution; probably to try and coerce Mef’s overdue loyalty. At the same time, Mef hired a courier, who passed a Kyo through to her father. This Kyo contained the same abstracts she’d cogged to Kirahmoor, plus a few others from that find. She did that, I assume, for leverage, in case her father wasn’t released right away. But not long after their expedition ended, Mef and the others from that Palialouge went missing.”

Puaolo plucked a ration from the hand of a startled Tarek. “About an untek ago, Mef’s father, who by then had been granted a full reprieve, approached Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest for help in finding his daughter. The Kyo that Mef had sent to her father? He passed that along to Dhulorei. I don’t

know what her father thought Um.Aara-Maest could do for him, but I guess he knew the old priest had enough skill in the study of Synthet to be dangerous. So sure enough, Um.Aara-Maest takes a few reads from the Kyo and goes berserk, hides out in cloister at the Medius Athlamaru for days on end, forgets all about Mefria2...everything. Other than the metals those revenants came from, I don't know what those abstracts told Kirahmoor. But it must've been the same thing that alarmed the old Muharic because otherwise," Puaolo said with laugh, "I wouldn't be sitting here with you ugly pucinos, slugging it out with another flagon of this fine swill!"

"Well, that explains a lot," Tarek said.

"What do you mean?" Eiliox asked.

"What's got the X-C worked up into such a lather, that's what. It's all over the Architrave! The vibe I heard is that it's Muharic Ephriancy that's been jousting with rest of the X-C for...for about an untek. Over what; who knows? Um.Aara-Maest carries a lot of weight with the doomsayers in the Muharadu. They've been hoping for some bad news to confirm their sad little auguries, though I'm sure they'd never admit it. There's only one thing that could get Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest up and out of his little hovel in the Saurostrans, and that's a taste of prophecy. *Apocalyptic* prophecy. There must have been something pretty frightening in those articulations that your fellow Chalister, Meflia..."

"Mefria. Mefria2."

"...Mefria2 came across, otherwise Um.Aara-Maest wouldn't have bothered the Ephriants with it, perched way up in their gilded cages."

Diarmad seethed at the cynicism oozing from the mouth of his second-in-command.

Puaolo sacrificed another root branch to the flames. He paid close attention to Diarmad, choosing his words carefully. "Whatever's in those reads, it's pretty important to someone in the Triumvirate; someone close to the 68th Cypliat. Yeah, the Triurate's got its usefulness to the Machaera; clearing the Muricai from out of the sorentrean Seamounds and all. But as far as the Architrave is concerned, that's not what's driving

Chronicle 398,” Puaolo said, easing back a final swig of Kyrulix. He tossed his flagon aside, never taking his eyes off his old chum’s face.

Diarmad fought to speak through a sluggish tongue. “What are you talking about?”

“The veins; after the heat from a Triurate splits them, they cool, become compressed. The explitore practically stands on end. The revenants separate from the coagulate, become energized. So they’re a lot easier to read after the veins are burned. A mnemonast,” Puaolo added, “would go a little crazy around a burned vein, what with all the Grist they’d kick up.”

“Mnemonasts!” Tarek said with a sneer, reflecting his Muharic upbringing. “You don’t buy into that sorcery, do you?”

“Sorcery? Nonsense. There’s *nothing* magical about the gift of Pras’demnos. It’s all intuition; the innate ability to see what others are unable...or unwilling...to see. That’s all.”

Puaolo caught Te.Sinian out of the corner of his eye, then struck hard. “Lo.Jehan didn’t go into a lot of detail about why you were being sent here, did he, Diarmad? Other than to stroke your ego. To tell you what a *rare privilege* it is to light the spark of 398? To support the work of Siruman Um.Sarujeh? Well, Chronicle 398 is about carving a path for the Enclave to complete its mission; nothing more. By the way, fine work in the Moirisois; except that first burn of yours was about 50 neurris off target. You should have told us before you lit that spark!”

Diarmad’s fingers began to close in around his flagon.

Puaolo went on. “Have you ever wondered why there’s always a Chalister tagging along with the maquit who sets the amalgams before your burns? And have you noticed how the burns have been tracking about 10 to 20 degrees away from the azimuths in your directives?”

Diarmad shook his head. He had no idea what Puaolo was talking about.

“It’s because your maquits are burning where we *tell* them to burn. Haven’t you been paying att...”

“Of COURSE I have!!” Diarmad shouted, crushing his flagon between his hands. He closed his eyes, squeezing muffled damnations through his teeth at his insubordinate maquits. At Puaolo for his contemptuous tongue. And at himself, for a thousand other reasons.

Tarek grinned at Puaolo, then pointed at the sulking Te.Sinian. “Well, isn’t that interesting! So, if the Enclave is driving S.C. 398, that means they’re also driving...*you!*” Tarek raised his flask toward Puaolo. “My compliments!”

Diarmad clenched his jaw, in full denial of the derision being heaped his way. He swallowed his pride, though, because swirling through his mind was a question that had been burning a hole through his head since the last time he saw Lo.Jehan’s face. It was a question which only one soul...amongst those who were within arm’s reach...could answer.

“Caddoan Lo.Therechist?”

“Yeah?” Puaolo knew what Diarmad was about to ask.

“Why did they take 398 away from him?” Te.Sinian mumbled, summoning these words from deep within. “Why did the Machaera put him in charge of a *peonage* camp, of all things? Why didn’t they just send him to the Moirisois, to the Swales, like they did me? Do you know?”

Puaolo questioned whether he should pull back. But if an honest answer was what Diarmad wanted, an honest answer he should have. “Caddoan is being groomed for Lo.Jehan’s vacant seat, Diarmad. They sent him to the Hirusovrans so you could take the reins of 398, to keep him in a safe spot until the time was right for the Council to induct him.” Puaolo lowered his head. “Not exactly what you wanted to hear, huh?”

“Why...wasn’t...I...”

“Considered? Is that what you were about to ask? Why weren’t *you* considered as Lo.Jehan’s replacement?” Puaolo’s borderline empathetic tone dried up. “You can’t be that blind, Diarmad. You know full well that Caddoan is Lo.Jehan’s protégé; has been for the past two quinteks. Plus, the Arduans would never go for you; as a Councilor? Never! Even your parents couldn’t buy enough influence to pull that one off.”

The scar on his neck began to burn, to seethe, to push Diarmad Te.Sinian into a realm of madness to which he had never ventured. He stared at a flaming rootbranch, suppressed the urge to grab it with his bare hands, to hurl it high into the air. But he remained as he was: eyes forward, silent, unflinching. This time Diarmad would drive his rage back, back into the bondage of an invisible chain; flawless, save the presence of a single weak link.

Tarek stood to face Puaolo, pouring the last drops of Kyrulix down his throat. He was prepared for his return to camp, then back to Astuverica in the morning. "Where does your blind cadre tell you to go now?" Tarek asked.

"I received a directive this morning, instructing us to target a few locations along the plateaus lying just above the Xhalamears," he said, "Then, we push on to norostre. *Always* to norostre," Puaolo answered, turning to face Diarmad, now a bundle of quivering flesh. "So light the spark again so I can do my job!"

*I*t arose in the same way the protoplasms do: a surging mass born of the heat of the day, chased by a ravenous flock until it had been thoroughly devoured. As little as two unteks ago, the sounds of the Astuverican experience had never penetrated the airs at this height. But these days, when the Helidrome is at full capacity, the tenor of thousands merges into a single, high-pitched wail, causing even the cerebellum to cringe in recoil.

Vikram Lo.Jehan, Khalaris Ve.Aztasur and Gersul Um.Niall sat at a small table outside the Hall of the Suhm-Kaolisch, at the 68th Cypliat: the pinnacle of the Architrave. Four hand ushers scurried back and forth, clearing the table of empty ladles and vials. Then they disappeared.

Three lone Ephriants sat near an empty Cathedra, the same one which had been commissioned to carry the tall, lanky frame of Yuanik Um.Chaltro, the first Suhm-Ephriant, who had placed her seat of authority in what was then nothing more than a seaside backwater at the juncture of the unpaved Andulkan viamars. Yuanik reigned long enough to see her

residences soar all the way up to the 21st Cypliat. It was through the efforts of the second, third and fourth Suhm-Ephriants that the summit of power came to rest here at the 68th. Like everything else representative of the vast edifice that is the Architrave, their efforts were a fitting tribute to the goals which can be accomplished when the forces of Fear and Greed come together as one.

Kirahmoor can be given credit for the Hall's name. The Kaolisch, legend has it, was the title of the one true Sovereign who ruled over the four Erasotras, after 100 quinteks of savage struggle in which their separatist instincts were finally subdued, joined into a single, unified entity. It was said that this ruler's name was *Kirahmagh*, or something along those lines: a name derived from what was believed to have been the Erasotran word for *everything*. The fifth Suhm-Ephriant, of course, drew his own pseudonym from this legend. No one could accuse him of failing to appreciate the value of drama and history, especially when they are conjoined.

Another roar vaulted skyward as at least 10 morithules rattled overhead in rhythmic unison. "Someone must have fallen," Gersul said with a smile. "That is the echo of death! Amaria, how the masses cherish their games. No khiromek has ever conjured an elixir more intoxicating to the senses, to the soul, than that of a good Pilects match!"

Lo.Jehan and Ve.Aztasur nodded in agreement. They were aware of how much they and others like them were profiting from the flourishing plungers working the Columns, brokering wagers that served to separate the player from his precious argency; now up to 15 times a day. They, like their Sovereign, had conceded that the frustrated voice of the malcontent, far from this thriving metropolis, had grown into a deafening cacophony. Rattling the Custody gates. Shaking the ground beneath the viamars, now paved with the spoils of blood and entitlement. Here, only the thunder erupting from the Helidrome could soothe that voice, preventing the vertically oriented Astuverica from collapsing into a derelict, horizontal heap.

An irritated Ve.Aztasur stared at the Cathedra, occupied only two stratimers earlier by an impatient Suhm-Ephriant, now engaged in at least a dozen other fritterings. Kirahmoor's energies had always seemed boundless, inexplicable, as he appeared to race from one well-timed affair, episode or milestone to the next; almost seeming, at times, as if he were in two places at once. They felt fortunate that he had been able...or was it willing?...to give them the audience they'd been crying out for. But now it was done. And two-thirds of those seated around the table were displeased with his response.

Ve.Aztasur now directed her attention at Um.Niall: Ephriant; Courvesant; consort to the shrewdest, most cunning killer she had ever known; and the father of the only Machaeran who had ever openly defied her...without a shred of remorse or consequence. Ve.Aztasur scanned his distinct face. Gersul remained silent, wearing a nervy grin. His hands had been tucked into the folds of his cloak ever since they'd entered this Hall, 30 stratimers ago. Overcome with an unexplainable rage, Ve.Aztasur fought the urge to reach out and strike Um.Niall; a justifiable litigation against all that this haughty pelot represented. *His expression...so mechanical, rehearsed. It has not wavered since we arrived,* the thorny Saurostran mused with a quizzical smirk. *What in Hedeon's name goes through his mind?*

Lo.Jehan, too, wrung his hands over Um.Niall, a little embarrassed. *We did not come here to discuss Pilects, my friend,* he thought. "How could the fifth have relented so quickly to the Muharadu's demands," Vikram asked, "without consulting the body of the X-C? How can we persuade him that this is senseless? Dangerous! Is there nothing we can do? Has Muharic influence become that imposing? What have we missed?"

Ve.Aztasur nodded. "How they've hounded him. They are *relentless!*" she replied. "The Medius will not allow this matter to die a natural death. But he is Kirahmoor. Why he hasn't been able to hold out, Hedeon only knows."

Darmek Ve.Muirgen had presided over the first one. Now, Kirahmoor would preside over this rare, historic event; only the third such gathering in the short history of the

Triumvirate. In a little less than one untek, the clerestories, the Principiates, the Halls of the Architrave will stagger and reel under the unique experience known as the Schimatariat. Over 3500 souls would be expected, not counting the thralls, the hirelings, even the favored chirapsiats of those who held rank and/or significant argency within the Horizon. And the prime subject on the schedule: the rants and raves of Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest and the Muharics who venerated him.

Another barrage of voices struck the air from below, this time rattling even the last few vials resting on the table before them. "Liege, I submit that our intent here should be control, not avoidance. After all, the thing is done. There is nothing left for us but to acknowledge the heat of Muharic breath, to channel its direction, its intensity." Um.Niall spoke in a voice free of expression, caged in restraint.

Ve.Aztasur nodded. "Perhaps," she said, "but the hinterlands simmer with acrimony, and ironically just as the Muricai vanish into dust. Who will ensure order beyond the Custody gates? Even here, at the last Schimatariat, we could not keep the masses under control. Do you remember that?" she asked, to no one in particular. "It was a disaster! We had to keep three Machaeran coteries in reserve just to separate 12 rival factions before the councils closed. It took two unteks to restore the peace. Remember?"

A conflicted Lo.Jehan raised his vial. "Kirahmoor cannot be blind to the risk, Khalaris. He must know how..."

"He can't, can he? Where was *he* during the last Schimatariat? Before he emerged from dust and darkness seven quinteks ago. Indeed...who! *WHO* was he? Did any of you even know of hi...? Ve.Aztasur froze, peering over her shoulder, fearful that her words might carry. Her eyes landed on Um.Niall. The Courvesant's face burned with enmity. "P...Pardon, lieges," Ve.Aztasur said. "My point is that a Schimatariat...it will leave the frontiers devoid of Regency. Vulnerable. Unguarded. The *risk* is..."

"I've no doubt that this has been taken into account, my liege," Gersul interrupted. Lo.Jehan, the junior member of this group, said nothing, still reeling from his failure at the

Ahramishk to forestall the weight of Muharic pressure with the power of his words.

Ve.Aztasur found her spine. "The risk is *too great!*"

Lo.Jehan was taken aback by Khalaris's defiance. He stared at Ve.Aztasur's hands, recalling how often, these past few days, the Xycloplast had been passed from one hand to the other. He recalled, too, how lightly Ve.Aztasur's hands seemed to have touched the stone...that day in particular.

Um.Niall showed a defiant streak of his own. "My liege, the Muricai is in submission. There have been no serious security threats in the outliers in two, maybe three unteks. The masses grind their teeth, but their tongues remain mute. As for Astuverica; the Constabularies will be reinforced. Order will be kept. It has been mandated. The Schimatariat is a matter of course. And Hedeon will ensure that it will carry itself...and us along with it...to its natural conclusion."

Lo.Jehan's puzzlement was obvious. *It's almost as if he feels he is speaking for the Suhm-Ephriant*, he mused. *How can Gersul be so confident?*

Through Ve.Aztasur's mind the image of *Kirahmoor's* hands wandered. She remembered the calmness in the Suhm-Ephriant's left hand that day, free once again of that erratic twitch; the hallmark of the incurable condition known as *Tzadaklu*.

"I know, my liege," Khalaris Ve.Aztasur responded. "And that is *exactly* what worries me."

Marching at the head of their column, Guymoun was the first to spot it: a Mnulorathean Kiyfer dome, running close to a series of steep Mysouxlian outcrops. Its cool outflow spilled over into a small pool before disappearing into a dark ravine to noro-wiso, surrounded by a meadow of Syriphada bushes, their conjoined root systems running deep into terra firma. This tangled organic mass ended where its fingers encountered the porous walls of the dome, there to ingest its life-giving waters.

"I'm detecting two syndroqlasts, separated...and I can only guess...by about 4000 neurris." Orneaes Ve.Tal-Lohdur

called out, sitting on a rock at the edge of the pool. He held Savita's Treflicat in his left hand. This former drudge from Level Three had won his freedom by convincing a certain Courvesant that she need never fear retribution, kidnap or thievery as long as she was in his company. Savita had been impressed. *Mildly intelligent; strong; takes orders well enough; fixated on me for some not-so-unpleasant reason*, she'd thought, skimming over the list before adding him to her entourage.

Not one to hide his envy, Guymoun recalled Savita's rationale for bringing Orneaes on this expedition. For he too had been liberated from the Zurish-Triece under similar powers of persuasion, after his patron's heartbreaking tragedy of five quinteks past.

He recalled how it had pleased her. How he and Orneaes had skirmished for her favor on the eve of this journey, insisting that only one of them should accompany her. She, unable to decide, chose them both. After all, Orneaes's nimble hands were more deft with the Treflicat when her head throbbed too hard for her to get a reliable read. Too, he handled a boat and a heavy pack of supplies better than anyone she knew. Guymoun made the trip, among other reasons, because of a certain little thing he did with his tongue. He was unrivaled in that department.

Savita leaned against Guymoun, wrapped snug in his arms, her knuckles pressed hard against the sockets of her eyes. With alternating pressure from his fingertips, his massive yet delicate hands stroked and then pressed deep into her scalp, compelling from her a series of satisfied moans.

At the age of six, he had learned this technique from a chirapsiat, just outside the marisatria of Tharadunin, near the Saurostran-Pavatrian border. Guymoun Te.Zhaktavor...the only child of a mother who hailed from the stock of gleaners and laevenants...had been born there 35 quinteks ago. His father...an invisible specter, the seducer who had stolen the innocence from his 12 quintek old mother...had also arisen from the Saurostrans. Now...lost to his son forever.

Guymoun cared to know nothing about him, other than what little he knew already; that he had fathered children by at

least two other innocents, far from the hinterlands of Tharadunin. Both siblings, he knew, were older than he. One was a Muharic priest, or so he had been told. The eldest, from the Saurostrans, had been brain-damaged at birth due to strangulation from the cord. It was said of her that she possessed a Malaeric intuition that was unsurpassed, though for the most part, untapped. Of their names, their fates, Guymoun could only speculate. That, though, was something he tried never to do.

His story was simple and direct. His mother...sold into chirapsia by her pellogroat of a father when Guymoun was five...would not forsake her son. So she took him into the Eroctriase where she lived out her days. It was here that he acquired the skills of a professional Carnalian, long before he was fully able to appreciate them. By the tender age of 11, his innocent features, his sinewy frame and formidable schlong were earning him praise from clients of all genders.

He toyed with a change of careers at the age of 19, after having grown tired of the trade. That was when he was hired to carry loads for a kratasiph, in search of fine ores near the Brandishments; tantalizingly close to a fascinating Mnulorathean locale known for swallowing up, and refusing to spit out, those who dared cross its divide. Upon their return, though, he quit to once and for all utilize the talents he'd perfected at an early age, instead of taking guff and insult from that irksome dealer in stanhics who hailed from some filthy little backwater in the wisoltrean Andulkas.

To trade eroiche for argency is a good way to make a living wage. But it's an even better way to remain trapped in a life of bondage. This axiom was no less true as it pertained to Guymoun. When he was 22, his mother was beaten to death at the hands of a fellow chirapsiat, jealous of her sway over an influential client whom they both shared. Not long after, his skills drew him to Level Five. At the age of 31 he was maimed in a knife attack from a client...an Ephriant, out of his mind from an overdose of Widow's Breath. His recovery took place in a crude infirmary, located right beside the Pentumus den of the khiromek known as Shirascur. It was there, four quinteks

ago, that Guymoun met a grief-stricken Savita Te.Sinian. In the following order, she took him into her employment, into her bed, and in small measure, into her heart. As to how much of *that* organ he occupied, Guymoun could only speculate. That, though, was something he tried never to do.

Savita drew a painful moan, her mind tripping the distance to that crewmember of hers who for over 40 days had gone un-named. Now, he'd become her best friend. For he was the sole source of that hideous grey-blue powder she craved, here in the middle of absolute nowhere. She lowered her left hand and pointed her finger at him.

"Rasmun, a snap!" she called out.

"Yes, Ceveaesh." Rasmun Te.Ulric pulled off a rationed pinch of Pentumus between his thumb and forefinger and placed it in Savita's mouth. She took it between her upper lip and tongue, closed her eyes and leaned her body forward. The mass of her pain was transformed at full immersion, 10 pulsimers later, with only a slight, lilted spasm in its wake. She raised her chin and turned to face Orneaes.

"Reads; give me reads!" She yelled, seized by a sudden, Pentumus-induced hunger.

"It...it's complicated, Ceveaesh. I'm less than skilled in its recognition. The pattern? Can you remind me?"

She took a noisy bite from a seedpod. For a pulsimer she was tempted to lash out at Orneaes, before she remembered the complexities of the cloistered code and its shadowy intonations. Her head was almost there, but not quite. "Recondite?" she asked.

Orneaes winced, fearing he'd disappointed his patron. He realigned his thoughts. "200,000 neurris to noro-wiso. That I'm sure of."

Savita was able to suppress but a small portion of her rage. "Then point your instrument to noro-wiso!" she fumed, "because she is out THERE; do you understand me? Out...THERE!" Savita sprang to her feet, her eyes bloodshot, her arms flailing, throwing themselves to wisoltre.

Guymoun reached for her and pulled her back to her seat. He felt a sudden kinship with his rival, having been in his place many times before. “*Sava!* Rasmusn, another snap.”

“No, No I don’t need it. I don’t...” Savita threw her hands over her face, took a couple of deep breaths and motioned to Orneaes. “Look for a linguistic amalgam, Orneaes. Hirusovran and Pavatrian on the high end, Andulkan and Vengathlian on the low. That’s the Kyhmekxian pattern. As I’ve said a thousand times before, that’s how the azimuths will be presented,” she cried out before throwing herself into Guymoun’s lap. Her eyes shifted from Orneaes and into a milky distance. Then, they closed. She dozed off, her mind unable to dwell any further on these matters. Guymoun stroked her hair with a tender touch, hopeful that she might now get her first decent sleep in three days.

Orneaes drove his mind even harder now, knowing that if he were unsuccessful, her displeasure upon awakening would return with a heightened vigor. He pressed his fingers into the dense alloys, imprinted with the watermarks of thousands of articulations. *Focus...bearing...alignment* he cajoled himself, digging deeper. He detected a sharp hyperbolic thud, tugging at the back of his mind.

Csh...Csh...Cshalor Denenthre: Shalu Ker Mnurozea Nul Ker...

His eyes opened into tiny slits. *That’s the low*, he thought. *Andulkan on the obverse. Vengathlian on the equivalent!* Then...

Ziresbk Kar Szlavosh Delox: Xuaru Rhyrov Darad Di...

High! That’s the high modulation! He turned his head and smiled at Guymoun, who raised his hand and nodded in relief. Orneaes dug his thumbs into the corners of the stone, locking the azimuths into the dark, grainy ores. As he did he could feel the presence of a cognition, carrying a distinct set of vernaculars, very different from those he had previously articulated. They penetrated the stone and began to make their way into his flesh. They, too, carried the mark of a Kyhmekxian abstract. But they did not come from the same source as before. In a panic, Orneaes dropped the stone, realizing that he had just articulated what he believed was a

communiqué from the Architrave. She'd warned him about handling the Treflicat in such a moment, for those reads would self-imbed. And those reads were for her and her alone. Fully aware of the consequences, he waited a stratimer, picked the Treflicat up from within a thicket of Syriphada vines and eased it into her lap.

"Should we wake her? She should know, don't you think? Don't you think she'll want to know, right away?" Orneaes's childlike eagerness could not be contained.

Guymoun shook his head. His vision was drawn to wisoltre, toward a sloping embankment littered with huge pillars and promontories, opening into a cavernous valley. His right hand cradled Savita's slumbering form. With his left, he pulled the Kyotrimlic from his hip pocket; the same stone that he and Savita had found in a pile of ashes at that crescent-shaped beach, far to norostre, its dense airs stained with a fading blue venom.

He stroked the aged Kyo's coarse veneer, struggling to discern its intonations through a raft of fractured abstracts, evidenced by the staticky *thft, thft, thft* sounds piercing his cortex. Between these intrusions, the sensation of language passed now and again beneath his hand. Far beneath that façade he detected a vague abstract, the involuntary articulations of one calling himself *Jarumon Te.Vurseamrean*. A set of azimuths presented themselves. An explosion of mnemonics. A sonorant deluge. Digging deeper, the intonations *Sh..Sh..Sh*, drew Guymoun's mind into a spiraling collapse...

He put the Kyo down. Savita shifted in his lap, pulling his arms around her breasts in a tight embrace.

"The command will imbed, Orneaes. She'll articulate it when she wakes. Give her 20, 25 stratimers and you can tell her. We'll eat, replenish our provisions and then push off. How far is it?"

"75, maybe 100,000 neurris at the most."

The distant rims of the Mysoux lurked at the far end of his vision. "Very good. Two or three days, and we'll be there.

She needs this. Savita needs to find her. It is her obsession! Then, perhaps, maybe...she'll be free."

Guymoun's eyes fell again to the Kyo, becoming harder to see in the paling darkness.

"*Kuwhan'Xalu,*" he mumbled under his breath, "*is near.*"

His back turned to the sorentrean dusk, he crossed his fingers and rested the thumb of his right hand on the edge of his Treflicat. The Kuspegias lay nestled within the palm of his left. He opened his eyes and peered off to wisoltre, then norostre. That nagging, turbid fog seemed to be lifting. *What did Tarek call it? Oh yeah,* he mused. '*Chi'ot.Vuloar.*' To his left, the lavender glow of the wisoltrean rilles came into view. He turned away, immersed again in a glaze of introspection.

Diarmad sniffed the air, rich with Actinetic stench. As he had been ordered, a series of burns had begun six days earlier, along the sorentrean ridges encircling the lower steppes of the Swales of the Neroluer. He fumed, knowing that for every order he issued to the maquits in charge of those burns, there was at least one Chalister standing beside her, whispering treason, disrespect...insubordination...in her waiting ear. It was all true. The Enclave, Puaolo Te.Mauxlur...they were in complete control, warping the sovereign will of Diarmad Te.Sinian into a useless pile of rubbish. A raw humiliation burned from deep within. The Moirisois had been intoxicating, more powerful than a million miaric weights of Rhiodaramir, and he longed one again to stoke the flames of annihilation, to rid himself of the humiliating support of magnetic inquiry.

But Actinetics, even in the pursuit of extermination, had again fallen subordinate to a single, enduring passion. He gripped the twin memory stones tighter as the first of four abstracts began to emanate from his Treflicat; to insinuate the nerves of his fingertips. He scrolled the first names of each prisoner. *Felliche...Andrion...Kor-Danal...* then he stopped and reversed. *Andrion! Andrion Ve.Wahstof. 22 quinteks of age; Andulkan; former apprentice maquit...member of Ghurodenthre*

for two quinteks, targeted traitor for twice that long. Diarmad continued to thumb through the pellot's final few stratimers of life, his mind witness to a clear image of the prisoner's pulverized face and head. A serrated Waeriaj, two neurris long, had been run through the raw tip of his thumb, severed at the joint. In a clipped image, it emerged from out of a bleeding wound on the left side of his neck. His screams shattered the air within the small cave in which he was being held.

Prior to insertion, the Waeriaj had been coated with a light dusting of Preklomith; a powdered depressant, intended to undermine self-discipline and mental acuity. The questioning touched on events occurring as many as four to six quinteks ago. But the mind of Ve.Wahstof, in its compromised state, focused instead on a particular stretch of days in the norostrean Vengaos. Diarmad heard him recount the image of a brilliant vein of undiluted alloys; clandestine parcels of powders and granules delivered from the Seamounts under cloak of night. And a hastily assembled furnace buried deep within a shallow ravine, impelled by huge slabs of dry root and fungus.

The prisoner choked, crying out through his agony of a renegade Amnic circulat from Astuverica and over nine pairs of those tiny, dark stones which had been spawned through various combinations of granule, dust and virgin ore. The prisoner remarked, though, that only three pairs had been forged to anything approaching perfection. And among those, none but a single pair carried the true mark of the absolute, dark as night, bearing an ultrafine speckling of lavender dust, turquoise crystals.

With a single jerk, the Waeriaj was then yanked from his body; the pellot screamed in agony, still claiming to know nothing more about these stones, or their elusive creator. His refusal to divulge the identity of that traitorous circulat brought Ve.Wahstof a dull, rusty blade through the bottom of his chin, its tip bursting out through the top of his skull. The pellot's fate mattered little to Diarmad, though, as he closed this abstract and placed his Treflicat back in his satchel. He lifted the Kuspegias and held them close to his eyes, the

elegance of their unadorned simplicity more obvious to him now than ever before. He knew that they and the others like them, captured by his subalternates, were less than worthless compared to the three which had so far eluded his grasp. His failures were soothed by the purr of last night's Kyruliax, slithering its way through his head. *Why am I here, doing nothing more than clearing territory for a bunch of freighin' Chalisters so they can pump the caque of filamentation into someone's blind cadre. Why?* he asked himself, as he had done so many times before.

Once more, the peel of the poison began to engrave its signature on his tender nerves. *Creegh Amaria! Why did it have to be Uropliet?* He thought as his fingers alternated between his wound and his birthmark. Haruhn Lo.Vytris, daughter of a Muharic priest, a trusted subalternate now nearing the end of her first quintek with Te.Sinian, approached from behind.

"Diarmad, we've picked up evidence of a cog arising from a dense outcropping below." Haruhn pointed to *noro-estre*. "It was conveyed earlier today. We don't recognize the dialect but it appears to be some kind of code. It's nothing a Machaeran would send. We suspect it's stolen, perhaps Muricai. Can you review the abstract?"

Diarmad took the Treflicat from Haruhn's hands. He noted the alternating modulations of the cog and the fusion of Hirusovran and Pavatrian on the high end. *It's a Kyhmekx*, he thought, recalling how his mother had taught him this covert language as a means of communicating with her from afar, despite the fact that it was never intended for Machaeran elocution. He grinned at the thought of having touched The Order's forbidden fruit. With this, his pain eased a little.

"Diarmad, do you understand it?" Haroun asked, frustrated at having to deal any longer with her capricious Regent.

"Quiet!" Diarmad gripped the stone harder, and as the intonations continued to pass through him, he detected a rapid series of clinks representing the morpheme *Sfalcyr*, repeated twice.

Savita! Diarmad thought, falling into a rage. *That's her epithet. This cog had been sent to my mother!* He handed the Treflicat back to Haruhn. *She's the one,* he thought in a haze of confusion. *But I was led to understand that The Order had designated this as a solo assignment. Who could be sending her a Kyhmekx...from down there?*

"What is it?" Haruhn asked.

"I need the elements of this cog debased and returned to me right away," Diarmad demanded. "I need to know exactly where it came from. How soon can you get that to me?"

"Diarmad, this cog was sent over 600 stratimers ago. The queue wasn't captured at transmittal so it's far too nebulous. I don't see how we'll be able to extract the elements sufficient to trace it."

A knot welled up in Diarmad's throat. With it, the stressors again triggered the Uropliet, working its way deeper and deeper through his fidgety nerves. He tried to center, calmed a little and drew a deep breath, bearing down upon a trembling Haruhn. Diarmad implored her with two words.

"DO IT!"

A rankled Haruhn Lo.Vytris skulked away without saying a word, feeling something snap within her. Her Treflicat purred inside her pocket, still brimming with the news that her father had been found alive, having survived the destruction of his Tribethian Palialouge, swallowed up in flame two quinteks ago. As she trudged off, she turned to leer at Diarmad. *Slaver over your useless little memory stones all you want, Te.Sinian,* Haruhn mused. *The finest of them will always remain beyond your reach!*

Dusk. Diarmad directed his vision toward a destitute valley, fading into darkness below. *How clever!* he mused with a wry smile. *Nothing is beyond your reach, is it? For you will find your target, Mother; I know you will. And as for me? I will follow your lead...*

The Chi'ot.Vuloar had now evaporated at all vistas except Zenith. Diarmad stared straight up, reflecting again on that Erasotran parable his father had told him in his youth. There is a widely accepted Metephistic premise...even amongst those

who shun such heresy...known as Chimierepha, an axiom which asserts that at death, the life force of the deceased will pass into the souls of their siblings. Diarmad recalled the words of his father; words which representing an ideology that had gone unacknowledged by his mother, under constant assault from the mnemonic obloquy known as the Grist of Caruvalus. They were the words which had told him of the death of his twin brother, in utero.

"You are the aspect, my son..." Gersul had said to a wide-eyed Diarmad, *"...of duality; that final spark of mortality which is the essence of Chimierepha. You are the recipient...of two souls!"* he recalled his father saying, *and they will carry you to their mutual advantage, but only if you will allow it.*

The mists had now cleared in the sky above him. Diarmad stared at the ground and drove the toes of his boots into the dirt, indignant at the unfairness of life's disappointments, while five Ione soared together at Zenith in a perfect circle.

UNDER A CHOKEHOLD CLUTCH, TINY cracks in the flagon began to pop. Greasy threads of Lumarathear oozed from out of the ruptured seams and poured out from between her fingers.

“Calm down, Dijal!”

“Don’t tell me to calm down...*Garion!* I can’t stand the thought of being here; not another day. There’s something about this place. It reeks of...well, I’m not really sure what it reeks of...but it *reeks!* I just *can’t!* I could be of a lot of help to you and the rest; you know that. Please say something to them. You can get me on that search party. I know you can, *Garion.*” Dijal caught sight of Nostra, walking into the boundary of her peripheral vision. “And her too!”

Arjun winced, uncomfortable with any reminders of the bogus eponym he had lived with for 20 quinteks. “You mean Nostra? She’s already in,” he said.

“*What the...!* Oh please, *Gari...*I mean *Arjun...*oh, whoever the *freigh* you are now.” Dijal threw her forehead against the table.

Arjun’s back was propped against a protrusion in a vein of Ularic. He reached around to push himself away from it as a sudden burst of warmth pulsed through his cold hand. He hardly noticed it, though, for something else competed for his attention. He turned to observe another vibrant clump, sprouting from a cleft in the rock, high above him. *Thrifleanur is all over this corner of the Collonade*, he thought, reminding himself that even more of this hallucinogenic antidote would have to be pulled and processed before their expedition could begin.

Arjun understood Dijal’s anxieties about remaining here. He understood, too, that they had less to do with conditions here at Shulumethros than with her overwhelming urge to satisfy her native curiosity. For this journey, and their

destination, had been on many minds and tongues these last few days: Meiluris, Ekavias, Odrahn, Kerak, Acheron Um.Jehanik, to name a few. Arjun had watched them all with a mixture of pity and pique as they had raged, vented, sniped and scurried for position, hoping to become among the first to lay feet and eyes upon that illusory locus that went by a thousand names. All of them, though, converged upon the same Mnulorathean handle: *Kuwban'Xalu*.

As Arjun tried to focus his hearing on his surroundings, a hundred frenzied voices echoed through the Collonade. On that particular night, at that particular moment, Kuwban'Xalu was not on the wind.

Hezhreon Te.Nisach skulked from beyond the shadows and brought herself down in a huff against a bench at the table behind Dijal. Her eagerness to avoid the open spot beside Odrahn Lo.Hualic was palpable, but she flinched, allowing her eyes to drift toward others, eventually landing on the face of Arjun Ve.Jalu.

A horrifying reality emerged as he examined more closely the burn scar over her right eye, her cheek. His suspicions, he knew now, were correct. *She's the one; the bounty hunter! The one who came for me in the Pulatheas.*

Arjun dropped his head, willing himself to shrink into invisibility. He continued to fumble with a plate of lukewarm Myenreawhip and Reelers; the same one he'd been picking at for the last 20 stratimers. Due to a shortage of essential supplies, the laevenants in charge of the brew here at the Grottos had been tweaking the recipe so often that even Zaphraela couldn't save it. Consequently, he'd now lost his appetite for the diminishing flavor of Lumarathear, preferring instead a mug of muddy water. Arjun could make out the tones of a loud debate between Hezhreon, Um.Jehanik and Odrahn Lo.Hualic, whose conquest over the leadership of this camp had not been pulled off with the assent of its current Regents, both of whom had risen to their posts in a time-honored fashion not uncommon to the rest of the Dimensional Horizon: that is, by the consensus of a willful minority, one which had, by now, either died off or moved on to other

locales. Cai, Thaloux and Ekavias were there too as Kerak entered the Collonade with a fresh mug of Lumarathear and sat beside Dijal. Arjun leaned in.

“How many, Cai?” Odrahn quizzed as he scanned the length of her body, head to toe; an awkward leer which was not lost on the watchful eye of Hezhreon Te.Nisach.

Cai’s eyes were swollen, puffier, more hollow than they’d appeared yesterday. “Right now, nine,” she said.

“What are you seeing?”

“Well, mostly lesions on the lower extremities, puss-laden, odorous, red. There were 12 of them on the legs of one poor soul I was with today and last night. Four of them burst. I ordered him quarantined right away. We just can’t risk contact with those fluids. I have no idea what we’re dealing with here in such close quarters, and since articulations are forbidden I can’t access the Iatricals for more details. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Do you know when they became ill? Did they show up here with those lesions?” Um.Jehanik asked.

“The old soul I spoke of came here about four days ago. He and the other eight all swear that they were in fine condition before they got here, other than showing up with a few sore throats or mild fevers. Judging by the fresh appearance of their lesions, I have no reason to doubt them. So that could be how it starts; low grade symptoms, then for some reason it grows from there.”

“Could they be getting it from *this* place?” Dijal asked. “From something already here? In these... Grottos?” She was sure the answer would be a resounding “*yes*.”

“No, I don’t think so. All of them are recent arrivals. The germ of whatever they have I’m certain came with them, from outside.”

Dijal returned to her mug, eyeing the remnants of something unbrewed, squirming, floating within. Nostra nudged her way in Dijal’s direction.

“How are they getting in? I ordered all openings sealed, didn’t I?” Hezhreon screamed. Like Arjun, she too disliked

Lumarathear so she grappled with a flask of some kind of tea, brewed with Myenreawhip and a modicum of scabric.

Um.Jehanik interjected. “The breach to noro-estre is open but under high concealment. Your orders, Hezhreon. Remember?”

Hezhreon dropped her throbbing head into her hands. “No, no. That’s not what I ordered. *Seal* it! I want it sealed! Where is Rennon? Go get Rennon. Tell him to seal that opening. *NOW!*”

Cai threw her hands into the air in disgust and began to walk away. Kerak chimed in. “I was at that breach yesterday, Hezhreon. One of the refugees who entered while I was there confirmed that the other camps are not only themselves sealed shut, but they’re turning anyone away who tries to enter. At Sul-Withulea they even murdered three refugees from the Moirisois for trying to pry open one of their breaches. He said the Machaeran presence is surging out there, way beyond control. We can’t just leave those poor souls to perish under the blade, or in flames!”

“Hezhreon, please keep the breach open,” Cai implored after doubling back, “but, but do this. Set aside an enclosure near it for a makeshift quarantine. Keep all new arrivals there, maybe five or six days. By then, if they’re symptomatic, the lesions will appear and we can deal with them. The others should be released.”

Hezhreon looked once more at Odrahn. The forlorn gaze of lost companionship, of a warm bed, smoldered in her eyes, then faded. She turned to Cai. “What do we do if they become sick? After they’re released?”

“We already have a quarantine set up in the infirmary. All nine are in there now. It has room for more. And if it fills up...we’ll just have to set aside another area for them. We have no choice.” With that, Cai motioned to make her exit, avoiding eye contact with everyone except Arjun, to whom she mouthed the words “*When can we leave?*” Within a stratimer, the drumbeat of dissension had quieted, leaving only the sounds of light conversation in its wake.

"*It reeks!*" Dijal's words rolled through Arjun's mind. *She's right*, he mused. *This place is a prison*. The sodden lineaments. The sunken, hollow eyes. The broken, dispirited animus in the glazed faces he saw all around him, were signs of something which came from an aphotic locus, all to its own, not so far removed from the abject Sphere which lay beyond these walls. Still, it seemed that the malaise over which he and Dijal obsessed did not extend to everyone. He pondered the line of demarcation, and for the first time, Arjun placed himself on the dark side of that queue.

"Dijal..." A thought occurred to Arjun. "Lumarathear. What do you think the ratio is of drinkers to non-drinkers?"

Nostra remained seated beside Dijal; silent, distracting.

Dijal scratched her head. "I'd say about a third of the souls around here imbibe. The others drink tea or water. Why?"

"When you said this place *reeks*, were you referring to the place...or its occupants?"

"Well, the occupants. But you know what? The ones who imbibe this stuff...it's like they're a completely different species from the ones who don't, present company excepted, of course. They seem so much less...dead! Talk to me, Garion. What are you getting at?"

"You're in the kitchen every day now. What do those laevenants put in the brew?"

"Well, pretty much any organic matter that's handy, plus a little pestle for seasoning. Plus, every batch is brewed with a small pinch of *that*," she said, pointing at the ceiling, to another greenish-brown patch of Thrifleanur. "It's the only living thing around here that seems to promote fermentation. A little of that caque goes a long way!"

Arjun laughed, for the first time in...he couldn't remember how long. "I don't doubt it for a pulsimer, Dijal."

"So...Arjun? Garion?" She laughed. "Can I call you *Garijun*? Or maybe *Arjurian*?"

"Absolutely not."

"Okay," Dijal said, resting her chin on her arms. She crossed her eyes at him. Nostra slid a little closer to her.

“What?” Arjun said.

“You owe me for helping you *sleuth the brew*, so to speak.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep. And you know what I want?”

“Yes, Dijal,” he sighed. “I think I do.”

“Well then, don’t ask them. *Tell* them! After all, this place of yours, way up there in the norostrean wilds; it exists only in *your* mind, and under your lead, until it can be found to exist at all. So they’re taking orders from *you*! Get it?”

“Yes, Dijal, I get it.” He paused and placed his hand over hers. “I’ll put you on the roster. But under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“Keep it straight, okay?”

“Your name?”

“Yes. Garion is nothing but an illusion. He belongs only to the Crescent. He doesn’t exist anymore.”

She squeezed his hand tightly. “Well, *I* belong to the Crescent, too! Arjun died ages ago, you old fool! As far as I’m concerned, *you* are Garion! And to me, you always will be.” She reached for her mug, still holding that which had not leaked all over the table. “Now, take a swig. It’ll do you good.”

He took a long gulp of Lumarathear, noting a look of bewilderment on Dijal’s face. He placed the mug back on the table. “Well? What is it now?” he asked.

“This...this place we’re going to; it’s the only thing I’ve heard anyone talk about around here for the past three days. What in the freigh is so special about it?”

He held his breath and closed his eyes. A sense of release washed over him.

“Sonorance, my dear. Lots and lots and lots of sonorance...”

Chadic Te.Zulfre had found it in his first untek here at Shulumethros: a vertical passageway leading straight up, beside the smallest of the four Kiyfers adjoining the Grottos. This tunnel clung to the innermost edge of the norostrean corner of

the Collonade. Access to its tight throughways and contorted angles had remained off limits since the beginning of his second untek in Shulumethros. But not so anymore. For this dangerous web of narrow shafts, known only to a select few, had the distinction of being the sole gateway from the Swales and into that needle's eye upon which they would begin their trek.

Kerak was the first to emerge into a soupy veil of low mist, inside a sloped pinnacle just below the Xyklian ambits. He grunted, pushing a large rock away from the damp egressway surrounding him. The familiar roar of the Kiyfer domes thundered in his ears as images of his terrifying foray into aquatic perdition, only two days before his arrival at the Crescent, continued to haunt his psyche.

Chadic, Thaloux and Odrahn Lo.Hualic followed close on his heels, spent from the exertion of lugging gear. Meiluris, Ekavias, Cai and Acheron Um.Jehanik followed. Then, Jadox, Baerosul Ve.Sorumon and Nostra Lo.Mhastreac appeared, gasping for air after snaking their way up through the worm's hole. After another two stratimers, the heads of Arjun and Dijal emerged into dim light.

13 exhausted souls rested on the moist ground, peering through a fresh influx of the *Chi'ot.Vuloar*. With the exception of Odrahn, Chadic and Thaloux...all three of whom were destined to return to the Collonade...they would soon burden themselves with equipment and provisions meant to last for at least 15 days.

In his fatigued state, Baerosul tripped the valve on his water bladder and began to drink with gusto. Arjun scolded him. "Baerosul, not so fast! Remember; we have to ration." A pair of disappointed hands re-fastened the open valve. To drink would have to wait.

Kerak craned his neck, trying to see through the weighty mists. In the past few days, nothing had supplanted this journey and its endless demands from his mind or his labors. His yet-to-be-conducted inquisition of Nishar, still courting his most hostile suspicions, had not been forgotten. But these elusive ambits would soon be crawling with subalternates. The

time to make this journey had come. Other matters fell to a distant second.

Odrahn had been troubled by his choice to remain at Shulumethros. But he too knew that Machaeran threats now lurked behind every rock and shadow. The once formidable strength of Ghurodenthre had been abridged to a mere 72 living souls, 32 of whom remained too diseased or injured to even stand. Clearly, he was needed here, now, more than ever. Too, Hezhreon's fawning, forgiving hands had implored him to remain. He was no more immune to the lure of a warm bed, and a warm body, than she was. Meiluris, whose skills were more appropriate to this journey, would be his eyes and ears. Odrahn's trust in him knew no bounds.

10 would make this journey, and other than Kerak and Meiluris, they were here, ultimately, at the approval and encouragement of but one soul. Dijal's blunt manner had stiffened Arjun's wavering spine, infusing him with the mastery to resist Lo.Hualic's brash impositions to dictate the team as well as the terms.

Planning and preparation were based on assumptions of time, terrain and distance; nothing more than calculated guesswork and common sense. As for whom to take; Cai's involvement was paramount to Arjun, and despite her eagerness to initiate herself in the soon-to-be-completed Baths of Shulumethros, she decided that a few extra days of grime wouldn't kill her.

Hezhreon had voiced no opinion regarding Cai's involvement in this expedition. On the one hand, the Regent was losing her dhuthaer, with the prospect that the infirmary might disintegrate in the face of this recent spate of disease which had visited itself upon her domain. But on the other hand, Cai's departure offered Lo.Hualic, his wandering eye and his throbbing organ one less distraction. The other hand, of course, won out.

Still, true to her nature, Hezhreon knew she could play Arjun, so she did. *If you take Cai, you must also take Um.Jehanik.* At last, she could be rid of her nagging, insolent

second-in-command. Arjun spent little time questioning this demand. Um.Jehanik, even less.

Born and raised in one of the many Hammock colonies that dot the Kurestrean plateaus, Acheron Um.Jehanik had decided early on that the oversight of agency...that is, the privileged life of a synulariat...competed well with the backbreaking labor of the laevenant, his parents' vocation. And he excelled at his chosen trade. At its peak, his client list had included at least 10 of the wealthiest Ephriants in the Architrave. He had once held the broach codes to no fewer than 22 blind cadres, scattered in some of the most obscure nooks and notches in Astuverica (two were buried beneath an Eroctriase at Level Four; three had been carved into a slab of metamorphic Breomear, beneath the Plain of the Palamonts).

Um.Jehanik's epiphany came to him when his consort's brother was arrested, then executed, without benefit of trial. His crime? Conspiring, it was said, against a paranoid Arduan Ephriant named Guliro Te.Juleriaph. Guliro's influence, and his reach, were as long and as sturdy as his need to lash out at alleged "stalkers" and "assailants," the list of whom was long and varied. So he decided that, in order to stifle the likelihood of familial retribution, he would also swing his axe in the direction of others who were close to his latest victim.

And so, Um.Jehanik's consort was the next to fall. The sole reason Acheron was not targeted was because Te.Juleriaph was a loyal client; one who could not bring himself to slaughter the piteous soul who had done such a wonderful job of managing his cadre, into which so many of his skimings flowed.

Um.Jehanik, for lack of a better word, snapped. At the time, he was in control of 38 accounts. Without saying a word to anyone other than his sole associate, the embittered widower emptied every one of them. Then, in the form of an anonymous "donation," he handed the agency that had once filled those accounts over to a Muricai operative. Four quinteks earlier, that same operative had taken a chance on him; had approached him for such a contribution, in a test to see how far Um.Jehanik would go to betray those to whom he had

sworn fealty. Now, the synulariat had been given a reason to follow through. That was just before he fled for the Seamounts. You already know the rest of the story, at least the important parts. But I digress...

Other than Cai, Acheron and one other, Arjun's staffing concerns centered around strength; i.e. who could carry provisions, and casualties, if circumstances turned awry. All that remained was the pugnacious Dijal: disliked by anyone who had not known her before her arrival at the Grottos; there due to her stubborn hatred of the word *no*.

Chadic and Thaloux had been offered the opportunity, but had declined. Chadic's commitments were to Shulumethros, not beyond. As for Thaloux, he watched each of his companions as they stood, one by one, while he, Chadic and Odrahn helped them adjust their packs. As the mists began to clear, he choked up, salvaging what was left of his pride. His soul yearned to be with his friends, but his body had grown far too weary of the trail. Now, all he wanted, all he needed, was a place to rest.

20 miaric weights: two for each of them. *That should be a sufficient allotment*, Arjun thought as he patted his hip pocket, satisfied with the fluid feel of the finely powdered anti-hallucinatory. He pondered another locale, less than a hundred thousand neurris to nore-estre; the place at which Jarumon had elucidated another large growth of Thrifleanur, through Euan's Kyo. And the thought passed through him...*should we attempt it to find it, to enlarge our reserves, to improve our chances once we reach the periphery?* He could think of only one reason why they should, yet a dozen more to the contrary; their limited food supply and the extension of their journey being at the top of the list. It troubled him, though, how hard it was to let that notion go.

Meiluris and Kerak turned to sorentre and began to walk while eight followed behind them. A small descent along a chain of large, fractured stones, then a pair of tight right turns would place them on a narrow circuit leading to a branch of the Swaaric-Tanolean routes, coursing to norostre along the ridges of the Xyklian range. As they trudged along, they passed

three large, bulbous protrusions, each one separated from the other by no more than 60 neurris; each one seeming rather out of place here in this terrain, filled as it was with so many jagged lineations.

Meiluris pointed. "Are those what I think they are?"

Nostra squinted into a breach in the mist. "If you're thinking they're the domes, you're right."

"Domes, as in Kiyfer?" a puzzled Kerak asked.

Nostra continued. "Yep. I've never seen pericules with such round, well-formed contours. There's an old legend that the more round the pericule is, the thinner it is at the cap."

She paused and let go a nervous chuckle. "The sheer force of the pressure beneath that stone; it's amazing. I shudder to think what it could do..."

“THE EYES...LOOK! DO YOU SEE THE EYES??”

“Yes! They’re glowing. What causes that?”

“Well, I’ve heard it said that there’s a certain weed found in caves in the norostrean Seamounts. It weaves its roots into Theosphora deposits. Lightstuffs, you know. They eat the weed and the Theosphora infuses their bloodstream. That’s what makes their eyes glow.”

She cocked her arm behind her head, her eyes squinting, focused on her prey.

“Are you ready?” Baerosul asked.

“Yep.”

“Then let it rip!”

The shaft of the Quadric rolled off the nimble fingers of Dijal Um.Diastrre-Mur. Nostra stood watch at backup, a Palick Raptor in her hands, rusty from limited use. Baerosul stood off to one side, mesmerized by the glint of the four lanky blades, tunneling into a tight spiral. Reflected light danced along their gleaming edges, their finely plated facets.

“*Thalall! Chanturthre!!*” Dijal jumped for joy as she skipped out onto the rock-strewn plateau to claim her prizes. Out of a small herd of six Khalizuds, three of the blades found their mark, carving a bloody path through black fur and grey skin. One was decapitated, its severed head howling in shocked surprise on its way down. Another was knocked to the ground when a blade sliced through two of its six legs, then grazed a major artery, spewing a robust jet of orange spray.

As he and Nostra followed an ecstatic Dijal, Baerosul knew that he would not miss the ashen taste of Klystip Reelers, the only meat he’d eaten since a few days after those threadbare strangers had emerged from a hole in the ground near the Sturosphere gradient, their packs full of dried fishmeat. Now, there was plenty. They would all eat well tonight.

Day four. Two days ago, the Swaeric-Tanoleans had faded into cobbled dust. Still, they pushed on, guided by Arjun's foggy recollections of primitive elucidations. Their course soon became marked by nothing more than narrow traces, ruts, switchbacks and vertical assaults, causing their minds, their joints and their limbs to suffer in ways they never could have imagined before leaving the comparative comfort of the Grottos.

Jadox, though, seemed the exception. The new prosthetic leg that Cai had made for him could withstand more pressure than his previous implement. It could even mimic the normal range of motion of a healthy foot, giving him the ability to nearly dance over the rugged terrain. For the others, the salves and analgesics Cai had conjured from the fungi and leafy growth she'd found in the Grottos had found a home; on their knees, ankles, tarsals...anywhere below waist level.

Despite the obstacles, their collective mood remained high, having spiked less than a day after passing to norostre of the Swales. Even Kerak had found himself lifted from the gloomy undercurrent through which he'd labored since his first day at Shulumethros. The only chain holding his feet to the ground was the remembrance of *heat*...in the veins of the Grottos...a circumstance which his troubled mind had, at the time, pushed away. Now, he struggled to understand, jousting with the awareness of looming fate, peeling away at his conscience with a merciless resolve.

Meiluris had far more to ponder than the Grottos. By his calculations, after all this time they were still no more than 40,000 neurris from Shulumethros, a mere fraction of the distance between the Swales and the Brandishments, the portion of the wisoltrean Seamounds near which he was convinced they would find their destination. Arjun's guidance had led them in a direction which Meiluris, now considering himself something of an armchair expert on this terrain, hotly disputed. As a result, his faith in Arjun, in the expedition, had all but vanished. To make matters worse, the Chi'ot.Vuloar was now rolling in thicker, lasting longer, the farther they traveled to norostre. These supposed setbacks served, with

every step, to shrivel Meiluris's patience. The question *where are we?* was on his mind every waking stratimer. Now, he realized he must do something.

Night, and the 10 of them huddled in a small circle, hoping that another gathering of precious body heat would once again shield them from the onslaught of darkness. Fire was not an option, due to a scarcity in these lands of root, fiber, fungi...in other words, fuel. The rations they had brought from the Grottos were ready to eat, but after this evening's windfall they had lost their appetite for broiled seedpods and the insects that came attached to them. And so Dijal's rewards would have to be eaten raw. The excess...dried.

Only a fraction of one carcass would be consumed tonight. The remainder would be cleaned and cured in the morning. Acheron tore into a stringy plug of red-orange tissue, tasty but, for some reason, still twitching. He teased Dijal and Baerosul. "You sure you killed this thing?" he asked.

Kerak laughed. "Yeah, Dijal. I think this one's just *playing* dead. Looks like the flesh'll jump right out of our hands any pulsimer and spring back into those hills."

Arjun sat beside Kerak, remembering that moment near the Cryostrilic plains when he'd opened himself up and poured his sordid life into a cup from which his youngest child would at last be allowed to drink...if, and when, he chose. They hadn't exchanged more than a hundred words since that night, but he could feel the rock of Kerak's heart begin, at last, to soften. He longed to understand more of Kerak's life before he came to the Crescent. There would be time for that, he knew. Now, though, Arjun yearned for something else.

"Kerak." Arjun leaned in to be heard over the clamor of other voices. "Tell me of them."

Kerak sighed, reluctant to go down that path, but unwilling to deny his father such an innocent request. "Well, Drogan...he was an Amnic circulat, and a very good one at that. The Kuspegias? They're his creation. He joined the Muricai six quinteks ago, after he'd been found collaborating with a few Muricai effectives on Level Five, right beneath the house at the Columns he shared with his consort and their

young child. He was forced to leave Astuverica under shadow, and he never returned. *Amaria*, if it hadn't been for the few Kyos passed between him and Ligeia after he left, he'd have gone mad!"

Suddenly, Kerak was reminded of his distaste for raw meat. He tossed a small scrap of flesh into the pair of hands to his left. "Drogan was proud of the work he'd put in for Ghurodenthre, but he died with one overriding regret; that he hadn't pushed harder for a chance to see them, to be with them, at least once more. It kills me to know that..."

Arjun heard very little Kerak had said after the word *child*. The competing sensations of pride and regret ravaged his mind and soul. His thoughts began to wander as he mused on that tiny stone jar he'd pulled from hiding, from the rear of the cave, on that last, poison-soaked night at the Crescent. *Did I pack it? Is it with me? Or is it still at the Grottos?* He ripped through the shortlist of tasks he'd performed just before they'd left the Collonade, retracing every step, every motion, every item stowed just before they'd begun their ascent to the ambits.

Then...*Sava*. He thought in an abrupt panic as Kerak began to speak of her. Thoughts of Liaramars dropped by the wayside. Once more, he tuned into the sound of Kerak's voice.

"As for your daughter...I have no clue. Never even met her, to be honest. She's a Courvesant, too; entered The Order at 16, never looked back. She's a lot like Drogan, in that she's a true master of her profession. So I can assure you; your talents passed cleanly to your oldest. She was...and I guess still is...the best. She has one child that I'm aware of: a Machaeran Regent. That's all I know about him. Her consort is an Ephriant with The Order, so she conjoined well, if that's a good choice of words."

Kerak glanced at another morsel of Khalizud flesh, now coming into his hand. His hunger began to reawaken. With a frown, he bit into it. "I guess because of her son's choice of a career, her willingness to defend and promote him above all else, she's been reprimanded several times by the Courvesois for breaking the codes of conduct. She's informed on other

Machaerans who held equal or even greater rank with him, tried to demote them, besmirch them with rumors or innuendo that she'd picked up from one Arduan or another. She has a lot of enemies, Savita does. Why she hasn't been taken out by someone...from any one of a dozen Principiates or coalitions within the Architrave...is a mystery to me. She's quite the survivor."

Kerak found his distaste for raw flesh beginning to soften as he went on. "Her specialty is hidden targets. She has a unique talent, this uncanny ability to find targets that have gone into hiding. I mean, the Architrave gives her a name, a vague location, and she never fails. Regents who've been driven underground. Flails or spikes, or other operatives in the Chivet-Pradur who're indebted to one Ephriant or another. Renegade Machaerans...*whoever*. If The Order can trace them to within no more than a quarter of a million square neurris, she narrows the gamut, finds them and hits them every time. Her only real weakness is this strange compulsion to leave a small *mark* on her targets."

"What do you mean?"

Kerak couldn't help but laugh. "I mean *bite* marks; under the armpit or in some other innocuous region. The Order, the Architrave...they've all warned her about that; many times! She just ignores 'em. I guess she can't resist."

Kerak's descriptions of his sister imprinted themselves to Arjun's mind. *Her ability to find missing targets: how ironic!* Arjun recalled a time when Savita was five, during his small family's nomadic sojourn to some forgotten marisatria in the Saurostrans. Somehow, she had lost her favorite Brotuce; nothing more than a Kyo carved into the shape of some innocuous little creature, cogged with musical riffs, giddy limericks or verses of quatrain, all meant to entertain young minds.

He recalled with renewed amazement how, upon the discovery of this loss, he and his daughter had retraced their journey a full 50,000 neurris. How Savita, on her own, was able to find this tiny blue rock, buried in a mossy thicket

within a sloping Shaestip forest after it had fallen from out of their atmosphere and rolled down a steep embankment.

He recalled, too, that not long after she had insisted on retracing their journey to find her Brotuce, Savita had started to complain of wracking head pains, which seemed to grow more intense the closer they came to the stone's location. He remembered how these pains would not relent until the toy was at last found.

These were the first. Over the ensuing quinteks, other episodes followed at random, rendering her helpless, unable to function for days on end. It was for this reason, in large part, that he had taken that fateful assignment to Braugnor-Zeprel, at the start of Savita's 14th quintek. He'd intended to seek the counsel of a certain dhuthaer, whom he had been told could offer her some relief. A dhuthaer whom he recalled was from...Baeroguslur, was it? How happy Savita and Inaya had been, he remembered, when they'd learned that Sava's malaise might soon be healed...

Stop it! What does any of this matter now? Arjun pulled himself up from the slop of sentiment, recalling how, after his target had been taken out, he'd scurried off to his next official task, forgetting all about this dhuthaer; as if he'd resolved conveniently that his daughter had learned to heal herself. As if she'd ceased to exist in his mind. In his heart.

The night's chill soon descended. Meiluris, holding a lightstaff, his shoulders wrapped in a Kira cloth, stood and walked over to Kerak and Arjun as Ekavias and Jadox sat nearby.

"Arjun, we need to discuss the course we're going to take tomorrow," Meiluris said. He picked up a piece of bloody bone fragment and began etching lines, numbers and random shapes into the thin dirt beneath their feet. "By my calculations, we're heading too far to wisoltre of the Brandishments. I feel we need to shift more to noro-estre, along the feeder branches leading to norostre of the Tanolean routes. I'm afraid we're not going to..." Meiluris's urgings came to a halt as his eyes locked onto Arjun's face.

"Have you ever been there?" Arjun asked.

“Well, I’ve cogged others who’ve come close and I...”

“That’s not what I asked you! Have you...*you*...ever been there?”

“Well, no, but I’ve cogged others who’ve...”

“Others? You’ve cogged...others? *Amaria!* What do you know of this place, Meiluris? Listen to me! I have stood at its gates. I have tasted the incursion of the Fetors; splitting my skull with the weight of 10,000 of your...your Brandishments! Forget them! That’s not where we’re going. You know nothing about which you speak.”

Meiluris was flushed, beaten with the force of Arjun’s words. “I...I’m just asking, Arjun. You don’t have to get so...” his voice faded to silence.

A cloak of gloom fell over their tiny circle. Then, without saying a word, Jadox stood, reached into his pocket and pulled out the Kuspegias. He placed them on his temples and walked over to Arjun. Jadox took Arjun’s hand, knelt and closed his eyes as Arjun’s lids began to droop.

The others huddled together against the cold, observant but unaware of what was going on. Jadox and Arjun sat rigid for five stratimers. Their faces twitched, drooled and contorted into hideous forms. Jadox released Arjun’s hand, stood and took the bone fragment from Meiluris’s fingers. He knelt again and with his eyes closed, he began to draw with it while the Kuspegias remained affixed to his temples.

This time it was numerics, glyphs, entwines; barely recognizable against the refuse littering the ground. Meiluris knelt beside Jadox, his hand resting on Jadox’s right shoulder. With a careful eye, Meiluris observed the work of Jadox’s deft hand as his mind took reads from the Kuspegias.

Motifs and geometrics began to appear in Meiluris’s mind, morphing into a labyrinthine verbiage; a slurry of Andulkan and Pavatrian, tongues which Meiluris and Jadox shared.

...traverse the length of the Mysoux escarpments...pass the Pharonemlik divides. At the abutment, turn to noro-viso and travel 20,200 neurris, then to norostre for 19,660,

where a distinct landmass will be visible in the near distance. Once there, proceed with...extreme...caution...

Jadox dropped the bone fragment to the ground and slumped into a frazzled mass. Meiluris's face was the picture of sudden alarm, his eyes like huge, bloodshot saucers.

So Arjun was right. It isn't anywhere near the Brandishments! Meiluris mused as he came to his feet. But beyond the Pharonemliks? How can that be? Rumor has it that no one has ever survived...

Jadox stumbled to his seat beside Meiluris. He took up a flagon of water, spiked with a shot of Lumarathear.

"I remember you...!" an alarmed Jadox whispered, staring at Meiluris's face.

What...are we getting ourselves into?! Meiluris mused, unaware of Jadox's words. Cold beads of sweat pooled into his palms.

One by one, all but two of them fell into a deep slumber. From a distance, the sight must have looked like a huge pile of Kiracloth, dumped on the ground over a mass of snoring, coughing, twitching flesh. After the final ration of Khalizud was passed and consumed, Arjun pulled a tiny lump of dried meat from his pocket. This was their last remaining fragment of Barutha, hard as a rock and just as inedible. Not that he would have eaten it anyway. Gently he caressed it, then placed it back into his pocket, a reminder of another place, another time.

The thought of that small stone jar entered Arjun's mind once again, the tiny instrument of death held securely within. *Give it up*, he thought, determined to follow through. *It's not a part of you anymore. And it never will be again.*

And neither, exclusively, was Kuwhan'Xalu. Images of mythic destinations, lofty ambitions, fell from Arjun's eyes. The remembrance of his oldest child began to take their place. *Those fools! They told me there was no cure for the malaise that is the Gift of Pras'demnos! "Once a Mnemonast, always a Mnemonast," they said. "Her pain," they'd all told me, "is a permanent, unintended consequence of her gift." But they were*

wrong. They did not know me! And they did not know her! We will find a way, Sava. You will be healed. That, I promise you...

Kerak turned to look at Arjun. "Father?" he asked.

Arjun had never heard Kerak use that word. "Yes son."

"Do you suppose The Order has ever placed *you* in her sights?"

"Hard to say. If they had, do you think she would have taken the assignment?"

"I don't..." Kerak paused, then reconsidered. "Yes. I think she would have taken it."

Arjun rubbed his hands together, satisfied. "Good. *Very* good."

Shadows danced across the landscape as the Lumens dropped with alarming speed toward their norostrean berth. The Tromean Extensors, now appearing to Kerak for the first time since he'd broached those stone steps above the observation perch at the Crescent, appeared in silhouette against the backdrop of waning light. A light breeze began to wash over them, causing the Chi'ot.Vuloar to tumble over the rough terrain in gigantic cartwheels, to sorentre.

It had now been seven days since they'd left the Grottos. Their progress the last three, though not to their liking, was impressive when compared to the first four. Meiluris, with the memory of Jadox's dirt etchings still fresh in his mind, had led them exactly as those elucidations had instructed. Their eagerness to finish this quest, to be done once and for all with Mnuloratheia, drove them to push on, ignoring thirst, icy darkness, sore ankles. Patience had pulled them through and beyond the last of the Mysouxlian escarpments until, at the abutment beyond the Pharonemlik divides, they came upon an outpouring of majestic stone sentinels, the likes of which none of them...Arjun excepted...had ever before seen.

Another area in which Arjun was excepted, at least in this corner of the Horizon, was in the measurement of distance, which is next to impossible if the traveler is not familiar with the uncommon reference points found in this slice of the

Seamounts. Only one who has traversed these lands, time and again, is in a position to gauge their span and scope.

This axiom rubbed a stubborn, self-righteous Meiluris the wrong way, so he took it upon himself to measure off the last two legs of those distinct instructions Jadox had extracted from the brain of Arjun Ve.Jalu. Meiluris soon discovered, though, by way of one faulty estimate after another, that Arjun Ve.Jalu was the only soul they could rely on for an accurate count. For half a day, Meiluris was given free rein to fail until Arjun's ability to *see* distance rather than consciously measure it came through for them. Until they rounded the slope of a steep ridge, squeezed themselves through a massive field of close-cropped boulders and emerged into an expansive plateau to at last witness what the brain of Arjun Ve.Jalu had informed them would be a *distinct landmass*.

Dusk. After Dijal, following Nostra at the end of the line, forced her way through, the group rounded one final abutment, to their left. Meiluris held a pair of lightstaves at arm's length, each beam splitting the sodden mists through which he passed. Pacing between the rocks surrounding him, he noticed in silent alarm that the twin rays of light emanating from his staves appeared to *bend* to his right. He turned to follow them until they ran straight once more. He strode 12 paces further and stopped.

And there, before him, it stood.

A Boric pier.

“EIGHT OR NINE STRATS AND YOU’RE free to go. When you hear the signal, line up single file and leave your names with the scribe standing just beyond the first turn. You are to report to the infirmary every other day for examination, starting in two days. This is *mandatory*! If you fail to do so, you *will* be found! And you will be expelled from this camp; without delay!! Peace, uhm...peace be with you...”

23 pairs of anxious ears listened to the scribe mouthing these words, sounding as if he were vomiting something cold and dead from deep within. His words, though, had been eagerly awaited, signaling their release from the dungeon in which they’d been living for the past five days. They were consorts, separated from their significant others. Children, separated from their parents, and vice versa. Idle wanderers, separated from their traveling companions. Friends, lovers, or those fitting any other description, separated from their favorite source of security, support, absolution...or Pentumus!

Creegh Amaria, how I’d love a snap right about now! That thought had wandered through her mind more than once in the past five days.

23. She recalled how the last leg of their journey had been mostly downhill. By the time they’d arrived here at “the Grottos,” as the tenants call this little caquepit, her entourage had been in high spirits, eager to move on once her work here was done. As usual, she’d complimented herself on being able to locate her objective with minimal help. Hedeon help her if she’d had to rely on the Architrave’s sterile promises of *azimuths*, and all that. But as they’d arrived, they were met by over a hundred other souls, from all parts of the Seamounts, the Pavatrias and the Vengaos: the lot of them yearning, striving, grasping; reaching for that narrow slit in the hard soil. *Needing* to bury themselves within.

Most were seeking to escape the full force of Machaeran encroachment, soon to be visited upon the Swales of the Neroluer. For others, their motives remained unspoken. But not all of them would succeed, for by order of the Regent of this proud establishment, a longstanding position had been reversed. After only 29 souls had managed to squeeze through, five days earlier, that slit had been sealed shut. The reasons, at first vague, soon become clear. For those wishing to enter, the avoidance of infestation, contamination, *disease*, was uppermost. For those wishing to exit, it was the fear of detection, and the Machaeran interrogation of runaways who might compromise the location of this Subterranean hideout. Either way, this place seethed with paranoia, sickness, stench...fear. Justification for the order to *hunker down*, as it were, was not hard to find considering a crowd like this. But such directives did not, in any way, benefit her.

23. That was all that remained. Six of the original 29 souls who'd managed to force their way into this cave had been ejected for the slightest of symptoms or circumstances, cast back into the light and all the uncertainty that shone down with it. Those who now remained had been told that they were the "lucky" ones, fortunate enough to one day be allowed to roam this quagmire at will. For now, though, they were relegated to squat in a stone prison. Or as it had been described to them: *quarantine*.

Five sweltering days and frigid nights she had endured, all of them rank with unwavering misery; but still, interspersed with a few rare stratimers of joy. One of those, on day two, had evoked a wicked, knowing smile. It was a vein of Ularic, throbbing with the warm glow of precious heat. In that instant, she felt close to him once more. For she knew that her son was out there, in the near distance, carrying the mark of succession to norostre. For a moment she had wished that this dark prison would suddenly burst into thunder and flame, to prove to these miserable pellets the true measure of her son's purpose, his destiny. Of that possibility, not a shred of fear or apprehension had entered her mind. For she knew that if this came to pass, it would have been her own flesh and blood to

have lit the spark. She didn't even mind that 10 or more sticky, smelly bodies had plastered themselves every night to that same vein, striving to suckle its balmy fervor. She wasn't the only one who appreciated his work.

Her proximity to this pleasant affirmation, though, came with a price: the onslaught of The Grist. She'd felt it, too, during their crossing of the Cryostrilic plains. The heat of Actinetics was doing the job for which it had been intended, to strip the veins of the revenants which had laid within, undisturbed, for eons. Often, she'd thought how strange it must have looked to the others ensconced within this cave, the way she had waved off those mnemonic specters, as if she were beating off a swarm of enraged buzzers; then reaching behind her to place a firm hand upon the birthmark at the back of her neck, to help her find her wavering center.

The resultant benefit which that motion brought to her was soothing, but with unintended consequences. For it reminded her of precisely whom she might find on the other side of those walls. The sense of proximity...of family...raked her psyche with an overwhelming disappointment. *Are they still here? Have they gone?* Joy and consternation never failed to infuse, to unsettle her mind, conscious or otherwise.

Of her closeness to the target, her feelings were no less mixed. Since her incarceration, imprisoned in a shell of complete sobriety, she had sworn to herself that this professional assignment would be her last. Alternating spasms of pain and pleasure poured over her, pushing waves of resonance into her body and mind. Suddenly, the familiar motions she'd called upon to help her ward off the Grist were not yielding the sense of realignment she sought. *A snap of eroiche as a substitute for one of Pentumus? Would that be sufficient?* she asked herself. She spat on the tip of her forefinger and drove it between her legs, wagging it to and fro until her mental fog lifted a tad, reasoning that if she couldn't find a vial or two of *something* in this den of apostates and renegade drudges, then a little carnalia would clear her head well enough. *Indeed, only the real thing will do,* she sighed in frustration.

“Line up! *NOW!*” A loud shriek ricocheted off the walls and into her ears. A shoving match ensued, putting her weakened frame off balance, sending her tumbling to the ground. The back of her head struck another warm vein, brimming with errants. She threw her hand against the base of her skull to check for blood, and she was struck with an epiphany.

“*He’s been in this place! He may even be here right now!*” she whispered under her breath. “*Elunid Te.Mirin’s traitorous disciple...Arjun’s little HALF-BREED!*” In a rage she jumped to her feet, reconsidering her prior commitment to cut herself off from the work of The Order. For after her consort’s request had been satisfied, she decided that, while she was here, she would do herself the honor of at least one more official task.

She shoved herself into line. Now, at last, it would be done! After having been caged, prodded, poked, and pummeled, the end...and a new beginning...lay ahead.

22 souls held their eyes to the ground. One by one, each of them came upon a short, stocky guard, standing between two other stooges yielding chipped, rusty quadric blades. The guard’s fingers held a Kyotrimlic stone. Names were mumbled until the words “*Speak up!!*” were screamed into their shocked ears. She was the 21st in this anemic shuffling of feet. Her head was held high. A proud smirk was glued to her face, as opposed to the glum stares worn by those forlorn tramps in front of and behind her.

The line crept along at a slow pace, each mouth spewing a barrage of questions, rants and complaints at the guard, instead of the names he sought. Number 22, a wiry, crippled old thrall, breathed hard at the back of her neck. She turned to observe a head scarred with patches of blue skin, scattered between clumps of coarse, burned hair. With a meek expression, he returned her glance, into eyes that breathed fire and venom.

Without saying a word, she clutched her satchel with both hands, lifted her arms and began to pummel him with the filthy, leathered bag. He fought her off as two other guards approached to separate them and continue the clearing process.

After the fracas mellowed and she was given a thorough tongue lashing, number 19 looked behind him to admire her gumption. His stare was greeted with the same look 22 had gotten. He nervously turned to approach the scribe.

18 and 19 gave their names, then 20 barked his in a phlegm-laden rasp. Another guard appeared out of nowhere carrying a single Quadric blade, its tip bent and split, its leading edge coated with bloodstains. He dropped the blade, grabbed the old soul from behind with both hands and dragged him back to the sealed opening, 15 neurris to their left.

The line paused in horror to see five grunting refugees heave the stone seals out of place, just wide enough for a pair of shoulders turned sideways. The old soul, his face frozen in fear, screamed out for mercy. As luments poured through the emerging slit, number 20 was tossed back into the light, forever bereft of the "luck" he'd been so privileged to wander into five days earlier. "Sounded sick!" was all the guard had to say.

"21, what's your name?" She paused, her focus still fixed to her left. She watched as the slit in the rock was sealed once more, as the sound of at least 40 desperate voices on the other side faded into silence. With deep regret, she did not recognize any of them.

"I said what is your NAME, skridlak? Answer me!"

She turned to face the scribe, then paused for a pulsimer, wondering how she should respond. In the past, she'd always given a lot of thought to that question. It was important, of course, to maintain anonymity, furtiveness, the sanctity and security of the mission. Suddenly, though, she realized that she no longer gave a freigh about that any of that. So she spoke up, but only after ensuring that her fragile tenor would resound with health, confidence, strength. *Bravado...*

"*SAVITA!!*"

“*Suiruska. Thastarkh ata Dhulkareis kuarashevta Yhuirshk? Kuaras hhardele? Sina; quertro kalaladarma. Solo, quertro kalaladarma! Shinh...shinhthe....*”

“Stop complaining! Even in Pavatrian your anxieties sound no less ridiculous. We’ve discussed this and we agreed, didn’t we? We had no choice but to consent.”

“*We* agreed? That is a lie! *You* agreed to the Schimatariat, not me. What makes you think the Enclave can be that porous? The Medius is nowhere near as cunning as they are persistent.”

“And therein lies the genius. The two are one in the same.”

“Perhaps...on one level. *Amaria!* Do you have any idea how tired I have grown of their rebelliousness, their *insolence?*”

“Yes. That’s a shared sentiment. By the way, *Ve.Azta* knows! I’m sure of it. Her eyes do not lie.”

“The *Tanaskith?* It’s effect on the left hand. You think...she’s made the distinction?”

“Yes. I believe she has.”

“*Huweria Fuerilato!* Well, I suppose it is a matter beyond our control. So much is these days. *Lo.Jehan’s* failure, too. Disappointing, but these things must be accepted and not obsessed over.”

“*Huweria Fuerilato. Agreed.*”

“But as for the Enclave, I admit it. You are far better than I at reading the eyes, at judging the intent and the character...the *machinations...*of others. But you’re wrong to think that a tribe of gullible clerics is capable of subterfuge against an agency of the Architrave, and one so close to the 68th *Cypliat.* You give the *Muharadu* far too much credit.”

“I don’t give them enough credit! The *Muharadu* has more than enough leverage within the Enclave to redirect those field articulations *away* from the blind cadre and *to* the Medius. Why can’t you see that? Are you listening to me?”

“*Kuarele dhanisk.* The alignment there is very narrow, but it...it points...so *well!*”

“Evidently not! Anyway, there are at least three *Chalisters* that I know of with strong ties to the priesthood. Remember,

I've articulated these connections; the touch of Muharic fingertips against the grain of the Xycloplast tells a great deal. You know how many queues you've missed? Queues which *I* have caught. Correct?"

"Yes, yes. I'm aware of your skills. But three? That's a bit of a stretch. Arucha Um.Yrgos's tie to the Medius is razor thin, you understand. Plus, you recall that she was expelled from the Palialouge for her wavering allegiances. She has no remaining connection to the Muharadu."

"Ah, but you're forgetting! Her former consort was aligned with the Principiate of Zhalach Te.Stanalu. And Te.Stanalu had blood ties to the Medius. And what about Ve.Than-Ulor and Lo.Hravlik. They have blood ties to three Muharics, one of them in the Medius. Those ties are distant, yes. But you know the power of blood. Only the 'Phemes know of other connections, beyond our eyes, our ears. Our control!"

"*Gueilyuroth!* That's three. In full alignment!"

"I wish for a stratimer you'd pause this Thermionic obsession of yours and listen to what I am...! Ah, *Creegh!* What's the point? There's no going back."

"Or so it would seem. *Kuarele Tur.* That one is very faint. That's four."

"Of course we wouldn't be having this conversation if you hadn't rejected my implorings. I still don't understand! Why can't a Chalister touch the Xycloplast? You and your irrational..."

"For the 10th time: Kirio-Lutrenos should never be imposed on a Chalister! It's impossible to articulate for revenants...*these* revenants...while under the influence of *those* entwines! Ephriants don't need to think. But Chalisters do; at least if they're going to be of any use."

"*Chanatrath!* You've lost your mind."

"You do not understand the Enclave. Chalisters, by nature, have no use for Muharics and their superstitions. Yes, *argency* can buy treasonous intent. But not from Chalisters who are two-million neurris from Astuverica."

"Perhaps."

“Chala dobhe. Gyrio gan dufregh? Amarae! Llanato vanagwal cueve. Cueve!”

“So am I. Do you have any idea...how? How this could have happened? How can we correct it if we don't know how, or why, the Xycloplast has failed us? It's very troubling!”

“Yes...yes it is.”

“You still holding onto your first hunch?”

“I am. The glyph of Osetys forms the nexus of the mid-lateral entwine. For some reason, I believe this amalgam has failed. That's the only explanation for the subversive bias bleeding from the minds of Muharic Ephriancy. The entwine still casts a long shadow where the Arduans and the Courvesois are concerned. But not the Muharics. Not anymore.”

“Glyphs, entwines, morphemes! They can *all* be countermanded.”

“You're wrong! The Osetys cannot be countermanded. Not when it's interactive with the coagulates in the Xycloplast. *Amaria*, do you know how relieved I am, every time I think of how fortunate we were that my missing stone turned up, 10 quinteks ago? Otherwise it might still be in the hands of that old Hirusovran drudge who'd pilfered it from us, trapped forever beneath the Helidrome.”

“Indeed. A youthful indiscretion, to be sure. Good thing that mistake has never been repeated.”

“The Zylux! Who knew that such a simple glyph carved into the butt of a haft could wield that kind of influence? If it hadn't been for that sad little thrall and the Tremens that struck him when he touched it, who knows how we would have found it? It's a shame he didn't survive. If we only could've laid hands on him before his demise, he might have proven himself useful. To an extent.”

“Indeed.”

“As for the Muharadu; someone in the Medius has found something. Nothing that countermands the entwines, mind you. But perhaps...stalls, diverts, interrupts...the filamentary discharge coursing through the Xycloplast, between the Thermionics and the compounds. Our informants have come back with nothing. I just don't know what they have.”

“Have you exhausted the Kaeobixt?”

“Yes.”

“Then could it be something in the stone itself?”

“No! There is absolutely *nothing* wrong with the construction of the Xycloplast. You know, it stuns me to think of how the ‘Phemes aligned for us in finding that kiln. Besides, what else do the wisoltrean Andulkas hold that’s of any value? I haven’t given up, though. There *is* a glyph, an entwine; somewhere! It will be found. It *must*...be found!!”

“*Chathrakapa?*”

“Yes. Now tell me. Did she make it to the Swales?”

“She hasn’t confirmed yet. Not surprising, though. She seldom does.”

“The Arduans still trying to pass intel off to her?”

“Naturally!”

“They’ll never learn. Of course, even if it was flawless she’d decline to acknowledge it. Or for that matter, draw any benefit from it.”

“Well, hasn’t the Council always held itself in the highest regard? They don’t think a Courvesant could find her way to the ground if she were dropped from a cliff!”

“I know. But this new assignment of hers; it’s puzzling to me. I know we debated Diarmad’s involvement, and I agree. His contingent would have run out of Actinetic amalgams far too soon if we’d asked him, instead of his mother, to target Lo.Hualic. But a single cornered Muricai Regent, even if he’s still alive, can’t be worth the risk of walking solo into an area so dominant in S.C. 398 activity. Can it?”

“Just think of it as a little insurance. If Ghurodenthre regroup, it will be at the behest of their leadership; nothing more. That mustn’t be allowed to happen. You want the Triurate to proceed, don’t you? Well, then the last surviving serpent must go headless, to quell any further distractions.”

“Understood. But I have to say, there are far too many Te.Sinians in positions of responsibility in the Emexes for my comfort!”

“Don’t concern yourself with it. Now, tell me about the reads.”

“Um.Yrgos and Lo.Hravlik articulated a cache of reventants near the remains of Wyriolte. They show a slight redirect. But Puaolo Te.Mauxlur has articulated a vein to sorestre of the Cyriklian Thrusts, and they are all in complete alignment. *Complete!*”

“Were the Actinetics a factor in their discovery?”

“Yes; the heat has proven itself, far beyond expectations.”

“And where is the alignment?”

“Look at the map. You see these azimuths?”

“*Creegh Amaria!* That...that cannot *be!* Can an expedition be sent in that direction, so close to the Pharonemliks? That wilderness is un-navigable!”

“That may be true. But what choice do we have? If the subchattels point the way, then so *be* it!”

By the hundreds, they thronged the ambits of the Mysoux, as far as the eye could see. Khalizuds, Builhern, Narwaselots, Numandriels, all herded late in the day into a calamitous knot. Their tongues howled in panic as their hooves beat out a wall of dust, surging to collide with a hungry flock, bound that evening for a wisoltrean berth.

Malachas Lo.Gurien, Diarmad’s third-in-command, stood erect. His eyes burned in a cloud of airborne detritus. He ran his hand across his mouth, trying to wipe away the bitter taste of raw Klystip Reelers, a native vermin they’d been forced to choke down after their distaste for rations had hit crescendo. *The timing*, he thought, a pasty drool coating his lips, *could not be any better!*

They had come from an area extending over a billion square neurris. Chased in a rising panic over the past two unteks by the force of Actinetics, hordes of escaping refugees and the grinding heels of Machaeran subalternates, these beasts had now found their way into an area extending no more than 2000 neurris in length. They were hemmed in to estre by a sheer precipice, at least 40,000 neurris long, which dropped straight down to the Swales. To norostre, a wall of 400 subalternates pounded their boots into the ground and yelled

in rhythm at the top of their lungs; a steady, fearsome beat. To wisoltre lay the forbidding approaches to the rilles of Aurea. And to sorentre, with the oncoming winds at their backs, stood 311 subalternates, armed with Raptors and Mephistaffs, awaiting the sound of a single voice.

Quadrics, by order of the Sovereign of this command, were to remain sheathed. Rations were still unopened. The fires...fanned and stoked. Just before the tempest erupted, a single word poured from out of Lo.Gurien's mouth.

"UNLEASH!"

Suddenly, the sky went dark, beneath luments blanketed by a cloud of soaring metal. 301 forged implements found their mark; 287 within the sinew of wild flesh, 14 through the impaled bodies and severed limbs of an equal number of Diarmad's unfortunate lackeys. 297 hungry subalternates rushed off, trampling turf from two directions in pursuit of fresh kills. Within 20 stratimers, all that remained on that patch of ground was barren, moss-laden dirt, stained red, orange and cyan with the fluids of life, forever quieted.

All 287 carcasses were gutted and cleaned that night. Right away, 100 were committed to flame while the rest were sliced, laid out to be dried in morning luments. As they fileted, dressed, cooked and ate their kills, their collective mood, and their appetites, were buoyed. For this was not only a welcome relief from the tedium of rations, assisted by the occasional Reeler. This was a breach in the boredom and lethargy that came with reserve duty, here in the windswept Mysoux.

Far below, 1200 of their comrades, plus 15 maquits, were engaged in their duties. 1000 subalternates, under the command of Eiliox Um.Kao-Ulant, had wandered in frustration for six days over the boulder-strewn valley floor, scouring every hole in the ground large enough for a child's head to pass through. Farther to sorentre, 15 additional maquits and 200 subalternates had kindled the flames of the Triurate, under the subtle but not un-noticed influence of an agency of the 68th Cypliat. Two days earlier, 1300 subalternates had been recalled from the Emexes, to places unknown. The Archtrave had overestimated their staffing

needs here in the Seamounts; there was simply not enough for them to do, under the command of the Machaeran Regent known as Diarmad Te.Sinian.

That evening, as hot flesh was being consumed all around him, Diarmad's hands remained free, save for a flask of warm coquont, infused with a tiny fingerpinch of Rhiodaramir. He stared down upon the huge expanse below him. A little over 50 yellow lights, the flicker of distant campfires, seeped through the encroaching mist. To his extreme right, a scant three glowed farther off, a dusky aquamarine: the waning glint of Actinetics.

He turned his back to the dying gale, pushing hard against the tug of remembrance. Of the Moirisois and his introduction to the Triurate. Of the fire and slaughter in the Vengaos, two quinteks ago. Of the Enclave. Of the bloody image of Siruman Um.Sarujeh. Of his mother and Vikram Lo.Jehan and the sugary lies which had fallen from their conniving tongues, lies which had trumped his ascension to *the pinnacle* of something or other. As their deceptions crumbled into dust, he pushed, too, against a growing realization that Savita's schismatic cogs would remain forever lost to translation.

Haruhn Lo.Vytris strode into the muted glare of her Sovereign's lightstaff, then sat beside him, beyond the glow of firelight. Lo.Vytris spoke, her face the image of feigned disappointment. "Still...nothing..." she said.

"Did you acclimate the modulations?"

"Yes. We ran them through the full range. They stopped at..."

"Did you consult with Ulsan, Khoja? They're circulats. And they have some background in Synthet. One of them *must* know a way we can reconstruct that cog?"

Haruhn's eyes dropped. "I did. I'm...I'm sorry, my Sovereign..."

Diarmad stared at the contents of his half empty flask, sodden in the muck of uncooked sediments which had refused to dilute. With his left hand he brought the flask to his mouth as Puaolo Te.Mauxlur and another Chalister, Arucha

Um.Yrgos, closed in behind him. Diarmad's Treflicat, lying beside his right leg, began to sonorate.

Um.Yrgos offer a salute, a habit from the two unteks she'd spent as a subalternate in the Vengaos, just before she'd been released from her failed apprenticeship and freed to pursue her true talents. She held a Kyo in her left hand and fumbled a crude map with her right. Te.Mauxlur let her do the talking.

"Sovereign, we have eliminated the 10th and 11th obstructions, and out of respect for your authority we'd like to request the commencement of S.C. 398 in these areas." Her fingers skipped across the map, pointing to at least 12 locations, none of them known to be occupied, much less even capable of such a thing.

"What is she talking about?" Diarmad said. The sarcasm he perceived behind her phrasing of the words *out of respect* grated his nerves.

Puaolo grew impatient. But he took great care to conceal it. Because for now, it was *assistance* he needed from Te.Sinian. And for that he would feign as much respect as necessary.

"We discussed this the other day, Diarmad. Remember? Obstructions are impediments in the stream of resonance."

"And they've run their course," Um.Yrgos chimed in, "At least in the revenants which we have gathered and returned to Astuverica. As a consequence, we've been cogged with instructions to divide our contingent. I am to remain here in the Emexes with Haakon Lo.Hravlik, to attempt to gather revenants up to this location." She pointed at the map, to a line ending just to sorentre of the area from which Savita's cogs were suspected of having originated.

"And Tethyan Ve.Than-Ulor and I are headed to norostre, Diarmad," Puaolo said in his best deferential tone. "We're leaving tomorrow. When Arucha and Haakon are finished in the Swales, the plan is for them to join Tethyan and me. In the meantime, my party will need 45 subalternates, three circulats and eight maquits. Other than that, I'll let you make the selections."

“24 subalternates: that’s all you’re getting,” Diarmad responded. His resentment at having to answer to a filamintation hound like Te.Mauxlur was obvious. “Circulats? Take whoever you need; I don’t give a caque! As for maquits? You can have five. That’s it.”

Puaolo understood the resentment foaming from Te.Sinian’s mouth, but he lacked neither the time nor the inclination to resist. “Fine. And Diarmad; thank you.”

Diarmad ignored Puaolo’s awkward stab at gratitude. He fingered the elaborate glyph which had been branded into his inside lower right arm; the *Tyzeriosch*, the time-honored symbol of Machaeran Regency. It had been placed there at the achievement of his current rank, just before the start of a clandestine operation he’d led to a Palialouge in the Tribethian highlands, a little over two quinteks ago. It had been his first act of leadership, a trial of pillage and death which, on direct orders from the 68th Cypliat, was to forever remain unheralded. And all for the sake of a few Kyotrimlic stones.

Does this symbol belong to me, he thought of the Tyzeriosch, or to those upon whose shoulders I recline?

Diarmad squeezed his flask harder now, raising the rim to his lips. He threw it back with a jerk. The sludge oozed into his mouth; he swallowed it, and as he did, he was convinced, for a pulsimer, that it tasted like burned flesh, tinted indigo. Tinted...the color of blood.

“I am...at your...service!” Diarmad hissed at Puaolo in response.

With the flask in his left hand, Diarmad palmed the Treflicat with his right. He articulated a cog from Eiliox, sent only 10 stratimers earlier under Rank of Signet.

A stray has been captured, the cog read. 8000 neurris to norostre of the uppermost zone of Actinetics.

Diarmad began to rock back and forth in rhythm with the beat of his pounding heart. *We are interrogating him, and will engage you 30-60 stratimers with a report.*

“We need to be out of here tomorrow by 45 degrees before Zenith; no later,” Puaolo said.

“How long do you expect to be gone?” Diarmad asked.

“10 to 20 days. Maybe longer. The area we’re vetting shows promise. But who knows? I’ll cog you within 10 days with an update,” Puaolo said, noticing a smile forming on Te.Sinian’s face. “Can we have those selections at first light, Diarmad?”

“Yes.”

“Again, thanks.”

“By the way, where are you headed?”

“The Pharonemliks.”

*O*f three minds. *What an understatement!* That is how she chose to describe herself at that very moment. Down on her knees in the hushed darkness of dim lamplight, her mouth stuffed with engorged flesh, her head bobbing back and forth, a pair of wet fingers thrust between her legs. Her thoughts were a turbulent pastiche, sprinting away from each other at breakneck speed. She took a deep breath, sighed, closed her eyes and fought with all she had to reign them in before she lost all control; before she forgot why she was here. Very soon, two of those minds were destined to seal shut. Then, the last would prepare itself to take firm, and final, control.

First things first: always the mark of a true professional. For close to three days she had searched this lithic sweatlodge. Dirty, nameless faces had paraded themselves before her in its claustrophobic airs, strong with the sickening efflux of B.O. and utter futility. Too many questions would have drawn the wrong kind of attention, so she chose to go it on instinct alone, aided by what limited research she’d been privy to. To her dismay, her questions...regarding his whereabouts...yielded no fruit. *Be patient*, she recalled thinking many times these past three days. *For he will come...to you*. She was right on both counts.

Odrahn Lo.Hualic was born 42 quinteks ago in the marisatria of Dhurgeshad, in the wisoltrean Vengaos, just beyond the Pavatrian border. His mother supported her family as a writhlic culturist, nurturing her yields of perennial native whips to near full capacity every season, aided by the Subterran

springs that erupted and flowed from the many Kiyfer domes dotting the undulating landscape.

Odrahn's father had sustained a debilitating head injury when Odrahn was four, the result of a fall from a cliff, 20 neurris high. When Odrahn was six, his father's fortunes worsened when he was severely injured again, this time after burning off a tangled mead of Slariague vines to make room for a new crop of Grouswhip. Due to the movements of a shifting flock, the direction of the wind took a sudden turn. Within mere stratimers of starting his burn, he'd found himself cornered, trapped against a stone escarpment, the flames to his front growing out of control. After they had abated, and he was dragged to safety, he held on; his enraged burns seething and baking his swollen flesh for half an untek. He finally succumbed, passing into what the young Odrahn had been told was *The Sphere Beyond*. This strange place sounded to him more like a plot of land on the far side of a hill than the mythic Arcadia it was intended to be.

Odrahn had never really known his assiduous, tight-lipped father. But after the culturist's death, his middle son did all he could to understand him. For many quinteks, Odrahn would ponder the nature of that mystic locale, his father's spectral destination. And the life choices he would make as an adult would give even a casual observer the distinct impression that the son was quite eager to join his father, to find out about it for himself.

Death. The loss of his older brother Mordrahn was a seminal moment in Odrahn's life, which at the time had elapsed for only 12 quinteks. This loss, though, sparked more than just a spiritual curiosity within the mind of the young Vengathlian. For Mordrahn's death had been at the hands of someone called an *Arduan*, passing through from some backwater coastal swamp which called itself by the name of Astuverica. Mordrahn, 18 quinteks at the time, was working for his mother to negotiate a fair price for their most recent crop. His crime? Price gouging. At least that's how the assailant described it to Odrahn's mother.

After this fatal exchange, the nameless visitor from Astuverica came to their terrabode and dropped off a Kyo carrying an indention for a paltry 410 Hraklian argents. This was, essentially, a voucher for less than half the going rate for the quantity and quality of Grouswhip the Arduan had requested. In return, his mother stood to lose 10,000 miaric weights of her finest grain for less than the cost of production; not to mention already having lost her oldest son. Not much of a deal, it seemed to the young Odrahn.

Death. *The Sphere Beyond*. The desire to right a wrong. Simple justice. When Odrahn turned 18, he kissed his mother on the cheek, hugged his little brother Girrahn...who was 15 at the time...and parted ways with Dhurgeshad, never to return, even when his mother died during a brief purge seven quinteks later. The blade, the spark and the staff; these became the tools of his trade in the growth industry known as *Resistance*. Odrahn Lo.Hualic was the finest example of a pioneer in this field, even conjuring the name "Muricai," a fusion of the Vengathlian words for *walls* and *fire*.

Over the ensuing quinteks, Odrahn lost count of the number of lives he had taken, or the sum total of the bounties which rested on his skull. There were times when the prizes seemed to grow exponentially, even by the untek. When the pressures upon him grew too great, he would back off and retreat. And when his bounties started to shrink, he would rise up to strike once more, repeating this pattern again and again until the name Lo.Hualic and its consequences ebbed and flowed in continuum. On the tongues of the X-C, though, it never faltered; like so many precious vials of Pentumus or its voluminous extracts.

His many strengths had served him well these past 24 quinteks. But like his father, he had lately found himself cornered. His back against the stone *walls* of the Grottos. A *fire* raging out of control to his front, slithering toward him with a fierce determination; one that was becoming more and more difficult to control. The name *Muricai* had turned to irony, with shadows physical and otherwise closing in, bearing down

on him now, far too often. One day, he knew, he would find himself unable to keep them at bay.

For the past three quinteks, visions of Mordrahn's face, his life, his death, had begun to fade from Odrahn's memory. The optimism endemic to youth, to blind ignorance, had begun to fail him. He knew too much. He had seen too much. He had felt...*too much!* Except, that is, where one lone sensation was concerned.

His many strengths had served him well. But no longer. So, to ease his pain, he found himself falling back on a single weakness; one which had also served him well. This time it would serve to help him *forget*. Not, though, where Hezhreon Te.Nisach was concerned. She had grown weary of his visual and emotional meanderings. His wandering fingertips. His sweaty, groping palms, sneaking off in other directions. From deep within, she had somehow found the strength to kick him and *keep* him out of her bed, once and for all.

They had met earlier that evening, in the Collonade. He had gone out of his way to sit beside her. For there was something, even from a distance, that drew him to this beautiful, solitary stranger. Something...mysterical. Something fresh, radiant, alive; *dangerous*. Was it her innocent enthusiasm? The way her hand seemed to casually brush against his at the table? The way her knee *seemed* to rub against his as the Lumarathear ran in coy little droplets down her cheek? He shivered as his mind and his crotch swelled with the arc of possibility. How he had wanted, in that singular moment, to *kiss* those little dollops of fermented dew from her cheek! He really had to fight that urge.

As he had stared at her face, he recalled how familiar she looked, like someone he had once known, in fact had been quite fond of. Someone who was now lost to him forever. The list of souls who fit that description, though, was long and tedious, so he had chosen not to dwell on the placement of names and faces. Nonetheless, that sense of familiarity drew him to her. So in order to grease the skids, to open the gates, he had quizzed her.

“Where are you from?” He had asked. *Those strands of hair across her eyes! Look how she brushes them back.*

“Oh yeah? I’ve never been there.” *What did she just say?*

“How long have you been here?” *Did she just touch the inside of my thigh with the back of her hand?*”

“You don’t say! I didn’t know that.” *She said, something. I’m sure of it. I think I saw her lips move.*

“Would you...would you like for me to show you around?” he had asked her. “I know this place quite well. And since we’re pretty much trapped here for the time being, might as well get the lay of the land.” *I think she said yes. Did I just say lay?*

Through corridors narrow and wide, straight and disjointed, far too crowded and easily passable, they traveled. Until they just *happened* to chance upon a cozy little notch, the same one to which he had been relegated the night before, just after he’d been tossed out of his last flat.

“Let’s stop here and have a rest. What do you say?”

“I’d *love* to!” Those were the first words he remembered hearing her speak all evening.

The span of time between the expression of those three syllables, falling from her tongue with such captivating allure, and the present, were filled with hundreds of shared heartbeats, racing together in unison. Now, she sat on his naked thighs, thankful to be off the floor, no longer having to wage war with the gag reflex. The sweat from his palms, mixed with the tallow from the Reelers, caused his hands to glide across her body as if they were airborne. She rose, fell in rhythmic opposition to the thrusting motions of his pelvis. His hands slid...up along her thighs, around her waist; then to the warm, sweaty meat of her ample breasts.

His slick fingertips encircled her areolas in opposing orbits, just before he gave her rigid nipples a commanding pinch. Joyously, he could feel the ejaculate rise up, up through his rigid torso, through his erect bearing, ready at any pulsimer to explode from his recumbent, sweat-laden frame, like the Lumens about to burst from some distant berth after a cold, restless sleep.

But not so fast, her body seemed to be saying to him. He could feel her rocking, swaying, timing their surging orgasms. Slow and steady she rode him, tossing her hair back. She dropped her head, revealing a strange sort of birthmark on the back of her neck. Right away, he recognized it. *That looks like a Cyclophitic; a Zsadaktathet! The mark of true dominion.* He understood now why she was so good at this. *Dominion.* He grew even harder as he considered the range of possibilities yet to be explored.

It was at this fertile moment that he made a silent commitment to himself. One he swore he would adhere to for the rest of his natural life. And that was to continue to indulge *this*, his finest, most exquisite weakness, with a reckless, unmitigated abandon. And so it was that he burst forth. She trembled. He sighed. As one, they purred and cooed contentedly.

And as he lay there, eyes closed, lost in the satisfying warmth of indulgence, she placed her right hand upon the back of his head. With her left, she reached into the bag beside her and yanked it out. In a single fluid motion, she lifted his head, whipped the end of it around his trachea and gave it a commanding jerk, its taut end held firm in her unwavering grip. Within 10 short pulsimers, he was unconscious, having uttered little more than a surprised, gurgling whimper. A little less than half a stratimer later, he was gone.

Now, perhaps, he would find out where his father went.

She removed the Kirzek vine and returned it to her bag. To her delight, she discovered that even in the throes of death, one part of his body remained warm, rigid, fully engorged. So she nailed another round, this one ending in a shivering, ecstatic wail that surprised even her. Regrettably, though, three was not to be that evening as his organ at last grew cold, wilting within her.

She looked at his face and noticed that his eyes had come open, staring up at her with a glaze of abject disappointment. She brushed her hand over his lids to close them. Then she slid down, placed her mouth upon his right hip, took a small lump

of flesh into her teeth and spit it out. Her task was now complete.

She came to her feet, drying herself with his clothing. It smelled good. *He*, in fact, even in death, smelled good. As she stood there, still naked, a tiny morsel of regret crossed her mind. She slapped it away. Then once more, just to be sure.

She dressed, all the while scanning the notch for a place to toss his lifeless remains. She remembered having passed a large, overflowing bourget, only a few neurris from here, tucked into a tight opening beside a small pile of refuse. She opened the cloth veil of the notch and peered into the adjoining hall, still clogged with passers-by here in the early evening.

She sat on the floor beside him, her arms resting on the bedroll. She nestled her chin in her hands and formulated a plan. She would wait until the Grottos had drawn their shades, gone silent. Then she would tote his carcass through the empty hallways, far from the retribution of knowing eyes, to a place...some place...where no one would think to find it.

Of *one* mind: that is how she chose now to describe herself. Any notions of further reprisal fell, for the moment, by the wayside. She pulled her Treflicat out of her satchel. With a keen awareness...clear, unfettered, calm and satiated...she reviewed his last cog, sent from right here in this massive cave system. They were still here! She shook, swayed and cried out with a joy, a sense of relief that she had not felt in five quinteks.

Tonight, Savita would sleep on his bed, wrapped only in the warmth of afterglow. But tomorrow, she would finish this. Once and for all.

I'm coming for you, my dear. Hold on! It won't be long now...

The closing stratimers of Lumenatra. The Plain of the Palamonts, as it appeared just beyond the courtyard windows here at the Medius Athlamaru, had never seemed so crowded. So reverent. So rife with...enthusiasm? Or was it *fervor*?

“What’s the word I’m looking for?” Vrabas Um.Luragaen asked himself in a frustrated tone.

Um.Luragaen had been serving here at the Medius for going on 12 quinteks, four of those as an Ephriant. In that span of time he had seen this “village” grow, no doubt. But the word “grow” was not enough to describe the evolution of this place, particularly in the past two quinteks. *Surge. Swell. Erupt! What’s the word I’m looking for?* He chided himself for playing needless mind games and diverted his eyes to focus on more urgent matters. They were not in short supply.

The Tsurithean Helidrome was beginning to swell with a new round of patrons. Um.Luragaen rubbed his chin, a look of satisfaction in his eyes. A motion which had been offered for consensus by Arduan Ephriancy, at an epilogue function after the last Ahramishk, had been aborted by the Medius before being allowed even to crawl from the womb. *A change of schedule, for the 10th Pilects match of the day? To start it at 80 degrees post-Zenith? How dare they suggest such a thing! Lumenatra would wither and die under such an arrangement, along with the bounties to be pulled from out of the Muriadants,* he mused, ruminating over those huge stone collection basins which lined the perimeter of the Palamonts.

So, at Um.Luragaen’s behest, a counterproposal had been crafted and placed on the docket for consideration, one which those detestable Arduans would not even *dream* of fencing. It was this: *the first round of nightly matches should begin at 50 stratimers past dusk, to allow time for the third round after Zenith, and of course Lumenatra, to run its course.*

By his math, considering that Lumenatra always lasted no more than 45 strats, the Muriadants would overflow with the agency of the winners from the day’s sixth round, eager to thank Hedeon for their good fortune! The losers, of course, would be there, too, each of them tossing their last khiriu into the till for a little luck...next time...maybe. *Not to mention how the blind cadres would grow by another 50% or more!* It made him stagger to think of the possibilities. Or was it just the psychoactives coursing through his veins that created such an imbalance? *Who knows,* he mused. *Who cares.*

Um.Luragaen rubbed his chin once more and gathered his center of gravity. He began his stroll through the gleaming plasmodic corridors of the Medius, then on to the Gallery of The Benathliu-Phuriga. Approaching the triple-slabbbed doorway of the Gallery...handcrafted from the finest aged Saurostran Carabyliis...his hand usher stood at the veil to greet him with a single crystalline vial. "Give me two, pellot!" he barked with a slur, striding into the Gallery to take his seat.

Um.Luragaen tried to relax, his arms resting on the large oval table, a permanent fixture here in the Gallery. Built over 100 quinteks ago of coarse grain Quagdurosep, the massive table was shellacked with an extract of concentrated Tarandru saliva, blended with a stanhic hardener. It was stained with the lavender/crimson blood of the Pulaethria, an oblong-shaped gastropod found in the clear shallows along the Kurestean coast.

Um.Luragaen placed his hands, palms down, on the table. His heart pounded as he watched it with a cautious gaze. To the uninitiated it appeared as nothing more than a tiny cylindrical stone, rounded and etched at both ends, with a tapered seam marking its circumference. It sat no more than 15 neurris away from him. And it occurred to him how *odd* it was that something so innocuous could elicit such a robust effect within the minds of so many. With his hand usher at the ready, Um.Luragaen threw back the first of the two vials sitting before him. Then, just to be sure, he emptied the next one in short order. His nerves immediately went into free fall.

Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest sat on the other side of the table. That tiny stone cylinder, the Thermionic enigma that it was, lay in front of him. Sullen, imposing, hiding behind a face gouged with cavernous creases and the hollowest of eyes, Um.Aara-Maest neither spoke with nor looked upon the face of a single soul. His mind was free of narcotic influence, just as it had been since he had returned to the Medius, at this most urgent of times. And just as it had been since the first time Um.Luragaen had met this reclusive Saurostran hermit, a little more than 10 quinteks ago.

Away and to Vrabas's right sat Cerys Lo.Uphliac. Like Um.Luragaen, Cerys kept her twin crystalline chalices close at hand. After a short invocation and a roll call, administered by Sarlac Te.Lighru, Lo.Uphliac rose from her seat. The Gallery fell silent. The table was now fully occupied. 53 souls were there; two more than the normal 51 who represented the full contingent of Muharic Ephriancy. One, of course, was the abstinent Saurostran ascetic who sat opposite Vrabas, fingering his tiny stone cylinder. The other was the Muharic priest known as Algarn Ve.Theriak.

Lo.Uphliac raised her voice to the crowd. "Brethren. *Hgarathul!* We shall begin," she growled in her native Kurestreaan tongue. "The soul to my right needs no introduction. You know most of his story, but through *my* voice, not his. Today, you shall know it all! For two quinteks he has been lost in the Vengaos, lost to us after the mysterious destruction of our Palialouge in the wisoltreaan Tribethians. *Well..!*"

Lo.Uphliac leaned forward. "He has returned. And that mystery? Consider it *solved!*" she said, taking Ve.Theriak by the left arm. An aged hand usher shuffled forward to take the old priest's right. They helped him to his feet as Lo.Uphliac raised her voice in triumph. "Speak, brother! You are among your kin once more. You are at last...*home!*"

Algarn fought to keep from collapsing. He took a deep breath. The clerestories above him were open as wide as they could unfold, allowing a cool breeze to wash over him, soothing the last of his unhealed burns, his broken bones, slow to mend even now. Despite the intensity of his pain, though, he dug deep, finding within a strong voice. "My Sovereigns, please forgive my appearance, my scars, my frail aspect. And please forgive my tardiness at reporting so late to the Athlamaru. I assure you, it was...not my fault." His words were met with a wave of light laughter and applause.

As Algarn found his strength, Um.Aara-Maest placed his index fingers upon the opposing etchings on the cylindrical stone. He closed his eyes for five pulsimers. Then he opened them and passed the stone to his immediate left as the voice of

the mangled old priest could be heard in every ear in the Gallery.

“Two quinteks ago...I was nothing more than another of Hedeon’s faithful servants,” Algarn said in a frail voice. “Today, I remain so, in simplicity. But as I stand before you, I am *much* more than that. True, I am broken. But I have been lifted from my demoralized state. I am...a casualty; of treachery, deceit, *betrayal!* If not for a simple family of Vengathlian laevenants I would not be here. My burns, my wounds, were so intense, so debilitating, that I was left for dead in those charred embers. But Hedeon smiled on me that day, leading me to heal rather than to perish. To be allowed to find my way here once again, rather than to continue to suffer, so far from home. *Orajlia Maru!* He is good; that I will always know!”

The cylindrical stone began to make its way around the table. Each of the Ephriants into whose hands it fell placed their index fingers on it in the same way that Um.Aara-Maest had done. As the stone was passed from the seventh to the eighth pair of hands, Algarn wobbled, finding support from the Ephriant sitting to his right.

“I know what you have been told. But I am here to inform you otherwise. Two quinteks ago you lost a Palialouge, along with seven brothers and one sister, our circulat. But as for me? I lost my faith...but in one thing and one thing only!” Algarn pointed in the direction of the plasmodic spires of the Architrave. “Place no faith in lies, my brethren. The Muricai have earned their place in the fires of reprisal, and are as hated as they deserve to be. But they were not responsible for *this* loss, for the damaged goods you see before you tonight.”

The stone made its way to Cerys Lo.Uphliac. She laid it on the table, took her two chalices in both hands and poured their contents down her throat. Then she placed her fingers upon the ends of the cylinder.

Algarn rolled up his right sleeve and pointed to the inside of his arm. “Our assailants were cleverly concealed, for the most part. But their young leader had not gone to the trouble of concealing the one symbol that was sure to divulge his trade,

his true allegiance. For on his lower right arm he wore the mark of the Machaeran. The *Tyzeriosch!*

Those who had not yet touched the cylindrical stone that evening reacted with amazement, disbelief, outrage. Those who *had* touched it did not react at all, as if they already knew what Ve.Theriak was about to say. This in spite of the fact that most of them had never met him, much less heard him speak. One of those who had not yet fingered the tiny matching entwines that evening was Vrabas Um.Luragaen. But it would not be that way for long.

Um. Luragaen took the stone, now being passed from his right. Carefully, he wrapped his fingers around it. In doing so, it occurred to him that this was the fourth...*no, no, the fifth. Or is it the sixth...*time that he and his brothers in faith had touched this stone, each and every time here in this very Gallery. The first was three days before the last Ahramishk, known to Muharic Ephriancy as *The Sudden Rise and Imminent Fall of Vikram Lo.Jehan.*

After holding his fingers on the cylinder for three pulsimers, Vrabas removed them. He could feel that familiar sensation begin to pass through his body, a thousand times more potent than any extract of Trofliage could elicit, without the loss of sobriety. The Chelomar in his vials had helped smooth the initial jolt. But now its effect slid into pink oblivion as another layer of detritus filling his befuddled mind soon melted away. The effects of six quinteks worth of contact with Kirahmoor's Xycloplast had been peeled back a little further that evening.

The shadows of dusk were filled by 22 wall-mounted lightstuffs, unsheathed by a squadron of ushers. Before long, 53 pairs of fingers had touched the tiny cylindrical stone. Then it was returned to Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest's gloved left hand by the last soul at that table to engage its semblance. Dhulorei's eyes reflected a satisfied air. Saurostran/Pavatrian lineage had its advantages, for to spring from the ancestry of the borderlands was to truly appreciate the advantages of Kirio-Lutrenos in all its many forms, shapes and colors. Um.Aara-Maest understood too that in the practice of that technique,

his intent was clear. He knew that their ongoing journey was destined, one day, to carry all of them *out* of shadow. And into...?

The Gallery was now infused with the sound of voices. They were not loud or cacophonous or overbearing, but they swelled with an undercurrent of enlightenment and redemption that had been unfamiliar to the Medius for the past seven quinteks. For another 60 stratimers they would blend and weave within one another; planning, preparing, notating, readying themselves and their faith for *their* moment.

This Schimatariat would be the largest, most celebrated event the Dimensional Horizon had ever witnessed. The Council of Arduas, The Order; both had lately come to see the futility of stopping this convocation, or of attempting to channel its direction. For as hard as they tried, they could not seem to defy the Medius and its newfound force of will.

Errants were not discussed that evening. In fact, they had not been a subject of conversation since the third time Um.Aara-Maest's little stone had been touched here in the Gallery. The thought of such an ambiguous notion, a few days earlier presented with the highest sense of urgency, had faded from importance. With each passing of Um.Aara-Maest's stone, indeed, some priorities ebbed, others flowed. Few, it seemed, could even be described. What were words, after all, when the fingers were pressed onto the beautiful entwines which had been carved into that exquisite little cylinder?

Long before the Gallery doused its lights and sealed its doors for the evening, Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest stood to take his leave. He had come to do what he meant to do; nothing more. To speak with or engage his fellow Muharics...that was not a part of his plan. Vrabas stood and left the table to watch Dhulorei pass through the triple-slabbed Carabylis doors and pause at the end of its long shadow. And it was then that he noticed something unusual. He saw Um.Aara-Maest grab both ends of the cylindrical stone, imbedded with fine, dark purple flecks & turquoise crystals, between the fingers of both hands. Then he saw him pull the stone apart at the tapered crease, separating it into two wafers of equal size.

Vrabas watched Um.Aara-Maest stride from the Gallery of the Benathliu-Phuriga; watched as the Saurostran placed each of the tiny wafer-like slivers of stone onto his temples. Strangely, they stayed in place, as if they'd become glued to his skin. Then, Um.Aara-Maest faded from view. Um.Luragaen turned his eyes back to the Gallery and made his way back to his brethren, his eyes to the ground.

Above the open clerestories, far above the head of Vrabas Um.Luragaen, six flickering Ione soared in poetic unison, at Zenith, in a slight, elegant circle.

*I*T ALL SEEMED SO VERY SURREAL TO him, as if actuality and apparition had woven themselves into a constricted knot. Kerak's young fingertips reached out to touch the walls of his terrabode. His nails scratched the gritty surface. The pungent scent of rustling Thrushwhip embraced him, carried by the late day Philean winds. The aroma of ripe Marasai berries fell upon the breeze too as they dropped from their branches by the thousands upon the grassy slopes surrounding his home. And the sight struck his eyes: dozens of lument-scorched faces, arched backs, gnarled hands; working, digging, tilling and culturing the community gardens, extending as far as the eye could see.

There, beyond the hedges of Garamoss and Tythien, he could see his mother, making her way down the clabbered stone path adjoining the gardens, a haversack slung across her back, her arms brimming with whips and Syena and green leafy Jyriaglip fronds. She looked up at him, beaming with a familiar joy, her pace quickening, her smile growing wider with every step.

Kerak stood there, rigid, unable to move his feet, overcome by the sensation of *sinking*, but still overjoyed at the sights, the smells, the sounds and sensations which were native to the Whistoph-Karnash he had forever known.

Kerak looked down at his left hand...or *was* it his? He raised his empty fingers to his mouth, as if in reflex. His mother approached. With a laugh, she called out his name. But as she began to speak he watched her smile, her joy, vanish. Her mouth flew open, as if her lower jaw had become unhinged from her skull. Her pupils began to dilate and bulge, tiny strings of bloody puss spewing from out of her eye sockets, her nose, her mouth. Then, her mouth suddenly sealed shut.

She began to speak! No, to *scream* through a clenched jaw, spewing slurs, spasms, cyclic rants in a thousand obscure

tongues, her body thrashing, spinning, gyrating now into a blinding, unmitigated crescendo.

In a pulsimer, Kerak blinked, and the evocative horror that transcended his eyes sent his mind sinking once more into a psychic dump.

Whistoph-Karnash? Now gone. In its place remained a craggy, desolate gridwork of translucent jags. Short spires. Jutting fragments of cracked, weathered stone, embellished with millions upon millions of chisel marks, enormous gouges and clefts, far beyond the extent of his vision. Kerak reached into his bag and tossed another fingerpinch of Thrifleanur into his mouth. Immediately, his visions became clearer, pushing back the abhorrent sights which had rooted themselves deep within his cortex.

He looked down at his feet, behind him, around him, to all sides. Glyphs, etchings, entwines...they covered every surface, in some cases five or more layers thick, until their cluttered aspect morphed into an identic slurry. And he noticed, too, everywhere he turned, along every visible surface, that some of these markings would suddenly appear in the rock, fading in and out, to be replaced by other, more obscure glyphs; as if they were being chiseled by some invisible hand. Or even by the air itself.

The ground shuddered; a low, guttural tremen. Kerak raised his arm toward the morning sky, to *noro-wiso*. He felt as if he could almost touch the Aurean veil, just inside the nearby terminus, lavender contrails ascending now into the shrouded firmament. In his ears he could hear a wailing shriek. White noise. Black chimera. The dying remnants of the voice of Adecyn Um.Tiago, now pushed away and into the vacuum of infinite reality.

The only signs of life visible to his eyes? Nothing more than the slow, hulking frames of nine souls, trudging their way behind Jadox, toward some mythic cynosure, still hidden from view. The apparitions of his friends appeared distorted, murky, as if they were being viewed under deep, dark water, awash in a maelstrom of currents. He looked to his right, his left, noticing the skeletal remains of at least 15, maybe 20 corpses nearby,

sucked to the ground, their arms reaching out in the same direction; the direction in which he and his companions were slowly moving. To wisoltre.

Kerak blinked, illusion continuing to dissolve even further; the ongoing effect of the Thrifleanur. He turned to his right again and saw his father and Cai, staggering up behind Jadox, who walked with a steady, rigid bearing, the Kuspegias affixed to his temples. Cai appeared in a semi-conscious state. Kerak noticed Arjun's lips as they moved, mouthing the soundless words "*I...need...more. Please!*" Kerak ran toward them, his limbs heavy, as if he were forcing his body through an opposing current of waist-deep water. He grabbed a small handful of crushed powder from his bag and forced it into Arjun's mouth. Then the same with Cai as he pulled her arm over his shoulder and bore her weight, one plodding step after another.

In the distance, Baerosul and Acheron, separated by more than 10 neurris, walked with a sulking thud, the weight of their packs drawing them lower with every step. Almost simultaneously, they fell to the ground. Kerak, with Cai still on his arm, made his way as fast as he could toward Acheron as Meiluris motioned toward Baerosul.

The muscles of Acheron's face seemed to have gone to war with each other, contorting themselves into a vicious weave. As he lay on the rocky ground, Acheron's limbs flailed and swung out of control. Kerak and Cai knelt beside him while Kerak tried to fumble through his pack for another pinch of Thrifleanur.

"*Hold his arms!*" he thought he heard Cai say to him, as if in some vaporous dream. He handed Cai the powder, then struggled to get a grip on Acheron's volatile movements. But once more, Kerak could feel his own mind beginning to drop off. Acheron's face began to redden "*He...he's not breathing!*" Cai's mouth seemed to be saying. The strident howl of a million voices, a billion languages and dialects, sliced through Kerak's wounded ears. He looked off to wisoltre and saw Jadox, standing in the passing mists. Jadox returned Kerak's gaze, his face blank, his eyes electric. The turquoise crystals in

the Kuspegias, affixed hard to his temples, burned with an elastic sonorance.

Time seemed to stop. Kerak and Cai redosed, still kneeling at Acheron's side. His lifeless body had already grown cold, still. His bloody, swollen eyes had pushed up and out of their sockets. With a numb resolve, they stood, gathered their packs and his, and made their way now toward Jadox, who was motioning to them from atop a sudden rise. Kerak turned to his right and noticed Meiluris stumbling with leaden feet away from Baerosul's sallow corpse.

The stratimers passed with a dense inertia. The sight of skeletal remains had thinned the nearer they came to the crest of the rise. Trudging those last few steps, a thin sprinkling of yellow dust could be seen covering the ground before them.

Before long, they all found themselves there, as if carried to it by some inexorable force of will. But there they stood, eight souls perched atop a narrow hillock, far above the adjoining landscape.

They paused to survey their surroundings. To sorentre, far into the milky horizon, stood the first Boric pier they had found, quite by accident, four days earlier. To noro-estre, the second Boric, sourced with a few advance doses of Thrifleanur and a handful of cinctured articulations. And to wisoltre, nearest the terminus, a third and final Boric stood...defiant, surreptitious.

Flowing from each of these vaulted salients, they could see three fractured rivers of reflected light. Chiseled remnants of Aquylur appeared to vibrate, spiraling their way around large gaps, jagged voids, shining through the Chi'ot.Vuloar. These landmarks caught the eyes, in particular, of Kerak and Ekavias, who from this vantage point were transported through their recollections of other veins, in other places far distant, which had seemed so familiar to them. And now, in this place, the point at which these translucent tributaries converged lay right below their feet.

Jadox, his face awash in catatonia, cast his vision downward. He pointed to a spot beneath Dijal's feet. Arjun took note of the others. Their supplies of Thrifleanur were running

low; he knew they had precious little time. So he signaled to everyone except Jadox to redose with the barest of minimums. To Jadox, Arjun's fingers contorted in a cumbersome signage, suggesting a triple dosage. The invisible rim of the Borealic Fetors stretched on for 3000 neurris, to an arc close to those Borics which stood to sorentre and noro-estre. If they did not soon make it back to that illusory line, there would be no surviving this place.

For now, though, there was work to do. Meiluris pulled out three pickaxes, handed one to Ekavias, one to Kerak. Jadox pointed down. "*Half a neurri,*" his lips appeared to say before three heaving cudgels began to thrust, to gnaw, to rip away at black and gray rock, gouging out layer upon layer of slag and crag.

Ekavias, his mind and body still reeling from the ongoing fallout of the Fetors, despite having redosed slightly more than Arjun had ordered, began to collapse under the strain after no more than four strokes. Dijal came up behind him and eased him down. Her mouth seemed to say, "*I'll take this.*" With a firm grip, she wielded the handle of his pick, raised it above her head and tore into a jagged wedge of rock near her right foot. Shrapnel flew in all directions with a single thrust.

Jadox grimaced, raised his arms above his head and began waving them furiously, as if to force something aside. Then he appeared to say "*Keep going. Another 10 or 15 strokes.*" Three implements continued to bear down upon the ground beneath them. 10 more pulsimers passed and Meiluris raised the tip of his axe; a dim yellow coating covered the tip. Another blow and he loosened a large, oblong fragment. Dijal knelt to lift it, tossing it aside. Underneath, a small vein of bright saffron ore could be seen, gleaming with tiny lavender flecks and powdered crystallines. Meiluris dropped the axe and began fumbling through his pockets.

Jadox dosed again, this time with twice as much as before. He motioned for them to stop. He knelt, removed the Kuspegias from his temples and placed one in each hand. He bent down into the hole beneath him and held the stones against a fluorescent chunk of bright yellow ore.

He closed his eyes. His lips began to tremble, his face becoming drawn and contorted. The rest of them knelt close beside him. Suddenly, Jadox's mouth, his eyes, began to open wide, then close and open again in succession. His face grew tight, strained, and a growling rasp emerged from deep within his chest, oozing up into his trachea, filling his neck with a convulsion of thick, guttural notes. His chest heaved and his cheeks began to fill with something sonorous, painful; something he fought with all his strength to disgorge upon the waiting air.

Jadox opened his mouth. And with a violent thrust, it erupted.

“SH...SH...SHUAI!!”

Within the mind's inner sanctum, each of them charted their common course. They'd done all they could, here, in this place, this *thing* known to the Dimensional Horizon as *Kuwban'Xalu*. Still, they had no genuine assurance that they had, in fact, done anything at all. Tomorrow, they would begin their return. The Swales of the Neroluer, in all its stark uncertainty, had never seemed so inviting as it did right now.

The first few stratimers after their return had been the hardest: a violent drawdown of retching, postliminary hallucination, followed by episodes of uncontrollable thrashing and twitching that had only recently abated in the last of them. Now, as the tangled remains of a Yicarusch vine burned hot, shattering the darkness of a crystal clear Ionian night, eight souls struggled to bring their minds, their bodies to an easy landing, still finding themselves crashing headlong into tangible existence, wringing out the effects of such massive dosages of Thrifleanur. To wrap their minds around what they had seen. To process what had happened to them. Where they'd been and what they'd done. Had anything they'd experienced that day been real? Illusion? Or just some cruel miscellany? These thoughts infused their minds to the exclusion of all else.

In small measure, their hunger had returned. A brief oversupply of food had resulted from Dijal's skill with the Quadric, and their exertions inbound had elevated their hunger, forcing them to consume far more than their stock of Reelers and fresh game could withstand. The net effect of all this had now left them with no more than a three day supply of food. Their dried Khalizud had been stretched as far as it would go, and tonight the last 15 preserved slivers were sizzling above a small pile of embers while their thoughts returned to anything but food.

No one stood. No one spoke. So Arjun, still nauseous and sweating profusely, brought himself to break the silence.

"I just can't *believe* what happened out there! To Acheron. Baerosul. Did anyone see them dose themselves. Didn't I give explicit instructions on how much to take, and when. Was there something I missed?"

"Arjun, don't," Cai urged him. "You did all you could. The same dosages wouldn't have worked for everyone. It's an anti-hallucinatory; that's all. Honestly, I find it amazing that Thrifleanur, or *anything* for that matter, could have held us together for as long as it did. For them, it...it just wasn't enough."

Her words, though, did little to ease his mind. Arjun recalled how, two days earlier, he had undergone his first exposure to the Borealic Fetors in more than 10 quinteks. It was along the periphery, a line of demarcation they had spent the first two days trying to find. But find it they did. Their original plan, agreed by all, had evolved at the last stratimer. At its inception, it had been to send Jadox in alone, with their entire supply of Thrifleanur. It was assumed that a Mnemonast, with the Kuspegias and enough powder, would be able to self-manage whatever adverse effects the medication could not. But the geographic field taken up by this gossamer anomaly had shrunk since Arjun had last attempted it. He'd feared that as a result, the Fetors had become more concentrated, and that the effect of being inside would have grown at the same rate that the field's size had diminished. He was right on both counts.

Assuming correctly that Jadox would need assistance, and at the same time unable to quell their fanatical curiosity, each of them had rationalized their way into the final thrust of their expedition; to forge ahead, as one, into its beating heart. They understood the consequences...or at least, convinced themselves that they did. So despite Arjun's urgings to the contrary, they all went in; with a hefty dose of nerves and clear minds, just before taking those first steps. That, however, was the last time the minds of Acheron and Baerosul would remain so lucid.

The return trip had been the riskiest. Their supply of Thrifleanur had been seriously depleted, what with such large dosages required by Jadox to chase off the effects of the Grist. Circumstances had left them unable to retrieve their fallen comrades, to portage them out of this Sphere with even the tiniest morsel of respect. And so, out there, the remains of Baerosul and Acheron remained, abandoned to rot like all the others they had seen. With their Thrifleanur now gone, there was no going back.

Still, it was all too much for Arjun to bear. "Time to let it go, Garion," Dijal said. "They're gone now; they're at peace. Let it remain that way." To Arjun, the idea of *letting it go* seemed quite strange, coming from one who had so stubbornly refused to let a certain Eusterian shore off the hook and out of her mind, as it were.

Nostra Lo.Mhastreac seemed to have come through her withdrawal with minimal effect. She cocked her head to one side, as if to fight off the urge to sleep. She'd been shaken by the loss of Baerosul, the member of their party she had known the longest. At the tail end of her drawdown, though, her grief was supplanted by a gnawing curiosity. "What was that? The Fetors? Is that what they're called?"

Arjun nodded.

"So, what are they?"

"Do you remember what we'd talked about right after we found the first Boric pier? When I'd warned you to be careful of..."

“*Careful!* You warned us to be careful, did you?” Meiluris, his mind still torqueing, could contain himself no longer. His eyes burned with hostility as his bloodstream lingered in detox. “The Fetors just took two of us with them...*forever!*” he screamed. His ongoing hostility toward Arjun was returning with a vengeance. “I’d heard that they were dangerous, but you’ve tasted them, Arjun. Isn’t that what you said? We didn’t all need to be in there. You’re the self-appointed *leader* of this expedition, aren’t you?”

“Meiluris, what are you...?” Cai asked.

“I’m not done yet! You should’ve put your foot down, Arjun. Restricted the size of the party going in. That way, just a few of us could have gone in, carried extra dosages and all. Maybe then we could have avoided having to leave someone behind,” he went on, jabbing a twitchy finger to wisoltre, “If you had, then those two would be alive right now!”

“That’s not fair, Meiluris!” Ekavias spoke up. “We all knew the odds, and we agreed to them; *you* included. You’re alive right now because of Arjun. Think about it!”

Meiluris turned his head and pouted with a loud whimper.

“So, what exactly is it?” Nostra asked again, to anyone with an answer. “I mean...*they?* The Fetors?”

Arjun cleared his throat and spoke up. “That’s a good question, Nostra. I don’t think any living soul really knows what they are. But my guess is this: the Borealic Fetors are...” he paused to fumble for a coherent response “...I believe, the force of thousands of quinteks of filamentary residue...*revenants*, if you will...that have, I guess, ruptured or mutated under intense pressure. The callings, the images, the sounds all of us heard out there: they are the scourgings of a distant time, not of the Sphere in which you and I live. They are the jumbled backwash, of tongues. Dialects. Murmurs and outcries. The voices, the longings, the fervors, the agonies...the *detritus* of all the lives and all the deaths which have come before us. For some reason, the voltaics, the ores which run beneath the feet or over the head of every living soul in the Dimensional Horizon, have brought them...*all* of them...to

this place. Right here! Only the 'Phemes know why, or how. Some call it the Grist of Caruvalus! To me, and to others who speak with the same heart, it is nothing more than the gift of pure, unquenchable sonorance!"

The smell of something burning hit Arjun's nose. "Yes, long ago I had once tasted the Fetors, but only along the periphery. 11 quinteks ago they were at least three times as wide as they are now. Today was different, indeed. But what have we accomplished? Have we only scratched the surface, or broken through? The true purpose and the eventual consequence of this journey? It lies right there." He pointed to the Kuspegias, hanging in a mesh bag around Jadox's neck. "If those little stones are as powerful as they've been touted, then they'll tell. They *will* tell."

Arjun looked into Ekavias's eyes. He seemed to understand. He seemed, in fact, to *know*. And Arjun sensed, somehow, that if he didn't, then very soon he would.

"Okay, so now that we've got that settled," Kerak interjected, "I'd like to know if any of you saw those glyphs, those entwines, just...just *appearing*, evolving on the rock, out of thin air? What the *freigh* was that? And where did all those chisel and pickaxe marks and gouges come from? That place looked more like an abandoned mining pit than some mythical wellspring of sonorance!" Kerak's reach for answers was met with silence. He reasoned that not everyone had seen the same exact visions as he had. Or at least not in the same way.

Meiluris's head was now properly screwed to his neck, but he seemed not to have heard Kerak. "The Fetors; that's got to be it. Revenants which've somehow morphed, split, broken under pressure. But why? How? Arjun is *right*!" The sound of that admission, coming from Meiluris's mouth, alarmed everyone, including Meiluris himself. "It's the Grist, on a gargantuan scale; but even more than that! Mnemonasts can see them. Jadox, at the escarpment; you saw them, right?"

Jadox nodded.

"What was it, Jadox? What did you see?" Cai asked.

Jadox struggled to answer that question. "Well, I guess...faces, voices, pain, anger, elation...existence! And

everything in between. It's hard to put into words. I...I saw the same thing at the Cryostrilic Plains, even sometimes at Shulumethros. It's like...thinking or feeling something, and then you see your musings pour out before you in a thousand tiny, visible wavelengths, like a curtain of smoke or mist. The urge to push it off is intense; like, if you don't, if you run into it or disturb it somehow, it'll disturb *you*. Over the quinteks, before I came to the Crescent, I'd seen it a few times...the Grist, as Arjun said. But never like I saw it today. *Never!*"

Seven souls sat there, mouths agape, marveling at the passion behind Jadox's words, as well as the fact that he was able to enunciate such complex thoughts in a single breath.

Kerak, though, remained unsatisfied. "Would somebody please answer my question? I know at least *one* of you saw what I did. The glyphs; the ones that just seemed to pop up out of nowhere? And the fragmentation, the chisel and gouge marks? Talk to me!"

Ekavias spoke after a lengthy pause, shaking his head as if he were trying to clear water from his ears. "Kerak's right. I saw the same thing. Glyphs! They would appear suddenly, like they were being written onto the rock, out of thin air? We all saw it, right? You saw it, Meiluris, didn't you?" One by one, the missing pieces of a puzzle began to form in Ekavias's mind.

"Yeah, I saw it. But that's got to be some sort of illusion. Those glyphs had to have been there all along," Meiluris said, beginning to pick up the vague scent of scalded meat.

"Okay, but what about this? There had clearly been something between those huge, spiraling veins of Aquylur; something which is just not there anymore! Ores, billions of miarics, look as if they'd been ripped and carried off from that place, as far as the eye could see. I'm pretty sure I didn't dream *that* up. Any thoughts?"

Meiluris and Kerak stared each other down. "A mind trick?" Kerak went on to say. "I don't think so. We weren't the first souls to attempt that place; just picture in your mind the shriveled remains we saw, everywhere we looked. But it's clear that others came before us, and made it out, too. And they *took!* I know you saw it. The question is...what? What did they

take? I have no doubt the Kuspegias captured something. But how does that compare to what had already been captured, long before we got here!”

“Even if we knew the answer to that question, Kerak, where does it get us?” Ekavias spoke with resignation. “All we know is what we have; a vague idea of what the Kuspegias absorbed when they were in Jadox’s hands. I agree; this place has been decimated. But I can’t believe that the essence of it all, the essence of...of simple, unrefined *truth*...had been stolen from this place. I mean, that’s what we’re after, right?”

Ekavias had struck the quintessential nerve. Arjun nodded, his lips turning a simple smile. Truth. *Now I know why so many have come to this place, and why so many have so failed. What is it? What is...truth?*

The scent of charred flesh now filled every nostril. Their minds remained indifferent, though, to anything but the subjects at hand. Jadox fidgeted. Other than his response to Cai, he had not spoken a word since that mangled scream had flown from out of his throat, from upon the low rise which formed the nebulous core of that vague patch of ground they had just put behind them.

Meiluris held out his left hand. “Let me see them, Jadox.”

“No...NO! You’re not ready, Meiluris. Not yet!”

“Jadox. Hand them to me!” Meiluris wiped his palms on his torn pants. “I can handle them.”

Jadox pulled the mesh bag from around his neck. He dug for the stones and held them together between his left thumb and forefinger. Meiluris, Ekavias, Kerak, indeed *all* of them, were amazed at what they felt, heard and saw.

The stones were still glowing, still burning, still...*pulsing*, along a range of spectrums: visible and audible, psychological. As they all stared at the Kuspegias, there came the sensation of a low murmur; slashing against the back of their heads like a dull blade...twisting, gouging a scabrous mnemonic path through their cortices.

Jadox placed the stones into Meiluris’s left hand. Immediately, Meiluris began to tremble. He kept the stones there, in the palm of his hand, unable to sustain longer than five or six

pulsimers before they fell to the ground. Meiluris lurched backward, struggling to catch his breath. The Kuspegias remained on the rocky soil, still vivid, incandescent.

"They're...*loaded!*" That was all Meiluris could bring himself to say.

It had all dragged on far too long. A hard rest was overdue. The flames began to die off, licking the dry air with withering tongues. Far into the Mnulorathean darkness, a brood of Numandriels echoed a chorus of caterwauls, their shrill tones soon to be dispersed in a gust of Ionian backwash; a familiar circumstance in a land so near to the periphery of the Dimensional Horizon.

Come morning, they would all take their leave of this place, with little food, very little drinkable water and far more questions than answers. Kerak leaned on the rock against which he would lay his head that night, measuring a few meager drops from out of his canteen. A sudden surge welled up from within, a subliminal convulsion, the mind of Drogan Te.Sinian; Chimierepha incarnate. *Glyphs which morph and meld, appearing out of thin air?* The answer to that question lay trapped there, deep within the farthest reaches of his mind.

A reminder was suddenly tripped, of those dried strips of Khalizud flesh which were to have sacrificed themselves in one final meal. Now, they lay wasted, blackened to crumbled char by heat and flame. Dijal picked away at 15 scalded lumps of flesh. All that remained of a useful nature was a simple, hard-earned epiphany.

Too much mouth, she mused on their lack of vigilance that evening, *and not enough mind*.

"Lean forward. Keep your balance...and your eyes...to your left. *Amaria*, it's a...long way down!"

Meiluris's panting advice was not appreciated. With their bare toes, each of them clung to the rocky ledge, nudging a cautious path to sorentre. To some stray soul who might be standing somewhere below, this slow progression would've resembled the fidgety crawl of 15 heels, six backpacks and the

tail end of a prosthetic foot. Every pulsimer, their convoy either dislodged the occasional rock, hurled the occasional expletive or implored the 'Phemes in a panic-stricken tone to run the gauntlet before them.

Meiluris maintained his position at the head of the line, a place he'd held since they'd put Kuwhan'Xalu behind them. His resentment lingered, of Arjun's self-imposed authority, not to mention his fellow travelers' fondness for the old skantaro. But he kept his bitters to himself...mostly. The unneeded stress of factional hostility would only burn extra calories. And they had so little of those to spare.

"15, maybe 16 neurris and we're...there!" Meiluris's frazzled nerves caused his voice to tail off. As they continued to work their way along the narrow rock shelf, the angle of the wall to their front appeared to grow more vertical, forcing them to lean a little farther back with each step.

Keep...center of...gravity...to front, Kerak thought in a cold sweat. The upthrust of an estrean dawn pummeled the rock face to which they clung. He dared to glance behind him, then down. What he saw was both unnerving and unsurprising: a thick, low-flung river of blue mist, wending its way to norostre, stinking of death and the triumph that Actinetics represented to those who had turned the Crescent, and so much else, into a barren wasteland.

Kerak praised the 'Phemes as the force of the gust pushed him forward a little, but not quite enough to lift the toxic cloud below them to a level higher than 100 or 200 neurris beneath their feet. Moving along to his left, his right cheek scraped the bare stone wall, tearing his skin. He glanced over to his right to see thin streaks of blood running horizontally along the coarse stone.

But he saw something else, too. It was Cai, right behind him, looking back at him with quivering eyes and a nervous smile. Her face ached with sincerity and a tinge of regret, for all the words gone unspoken, all the deeds gone undone, long before now.

She wobbled. Kerak's right hand reached for her left. Making their way along an increasingly narrow toehold, he

placed his palm over her hand and pressed down, as if to hold this small part of her body to the stone surface. Her cold skin began to grow warmer and drier as they wrapped their forefingers into a fleshy serpentine. If one of them were to fall, she knew, so the other would follow. *But not today. Today will not be that kind of day.*

12 more stratimers passed. Meiluris reached his left hand around a backward leaning column of Menshar. He pulled himself over the last half neurri of the narrow ledge, extended his left leg and found a secure footing on a massive horizontal plane, stretching far out to wisoltre. He breathed a sigh of relief, offering his right hand to each of them as, one by one, he helped pull his friends to safety. The last hand he took was that of Arjun Ve.Jalu, holding the back of the line. To his surprise, Meiluris seemed to have clutched that hand a little tighter than those he had taken before.

Their brief rest was wordless, unsettled, lasting little more than 20 stratimers. The sensation, of the uncontrollable escape of time, coursed through their minds like so much fine sand, falling from between their fingers. And so they broke their pause to recontinue their journey. Past Zenith, they walked. As the wandering stench of the Triurate drew nearer, they walked. Turning this way and that, they trudged along to sorentre, in the general direction of the only place they could reliably call home.

Through hunger, thirst, exhaustion, pain and a surging sense of foreboding, they walked. This was not the path they had taken upon leaving Shulumethros; that route was now closed to them, thanks to the toxicity coming from the sorentrean Seamounds. But the path itself didn't seem to matter. The direction, the destination...was all there was.

At about 80 degrees past Zenith, their pace slowed, as if all eight of them had begun schlepping through a sea of mud. Ekavias and Nostra were the first to stop. The others came to a slow halt behind them. Consumed by exhaustion, they dropped at the spot where each of them stood.

"Camp?" This single word fell from Dijal's mouth. They all nodded as one.

After 15 stratimers, Kerak and Jadox stood and began pacing a perimeter no larger than a hundred neurris in diameter. The clouds of the Chi'ot.Vuloar began to enfold, shrouding from view the last visible remnants of the nearby terminus.

"Did you see anything, Kerak? Fuel? Or what about those little seedpods? They'd be good, if we can find any. What are they called?"

"Syriphada," Kerak said, tamping a soft layer of soil with his right foot. It was spongy, damp. His eye ran uphill and to his right. "Look for the water," he urged Jadox, knowing that if there was anything to eat around here, that's where they'd find it.

Through the encroaching mists they slogged. With each step the ground grew more sodden. After another 12 neurris they noticed a narrow tunnel, no wider than three neurris, no higher than two, opening before them within a vertical outcrop. They knelt and stared into it, their vision met with a hollow darkness.

"Stay here," Kerak told him, enticed at the thought of finding edible fungi. "Let me have a look. I'll call out if I need you to get the lightstaff. Okay?"

Jadox nodded. Something inside him shut down at the thought of having to go in there, of having to endure such tight spaces. That sensation was new, and troubling.

At 15 neurris in, the surfaces surrounding Kerak had narrowed until he found himself on his hands and knees, staring down a passageway that extended another 30 or so neurris before him. "What the *freigh* am I doing here?" he asked himself, angry at this gnawing curiosity and where it was taking him. As he spoke, he realized that the darkness seemed to have eased somewhat. Surprised, he nudged himself a little farther forward and to his left. Then, he looked down and saw it.

Water. Glowing water. A limpid pool, filled with the vibrant haze of orange and green phosphorescence. Thousands of tiny wagging lines, quavering, twisting, fluttering seven or eight neurris below him, a miniature sea of brilliant chromatic

luster! Against his will, he found himself unable to extract his gaze, to pull himself free. His mind began to race, putting the pieces together, one by one.

Instinct began to set in. Kerak reversed himself and started back for the tunnel entrance. Suddenly, he felt his right knee give way beneath a plot of collapsing dirt. It fell and landed with a loud splash. His pulse surged. Jadox, kneeling no more than 12 neurris in front of him, disappeared from view. Kerak slid down, down, farther, faster with each clipped breath, wrapped in a cist of mud and root and stone. Reality set in and the word shot from his tongue and from between his teeth in a panic-stricken shriek.

“CLYSOPHICUS!”

Jadox heard him. Meiluris and Ekavias and Nostra and Arjun heard him. *Everyone* heard him. But the most urgent sense of alarm belonged to Arjun. Within half a pulsimer, he and Cai and Meiluris were on their feet.

“Where? Where did that...?” Arjun called out.

“Here! Come here. Quick!” Jadox answered. Swallowing a sudden anxiety, he vanished into the tunnel after Kerak. Arjun, Cai and Nostra sprinted over the soggy rise in front of the tunnel, only to find Jadox’s muddy ass scurrying off into darkness, then backwards again in red alarm as Arjun squeezed past and climbed in ahead of him.

Meiluris realized that they’d forgotten to bring a lightstaff; he raced back for it. He fumbled through one sack, then another, searching in vain for one of the two workable staffs available to them while muffled voices screamed out for light.

Meiluris found the staff and bolted again for the tunnel. Arriving at the opening, he found Jadox kneeling against the sheer wall surrounding the tunnel veil, panting, his head in his hands. “Too, too tight! Couldn’t breathe! He’s...he’s in *trouble!*”

Meiluris knelt and shined the lightstaff into the tunnel, reflecting Arjun’s pupils, burning into the glare. He’d managed to slither to within half a neurri of the newly created ledge, nine neurris from the opening. The effects of the sudden

collapse of the silt strewn floor could be seen on every surface. At first, Meiluris tried to enter the tunnel himself, but gave up for lack of space. He handed the lightstaff to Cai, who passed it on to Arjun.

“I...can’t...*hold!*” The words broke in breathless, terrified snippets from Kerak’s mouth. Arjun pushed the staff forward with his left hand. All he could see was his son’s two hands grasping a small, damp finger of root. Kerak’s wet grasp was failing with each fraction of a pulsimer. His feet dangled no more than four neurris above the illuminated surface of the lagoon as rock and muck continued to fall, hitting the water, dousing his body with spray.

Arjun leaned forward as far as he could, noticing a cluster of small, sinuous lights beginning to converge beneath Kerak’s legs, winding themselves together in an ever-tightening spiral. *They’re waiting for him*, Arjun thought, sick to his stomach with fear.

Arjun threw down the lightstaff. He thrust both hands in his son’s direction, holding for all he could onto Kerak’s forearms. Artificial light bounced off smudgy walls, reflecting onto Kerak’s face, his expression wavering between abject terror, solemn acceptance and a ferocious but seemingly futile will to live.

“Father...*help*...*ME*...!!”

Arjun heaved, strained, yanked. “My hands...too *wet*,” he muttered, his grip on Kerak’s arms beginning to loosen. Arjun tried to shove his knees forward to improve his leverage, so as to pull with his back. They too slid out from under him. The root Kerak was holding onto suddenly splintered. Arjun’s grip on Kerak’s forearms slipped down to his son’s wrists. “I can’t hold. *H...help! Please!*” Arjun screamed, turned back to face Cai, unable to accept what he was certain was about to happen.

Arjun’s panicked thrusts jolted the lightstaff until Cai could at last see what was going on. “PULL!!” was all she could say as she threw her hands around Arjun’s hips. She began to kick, flailing as hard as she could in reverse, in the direction of the tunnel opening. Ekavias, Nostra and Dijal were behind her, in that order. Right away, they picked up on her intent as

Ekavias grabbed Cai by the legs. Then, Nostra took Ekavias's, and so on, all the way back to Meiluris and Jadox, by now able to breathe again as he knelt just outside the veil of the tunnel.

"BACK! BACK!!" Cai screamed.

One neurri in reverse was all they needed, not to mention a little strength. Neither were in long supply. They tugged and cursed and kicked and pulled backwards with every last miaric of their waning energy.

Kerak, his wrists still nestled within Arjun's loosening grip, began involuntarily to swing his body backward, raising his knees to his chest on the upthrust. The momentum caused his body to become lifted up. His hands flew forward. Arjun's grip loosened for half a pulsimer as Kerak's hands found a rock on which to grab, beside his father's knees. Then Arjun regained his hold. Another series of strenuous pulls, then up and out as each of them from Arjun on back were jerked half a neurri toward the cave opening.

Kerak breathed hard and trembled. His torso landed on what remained of the floor of the tunnel. His ankles and feet dangled whimsically over the ledge, high above the colorful, aqueous surface below him as his mind began to fall away. Without thinking, Arjun leaned forward and laid his head on his son's back. As if in reflex, Cai did the same with Arjun, and Ekavias with Cai, and so on and so on...

For 10 stratimers they laid there in silence, the cloudy emissions of the lightstaff casting dull shadows on the walls of the tunnel. Arjun sighed and rubbed his son's head as Kerak regained awareness and began to chuckle. All he could hear was the rhythmic squawking of at least four snoring mouths. Kerak's reaction soon turned to outright laughter. The snoring came to a halt. They all lifted their heads in unison and stared back at him.

"*Amaria!* That's got to be the best sleep I've had in 10 days," Kerak chortled, his beaming face met with a cluster of drowsy smiles.

Eight elated souls freed themselves from the muck and made their way outside the tunnel opening, toward the small clump of ground on which their gear lay. Jadox was now in

charge of the lightstaff. Assuming the rear, behind Kerak, he looked off to his left, about 20 neurris from the tunnel. There he saw it, behind a boulder, a little over waist high.

“Kerak...Syriphada. Over there.” Jadox called out.

“Go get it,” Kerak croaked. “I’m beat.”

Jadox returned with his hands full of Syriphada branches, loaded with seedpods. The eight of them sat in a tight circle that night, nibbling on the cool, greenish-blue pods, crunching and snapping as fast as their fingers could manage.

Their short nap in the tunnel had done its job. After they finished eating, a mere five stratimers passed before they all stood as one, as if lifted by some unseen imperative. An invisible hand pointed in one direction, into the face of doubt, fear, chaos, absolute uncertainty. Dijal grabbed the lightstaff from the center of their circle and held it high into the air. Without speaking, they lifted their gear to their shoulders. With Dijal in the lead, they rejoined their return journey to Shulumethros. To sorentre.

Meiluris, for a change, assumed the rear, and without regret. After adjusting the straps of his pack, he reached into his pocket and lifted it for a quick inspection, to make sure it had not become torn or frayed in the struggle to save Kerak. Assured that his souvenir was unharmed, he placed it back in his pocket. The small bag of yellow dust nestled itself around a few random Syriphada husks.

The air that night repulsed with the sickening balm of the Triurate. To estre, far to their left, over and beyond the river of blight winding its way in the opposite direction, 24 subalternates, three circulats, eight maquits...and two Chalisters...crept along in the darkness. To norostre.

*T*HERE IS A TIMEWORN SAUROSTRAN tale which straddles the fleeting boundary between truth and legend. It is the story of a former Receptif articulat from the now defunct marisatria of Uloyisthea, and the Kiyfer dome near their community...that one day ran dry.

In its time, Uloyisthea was situated about 100,000 neurris to sore-estre of the wisoltrean terminus, not far from the Saurostran borderlands. Uloyistheans were prolific culturists, nurturing whips, Syena and fruit bushes called Guaerea, among other yields. As in every region of the Dimensional Horizon, these and all other perennials had carved their rhizomes deep into the rich Subterra, or had tapped into the bottomless root structures of other ancient growth. Their objective: *Aqua Pura*, originating from the Kiyfers, those treasured keepers of the blood of life, lying forever beneath the landscape and the line of the naked eye.

In keeping with common practice, Saurostrans (like their Pavatrian and Philean neighbors) were in the habit of naming their domes. This dome, the only one within 40,000 neurris of their community, was called *Nuer Locuh*, Saurostran for “many fingers,” a reference to the numerous tap springs which emanated from the walls of the dome and radiated for thousands of neurris from their source.

For as far back as anyone could remember, Nuer Locuh’s pericule had been covered with fungi, heavy moss over a thick layer of rocky soil. One day, a band of culturists carrying their harvest to the Terraces noticed that the Stirrup moss over the pericule had turned black. The Thrapp-Niscal, a local cult of Cimmerians, believed that this curious circumstance was strong evidence of an approaching catastrophe. So in an effort to either ward off this cataclysm, or perhaps just to better understand it, they burned off the Stirrup in an elaborate

ceremony and removed the soil all the way down to the top of the dome, exposing the pericule in its entirety.

After this thick layer of soil had been removed, the locals noticed something strange. The pericule, consisting mostly of chelated Hagonite, and now free of the loamy burdens it had carried for eons, had begun to change shape: to expand up, down, at will; almost as if it were alive. This now unrestrained arch, a perfect semi-circle, heaved and swayed in rhythm for 14 days. But at the start of its 15th, it suddenly collapsed and fell silent.

Upon closer examination, it was discovered that the dome, in the course of its movements, had cracked. This had caused air to seep into the pericule, into the vacuum below it, thereby allowing billions upon billions of vuarsets of water to collapse to the bottom of the Kiyfer and drain into the Subterranean depths, far below the canopy of root structures closer to the surface.

The citizens of Uloyisthea were terrified at the impending consequences of the drought which was sure to follow, and furious at the Thrapp-Niscal for tampering with their only Kiyfer dome and bringing on this debacle. But the sect was quick to defend its actions. "Why, this is the very catastrophe we predicted!" implored Hykeriat Um.Voldesh, the sect's chief cleric. This excuse and others he went on to regurgitate, though, were not enough to spare his life, or those of his 10 followers. For within eight days of the pericule's collapse, all of them had been judged and sentenced in a mock court, soon to be forced to chisel a shoulder width hole in the thin cap of the dome and be cast, one by one, into the now depleted Kiyfer.

Before succumbing to the numerous character flaws which had led him to his bleak, self-serving spiritual views, Um.Voldesh had worked for three quinteks as a Receptif articulat; a manipulator of magnetic polarities. Two days after their conviction, Um.Voldesh stood alone on the pericule, which by then had collapsed even further, into the shape of a deep bowl. He wielded a pickaxe over the crack which had caused all this trouble. And so, that morning, with his feet bound in shackles, he took his first swing at the dome.

As forged metal pierced ore for the first time, he could sense it through his fingertips, just as all well-trained Receptifs are taught. *Now I understand*, he mused. *The ores; their polarities: they're unstable. That's what led this pericule to heave and crack. I...I can heal this dome!*

"Wait!" Um.Voldesh called out to the crowd of 100 or so spectators who'd gathered to witness his demise. His mind ran through a quick checklist, to remember all that he'd been taught about this exacting science. Then it came to him. "I used to be a Receptif articulat," he announced. "I can mend this pericule, restore it to its original shape, and bring water and new life back to this Kiyfer dome. But only if you agree to spare my life, and the lives of my followers. Will you allow this? Will you spare us? All I need is six days." This timeframe was nothing more than a wild guess.

His words were met with incredulous stares. Not a soul standing there, including his terrified followers, believed a word he had just said. But what did any of them, particularly the residents of Uloyisthea, have to lose?

The Regent in charge of their marisatria responded after giving this offer some thought. "We'll give you three."

"But I need at least five."

"Three days. That's all you get!"

Accepting what he could, Um.Voldesh's shackles were removed. For the next three days he remained in the custody of two guards while his followers were imprisoned in a makeshift cell. For the first two, through luments and darkness, he and his keepers combed the tablelands, the moors, the bogs and the hillocks around Uloyisthea, searching, digging and culling for Paeaduriap, for metamorphic Kablature and Ularic silctures; for all the minerals and materials necessary to complete a polarity reversal within a slab of Hagonite. By the start of his third day he had located sufficient supplies and had begun to classify them, to infuse these components into the ores at the periphery and the cap of the pericule.

Thanks to its near perfect semi-circular shape, he knew that the pericule was thin. He guessed that this would speed up the Receptifical process, increasing the odds of quick success,

and he was right. For only 50 stratimers before dawn, 80 stratimers before the end of his third and final day of reprieve, the polarities in the Hagonite began to shift. The dome started to expand, lifting him and his two guards by at least eight neurris over a span of less than a hundred stratimers. As soon as the sunken dome began to rise, the crack in the pericule started to seal. Once the dome had regained its full arc, Um.Voldesh and his two guards began work to stabilize his repairs by replacing the soil and rock which had earlier been removed from the pericule.

Still, the waters had yet to return, leaving his task incomplete. A day later, as Um.Voldesh pled and prodded for continued patience from his captors, two runners sprinted up from the base of a hill, a thousand neurris distant. They reported that a series of tiny springs, which 12 days earlier had ceased to flow, had now erupted with new life. The next day, all of the springs and lagoons fed by Nuer Locuh were once again bubbling and gurgling with their usual vigor.

With that, Um.Voldesh and his cult were spared. But they were not forgiven. Instead, the lot of them were expatriated to the Vengaos, never to see their native Saurostra again. After the passage of many lineages, and further exile at the hands of the Muharadu, the Mnulorathean desolates would become the permanent home of the Thraph-Niscal.

* * * * *

Nostra Lo.Mhastreac winced as she dropped her backpack into Chadic Te.Zulfre's vertical passageway, illuminated by the artificial light held in Cai's Lo.Subira's hand. That evening, after dusk, that old Saurostran yarn had passed through her mind, serving to fend off her growing anxieties. But now, she knew, the time had come to dispense with childhood fables, true or otherwise. For it was a mere 150 stratimers before dawn, and she'd had her fill of the Actinetics which, for the past two days, had permeated her eyes, her lungs. The robust stench which poured up through the tunnel, the sour and sickening efflux of Shulumethros, though, was sure to be nothing more than a slight improvement.

With his empty stomach groaning for nourishment, Kerak held the rear guard, behind Nostra. He removed his backpack, holding it between his knees, searching through it once again. Maybe he'd missed some tiny morsel hidden behind a fold, a seam. But he had not. *Amaria...Nothing!* Of course, he already knew how that search would end, for they'd all run out of food the day before. He sealed his pack in frustration and raised it to his shoulders.

Kerak remained steady, turning around in a lazy circle to survey his surroundings, one last time. To sorentre and norostre, the Ambits of the Mysoux, at his level, remained clear. To wisoltre, the terminus loomed dark lavender, hard and serene. But his last glance, down and to estre, caused him to tremble. For there lay the Swales of the Neroluer, a thousand or more neurris below him. He stared out for three stratimers, observing the yellow and orange glow of at least 50 lights...Machaeran encampments, no doubt...flickering in the pasty morning mist.

Nostra, who had taken the lightstaff from Cai, offered it up to Kerak. "No, keep it down!" he waved the instrument off, reaching behind him for the large, flat stone cover. He lifted it over his head, squatted and placed it over the narrow tunnel entrance. The uppermost passageway into or out of Shulumethros was once again sealed.

Ekavias and Dijal, in that order, had taken the lead back into Shulumethros, unsure if clambering *down* this suffocating little stone straw was preferable to the ascent. Either way, it was no simple chore. After 30 stratimers, though, one fact was certain. The upward journey through this tunnel, 15 days past, had gifted them with a sense of freedom, release, even hope. The return trip held none of those. That was as far as they wished to dwell on the matter.

No simple chore. That was especially true for one member of their party. It had taken three of them...Arjun, Meiluris and Cai...to soothe and cajole Jadox into even thinking about getting himself into this passage. "It's the only way back in!" they'd assured him calmly, trying to ease his claustrophobic nerves. The descent would not have been possible for Jadox

had it not been for Cai's suggestion that he be blindfolded until they made it back to the Collonade. And so he was, after dropping the first two neurris below the tunnel's entrance. Whatever had provoked his sudden fear of tight spaces, no one knew. But Kuwhan'Xalu, and the escarpment at the center of it all, was the prime suspect.

The return trip took twice as long as the ascent, and at the end of it all they found themselves standing about three neurris above the Collonade, on a large stone platform near the kitchen. Ekavias knelt and peered out through a rank cloud of vapor, at a set of eight steps which would, very soon, bring them "home."

Shulumethros. It was lost on none of them that this refuge had undergone a precipitous decline in the past 15 days. The place was now silent, cold, heavy with atrophy, B.O. and surrender. Ekavias knelt even further until he could see that the dining tables, the floors and the chairs of the Collonade had all either been ripped to shreds for fuel or converted into beds, supporting an untold score of snoring, wheezing, coughing, hacking souls. The white noise of shrieks and wails ricocheted in the distance. Ekavias stood, straightened his back and turned to face his seven companions.

"Do any of you know where Hezhreon keeps her bed-roll?" he asked.

"I do," Cai answered.

"Well, go get her. And keep your voice down, but tell her we're back." Ekavias rubbed his hand over his face. "This place..." he began, pausing to put his thoughts into words, "...whatever it is, you can almost cut it with a knife. I'm afraid that if the eight of us pop out of here all at once we might throw this place into a riot."

Cai lost no time, dropping into the Collonade and out of sight.

"...*Six!* All entrances are to remain sealed, and for those who loiter near them any longer than four stratimers...*Cholosekru!* Seven! As of now, rations are being reduced to four miarics each, per day. Just yesterday, five souls were caught stealing from our reserves. For them and all who

even *think* to violate this edict...*Cholosekru!* Eight! All souls will report to inquest depots one through 10, twice a day, for rectal and oral exams. You will be marked at each inspection. If anyone fails to appear...*Cholosekru!* Do you *hear* me? *Cholosekru!* *Cholosekru* for you if...if you cannot show your mark. Nine! If you..."

Hezhreon's tone grew more hoarse, angry and tense with each utterance of the Saurostran threat of punishment, falling from her mouth and into the ears of the 400 or so who had crammed themselves that evening into the Collonade. This was the fourth time in the past 200 stratimers that she had laid out her manifests, so far delivered to over 1600 souls. She cleared her throat and shook her hands in front of her, imploring Hedeon under her breath to somehow help her survive this moment. Her neck seemed to retract, to suck itself into her shoulders as she went on.

Meiluris and Arjun stood with their backs against a wall, hanging onto her every word. They yearned for the warmth of luments, the subtle brushstrokes of the Mnulorathean winds against their skin. Even on empty, aching stomachs and sore feet, *there* was decidedly preferable to *here*. Thaloux, standing beside Arjun, interrupted their conversation with a sharp, cackling cough. His emaciated expression sent a chill down Meiluris's spine.

Meiluris dropped his left hand. It brushed against a small vein of Menshar. His fingertips were burned as they struck the vein. As if in a dream, a sense of concern passed through him, then out as Thaloux opened up.

"Some has got the Scales; the Scales of Mueridal." Thaloux's speech was cautious, slurred; his eyes, bloodshot and blank. "Gets in the bowels, inflames the lower intestines. Blows them up till they rupture, bleed...can't even drop the caque. Means they can't eat. O'course, our reserves are next to nothing so what's the point. Some's got Pakyrium! 100, maybe 150 are in the infirmary with that. Gone blind...every one of 'em. Chadic's there. Nalamear and Ilunea too. And some has got..." his voice cracked, fading into the din.

“What the freigh has *happened* to this place?” Meiluris said, taking ahold of Arjun’s shoulder. “We were gone 15 days, right? This place has fallen to pieces since we left.”

Arjun’s eyes twitched in their sockets. The militia which Hezhreon had taken such care to enlarge had by now grown four-fold, with none of her enlistments appearing any less brutal or ignorant than the ragtag band of hoodlums he’d found when they first came to the Grottos. Neither did any of them appear older than 17 or 18 quinteks.

To Arjun’s front, a brutish gaggle of about 24 males and females shuffled off toward the infirmary in a wavy line, some carrying heavy stones above their heads, others bearing huge rootbranches that had been fashioned into clubs. The poltroon at the head of their line glared spitefully in Arjun’s direction.

“Seems that way,” Arjun answered, after a ponderous delay. He noticed two short, frowning enforcers holding up the rear, with a pair of tight grips on Nairul’s arms, escorting him out of the Collonade. Arjun suppressed the urge to intercede, deciding for now to hold that action in reserve.

Meiluris held in his right hand his first and only meal of the day: two miaric weights of ground, uncooked Myenreawhip and Reelers, pounded beneath the single whack of a large stone into a palm-sized portion; as dry and hard as a clump of Broutish Clay and smelling no better. Fermented brews had become a thing of the past. The Thrifleanur which had once covered the walls and ceilings of this place...and which had still been in plentiful supply as they’d begun their journey...was now gone.

“What a way to welcome us back,” Meiluris sighed. “Guess we’re now just eight more mouths to feed in this filthy caquehole, huh?”

“It would appear so,” Arjun slurred, feeling as if he and Meiluris were being overheard, watched...sized up.

Meiluris leaned in and whispered in Arjun’s ear. “Have you seen Odrahn? I’ve looked everywhere, asked around. Nothing!”

“No, I haven’t seen him. And based on the way Hezhreon is acting, I’d say she hasn’t seen him in a while either. You concerned?”

“Yes. Very!”

“You should be.”

Arjun, Meiluris and Thaloux broke away from the subjects of suspicion, disease and hunger as the voice of Hezhreon Te.Nisach screamed out in closing. “15! All able hands are to report to all staffed inquest depots immediately after rations have been distributed. There you will be broken up into teams. We are to scour every nook, notch, gap and cleft in Shulumethros tonight. Someone has...,” she said, with a lump in her throat, “...has disappeared.” Hezhreon appeared to go into freefall. “At that time you will receive further instructions. That is all!”

“**Y**ou’ve really transformed this place since we left. My compliments,” Meiluris said, trying to catch his breath, to keep pace with Hezhreon while she darted in and out of adjoining passageways, between this or that listless, shuffling soul; that or this broken, overturned bourget, spilling its load of soiled or torn clothing, garbage, caque...or all of the above.

“I’ve done *nothing* to this place but to protect it, care for it,” she answered with a sneer, “while you and those other pellots were out feting your way across Mnuloratheia. For your information, it’s the Machaera, out *there*, that has transformed Shulu...Shulumethros! But I wouldn’t expect you to understand that. What the freigh do you *want*, anyway?”

Meiluris grabbed her by the arm, bringing her to a sudden halt. “Odrahn. Where is he? Or...or is that what edict 15 is all about?”

A middle-aged dragoon came up behind them, carrying a single Quadric blade in his hand, its shaft broken halfway up. Hezhreon pushed Meiluris aside and into a wide cleft in the walls. She trembled, alternating between tears and seething anger. “*Yes*, you fool!” she snapped. “I haven’t...seen him in over five days. We fought! *Amaria*, I don’t even remember

why. But I...I kicked him out of my bedroll. And ever since then..."

The guard carrying the Quadric moved closer to where they were standing. With a scowl she brushed off her fears and regained her composure. "He can't have left the Grottos. The Swales out there...they're *swarming* with blades, outriders, that terrible acrid smell, that...that blue smoke! But where he is, I just don't..." She paused, then pulled herself away. "We've got work to do! So get the freight outta my way!"

The stratimers wore on. While 900 souls, alive and dead, packed the infirmary and its corridors, a little over 600 of the remaining adult population of Shulumethros had gathered into groups of about 10, scouring the Grottos, vaguely fumbling around for what Hezhreon had described as "anything unusual." Each search party was accompanied by at least one of Hezhreon's dragoons, the only defense available to her, to quell her insecurities of what lay "out there." Not to mention the internal threats she saw in every face, every lump of stone, every gesture and word, spoken or otherwise.

About 300 stratimers after their search had begun, the muffled din of voices began to reverberate all at once, from three, then four locations in the Grottos. After two stratimers, the echoes died off and were replaced by the sound of feet, racing across dirt floors, seemingly to and from all directions. Kerak, Meiluris, Hezhreon and Kiralu Um.Kiruvor, as if guided by some vague instinct, darted off from their respective search parties and toward the nearest, most urgent sound they could hear.

Kiralu was the first to stop. He came upon a party of eight, 200 neurris from the now sealed off sorentrean entrance. Hezhreon was right behind him. "Five full bourgets of dried Myenreawhip and Reelers: someone's been hoarding," was all Kiralu could say as Kerak arrived. Hezhreon issued a few angry orders in their direction, wheezed in frustration and ran off toward other tones of alarm, coming at her from other parts of her domain.

She would not so easily turn away from the second search party she encountered. "Someone, come...come quick!" she

heard a familiar voice call out. Kerak and Meiluris appeared less than a stratimer later. This was Dijal's group, and as Hezhreon and at least four others approached, she pointed to it, crammed into a tiny alcove. It was a large roll of cloth, about three neurris long, wrapped around something resembling a body.

Dijal and two of her fellow searchers unwrapped it, first exposing a hand, the remains of which gripped the edge of the cloth in rigor mortis, as if to hold it shut. Then the other hand appeared. It held a small knife between its fingers, just below the chin and above a pool of blood at the bottom of the cloth. The knife's blade was stained dark red.

Kerak and Dijal reached down and pulled the rest of the sticky cloth free. "It's a female. Her wrist. Her neck," Kerak said, pointing to a small slash just above her right hand, another below her chin. "Suicide." He pursed his lips, placing the cloth back over her head. It was clear that, whoever she was, she'd been dead for five, maybe six days. Because of the stench that had replaced breathable air here at Shulumethros, no one had noticed anything amiss about the spot she'd chosen as her last.

"How are you disposing of the dead?" Kerak asked Hezhreon.

She answered after managing to conceal her disappointment. "We aren't. Leave her. Someone will deal with it. The infirmary is full of 'em."

As Hezhreon shuffled off, another series of loud voices broke the air. Kerak recognized the sound of his father. "We need help...*now!* We've got a body here!"

By the time the others arrived, the halls surrounding Arjun's search party were choked with a hundred curious onlookers standing shoulder to shoulder in a space no larger than 600 square neurris. Kerak and Meiluris forced their way through with Hezhreon on their heels.

The space in which the body had been stuffed was tight, dark, dripping with brown fluids, rank with a cloud of vile odors. Arjun and Meiluris began pulling it out by its lower legs, the decayed skin peeling off in their hands. The naked,

swollen corpse ruptured in a fetid spray as they quickly pulled it free of its enclosure.

Arjun ran through a description of the remains before him. “Male. Age...35 to 45, I’d guess; looks like three, maybe four old knife wounds on the arms and torso. I...I can’t make out the face. Clear that away!” As he spoke, the corpse was rolled over on its left side, its shroud tangled around its head. Hezhreon gasped as she looked between the corpse’s legs.

Arjun pointed to a small, semi-circular mark with serrated edges, barely recognizable on the blighted remains of the right hip. “What are those?”

Kerak knelt. A sense of rage, betrayal, *recognition*, boiled up from deep within his chest, his heart, his soul. “*Bite marks!*” he whispered to his father.

Arjun’s jaw dropped.

“Odrahn...*Odrahn!*” Kerak murmured. He turned to look at Hezhreon, his face flushed, steam rising in ethereal wisps from behind his eyes. “You need to call every living soul in this place to the Collonade RIGHT NOW! Do you HEAR me? *NOW!*”

“Wh...why?” Hezhreon asked, bewildered. Grief poured from out of her in spasmic sobs. *Another suicide!* she thought, satisfied that her jilted lover’s unwillingness to live without the throaty blows, the warm breasts and tender cooch of his beloved *Hezh* had brought this on.

“Because, you fool, she is *here!!*”

*E*arly morning. The last few tables had been torn apart and crammed into an alcove beside the kitchen, now bearing but a single tiny flame; a futile effort to cook which would not survive the depletion of the last of their fuel. Cai stood in a corner with Thaloux, exhausted, demoralized, glad to be out of the infirmary for a change. She pressed hard, forcing a damp compress against his head, trying to arrest the raging fever which had rendered him delirious for the past four days.

Conflicted is the word that would best describe their collective mood at that moment. Odrahn’s death had left them

as alarmed and suspicious as their chronically paranoid Regent. But as they peered over at the corridors beside the kitchen, they shared another, more selfish disappointment; that the shortage of fuel had shelved the idea of warm baths at the Grottos...for good.

Cai and Thaloux squeezed themselves even further now into their corner. The Collonade was about to fill to capacity. Cai's attention swung to the front as she watched Kerak and Arjun arrive from the sorentrean access. They had come from just beyond the infirmary, trying between the two of them to identify one lone soul; Odrahn's alleged assailant. Cai watched them begin to make their way to the outcrop overlooking the Collonade; the same platform upon which Hezhreon had recently chosen to reassert her waning authority.

Before they began their ascent, Kerak and Arjun conferred with Meiluris. "Any luck?" Meiluris asked, his angry fists alternately clenching, relaxing.

"Not yet," Kerak responded.

"Have you ever *seen* her, Kerak?" Meiluris asked. "Didn't you tell me that you've never met her?"

"Well, no. But I've articulated images of her, so I'm pretty sure I could pick her out."

"Pretty sure, huh? What about you, Arjun? How long has it been? You confident you can identify your daughter in a crowd like this?"

Arjun paused, all too aware of his shortcomings. He recalled that day, buried within the dust of the ages, when he'd last parted ways with his children, at his sister's terrabode in Belgorslo. But their faces, their features and physiques all remained a nagging mystery to him.

During his many quinteks with The Order, he could not, in fact, recall a single moment of conscious awareness of those with whom he had formed any sort of a bond. Hence, a prime reason why he'd failed to recognize Drogan when he first showed up at the Crescent. But it would not happen again. From the very pulsimer he had learned of her presence at Shulumethros, Arjun had resolved to exhume each dormant strand of revenance, at least where the image of his daughter's

face was concerned, before that tangled mass of memories disappeared forever.

“Arjun?” Meiluris repeated, snapping him out of his fog.

“She wasn’t in the infirmary,” Arjun responded. “Who knows if she’ll show up in the Collonade tonight. But we’ll find her. I hope.”

Conflicted. Cai and Thaloux weren’t the only souls subject to this predicament. Waves of excitement and disappointment alternately coursed through Arjun’s mind as he said those words.

Kerak positioned himself high above the agitated crowd, 900 strong and crammed shoulder to shoulder. Their hostility surged as a fusillade of shouts, curses and catcalls sounded from all corners of the massive hall. Hezhreon’s militia had herded every soul they could find in the Grottos, not bound to the infirmary, and brought them to this very spot. They stood with their weapons in check, in tight clusters, covering the exits.

Arjun rushed up to join Kerak, peering out over the crowd. “This may not have been such a good idea,” he whispered, assessing the rambunctious horde below him.

“I think you’re right. I just can’t see her! *Amaria*, how else are we going to do this?”

Hezhreon angrily strode to the base of the chiseled steps leading to the top of the platform. “I can’t risk this any longer,” she yelled up to them. “There’s going to be a riot here if you don’t finish this! And I mean *now!*!”

Arjun ignored her. While she spoke, he took a mental tally of all the faces he could recognize; the faces of those which he knew were, at this moment, at Shulumethros. Other than those he’d seen in the infirmary, and those he recognized here in the Collonade, only three were not here. The name of one slipped from his tongue.

“Nishar.”

“What?” said Kerak.

“Nishar. He’s not here. Not in the infirmary, either. In fact, I...I don’t think I’ve seen him since a few days before we left for Kuwhan’Xalu.”

Arjun was stunned at how fast his son's expression seemed to shift. Kerak slipped past him, sprinting at full bore down the narrow stone steps. "It's done...send them away," Kerak snorted at Hezhreon as he darted off. Cai quickly instructed Thaloux in the use of the compress, eased him to the floor and took off, forcing her way to the front of the crowd, now crawling angrily toward the exits. Dijal and Meiluris followed Kerak out of the Collonade, trying to keep up.

"I should have done this before we left this place," Kerak huffed under his breath, cursing himself. "*I should have dealt with him long before now!*"

Kerak left them all in a cloud of dust. *Where could he be? Where?* Then, it dawned on him. *Edict 15: what portions of the grottos were left unsearched?* he wondered. *The most inaccessible! Dark, foreboding, labyrinthine, unobvious. The caverns of the estrean access; where we entered when we first came to Shulumethros!*

He struggled to breathe, panting, licking his dry lips. Through angular corridors, down darkened passageways he dashed, poking his head into every nook, notch and cleft he came to along the way.

When he was a little more than 20 neurris from the now sealed entrance, he slowed to grab a doused lightstaff from the wall. To his left...an empty chamber, formerly used as a quarantine for new arrivals. He adjusted the staff to its lowest level. Tiny bits of food littered the dirt floor. He took a series of silent, shallow breaths, tightened his grip on the lightstaff and stole his way back to the dark foyer leading to that seemingly empty chamber.

Behind him...echoes. Voices. Cai, Dijal, Meiluris, his father. He slowed his pace. As soon as they came into view, he raised a finger to his lips and motioned for them to stop, to remain silent.

To his front he noticed that some of the massive rocks and flat stones which had been placed to seal the corridor leading to the estrean entrance seemed to have been shifted. He began to shuffle his feet as he entered the darkened room. The

floor was littered with bits of food, ripped cloth. The odor of filth and decay caused him to sneer as he spun on his left heel to survey the chamber.

After making a full turn, Kerak paused. Before him, a lone cleft presented itself. *What do I have to lose?* he puzzled, discarding this needless caution of his. He picked up his pace as he moved toward the shadows surrounding a deep rupture in the walls.

He entered, turned to his left and adjusted the staff to its highest intensity. He squinted, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. There, cowering before him, was Nishar; pale and silent. Kerak thrust the staff toward him as Cai and Dijal entered the chamber.

“Where is she?” Kerak demanded.

From behind Nishar she emerged; defiant, muzzled, her eyes burning with fear and hatred. As Kerak moved closer, blinding his sister’s eyes, Nalani leaned out from behind Savita, wearing a coy grin.

*M*eiluris stared up at thousands of stubby tendrils of root and fungus, clinging to deep fissures in the ceiling of the Collonade, welcoming the encroachment of a dawn he could neither see nor feel. He was tired, frightened, frustrated, angry, bitter. But this whorl of emotions was nothing compared to those boiling within the mind and foaming from the mouth of Kerak Um.Tiago.

The education of Hezhreon Te.Nisach had come late. In response, she had issued two orders after the discovery of Nishar, Savita and Nalani. First, that the massive stones which had been partially removed by Nishar and Savita must be replaced and strengthened; right away. Second, that the Collonade should, for now, remain empty, and be reserved for only one purpose. For the past 30 stratimers, this chamber had been filled with the sound of cracks, screams, curses, threats, angry chatter, hoarse avowals. Also very little useful information, no remorse, and no retribution: at least not yet. It was to the Collonade that Nishar and Savita had been

taken...more like *dragged*...kicking, hissing, swearing, pleading. Savita's introduction to her younger brother had begun with agitated awareness, cascaded into leery scrutiny, landed at aspersion. This came as no surprise to Kerak, for whom 30 of the most angry, belligerent stratimers of his life had now passed. By now the inquisitions had slowed somewhat, interrupted by long pauses, assuming at times a tone of near somnolence.

She paused more than once to collect her breath, to drape her insecurities in a boastful, malicious pride. Through it all, Nishar remained silent, tied to a crude rootbranch chair, pelted with questions, his tongue locked in a neutral zone of guilt, fear and defiance. In the midst of it all, Nalani had been taken away by Ekavias and Dijal, far from this madness, nowhere to be seen.

Savita's defenses and Kerak's queries had now fallen to repetition. "For the last time...it was my assignment, my mission, little brother! In case you don't know, Odrahn Lo.Hualic has been on an object list with The Order for going on 12 quinteks. But it was left to me...*to me*...to finish the task! This is my calling. Who the *freigh* are you to feign an understanding of my work?! Did Te.Mirin teach you *nothing*?"

Kerak sighed, rolled his eyes. He glared to his left, toward a deeply riven cleft in the rock. There, in shadow, stood Arjun, watching these proceedings with reluctant eyes, chewing his fingernails to the nub. He had not identified himself to his daughter, and despite his impulses, he doubted now if he ever should. Or could.

Kerak had asked...in fact, *begged*...his father for his help in persuading Savita to talk. She was completely unaware of Arjun's presence at Shulumethros, still unaware that he was even still alive. Kerak thought of playing this card, of revealing her father to her, in the hope that the surprising revelation of his survival in the face of Machaeran and mercenary resolve would somehow break her will, soften her defiance. But after over 30 stratimers of threats and inquiry, he came to realize the futility of this strategy. Savita would not be broken. And so,

Arjun remained in darkness, incapable of unburdening himself of the dissonant voices raging within his skull.

“When did you arrive here?” Kerak quizzed her. “You still haven’t answered me! And your guards, your entourage...where are they? Are they here, at Shulumethros? Identify them! NOW!!”

“I owe you nothing, you freighin’ *Skantaro!*” Savita screamed, her eyes burning orange and umber, her last vestige of self-control on the verge of collapse. “You are...*dirt! Cague!! A traitor*; no better than the slime that is Arjun Ve.Jalu. You will *never, ever* get me to talk!

Half a pulsimer, and she threw her body forward, lunging at him, sputum soaring in every direction. She took a robust swing at his chin, missing it by a hair’s breadth. A dollop of bloody slaver landed on his forehead. Meiluris and Hezhreon restrained her, forcing her back into the chair, strapping her hands to its frame. As she squirmed beneath her restraints, Kerak noticed, for the first time, the odd marking on her neck. *A glyph; an entwine of some sort?* he paused to ponder. The faintest hint of Actinetics wafted down from a crack in the Collonade ceiling.

“Fine! Then don’t say a word!” Kerak leaned forward, shaking his fists for emphasis. “But this assignment. This mission! It’s still murder. And murder...this one in particular...will not go unpunished. So wipe that cocky sneer from your face, big sister! I haven’t forgotten the skills I learned from Te.Mirin. And you’re right here. I know how to deal! *Trust me!*”

“Then *deal*, Kerak. *Deal!* If that is *your* calling. DO IT!!”

Meiluris screamed, lunged for Savita, his left hand lugging a large rock over his head. He was restrained by Kerak as the rock fell from his hands, landing with a thud in front of Savita’s toes.

Kerak helped Meiluris to his feet, glaring once more in the direction of the shadow in which Arjun stood. “You don’t know what a *fool* you are, Savita! I could end all of this, right here, right now, if I wanted to! And only *one* soul in this room would not forgive me for my actions! I can only...”

“Silence! *Silence!!*” She screamed, as if her threats carried any weight, as they did beyond the Grottos, within the velums and the Principiates of the Architrave. “You *owe* me! You and that so-called father of ours are on an object list of your own; a very resilient one at that.”

“And that’s supposed to mean...what?” Kerak asked, feigning disinterest.

“I’ve had opportunities to take both of you out. *You*, when it was discovered that Drogan’s little skridlak was harboring you at the Columns. And as for Arjun...I’ve tracked his azimuths. Twice.”

“So, what stopped you?”

She lowered her head, then raised her eyes with a cold glare. “I thought I knew, but now...” She paused to find her bearing. “What difference does it make? He’s likely dead by now, anyway.” Savita shook her head energetically, raising her voice. “Be forewarned, little brother, that I carry the mandate of the 68th Cypliat!” Savita said, visibly scorning the disregard on Kerak’s face. “My *entourage*, as you call them, are out there, beyond those walls. They will come for me, or my corpse. I am connected, Kerak, in ways you cannot even *begin* to understand. And if I do not return, the imperative of your death, to the Architrave, will only grow!”

Kerak tacked, lowering his voice. “Nalani. Explain.”

“Who?” Savita asked, looking at Nishar with a puzzled frown.

Nishar nodded. As awareness dawned, Kerak noticed that she flickered. Her bottom lip quivered. Her eyes grew red, puffy. She cleared her throat and held her chin a little higher. “Ayu! Her name is...Ayu...”

Kerak shook his head. “What...? No. I’m talking about *Nalani!* Who is *Ayu?*”

Savita turned again to face Nishar. Now an accomplice to murder, he motioned to speak.

“Kerak, Savita’s right. Nalani was just a name given to her at a refugee camp, before Bechrach brought her to the Crescent. Ayu is her given name,” Nishar said.

“Then...who is she? Who is *Ayu?*”

“Ayu is Savita’s daughter.”

“*I*t was five quinteks ago. I’d been assigned to Calu-Duaringe, in the sorentrean Andulkas. I’d been sent there in penance, to fulfill an obligation to the Medius Athlamaru, for having three priests arrested by the Machaera for allegedly tipping off a target I’d selected an untek earlier, in the Saurostrans; one who was not on The Order’s object list when he should’ve been. Calu-Duaringe was not an assignment, or a place, that I would have preferred, but for better or worse it was still mine.”

Savita remained strapped to her chair. She tilted her head to wipe her eyes against her sleeve. “The Muharadu was suspicious of certain activities going on there. A cult of the incarnate, The Sublimation of Autarchy, was raking in converts by the bourget and had vandalized a Palialouge an untek earlier. So my assignment was to infiltrate, identify and nullify their Regent and complete an object list for future reference.”

“*Ayu...*” Savita sighed, glancing toward a shuffling sound coming from a shadowed cleft in the Collonade walls. “She was barely a quintek old. She’d been born with a Palmuric disorder,” Savita said of her infant daughter’s respiratory ailment, “and she wasn’t well. *Amaria*, I didn’t have to travel! I’d been offered a chance to defer this assignment until she was better. But I just *had* to get away from Astuverica, to feel the coarse skin of the Kirzek vine between my fingers once more. Besides, I didn’t trust the dhuthaers who were treating her. They had no understanding of this strain of Palmuric. They were idiots...all of them! So I brought her with me.”

Who is she? What has happened to her? they all asked themselves. This was a Savita which not a soul standing in the Collonade had yet seen: proud, yet contrite; hesitant, yet assertive; transformed...yet stultified. They hung on to her every word, unable to turn themselves away.

“I’d been accompanied on this mission by two retainers. They were strong, capable, loyal...or so I thought. They were

both new to me. They'd been vetted, true. One of them, to whom I'd entrusted Ayu while I was off gathering intel, was from the Kurestreans, only 5000 or so neurris from Calu-Duaringe. He found out after we arrived that he was related to one of the new converts to The Sublimation. Around that time, I discovered that certain elements within the cult were engaged in the trafficking of infants, raising argency to support their activities by selling them off to childless families in other regions, or to those who'd lost their children in the recent purges in the Pavatrias."

It was all Arjun could do to hold himself back, to remain concealed, as Savita leaned back, rolled her eyes and went on. "I'd been there four days. *Four!*" She trembled, her hostility now reawakened. "Behind my back, that miserable skantaro sold her to The Sublimation, who in turn hustled her off to somewhere in Pavatria, to *Hedeon* knows who. What I know of this treachery took me four quinteks to unveil. The family she was eventually sold to were laevenants who'd become refugees after a series of minor purges near the Vengaos, then were killed in the sorentrean Seamounds. That pellet who'd sold her off to those freighin' miscreants...he *lied* to me, telling me that she'd been taken from him, against his will! '*Ripped from my arms she was, Ceveaesh!*' he'd had the guts to say to me through his lying mouth!"

Savita took a deep breath. "He later became a subalter-nate. It's a good thing he lost his life in the purges at Suer-Karslo. Otherwise he would have drawn the Kirzek. And the Waeriaj! Slow and steady..."

The old familiar Savita had returned, in full form. "Needless to say, I never finished that assignment. I took a few others over the quinteks, here and there, but nothing too challenging or time consuming. For the past five quinteks, my only reason for living has finally brought me here. I came to your humble little cesspool for two reasons. Now? *Done!*" Savita lowered her head to draw herself inward, mute.

Kerak knew that her shield had again been raised. *I do not care for my own life*, he could feel her saying to him, silently, *but do not deprive me of the young life that is rightfully mine...*

Kerak steeled himself, feeling his spine beginning to waver. But his resolve was reborn when he peered over at Nishar, eyeing him with a growing sense of dread. Kerak motioned to Meiluris and Hezhreon. "Take her away," he slurred.

Meiluris loosened her bonds while two of Hezhreon's militants took Savita by the arms and escorted her out of the Collonade, toward a tiny chasm at the far norostrean corner of the Grottos. She was followed by Hezhreon, and at a distance, still veiled in shadow, by Arjun.

As her guards confined Savita, alone and in total darkness, Hezhreon remained, 10 neurris away; fidgeting, squirming, eager to impose a judgment consistent with her own expectations. She flexed her fingers, popped her knuckles, breathed deeply. After standing patient for five stratimers, she realized that she had waited long enough. Hezhreon motioned toward her two dragoons, standing guard in front of Savita's enclosure. "Leave me. Return in 10 stratimers," she said to them.

Slowly, Arjun stalked up behind her as Hezhreon moved toward the stone slab over the enclosure. She took the edge of the slab in her hands to move it, intending to nudge it just wide enough for her to slide in, do her business and leave. Before Hezhreon was able to remove the slab more than an arm's width, she felt a hand on her shoulder. A pair of fingers sliding along the back of her neck. A gust of hot breath scalded her skin.

She turned to look into the eyes of Arjun Ve.Jalu.

In a split pulsimer, Hezhreon jerked her right arm up, toward Arjun's neck. But his reaction was true. His left hand caught her wrist and held it in a tight clutch. With his right, he immediately lunged for her throat, blocking the rapid motion of her free hand. He planted his palm against her skin, bearing down on her trachea. A heavy line of pink drool ran down her chin. The scar over her right eye and cheek began to throb. Her face turned blue. Her hand went limp while Arjun's shook but remained steady.

The words oozed angrily from his mouth. “Stay...AWAY!!”

He pushed her off with a strained grunt. She coughed, staggered, but remained upright. She grabbed her throat, panted for breath, the crimson image of his handprint buried deep into her skin. She turned, whispered an inaudible curse and hobbled off.

Seeing no sign of her guards, Arjun bolted for the corner. Exhausted, he dropped to his knees and locked eyes on the large, flat stone covering Savita’s cell.

He crept toward it, motioning to place his hands upon it, to move it even further.

Where is Nalani? Where is...Ayu? he mused in alarm.

He ran from that spot, down a winding corridor, his mind at last unburdened.

Kerak approached Nishar, squatted and placed his hands upon the knees of his prisoner, still strapped to his chair.

“*Nishar*. Nishar Te.Ines. Let’s talk, okay?”

“I swear, I can...I can explain this, Ke...”

With a fluid motion, Kerak shot to his feet, drew a fist, cocked his left arm and threw his hardened vise against Nishar’s defenseless face. The crack of the strike ricocheted half a dozen times off the bulwarks of the Collonade. A bloody spray of saliva, a small sliver of tongue and three teeth went flying off to Kerak’s right. One of them struck the wall, making a chirping sound as it ricocheted off. All four chair legs lifted off the ground for three pulsimers before coming down with a crash.

“And you WILL, skantaro!” Kerak screamed. “Odrahn Lo.Hualic, maybe the last remaining Muricai Regent in the entire D.H., is *dead* because of you, because for some reason, you led her here. You brought a *Courvesant*, active and loyal to the Architrave...HERE!”

Cai motioned forward with a handful of dry rags, cut from the clothing of one of the recently deceased who now thronged the infirmary. She knelt, tore off a smaller piece and

placed it in Nishar's mouth. As she came to her feet, she glanced at Kerak, unsure of whether to chastise or praise him.

"Was it the Kyhmekx? Did you signal her? *Did you?*"

"H...How do you...?" Nishar tried to raise his hand to his mouth, throbbing now through wave after wave of pain. "How do you know about...?"

"Because Jachin was here. He'd arrived with a group of other refugees, 20, 21 days past. He was injured in the collapse of the sorentrean access. He lingered for a while. But now he's dead," Kerak said, emotionless.

Nishar's eyes rolled in huge, loopy spirals. "But, but...*how*...?"

"He was my stepfather, Nishar. I know that you and he developed the Kyhmekx. I was a Courvesant, myself; remember? And I know that anyone who could develop a code that complex likely has the skills to find a way to transmit it as well. No shortage of dormant memory stones around here, or in Droган's bag at the Crescent; am I right?" Kerak dropped his head, collapsed to the floor. "But why? Why did you DO it, Nishar?" Tears of frustration began to fall from Kerak's eyes.

Nishar paused...to consider his brother, his actions, his purpose. His fate. He tossed his head back. "I didn't lead Savita here to kill anyone, Kerak. I led her here so she could find her daughter. That's all. I didn't know she'd come here for any other reason. You must *believe* me!"

Kerak stood. The subject of Odrahn was closed, for now. "So, you see an orphaned child at the Crescent and right away you think she belongs to...Savita? Is that how your mind works? And...and did she contact you? Or did you make first contact with her, when all this started to brew in your *demented* little brain?" Kerak said, jabbing his fingers at Nishar's forehead.

The desire to be understood overwhelmed Nishar. He paused, spit out the excess blood and allowed himself to find his center. "Let...let me explain. I'll tell you *everything!* The Kyhmekx...it was originally Jachin's idea. He'd developed it as a language for Amnics who worked beneath the eyes of the

Triumvirate. In those days there weren't many of them, but their numbers were growing."

A thick strand of bloody saliva poured from out of his mouth. "Jachin discovered later that, for whatever reason, it was not suitable for its intended purpose. I'd been trained as a maquit, but over the quinteks I'd dabbled in Amnics, and in my travels I met an Amnic with The Order who convinced me that with a few modifications, the Kyhmekx would satisfy their need for a new code, a *furtive* language which would remain undetectable, particularly from the eyes of the other branches of the Architrave."

Nishar felt his speech becoming garbled, the swelling in his cheek pressing hard against his tongue. He winced in pain as Cai came forward to lance the inflamed tissue. She dabbed some more blood as he went on. "So...so I sold the Kyhmekx to The Order. But I was stiffed! They never paid me the amount we'd agreed to. What I ended up with...that is, what Jachin and I ended up with...was paltry. I felt cheated, betrayed. The Order...their eyes were everywhere! They knew of my animosity toward them. So when I was approached by someone who I assumed was an Arduan Councilor, someone who promised me even more argency for the code than I'd gotten from the Courvesois, I sold it to him. I took the bait; for he was not an Arduan. He was a pellogroat, on retainer with The Order," Nishar said. "With that, my fate was all but assured. But my escape? Not so much."

Nishar paused as another wave of pain washed over him. "I made my way to norostre, to the Seamounds. I was *so* incredibly lost! I'd once led a good life, far from the hills and the swales of Mnuloratheia, but that was all in the past. Two quinteks before I came to the Crescent, I met one of those 'retainers' Savita had brought with her to Calu-Duaringe. Not the one who sold Ayu, but the other one. He'd done nothing wrong, but in her wrath she'd blackballed him too, cast him into peonage. He had walked away from a slipshod guard at his camp who'd been managing a work detail, and he wound up in a refugee camp in the sorentrean Seamounds. That's where I met him.

“In spite of the path Savita had put him on, his loyalty to the Triumvirate had never faltered. He was determined to find Ayu, to bring her back to Savita, to regain her favor so he could pick up the pieces of his life and move on. He described the child to me, particularly her birthmark. I guess he sympathized with me on some level, not realizing that I was ready to use the same tools to restore my *own* life. But when my bounty grew too large, I did what anyone else in my position would do. I took off for the Bay of Teoramugh.”

He winced again, his gums now bleeding more profusely. “I was...I was overjoyed when...,” Cai watched as Kerak reached for a piece of cloth and applied it to Nishar’s mouth, “...when Bechrach arrived, three unteks after I got to the Crescent, with Nalani! I thought of escaping with her right away, but the encroachment of Machaerans in the norostrean Seamounds terrified me. I knew of that sonorant vein in the notch, but the simple little memory stone I’d brought with me just wasn’t up to the task. When you and Drogran showed up, I rummaged through your bags, thought of using the Kuspegias, but I knew nothing of those stones. Then I found the Myotrophus. So I articulated that vein in the notch. With that I was able to make first contact with Savita. The bearing was weak, but at least she knew her daughter was alive.”

“Were you the one who destroyed it?” Kerak asked.

Nishar nodded. “I had my doubts...about whether I should have made that articulation. As if I was selling us all out to forces which I didn’t understand; which were too powerful to resist. I was surprised that I was able to make that connection with Savita. Either way, I’d resolved to destroy the Myo, to break it against the rubble outside the notch when I was done. One less temptation, you know. But then Nalani found the pieces and Drogran repaired it. With the encroachment of Actinetics and our departure from the Crescent, I came to realize that more cogs were needed before the deal could be finalized. So I could finish what I’d started.”

Nishar touched his jaw and cried out in pain. Cai brought him water, which he threw back as if he’d gone all his life without it. After he collected himself he went on. “Just

before we left the Crescent for good, I articulated her a second time. Again, when we were in the Sturosphere gradient. The semaphore; it seemed to improve the more I used the Myotrophus. All the while, I continued to rationalize my guilt, then found the strength to ignore it altogether. As for Savita; she never accepted a deal from me. But she didn't reject the idea, either. I knew she would come, on my terms. But where?" Nishar said, appearing to lose consciousness. "The point...the point of merger was always in flux. But since we wound up here, this is where she had to come to finish it. To find her daughter. To find...Ayu."

"And for all this, you asked...?"

"...Forgiveness. That's it."

Kerak's eyes turned to flame. "But who's going to forgive you for betraying Nalani to a stone-cold...?"

"Listen to yourself, Kerak!" Nishar shot out in a sudden storm of defiance. "You know I'm right! Have you seen their markings? Those aren't just coincidence. The 'Phemes have bound them to each other. They are *one!* You know in your heart it was the right thing to do!"

Kerak squatted on the dirt floor, unable to respond. He folded his arms and stared at Nishar with a look of cold indifference. *The thing is done. It cannot be taken back now, so what's the use?* A feeling of transience passed over him. What should become of Nishar? Of Savita? Or...should anything become of them at all, other than that which sheer destiny might hold in store?

"Just curious here, Nishar," Kerak asked as he came to his feet, "but did Jachin ever get his share of the argency you were paid by The Order, as piteous as it was?"

Nishar's self-righteousness seemed to evaporate. He dropped his head. "No," he said, his shame revisited.

Kerak heard the sound of footsteps approaching the Collonade. He motioned to leave.

"Kerak, tell me please," Nishar asked his departing inquisitor, in a last-bid effort to soothe his conscience. "Did...did Jachin suffer? *Tell me!*"

Hezhreon staggered into the Collonade, in the company of three of her dragoons. Kerak and Cai exchanged nods as Cai left for the infirmary. Kerak's head began to clear, knowing that the question of *what should become of Nishar* was soon to find an answer.

"Yes," was all Kerak had to say.

Nishar began to grow tense, observing Hezhreon out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face her.

At the of 15, Hezhreon Te.Nisach had apprenticed for an untek with The Order, but had earned her rejection from that ancient coterie because she'd refused to use instruments of any kind to carry out her assignments. "*Tools are for fools*" had spilled from her mouth more than once as she had laughed her way out of Astuverica and into the life of a commissioned, rather than a salaried, killer. What the Architrave had failed to observe, though, is that when Hezhreon Te.Nisach was lucid, sharp, *on her game*, tools really were for fools.

One of her dragoons knelt at Nishar's feet and loosened his bonds to the chair. Nishar passed a nervous smile, cloying forgiveness, rising to his feet with a wobble. He remained standing as Hezhreon approached him.

Her guards? They didn't see it. Four random souls who had just wandered into the Collonade, searching for a few meager scraps to ease the hunger that screamed from their bodies? They didn't see it, either. But the motion of Hezhreon's massive, open palm, pushing away the rank air, rising up to make its acquaintance with the neck of Nishar Te.Ines? That happened in a mere fraction of a pulsimer. The sound of her splayed palm, coalescing with the raw skin of Nishar's neck, resounded a violent slap that ricocheted from one end of the Collonade to the other. She held him aloft in a merciless clutch, his dangling feet making a light breeze as they mimicked a swift running motion.

Within a stratimer it was done. She heaved his lifeless body into the air, slamming it against a stone wall more than five neurris distant. "Take him away," she barked at one of her stunned guards.

Ten pulsimers later, a wave of embittered, hungry, souls pressed against the hands and the arms of 10 dragoons, fighting to re-enter the Collonade, as a low thud whispered from the Sorentrean end of the Grottos.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eiliox Um.Kao-Ulant had seen it, clear as day, here in the norostrean sector of the Swales of the Neroluer. 14 of his subalternates, marching across a circular rise, appeared to have jumped simultaneously, thrown in the air a full neurri before landing in a heap within a dust-choked depression, about 20 neurris in diameter and two deep. After four pulsimers, one of them stood, pressed down on a large rock with his foot and saw it vanish into the now softened ground. Above their heads, a blue fog, induced by the leaching of Actinetic residue through three-million square neurris of porous rock, arced high into the air, settling far to norostre in a narrow ravine.

“Get up! Get away from it!” Eiliox yelled out, ordering his corps to their feet and back onto solid ground. The rocks beneath them sank another neurri, then appeared to settle. The rest of his contingent, including three maquits fully-laden with Actinetic amalgams, ran up from the rear to see what was going on. The Chalisters in his company, Haakon Lo.Hravlik and Arucha Um.Yrgos, sauntered up, impatient, uneasy, pondering the norostrean steppes upon which their fellow Chalisters now trod, hopefully with better results than they were getting here in the Swales.

Waalic Te.Noreklis, the contingent’s most experienced maquit, grabbed each subalternate by the arm to help them to higher ground. “A sinkhole,” he yelled, to no one in particular.

“What?” Eiliox responded, unable to hear Waalic’s voice in the clamor of shouts, tumbling rock.

Waalic paused until the dust settled. “A depression, a crater. Looks like this patch of ground had collapsed before, then someone tried to cover it over. See the pattern in those rocks. They were laid by hand.”

Eiliox's curiosity was now piqued. In the past few days, other evidence of surface activity had yielded promising fruit, satisfying the needs of these imperious Chalisters, as well as Diarmad Te.Sinian: a rare coincidence indeed. Two subterranean refugee camps, known to the locals as Prath'amreis and Quisoluria, and shielding a combined 1200 souls, had gone up in blue flame and toxic residue soon after their discoveries, leaving no chance that anyone could have survived their demise.

Not that he would have stayed long enough to find out. On direct orders, and after dosing himself and his contingent from a hefty reserve of Rhiodaramir, he and his corps had immediately left the scene of the deed as soon as the spark had been lit. Diarmad had learned a bitter lesson in the Moirisois highlands, about placing himself and those in his command *too* close. He had managed to pass this morsel of wisdom, gathered from his rather limited supply, on to his second-in-command.

Now, it seemed, their chance had come again. But first, Eiliox thought it best to cog his Sovereign for instructions. Should they explore it, leave it alone or tag it for later reconnaissance? When confronted with similar opportunities in the past few days, he'd been unable to come up with answers on his own. As a result, his confidence only worsened. So...*play it safe. Let Diarmad make the call.*

He fumbled his Treflicat for 10 stratimers, with no response. He coggled the Treflicats of at least four others, all of whom he knew were in Diarmad's immediate vicinity. Three of them acknowledged. None, though, had the courage to speak to their Sovereign, to dare attempt to revive Te.Sinian from his present condition: crocked, stewed, ripped from head to toe. *Lousy coquont and two miarics of The Rhio*, Eiliox thought, shaking his head. *Someone should have kept an eye on him*, he mused, laying convenient blame for Diarmad's recent tumble on that lone Machaeran, lacking a defense, who failed to answer his cog.

"Use your amalgams, Eiliox. That's what I'd suggest. That's what Diarmad would want." The words of Marranik

Um.Xanthe, fourth-in-command, echoed strong and clear. Realizing the futility of reaching out any longer, Eiliox placed his Treflicat back in his pocket, his brain a whirl of paranoid confusion. He was awakened from his lull by Arucha Um.Yrgos.

“Eiliox...Eiliox! We need to go,” the Chalister prodded him. “The veins in this quadrant are only 12% defined. We need to keep pushing on. We’ve got to make at least another 3000 neurris before dusk.” Through her insistence, Arucha witnessed the complete fracturing of her waning influence over this single-minded Machaeran. She knew well enough that in the Swales, where there was evidence of the *deliberate hand* anywhere upon the landscape, there would soon be fire, whether she wanted it or not.

He spun around with a jerk, turning his back to her. “Waalic, what’s your count?” Eiliox asked, his mind already made.

“175 weights. That’s all we got.”

“What do you think?”

Waalic scratched his head. “Don’t know. But before we do anything, I think we should dig.”

They stared at the large field of stones which had been placed there, continuing to compress. Eiliox bit down on his bottom lip. By association, he reasoned that a large hole (*it’s a large hole, alright*) would correspond to a large cave system (*Amaria, I wonder how much root and fungus is down there*), which in turn would correspond to...a large colony (*the populace could be twice as large as the last one we burned!*).

Then, an epiphany. “We don’t need to dig,” Eiliox said with a confident mien. He picked up a large boulder, raised it over his head and tossed it toward the center of the depression. The subsequent impact caused the crater to drop by another half a neurri.

One of his subordinates caught on and tossed another large stone close to where Eiliox’s had landed. Another half neurri, then the rate of collapse began to accelerate.

Grabbing Eiliox by the arm, Haakon Lo.Hravlik bid farewell to his last unraveling thread of patience.

“Arucha and I are under direct orders...*from the Architrave*...to carry this expedition where it needs to go in order to gather revenants; where *we* see fit! As I believe she just told you, the veins here don’t direct with a proper bearing, so we don’t need a burn in this sector. But now you’re thinking about wasting our amalgams on a fetid little hole full of refugees?”

“Yes,” Eiliox said in a monotone. “I’m under direct orders from Diarmad Te.Sinian. Are you picking up on that?”

“Te.Sinian has no control over these amalgams. If you want to kill refugees, use that Quadric you carry around with you. Actinetics are the domain of the 68th Cypliat. That’s where *I* come in. Are *you* picking up on *that*?”

“I answer to Te.Sinian!” Eiliox responded.

“Te.Sinian answers to the *Architrave*, Um.Kao-Ulant! Therefore, so do you; same as I. And you *will* not use the last of our amalgams in this place! I *forbid* it!”

Eiliox’s attention was pulled away from the rapidly collapsing sinkhole. Now it all belonged to Haakon. His contempt for these insolent little Chalisters with their “*We’re from the Architrave*” mentality had finally peaked. “You little pello! I don’t give a *freigh* where you get your orders from. *I* am in charge here in the Swales. Not the Architrave. And Hedeon knows; not *you*!” In a fit of rage, Eiliox bent down, grabbed a stone and lobbed it toward Haakon’s head. Strings of blood and shards of skull bone shot out from his temple, striking Arucha in the eye, temporarily blinding her. As Haakon and Arucha slumped to the ground, the collapse fell into climax; a thundering backwash of dust, rock and detritus, now forming the base of a steep caldera.

Eiliox raised a cloth to his face and jumped into the rubble. A subalternate tossed him an engaged lightstaff. He knelt and crept toward a dark spot at the side of the crater, to increase his scope of vision. What he saw was both surprising...and pleasing.

Trash. Lots and lots and lots of trash. His itchy eyes saw enough fresh rubbish, refuse and rummage to rationalize the existence of at least two to three times the number of souls who

must have dwelt within the sorentrean cavern he'd wasted three days earlier. And judging by the intensity of the smell, they were, no doubt, still down there. Unaware. Unsuspecting.

Eiliox walked a little further. The cloud of dust into which he had thrown himself had now thinned to visibility. He adjusted his staff to full intensity and thrust it forward. Beyond the stench, his light revealed a large tunnel, winding its way far beyond the glare of his instrument, as far into the dark as the eye could see. He raised himself up and began to climb, one stone at a time, until he reached the rim, his heart pounding with anticipation.

He turned to face Waalic. "Get your amalgams ready. All of them! There's a massive cave system down there. I think we've hit pay dirt."

Waalic grinned. The loyal maquit rose within him, proud and eager to do his Sovereign's bidding, suppressing once more the acceleration of conscience which lay buried within the mind of this son of Vengathlian refugees, displaced from their home more than 25 quinteks past, now long since gone.

Waalic and the other two maquits in his company dove into the crater, shining their staffs into the tunnel ahead of them. Within a stratimer, they were able to locate a comingled vein of Ularic and Menshar to which they could attach their compounds.

Waalic called up to Eiliox, standing at the edge of the rim. "Five stratimers," he said, anticipating his Sovereign's response.

"Good!" Eiliox placed 15 guards at the base of the now totally collapsed crater as his maquits went about their business. "Quick...quick," he admonished them, offering assistance whenever possible. His worst fear: that the sound of the collapse had sent the tenants of this hole scrambling for other accessways. *But the smell! Ventilation down there must be non-existent. That must mean, too, that other accessways are likely sealed, or really small...!* As this thought passed through him, he relaxed, fumbled for his Treflicat and cogged a quick message to Diarmad, in no way expecting an immediate response.

Six stratimers after Waalic dropped himself into the crater, the spark was lit. Eiliox watched with a smile as the vein began to glow, to swirl, to pulse and flex and writhe in incandescent agony. Helical tongues of blue began to wrap themselves around the vein as its rugged tendrils passed through the rock and into total darkness.

“Bury it. BURY IT!!” Eiliox screamed. All hands reached for every available shard of slag, throwing the stones into the opening, locking in the first wisps of smoke. Pulsimer by pulsimer, their efforts gained momentum. With each toss, the opening began to fill.

Arucha, silent and stunned, crawled over and knelt beside Haakon, his body twitching, his bloody eyes spinning in their sockets. She then came to her feet and sprinted for the crater’s edge, screaming at Eiliox.

“Skantaro! You freighing *Skantaro!!*” She jabbed a pair of angry fists his way. “Look what you’ve *done!*”

“Stop!” Eiliox called out to his corps, ordering a temporary lapse in their work to seal the opening. He ran up to Arucha, threw his fist back and knocked her to the ground with a single punch to the face. He then trudged over to Haakon, lifted his left boot and plunged its hardened metal heel, studded with small, broken rocks, into Haakon’s face, crushing his skull. Blood and cerebral fluids spurted in all directions.

He ran toward Arucha Um.Yrgos, trying to escape. He grabbed a fistful of her hair in his right hand and with a grunting heave, tossed her off the edge of the rim and into the smoky abyss of the dark opening. He raised his hand for his corps to continue their work. In his last vision of her, she came to her feet, small rocks flying toward her head. She leered back at him, dizzy, choking, a sneering hate burned into her countenance. She slid down to avoid being hit by a huge chunk of slag. Then she disappeared.

Don’t linger. Get out! This had been the well-considered advice of Diarmad Te.Sinian. When the last rock was tossed,

Eiliox wasted no time in ordering his subalternates out of the crater, away from what was certain to become a conflagration of mythic proportions. Or so he hoped.

“Where to?” Waalic asked, his load far lighter now than his amalgams, and those of his fellow maquits, had been used up.

“The Mysoux. We’re done with the Swales, for now.” Eiliox responded. A line began to form, pointing to wisoltre, and the conclusion of a highly successful foray.

As luments vanished behind the Xyklian ambits, Ayu stood behind him, and Arjun Ve.Jalu at last found the strength of body and soul to remove the large stone slab which concealed the cell that held his daughter. Tied around Ayu’s waist...a small bag, holding a finely etched stone jar. Wrapped in both hands was her mother’s Treflicat. The glare of Arjun’s lightstaff shone upon their faces while the first series of cracks, of splitting ore and rupturing stone, broke the silence between them.

*T*HIS WAS CONVERGENCE...ON A scale she had never experienced. Hezhreon could feel the weight of her body begin to compress, as if an invisible mass was bearing down on top of her head. She turned to face the horde as it strained against her helpless militia, strained to compel its way into the Collonade, then into what was left of the kitchen, now under heavy guard as the sole repository for their rapidly dwindling food reserves.

Sadness, helplessness held her in their clutches, forcing upon her the belated realization that all of this had been a huge mistake. Staging the interrogation of her lover's killer and her accomplice in an area such as this had fomented some nasty rumors; fictions, falsehoods and half-truths which had spread like a terminal gust...that Hezhreon and her "friends," her "chosen," were hoarding, stealing, pillaging away at the colony's precious stores of food, keeping it all for themselves *while the rest of us back here suffer in forced seclusion, degradation...misery...!*

"Let us in! LET US IN!!"

Convergence. Hezhreon watched in despair, her eyes glued to the ravenous throng, clawing and tearing its way through the anemic wall of resistance she had placed in front of it. She watched as they forced their way into the kitchen, to grab and grope at the last few bourgets of vanishing nourishment, to stuff their faces, rushing to impede the onset of a lasting hunger which by now had crippled not only their stomachs, but their minds, their hearts, their very souls...

Convergence. It was as if the ceilings of Shulumethros had somehow been cleaved by a mighty bludgeon, wielded by some unseen, omnipotent hand. She dropped to the ground, reeling under the weight of each resounding echo, crawling above her now in unrelenting crescendo.

Convergence. A desperate wail consumed the air, an inflection of cracks, screeches, now gathering strength from the

niches to sorentre. Like a brilliant ball of light it exploded, bounding off the surfaces surrounding her. The swarm of impassioned mortals which had buried themselves in what remained of their food supply raised their faces toward it, as one, drawn in their alarm, their fear, from any thoughts of starvation. Terrified at the catapulting malignancy which now heaved its impulsive breath upon them.

Convergence.

It had begun.

They hung from the stone ceilings like so much overripe fruit, putrid and morbidly pungent. By edict of Hezhreon Te.Nisach, the dead were ordered to remain in, or be relegated to, the infirmary. And so, in an effort to maximize space, she had commanded that each corpse be wrapped head to toe in scrap cloth and hung at staggered levels from the infirmary's vaulted ceilings, there to cast their somber, dark specters. "*The stench of decay will be hard to notice. It will fill the ceilings and seep into the high rock,*" Hezhreon had assured them all, with a straight face, when this order was issued.

Kerak had just entered the infirmary, arriving from the Collonade, nursing his worst headache since the pummeling he'd received at the hands of his brother. He'd barely noticed the dull thud which had come from his front, from what remained of the sorentrean access. Indeed, none of the 30 or more living souls who were also there paid much attention to it either. His customary promise to *get around to it later*, much later, passed through his brain and exited just as soon.

On his approach to the infirmary, he had tied a damp rag around his face in a vain effort to fend off the sickening bouquet he knew he'd soon have to endure. *I'd like to drag that freighin' skridlak in here by her heels, just so she can get a whiff of her ignorant theories*, he thought of Hezhreon in a spitting huff as he walked in. For four to five stratimers he stared with hollow eyes at the newly deceased, lining the floors; a fresh batch of 40, maybe 50 remains, bound in scrap cloth. Then his eyes hit the crowded ceiling. *Where are we going to put them all?*

Thaloux was standing just inside the opening to the infirmary, his fever now in full retreat. Kerak turned and smiled at him, grateful for his offer to help with the thankless task of *clearing the floors*, as Cai put it. He was glad to be out of the Collonade, and had by now managed to push away all thoughts of his frustrating encounters that morning with Nishar and Savita. He joined Thaloux and stood rigid, gawking up at the ceiling, spying a tiny slit of stone between a tight-knit cluster of corpses. Each swaddled set of remains leached a tiny thread of decaying fluids which fell onto the corpse below it, and so forth, until a conjoined stream of fluids made it to the floor. It was here that this river of putridity was channeled by a system of well-placed barriers into one of many hollow clefts in the floor, soaking into the porous rock.

Just then, a vein of Menshar in Kerak's line of sight began to glow, changing from a dull grey-brown to vivid indigo to a brilliant neon azure, all within a span of less than five pulsimers. Kerak grabbed a long pole...actually three Quadric shafts tied together, end to end...and shoved it into the air to move the corpses dangling above his head, to get a better look at this anomaly.

Within two pulsimers, thin tongues of flame crept down the numerous crude ropes connecting the 30 or more corpses which hung from this vein. A pulsimer later, at least 10 corpses erupted into flame, urged on by the residue of decay infusing their cloth wraps. One by one, each flaming carcass, their supports now burned through, dropped from the ceiling, bouncing off other suspended remains on their way down, setting each of them ablaze in terrifying succession.

Kerak and Thaloux, stunned, recoiled and fell against the wall behind them. Thaloux lost his balance and hit his head against a stone protrusion, scorching hot, its color now a dull indigo. His painful scream was lost in a percussion of howls, shrieks, scurrying feet, more bursts of flame and fracturing stone.

Kerak stayed upright, scorching his arm on the protrusion. He offered his hand to Thaloux and pulled him to his feet. He then tore through the infirmary at full stride,

conducting a quick triage as one flaming corpse after another fell from the ceiling. He coughed as the air began to turn from misty clear to dull blue. Thaloux, still dizzy from his fall, staggered along behind.

Kerak's gaze was met by a dozen confused faces, cast in fear and alarm, reaching out to him in desperation as the air began to cook. He struggled to breathe, sucking in layers of hot fumes. He caught a quick glimpse of his hands, now wearing a thin coat of stringy blue dust. He continued on, dodging an obstacle course of plunging, flaming corpses.

Then, he spotted Cai in a corner, trying to bear the weight of three pairs of arms wrapped around her shoulders, fighting to make her way over the sick and injured too weak to pull themselves up from the crowded floors.

"Kerak, help me! Take them, please!" she screamed.

Kerak grabbed all three by the waist as Cai ran through her own muted triage. Kerak bolted with his cargo for the exit, at the norostrean corner of the cavernous hall. He then spotted Thaloux, staggering toward him in distress. *Concussion*, Kerak thought in a panic, waving at Thaloux to show him the way out.

Suddenly, a corpse fell and struck the two patients clinging to Kerak's left arm, setting their clothes ablaze. The female on his right gasped in horror, her clothing, too, catching a wide tongue of flame. All three of them fell away in a trio of panicked screams, their bodies now fully engulfed.

Kerak rushed over to Thaloux and pushed him toward the exit. "Run...RUN!" he yelled as the two of them were swallowed up in a sea of souls, dashing off at breakneck speed for the Collonade.

Kerak forced his way out of the throng, watching Thaloux, still in a daze, being carried off in their midst. Kerak slid along a waist-high vein, growing hotter by the pulsimer, and re-entered the infirmary, now filled floor to ceiling with flame, smoke, ear-splitting screams and pleas for help. He bolted for the wisoltrean corner, to where he had last seen Cai.

In the brilliant light, he saw her, standing still, alone, her eyes glazed, hollow, bereft of emotion or feeling or any sense of

concern for life...including her own. She stared into the legion faces of death, flashing all around her. She saw Kerak, and waved him off.

“Go!” She sneered, her voice tinged with hatred. “Leave...*me!*” In her exhaustion, in the face of stolen hope, she held her gaze upon him, her hands rigid by her side, her eyes intense, now turning red.

“NO!” Kerak fought to steady his voice, his eyes filling with tears. “I won’t, Cai. We’re only the two of us. We can’t save them. But we can save ourselves! We *must*...!!”

The burning remains of the pendulous dead continued to fall all around them. The screams of the living now abeyed as their bodies became whipped in tongues of flame; waves of fire from above, below, beating against each other in furious confrontation as the blue air hissed and baked, seeping into the porous rock.

And Kerak Um.Tiago, the tears in his eyes now boiled off, met Cai’s unwavering eye. Her will to die began to dim, to fade along with the lives of those she had tried so hard to save. She held her arms out to him. He took them, wrapped them around his shoulders and sprinted with her, out of the infirmary.

The cavernous hall behind them was now completely consumed; a thousand blazing tongues of red and yellow and orange. And a great tide of souls washed Cai and Kerak away in its exodus.

*T*he gargantuan press ended at the Collonade. With a mighty groan it exhaled, dropping 800 frightened souls in its wake. The norostrean and estrean passages from the Collonade were too narrow for them all, low flung and loopy, still clotted with debris and the corpses which had not yet made it to their slings in the infirmary. Still, a few continued to press themselves into those channels, striving for the outermost reaches of Shulumethros, ready with their bare hands to tear away at the slag and the dross at the sealed accesses. For most, frustration, or worse, would be their sole reward.

For half a stratimer, those who remained in the Col-lonade stared at its high arches, pausing to listen as the murmur of sudden expansion, billions upon billions of miarics of superheated ore and stone, ripped through the air. Those who were now forced against the walls were the first to feel it. Extreme, overpowering heat. Burning, scalding, driving itself through each constricted granule of rock, penetrating cloth, skin, muscle and bone. The screams which now emanated from those at the perimeter made their way by association to the center of the crowd, like the waves breaking from a rock tossed into a calm lagoon...only in reverse.

Kerak spotted Meiluris, Dijal, Nostra and Ekavias, crowded together near what was left of the kitchen. Cai, still in a daze, dragged an exhausted Kerak along in a tight clutch, trying to blunt her way through the crowd. Kerak spotted Thaloux and reached for him, took his shoulder. The three of them ran toward Nostra's waving arms. On their way, Kerak spotted Hezhreon, sitting squat-legged and dejected on the dirt floor, her head buried in her hands. The crowd flowed and oozed and swirled around her, not a one willing to touch or disturb her. Her dragoons, the sole fountainhead of her authority, had by now vanished, melted into the fear and rancor surrounding them.

The seven of them pressed against each other, soon forced against a wall, damp with condensation, free of any contact with neighboring veins and only slightly warm. *The wall of a Kijfer dome!* Kerak, Meiluris and Nostra thought in silence, as one.

"Exits?" Kerak screamed out.

"The estrean is sealed again. Hezhreon's thugs made sure of that this morning," Meiluris answered, struggling to be heard above the din.

"Norostrean...?"

"Yes, but it's sealed tighter than the estrean. Our fearless Regent saw to that herself. Plus, it's twice as narrow as the estrean! *Plus*, how are we gonna claw our way through those rocks, as hot as they're getting? Even with tools we'd all burn

alive by the time we dug a hole big enough to stick a hand through.”

Kerak’s eyes fell away, in the direction of a narrow, well-hidden passageway leading toward the vertical shaft which had started them on their way to Kuwhan’Xalu. “You must be kidding?” Meiluris said, picking up on his intent. “You wanna get *this* crowd up *that* hole? Forget it!”

Kerak paused for a pulsimer, straining in concentration. “Your tools? You still have them? The pickaxes?”

Meiluris let out a sinister laugh. “*Ha!* They’re just around the corner from here. But even if I could get to them, then get to one of those accesses, do you really think we’ll be able to get this crowd out of a shoulder width hole in the ground, single file, before this place dies in flame? I don’t think so! Besides, the estrean access...it’s our best hope, but it’s on the *other* side of that crowd!” Meiluris pointed toward the throng, its wails now growing more deafening, its press more desperate, defiant.

Kerak was at a loss. He stood on his tiptoes, trying to make out the face of his father in the crowd. Giving up, he and the rest of them took sharp notice of the surfaces forming their prison. The dull cobalt color which had permeated a dozen crisscrossing veins above their heads had now begun to morph into more vibrant hues. The thousands of dead root structures imbedded in the rock ceiling began to smoke, then to ignite. Tiny, glowing strands of root could be seen breaking away and falling from the ceiling, setting ablaze the clothing and skin of those in the crowd, now growing more vehement, more unnerved with each lumbering pulsimer.

Whether by design or by accident, Dijal found herself driven hard against Nostra, the two of them pressed together against the walls of the Kiyfer dome. Dijal began to ponder, to lament her procrastinating ways, to count the pulsimers of her existence, one by one. Swept up in a current of instinct, she took Nostra’s face in her hands and brought their mouths together; an act reciprocated in kind. Their lips, their tongues enmeshed in a joyous dance...an act of blatant rebellion in the face of all that stood before them. Nostra closed her eyes,

wrapped her arms around Dijal, the two of them carried away in a laconic rush.

Nostra's mind was clearer now that it had been in days, and it began to drift, to wander off to sorentre, to the Saurostrans of her youth. Fields and shoals, forested highlands, brightly adorned cavenders, burms and niches, the skies awash in luments and Ionian light...all of these cascaded through her mind in a calamitous jumble. And as her eyes began to open, the last of her remembrances began to awaken, led by the fables and legends of the Moors of Dharoun. One, in particular, rose to the fore: a tale about a certain Receptif articulat who had once wielded a certain pickaxe over a certain thin-skinned, smoothly arced pericule...

Nostra's fantasy with Dijal came to a sudden, reluctant end. She squeezed Dijal's face and stared into her smiling eyes. "We're gonna to be alright!" she cried out.

The faces of her companions turned to her in cynical disbelief.

She squeezed and plucked her way toward Meiluris, Kerak and Ekavias, grabbed them by the shoulders and took them aside.

Time. It was their worst enemy. That is, aside from a lack of tools.

Of the three pickaxes Meiluris had brought to the Grottos, only one could be found. After crawling the floor for ten pulsimers, Dijal discovered, by accident, a small assortment of hammers and chisels...two of each...behind a dark cleft near the kitchen, a neglected gift from the Vengathlians who had come up with that clever but unrealized idea to build a bath at Shulumethros.

Time. With frightening speed, the pulsimers ticked away. One final, somewhat combative huddle, and a nebulous plan began to take shape.

Then began their ascent. Nostra reached, clambered through Chadic's claustrophobic vertical thrust with all the strength and speed she could muster. A hammer lay tucked

under her left arm, her lungs near collapse under the weight of the air, heavy with cerulean toxics, venting furiously through this opening toward the Mysouxlian ambits.

Meiluris was half a neurri off her heels, his pickaxe slung over his shoulder. A clunky chisel filled his left rear pocket while a leathery bag of stanhic dust filled his right. His ears still burned over that hasty, impassioned argument with Kerak and Ekavias over the allocation of their five scarce implements, all while their confined little Sphere withered away in fire and ash. *Three up, two down, or vice versa? Ah, who cares! Time would not permit.*

Nostra's old Saurostran legend, true or not, had set the tone, which Meiluris had picked up on right away. "If this is going to work, it has to begin at the pericule," Meiluris and Nostra had told them, their conviction all but assured.

And so they had prevailed. To ensure that the pericule was broken in the shortest time possible, it would have to be a chisel, a hammer and a pickaxe up top. All that was needed below was a hammer and chisel, plus whatever else could be found at depth to get the job done.

Meiluris smiled, too, at the thought of Kerak's last statement before he watched Meiluris begin his ascent: "We get why Nostra's going up there. But why *you*?" He never really gave Kerak the answer, simple and direct as it was: *because I want to get the freigh out of here!*

It now came down to two obstacles: the norostrean Kiyfer dome...and time. In the decay of breathable air, the stench of burning flesh, the rapture of desperate pleas and cries for absolution of any kind, Kerak, Cai, Ekavias and Jadox had gathered as many large rocks as they could. Kerak and...what he hoped would be...his steady hand would manage the hammer, and whoever was nearest at the time would take the chisel. The job entrusted to them was being recited repeatedly with within the minds of each of them. It was this: *keep an ear to the walls of the dome...listen for a large sucking sound, as of a strong, rushing wind...when it comes, signal the others, then pound away at the wall with everything you've got, as if your miserable life depended on it...which it DOES!*

Kerak closed his eyes, spat a few times on a tattered shred of shirt with what was left in his dry mouth, ripped it and tied the damp cloth around his face. He listened, thinking of Arjun...and Nalani. *They live; I know it...somehow...some way! But where can they be?*

He took a wild guess. And he didn't like the answer.

Nostra and Meiluris sat, exhausted, for twenty pulsimers, about 15 neurris from the opening to the Grottos, staring out over the Swales, basking in the warmth of mid-day lumenescense. Reluctant to pull themselves away, they leaned back and with scorched lungs took deep, gasping breaths. Arising from their lazy respite, they forced themselves to trudge another 10, maybe 15 neurris to sorentre. Here they found the ancient pericule of the far norostrean dome. There was work to do.

Above. Nostra fought with the hammer and chisel, hunched over, her strength squandered, her arms and back aching, her skull throbbing. Meiluris, in no better shape, lifted the pickaxe, turned to face her and swung with all he had at the stone surface lying half a neurri from her feet. His weapon gouged a narrow groove in the rock, just wide enough for her to set her chisel. She smiled, wielded her implement and drove down upon it, sparks flying, metal tearing against metal.

They sustained for a little over five stratimers, hand over fist, scoring and ripping to a depth of half a neurri. A Pale of protoplasm crossed the sky to norostre with the Lumens in full pursuit. Nostra, her body now thoroughly beset with pain, took another swing, driving her chisel down even further with a resounding clang.

A tiny hiss began to sound from the bottom of the hole.

Meiluris turned to face her. "Hit it again!" he yelled. She struck once more. "Again!" he implored, urging her on, listening as the hiss began to moan, to growl. "AGAIN!!" he screamed. With all her strength, she drove into the head of the chisel, now buried deep in the smooth stone. As the last raucous knell resounded, they watched in amazement as a

black hole, half as wide as a child's head, appeared in the pericule. The chisel...disappeared. The hammer...sucked out of her hands and into darkness as a vigorous, ear-splitting shriek of wind washed over their bodies, knocking them to the ground, driving them down in all its fury toward the sudden opening. Meiluris and Nostra, on all fours, crawled across the pericule. Within 10 pulsimers, the violent air stilled.

Below. The poisons now filling the vaulted ceiling of the Collonade danced in great, cresting billows, swirling and curling with greater intensity as the heat in the rock continued to build. The high surfaces were now totally consumed in flame, enlarging, creeping downward toward the little more than 500 who now survived. The stench of cooked flesh, of those who only pulsimers earlier had been pressed against the walls of the Collonade, filled every nostril with the redolence of blue dust.

Cai, Kerak and Dijal, their faces hidden behind damp cloths tied to their heads, pressed their ears to the walls of the dome. They struggled to make out its signals, over the caterwaul of noises crashing all around them. Jadox and Ekavias lay prostrate on the floor, drifting in and out of consciousness, their heads covered with clothing pilfered from a pair of corpses lying nearby. Their lungs had seized four stratimers earlier, leaving them breathless, unable to stand.

Cai staggered and embraced the stone with a fever grip, her left ear pressed hard against the Kiyfer wall. Kerak opened his eyes, looked behind her and noticed a spring, 10 neurris to sorentre of the dome to which they were attached. Stratimers earlier it had been seeping through the gap in the rock with a light trickle. Now it was spraying furiously in all directions. Then he looked down and noticed a small rivulet of water washing around Cai's feet.

Kerak bolted off to the rear in search of the hammer and chisel. He spotted the hammer in a corner, four neurris off, but the chisel was nowhere to be seen. He shook off his frustration, gripped the hammer and ran back toward Cai. She opened her eyes as he approached, noticing the water at her feet. Kerak fell back and let go a loud grunt, wielding a strenuous swing at the

stone surrounding the seeping fluid. He struck it hard, and a jet of fingertip-sized pebbles shot out, rousing a startled Dijal.

“Get the rocks!” Cai called out to Dijal.

Kerak drove again, *again*, screaming out. With each determined stroke, the head of the hammer grew muddier, more saturated.

By now, Dijal, strong-arming a massive stone, was pounding against the same area, immersed in a deepening pool of water. Cai ran back toward Ekavias and Jadox, dragging their unconscious frames back and away from the flow of water before lifting them onto a high ledge beside the Kiyfer. Ekavias and Jadox opened their eyes but remained dazed, unable to manage more than clumsy gestures.

One vigorous strike after another and the steady trickle which had begun at Cai’s feet now morphed into a spirited cauldron of spray, knocking Dijal off her feet, washing her away in its midst. Kerak remained, reared back and let loose a final murderous rasp with his hammer, tearing away a huge chunk of stone. In a pulsimer, the deluge engulfed him, tossing him aside like a twig in a maddened vortex.

*T*he second Kiyfer dome now lay beneath Meiluris’s feet. Diminished by hunger and thirst, he reeled under the weight of the pickaxe he held high above his head and bent forward into an oozy cough, spewing out a blue-tined blob of mucus half the size of a fist. Then he rolled his eyes, reared back and drove the point home with all he had.

Three swings. That was the best he could do. Meiluris then turned, dropped the axe into Nostra’s waiting hands and fell to the ground, hacking up another mouthful of indigo mucus.

Nostra, almost as wasted as Meiluris, carried on. She spurred the tip of the tool once, twice, three and then four times, until the aged Bittermoor handle splintered and broke with a loud crack. In her frustration she paused, remained upright and drew a painful breath. She bent over and listened. Then, ever so faintly, that familiar sound reappeared...

She jumped, then tried to lift the hardened metal end of the instrument above her head. But her body failed her. "Meiluris...help...me!" she cried out as he tried to lift himself up.

She stumbled over to him, offered her hand and helped him to his feet. They stood and stared at the micro-thin crack through which a tiny wisp of air was now seeping. They pondered their next move. How were they were going to finish this? Dome two would be their last; that was assured. But still, it wasn't enough.

"It could go on seeping like that for days," Meiluris sighed.

"What do we do?"

At once, the two of them spied it: a large stone, positioned at the left edge of the pericule. The same thought coursed through their minds. Nostra and Meiluris walked over to it, bent down and dug their raw fingers beneath it from opposite sides. With dizzy grunts they heaved, straining to lift it, managing to bring it only a hair's breadth above the ground. With tiny steps they crept, easing the rock toward the pinhole rupture into which a stunted hiss of air continued to seep.

Standing over it now, they lifted this massive stone to near shoulder height, released it and watched it drop to the hard ground beneath their feet.

The pericule shuddered. Within pulsimers, the spidery crack which had previously begun to radiate from the tiny hole now began to enlarge, slithering toward the outer edges of the dome. They could feel their bodies trembling, sinking as they scrambled off in a panic.

About 20 neurris off, they turned and watched as the huge stone they'd dropped onto the crest of the pericule was quickly sucked beneath the surface. With it, a fiery gust of wind shuddered, collapsed hard around them, striking the ground with a force that seemed even to defy even that which had driven itself into the first dome.

For four stratimers they sat, exhausted, as the Chi'ot.Vuloar absorbed the air and the light around them. Then they turned to face the opening of that narrow tunnel

which had twice now brought them to the ambits above Shulumethros. The small hole which only a few pulsimers earlier had spewed a lukewarm smoke the color of ultraviolet was now venting a raging river of fiery blue steam.

*F*aces, voices, once cast in a pall of pain and terror, were now crushed in a sodden, aquamarine maelstrom.

Each breath was embraced in an atmosphere of broiling convulsion. The air, what there was of it, was suffused, searing hot, rife with thick clumps of damp, bluish grain and the swirling, pasty muck that surrounded them.

The twin assaults now spraying from the base of the ruptured Kiyfers had driven every soul around them against the burning walls, tearing away, searing raw flesh, coating their burns and their abrasions with a soggy seal before shoving them hard against yet another scorching hot wall, the ceiling, the floor...or each other. Dijal and Cai had seen it with their own eyes, gratified, at least, that so few were nearby at the moment of fracture. But one of them, Chadic Te.Zulfre, had taken the full brunt of it, from the base of the second and last dome, eroded from the hydrostatic force pounding against it from the base of the first. A cataclysm of rock, muck and millions of vuarsets of water shot out in every direction. Chadic, semi-conscious from exposure to heat and smoke, had been shoved hard against the base of the adjoining dome. His broken body now spun around in lazy circles, tongues of fluid continuing to erupt, rising, filling the aqueous tomb once known as the Collonade.

Ekavias and Jadox, their lungs still seized from the infusion of Actinetic heat, dust, and steam, fought to keep from drowning. They paddled, clawed, strained to keep their heads above water. Kerak, the skin of his torso, arms and legs singed and scraped, tried to swim toward them, but his strength failed him. His head dropped below the surface of the cauldron. Cai, paddling no more than three neurris off, dove for him, reaching, pulling him up and out of certain death.

And the waters continued to rise, cooling the Grottos' fiery surfaces in equal measure. Hundreds of scorched, sodden limbs flailed about in the rising chop. Hundreds of mouths suckled and heaved in desperation, becoming squeezed closer together, propelled ever nearer the ceiling of the Collonade, still glowing orange, red and blue from the Triurate which seethed and cooked above them.

They were driven now...slammed together into a tight clump, struggling to breathe, to avoid the scalding, compressed stone not far above them, when suddenly...

“My instincts will not betray me!”

Arjun had held his breath for over a stratimer, swimming as hard as he could for the estrean access, fast losing the battle with his compressed lungs, now almost devoid of air, rebelling against his frantic exertion to suppress the simple, mundane urge to *breathe*.

A chain of hands had bound them together as they reached a point no more than 10 neurris from the estrean access, sealed once more. Here, they raised their heads into a tiny vault, a constricted chamber of precious air, the stone above it just now beginning to glow cobalt blue. As the water rose beneath them, their faces were now forced ever closer to the rocky ceiling, until they were compelled to again submerge.

The pulsimers began to take on a dreamlike aura, passing slowly, ticking away, life hanging like over-ripe fruit in a capricious balance. There was nowhere else to go, nothing else to do...but wait.

His instincts tagged him once again. *It's only a matter of time*, he mused, his lungs sliding anew into a state of defiance. It was down to little more than fingertips now, but the chain had survived. Fighting to maintain control, he could feel the brisk pounding of his heart, beating a path backward in time.

He'd remembered its onset: a lustrous crack, splitting the air, as if their surroundings had been plunged into some dark ravine, torrid and stinking with hideous familiarity. *“The norostrean access!”* he had recalled hearing someone say. And so

he had thrown himself in, digging barehanded through the impenetrable rock obstacles which Hezhreon had placed in front of that opening, no less than 30 panicked souls at his side. All the while, with every passing pulsimer, his sense of fear surged to new heights. Not for himself, but for his scattered coterie, displaced from one end of Shulumethros to the other.

Ekavias, Jadox, Thaloux, Nairul, Dijal, Cai...and Kerak. *Where are they?* How often, over the ensuing stratimers, he had tossed that question around in his mind! His choices were difficult, heartbreaking. But they had to be made. Those whose names passed through the roll call in his mind would have to fend for themselves; there was no other option. He would be limited to saving only those he saw before him. So they dug, clawing away at the norostrean access for 10 stratimers, until their fingers bled, then burned. Until the rock would no longer relent. Until the terms of survival took a sudden turn. Until the deal turned to this: *it's every soul for himself!*

With that, the chain was born. The Collonade, crammed with hundreds, both dead and alive, had been the most challenging obstacle between them and the estrean access, by far the weaker of the two exit points, and the only one which was even remotely accessible.

The press of flesh through which they'd been forced to navigate in order to escape the norostrean passages was nothing compared to the massive deluge that struck them on their way to the Collonade; a torrent which lifted their bodies like castoff flotsam on a clamorous sea. With the waters rapidly rising, their chain had somehow managed to survive. After making it through the Collonade, their path had consisted of short spurts, nerve-wracking stutters from one crowded air pocket to another, dodging huge tufts of debris and the charred corpses which crowded the narrow corridors leading to the estrean passages.

Now, nothing stood before them except the slabs of stone which had been placed in front of the estrean access, only seven neurris to their front. Hydrostatic pressure held them in place with even greater surety.

Fill...Amaria...fill! Arjun implored the 'Phemes, pleading for even more pressure, knowing that if there was a weak spot in Hezhreon Te.Nisach's fortress of stone, this was it.

In a victory over his evaporating consciousness, he turned behind him, to look into the faces of Savita, Ayu, well past the hopeless acceptance of their collective fate. Then, a sound, from the opposite direction. He turned again, to acknowledge the retort of suction, current and cataclysm. To at last find the estrean access now breaking apart in a mighty inundation, right before his very eyes.

It had been a little more than 80 stratimers since the Actinetic Triurate had descended upon Shulumethros. His instincts had led them to this spot. Now the realization burned bright within. *We live!* he thought with a joyous rush, leaning back, ready to cast his fortunes to the 'Phemes, to allow this watery ride to carry them out and into the shimmering glow of late-day luments.

An abrupt river of water, steam, indigo mud, stone, trash, life and death deposited itself on the boulder strewn floor of the Swales of the Neroluer.

NIGHT, AND THE STARK GLOW OF A dim, semi-functional lightstaff swung from side to side within these clammy, crowded corridors.

Cai, her mood grim, stood with the staff in her hand, hunched over, wheezing, while short bursts of pain tore through her body, then dissipated between spasms. The stench of the Swales, of hundreds of bloated corpses, combined with the odor of Actinetics, still hung low in the air, six days after their escape from the Grottos. The deluge from the domes had only slowed the inferno, allowing the survivors just enough time to escape the remains of Shulumethros before Machaeran stragglers plucked a few easy prizes, both dead and alive.

Hezhreon Te.Nisach, her mind and tongue a muddled slurry, sat cross-legged in front of Cai, squeezed between two rows of flesh lining the ground in this low-hung corridor. Most of the other unfettered survivors of Shulumethros, 180 in all, moaned, thrashed and slept, their fitful dreams sated with fire, mud, blood and soaring torrents of azure water.

"I saw *you*...you...you, with your...*friends*, beating away at our...!" Hezhreon shook her finger at Cai, then paused to suck back a noisy sob, "...at our *Kiyfer domes*! You *destroyed* the Grottos! You miserable little skridlak! You tried to...to...DROWN us all, you...!!"

Her mucousy shrieks were cut short as Cai bore down upon her. "Shut...the freigh...*UP!*" Cai screamed, raising her hand high above Hezhreon's burned, beaten face. "If it hadn't been for *us*...*no* one would have survived! Do you *get* that?!" Cai held her trembling fist in mid-air for six pulsimers. Kerak, his arms laden with salvaged clothing that had been scrounged from the debris field the night before, came up behind her.

"Some urges are hard to resist, Cai. I know." He dropped his load and raised his hand to meet hers, clutching her fingertips, the only part of her body not beset with pain.

“Relax...” Together they dropped their hands as Cai furrowed her head into the gap between his shoulder and chin. Kerak took the lightstaff from her other hand and walked with her, far past the injured, to find some quiet place into which she could escape, to put the face of the afflicted far behind her.

Beyond, the cries of distant herds...Builhern, Narwase-lot...sounded in the darkness. As he and Cai walked, Kerak staggered over dozens of piles of trash, gleaned four nights earlier from the floor of the Swales, all in the distant hope that some of it might be found useful. In a fit of exhaustion, he was seized with a familiar sense of foreboding. Dawn was a few short stratimers away, and he knew that it was just a matter of time before the Machaera would stumble upon this place: a deranged little cluster of chasms tucked into the base of the Xyklian ranges, not more than 2000 neurris to noro-estre of the rubble field which had been vomited into the Swales through the collapsed estrean access of the Grottos. A series of short Kiyfers, conjoined by hundreds of tiny springs, soared high above them, drenching them with such regularity that it was nearly impossible to find a dry spot anywhere.

The principle benefit to such an oversupply of moisture was the prevalence of food: Wissoria, Pragash and Kalmuth mushrooms grew in profusion. Another discovery had both surprised and pleased Cai. Cheulawort could be found everywhere in this cave system, growing between the copious clumps of Wissoria that clung to the ceilings. Normally found in drier confines, she had discovered it on their second day in these caves. Right away she'd put a small crew of laborers to its harvest. Then another gang of conscripts, wielding smooth stones, were tasked with grinding it into a fine powder before the distribution of this efficient, non-hallucinogenic painkiller began. Without Cheulawort, the road to recovery for most would have been a near vertical thrust. At least now it had leveled out a bit.

Ahead, a small, dry notch appeared before them. Cai and Kerak fell into it, wrapped in a snug embrace. Kerak rolled up a wad of torn cloth for a pillow. No sooner had their heads hit it than they were thrown into a bottomless sleep.

Cai's visions were bloated in red, a roll call of the dead, the injured, running through her dreams. Of those she had arrived with from the Crescent, the injuries varied, but ran a narrow gamut: scorched, partially collapsed lungs, numerous burns and abrasions. Jadox and Ekavias were on the deep end of the scale, bested by Thaloux, who was more than lucky to be alive. As for Nairul, his charred corpse had been found by Jadox as they'd fought to make their way out of the Grottos before mid-day luments threatened to surrender them to their pursuers. And the fate of Nalani? That remained a nagging, worrisome mystery.

Of the others she was most familiar with at the Grottos, the results were even worse. Nalamear and Ilunea, with whom they had traveled from the Sturosphere gradient, had not survived. The loss of Chadic, too, had stung her conscience, the sad image of his violent death still haunting her dreams. The injuries sustained by Hezhreon and Kiralu were similar to those of every living soul she tended. Nostra and Meiluris, who had arrived here just the day before, had survived with scorched lungs, however they were also badly bruised in a fall they'd taken coming off the Mysouxlian ambits, in their desperate search for those they had fought so hard to save.

Revelations in red now turned a shade darker, more vivid; the one constant that gave her even the slightest semblance of peace. For in the glow of her lightstaff, in the reflections of the bloody gashes and lacerations evoked by having been tossed about in the backwash of rising water, one image had remained true. The color of the blood belonging to those who had come from the Crescent, when compared to those who did not, remained unchanged. The Aurean saturates endemic to the waters of the norostrean seas were still there, still tinting the fluids of life the rich colors of mauve and lavender, the hues of lives lived free of the chains which stained the nature of this acrid existence they had come to know.

Cai's last stratimers of sleep grew softer, more fluid as the first rays of a norostrean dawn oozed through a pair of narrow chinks in the stone above their heads.

*T*iny flickers of light struck here and there, bathing a mélange of faces in a jagged brushstroke of luments. With her back hunched, Cai trudged from one row to the next, passing out delicate fingerpinches of powdered Cheulawort to every soul who was awake. One, in particular, appeared to need it more than anyone else.

Cai knelt to lift her patient's head, to stare into her swollen eyes; her melted skin, the color of crimson, cinder and char. She moved her mouth to speak. "Wh...whatever that is, make it a...a double," she said, forcing the words from her lungs, holding Cai's hand, heaving between labored breaths.

Cai put two, then three pinches on her tongue. "Let's call it a triple. You look like you can handle it." This nameless soul, who had been wavering in and out of consciousness since her near lifeless frame had been pulled from the floor of the Swales five nights ago, astounded her. Injured far worse than any of the others who'd been lucky enough to have survived the fire and the flood of Shulumethros, Cai's curiosity would not relent. "Mind if I ask? Where were you when the fires started? You must have been right on them? You weren't in the infirmary; that I know."

She nodded. "I was."

"You were...what?"

"On them." The narcotic began to kick in. "I...I was the first," she whispered.

Cai shook her head. "I don't understand."

Cai's patient sat up, for the most part free of pain and any sense of verbal restraint. "The Machaerans; I was there," she said in a loud tone. "I was with them until that freighin' skantaro tossed me into that hole and tried to kill me!"

Her voice then calmed. "I'm a Chalister. Arucha Um.Yrgos; that's my name. And you are...?"

*K*erak stood beneath a narrow slit in the ceiling. Before joining his rounds that morning, he had wanted to put his eyes on it, just to be sure. Compared to the Kuspegias, it seemed a bit inferior, but still a fine example of his brother's handiwork;

twice, no less. Somehow, the Myotrophus had survived the catastrophe, hoarded away within the undamaged pockets of Kerak's tattered pants. He stashed it into the side-fold of his current pair, extricated from some soul, about Kerak's size, whose remains had been found during their last clandestine foray into the swales.

The rationing of their supply of food, appearing to grow so conveniently above their heads, had been suggested and agreed to that morning. Kerak, Meiluris, Kiralu and a small throng of helpers had spent the morning harvesting it from the rock with dull shivs and bare hands, then passing out allotments which they'd surmised, with simple math and some common sense, should last for the indefinite future.

Kiralu wandered back to what passed for an infirmary, to medicate himself and catch up on some sleep after a restless night. Behind him, Kerak and Meiluris toted the last of their allotments through a dark passageway, forever uninitiated to luments, deep within the bowels of this quirky maze. To their left and right, another series of narrow passages, appearing devoid of life, faded into blackness.

At the end of this winding catacomb they found Ekavias and Arjun, warming themselves by a small fire of trash and strips of clothing for which no other use had been found. A sinuous line of smoke disappeared into the porous ceiling, to absorb into millions of pockmarked vacui hidden beneath the Xyklian ambits.

Jadox knelt behind them, leaning against a wall, the fresh taste of Cheulawort on this tongue. The greenish powder had managed to control both his pain and his claustrophobia. As always, the tiny mesh bag holding the Kuspegias dangled from his neck.

Kerak and Meiluris dropped to the floor as Dijal and Nostra, their fingers in a loose embrace, followed them in. Kerak glowered at Arjun, who seemed to have been avoiding eye contact with everyone since they'd rejoined after the collapse of the estrean gateway. During their careful nighttime forages through the Swales, there'd been no sign not only of Nalani, but of Savita as well. For five days the question had

been gnawing at Kerak, adding a mental component to the physical pain that simply would not relent, regardless of how much Cheulawort he ingested. For his instincts were no less astute than those of his father. So he plowed through his hesitation, broke the silence, and asked.

“Do you know anything about Nalani? And Savita?”

Arjun raised his head, an embarrassed look on this face. “Are...are you asking me?”

The others, in unison, also raised their heads and their eyes. The sound of breathing turned silent. “Yes, I’m asking you. You disappeared after Savita was taken and sealed away. Where did you go, before the fires broke out?”

“I...I went to...to the infirmary to...”

Kerak jumped to his feet. “That’s a *lie!* I was in the infirmary when that place shot up. *You* were not there! Where were you...Arjun?!”

Half the room had its eyes on Kerak, the other half on Arjun, who grunted and came to his feet, walked over to Kerak and motioned to place his hand on his son’s shoulder. Kerak slapped it away. “Tell me...*father!* Tell me what you know!”

Arjun dropped his head and paced to a narrow corner, wringing his hands. “You don’t know what it’s like, Kerak...to have to *choose!* To have to make *that* kind of choice! And I hope you never...”

“TELL ME!!”

“Alright...*alright!*” Arjun staggered, his head in his hands. He leaned against the damp wall, shoulder to shoulder with Jadox, steeling himself for what was to come. “I was at her cell...when the Triurate began. And yes, Ayu was with me.”

“You mean Nalani.”

“No. I mean Ayu!” Arjun said in a steady voice. “Her name is *Ayu*, Kerak. If you’d bothered to notice, you would have seen it! The similar features, the birthmark. I know what I’m talking about!”

Kerak pursed his lips. “Go on,” he said.

“When Savita was incarcerated, I didn’t know what to expect. Yes, she admitted to Odrahn’s death. But her fate! No one said a word about punishment, about retribution. So I

brought her daughter to her, to be with her, in case the outcome for Savita...for your sister...was death. I would not have resisted that decision, Kerak. I knew she deserved it," he said, sounding less than sincere, "so I would have...concurred."

Arjun acknowledged the silence that met his words. "The fires! We...we tried to dig through the norostrean access, with no luck. Then we joined hands and made a break for the Collonade. I couldn't just *leave* her...leave the two of them...to flounder on their own; to perish! So yes, we made our way to the estrean access. I knew it was at a lower grade than the rest of the Grottos, comparatively weak, more prone to failure under pressure than the others."

Cai walked in at that moment.

"So, what then? Where are they?" Kerak asked with a sneer. Deep within, he already knew the answer.

"I let them go," Arjun said, swallowing against a dry throat. "She was no longer our prisoner. Before any of you were able to emerge from the Grottos, she and Ayu...they took off. No, I *sent* them off. To sorentre! I told her to go, to find a detachment of Machaerans, to return to Astuverica, where she belonged." Arjun dropped his head, his knees growing weak. "She...she asked me to come with her," he whispered, forcing the words from his throat.

Cai moved toward Arjun now, her expression determined, her stride tilted forward. Jadox slid away to give her space, fumbling with his hands, in shadow, to find his way along the rock. He moved toward a reflective bulge in the wall.

"So! If you were that concerned for her safety, out there in the middle of nowhere, why didn't you just...take her up on her offer?" Kerak asked, the sarcasm dripping from his tongue.

Just then Cai lunged toward Arjun, her twin fists cutting through the smoky air. With her left, her right, she struck him, beating against his skull with a force of will fueled by the stain of betrayal. "Why did you *free* her?" Cai screamed, driving Arjun to the ground. "And with *Nalani*, you freighin', worthless piece of...!"

Kerak and Meiluris raced toward Cai to pull her off, fists and spit and curses still flying. Ekavias reached for Arjun and offered him a hand, pulling him from the floor.

“Why?” Kerak demanded once again. “Why didn’t you?”

Arjun, his bloody face now steeped in defiance, screamed out at Kerak. “Because I chose *YOU!!*”

Silence. Reflection. A thin circle began to form, reluctantly at first, but growing more assured in a vague sense of understanding, acceptance...even forgiveness.

Jadox, though, remained alone. He reached into the mesh bag, held the Kuspegias in the palms of his hands and began to press the twin stones against the translucent rock. Suddenly, his eyes grew wide, his grip more adhesive. A wrenching wail poured from out of his scorched lungs, shredding the murky haze that encircled him.

*E*kvias ran his fingers through the dark green residue, then placed them in his mouth, licking each one clean with a thick dollop of saliva. Only a small dusting of Cheulawort remained on the stone platter. Cai watched him as he sucked each particle from the skin around his nails. Then she frowned and trudged off, realizing that her conscripts would now have to find, and *grind*, even more of this stuff, to re-energize their waning supply.

Kerak, Meiluris, Dijal and Jadox huddled around Ekavias as he placed his wet fingers against the protruding patch of Aquylur.

“The extra dampness...it helps?” Kerak asked.

Ekavias nodded. For over a day now, he’d sat in this same spot, wearing the same deliberate gaze. All the while, Drogan’s Mytrophus had remained buried in Ekavias’s left palm as one by one, he mined the abstracts that only yesterday had electrified Jadox’s touch. They were the same abstracts which had been replicated within the Kuspegias; the same streams and reams of primordial data they had fought so hard to extract from the heart of Kuwhan’Xalu.

For the past 200 stratimers, hundreds of small, indistinguishable glyphs and entwines had appeared on the surface of the glassy veins, right beneath his fingertips, only to be replaced by others in rapid succession. As the Myo made contact with one, his fingertips would articulate the fringes of others. The force of the resulting elucidations drove themselves through sinew and cerebellum, a voltaic wedge splitting the embryo of his discernment. Like a vortex...fierce, enigmatic...this vein spoke to Ekavias in fractured languages, broken syntax, garbled dialectics and vague Thermionics, all of which poured through his stone, his hand, into his conscience in a vigilant tempest of form, perception, revelation. Here, in the aftermath of the most profound cataclysm he had ever known, his...no, *their*...opportunity had at last arrived. Ekavias's dormant skills in the interpretation of Synthet, plus every last measure of intuition he could conjure, were now being tested. *They must not fail me*, he had thought, more than once.

After another 20 stratimers, Ekavias dropped the Myotrophus, stood and began to pace the room. "*Tugyr.L'shniok Cuorm.Duleth. Gyerato'gy'rithliov.*" His step quickened, his fingertips pressed now onto his forehead. These words and others spewed from out of his mouth, repeated...seven, eight, nine times in succession. The last repetition ended with a long pause and a single, disconnected phrase.

"Shuaig'uy.Huwgc'dyxcariph!"

Ekavias came to a halt. He opened his mouth again to speak. "The Nucleus of Three Minds!"

"What is that?" Dijal asked. The Kuspegias lay neglected nearby, sitting atop their mesh bag. Without thinking, she began tapping them, massaging them with the tips of her fingers.

"Kuwhan'Xalu. 'The Nucleus of Three Minds'. That's what *Shuaig'uy.huwgc'dyxcariph* means. It's Erasotran, with a hint maybe of ancient Mnulorathean. That's what Kuwhan'Xalu is!"

Ekavias began to walk the floor again. Then, in a voice that sounded almost as if it were coming from someone else, he

began to pour. “The veins; the Aquylur that spiraled out from each of those Borics; the empty spaces within those veins. They had once been filled with ores; pure and elemental. And *highly* voltaic! Now they’re gone; stripped, mined eons ago, thousands of quinteks past. By who? I can’t tell. *That* we may never know.”

His pace, the eagerness in his tone, quickened. “The waterstone. Whoever mined the ores was convinced that the Aquylur had no value, no voltaic capacity. But...but it’s *alive!* The Fetors! They are the revenants of the filamentation which had once crowded those ores, only enhanced, deepened by contact with the Aquylur. Too, in equal measure, they’re a...a replication of the revenants which permeate the entire Dimensional Horizon! But for some reason, the Fetors are becoming tighter, more compressed. Why? I think because the dissonant impulse is so strong in that place...surging within the Aquylur, exhausting itself. Even...*morphing?* But into what? That I can’t tell. The ores carried only a fraction of the voltaics that the remnants of those veins...the Aquylur...are capable of, except at the rise, where the veins conjoin and the waterstone merges with the ores. Where Jadox completed his articulation. The ores at that rise are all that remain...”

His tone became hoarse, panicked as he struggled to channel his thoughts. “The Glyphs we saw: the ones that faded in and out, appearing out of nothing. They are...they’re the graphic manifestations of the thoughts, the awareness, languages, hatreds, passions, *resonance, dissonance*...you name it...of the millions not only who came before us, but who exist even as we speak. They’re being replicated in the waterstone and the surrounding rock as waves and waves of sonorance move through it. They’re all that’s left. Those glyphs have a name, in Erasotran. It’s vague. I didn’t get a good read on it, but I think they’re called...”

“Kabalyphs!” Kerak yelled out, stunned at the sound of his own voice.

“That’s it!” Ekavias said. “How did you know?”

“I...I don’t know...,” Kerak mumbled, trying but failing to form a cogent response. Images passed before him, of the

perfectly formed etchings he had seen in the cave system which had brought him and Drogon to the Crescent.

Ekavias tossed a confused look at Kerak and went on. “Anyway, the remains of the three veins we saw at Kuwhan’Xalu; they’re connected to every stanhic vein or capillary in the Dimensional Horizon.” He paused for a few pulsimers to consider his words. “Or...or is it...the other way around?”

Ekavias’s expression became even more animated, and he spoke now as if no one was listening. “The errants; like the ones I found during our expedition from the Palialouge. *Creegh Amarial*! They were...*infinite*...”

He sat, exhausted but still energized. “There’s more. Abstracts containing snippets, passages of the Zyn’hetreal, or what’s left of it; they were there, too!” He stood to begin pacing again, seized with an even greater agitation. “The Zyn’hetreal was written just after the Eclipse; that we’ve always known. It’s believed that the survivors wrote this book for the benefit of succeeding lineages, as a narrative, and a sort of morality play, all rolled into one. Its intent was to describe how we should rise from the ashes, if a similar catastrophe should ever happen again. At least, that’s always been the theory.

“During my elucidation I caught wind of...of words. Certain words that stuck out, that reminded me of bits and pieces of a certain tome, a tome found in the third book of the Guderaph; the 137th tome, to be exact. The 137th, I saw it revealed, had been pulled from the Zyn’hetreal! It’s been reinterpreted a hundred times, so it’s not word for word, but the gist of it is there.

“When I’d first heard it, early in my career, I thought it’d been written by some pelot laced up on an overload of bad Pentumus. But in a strange way, it’s always fascinated me. Even now, I can recite it from memory...”

“Observe, for when the Hemlet of Coda rises up to touch the UnCairn, then will the Trath’ul Bri.Duc seize the Domnium. The trial of choler and sinew, of Nugnui and Tolos’thetumos, will pass beyond the purlieu, and the Curtain of Neblach will descend upon the sweep of Cre’Lurgia...”

Arucha Um.Yrgos wandered in with Cai as Ekavias began to speak these words. Her last dose of Cheulawort had been massive; the only barrier standing between her and the fierce shockwaves of pain her injuries had imposed upon her. Her eyes grew wide when she heard Ekavias speak from this book of the Guderaph.

“That’s from *The Treatise of Parchments*, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ekavias answered. “And you are...?”

“Arucha Um.Yrgos. I was...”

Cai nudged her, mumbling the words “*Be careful what you say*” under her breath.

“I was...burned. Really bad.”

“I can tell,” Ekavias said, rattled at having to belabor the obvious with this stranger, but still fascinated by her awareness of such an obscure passage of the Guderaph, particularly in such an impaired state.

And Arucha, upon hearing those words, imparting the murkiest of all Muharic visions, was at last transformed, shedding herself of the resentment which had stung her so bitterly since she’d awakened, long after the fires had gone out. From her first pulsimer of post-Actinetic consciousness, she’d been all too aware that she was trapped within the presence, and subject to the care, of traitors. The fact that she had survived...and continued to...because of them had at first touched only the fringes of relevance. But those fringes were now crumbling away. She leaned harder on Cai’s shoulder as they found a place to rest.

Ekavias carried on, seeking a way to relate his visions. “Anyway, the 137th tome...to describe it as ‘enigmatic’ is an understatement. *No* one knows what it means, or even why it’s in the Guderaph. But during my elucidation, certain phrases, words...and even a number...kept popping up, all of it tying into the 137th. The number? Seven. I elucidated that in Erasotran. Seven represents the initiation of fulfilment; a completion, of sorts. But at the same time, a beginning.”

Ekavias stood. “*Trath’ul?* That’s the word for seven in Erasotran. I was able to touch on only a few of the other

words. *Bri.Duc* is a little hazy but it means ‘round’ or ‘perimeter’ or something like that. Other words, like *Nugnui*, *Tolos’thetumos*? All I can tell is that they’re opposites. As for *Neblach*, I couldn’t decipher a meaning for that word, but it has a foreboding air, almost...apocalyptic? It must tie in somehow with the phrase *trial of choler and sinew*, which seems to describe a struggle of some sort. And *Cre’Lurgia*? That’s the most telling of all the Erasotran words I elucidated. It means...*existence*. Nothing more.”

“But what about the others, like *Coda*? What is that?” Arucha asked.

“You mean *Hemlet of Coda*? As far as I can tell, that’s a reference to some sort of dissonant wavelength, but I’m not sure. As for words like *UnCairn* and *Domnium*; they’re very hazy. They’re modified translations of Erasotran. The definitions are still buried within those abstracts. In fact, *everything* I need to round out my understanding of the 137th is still buried within those abstracts...” Ekavias covered his face with his hands. “For some reason, I just...can’t *see* them!” He dropped to his knees in frustration.

Arjun began to pace the room. Then he turned to Ekavias. “You said that the *Zyn’hetreal*, or whatever that missing book of yours is, somehow addresses the Eclipse, right? Didn’t you say that?”

“That’s right.”

“And the 137th tome was pulled from the *Zyn’hetreal*? Correct?”

“Yeah.”

“So, the 137th states that a *trial of choler and sinew*...in essence, a struggle of some kind...is going to accompany some sort of apocalyptic event that will descend upon the...”

“*The sweep of Cre’Lurgia*...” As he spoke these words, Ekavias’s expression grew pale.

“So what does that tell you?” Arjun asked.

Ekavias jumped to his feet. “That the 137th...is describing the events that led up to...the *Eclipse*?!”

“Not just *the* Eclipse. It’s describing the events leading up to *an* Eclipse! The *next* Eclipse! That event, Ekavias, wasn’t just

some random happening, some arbitrary calamity that fell upon a hapless Horizon, with no clue as to its coming. There was a symmetry, a logic to it. And that cryptic Muharic tome of yours is proof. If conditions are duplicated, then the event will happen...again!" Arjun said. He noticed Jadox leaning against the bulging vein of waterstone, his face contorted in concentration, his bare hands hugging the rock.

"So, how does the number *seven* fit into all this?" Cai asked.

"That number has no meaning to anyone except a few Cimmerians," Ekavias answered, "and I'm no expert on Cimmerian dogma. That's not something they would have taught us at the Palialouge."

"Well, somehow, that's got to be the clue we should be looking for, right?" Kerak interjected. "So I suppose that means that when seven of something appears in a perimeter, or in the round, then I guess..."

Meiluris jumped up, his arms flying out in all directions. "Hold on. Wait a minute! We just survived the destruction of Shulumethros. We're trapped here in a damp, cramped little dungeon, limited on food and medicine, and this place smells like a caque dump! And now you're telling me we're supposed to be hunting around for *seven* of something inside a stupid perimeter of some kind? Can we please just move on? Hundreds of Machaera out there breathing down our necks and we're chasing our tails over a bunch of Muharic fables!"

"Fables?" Ekavias shouted, his voice exploding through the mist.

Kerak stood between Meiluris and Ekavias. "Settle down, both of you. Look, whatever you choose to believe of those abstracts is your business, Meiluris. But one thing is certain. Ekavias has only touched the surface. There's a lot more replicated in that vein...and trapped in the Kuspegias...that we don't know about, and maybe never will. But somehow we've got to try! I mean, someone please back me up on this. Think of all the risks we took to get those freighin' abstracts! We've got to try and do something with them, to make them work for us..."

“Well, I guess we are, Kerak!” Meiluris slurred. He glanced behind him, toward Jadox, still huddled on his knees beside the vein of Aquylur. Then he pointed to Ekavias. “*Amaria!* We’ve got a Mnemonast and an expert in Synthet! What more do you want?”

“Answers. Facts. What else do we have going for us?”

“Not much, but what good are our precious *facts* if we’re starving? Or in Machaeran custody? Or both? Those abstracts? All they’ve led us to so far is a bunch of...” Meiluris paused with an eye on Ekavias, careful not to cross the same line twice. He waved his hands in the air. “Ah, do what you want! The rest of us have to live. And we will! *That* I promise you!”

As Meiluris spoke, Arjun noticed an alarmed Jadox, who came to his feet, stood rigid and turned his attention toward Dijal. Behind the others, near a shallow cleft of rock, she remained there, alone, succumbed now to the voltaic demesne which had infused her. From the first moment she had touched them, they’d beckoned her, like two scrumptious morsels of food in the hands of a starving beggar; as if her entire existence had been spent buried alive, devoid of light and touch and sound. Now...awakened.

Somehow, she knew. She did not know *how* she knew, or if she ever would. But here, in this time and this place, she had never been more certain of anything in her life.

There *was* an answer to the questions Ekavias and Jadox put forth; a *dénouement* to the bewildering catechism thrown upon them. Deep in her heart, her mind, she knew that if these questions were to be answered, the first step would have to begin...with her.

Dijal placed the Kuspegias together and held them, the pair nestled tight within the palms of her hands. They began to burn with a dim glow. And without seeing the etchings that were evolving within, she could feel them, slithering, crawling, forming under the direction of the invisible hand at the fountainhead now known to a small corner of the Dimensional Horizon as *The Nucleus of Three Minds*.

Beyond, Ekavias remained seated, his head in his hands. A question rolled around on the tongue of Arjun Ve.Jalu.

“Ekavias, I wonder, did you elucidate anything about the Circonic? There’ve got to be abstracts of some sort, containing clues; something which could guide us there. Might at least come in handy as leverage if we need to bargain our way out of here, if you know what I mean.”

Ekavias shook his head. “No, Arjun. I didn’t.”

Just then, Jadox’s face began to appear in the firelight. “I...did,” he said in a monotone.

“What did you say, Jadox?” Cai asked.

“I said ‘I did’.”

“You did...what?” Arjun asked.

“The Circonic.”

Arjun’s face began to glow. “Jadox, what did you see?”

“They are one. Kuwhan’Xalu...,” Jadox said with a relaxed confidence, “...Kuwhan’Xalu *is* the Circonic!”

I50 stratimers later, and Ekavias, Jadox, Nostra, Dijal, Kerak and Meiluris had each finished taking their turns, the Kuspegias at their temples, grappling with the Aquylur beneath their fingers. In succession, they’d cursed and coaxed and screamed in frustration, attempting to try and affix the fractured remnants of Ekavias’s articulations into their proper place, to understand the tantalizingly obscure 137th tome and its relevance to cataclysm and rebirth; all in the context of the preternatural transformation the Kuspegias had undergone the day before. Sadly, though, they’d all come to the same conclusion; that their efforts were destined never to rise above complete failure.

When they were done, Dijal laid the Kuspegias out on the flat stone beneath the broken glare of their sole lightstaff, now exhibiting a split that had grown to half the length of a child’s forearm. Nostra bent down beside Dijal for another look, bumping heads with Jadox and Ekavias. There, etched onto each of the twin stones, were two exact representations of the crude, enigmatic glyphs that had appeared on the palms of Dijal’s hands, a little less than an untek after her arrival at the Bay of Teoramugh.

To Kerak, the etchings gave the Kuspegias a malformed appearance. But still, they betrayed a certain familiarity. Standing above them, he was struck with a flashback.

Astuverica. The A.30.B Quarter loop. Once again, he could feel the sights and sounds, the hue and the cry of life at the Columns. He closed his eyes, carrying himself on a virtual tour of the small blue terrabode known as Ligeia's house. For a pulsimer, he opened his left eye to steal another glance at the Kuspegias, then closed them again.

Remembrance. This is what Kerak sought, framing in his mind's eye the Kabalyphs which had begun to form on the Kuspegias, within the press of Dijal's hand. He recalled the short time he'd spent with Ligeia, after being pushed out of the Vengaos by his brother. While at her house, Ligeia had shown him a small, serrated fragment of Ularic, imbued with a sprinkling of yellowish translucent dust, stuffed away in a crowded cubbyhole in her kitchen. The stone had been a gift from Drogan, she had told Kerak. He recalled how much he had admired its glyphs, etched on opposite sides of the stone with the cleanest of lines, more flawless than any he had ever seen; created as if by the 'Phemes themselves. Glyphs that *no* living hand could have carved with such a high degree of refinement.

And the *resemblance!* It was as if...

The missing pieces fell into place. Kerak grabbed Ekavias by the shoulder and took him aside.

"Those markings on Dijal's hands; the same ones that are now on the Kuspegias," Kerak said. "I've seen them before. They're the unfinished duplicates of a pair of etchings I'd seen on a small chunk of Ularic at Drogan's house, in Astuverica. He'd given his consort a stone which had those same markings inscribed onto them; front and back." The small crowd now diverted its attention from the Kuspegias and toward the sound of Kerak's voice.

"Wait! Are you sure of this, Kerak?" Ekavias asked.

"Yes, yes I'm sure. The markings on her palms and the Kuspegias are embryonic, but they're the beginnings of a direct match with the glyphs on Ligeia's stone. I swear it!"

A trance-like pall hung over the crowd until Meiluris jumped to his feet. “We’ve got to get our hands on that stone!” he blurted, a toothy grin covering his face.

“Which one?” Ekavias asked, befuddled. Then...realization. “Wait; you mean the one in Astuverica? How are we supposed to...?”

Meiluris pointed to the Kuspegias. “The gift of Malaerosch; the talent for creating glyphs with voltaic potential? Any of you ever heard of that?”

“Of course,” Ekavias said.

“There’s a technique practiced by certain Malaerics where, if conditions are right, they’re able to transfer glyphs directly onto stone or ores; not by hand, but through...”

“...Mnetharsis!” Kerak mumbled loudly. Every pair of eyes landed on his face.

“That’s right. How did you know that?”

Kerak said nothing. His face, his mouth contorted into a knot while he groped for the answer, lying so near the surface.

“I’ve heard of that; Mnetharsis,” Ekavias said, “but only enough to convince me that I could stand to know more before passing judgement.”

“Well, while I was still living in Astuverica I elucidated some accounts of it through a Pavatrian aggregator. Through this transference, when two stones are held together, a completed glyph on one stone, if the process is successful, becomes transferred to the other stone; particularly if the receiving stone bears even the crudest depiction of the original. And the sonorance of the glyph on the receiving stone can surge; as much as *ten-fold* from the original! Too, I’ve heard that the process can draw out and erase any abridgments or incongruities between the two glyphs...on both ends.”

“What are you getting at, Meiluris?” Arjun asked, fearful that he knew the answer.

“Don’t you see? If the glyphs on that stone in Astuverica; the one in...,” Meiluris thumped his head and pointed at Kerak.

“Ligeia,” Kerak said.

“...Ligeia’s house, are more thorough representations of those that are on Dijal’s hand...and now on the Kuspegias...then maybe if we place the Kuspegias against this stone of hers, then we can complete what’s been started on the Kuspegias. Get it?”

“And why is that necessary, Meiluris? I mean, the Kuspegias, just like they are, are strong enough to...” As Ekavias began to speak, Meiluris’s point came home with a jolt. A smile lit up his face.

“That’s right!” Meiluris said, jabbing his fingers into the air. “If the Kuspegias were enough as they are, then we’d have already picked up on those scrambled abstracts. We’re just gonna go on beating our heads against the wall for nothing if those glyphs aren’t completed.”

Cai chimed in with a thought. “Kerak has seen the glyphs on Ligeia’s stone. Why can’t he just chisel them out, and finish them by hand?”

“It won’t work that way, Cai,” Meiluris said. “It won’t work if the complete manifestation is not received in the same manner as on the original. Besides, did Kerak memorize every tiny, obscure detail of those glyph’s, on...on...”

“Ligeia. Her name is *Ligeia*,” Kerak reminded him, again.

“...on Ligeia’s stone?” Meiluris finished, thumping again at his overworked mind.

“Not really,” Kerak said. “I mean, I got most of them, but not every detail.”

Arucha, still weak, strolled past on her twice-daily aerobic foray to rebuild her strength. She stopped and sat beside Cai. She rested her hands on her crude cane, carved from a fragment of root branch which had been salvaged from the floor of the Swales, five nights before.

Kerak was incredulous. “Let me see if I understand this. You’re suggesting we get Ligeia’s stone and bring it into contact with the Kuspegias, to finish out these etchings? Is that what you’re saying?”

Meiluris nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. I mean, how else are we going to understand all this *Coda* and *Neblach*

caque and all those other vague abstracts we got our hands on? You got any better ideas?"

"No, but...are you *insane*? The only way we're going to get to Ligeia, and get our hands on that stone of hers, is if we actually *go* to Astuverica! I mean, look around! How are we supposed to do that? We're a collective wreck. The Machaera is scouring the Swales day and night. Even if we wanted to, we couldn't make it out of this cave without drawing the wrong kind of attention." Kerak paused to compare the similarities between his own doubtful tone and the cynical sneers uttered by Meiluris, just yesterday.

Arucha leaned against the wall behind her. "I think I may have a solution to your problem."

The others gawked at her, slackjawed.

Arucha stood and moved toward the crowd. "Any of you familiar with Pilects?" she asked.

Kerak spoke. "Yeah. I used to play it when I was a kid, in the Phileans. Why?"

Arucha let out a chuckle, positioned her feet and drew her cane into a cocked position. With all the strength she could muster, she threw it, pointed end first, at Kerak's head. He ducked, raised his right arm and deflected the blow, sending the cane crashing against a wall at the other side of the cave.

"*Amaria!* What was that for?" he fumed.

"What kind of equipment did you use when you played Pilects, when you were a baby in the Phileans?" She savored the moment, for her native sarcasm, and her remembrances of the matches, seemed to infuse her.

"I said I was a *kid*, not a baby. And we used to stryge with the dried shells of Malmoux," Kerak said, describing an offensive tool used in this popular team sport. He paused. Suddenly, he understood. "The Tsurithean Helidrome!"

"That's right. Have you ever seen a match there?"

"Yes. And you're right. Until a little over a quintek ago, at the Helidrome, they were stryging with flakliners. Now they use...spears?"

"Well, to be precise, they're called Terruqleis." Arucha gasped, paused for a breath and went on. "Until I took the

field assignment that brought me to the Neroluer, I was stationed at the Architrave, as a Chalister. About 10 days ago I was cogging with a friend, a sub-Regent with the Council. He said security has been stepped up around the Custody gates, but the Helidrome is so desperate that they're offering dispatch vouchers for experienced players, even if they have no other credentials...meaning they're getting in practically unrestricted. He also mentioned that the khiromeks inside the gates have put out an urgent call for female corpses, which I thought was a bit odd. But my point is, even if your stone is unindented, or you don't even *have* a stone, well, you're getting in...that is, if you've got some skills."

"So what's up?" Meiluris asked. "Why are they so desperate for Pilects players?"

"Well, it seems that players are falling like whips under the sickle these days, and the Helidrome is fast running out. Pilects is big argency, you know."

"And...and what was that you said about female corpses?" Meiluris asked.

"I'm told that the dens have come up with some new, more potent Chelomarcic mutation that they believe will tolerate only female torsos as a growth medium. I guess the spikes are having a hard time keeping up with demand, so they've put the word out beyond the gates. The selling price is larger if the torso is uncut, so that means the khiromeks want to see the whole body and not just the torso. Then they dismember it themselves. So, bottom line: if you don't fall into one of those categories, you're not getting into Astuverica."

"You said something about stepped up security around the Custody gates," Arjun asked. "Why is that?"

"The Schimatariat," Arucha said. "The Architrave is hosting one, very soon. That's what I'm told."

"What is a Schimatariat?" Nostra asked.

Arjun staggered back to his seat. "A Schimatariat is a very good reason *not* to go to Astuverica! I get what's going on here. If you think you're going to get through those gates, undetected, at a time like this; well, you've all lost your minds, that's what!"

“What is this...Schimatariat?” Cai asked.

Arjun pursed his lips. “It’s a rare, and massive, conference of Regency. Virtually every Regent in the Horizon will be required to attend, if tradition holds. To us, though, it’s much more than that. If you send Kerak into Astuverica at a time like this, someone will catch on to him. I’m telling you, he doesn’t stand a chance!”

Arjun stared into their eyes, aware that this risky...but not altogether *bad*...idea was starting to gain traction. So he relented, but only a little.

“Look, what’s the harm in waiting?” he asked. “Wait until the Schimatariat is over. Astuverica is going to *bleed* with paranoia until this thing is done! I remember the first one, under Zhalach Te.Stanalu. The Constabularies detained over a thousand souls, some for even the slightest of infractions. I remember, one poor culturist was on his way to a stall at the Columns, making his way past the 115th Register, very innocent-like. He happened to be going the same direction as a Muharic Ephriant; following along behind him. A subalternate saw this and the culturist was detained on suspicion of stalking! They held him, beat him senseless for half an untek until they let him go. If you’re thinking of sending Kerak in there; well, someone is going to recognize him. A former Courvesant, now a renegade? Of course they will! And he’s *dead* if that happens!”

Arjun’s words went unchallenged. For one, then two stratimers, they all searched for a way to break the impasse. The sound of their breathing cut through the crackle and hiss of burning cloth. The faint din of distant voices...*Machaeran* voices...echoed far beyond the porous walls of their prison.

“They’re out there,” Dijal whispered, trembling. Instinctively, she turned her head, to stare into the bowels of an unexplored passageway leading off and away, far beneath the untraveled Xyklans.

Ekavias pointed toward the vein of Aquylur, glistening in the glow of firelight. “Listen to me, Arjun. We have nothing to defend ourselves here, except what’s in those abstracts,” he said. “*Creegh!* You heard Jadox, right? I believe him. We’ve found the Circonic! What would the Archtrave give to know

what *we* know, right now? But even better, what could we take from them if we could decipher the intuition, the elucidation locked within those undecipherable abstracts that are held within the Kuspegias, and now within that bulge of waterstone?"

Ekavias held his arm out to Arjun. "At the very least, we have to survive. If the Machaera finds us here, not only will they imprison us, but they might also find that vein over there. There's no telling if one of their circulators might be able to unlock those abstracts. If that happens, we're done! We've got to decipher those abstracts before someone else does; someone out *there!* All we have is our limited knowledge. But what we don't have, is time!"

Kerak nodded. "I agree. We can't wait for the Schimatar-iat to end. We need to do this thing now...or never."

Cai, who had been sitting in a corner with Arucha, stood to speak. "So if we're going to do this, then how? Give us some details?"

"Well," said Jadox, "if Kerak has a chance to get in, and to get that stone that belongs to Drogan's consort, then I guess we provision him up and send him. He can't go alone, so he needs at least one, maybe two to go with him, right?"

"Wait," Kerak chimed in. "We're not thinking that I should bring Ligeia's stone back *here*, are we? Wouldn't it be better to do the transference there, at Ligeia's terrabode? I mean, the sooner the better, right?"

Ekavias and Jadox nodded in unison.

"Okay, so we're looking at provisions for...no more than three?" Cai said. "But for how long? And without Cheulawort, keep in mind that they won't get very far before the pain of their injuries catches up with them. There's not a single one of us who wouldn't need the 'wort on a long trip like that."

Meiluris spoke up. "What do you mean 'without Cheulawort'? Is that going to be a problem? I thought this cave was full of it?"

"Not anymore. We'll harvest the last of it in two, maybe three days. I can't provision a party of three with anything more than a five or six-day supply. The exertion of the journey

will only worsen their pain, their injuries, especially to the lungs. Their strength has to hold out. I mean, Astuverica is 35, 40 days from here on foot, at the very least. And that's for the healthy."

"Two," Ekavias whispered. "That's all we have to choose from to accompany Kerak."

"What do you mean?" Kerak asked.

"It's between Jadox and Dijal: those are our only choices. If we're going to do the Mnethartic transference in Astuverica, we need to send someone who can manipulate the Kuspegias, who've created a mental bond with the stones, or at least have the skills to channel them. They're the only two who qualify."

Meiluris paced off into a dark corner, beating his hands against the wall. "There's no choice. It's already been decided. A one-legged Pilects player? Jadox'll never convince a subalternate at the gates that he could pull that off. But didn't you hear Arucha? The khiromeks are desperate for *female* corpses, right?" he said, pointing at Dijal.

"What are you saying?!" Dijal bellowed, bolting to her feet.

"Calm down and listen," Meiluris said, finding a way to turn events to his advantage. "When I lived in Astuverica I worked for a time as a boiler. One day I happened upon a little concoction that mimics a hard sleep with a barely negligible pulse rate. I used to sell it to drudges looking to fake their deaths, to escape the Zurish-Triece, or get out of Astuverica altogether. If I can get my hands on the right ingredients I can prep it, administer it to Dijal and get her *and* her torso, all in one piece, through the Custody gates."

"What do you need to make this 'concoction' of yours?" Nostra asked.

"Hold on! Are we seriously considering this?" Dijal shouted, her voice shattering the mist.

Meiluris ignored her. "The prime ingredient I used when I was in Astuverica is available only in the estrean Andulkas. But when I left there and made it to the wisoltrean Andulkas, I had good results for a while with a proxy ingredient. Outside its native grounds it's known as Tyrupliak. I'd need two

batches of the stuff. The cooked batch would induce her. A raw batch would bring her out of it. No problem.”

“What’s...Tyrupliak?” Cai asked, her face wrinkling in disgust. “Wait! Is that what I think it...?”

“Yep. It’s the dung of the Guirabaka. The locals call it *Bakadado*. Those little buggers used to cover about two-thirds of the Horizon. Now they only exist in one place.”

“Wait, wait, I don’t understand this!” Dijal shouted again. “Why can’t I pass for a Pilects player, like Kerak?”

“Have you ever played Pilects?” Arucha asked.

“Well...NO! But...”

“Forget about it, Dijal. And stop worrying. You’re in great hands, here!” Meiluris said with a cheap grin, pointing at himself.

“But I...” Dijal whimpered.

“They’re screening everyone looking to pass through the Constabulary channels,” Arucha said. “So if you don’t have the skills, or the proper indentions....or an uncut female corpse...you’re getting nowhere. Female corpses are passed through the gates without even so much as a second glance.”

“Okay, okay, I *get* it!” Dijal said, her resistance melting away. She passed a hard stare at Meiluris. “So where do we find this...*dado*?” she said with a puckered face.

“If we can get out of the Swales,” Meiluris answered, “to sorentre of the Xyklians, we can make our way along the Cavak-Tysekrian routes, through the Pavatrias, and into the wisoltrean Andulkas. The Guirabaka there burrow through the caves just inside the borderlands. There’s a little marisatria there, too, in case we need to resupply, barter...whatever. Bakadado also makes a great fertilizer for Marasai and the whips, so it’s prized. If we can make it out of here, I feel sure we can put our hands on enough of that caque to do this.”

The geography of the wisoltrean Andulkas ran through Ekavias’s mind. “What’s the name of the marisatria?”

“Fhydalaku. It’s just to sorentre of the Pavatrian border.”

The weight of the moment bore down upon them like the stone hanging from the jagged ceilings; lumbering and cold.

Nostra, visibly shaken, nudged Dijal. “So what then?” she asked. “If the three of you make it to Astuverica, and if you find this stone you seek, then what? The rest of us can’t stay in this cave forever. Because, chances are, if...,” she corrected herself, “...I mean, *when* you return, we won’t be here.” As Dijal had done only a few stratimers earlier, Nostra stared down the dark corridors of a narrow passage, to her right, a gateway to a murky inevitability in the face of Machaeran incursion. “To cog us would be too risky. How will we find each other again?”

Nostra’s question was met with nervous stares, abject silence.

Kerak turned and approached the fire. In the frantic rush that had ensued since their recent revelations, he had forgotten to dose himself. As a result, his bloodstream had been free of Cheulawort for more than a full day now. As he became aware of this, his pain began to reawaken in erratic bursts.

In his mind, though, an epiphany; that it was only the *awareness* of the absence of Cheulawort in his bloodstream that had elicited this new round of pain, not the absence itself. For the past day, his nerve endings had been unchained, an extension of a narcotic-free mind, driven to relief only by the cue of suggestion, the strength of Cai’s verbal assurances in the powers of this plant, now vanishing from their midst.

As the others watched in astonishment, Kerak thrust his right fist into the flames. He held it there until the nauseating stench of burnt skin filled the smoky air. He pulled it from the fire, opened his palm, worked his throbbing fingers in and out, in and out. With focus and absorption, he stared at his hand, channeling his concentration far and away from his blistered flesh. Within a stratimer, the sting of heat and flame floated away in winnowy juts. Along with it followed the last vestiges of the torment which had been heaped upon him eight days ago, in the fires and the flood of the Grottos of Shulumethros.

Kerak turned once again to face Nostra. “We’ll find you. We will find *all* of you! Somehow. I promise!”

The flames abated, replaced by the chill of encroaching darkness. Preparations would have to wait as one by one, they

faded away, wasted from the day's mental exertions. The insomniacal Arjun, struck with an epiphany of his own, lingered beside the embers with Kerak. Ever since their successful foray into the heart of Kuwhan'Xalu, scattered fragments of thought had begun to coalesce in his mind, particularly as it pertained to Kabalyphs. *Naturally occurring glyphs. That explains so much*, he thought, satisfied that at least one piece of the puzzle that was Savita Te.Sinian had been found. *And not just her*, he was convinced, reminded of the crude markings which infused the skin of many of those who'd spent time at the Crescent, its waters brimming with stanhic toxins.

Arjun thought, too, of Dijal, Kerak and Meiluris. *Where will all this lead us? Where will it lead them?* he wondered, his stomach in knots. *I've done all that I can...perhaps*, he thought, with one exception.

He turned to face his son and spoke.

"Do you remember, before we came to the Grottos, when we were camped to wisoltre of the Cryostrilic Plains. We talked, remember, just before dawn?"

Kerak laughed. "You did all the talking; that's all I remember."

"Well, there was something...I should say *someone*...that I didn't tell you about. Someone I'd met about a quintek before I made for the Bay of Teoramugh. She'd apprenticed for two quinteks with the synulariat who'd managed the accounts for Duremear Ve.Thilourme. She'd turned renegade after stealing argency from two blind cadres, to cover a ransom demand by her father's kidnapper, some underpaid Machaeran subalternate who thought he could pocket a little on the side. Anyway, she was caught, and instead of submitting to arrest, she wound up in the same camp with me for an untek, harbored by some Incarnate cult from the Kurestreans."

Arjun leaned over and pressed his finger into a thin patch of dirt at his feet, marking out a crude entwine.

"What's that?" Kerak asked.

“This apprentice...her surname was Lo.Veik-Tunir. I don't remember her first name, or much else about her, but I made *very* sure to remember that entwine.”

“Why? What's so special about that?”

“That, Kerak, is a tool. The handle to a little leverage, or bribery, to be more precise. I'm certain that you'll run across a guard or a subalternate somewhere who'll throw up an obstacle to access through the Custody gates...or maybe even to just getting around Astuverica. By now, Ve.Thilourme is dead, but I have no doubt that his heirs are still tapping into his fortune. It's bound to be lush.”

“But this entwine? What is it?”

Arjun grabbed his son by the shoulder. “It's the sanction code to one of Ve.Thilourme's blind cadres.”

*T*he cold and the damp cut sharp gouges through their wounds as Cai and Kerak wandered a maze of corridors, their arms burdened with large wads of cloth for their bedrolls, plus a single torch, held high in Cai's left hand. The obnoxious cackle of sleep pushed through the corridors. As envious as they were of their dozing companions, neither could quite bring themselves to close their eyes. The sudden onslaught of the decisions which had been made that night...by them, for them...were just now starting to sink in.

Walking in lockstep, they rounded a corner, trudging deep into a narrow passage which neither of them had ever traveled. Without warning, Cai felt a faint trickle of water strike her right shoulder. To her amazement, it wasn't as chill and clammy as the other springs which were so prevalent here. In fact, it was quite warm.

Cai knocked the bundle of cloth out of Kerak's arms, grabbed his fingers and thrust them into the drizzle.

“Where can that be coming from?” he asked.

“Let's find out.”

With nothing but faint torchlight, they looked up to examine a gnarled, circuitous web of rock, hanging three neurris above their heads. The balmy trickle seemed to be

coming from a crack within the rock, about 10 neurris up. Cai thrust the torch higher, noticing a series of aged roots, slick and twisted. They led straight up.

She placed the torch in her mouth and dropped the rest of her load. Making her way toward the root system, she took it in her hands and began to climb, one careful step, one tenuous hand and foothold after the other. Kerak followed close behind.

Frustrated, they came to a sudden halt at the top of the root structure. "Kerak, what do you see?"

He pivoted to his right and pointed. Through a tiny gap between two large boulders, the sight of a single Ione caught his eye. "There!" he said.

The torch died out; Cai threw the darkened stick from her hand. She followed the tiny beacon, crawling through a yield in the rock. To their left, a vein of Ularic coursed along at an angle parallel to their tight passage. Along the extent of its length it was hot to the touch, a legacy of the Actinetics which had so recently seared the Swales.

After an exhausting slither of 10 neurris, Cai forced her arms through a break in the rock and pulled herself up. Kerak followed, grunting and swearing.

They stood, facing sorentre, at the edge of an abrupt cliff. To their right, the Swales lay in dark repose. Farther off, the Mysouxlian ranges reflected Ionian light and the faint flicker of distant Machaeran fires, all of which accented the contours of imposing ridges and steep valleys.

To their left and behind them, the Xyklians began their upward thrusts, obstructing all with the threat of impassability. To sore-estre, Kerak caught sight of the series of low hills which would lead him and his two travelling companions to the Cavak-Tysekrian routes, the Pavatrias and the wisoltrean Andulkas. High above them, at Zenith, the mists of the Chi'ot.Vuloar drifted, now beginning to tear apart in flocculent tufts.

Cai took a step forward, to follow the sound of flowing water. She soon found herself standing in a warm, shallow

pool, ankle deep. She reached down to touch it and brought her fingers to her tongue. The taste was pure and clean.

Hand in hand, the two of them climbed a low rise to their left. Upon reaching the top, Cai gasped in disbelief. She picked up a large rock and gave it a toss. With a loud kerplunk, it was swallowed up. The torrid spray from the impact struck her flesh, warming her skin as an inviting tingle ran down her spine. With Kerak's hand in hers, she took a single step forward and placed her foot on a hot vein of Ularic, then hopped to avoid burning her toes, falling in headfirst and laughing in sordid delight. Their grasp fell away; the momentum of her fall caused him to lose his balance, sending him too into the steamy drink.

A warm bath. *Amaria, how I have wanted this!* she mused, her face reflecting the first real smile she had worn since long before they had left the Crescent. They spoke in hoarse whispers, not only to shield themselves from detection, but to parse out for themselves a small, private slice of euphoria which could not be shared, compromised...or cooled...by anyone, or anything.

For three stratimers, Kerak and Cai crouched, waded in lazy circles, the water up to their chins but no more than two neurris deep. At each rotation, their toes passed the cold spring which fed this tiny lagoon, then half a turn later to the scalding hot vein of Ularic which made it so very warm, enjoyable...sensuous.

Their pirouettes soon devolved into a dwindling spiral toward the center of the pool. In the flicker of Ionian light, Cai's face reflected the million and one thoughts passing nervously through her mind, each in turn reflecting a million and one reasons why she should...or should *not*...feel the way she did, right now. But as her heart nearly exploded from out of her chest, as the warm water lubricated raw abrasions and sore muscles, a final image appeared, and remained, before her eyes.

Sitting atop the perch at the Crescent, high above the sparkle of Eusterian waters, she turned to her left. And there he was, right beside her, where he had been ever since that first

brilliant day when her tongue had waded with so much needless hesitation, into the language of the Hirusovrans. And home.

She extended her hand, whispered, anxious to convey what was in her mind, her heart...unable to think of anything more profound than this: "Et yuonantso. Et yuonantso kiu zaladuchte. Huvag sud?"

"Yes, the night *is* beautiful, Cai. And yes, so are..."

Cai stood at the shallow end of the lagoon. She pulled off her shirt, filthy and tattered. A breath of Ionian wind chilled her skin. Her nipples hardened, bulged. She bent down to remove the rest of her clothes while Kerak, his hands trembling, ripped the wet cloth from his skin.

She waded to him, taking his hands into hers. She pressed and held his palms to her breasts, his fingers spreading, writhing, squeezing her flesh. The carapace of inhibition and self-denial in which Cai had so long imprisoned herself began to melt beneath his touch.

He reached down to stroke the warm lips of her labia, slick and oozy. He then grabbed her from behind and eased himself into her; thrusting, pressing, pushing hard, hard against her in effortless rhythm, unable to think but only to feel himself now in full, joyous insertion. He cupped her buttocks, cradled her hips within his forearms and drew himself deep within her. Again and again and again...

Together they came, into that single point where the joy of fluid release and idyllic bondage intertwine. Together, they remained, unmoving, still trembling and hard, moist and swollen, unwilling to pull out and away, savoring a moment which might, for all intents and purposes, never come again...so to speak.

Before their lips, their tongues, merged again into a single, fleshy embrace, they gazed up into the sky. At long last, the Chi'ot.Vuloar, now in tatters, revealed what it had once concealed, at the top of the dome, high at Zenith.

Upward, they stared in nervous astonishment...

...As Diarmad Te.Sinian watched from atop a rise at the Mysouxlian ambits...

...As Ligeia Te.Nurasier peered up through the fenestra above her cold trundle...

...As Meiluris, Ekavias, Arjun, Jadox, Nostra and Dijal, lying awake on their bedrolls, stared up through tiny clefts in the stone ceiling above them...

...As Vrabas Um.Luragaen, Khalaris Ve.Aztasur, Vikram Lo.Jehan and Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest, from their respective locations above the Zurish-Triece, looked up into a dark sky...

...As Guymoun Te.Zhaktavor and Savita and Ayu, traveling along the Plasaic Nearings before reaching the Mnokathic Viamar, surveyed the dome above them...

... And as my brother and I stood and observed in amazement...

Seven Ione danced and spun and wheeled and soared in a single, perfect circle.

VI

Astuverica

CANGJE TE.RILA-UN SHOVED HIS head through a filthy, sod-choked hole in the ground, struggling for a breath of air which was not burdened with the essence of vomit and decay. For the past two days...more than 800 stratimers in all...he and his fellow “co-workers” had been sealed away in this fetid little dungeon, digging and chipping and scraping, all under conditions which by now would have sent even the filthiest drudge running for the nearest breach.

Fine. No one forced me to take this job. All I asked for was a little Kidrokael, he thought, struggling to find something to rub his nose against. But this! This is too much!

“Cangje, you done *breathing* yet? We need you back down here, like, five stratimers ago.”

“Yeah. In a pulsimer,” he said with a sneer.

The scent of warm Marrowhip Sendeles, roasting on large, flat stones, had infused his senses, just like it did with a heartbreaking regularity, twice daily. *10, 15 days ago they would have been baked from Grouswhip, or even Syena, he sighed.* Regardless, the aroma coming off those stones, about a thousand neurris distant, teased him without remorse. *When will these freighin’ pellots be done with me?* He buried his face against a Jaspersis root and moaned. *Can’t even scratch an itchy nose in this caque dump!*

Cangje pondered these squalid wanderers who had enlisted his help in this cave. He turned to his left to rest his chin on a rock. They were now close to the end of their second day, him and those two pucinos all dressed in rags and that one hideous skridlak, no better attired, who couldn’t keep her mouth shut longer than a pulsimer or two. *She barely ever lifts a finger to help!* he thought in disgust. *Just pisses and moans all freighin’ day long!*

Staring off to estre, he noticed the silhouette of the Chandalith, positioned at the center of the Terraces, at the very

heart of the marisatria. Even in its present, derelict state, chipped and cracked, splattered with graffiti, stained with the still fresh tint of dried blood, it held its own, a fitting testimonial to the self-serving tradition of covering both ends of the same stick. *Those souls who built that thing*, he mused, admiring such an impressive work of art and tribute, *were freighin' geniuses!*

The scent of an oil lamp near his feet seeped up and around him, through a gap beneath his left ear. Cangje shifted his chin from the rock on his left to the rock on his right when he felt a pair of hands at his ankles, then a violent tug as the image of the ravaged skyline of Fhydalaku disappeared from view. He collapsed onto the muddy ground, blinded by the glare of the leaky lamp. The despotic pelot who called himself *Meiluris* stood over him, his eyes burning.

"I said five stratimers ago! You want me to give you your...what do you call it where you come from?"

Cangje rubbed his eyes with dirty, oil splattered hands. He came to his feet, slapping the mud from his knees. "Kidrokael. That's what we call it in the Kurestreans."

Meiluris smiled, proud that his concoction, and its reputation, had spread far beyond the boundaries of Astuverica, even under a different name.

"What do *you* call it?" Cangje asked, brushing himself off.

"*My ticket out of the Zurish-Triece*. That's what I call it."

"Kind of a long name, huh?"

"Yeah, it's kind of a long name. *Tyrupliak*. That's what this caque is called any place more than a 10 day walk from here."

"How did you used to make it in Astuverica?" Cangje asked with a cynical tone. "Not with Bakadado. Or did you get it on the Chivet-Pradur?"

"Yeah, that's where I got it," he lied, reluctant to discuss material sourcing with a relative stranger.

"Why don't I believe you?"

Meiluris threw his head back in frustration. "You want to know? Alright. When I was in Astuverica I used a paste culled from Ciroghyb dung. The compounds are the same, for all

anybody cares. ‘Cept the Ciroghyb would wear off after about four or five days. Bakadung will too, but it takes a lot longer.”

“How did you know Guirabaka dung would have the same effect?” Cangje asked, his eyes on the bourget they were filling that day. “Caque isn’t always caque, you know.”

Meiluris’s final thread had at last come unwound. “*Amaria*, you like to yammer, don’t you? Anything to avoid a little work! We need to be done digging by nightfall. I need another 20 miarics out of you and we can finish this.”

Cangje jabbed a defiant finger into Meiluris’s chest. “Yeah, I hear you. But we got a deal, remember?”

“Of course. As soon as I prep the first ingestion you’ll get what I promised,” Meiluris said, wringing his hands. He hesitated to ask, but jumped in anyway. “What about you? What do *you* need it for? I mean, you’re not trapped in the Zurish, behind the gates. What’s your gig?”

Cangje picked up his shovel and raised it against a wall of dirt, to his front. “We’ve been down here two days now and all of a sudden you want my life story?”

“No, just curious, that’s all.”

While Meiluris turned and examined a clump of soil, Cangje drove three firm hits against the wall. The last strike dislodged a clod of hard dirt, effervescent with tones of greenish-blue. “I have a son. He’s about eight now. A quintek ago I bludgeoned and killed an Arduan Regent in the Kurestreans. The pelot had kidnapped my child, sent him to a makeshift Eroctriase they’d set up near a hammock colony, not far from a new Thulitar mining operation near the Aquina Sul-Ataurea. I tracked the place down, bribed my way in and found my son, naked, with two Arduans and a subalternate who had about half of their clothes off. They had my son bound, strapped to a table, pouring a vial of Pentumus down his throat, with their hands stroking his...” Cangje broke off, bit his lower lip. “You want me to go on?”

“No,” Meiluris whispered.

“I can arrange passage back home, but not upright. Not with a pulse. Faking my death is the only way I can get to sorentre of the Andulkan border without triggering a free-for-

all over that bounty I'm saddled with." Cangje rested his shovel on his hip. "So if you don't mind, I'd like to finish what I'm doing and get out of here. This dado is *relentless!*"

Meiluris pointed to the medium-sized bourget, one of two, now positioned inside a hollow at the end of the cave. The first one had been filled the day before.

"Kerak and Dijal are almost done. Give me another good clump or two, and make sure they've got a few decent clusters in them, the same color as the one you just knocked loose. We're close to a good vein, and the darker green the stuff gets, the better. Then we can call it a day."

Meiluris knew that with the quality of their finds on the upswing, their time in this cave was drawing to a close. Kerak and Dijal, weak with hunger, sick with the rank odors surrounding them, stuck their heads around the corner beyond which they'd been toiling for the past 200 stratimers. There they saw Cangje, his face brimming with anticipation, thumbing and poking and burrowing through the damp walls above him, filling their last Bourget to the brim.

*D*ay five in the wisoltrean Andulkas began, as had the others, with the scent of warm Sendeles revisited, baking nearby, beyond the steep hills to estre.

Today, though, seemed different. Dijal's eager nostrils caught an early whiff. "*Are they seasoning those things with Tarandru butter?*" she asked the air around her. Dijal poked her head around the veil of the cave, splashed her face with a flagon of water and took another clean whiff. Further off, the low sonancy of music drifted toward her ears. She grinned, then leaned back to find Meiluris, Kerak and Cangje furiously culling and spreading the last remnants of undebased dado from the bourgets, now almost empty.

How long have I been sitting here? She puzzled, stung by the slippage of time, the speed at which her cohorts worked; maybe both. She grunted and pulled herself back to help them finish this task, the second stage in what was destined to impose even more exposure to this foul substance. And her reward...the

thought that she would soon have to ingest this stuff...made her even more nauseous, rivaling the condition she was in when she and her travelling companions had arrived here, six days ago.

While she worked, she fought to reconcile the conflicting aromas, the obnoxious complaints of her fellow dado-miners with the breezy intonations looming nearby. Nine sleepless days and nights at a brisk pace along the Cavak-Tysekrians had nearly destroyed them, forcing her and Meiluris to exhaust their stash of Cheulawort, two days too soon. Kerak's cerebral conquest...of mind over pain...had run its course at about the same time, forcing their agonies to invigorate a collective will, to push on, ignoring the adamant refusals of their bodies to move another step.

Dijal reminded herself that it was little more than pure luck that had gotten them to the Andulkas, that had led them to this cave, what with Meiluris surreptitiously prodding around the Terraces of Fhydalaku, quizzing the locals for clues as to the whereabouts of what the older souls around here referred to as *The Dado*.

When that line of questioning ran dry, after so many puzzled looks and dismissive tongues ("The Dado? Mined-out, five or six unteks ago. All gone. Go home, pelot!"), it was nothing less than the 'Phemes themselves which, three days after their arrival, had led them to Cangje Te.Rila-Un. He, who for nearly a quintek had been known around here as just another nameless, aimless hermit, had spoken up when the unique smell of Bakadado was described by Meiluris. That's because, ever since he'd arrived at Fhydalaku, he'd been living in a cavender, separated by half a neurri of moist dirt from a rich vein that was filled with the stuff.

The morning seemed to drag on as Meiluris ran through a list of instructions. All the while, he, Dijal, Kerak and Cangje, the blunt ends of their shovels in hand, pounded the dung, separating the green from the brown, beating finger-sized clumps or larger into a fine, aquamarine paste. They then kneaded and beat it further with fingers covered in blood; particularly Dijal's, flowing a brilliant mauve through so many existing breaks in her skin. "The blood reacts with the acids in

the dung,” Meiluris said, “so keep kneading. Very soon we’ll mull the first ingestion. *Keep kneading!*”

Mid-day, and stage two of their work was nearly complete. Meiluris and Kerak squeezed out of their narrow confines to fill a couple of bladders from a nearby spring and steal a clean breath. They were followed by Dijal and Cangje as nearly seventeen miarics of a dense, greyish-purple paste...their hard-earned work product...remained on the floor of the cave. Once fully processed, a third of this supply would be used on Dijal; first to induce her, then to pull her out of her paroxysm before she “woke up” in some Subterranean den, her body full of brine, activators and fermenting Trofilage. A quarter constituted Cangje’s share, allowing him a surreptitious homecoming and the chance for his self-infused dosage to unwind on its own, then to trust the ‘Phemes to deal with his oppressors however they saw fit. As for the rest? That would be the first to pass from their hands.

Dijal and Meiluris finished off their allotment of Pragash. Three rations remained: a day’s supply. Dijal’s stomach squealed like a crying infant. “Just give me that dado now!” she moaned in bitterness. “At least if I’m playing dead I won’t have to scarf down any more of this Pragash caque!”

“I don’t know how you can eat fungus when you’ve got Fathidis,” Cangje said with a grin. “They’re all over the walls of my cave. I told you I’d share. You too *good* for ‘em?”

“No, but I can’t scarf down insects when the smell of those Sendeles keeps slapping me in the face,” Dijal said, turning to face Meiluris. “So give me the plan. I want to ‘die’ with the taste of warm bread on my tongue. That’s what *I* want!”

Meiluris ignored her, tapping his fingers against his forehead. Their surplus amounted to a little less than seven miarics. With that in mind, he ran through a quick chisenbop, adding the cost of at least three batches of fresh Sendeles; allowing for the need for any other foodstuffs due to the dearth of edible, wild vegetation in these hills; inserting his own personal distaste at the thought of surviving any longer on nothing but insects and fungi; considering the cost of who-

knows-how-many stratimers in a rented furnace to heat two ingestions; plus passage to Astuverica, a trip he was certain could *not* be made on foot. After all that, the full accounting, he knew without a doubt, was sure to leave him short.

Meiluris turned to Cangje. "How long ago did they run out of Syena and Grouswhip around here?" he asked.

"The flails swooped down and started buying it up about 20 days ago. The last harvest was shipped down the Plasaics maybe nine, 10 days ago."

"They're baking Sendeles from Marrowhip now? Nothing else?"

"Yep."

"What else are they eating around here?" Kerak asked.

The answer rolled for a while on Cangje's tongue. "Nothing, really, 'cept the same thing I've been getting by on. Insects; Fathidis and Klerojies. The spikes have hunted the herds to depletion: Khalizud and Tarandru mostly. They stripped the groves, all for some huge event they're having in Astuverica, from what I hear. A big detachment of Machaera is leaving the Pavatrias and they're due to come through here any day now. But for these souls, the Machaera is the last thing on their minds. Their surplus Marrowhip, or what's left of it, is buried in a row of cavenders to norostre, far off the Nearings; *very* well hidden. So when that goes I guess I'll be selling Fathidis out of my cave. Some of them are *huge!*"

"Do they make you pay?" Meiluris asked Cangje. "For Sendeles, I mean."

"Didn't used to. They'd feel sorry for me and toss me a couple every so often. But not anymore. The last act of charity I saw was four days before I met you. I hear even Marrowhip is about to triple in price. But I doubt they're gonna accept khirius. If you want anything around here you're gonna have to barter for it."

That answer came as no surprise to Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen.

Kerak arched his back, standing no more than a neurri from its base. There, the Chandalith loomed above him. Tones of

grey and turquoise in the smooth rock resonated, filled with cracks, splits, glyphical expressions of anger and hope, hatred, passion and betrayal, all of it overlaid by hundreds of tiny finger streaks of blood, now permanently shellacked onto the stone. These images and more covered this filthy, winged icon, reflecting lumens now at 80 degrees post Zenith.

He found it hard to tear himself away. But tear himself away he did, turning to acknowledge the light banter of the markets, buzzing all around him. Here and there, between each occupied stall, at least three stood vacant, abandoned, echoing a silent sentinel. All of them were painted, scratched, scored with all manner of defacement, including a few random etchings and entwines. Most of them, like the ones which adorned the Chandalith, were crude, elementary expressions, naïve but hopeful attempts to draw the resonance from something...anything...that had it to give. Some of the markings were bastardized counterfeits of more familiar glyphs and entwines, as if the act of creation through mutation might evoke an unforeseen serendipity, far beyond the capabilities of your average garden-variety etching.

Within the confines of the marketplace, the thud of footsteps resounded. But as Kerak's focus drew closer to the center of the marisatria, he noticed that the tongues above those feet spoke with caution, framed by jaded faces, beset with anxiety. Females, in particular, darted here and there at a quick pace, their heads hung low, their eyes avoiding even the briefest contact.

Kerak took another step away from the Chandalith and spun slowly to get the lay of the land. Beyond the Terraces he could see the burnt-out remains of dozens of terrabodes, on all sides of the plaza. To estre he could make out a pair of hand-carved, spring-fed lagoons, the center of a network of irrigation ditches which emptied into stair-stepped canals on the downside of the surrounding hills. Their dark waters were filled with trash, sewage and the bloated carcasses of four rotting Tarandru, bobbing about in the soup, bumping together, two of them with their legs extended skyward.

A light breeze tapped his senses, pushing the smell of fungal smoke and fresh Sendeles into his face. The vendors' voices carried well, but despite their protestations, their wailings and rebuttals at the paltry sums they were being offered, they moved very few goods. *We'll hang here until just before dark*, Kerak had recalled Meiluris saying, before the two of them had left their refuge, not far to wisoltre. *They'll deal with us then.*

Kerak stepped off the base of the Chandalith and turned as they collided.

"Hello, Frishkit!" he heard her say. Kerak looked out, then down, at her well-worn, malleable face, "You and your friend over there. Weren't you the ones scratching around here the other day for Bakadado? Right?"

Kerak froze. His eyes pivoted, trying to find Meiluris, who had just disappeared from sight. Kerak recalled his warning not to say too much...or rather, *anything*...to the locals here in Fhydalaku. *How do I lose this Gythrit?* he thought in a huff, evoking Andulkan slang for an elderly female.

His search for Meiluris was in vain. "Uhm, yes. That was...that was...*us*?" he said.

"Are you asking me or telling me?" the Gythrit asked. "Anyway, I want to know; did you find any? Used to be, Bakadado could be found 'bout everywhere in these Ascents, between here and the Saurostran border. But the past two or three quinteks, the *spikes*..." she said, her smiling face contorting in anger. "They'd bring their grinders and their hacks in here, in the middle of the night, to scrape it from the caverns and sell it off to the Arduans for fertilizer, so they could cart it off to the estreans, and 'Stuverica!" She paused for a breath. "Some culturists near the Eusterians; they were using it to grow Trofliage! Can ya believe that?" She paused again, batting her eyes. "My consort and me; we used to bury it under our Marasai bushes. Not anymore..."

She turned her face upward and passed a coy grin.

"Is that...all?" Kerak plotted his next move, hoping she would stop talking and turn back to her stall.

"Did you...?"

“Did we...what? Oh, oh yes. We found some.”

The Gythrit’s face lit up. “*Amaria!* You lookin’ to trade? You look hungry, Frishkit. I make the best Sendeles you ever tasted. Ya!”

“Uhm...” Kerak craned his neck.

“Got nothin’ but Marrowhip flour, but I spice it up with Tarandru butter and a little Muyleanth spore,” she said, describing not a plant seed but the tiny eggs of a poisonous insect, local to the Pavatrias. “Oh, you won’t mess with Fathidis after you’ve had one of my Sendeles!”

The Gythrit’s eyes flashed, and Kerak thought of the inviting aromas captivating his senses; the same ones which Dijal, too, had described with such luster. *Nothing wrong with her nose*, Kerak mused over that exchange.

The Gythrit tugged at Kerak’s arm. Meiluris lingered a few neurris off, lost in an argument with another vendor. Her face soured. “We need it, Frishkit!” Kerak’s inquisitor whimpered. “Vhaghrivol just don’t grow as well without the dado. We don’t need much of it. A little’ll go a long way. Or...or if Sendeles don’t grab ya, we got a foundry my consort runs on the side. Could crank it up for ya if ya need somethin’!”

She winked, took his left hand and pressed it tenderly against her right breast. She turned her head, a motion which magnified the fluidity of her countenance, making her appear as if she were someone else. “My name is Arnaia. Been a long time, Frishkit? Whatever ya want, it’s yours...”

Kerak jerked his hand away and made eye contact with Meiluris, who had given up on his last prospect and was by now close enough to have overheard Kerak’s conversation with this stranger.

Meiluris came up from behind. “Gythrit,” he said, “let’s talk!”

“**I** need 14. No...18; 18 Sendeles! And I need your kiln for 40...No, wait! 60 stratimers. *60 stratimers*. 18 and 60. Deal?”

Meiluris wrapped his demands, sitting with his arms crossed. His currency...a small pile of uncooked Bakadado...lay on the smooth-grained Mirinueth table, between him and the owner of this 'bode. A wisp of Ionian wind rattled the windows and the front door. A dusty, archaic lightstaff dangled from the ceiling. Jerath2 Ve.Lankolaer stared at Meiluris over the bridge of his nose, wearing his usual constipated frown. His gnarled hands...one of them missing two fingers and the other at a loss for only a single digit...rested on the table. *How this ignorant pucino found Bakadado in these hills*, Jerath2 thought with a deadpan face, *is beyond me!*

"10 and 20," Jerath2 said, closing his eyes to avoid seeing the look of derision on Meiluris's face.

"16 and...and 50?" Meiluris squeaked in counter-demand, passing a sigh that could wake the dead. From his seat in the kitchen, he gawked at the dented flue of Jerath2's kiln, the warped outer walls of the heat chamber; the whole thing appearing too decrepit to cook even a decent meal. The tumble-down contraption was ensconced in the basement at the end of a plunging staircase.

"You asking me or telling me?"

"Telling!" Meiluris blurted, trying to sound more assertive. "Your consort brought 15, 16 Sendeles home with her tonight. 16! And that furnace. Why, I'll bet it's been cold for, what? An untek? Or more? I know something about kilns, Furthkit! I'm no fool."

A long pause. "10 and 20," Jerath2 said, reasserting his ground.

"10 and 20? That was your last offer!"

Jerath2's eyes fell once again to the table. For the first time, in the blaze of artificial light, he noticed the dark crimson-lavender tones in the dado paste. *Him or one of his cohorts is a Vidanthric; their blood was used to invigorate the paste*, he mused. *Amaria! With enough of that we could stretch the whole load of dado out for a full quintek.*

Meiluris clenched his fist and pounded the table. Small clumps of paste rose, aerated and fell. "14 and 40! I'm not here

for my health, Furthkit! It's 14 and 40 or we walk! Klerojies and Fathidis have started to kind of...grow on me," he said, with nothing that passed for a straight face.

Jerath2, by now at the end of his rope, folded his arms. "Okay, but I have two conditions."

"And they are...?"

Jerath2 shoved a medium-sized terracotta cup across the surface of the table. "First, I'll need you to fill this cup with your blood."

"My blood? Why?"

"The lavender tones in that paste. There's blood in there; the blood of a Vidanthric."

"It's really not so much *my* blood, as it is..." Meiluris responded, despite his better judgement, before shutting down mid-sentence.

"As...whose?"

Meiluris said nothing, but pointed timidly to Dijal, sleeping in a chair in a dark corner of the room.

Jerath2 waved the cup in Dijal's direction. "I'll leave it to *you* to get her to fill it."

"Anything *else*?" Meiluris asked with a slur, hoping this pellet had forgotten all about condition two.

"Show me where you found the dado."

"Sure, but it won't do you any good. Everything we pulled came from two veins, and they're all tapped out."

Jerath2 scratched his chin. "That bag behind your back. It's filled with more, right?"

Meiluris froze.

"How much is in there?"

"No. You can't have it! We need it to pay for passage to..."

"Throw it in and you got a deal."

Meiluris's pride, his native feistiness, began to well up in his throat. He'd been beaten, and he knew it. His judgment, his strict adherence to the numbers, began to smoke and burn. But his exhaustion, his need for rest and warmth and a tiny morsel of something delicious, consumed him. He swallowed

hard, preparing his voice for a calm tone and, like his counterpart, an additional demand.

“There are four in my party. Throw in room and board for all of us, for five days. *Then* we have a deal!”

Jerath2’s pride, his native distaste for visitors, guests, strangers, and a long, dull list of other things, *plus* his disgust with this pointless drivel, began to well up in his throat. He clenched his fists, his jaw. His face began to burn. But he, too, spoke without raising his voice.

“Deal!”

“*H*a! I’ve run a lot more than that through here. Why, this kiln has been around for more than a hundred quinteks. My great-grandfather built it. Built this terrabode around it, too. Dug out the foundation, cut and set the stone, all by himself. This is the only functional furnace within 60,000 neurris of here, and has been for a little over five quinteks, when the nearest two were shut down by the Machaera. Before the Triumvirate came into being, there were no less than 10 foundries here in the Vriklian Ascents. As for me; I been firing up this hothouse on my own for nearly 40 quinteks. Yep, let’s just say that the ‘Phemes haven’t dumped a load of caque on us; ‘least not yet. ‘Course, can’t say that for everyone around here.”

Cangje thrust another heaping shovel load of Bittermoor chips into the furnace while Kerak eased his gloved hands into the transfer chamber, then set the carved urn, filled with six miarics of dado paste, onto the hot grate. Tongues of yellow and green shot out as he stole a quick peek at the rugged interior of the chamber.

Kerak had seen the inside of only three kilns in his life, but he had never seen one like this. The inner walls of the chamber appeared dense, glassy, covered with a charred, swarthy concretion that had built up over the quinteks, and taken on a consistency all its own.

The stubborn intensity of the flames, though, would not allow a more thorough examination. They spewed from out of

the open hatch, scorching the hairs on his arms, turning his skin a deep crimson. A stream of acrid smoke spilled from a pair of holes in the rusty flue. Arnaia and Meiluris, sitting at the kitchen table above, coughed, hacked, cursed and bolted from the terrabode and into mid-day luments, just before Kerak shut the door.

Jerath2 handed a Kyotrimlic stone to Kerak. "20 stratimers. Mark it," he instructed.

"But you and Meiluris agreed to 40!" Kerak protested. "You had a deal, remember?"

"Relax, Frishkit. This is the hottest furnace anywhere in the Andulkas. Maybe even..." Jerath2 paused, unable to comprehend anything beyond the farthest landmark he could see with his own eyes while standing at his front door. "Anyway, 20's gonna be all it needs."

"Well, if that's the case then why didn't you just say so last night? Meiluris thinks..."

"I don't care what that little pellet thinks, Frishkit!" Jerath2 laughed. "Ha! I was just having a little fun, watchin' him squirm. He's a lousy dealmaker, anyway."

Kerak failed to see the humor. "Same for the Sendeles?"

"No, you'll get what's coming to you. You got free rein of this place for five days, right? We got a cavender out back stashed with enough Marrowhip to feed this whole marisatria for an untek."

Dijal, sitting on the floor in a dim corner of the basement, picked away at her second helping, her eyes closed. She took a small bite and rolled the sodden morsel around on her tongue before swallowing it, reluctantly. She was amazed and pleased with the amnesia brought on by a warm, crisp Sendele.

"So if this kiln is so great, why aren't clients lining up at your stoop right now to use it?" Kerak asked.

"Because they've already used it. Almost every culturist between here and the Vengaos uses an implement created in this forge. And they've *lusted!* You saw inside it. Notice how thick the walls are? The lining! The heat this thing can generate, and sustain, with only a few shovelfuls of fuel! It'd amaze you. Whatever your friend is intendin' to do with that

dado in there, well, all I can say is that in 20 stratimers it'll be ready for anything."

"The lining?" Kerak asked. Jerath2 stared straight ahead, through an undistorted face, pretending as if he'd heard nothing.

"So, why *are* you cooking Bakadado?" Jerath2 asked.

"Uhm, I really shouldn't say. You'll have to quiz Meiluris about that."

Jerath2 tossed his head to the side. "Oh, I don't care. I mind my own where the business of others is concerned. What they make, why they make it; that's for them. And that friend of yours up there...!" he went on, lost in thought, pondering how familiar Meiluris looked to him; like someone he used to know. Someone who'd since been lost to the ages.

"Tell me about the Chandalith?" Kerak asked.

"That thing? Ah, it was built maybe 24, 25 quinteks ago. This being the Andulkas, the Muharadu had built an early Palialouge about 10,000 neurris to estre of here, which at that time was their farthest frontier post from Astuverica. The carving above the base; that's supposed to be Hedeon. A few of the locals around here built it to keep the Triumvirate off our backs, to convince them of our 'loyalty' to the Architrave. Not that they would have bothered us without it. We got no ores or tars or woods of any kind around here. Never have."

"I was under the impression that old guard Muharics didn't like representations of Hedeon? *Blasphemous*, I heard."

"They don't. 'Course in those days, what did we know of the Muharadu? The souls around here who built that bird were just stabbin' at the dark, I suppose."

Jerath2 pulled a stopper from a tapered flask. He poured a turquoise liquid into two wooden cups and handed one of them to Kerak. "So about 12 quinteks ago, after the Palialouge got burned out in the Purges of Chara-Dulathrea, some of the other locals decided it was time to hedge their bets. So they spent a quintek putting in a Divarishk below the bird's base."

"What's a...Divarishk?"

"It's a long, tapered metal rod, driven straight into the ground. In ancient times the wisoltrean Andulkas were the

birthplace and the home of *The Centris of Divaesh*, which was a cult of the Incarnate. They buried Divarishks all over these hills,” Jerath2 said, glancing at the furnace. “Two of those ancient pointers were dug up, joined together and buried right below Hedeon’s base. We used the old kettle over there to soften up the metals so they could be worked.”

“What’s the point of driving a metal rod into the ground?”

“It’s about playing the odds. A lot of these souls around here still cling a little to Incarnate ideals. At the same time, even though no one around here gets down on all fours at Lumenatra, we still ask ourselves...why tear the old bird down? It ain’t that bad lookin’ after all! So the Chandalith was added...just in case maybe the both of them might have a point. And look at us! Look at Fhydalaku!” Jerath2 tapped his flask against Kerak’s. “Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea after all, huh? We’re still here, right? A bit worse for wear, but still...*here!* Drink up, Frishkit.”

Jerath2 took a fleeting sip from his mug while Kerak downed a hefty swig of the gritty, light blue liquid.

“Call me Kerak. What’s this? It’s...good, I think.”

“‘Winkanod.’ That’s what I call it. Made it myself. Grew and picked and fermented the Marasai berries, added a little scabric and a few other ‘gredients tossed in for good measure. Whaddya think? Kind of makes you want to wink and...”

“...Yeah, yeah I get it. The name ‘Chandalith.’ Where did that come from?”

Jerath2 returned his flask to the table and peered off into the dark corner in which Dijal sat. “Don’t know. Had to name it something so someone just put it out there. Sounded okay to me.”

Kerak wondered how a “True Believer” would look upon an instrument of worship that represented opposing viewpoints. “And which way do your instincts run,” he asked his host. “Up? or down?”

Jerath2 didn’t flinch. “Don’t know you quite well enough to say...Kerak. Let’s, uh, change the subject, okay?”

Kerak took another sip. "Tell me about the blood. It looks fresh."

"What blood?"

"The Chandalith."

"Oh! Well, five quinteks ago, a refugee passing through here on his way to the Seamounts came head to head with an attachment of subalternates camped outside of town. There were 15 of them. Three of 'em are still there, about 2000 neurris to sorentre of my front door."

Jerath2 observed Kerak with caution, watched him take another drink from the flask. He went on. "Anyway, the traveler went off and got into a fight with one of those subalternates, got the upper hand and killed the Machaeran with a knife. In the middle of the night he gutted him, tied the subalternate's body to Hedeon's tail and disappeared up the Cavak-Tysekrians. The next morning, his fellow Machaerans find the body, blame all of *us* for that skantaro's death, but they don't have enough numbers to take and hold prisoners, so they just burned us out, all for spite! All those wrecked 'bodes you saw when you were at the Terraces? That's their work. Instead of rebuilding, most everyone around here just dug some cavenders in the ground and lives in them now. Centris leanings, don't you know. You can't very well burn a hole in the ground. I mean, it's a hole. You see what I mean?"

"But the blood, on the Chandalith? Why does it look so fresh?"

"About a half-dozen of our local citizenry decided to advertise their take on Machaeran aggression after the pillage, and after the executions."

"What executions?"

"A culturist and a laevenant. They lived on the other side of the Terraces from here. No one's really sure what they did to deserve their fate, but before the Machaera finished ransacking Fhydalaku those two were beheaded on a large stone just down the hill from the Terraces. A bunch of subalternates smeared their blood all over that stone and shellacked it after it dried; a little reminder of their handiwork, and maybe more to come. In return, a few of my neighbors

decided to return the compliment. The blood of that skewered Machaeran had never been cleaned from the Chandalith, so the locals took their own bucket of shellac to it. Makes the dried fluids stand out real nice against the dark stone, don't you think? I mean, the Chandalith is meant as a tribute, right? Might as well use it to pay a little homage to that pellot's demise, while we're at it."

Kerak noticed a strange aftertaste beginning to form on his tongue. "Just curious, but why didn't they destroy your terrabode, too?"

Jerath2's face appeared to glaze over. He batted his eyes and glared at Kerak. "You feelin' okay there, Frishkit?"

"Yeah, I'm...I'm fine." Kerak could feel the blood rushing into his face, said nothing about it, forgot his last question and went on to the next one that popped into his head.

"Why..." Kerak's mind went blank for two or three pulsimers, causing him to forget what Arnaia had told him at the Terraces. "Why do you need the Bakadado? Your Marasai berries? Your consort said you fertilized them with it."

"No, we don't need it for Marasai. We need it for the Vhaghrivol. The Vhagh really takes off when it's fertilized with dado. Really enhances the narcotic qualities of the seeds. Since the spikes walked off with most of our dung we've been fertilizing with whatever comes out of the latrine over there; me and everyone else in Fhydalaku. Doesn't work quite as well, though. But Bakadado...that's the best! Harvest the leaves and stems, grind and dry them, and one pipeful will keep those subalternates borderline comatose for two, three days, minimum. Plus..." Jerath2 cleared his throat, "Arnaia likes it. I can't afford Pentumus anymore."

"What were you saying about subalternates?"

"Remember I told you about the three subalternates who're still camped to sorentre of the Terraces? They're skirueics. They've been here since the pillage. They get resupplied by a courier every so often but after them and their friends went off and burned us out we found a way to gift them with a few bags now and then, just to keep 'em quiet..."

Jerath2 said with a wink, "...And off our backs. They just sit in their little hovel all day, dragging on their pipes, their heads covered in these massive clouds of smoke. It's a sight! And now, with Vidanthric blood in the mix, we can stretch out a normal dado supply by a factor of five...or maybe even 10!"

Kerak shook his head, confused. "Why would the Arduan Council keep a contingent of three subalternates in a little dirt'n'squirt like Fhydalaku? That doesn't make any sense."

Again, Jerath2 remained silent. He stared at Dijal, blissfully ignoring the conversation going on near the furnace. Her Sendele was now eaten, except for half a handful. The Kuspegias lay nestled together, deep within the clutch of her left fist. It made her cringe; the thought of how she had gone down without a fight, so docile and compliant, willing to cut not one, not two, but *three* slits in her upper left arm in search of a suitable vein through which to fill Jerath2's terracotta bloodkeeper.

"As for her," Jerath2 pointed at Dijal. "Tell me. She don't have a distinct Cyclophitic or Nurespheric marking anywhere on her, far as I can see; not even on the back of her neck, where they usually are. But she's Vidanthric! What's her story...?"

Kerak ignored the question, fumbled around for the Kyotrimlic stone, then reached for a pair of gloves. It was time to remove the urn from the chamber.

Kerak's insulated hands reached into the inferno, grappled with the hot urn and removed it to the table. What he saw at the bottom resembled a dry, flat rock, glowing red and orange, venting a small puff of vapor. He heard a commotion at the door as Meiluris and Arnaia returned to the kitchen. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Meiluris, disheveled, a slight bulge in his crotch, sulking again over what he still viewed as a lopsided deal with Arnaia's consort.

Suddenly, Meiluris's eyes grew wide with amazement when he sniffed the air and realized that his recipe was finished, and in half the time he'd been accustomed to in the Zurish-Triece. He shrugged, sat beside Arnaia at the kitchen table and dipped a spoon into a bowl of Klerojie stew.

The urn sizzled and cooled as Kerak continued to probe Jerath2, who by now had come to resent what seemed like a nagging inquest.

“A furnace in a land without ores?” Kerak asked. “Explain that to me.”

“Well, Fhydalaku is near the crossroads of the Cavak-Tysekrians and the Plasaic Nearings,” Jerath2 said, puzzled by the delayed reaction in Kerak. “The kratasiph; they used to follow those paths all the time. Some still do, but it’s rare to see one around here these days. Most of ‘em back then found Fhydalaku a good place to rest, resupply, trade. The stalls at the Terraces were always loaded. The hostels had a clean bed or two to spare. There were lots of kilns here back in the day, so they could sell their stock with no trouble. Circulats, flails, even the occasional spike if you weren’t looking; they used to crawl all over this place.”

Jerath2 scanned Kerak’s eyes. He looked up through the stairwell to see Meiluris, sitting close beside Arnaia at the kitchen table, staring down at him.

Kerak glanced at the Kyo, lying on the table between him and Jerath2. “You ever make any memory stones in this furnace?”

A pause.

“Yes.” Jerath2’s irritation rose to a new high.

“Tell me about one of them.”

Jerath2 stood and paced the room, studying his so-called *guests*, the urn, then debated whether he should offer another cup of Winkanod to Kerak, or one to Meiluris, too. But he dismissed those notions. *Four more days and they’re gone!* he mused with a smile. *I got nothing to lose...*

“About seven quinteks ago, I was visited by a client looking to forge a new stone, in part, from the remains of an older one, heavily etched, and another stone, one that had a large, bulbous haft. That same day, a kratasiph I knew had come by here, sold me a parcel of yellowish stanhic dust. I’d purchased two miarics from him...”

Jerath2 turned his back to Kerak, to face the dark corner once occupied by Dijal, three stratimers earlier. By now, she

and Cangje had bailed on the basement in pursuit of cooler air and a familiar inflection, the melodic resonance of a vaqchaser and a concretion of sound, far into the distance. By the time the word *stone* had fallen from his lips, the customary reaction to a virgin sip of Jerath2's brew had at last taken effect, leaving Kerak slouched in his chair, passed out. Meiluris, who was upstairs, out of Jerath2's sight, listened.

"This stone had a strange rune on it, an old Saurostran glyph; something called a *Zylis*," Jerath2 went on, unaware of his audience. "Those compounds, the way they blended! The dusts, the ores in the stones...I just can't describe it! When I pulled the new memory stone from the kiln..." Jerath2 closed his eyes, "...it stayed red hot for nearly *three days*, long after the fires had cooled." He turned to see that his brew had done its job on his former interrogator. His eyes turned upward, to find Meiluris, his back turned to the furnace, still nursing his stew, pretending as if his mind was elsewhere.

Arnaia leaned over the railing above the basement. "Kweath," she called out to him, using a nickname he'd been given as a child, "when are those Machaerans due to come through here?"

"I don't know. Tomorrow. Why?"

"Because our guests...I think they might like to do a little business with 'em."

Good! Jerath2, a.k.a. Kweath, thought, with a grin, *Maybe they'll cart 'em off to a peonage camp. Because four more days with these pucinos is not gonna happen!*

The Regent called himself Staugard, and his commands to his subalternates were belted out in loud, frantic tones, uttered between the suspicious glances he tossed every so often at Meiluris, now second in line.

The Machaeran palmed his Treflicat, confirming his latest order. *Five days*. That was all the time he had to get to Astuverica, first along the meandering Plasaic Nearings, then along the broad, linear avenues of the Mnokathic viamar as it poured in from the wisoltrean territories, then into the

Constabularies, and *then* through no less than three new chains of Custody gates before dissolving into a solid sheet of Tricee, spilling off into utter chaos.

Meiluris stood under a large tent, out of the glare of just-past-mid-day luments, awaiting his audience. Behind him, a meandering line of supplicants, all males, waited their turn. Meiluris glanced behind him once again. Not a single female was anywhere in sight. He knew it would be at least half a day after the departure of this contingent before they would reappear; perhaps even longer. Word was, demand remained steady in the dens of the estrean Andulkas. And the supply of female stock...that which was not under private guard, locked away or both...was becoming a lot harder to come by.

Meiluris crossed his fingers. The rumor, from Arnaia, was that this contingent, which had *walked* the tortuous routes from the Pavatrias to Fhydalaku, would *ride* the rest of the way to Astuverica. There was, of course, no quicker way to get there, and Meiluris's ongoing doubts about the effectiveness, and the safety, of his latest batch were giving him a massive headache. *The less time Dijal is under the influence of this dado,* he mused once again, *the better. I've got to get her on that caravan!*

After Staugard had dismissed the entreaties of yet another Vriklian hilljack with a resolute *no*, Meiluris stepped up. The youthful Regent, new to the task of leadership, tried to impart a rigid bearing, to represent himself the way his mentor, Siruman Um.Sarujeh, would have wanted. Any thoughts of the last one he served under, who went by the name *Te.Sinian*, were pushed far into the back of his shallow mind.

For a pulsimer, Meiluris thought of Cangje's share of the dado, traded away that morning in exchange for his services. By now, he guessed, the Kurestean would be back in his tiny cavender, pondering his return home in a wooden crate. Or maybe he had abandoned that idea and was cutting a skewed deal with "Kweath" for a few more Sendeles.

Kweath. Jerath2. The mere thought of the skantaro with two names made Meiluris physically ill, as did the reminder of how he'd thrown away their last few crumbs of dado, their

ticket to Astuverica, all for a few nights in a “real” bed. “What I’d give for one or two of those last miarics I passed off to that pellet,” Meiluris hissed under this breath before extending his hand toward Staugard. *But a deal’s a deal*, he thought. *With this one, I’ll have to take my chances, however I can.*

Meiluris and Staugard made skittish eye contact, and with all the charisma he could feign, Meiluris dished it out, mumbling on and on about a *Pilects player* and the *Helidrome* and a *female corpse* and the *khiromeks of Astuverica*. You could have run a whole contingent of subalternates, shoulder to shoulder, through the gaping holes he was leaving in his flimsy sales pitch.

By the time Meiluris was finished, though, as conscious as he was of how stupid he must have sounded to this expressionless Machaeran, he was reminded of the tiny gleam that seemed to appear off and on in Staugard’s left eye. He also came to realize that those last few grains of Bakadado which he had so carelessly traded off to Kweath were not the *only* ticket to Astuverica.

“So where’s this female?” Staugard asked.

“Oh! She’s...her body’s in a cavender to sorentre of here. I can have her here in 20 stratimers...or sooner. How long are you staying in...in Fhydalaku?” Meiluris asked.

“Leaving in the morning. Won’t she rot?”

“Naw, not a bit. She’s all shot up with Azupran salts. She died two days ago but she’ll last another 30 if she’s kept in a cool place.”

Staugard studied Meiluris’s face. “How’d she die?”

“Suicide. Bled out.” Meiluris was confident he could pass that story off, what with the myriad scars covering Dijal’s body.

Staugard yawned while Meiluris stood over him, wringing his hands behind his back.

“And what else did you say? Something about Pilects?”

Meiluris pointed to Kerak, standing behind Arnaia’s stall. “Him,” he said.

Staugard rapped his fingers against the table. "Oh yeah, now I remember. You say he has skills? *Him*? He doesn't look like he could find a hole in the ground if he fell right into it."

"Best Pilects player in the Phileans!" A now self-assured Meiluris threw his chest out. "I'll bet your Sovereign will give you a commendation for bringing him in. Or, you can just keep him under wraps, for yourself. Your call. You know how bad the Helidrome needs good players?" He motioned for Kerak to approach.

"Well, I've heard...But him?"

"Oh yeah. He may not look like much, but I can vouch for him! The Helidrome's desperate for fresh players. Give anything for 'em! You could sell him for...*Hedeon* knows how much. A lot!"

"But..."

"He's a lot stronger than he looks," Meiluris said, rapping Kerak on his arms, his shoulders. "Besides, you've got a few days to fatten him up before he gets to the Helidrome. Regardless, they'll take him."

A subalternate ran up from between the remains of two charred terrabodes, approached Staugard and bent over to speak. "Sovereign, they're here. 38 aerospheres, about 1000 neurris to wisoltre. They came in about 10 stratimers ago."

"Excellent. How long do we have them for?"

"6 days."

"Who from?"

"Scivaka Lo.Tal-Huin. She's in charge of the 37th coterie. She just cogged me. She said to mark them and leave them at the last Custody gate when we arrive."

Staugard raised his right hand as the subalternate darted off. He leaned forward to take his flask in hand after dropping another pinch of Rhiodaramir into the brew. His mind began to race. *A female torso; good argency in those right now. Real good. But the weight? The space?*

"About the female. Can I lob off her limbs, maybe her head, before we load her? Gonna be kinda tight. I got 6 days to get there. Got no room for extraneous..."

“...Uh, uh...*no!*” Meiluris was barely conscious of the drool spilling from his jaw. It dropped, coating his left boot with a silvery sheen. Kerak frowned at him, urging him to speak. “The khiromeks like to inspect the bodies whole. They’re funny that way...”

Staugard pursed his lips. He drew inward again. Doubt, anxiety and greed assaulted his conscience all at once. *Should I take both? If I don’t, who’s worth more? he pondered, a female torso, or a Pilects player?*

He decided, and stood. “Well, in that case keep the skridlak. I’ll take the player. If he’s that good I’ll bet he can walk to Astuverica. Or maybe even *run*.”

Meiluris choked on the clutch in his throat as Staugard motioned to leave. “But...you’re giving up a small fortune! I spent 10 days’ wages on Azupran just to keep her fresh.” His calm demeanor shriveled.

Staugard turned. A dim light appeared in his mind. “So, if you spent so much trying to preserve her, then why do you want to *give* her to me? And why are you giving *him* to me too, huh? What the freigh are you up to, anyway?”

It occurred to Meiluris, perhaps a little late, that in the brazen act of opening his mouth he had mislaid a key element or two in the construction of this ruse. So he took a detour.

“Oh, well, I hadn’t intended on *giving* them to you. Just asking for a small...fee. That’s all...”

“I got nothing to give. But like I said, I’ll take *him* off your hands. Doin’ you a favor, here. Understood?” Staugard pointed to Kerak. “*You!* Follow me!”

Kerak and Meiluris staggered along nervously behind Staugard, fumbling for a way to get this stubborn, neither-smart-nor-altogether-stupid Machaeran to reconsider. Suddenly, Kerak remembered his last conversation when he was alone with Arjun. In his desperation to salvage their scheme, the image of that obscure entwine began to resurrect itself. Kerak closed the gap and tapped Staugard on the shoulder.

“What?”

Kerak knelt, and with his finger he traced on the ground the elaborate scrollwork which he hoped would ensure their ticket to the Custody gates of the estrean Andulkas...on *their* terms.

“What’s that?” Staugard said it. Meiluris thought it.

“That’s the sanction code to a blind cadre in Astuverica; a cadre in the name of one called *Ve.Thilourme*. He was an Ephriant, with The Order. Passage for me *and* the corpse to Astuverica and you can have it. Otherwise...” Kerak placed his hand over the pattern in the dirt, ready to scatter it into dust, “...it’s gone.”

Staugard laughed. “So, let me get this straight. *You* have the sanction code to a blind cadre...of an Ephriant, no less...and all you want in exchange for it is transit to Astuverica, for you and some dead body? Is that right?” Staugard took a cautious step back. “Who the freigh are you? And your friend?” He drew a blade from his scabbard, ready to call for reinforcements.

“Your Treflicat; pull it up,” Kerak demanded. “You can articulate a dossier called ‘Sreplicsh,’ subheading ‘Tanaais.Ordeul.’ It’ll show you where the cadre is located. See if it matches. Go on! What’ve you got to lose?” Kerak, who had never bothered with these clandestine niches during his time as a Courvesant, recalled the advice Sorchu Ve.Sian had given him, should he ever reconsider. Kerak’s mentor had kept three of them.

Staugard sighed and pulled out his stone to begin an articulation. After a stratimer of searching, his eyes grew wide. “But how...how do I know this cadre’s got anything in it?” he quizzed Kerak. “This...*Ve.Thilourme*...he’s dead. It could just be a lot of empty space!”

“You know how hard a good cadre is to come by? His heirs are bound to’ve kept it replete. Where else are they gonna hoard his lucre...and theirs? Think about it.”

Staugard rubbed his head.

“What’s it gonna be?” Kerak pressed, seeing that his ploy was starting to work.

Staugard looked over his shoulders, knelt and coggged the image of the entwine into his stone. Then he dug his bootheel into the dirt, scattering Kerak's handiwork into nothingness.

"I don't know who you two pellets are. And I don't *want* to know; you hear me? No more talk! You..." He pointed to Meiluris. "Have the corpse to me by dawn or I'm leaving her here to rot. And you can *shove* your so-called fee, whatever that might've been! You hear me?"

Staugard pointed at Kerak. "Same for you! Dawn. Understood?"

Arnaia held the lightstaff as Meiluris knelt beside the bedroll, deep within a squat, claustrophobic tunnel beneath the Terraces of Fhydalaku. Dijal lay still, silent, trembling, her eyes wide open, staring straight up, her fists hard and cold by her side. She turned her head to take in Meiluris's face as Arnaia handed the lightstaff to Kerak.

"I need to eat!" Dijal protested, buying time.

"You just inhaled a whole Sendele, 10 stratimers ago. Isn't that enough?" Meiluris bellowed. In his right hand, he held a small clump of Tyrupliak, pulled from the kiln just two days ago, before being crushed into a fine powder.

"I dunno...is it? I've never been *dead* before! What if I get hungry?" she rolled her eyes and let go a forced laugh. "That sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? The dead don't get hungry." In that moment, her ears were filled with the tenor of a low but resonant melody, stronger than the similar cluster of sounds she'd heard three days earlier.

"In five stratimers, your body..." Meiluris tried to explain without alarming her, "...will shut down. Your pulse will slow to...undetactable. Heart rate; next to nothing. If you're hungry, you won't know it. Your body will live off that Sendele and maybe five miarics of fat and fluids until Kerak can revive you."

To Kerak, hanging onto Meiluris's every word, came a sudden realization. He'd had neither the time nor the inclination to put the pieces together, until now. The full focus

of their efforts had always been this: get Kerak and Dijal out of the Swales, out of Meiluris's native Andulkan borderlands, and...the 'Phemes willing...into Astuverica. For this leg of their journey, though, no place had been reserved for Meiluris. And now, half an untek after the depredations that had nearly destroyed them all, it dawned on Kerak that this had been Meiluris's plan all along.

Kerak watched Meiluris mix the cooked Tyrupliak with a froth of boiling water, in a wooden flask. He heard Dijal mouth the very words that he himself was about to ask.

"How's that gonna happen? How is Kerak going to...you know...revive me?"

"What do you care? You're gonna be dead. That's *his* domain."

"But it's *my* BODY!!" She sat up in a red-eyed rage. "I've had it with you, Meiluris! You're not the one crawling back into the belly of the beast like we are, you freighin' *pellot!*" A single tear welled up in the corner of her right eye. "I would...simply...like to know...how Kerak is going to pull that off, if you don't *mind!*"

Meiluris dropped his head. "I...I'm sorry. You're right. You both need to know, so I'll tell you now." He pulled a small bag from his pocket. "Kerak, here. This is the uncooked Tyrupliak. When you're ready to revive her you'll need about half a miaric of cold water. Let this entire bag steep for about 10 stratimers. Prop her body up against a vertical surface, tilt her head back and pour it...*all* of it...into her mouth. In her condition, she'll have no gag reflex so she'll take it all in. Be sure her nostrils are closed while you're doing this. Give it about four or five strats, then check her pulse. She should come around in..."

"SHOULD?! SHOULD!?" Dijal screamed.

"She...she'll come around after that. Yep. And that...that's about it."

Dijal and Kerak stared at each other, then at Meiluris.

"Look, I know the two of you have your doubts, and I don't fault you for that. But I've done this a hundred times before. The dado is the same, just with two different mediums.

Ciroghyb, Guirabaka; they're the same animal. It's worm dado; whatever you want to call it. Okay? So please, please trust me on this," Meiluris said, almost believing the words which had just come out of his mouth.

Dijal squinted and leaned on her elbows against the bedroll. She opened her eyes and faced Meiluris and Kerak. "What choice do we have, huh? I mean, what choice...?"

As Kweath and Arnaia stood behind them, Meiluris stirred the steaming, brown-tinted water in the flask. He handed it to Dijal. His arm trembled and his eyes grew moist. He paused to take her hand.

"Hedeon, the 'Phemes...I don't know whose favor to evoke on your behalf, Dijal," Meiluris said, his voice breaking, "so I'll just say this. You are the bravest, most unselfish soul I have ever met in my entire miserable, squandered existence. Above all else, more than anything, I *hope!* I hope for you, and for all of us, that your journey will bring you to the outcome that you seek. That we all seek. That...that's all I have to say."

A single dirt-stained tear drifted down her mangled lineaments. Dijal raised her head and drew the cup to her bottom lip. "Next time, lead with that. Okay?"

The last remaining tears were squeezed from her eyes in a fit of light laughter. Dijal squinted and threw the dark liquid against the back of her throat. She then lay back down on the bedroll, looking up at Kerak.

"See you on the other side," she whispered.

Kerak smiled through a misty gaze. "That's a promise," he said, struggling to find the words, a few pulsimers after she'd lost consciousness.

Kweath, unable to tolerate maudlin selflessness in all its hideous forms, straightened his back and took off at a brisk pace for the nearest norostrean breach. 40 neurris out, he paused, turning to face the glow of the lightstaff, held by Kerak. Arnaia followed after a long pause. 10 neurris away, she turned to face Meiluris, to gauge his reaction.

Above them, dawn approached. The pitch of 500 pairs of bootheels shook the ground with deft precision. The Terraces

were filling rapidly, and the time to take their leave was drawing near.

For another three stratimers, Meiluris remained, his eyes closed, counting down the pulsimers. When he opened them, he grabbed Dijal's wrist and held it for a stratimer. "Three beats. That's all I get. She's in, Kerak. She's all yours now."

Kerak and Meiluris carefully wrapped Dijal in the bedroll and tied it with a length of rope supplied by Arnaia. Kerak took her limp frame into his arms and eased her across his shoulder as Meiluris began to make his way toward the norostrean breach. The sorentrean opening, for which Kerak and Dijal were bound, was a contorted, but short, 20 neurris away.

Meiluris turned to speak as Kerak's footsteps echoed.

"Somehow..." Meiluris called out to him.

"Somehow," Kerak turned and answered. "Until then, let's just say, 'so long...'"

Meiluris nodded, watching Kerak make his way toward the first turn in the tunnel before disappearing. Meiluris offered a knowing glance at Arnaia, her face the reflection of shared concern. She rotated her head a quarter turn, and once again, it happened. In the dusky glow of the lightstaff, blended with a tiny ray of lumenosity, her appearance seemed to transform, to morph into the face of Inari, lost to him so very long ago.

He approached Arnaia. She smiled and turned toward the dark corridors ahead for the short walk home. With joy, Meiluris recalled their encounter yesterday in front of her terrabode, the furnace raging below them. While they'd stood outside and talked, he'd placed his fingers on her chin and tilted her head. There, Inari appeared before him. In a fit of helplessness, self-restraint abandoned, he had taken her, plunged himself into her, coming hard into Arnaia's dry, barren well, now cooing with life, welcoming him with a warmth and affection that had surprised them both.

Arnaia made her way toward the norostrean breach with Meiluris in tow, patting his hip pocket. In it lay the tiny bag of yellow dust he'd collected from the rise at the core of

Kuwhan'Xalu. Approaching a sudden, perpendicular notch in the tunnel, they noticed the source of those musical sounds; a small child, holding a crude, homemade vaqchaser, waving it back and forth over an exposed section of the Divarishk, coaxing and teasing its magnetic mantra, one symphonic upsurge after another.

Kweath, plodding along a few neurris ahead of Arnaia, ignored the thunder of footsteps above, the thunder of the heart and the soul pacing along behind. A thought passed through his head. *Meiluris...* he mused, stretching his memory back as far as it would go, *...and that old kratasiph, Turangien. The resemblance...!* With the breach below the norostrean edge of the Terraces now in full view, Kweath rounded the last corner, nearly mouthing the words. *What was the first name of that little Frishkit Turangien was accused of raping; the one who went by the surname Ve.Jarkonen?*

*T*he hum of magnetic levitation, this time, did not cause him to reminisce over those sprightly outings he'd enjoyed so long ago with Jachin and Adecyn. But if he had to return to Astuverica, this was, no doubt, the only way to do it.

The end of day one, and a milky, particulate-shrouded estrean dusk was a mere five stratimers off. Kerak sat in the open gate of the fifth supply aerosphere, 36th in a line of 38. Djal's wrapped form lay at his side, stuffed into a cocoon-shaped bedroll woven from the rugged bristle of Numandriel hide. Three huge bags of spare and dirty clothing sat on his lap. Behind him, the twisted, sometimes alluring scenery they'd passed that morning, of the wisoltrean Andulkas, now contrasted with the equally twisted but far less alluring scenery of the Andulkan midlands that they were now entering.

Far beyond the boundaries of Fhydalaku, the hollow tones repeated themselves, of the faces his caravan had passed that day, milling about in vacant disarray. Derelict colonies, marisatrias; roofless, burned-out hovels taken up by the downtrodden, the destitute, the disillusioned. The monotony of lifelessness drifted past at a steady clip. He could not

remember a time when the once proud Nearings of the Andulkas had shone with such an apathetic gleam.

“Yours?” A drudge sitting on a sealed box of Quadric blades leered at him, tossing an occasional glance at the lump in the bedroll.

“Yes; *mine!*” Kerak placed his arm over the bedroll, trying to sound emphatic, a little edgy, even. He gnawed at a tough shred of Tarandru jerky, aware that more edible rations were destined to run scarce for the next five days. Knowing that he needed to conserve energy, pointless exertion and senseless chatter would be relegated to the ash heap.

He gazed at the darkening dome, high above. *What am I doing? What have I become?* he puzzled in silent despair. In a little less than three unteks he had gone from being a proud, respected member of The Order of the Courvesois to a runaway captive, a refugee, and finally a slave; nothing more than a few hundred miarics of living, breathing chattel, intended only for eventual sale to the fleshmongers who drove the matches at the Helidrome. He wondered, in a fit of self-pity, how much farther he would have to go before he could lose no more. The answer, vague as it was, brought him no sense of satisfaction.

As the aerosphere flitted along, half a neurri above the gravel-strewn hardshell of the Plasaics, Kerak pondered the “Plan”: or, as it should have been called, “The Lack Thereof...” *Once we get to Astuverica, how do I find someplace to revive Dijal and keep myself from getting sucked into the Helidrome, to avoid catching a Terruglei between my eyes? And if I can do that, how do I make contact with Ligeia? Or, will she even be there...alive...what with females and their torsos in such demand? And...if I can find her and we can conjoin these stones and achieve this so called “Mnetharsis”... then...WHAT?!*

He wasn’t finished. *How?* he thought. *How do we then get out of Astuverica and back to the Swales, or wherever we need to go to rejoin with Ekavias, Arjun, Jadox...and Cai? How do we do all of this without being captured, because, for the Phemes know how long, Dijal and I are going to be shoulder to shoulder with*

every Regent, Ephriant and subalternate in the entire freighin' Dimensional Horizon!!

Kerak rubbed his sore head, held it between his hands while one final thought crept into his addled brain. This one, by far, troubled him more than all his other concerns...combined! *And if I manage to make contact with Ligeia, how....how do I tell her about Drogan?*

Kerak leaned to his left to peer out over the edge of his conveyance. To his front he could make out the image of 10 other spheres and their cargoes, about 300 souls in all, straddling the Nearings as lumenescence evacuated the sky. Each of them, like him, fixed their eyes on a darkening Andulkan backcountry and its surrounding horizons. He looked out beyond the skyline, the reflection of Ionic light revealing a nearby spring. It brought to mind a distant, warm, Mysouxlian lagoon, shared with her as if in a watery mirror, conveying the curious gleam of seven flickering lights, circling the sky at Zenith.

Kerak then thrust his gaze skyward. Every night since then, they had returned. And tonight was no exception. Kerak wondered in a tempest of assent and denial if Ekavias's articulations, his vague interpretations of the 137th tome, bore any real connection to that dim circle, captive to a darkened sky. Then he closed his eyes, his mind choking on a glut of dissonance, encumbrance. When he reopened them, he caught a glimpse of a few of the other souls who shared this convoy with him, aware that all of them were oblivious to the enigma soaring still and silent over their heads.

As the convoy continued on its way, twin rays of flickering artificial light caught his eye. Surrounding them, he noticed a single, lonely structure, lost in a dense choke of overgrown weeds, tree stumps, burned and abandoned terrabodes.

Drawing nearer; a tiny, rumped, clapboard Eroctriase stood, chalked and coated with crude glyphs, burnished by two fractured lightstuffs. Just outside its open door stood a nude, silken chirapsiat, her arms raised, her eyes closed, a thin, careless smile painted on her lips. She spun and swirled and danced in a lazy, elegant pirouette.

“STRAIGHTEN UP! STOKE YOUR spines and watch for my signal. You are unit 36. Look alive and await your call!”

A tumult, the thunderous crest of thousands of stomping feet and screaming voices, hammered down upon the cracked mortar joints of the barrel-vaulted ceilings. A blast of dust and hot air struck their faces as the 12 of them were hustled in front of the closing gates and into the dark chamber before them. Once inside, they strained to hear through a row of high, close-set metalwork grilles, to see a pair of dauntless strygers and a panic-stricken herd of hasters rush by. The crowd came to its feet, vaulting its approval high into the smoky air.

Kerak Um.Tiago stared again at the tiny, smooth-edged Flapstone, hurriedly sewn that morning onto the skin of his upper arm. He picked at it, wincing in pain, ripping another shard of swollen flesh from around the high tensile thread that bound the stone to his body.

A thin voice came at him from his right. The stranger pointed to a bulge under his own arm, beneath a single, reddish seam, sewn shut two days earlier. “Take a look at that. They buried mine under the muscle. Never saw one sewn onto the skin like that. Somebody musta been in a hurry to get you to the Helidrome!” The stranger said with a grin. “Won’t take much of a Courderax to find you if you go missing.” He paused to extend his hand. “Nicosian, that’s my name. And yours?”

Kerak mumbled, but his tongue and his mouth were too dry to render a coherent response. He tried to breathe but once again felt the clutch of the Actinetic scarring on his lungs, the coarse air dragging through them. He steeled himself for a deep breath and closed his eyes. A short, one-armed drudge rapped on his head with the butt of a wooden ladle.

“Ya gonna eat enough dust out there. Ya gotta be thirsty. You’re no good if you’re thirsty. Ya gonna take it!”

Kerak needed no prodding. The drudge dipped the ladle in a bucket of water, held between his knees. Kerak grabbed the handle and threw the contents of the oversized spoon against the back of his parched throat in two loud gulps, rolling the last sip around in his mouth before swallowing. He could have used two, maybe three more helpings, but that was his allotment. It was enough, though, to enable him to return the exchange to his right.

“Kerak. I’m Kerak.”

A chorus of opposing voices, surging from behind the huge metal gates to their rear, their front, beat against each other for 24, 25...30 pulsimers, then died with a whisper. Kerak nodded off for a moment and was jolted awake by the chink and clank of rusty gears and chains, engaging themselves to unseal the gates to their front.

It was about to begin. But before rising to meet this new fate of his, Kerak paused for a pulsimer to organize his scattered thoughts, to center himself; to reconcile the anticipation of fate with the cold realities squaring off ahead of him, all the while wondering how he would ever be able to make this right.

Staugard had met his time limit, as ordered. It had taken his convoy just under three days to bridge the distance from Fhydalaku to the Constabulary channel serving as the first line of defense and assault along the Mnokathic viamar. But for the next two days this achievement had been answered with his complete failure to move his aerospheres more than the 2000 neurri distance from that Constabulary to the final chain of Custody gates. The crush of caravans, the press of flesh, all of it focused on getting into one place, had created a logjam that would not budge.

Most of Staugard’s subalternates, having already been tapped to serve as guards in and around Astuverica for the foreseeable future, had been ushered through the gates *post*

haste, following a terse review of their indentions. But his prisoners, his supplies and his personal trappings, including Kerak and Dijal, remained on lockdown.

And so, the Flapestone vendors emerged from several of the thousands of cavenders dotting the terrain beyond the periphery of the gates. These recent inventions, cooked in crude foundries from low grade Phylox, can each be articulated with their own unique indentions, allowing them to be located by any Courderax or Treflicat within a 40,000 neurri radius.

Most Flapestone vendors bury their wares for their clients, hiding them in tissue about half a fingerwidth beneath the surface of the skin. However, as it concerned his newest possessions, and in an effort to save time and argency, Staugard had ordered the stones of Kerak and Dijal to be stitched to the surface, in full view. Kerak knew he'd never forget the narcotic-free experience of a rusty, coarse-grained needle digging into his flesh while his thrashing arms and legs were pinned to the rear deck of the aerosphere by Staugard, two drudges and a guard from the Custody gate.

At first, Staugard was cold to the idea of using Flapestones. But his refusals were cleverly rebuffed. *A little insurance*, one cunning vendor had told him, *in case some pellot inside the gates tries to pilfer your prizes before you can get them to the Helidrome and the nearest khiromek*. Of course, a Machaeran Regent in full dress needn't have worried much about assault or pilferage, especially in Astuverica, even in the midst of the most offensive, oppressive crowds this megalopolis had ever seen. In spite of Kerak's feeble protestations, Staugard caved to his dwindling patience and sold his female corpse and his Pilects player for the first offers he could connive, then scurried off in a slew of curses, promising to find that thieving Flapestone vendor and retrieve the khirius he'd been fooled into parting with. Of course, that would happen only *after* he had paid a visit to a certain blind cadre, nestled beneath the amleatropic platform over the 305th Register, between the Architrave and the Plain of the Palamonts.

Kerak had not been surprised at how it had all gone down. Staugard had had no trouble getting Dijal through the

last gate, but his would-be Pilects player was another matter. There, a rouge subalternate had inserted an additional barrier when a naïve Staugard had tried to push this prize through. Only after the arrogant, inquisitive gatekeeper had been assured of a 30% share from Ve.Thilourme's dormant grubstake was Kerak allowed...or should I say *condemned?*...to enter.

The last set of cogs on the huge gates struck a pair of corroded, mis-shapen links with a resounding crack. The 12 were then ushered from their holding cell and into the foyer of a windowless, white room. All four walls were crowded with strings of lightstuffs. To his front, Kerak could see a row of cushioned seats as well as three servants, standing at the ready beside carts holding steaming plates of aromatic food, warm refreshments.

Before Kerak knew it, a plump, frowning guard came up from behind them and ordered them to remove their shirts, while a well-dressed functionary of some kind wandered in narrow loops between him and the others, examining each of them with a keen eye. This pale, thin proctor lingered for a while beside Kerak, running his fingers along the diagonal knife scar spanning the distance from Kerak's shoulder, down to his hip. Not soon enough, Kerak caught on to what was happening. After completing his examinations, the functionary stood aside and pointed to seven of the 12, who were shoved off through a side entrance for "further conditioning," as Kerak overheard a guard say through the closing door. Kerak and the other four who remained were then ordered to raise their arms. Nicosian was to his immediate left.

Another tepid-looking, equally well-coiffed functionary leaned around the corner of the room, staring at each of them one by one, cogging their images into a Kyotrimlic stone. Then they were ordered to re-clothe and were escorted to their seats.

Kerak took a careful look at his cohorts. All of them, he intuited, were strangers to Astuverica. Of them, he surmised, two were conscripts. The other two were sponsored, the hirelings of oddsbrokers, both paid in scraps but happy for even the meagerest agency. He was sure that included

Nicosian, despite the Flapestone buried beneath his skin. All of them, he was convinced, were neophytes to the sport. *I thought the Helidrome was holding out for experienced players only*, he mused, recalling Arucha's confident admonition with a vein of sarcasm. Acknowledging the collective aspect of terror he saw in their eyes, Kerak realized that he could not objectively gauge the anxiety reflected in his *own* face.

As Kerak leaned back, a grinning, courtly servant placed a tray in his lap, piled high with roasted Syenacakes and a marbled slice of Baethrugant loin, seasoned with Thaeuxdukep...the chopped, sautéed remains of Thisklean Buzzers...and a dash of scabric pestle. Beside these delicacies sat a Chabender leaf salad and a bowl of finger-sized pastries that Kerak recognized as Pictelics. These delights were accompanied by a tall flagon of mulled, spiced coquont.

Kerak knew very well what was about to happen. But for ten stratimers he couldn't have cared less while he and his fellow journeymen engorged themselves in a culinary clamor, a gastronomic orgy, rivaling anything that the simple act of eroiche could ever render. He licked each of his fingers, then his empty tray at least five times before his implements were taken from him, against his will.

The second functionary, who had left the room during this feeding, re-entered through another door, accompanied by three others, all of them looking just as anemic, though not as well-dressed. He spoke up. "36...or what remains of you. My name is Griphmun. Very soon, you will all enter onto the field of GLORY! Listen up, for your opportunity to *elevate* yourselves is drawing nigh..."

...Meaning the promise of freedom, or fair treatment...if we survive? Kerak wondered, passing a glance at Nicosian. He wished he could speak those words, but he did not know what kind of retribution a careless tongue would elicit.

"Your patrons have passed all of you off as experienced Pilects players. I won't waste my time or degrade my intelligence...or what there is of *yours*...by polling you, to test the veracity of those claims. So if you are *not* what has been said of you, for the next four stratimers I will give you an

abbreviated primer into the art of Pilects...*Helidrome* style! The rest you will learn on the field. Pay close attention and it will come quickly to you. Fall asleep, either in here or out there, and a far more sinister outcome awaits. Your choice."

Griphmun reached behind him and grabbed two implements, one in each hand. One had the appearance of a twisted stick with a sharp metal point, weighted at various intervals along the shaft. "This is the *Terruqlei*, carved from the core of the porous, but rock hard *Mirinueth* tree. Its shape is deceptive, but its engineering is flawless. Aerodynamically it can be unpredictable, but in an experienced hand it can always be counted on to deliver! You may...or may not...get the chance to use one..."

Griphmun handed the *Terruqlei* to one of his associates. He held the other implement high above his head; it resembled a curved, oval plate with a strap, covered with a burnished metal surface. "This is the *Blute*. It is a shield, of sorts, meant to deflect the *Terruqlei*, in hasty." He placed the *Blute* on his arm. "Just before entering the field, each of you will be assigned one of these. You will join three others, eight in all, comprising the hasty squad. After the signal is fired, four strygers...standing at each of the field's four corners...will, as we say, 'run counters.' Each stryger carries two *Terruqleis*, and they will sprint along the counterlines...which are at the longest sides of the rectangular field...from one corner to the next, all the while lobbing their implements at you. Your primary objective is to deflect the *Terruqleis* with your *Blutes*, to defend yourselves and your squadmates. In doing so, you must remain on your feet at all times. And you may not touch a *Terruqlei* with your hands; only your *Blutes* may touch the *Terruqleis*. As for your secondary objective; it is this..."

Four of the five sitting in that room, to whom Pilects was little more than a vague mystery, *Helidrome* style or not, stared at each other with fidgety eyes as Griphmun went on. "...Deflect the *Terruqleis* over the counterlines! As soon as 12 *Terruqleis* have been deflected in this manner, the match belongs to you. Victory to the hasters!" Kerak grimaced,

knowing that Griphmun's clipped narrative revealed but a fraction of the truth about this game...Helidrome style, that is.

And he went on. "Of course," Griphmun said, "during the match, if you are somehow fortunate enough to *hit* a stryger with a deflected Terruqlei..." He scanned the room, took a deep breath but never bothering to finish his sentence, to mention that if a single deflected Terruqlei came into contact with a stryger, the hastery squad could claim immediate victory. To have said so, he knew, just didn't seem worth his time.

It was standing room only that evening, and because of the impending Schimatariat, the Helidrome was grinding out matches day and night, with little pause and no cease. As the five rose from their seats, a billowing discharge split the air. The naked vibrancy of 15,000 restless souls burst forth, causing the spotless white walls to tremble with the anticipation of another showdown.

The five were hustled through a narrow door and into a sweaty passageway, then up a single flight of stairs to another small chamber with a set of wooden double doors on the other side. The Helidrome could not keep up with the need for uniforms so each of them were given bright orange numbers which were hurriedly sewn to their clothing, front and back. Kerak's was 33. He took notice of the numbers pinned to the others: 22, 4, 18. Nicosian was 67.

A panicked thought tugged at Kerak, running his hands along the seams of his pants. He let go a relieved sigh. The last bag of Tyrupliak was still there, as was that small woven satchel which held the Kuspegias, nestled together.

After their numbers had been sewn on, the Blutes were then distributed. Over trembling hands, each of them adjusted the straps of their implements. In silence, they stared straight ahead, unblinking. Now, it was down to mere pulsimers.

But rich platefuls of cuisine on underfed stomachs were about to break the silence. A low, flapping sound emerged from the rear, then others, followed in this tight space by choking billows of caque-infused air. The five of them moaned in agony as time slowed to a crawl. A few more squishy toots

were followed by a chorus of light moans and muffled guffaws, easing tensions ever so slightly.

Griphmun entered the room and raised his hands. "The Tsurithean Helidrome awaits you," he called out, feigning confidence. "Go now, and carry yourselves with pride! *Hedeon be with you!*"

With that, the first ray of light appeared through the opening doors.

The Helidrome! Here, surrounding them in all its pride and exultation, was the nucleus of diversion and currency trade in Astuverican social and political circles. From the lowest level of bleachers on upward, this place was the source of billions of khirius of waged gain and loss, of deals and schemes and plans laid, nurtured and sometimes ripped to pieces, particularly from within the dozens of stylish shadow flats positioned at the upper decks, accessorized as they were with chirapsiats and khiromeks, looking to ply their trade amongst those who were gifted with manner and means, far above the filth and the chaos of the Zurish-Triece. A new crescendo of thumping feet, claps, screams and catcalls shook the ground.

The doors swung open, and Kerak was shoved onto the field, his gaze locked in amazement, his head held high. His eyes were stunned with a momentary blindness brought on by the glare of over 500 soaring lightstuffs, anchored to the girders above the shadow flats at the upper decks. Another pair of hands pushed him further across the field, to the center. The five who comprised what was left of unit 36 were now joined by three others, accomplished veterans, lucky survivors of previous matches, here again after another brief respite to heal their wounds, to carry on until the Helidrome had taken from them all that it could take.

Kerak looked out upon the bleachers, from the lowest rows to the highest, to see thousands of seat holders staring at him and his teammates, their memory stones in hand, cogging their wagers on each of the eight members of this, the most current squad of hastery to test the boundaries of Metephestic fortune. It dawned on him that he should keep his chin down, in case someone from his past life recognized him, perhaps

inspired to call him out, to have him pulled from the field and arrested, all before those souls who had been brave (or foolish) enough to place odds on him could test the boundaries of their *own* fortunes; Metephestic or otherwise. Kerak raised his head at the realization, late in coming, that *this, after all, is the Helidrome. Whoever they are up there, they'll have to wait until this match is done before they bother to take me into custody. For nothing is going to interrupt a Pilects match!*

Before the signal to take positions, Kerak took note of the strygers, standing at all four corners of the field, leering through hungry eyes at the hastery squad. He tried to size them up, but beyond memorizing their numbers, and having convinced himself that they were no doubt very good at handling the Terruqlei, he could not read them. That, he surmised, was no doubt by design.

He observed their numbers: Five and Seven on the sorentrean side of the field, 38 and 21 on the norostrean. He took a closer look at stryger Five, appearing more tenacious with each passing pulsimer. She would be the sole female to participate in this match.

Kerak took note of the veterans in their squad: 27, 14 and 54. All three of them still wore at least two fresh tourniquets and bandages apiece, with none of their dressings completely covering their bloody wounds. And their taut faces spoke volumes: numbed, frightened, resolved to their fate but fierce in their determination to forestall the inevitable. As four officials approached the field, haster 54 turned to speak to the rookies. "Keep moving, keep your Blutes held high, and for Hedeon's sake, keep your eyes on 38 and Five! Do *not* turn your backs to them!" Kerak looked down, observing thousands of thin red streaks and splatters on the ground: some damp, others dry; a gridwork of mortality laid out beneath his feet like the crumpled fingers of a thousand gnarled hands. Kerak turned to see Nicosian and two other rookie hasterymates, their eyes cast downward at this crimson carpet, conscious now of the fate lying in wait before them.

The strygers motioned to assume their positions. A lone official, standing mid-field, began to shout, straining to be

heard. "Five legs. Each stryger will run a set of five legs before the first recess, which will last three stratimers. Then three more sets of five legs and the match will be called," he yelled, filling out Griphmun's oration, just before the first warning shot was fired. Kerak's heart pounded; an official took him by the arm and led him into position. *This part is a lot like I remember, in the Phileans*, he thought. *Two rows of four; that's how the hastery squads were set the last time I played.* But his thoughts were interrupted by another warning shot, signaling the 10 pulsimer mark.

The strygers each thrust a leg forward, their Terruqleis held high, ready to take flight at the next volley.

A final ear-splitting burst shook the ground, and the strygers were off.

The Helidrome shuddered from the tremor of the final signal. A repercussion of voices shattered the night air. Except for the three veterans, the other hasters kept their feet planted firmly on the ground. Kerak watched as strygers five and seven began their sprints from the corner posts, now approaching each other at full gallop along the sorentrean boundary line, their implements seated within their raised hands. Just then, a strange sound struck his ears, growing closer, now just a few neurris from his head. He turned to his left and...

...WOPWOPWOPWOPWOP...

A Terruqlei, thrown from behind him by stryger 21, passed half a neurri above Kerak's scalp. It curved off toward haster 22, who was staring at stryger Five in a fit of terror. "Turn...drop...*DROP!*" Kerak yelled at him in a panic. 22 dropped to the ground without a scratch. On his way down, though, the wobbling javelin deflected off his shoulder and took a loopy turn toward haster 27, sprinting toward the rookies in the squad, cursing and screaming at them to "wake up, run...*RUN!*" Just as he spoke, the other strygers let loose. Five, then seven, then 38 released their first throws in quick succession toward the center of the pack.

By now all eight hasters were in a fit of hysteria with four Terruqleis now in full aerodynamic assault. The first implement which 21 had thrown fell to the ground. Kerak jumped over it, then looked up to see haster Four running straight toward him in a blinding haze.

“W...watch out...!” Kerak called out to him, then diverted to his right. Four, oblivious to his hasterymate, kept his course. Kerak watched the second spear thrown by stryger Five as it clipped the right hip of 18. A vigorous spurt of blood shot out before the red-tipped Terruqlei hit the dirt. Haster 18 fell with an agonized thud.

By now, the shadows of the four remaining Terruqleis in this leg were racing across the ground, spinning and arcing from all directions. The strygers, their hands now empty, flew for the corners to resupply. They reached their opposite posts within half a pulsimer of each other, grabbed fresh points and reversed course to return to their starting posts. Leg two had begun.

As soon as the last stryger reversed course, that familiar erratic hiss encroached upon Kerak once more. He turned to see it as it quivered and shrieked in frenzied loops. Kerak dropped, torqued his body and raised his Blute high into the air. It deflected the shaft near the point, sending the implement veering off now toward 54.

Kerak screamed. “54...turn!” His hasterymate heard Kerak’s call, veered, dropped and threw his Blute skyward, striking the shaft of the Terruqlei with a fierce *clack*. That sent it soaring for the norostrean boundary line, striking the ground with a dull rap. Stryger 21, his arms raised, jumped the grounded implement, tripping over his feet in the process. He stumbled for a pulsimer, then released the weapon in his right hand, sending it soaring for haster 14, who had lost his balance avoiding the last Terruqlei thrown in the first leg. The point struck 14 in the back of the neck; the tip forced its way through the front of his throat. He fell hard in a cloud of bloody dust.

Two hasters were now down, with the second leg still in full swing. At the sight of 14’s easy demise, a sense of futility

descended on the rest of the squad; grimy, dazed, exhausted. Kerak spun, his knees ready to buckle, the residue of Actinetics rising up again in his scalded lungs. He watched yet another Terruqlei strike, this one at 67: Nicosian. The jagged point, thrown by stryger 38, grazed Nicosian's left calf with a bloody spurt, knocking him off his feet. Then another, lobbed from the deft left arm of the infamous Five, landed squarely between the shoulder blades of 54, another of the veterans, felling him in an immediate death spiral. The second leg was nearing an end as the strygers, bold and confident, kicked the last few neurris to their starting posts, ready to resupply once more.

Four down, and we're nowhere near being done! Kerak mused, shrouded in a fog of disbelief, unable to speak or to think, trembling through a haze of sweat at the expressions of terror and hopelessness written on the faces of his hasterymates. His mind spun and dropped. A thought passed before him, of a strategy he had once learned and practiced with moderate success as a youth in the Phileans. A shard of doubt clogged his budding confidence in this move, but it was overruled by a basic truth. *Pilects is Pilects. Whether it's played with Malmoux shells or Terruqleis, it's still the same game.*

Kerak kept a close eye on the strygers. By now their hands were empty as they neared their posts to begin leg three. Using all the strength that remained in his legs, he dashed for the short end of the field, the one nearest him, known to Pilects aficionados as one of the field's two *brunt zones*. Kerak stood stiff as a rock, there at the wisoltrean brunt, his eyes glued to the approaching strygers, Five and 38.

As the two strygers resupplied, they paused, tossing out cold, knowing glares at Kerak. His gaze, darting from left to right, at last centered on these two opponents. *Good!* he thought, satisfied. *They know what I'm up to.*

"Break! Break!" two of the corner officials screamed, ordering Five and 38, the strygers closest to the wisoltrean brunt, and on opposite sides of the field, out of their lull. Unable to sprint at full stride while torqueing their bodies to direct an accurate throw toward their chosen target, 38 and Five began their sprints for mid-field, each of them choosing to

lob a single implement apiece in a dual assault at yet *another* target: haster 27.

27 saw both implements, approaching him simultaneously. He dropped and managed to deflect them both, sending the Terruqlei thrown by 38 off into a tight spiral, toward haster 22. It fell short and hit a soft patch of ground. Frustrated, stryger Five launched her last javelin. It lanced the upper left arm of a befuddled Four, who remained on his feet for two pulsimers before crumbling in a fit of pain.

The strygers are exhausted, flustered, Kerak knew, watching 38 and Five approach mid-field, and their teammates, strygers 21 and Seven respectively. All four strygers slowed and turned to glance at Kerak. 21 and Seven then began their sprints for the wisoltrean posts. For Kerak.

Both of them, now having been bolstered after commiserating with their teammates, ramped into full sprints, glaring at Kerak with a proud determination. Each of them now carried but a single Terruqlei. Kerak hunched over, steeled his gaze, shifted his eyes rapid-fire between his two nearest opponents. As the voices of 15,000 vaulted to a piercing crescendo, Kerak watched the first Terruqlei roll off the fingertips of stryger Seven. He then shifted his eyes to the spear now being lobbed by 21, released half a pulsimer later. With all his strength, Kerak threw his Blute skyward, deflecting Seven's spear into the netting behind him. With the same rapid motion, Kerak reversed his Blute, striking the upper shaft of the Terruqlei thrown by 21.

The implement shook with a loud crack; the point trembled and careened furiously toward a spot about two neurris beyond the corner post which stryger Seven was now approaching. Kerak could see the dull haze of surprise on Seven's face, just before the razor-sharp point of the spear tore through muscle and bone with a squishy thud, shattering Seven's upper left leg, just below the crotch.

A streak of fresh blood struck the counterline beneath his feet. The wounded stryger cried out and tumbled headlong into the corner post, hitting the stone with his face and passing out.

A pall of shocked silence stung the Helidrome. 15,000 voices gasped in utter disbelief. Yes, strygers had been hit occasionally by glancing blows. But no one...*no one*...could recall a moment such as this.

A dozen nervous functionaries ran to a spot behind the wisoltrean brunt and gathered into a huddle, eyeing Kerak with hostile suspicion, their faces contorted in anxiety and confusion. "*The rules... The match is... is over. A stryger has been hit!*" could be heard coming from their mouths. Hollow-eyed, they stared at one another, becoming aware now of a thrust of voices, building into a tumultuous roar; a cascading swell of approval that rivalled anything the Helidrome had seen in...Hedead knows how long!

At the same time, strygers 38, Five and 21, their faces the epitome of anger and revenge, slowed their pace. But they did not stop.

Three huge lightstuffs at the risers above the norostream shadow flats flickered from a series of quavering tremors. From more than a dozen rows below the flats, 3000 restless souls rushed the lower seats, drawing themselves closer to the most dramatic action anyone had ever seen on this field. The momentum of this assault split eight rows of bleachers with a loud crack, pinning 800 exuberant spectators against the impediments protecting the field. "Perish the thought of trying to stop them," two of the officials called out.

And so, it was decided. The crowd would have its way. This match would go on.

After stryger 7 was carried off the field, an enraged stryger 21 drew himself back from his pause, taking two fresh Terruqleis in hand before reversing course from his corner post. In an act of impulsiveness, he thrust them both at Kerak, losing his balance and tumbling to the ground. One of the implements grazed Kerak's left upper arm, cutting a deep sluice across his skin. The other soared a neurri above his head and landed harmlessly on the other side of the field. As Kerak's two remaining hasterymates, 22 and 27, stood and swayed from side to side, they noticed that so far during this leg, not a single Terruqlei had been thrown their way. They doubted that

circumstance would change anytime soon. And so the four remaining spears, now in the hands of strygers 38 and Five, were destined for not a single haster but the one known to all as 33: Kerak Um.Tiago.

Kerak recalled the warning leveled at him and his squadmates by 54 before the match began. *Keep a close eye on 38 and Five!* These words shook him to his core as he watched his pursuers sprint along their counterlines at full bore, trailing behind them a muddy mist of sweat and dust, their mouths gaped open in a sputum-laced stream of curses and avowals of revenge: swift and certain.

His Blute, his knees, trembled. Kerak had no time to think. *How the freigh can I avoid four Terruqleis?* He reasoned that neither stryger would throw their points at the same time. Their accuracy, after all, would suffer for such needless haste. *But still, they'll come quickly, and I can't just stand here. I'm too easy a target!*

Kerak roused from his short lull to find 38 and Five passing mid-field, sprinting for their starting posts. And so, with his mind now drowning in a sea of panic, he did the only thing he knew to do.

Move!

Kerak galloped sideways, backwards, forwards in a series of manic arcs, keeping his radius tight, never taking his eyes off the Terruqleis soon to be launched his way. Stryger Five...impatient, hot...was the first to let one go. Kerak ducked; point one slid past him and out of sight. He had no time to reflect on his luck, though, as the second Terruqlei, this one thrown by 38, whizzed past him, grazing his left arm before spinning out.

Stay on your feet! he commanded himself. Point three followed a pulsimer later from the fingertips of 38. Kerak forced his Blute at the hissing spear, deflecting it into the net behind him. The weight of the impact against his arm caused him to wobble, but he repeated the words to himself as the fourth spear, thrown by stryger Five, the final implement to be released in this leg, sliced through the air in a jagged swath. Its aim was true: right between Kerak's eyes.

In a final, desperate show of defiance and survival, Kerak swung his Blute with all he had. The shaft of the Terruqlei slid gingerly off the hard shell, sending it soaring for the opposite sideline. Stryger 38, in a fog of denial, torqued his body to face Kerak. He watched the tip of the Terruqlei strike his sternum, splitting the bone in half and burying itself deep into his chest.

All became darkness as stryger 38 fell to his death in a dark, silent shroud of blood, sweat and grime.

*T*he throngs which had squeezed themselves together into the Helidrome that night stood and stared, murmuring in abject confusion...but only for a pulsimer or two as reality settled in. Thoughts of the merely *injured* stryger known as "Seven" were forgotten as the far more memorable sight of an *impaled* stryger burned itself into the collective psyche of the crowd. A squadron of red-faced functionaries sprinted for the wisoltrean brunt, to descend upon Kerak, while all 15,000 spectators heaved their approval skyward, even more loudly than before, shaking the Helidrome to its foundations.

The scene fell into immediate chaos. Within half a stratimer, 8000 or more souls had vaulted the impediments and rushed the field, followed in short order by the rest of the stadium. Over 500 frenzied spectators collided with the officials, the entire throng becoming swallowed up in a tangled thicket of heads, torsos and limbs. Hasters, strygers, Regents and even more functionaries were swarmed by another crush of spectators, controlled somewhat by the inadequate contingent of Machaerans which had been placed on hand for emergencies such as this. Kerak struggled to raise his head above the growing press surrounding him, seeing the face of the pugnacious stryger known as "Five," standing on the other side of the field. Her eyes burned in his direction with a raw, unrestrained hatred.

I've done it. I've gone too far! he agonized over the unwanted attention he'd now heaped upon himself. The jolt of excitement this once and forever Courvesant had felt at his most recent kill was squelched as he was jostled, tumbled,

forced together with his fellow hasters, pushed into a tightening knot by the growing throng. In an instant they were whisked off in a sea of bodies, helpless to resist, the herd being forced against its will in the direction of the nearest available exit, in an effort by the alarmed subalternates to somehow clear the field and restore order.

A thinning fraction of the crowd, including the hasters, was pushed through a set of double metal gates, then down, down into a series of twisting corridors. The numbers surrounding Kerak began to wane, until less than five stratimers after the first-ever recorded death of a stryger at the Helidrome, Kerak found himself alone, woozy, trapped far below the field, lost within a series of dark catacombs.

The clamor of the Helidrome was but a faint whisper at these depths. Kerak stumbled along the damp, cobbled floors, panting, gasping, searching in vain for a way out, knowing full well the magnetic force of the mark which had been placed upon him. Which he had placed upon himself.

10, 11 enraged voices could be heard in the near distance, some growing louder, others fainter. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the rays of a lightstaff set to its lowest level, coming up from behind. He felt a hand on his left shoulder.

“Haster! What are you doing down here by yourself? Did Te.Ghuluy send you?”

Kerak turned to look into the face of a short female, dressed very much like Griphmun and the same team of sadistic operatives who had forced him into this predicament in the first place. He stepped back and raised his hand to resist. She spoke up again.

“How come you have no escort? And why didn’t they bandage that wound on your shoulder?”

“Well, I don’t...” Kerak mumbled. He could feel his eyes growing cloudy.

“My name is Sivantha. Here, come with me.”

The attendant led him through a side corridor, around two sharp turns and into a small, well-lit room, filled with four gurneys. Two of them were occupied by sleeping patients; injuries from an earlier match. Kerak could feel himself losing

consciousness, could feel Sivantha's hands behind his back as he collapsed onto an empty gurney.

He slept for what seemed like 10, 15 stratimers. When he woke, his shirt and his shoes were gone. He felt a bandage on his left arm, covering the wound he'd received from the Terruqlei thrown at him by stryger 21. He turned to his left to see Sivantha leading a bandaged Nicosian into the room. He was placed on the last available gurney. She said a few words to him before making a hasty exit.

Kerak sat up, suddenly aware of the sharp pain in his shoulder. He peeled back the dressing from his arm to inspect the wound. As he did, a sense of calm washed over him, a welcome shot of amnesia against all he had endured since leaving the Bay of Teoramugh. He hadn't taken the time to notice it before now, but there it was. The bloody wound swirled with light but well-defined tones of mauve. The emphasis of color did not reflect the deep lavender which coursed through the veins of Dijal, of others who had spent far more time at the Crescent than he. Still, it was enough. *The saturates; the stanhics of the norostrean waters...they're still there!* Kerak thought with a sense of satisfaction.

A hand usher appeared through a side door, carrying two trays of food. He placed one beside Kerak's gurney, the other beside Nicosian's before gathering up bags of dirty clothing and spent bandages and leaving the room. The culinary fare this time was not as lush as what they'd been plied with before the match, but its aromas were every bit as satisfying.

Nicosian caught sight of Kerak, sat up and greeted him with the wave of a shaky hand, then lost no time tearing into his plate. Before Nicosian took his first bite, Kerak noticed that the meat, of unknown origin, had been coated with a dusting of fine, white powder. *Is that a painkiller? Or something else?* he wondered.

Outside he could hear it again, only nearer: a tempest of bootheels, hostile voices calling out to each other in a desperate search for something. Or someone.

Kerak pushed his food away. *They're coming for me!* he thought in a panic. If he allowed himself to linger, to remain

here to be fattened, soothed and drugged, it would be just a matter of time before he would be expected to rejoin the field, or more likely face a retribution the likes of which he could neither gauge nor elude.

A thought entered his wavering conscience: of the Swales of the Neroluer; of those he had left behind; of his father; and above all...*Cai*. Now, they awaited him...*counted* on him...to make the next critical move. Kerak shook his head. *Dijal!* he reminded himself in a panic. *I've got to find her. But how?*

Suddenly, he remembered something Nicosian had said to him when they'd met. Kerak climbed from his bed, noticing that the two doors to this infirmary annex could be locked. He motioned to engage the bolts, then walked over to an oblivious Nicosian, conscious of nothing but his meal. Other than the sound of his hasterymate's munching mouth, the squawking snores of the other two patients filled the room.

"Kerak, you startled me!" Nicosian said, raising his head from his half-finished plate. "You done with your food already?"

"No, I'm not hungry," Kerak said, noticing that Nicosian's trembling hands seemed to be calming.

"Oh, you should eat. No telling when we'll get anything like this again."

"Yeah, I'll get to it."

Nicosian wiped his mouth. His eyes grew wide, then he laughed. "You! Where did you learn how to handle a Blute like that? Your patron...why, I'll bet your stock just went up with him. *Way* up; huh? Am I right?"

"Yeah, sure," Kerak said, hearing a slight shudder coming from the door nearest him. "Nicosian, when you first saw my Flapestone, you said something about a Courderax. Are they used to track Flapestones? What can you tell me about that?"

Nicosian took another bite, then yawned. "Well, a little. My patron is an Amnic circulat. I've overheard him talk about them. Flapestones...they're indented. And most any average Courderax can track them."

"I see."

Nicosian peered at Kerak through skeptical eyes.

“How? How do you find the indentation of a particular stone?” Kerak asked.

“What do you mean? You trying to find someone?”

Kerak could feel his suspicion. “Oh, my father, he’s...there’s this drudge who owes him a few khirius. I just wanted to fill him in...”

“Your father come to the match tonight?”

“Yeah. Well, no. I think he was...Anyway! So, how do you find the indentation?”

Nicosian’s doubts were overshadowed by his overwhelming urge to get on with it, to go back to his plate, to satisfy this sudden urge to sleep. “It’s easy. They’re sequenced, every third number. If you know the indentation of the stone that was placed before it, then you...,” Nicosian said with a yawn, before taking another bite. His head eased onto his pillow. Within five pulsimers he fell into a heavy slumber.

Kerak scanned his surroundings. He noticed the rim of white powder on the edge of Nicosian’s plate, on the plates of his other two infirmymates. *Knocked out!* he thought.

Taking quick advantage, he dashed in and out of a series of closets. He found a pair of shoes and a shirt. On the counter beside the closet he saw a sharp knife with a large metal handle, along with a bag of that mysterious white powder. He dressed quickly, stuffed the knife and the bag into his last available pocket, unlocked one of the doors, peered around the jamb and made a dash for the darkened corridor.

Kerak knew the risks of attempting to escape from beneath the Helidrome. But to even the odds, he knew what he must do first. Crouching within a notch just down from the infirmary annex, he pulled out the knife and bore down upon the rigid metal threads holding the Flapestone to his skin. After two stratimers of painful gruntwork he managed to sever the stone from his skin. Then, he laid the Flapestone on the floor and rapped it hard with the heel of his shoe, splitting it in half.

He stuck his head out from the edge of the notch, listening in the dark. After four pairs of feet rushed by, he waited for at least half a stratimer of silence, then ran for five, six stratimers along a series of low hung ventilation tunnels,

just below the surface, a neurri above the uppermost level of the Zurish-Triece. By the dim glow of a series of flickering lightstuffs he came upon a row of grated floors, running beside a narrow crosscut between the Columns and the dry vaults beneath the Medius Athlamaru.

An idea came to mind. Kerak lay on one of the grates, pressing his face between the thick metal bars. The rank stench of B.O. and overcooked Pentumus wafted up from the narrow passage below, informing him that a den was nearby.

“Szaragan! Szaragan!” Kerak yelled out the familiar Kurestean call to trade, a practice he’d observed a few quinteks back while on assignment in the Andulkan borderlands. “Szaragan tud Ghilende.”

Another stratimer passed and a pair of detrus scorchers, male and female, appeared from around a corner. “Szaragan?” the female said, looking up. “Whatcha’ got?”

Kerak pulled the bag of white powder from his pocket and held it out for display. “This. It’s a sedative. Very effective. A tiny sprinkle of this stuff will send you into hibernation in no time. I need a Courderax.”

“I don’t need no sedative. I sleep just fine, when I sleep,” she balked.

“Well, then trade it to someone else for whatever you *do* need. I need a Courderax!”

“Yeah I heard you!” After a pause her wiry face turned curious. “Give me a sample.”

Kerak cut the corner of the bag with the knife, licked two fingers and buried them into the white powder. He thrust his digits through the grate. She grabbed his hand and pulled his fingers into her mouth.

In five pulsimers the scorcher’s eyes grew hazy. She lurched forward, grabbing her forehead before she hit a wall. “Y...yeah. That should do it.” She motioned to the male beside her. “Go get Vrishan. I think he’s got two Courderax’s. He’s in Thalarak’s de...de...” She plopped to the ground with a lazy thump.

Kerak dipped two pinched fingers into the bag. "Take this," he said, dropping the powder into the male drudge's open palm. "It's a little sample for Vrishan."

"Na you're not!" the female scorcher belted out, after coming around momentarily. "Give him the whole bag. Vrishan ain't gonna trade nothing for a stupid fingerpinch of...*nothing!*"

Kerak protested. "What? Do I look like a fool to you?"

"You don't look like nothin' to neither one of us," the female laughed, trying to prop herself up on her elbows. "You want your stone? Give him the bag."

Kerak paused, grimaced and handed the entire bag of powder to the male scorcher.

"Get along, Ulyrieth," the female admonished her somewhat doltish companion, with a leering eye on Kerak. "Don't want to keep the kind fellow up there waiting, now do we?"

For two stratimers, the female scorcher drifted in and out of consciousness. To keep her from falling into a heavier sleep, from being mistaken for potential fodder for another den, Kerak babbled on for three, four stratimers, every so often scoping the corridor for more unwanted company. The shrill tones above him signaled the impending start of the next match, to be delayed no longer by the rude intrusion he had forced upon the Helidrome and its petulant patronage.

Five stratimers after Ulyrieth had disappeared, Kerak was driven to silence by the approach of more voices, bootsteps. But at the start of stratimer six, the scorcher reappeared...with a Courderax in his hand.

"Vrishan traded his last three stones yesterday," Ulyrieth said, "but Scaralik2 had one. I think he liked the powder but I ain't sure 'cause he passed out right after he tested it. He ain't slept much lately."

The female shot to her feet with an angry jolt. "Does he know you have that?" She pointed to the stone.

"Well, no, But I left the bag with him. He'll cut us in for our share. You know he's..."

She threw her arm back, balled a fist and punched Ulyrieth on the bridge of his nose, knocking him to the ground, blood flying in all directions. "He'll *kill* us if he finds out you took a Courderax from him with him knowin' first!"

Kerak's patience had come to an end. "Look, do we have a deal or not?"

The female stomped the ground in a bitter rage. "If Scaralik2 finds out you been stealin'..."

"Didn't you hear what your friend said?" Kerak whispered sternly to the female scorcher, hearing more footsteps in the near distance. "Scaralik2 got a bag of sedative worth *ten* stones, not just one! He'll probably cut both of you in for a whole lot more when he realizes that."

The female scorcher squinted. "You got any more o' those bags?"

"No. That was my only one," Kerak said, the crunch of boot heels drawing nearer.

"You know where you can get some more?" she asked.

Kerak raised himself to his knees and grabbed the bars of the grates with both hands. "Do you hear those footsteps," he asked.

Ulyrieth and the female nodded.

"They're subalternates. They're coming for *me!* But if I tell them I saw a couple of filthy vassals down there with a stolen Courderax in their hands...? Well, who do you think'll be more valuable to them? Me...or you?"

In a panic, Ulyrieth grabbed the stone from his companion's clenched fist and threw it up between the grates, into Kerak's waiting hands.

"Dulei," Kerak said, passing the Andulkan word for *thanks* before raising himself from the grate and sprinting off in a desperate search for a hiding place. He spotted one to his right, then turned for it: another small notch in the wall, 15 or so neurris distant.

12 pairs of feet darted past him, and Kerak heard the number 33 muttered twice in anger. *They're on to me!* he thought. But any concern he had for himself and the prospect

of capture and return to the Helidrome...or worse, was secondary to this: finding Dijal and cogging Ligeia.

He elucidated the Courderax and pulled the broken pieces of Flapestone from his pocket. He smiled. *Looks like a fractured Flapestone is untraceable*, he mused. *But how will I be able to pick up its indentation when it's in this kind of shape?*

Kerak closed his eyes, unsure of what to do next. Suddenly, an image appeared before him, then another, a vigorous clutch of Thermionic constructs, Malaeric idioms, the faces of Ligeia...Quilla...and the panicked image of Jarumon in the throes of death at the hands of Eimear Ve.Aroa! He trembled, sweat pouring from his face as these visages came and went, leaving only tiny revenants of psychic awareness in their wake.

But they were enough. Kerak pushed the broken pieces of Flapestone together and held them hard against the surface of the Courderax. Guided by a thread of intuition, he understood that the Thermionic indentions in a Courderax always appeared in hyphenated numbers. He searched his mind for queues, clues...hyphens and numbers!

Within two pulsimers, they appeared. Random at first, but more systematic with each tap of his fingers upon the broken Flape. He hunkered down, heard another rush of footsteps coming from the direction of the Helidrome. Quickly, he separated the broken shards of Flapestone and crushed them further beneath his heel.

Three, four, five anxious stratimers passed while the Courderax remained in his right hand. Then, he caught it. The indentation of the Flape had lodged in the stone, coming through with a repetition of dull pings, coursing through the back of his mind. Kerak held his breath and drove his conscience deeper into the stone. With a final rap of pings, the indentation of his broken flapstone appeared: 10-513.

He looked around the notch, seeing nothing but hearing everything. "Dijal's stone was sewn onto her shoulder," he muttered under his breath, "right after mine was attached." *But does that mean that the stones were indented in that order?* he wondered. He remembered Nicosian's advice: *"They're sequenced, every third number."* He felt another tug at his mind,

telling him that in certain stones, the triplicate sequencing of certain indentions could be magnified by a factor or ten, depending on the amount of Menshar in the amalgam. He examined the largest chunk of broken Flapestone, rubbing his fingers in circles along its coarse grain, feeling that...somehow...his hunch was right. *If the ratio of Menshar in this Flape is high, he thought, then that would make hers...10-483? Or 10-543?* Any further divinations, on a subject as dull to his own nature as stanhic ores, remained shrouded in fog.

To be sure, he elucidated both indentions. *10-483 is in the Architrave now. There are no dens in the Architrave...*

He went on. *But 10-543 is...is at...* He dug harder. *...Is at the B.43.D Quarter loop, 214th Register.* He put the Courderax down and stared into space. "That's at the Columns!" he whispered. "That...that's no more than 500 neurris from Ligeia's terrabode!"

Kerak stuffed the Flapestone fragments back into his pocket, shook his head and tried to regain his bearings. He held the Courderax in a tight grip, wrapping his fingers around its smooth edges, and cogged a surprised and overjoyed Ligeia with instructions to meet him at a building at the 214th Register in 60 stratimers.

A thousand neurris from the Helidrome, this run of supply corridors leading to and from the stadium narrowed to a thin tunnel that went straight up, about three neurris. Kerak sighed and stared at the narrow egress, evoking Chadic's Te.Zulfre's vertical passageway at the Grottos. Then he grunted and heaved his way up to the scuttle hatch, just below street level.

How much longer until dawn? he wondered, marveling at the grind of hundreds of feet beating down upon the metal hatch. With each thud, the heavy portal, too weighty for him to lift on his own, bucked so high that at times he could make out the faces of the vigilant, the aloof and the stoned as they trod aimlessly over him.

Kerak pulled off his left shoe. The hatch jumped a little higher with each pair of feet that struck it, until he was able to insert this tattered lump of leather into the gap on a high bounce. He held onto the back of the shoe, peering through the crack, hoping that someone would find it odd that such a thing had just popped up out of a hole in the ground.

Then, a tug at the shoe. Kerak held on. Eight fingers yanked at the footwear with no luck. Then they tried to lift the hatch on their own, to retrieve this unexpected prize, still with no success. Kerak assisted by shouldering the hatch from below while the hands of the clueless thief did the job from above. Five pulsimers later and Kerak looked up from below, into the face of the hapless stranger. He gave the latch a final heave, climbed out, pulled the shoe from her hand, thanked her and ran for the Columns.

He weaved and wended his way to wisoltre, through streets and avenues clogged with a heaving press; hustling, noisome, overripe flesh the likes of which he had never seen or smelled in his entire life. After walking a thousand neurris he paused to look at the dome of the sky. Zenith was obscured by the garish glow of the lightstuffs of the Helidrome, but he could make out a few Ione near the periphery of the sky, now beginning their reluctant descent. *Morning isn't far off*, he thought, picking up his pace, unwilling to face the exposure and easy detection that luments would surely bring.

Approaching the 210th Register, Kerak slowed to a crawl. The avenues between the terrabodes at the Columns grew darker, quieter. 57 stratimers after he had elucidated Ligeia, he came upon the B-Quarter loop of the 214th Register, slowing even further, counting the numbers on the doors as he passed them.

B.35.D...37.D...39.D...

He stopped. *B.43.D* was imprinted in faded characters on a pair of dark stained double doors, at the front of this large, windowless building. He jiggled the lock and looked around. Seeing no one, he grabbed the handle of his knife and struck the blade against the hasp. After six, seven, eight good hits, the lock broke on the 9th. He ripped the fractured mechanism off

the door and pushed it open. All was dark inside. Then, he felt a gentle tap on his right shoulder.

He turned to see a smiling, nervous Ligeia, there before him. A few steps behind her, his face cast in shadow, a tall, well-fed vassal stood in silence, carrying a disengaged lightstaff in his right hand. He was here, Kerak surmised, to keep a close, protective and well-paid eye on his client.

With a sickening vengeance, the realization of what was about to happen revisited him. Seven days ago, sitting in the back of the 36th aerosphere, Kerak had pondered, from a distance, the hefty rewards, the burdensome disappointments this reunion would bring. Now, he stared into Ligeia's eyes, unable to open his mouth, to utter even a strangled whimper. The smile she had shown at their first sight of each other had now morphed into something else. Something far different.

The look on Kerak's face, a polychromatic of lofty hopes turned to death, despair and broken promises, said it all. Within five pulsimers of their meeting, she knew.

A veil of bitterness, disillusionment and anger covered Ligeia's face. She raised a trembling fist, drove it hard upon him, slowing its descent before it struck his chest. She opened her palm, shoved it down on his shoulder and laid her head against his chest, beating and screaming and crying in muffled tones.

As Kerak put his arms around Ligeia, he looked up and noticed a handbill plastered to one of the open doors of B.43.D.

ATTENTION!! it read in bold letters. *The Schimatariat convenes in three days. Until further notice you are required to comply with the following codes of conduct...*

“SUL-WITHULEA. THAT’S...WHAT they used to call it.”

Eiliox Um.Kao-Ulant panted, trying to keep up with Diarmad, his words coming in fits and starts. He and his Sovereign dodged boulders, mounds of burned and waterlogged trash and the decaying stench of hundreds, here on the floor of the Swales of the Neroluer. Their new camp, to which they were now headed, lay 2000 neurris to sorentre.

“Do I look like I care about that? That den of apostates, whatever it was called, doesn’t exist anymore. What I want to know is how many more active colonies there are, here in the Swales?” Diarmad commanded. “And how many pellots have you interrogated so far?”

“Three, Diarmad. Three prisoners were interrogated. The others who survived are...deranged. The Actinetics must have put them in a state of shock. We can’t make out a word they say.”

“What did the lucid ones say?”

“Two of them confirmed that there had been no more than four known refugee colonies in the Swales. We took out two of those camps about half an untek ago, with no survivors. Remember?”

“Of course I remember! But I also know that you let nearly 200, maybe 300 skantaros escape the third camp, or what’s left of it.” Diarmad pointed to his right, snapping his fingers in the direction of a low rise at the Xyklian ambits. “What was it called?”

“Shulumethros,” Eiliox said, absorbing the sting of that jab with a bite to his lower lip.

“Why? Why did you allow their escape?”

“We’ve been through this already. You...you told me not to linger, after the Triurate was sparked. You told me to get out, to get my contingent out. I was just following orders. No one wants a replay of what happened in the Moirisois...”

Diarmad turned, his hands raised, his manic eyes glowing red. “Do not EVER speak to me of the Moirisois! Do you hear me? *Do you?!*”

Eiliox recoiled, considering his response. He chose, though, to say nothing.

Diarmad plowed ahead, making sure to keep a lead on his second-in-command. Feverishly, he threw his hand against the back of his neck, lifted the damp hair around the high collar of his jacket and began slapping, picking, jabbing, ripping, tearing away at the unhealed, *unhealable* wound behind his ear. Eiliox watched in horror as Diarmad’s bloody fingertips left mauvy stains around the edges of the entwine, the birthmark at the nape of his neck. He watched his Sovereign sink to his knees, tremble, then with a jerk regain his footing, as if his step had never faltered.

Diarmad turned to face Eiliox, his face now imprinted with sorrow, regret. “Eiliox, please forgi...” Without blinking, he went mute, fighting off the urge to apologize, taking charge of his usual rigid demeanor. The constriction of duality now presented itself clearly in the face of Te.Sinian.

“What’s our current supply,” Diarmad asked in a monotone, caught between moods.

Eiliox took a deep breath. “It’s all gone. The amalgams are gone, Diarmad. I told you about that yesterday. After Shulumethros, I’d managed to pilfer about five-hundred miaric weights of amalgams from Lo.Ruikis and Ve.Guirole. That was all they had. And that was all used up when we burned Sul-Withulea.”

Diarmad began staring at his hands, noticing the blood on his fingers. He began shaking them, cursing, twisting his head back and forth, side to side. “Did you...did you ask Lo.Ruikis and Ve.Guirole...if they had any more amalgams?”

“Diarmad, did you hear what I just said? They’re out. I can’t find a maquit outside of Astuverica who has enough amalgam to burn a Braylimunt,” Eiliox said, describing a cavender only large enough for single occupancy. “So if you’re thinking about another Triurate...don’t. We’re done with that until we can resupply. Besides, what is there left to burn?”

“Where are they now? Where?!” The pendulum of Diarmad’s mood began to swing into familiar territory.

“Lo. Ruikis has returned to Astuverica, with the other half of *your* contingent.”

“What about Ve.Guirole?”

“I sent him off to try and locate more amalgam, anywhere he can find it. By the way, I cogged those orders, too. How do you intend to explain yourself to Lo.Jehan? *You* were supposed to be there, at the Schimatariat. You were supposed to leave me in charge here,” Eiliox said, lamenting his missed opportunity at sole command, far and away from his Sovereign’s paranoid demeanor. “You disobeyed orders, Diarmad!”

Another sudden swing, this one more restrained. “I doubt that the D.H. will sink into anarchy because one lone Machaeran chose to obey his *conscience* rather than that gang of caquehead panjandrums in the Architrave. Besides, whatever I’ve busted, my father will have it fixed. Or my mother; she and my sister should be back in Astuverica by now.” Without warning, Diarmad was struck with an awareness, of the limits of his parents’ ongoing willingness to “fix” anything as it related to their son’s transgressions.

“Good thing Savita made it out of that camp alive,” Eiliox said. “In case she fails, though, you’d better find a way to make this right.”

“Oh, that’s taken care of!” Diarmad carried himself now with a more confident air, the ascendancy of Chimierepha. “What do you think I’m trying to accomplish by staying behind? *Justification*, in its purest form, my old friend.”

Eiliox cursed as his boot floundered in an ankle-deep pit of mud. He high-stepped, resuming his pace. “I can’t believe those pellots at Shulumethros managed to destroy those Kiyfer domes?” he said. “How the *freigh?! If not for that...*”

“...Then they would have all perished,” Diarmad raged. “*All of them; that’s how it should have gone down.*”

Eiliox paused, alarmed at this callous tone, even coming from one as reliably caustic as Te.Sinian. *Does he not care a whit for the life of the skridlak who brought him into this Sphere?* he mused.

“But who? How?” Eiliox asked. “It’s no small feat breaking through a pericule?”

Diarmad pumped his fists, obsessed with the notion of insubordination...in his own ranks. *There were subalternates, under my command, he mused, stationed along the ambits, not far from those pericules. Could they have had a hand...?*

Diarmad dropped his head and diverted his focus to the debris-strewn path at his front. He pulled his blood-stained hands from his pockets, then quickly returned them, making sure to hide them from view, cursing himself for the momentary lapse of concealment. “Body count?” he asked.

“From Sul-Withulea...900 to 1000 dead. Some were crushed in the cave-in, when the Actinetics were at their hottest. No telling how many are buried under that rubble.”

“What do we know of the survivors? Estimates?”

“75, 100 at the most.”

Diarmad paused to pivot, to survey the Mysouxlian ranges to estre. “As it concerns escapees, we’re looking at anywhere from 275 to 300, between the two of those camps. Correct?”

“Correct,” Eiliox responded, having no idea if those numbers were accurate.

Diarmad pointed an anxious finger to estre. “Tomorrow morning at dawn I want every available pair of feet on those ranges. Do you hear me?”

“We’ve been searching the Mysoux, Diarmad. Not a single survivor has turned up.”

“Listen up; I said *everyone!* They couldn’t have gone in any direction other than estre. If they had, we would have known about it. They’ve got to be tucked away somewhere inside those slopes. There are a few azimuths we’ve disregarded. I want you to cover them immediately. *That’s* where you’ll find them!”

The two of them carried on, approaching a steep rise. Diarmad bent down to pick through a wide field covered with shard; efflux from the flood. The Lumens hovered high above them in a disjointed patchwork, bound for a wisoltrean berth along a meandering norostrean pathway.

Trudging onward, Eiliox and Diarmad noticed that the ground was now largely dry, here at the edge of the flood plain which had been created by the deluge of Shulumethros. Before pushing off for the top of the rise, Diarmad noticed a pair of twin glints off to his left, about five neurris apart, near the edge of the flood line. He walked toward them, then picked up and examined the sources of those reflections.

He stared at the stone in his left hand, remembering the last request Vikram Lo.Jehan had made of him before they'd parted ways. Based on the description his circulats had provided, Diarmad knew exactly what he had found. *Without a doubt*, he thought, *this is a Trimethric stone.*

He reached for his satchel, opened the flap and lowered the stone to the bottom. In doing so, the back of his hand brushed the Kuspegias, buried within a fold of cracked leather. He pondered the idea of tossing them, with a lusty, satisfying heave, out onto the floor of the Swales. *What good are they to me, anyhow? All they've brought me is criticism, doubt, distraction!* But as he took the tiny, twin stones between his fingers, he reconsidered, dropped them, rendering them once again to darkness and neglect.

Now he studied the stone in his right hand. It looked to him like an old memory stone, a curious object, rife with cracks, glyphs and entwines. He noticed that a wafer-thin part of it had been sheared off. *Judging by the teethmarks in the grain*, he thought on examination, *this looks like the work of a filiablade.* It, too, he gently lowered into his satchel, promising later to give it closer scrutiny. He then pushed from his mind any further meanderings on Thermionics.

From across the sorentrean expanse of the Swales, Haruhn Lo.Vytris coggled the imminent return of her Sovereign. She steeled herself, pursed her lips and laid her Treflicat aside. She picked up the weathered old memory stone her parents had given her, before Haruhn had begun her journey to free herself from the absorptive prison of Muharic thought, so near to the heart and soul of her father, Algarn Ve.Theriak. Now, in the wake of the blue death which had consumed the Neroluer, Haruhn's wavering devotion to

Machaeran principals finally turned to dust. So had her once lofty regard for her schismatic Sovereign, Diarmad Te.Sinian. Not that the Muharadu had ever held a warm place in her heart; far from it. Her sense of justice for her father, though, had grown stronger than ever.

It had been with a conflicted bias that she had pilfered and traded those two tiny pairs of high-grade memory stones, confiscated in a raid on a Muricai furnace; a raid Diarmad had ordered while in the Vengaos, just after Haruhn's enlistment as a Machaeran subalternate. But those acts were now epilogue, far beyond her control.

And so, she gripped her parents' Thermionic gift with a compressed fury. *Father*, she cogged, with nervous enthusiasm, *I can confirm once and for all that your suspicions are correct. Your Palialouge! Te.Sinian gave the order. It was his contingent that lit the flame. Make the Medius aware, and do with him what you will...*

*T*hrough plasmodic glass she stared, her eyes filled with wonder and sadness, her vision cast toward a bright wisoltrean sky. She squinted hard, and in so doing she could almost feel the Eusterian waters lapping at her feet. Behind her she could see the towering cathedrals of rock surrounding the beach at the Crescent. In her ears...the voices of Bechrach and Cai and Kerak pushed, then drifted away on a vague norostrean breeze.

Savita stirred, and the outcry of thousands, at the Columns, the Helidrome and everywhere above the stones of Triage, consumed the child's innocent wanderings.

"Ayu...Ayu!"

Savita screamed, panicked, still drowsy from half a day of restless sleep. She threw an arm toward the clerestory above her bed, as if to slap it, then tossed the other out to her side in search of her daughter, finding her only a pulsimer before preparing her scarred lungs to scream out once more.

Savita tried to sit up in bed, then plopped back down again, her bruised, bandaged limbs failing to sustain her weight. Since their exodus from the Swales, her strength had

vacillated between polar extremes, from bad to worse to better to stable, then repeated in succession. At the present, who could say at what point on the spectrum she was? Her daughter was at a loss to understand how any of this would turn out.

A hand usher tiptoed in, whispered something to Guymoun. He wore a mask of solicitude, sitting alone in the darkest corner of Savita's vast suite. In his fingers he massaged the Kyotrimlic stone that their party had brought back from the Bay of Teoramugh, hidden from even his Ceveaesh since their return to Astuverica.

Guymoun stood, tossed a sad smile at Ayu and hurried off. He knew that this was not the time for him to be here. Ayu watched him as he sulked out the door. She knew her father would arrive soon.

Ayu. She still had trouble answering to that name on the first call, but in her own sincere, disoriented way, she vowed to keep trying, to keep it straight, to acclimate herself to this new order into which she had been stolen. She was desperate to please the manic invalid who insisted on being called "Mother", the one who had kissed her and held her with such affection as the grottos burned all around them, until they were able to slide through that watery funnel, between the fractured stone, to their salvation.

I owe her. I owe them, her little mind thought behind a trembling frown. *This is my place, now. I must protect them, the way they protect me. I must make my...Mother, and my, my...Father....proud of me. Shouldn't I?*

A bell rang in the foyer; a delivery from a courier, fresh from Level Five. It was a package, emblazoned with the seal of Shirascur. The talented, trusty khiromek had not failed his Ceveaesh; not at all. 20 crystalline vials tinkled and gleamed in the heavy wooden container as Tyrilia, her mother's favorite hand usher, entered the room and approached. She lifted Savita's head and poured half a vial of clear liquid into her mouth. Then she leaned over and pressed her palm against the articulum stone giving her secondary control over the morithules. She watched the clerestories open slowly above Ayu's head, here at the 36th Cypliat.

At this height, and this time of day, the airs moved upon the gentlest of breezes. The only sounds that could be heard were Tyrilia's wispy footsteps on the padded floor, contrasted with the screeching grind of Savita's labored breath. Ayu remained, clutching her mother's fingertips with her left hand. Beneath Ayu's right palm, Savita's Treflicat lay nestled within the folds of her mother's quilt.

Now, a chorus of sound; of doors, closing, opening, repeating. All the while, Ayu thought of Guymoun. From the first moment she'd met him he had held her trust, her deepest affection, within the palms of his massive, cratered hands. She squinted again, picturing his ravaged face, the epitome of redemption soaring from the barren waters of defeat. He was, to her, a vivid reminder of the Barutha divers, all of whom, she imagined with a smoldering regret, had by now been swallowed up in one form or fashion by this vast Horizon into which she had been thrust.

In the hallway, beyond the closed door to her mother's suite, she heard the sound of footsteps. First five pairs of feet, then three, narrowed down to one. Ayu lifted her left hand, causing Savita to shift, to moan ever so slightly. The fingers of Ayu's left hand brushed the pocket of her cloak, the one which contained the small stone jar she had "collected" from the Grottos. It too was a reminder of sorts...of great joy, tragic loss, almost as much as the Eusterian shore she pictured before her. But in reality, this little jar was so much more than that, and as she pressed her right hand upon her mother's Treflicat, a wave of resonance led her to understand why.

A single pair of footsteps came to a halt outside the door. The sound could be heard of a lone hand brushing against the stained Bittermoor paneling. To Ayu, it seemed like a lifetime had passed since she, Garion and her mother had first chained themselves to each other. Now she could feel that the circle was at last beginning to close.

She could hear a hand pressing against the articulum. The door began to open.

Ayu closed her eyes and pushed harder. Then, she could feel it. A great event, she sensed, was at the threshold; a

gathering of souls, a challenge of minds, a conquest of the will! Ayu could feel that by the time this event had drawn itself, the Architrave will have trembled, all the way to its core.

She understood its importance to those around her, to her parents, to the Triumvirate and to the Dimensional Horizon as a whole. Her concept of the Horizon still remained within the confines of a narrow boundary. Her place in it, though, suddenly seemed to have grown far more significant.

Ayu's hands trembled. The door was now opened to its fullest extent, and she stared into his face with a thorough, unvarnished understanding.

Or did she?

Ayu placed her left hand against the back of her neck, the tips of her fingers touching the edges of her birthmark. The fingers of her right hand remained against her mother's Treflicat. Her father's fingers, she could sense, had touched this same stone, many times. And as she stared into the mind of the soul who approached her, she was struck with a portent...an overwhelming aspect of deceit, incongruity...*duality!*

Should I? she asked herself again. *Yes, I should,* she concluded. *But now is not the time. Now is not the place!* Ayu fidgeted as he began to walk toward her. *Mother won't miss me; not for long. Tyriia! She'll take me there. She won't refuse me. I know it.*

He knelt beside the bed and took Ayu's hand. *Who does that face really belong to?* She wondered. She extended her arms, aware, as always, of the stone jar lying beside her. Something deep, conclusive, troubling, spoke to her.

My father will soon be in trouble. He'll need me! And I must do what is right for him, whatever the cost!

Puaolo Te.Mauxlur lay on his knees. His torso heaved, lunged in painful repetition. His shivering limbs were enmeshed, locked together, unable to separate. He pressed his face to the ground, his eyes sealed shut. His hands gripped his stone so

tight that the bones in his fingers began to splinter and crack under the pressure.

The wind beat against his back, encircling him in a cloud of amber. The Lumens pivoted this evening to norostre, then looped and spun around to sore-wiso, bound for a wisoltrean berth. He tried to raise his head, to open his eyes, to turn his face to the right and catch a glimpse of the mighty flock, for what might be the last time. "Givers of light...of *life*..." he mumbled, the words breaking apart within a mind filled with the wreckage of thousands, *millions* of thunderous invectives, "*Please! Spare! MINE!*"

32. That is how many souls had fallen here today. Puaolo, now alone, moaned, screamed, fought to channel his thoughts, to steer his mind away from the stain of psychotic contagion.

He held his Treflicat more tightly now, placing his thumbs on the seal through which the stone had been pumped with Tyrgomec. He intuited the presence of at least three urgent cognitions, all from the Architrave, left for him right before he'd lost contact with the Recondite. He wrapped his hands around the stone, sensing that the Tyrgomec had begun to assimilate with the Phylox/Hagonite amalgams of which the stone was comprised, suffusing his own thoughts into the dwindling open spaces within his cortex. For now, these strands of private filamentation served as tiny wedges, preventing the intrusive subchattels, tumbling around in his head, from colliding headlong. From tearing his fragile brain to pieces.

For a few pulsimers, Puaolo was able to gather himself, musing now on their journey, one which had taken them far from the Swales, even from the Brandishments, a desolate terrain which he had been falsely convinced would bear encouraging fruit. He remembered how this expedition had been almost routine; even pleasant, in a way. How the Machaerans under his limited command had seemed to embrace him, relieved to be out from under the yoke of their tormented Sovereign. Where the pursuit and discovery of

revenants was concerned, though, it had been anything *but* routine.

This place seethes with filamentation; resonance; DISSONANCE! He recalled how that thought had obsessed him as his contingent had paced back and forth for two days, in a wide arc between two Boric piers. He had failed, though, to find the syndroqlast he'd so desperately sought, to enable him to cog a set of abstracts to the Architrave; abstracts containing the last of the revenants he'd been able to capture until now, suffuse with Thermionic volticity.

Day three had been a success, leading him to know that there was more...*much* more...between not just two but *three* Borics, buried inside an invisible boundary between the balanced and the unhinged. Explitore and subchattels of a nature never before articulated by the mind of any soul, dead or alive, had been articulated by *him* alone! Or so, in his naïveté, he had thought.

After a day of deadly pursuit, his ambition for raw, unrestrained filamentation had led him to this place. Puaolo managed after a vigorous effort to raise his head. There, from the corner of his eye, he saw not the Lumens but the remains of seven souls: four subalternates, all three of his circulats and one maquit, wrenched in rigor mortis. They had dropped no more than 15 neurris from where he lay at this very moment. Beyond them, 24 others lay dead in the dark mists of the Chi'ot.Vuloar. This is where his arrogance, his blind sense of duty, and his simple, unfulfilled longing to *know*, had led him.

He cried out as another wave hit him, a dense shrill of voices, reams, tomes. Vibrant images of glyphs, Kabalyphs, filled his skull. A convoluted backwash of faces; tongues whipping in, through and beyond his mind with manic intensity, fallen headlong into the realm of the unbearable.

It's no use! With eyes wide open this time, Puaolo rolled over and once again buried his face into the ground. Another wave, this time accompanied by a sense of anger and resentment, burned deep within. For beneath his eyes lay dozens of chisel marks, within a deep hole; strong evidence that someone had preceded him, had taken *something* from this

place, and recently. *But...where? Where did they go? And HOW for the life of Hedeon, could they have made it out of this place...alive?! It is simply...not...POSSIBLE!!* In the complete parting of the Chi'ot.Vuloar, the sight of dozens, then hundreds of skeletal remains caught his eye.

He turned his head to the left, the tremens now shaking him with such force that he could feel muscle and cartilage tearing apart, eyes bulging, bleeding from within his sockets. With his right hand, he laid his Treflicat at the bottom of the hole which someone had dug there, beneath his left shoulder. He pressed down upon the forged grain, still fighting to focus, to channel his diminished sanity into the stone, in the hope that it would somehow be returned, reflected, magnified upon its journey home. To Astuverica.

Puaolo opened his left hand and pressed down upon a clump of fine, yellow dust. Like an arrow pulled from a cerebral quiver, a voltaic, slipstream shot through his arm and across his shoulders. The jolt twitched his right thumb, causing it to slide along the grain of his Treflicat, launching a single abstract into the twilight sky and a distant, waiting syndroqlast, somewhere to sorentre.

“SH...”

His tongue swelled, spitting the sound from out of his mouth.

“SH...SHU...”

To his front, the Chi'ot.Vuloar disappeared. Puaolo Te.Maaxlur brought himself to his knees, arched his back, lifted his head and stared out upon a lustrous tongue of waterstone, now reflecting orange and red in the death of lumens. Another parting of mists revealed, to his left, a deep, dark notch, a chasmic separation between two spiraling rings of Aquylur; a place at which he could take refuge as night fell. And there, he willed himself to follow.

Puaolo Te.Maaxlur raised his head, lurching a guttural blast into the twilight air.

“SH...SHU...SHUAI...!!”

There is a popular, oft-repeated legend of a young soul named Guienne Te.Vidanth-Culur, a fisher who once hailed from a mythic archipelago located thousands of neurris to estre of the Peres-Surhofrian island chain, deep within the confines of the Eusterian sea.

Guienne, her older brother Paetric and their mother Sinheia spent their days in their little Eremostepe pirogue, paddling or sailing through clear, native waters, laying out buoys and nets. Their constant prey were the myriad schools of Peligarthe and Nerialuge that migrated between the Aquina Sul-Ataurea and the mid-norostrean reaches of the Eusterian sea, before being rebuffed by the toxic saturates which poisoned the far norostrean waters.

Due to their proximity to the Aeries, the seas in this corner of the Horizon can become quite hazardous during an estrean berth or dawn. During their daily expeditions, the cautious Sinheia always kept her children and their fragile boat close to shallow home waters, particularly after Zenith, in case the Lumens chose to berth nearby. And if such an estrean dusk occurred, she made sure to delay their launch the next day until just after dawn, for the same practical reasons.

Most of the other fishers from this archipelago exercised as much caution as Sinheia. The alternative was clear: to be lost at sea, or worse, cast upon the nearby Aurean rilles; left to choke and burn in a cloud of lavender toxicity. The few-in-number who chose to remain far out to sea near dusk, or brave a launch before dawn, suffered for their foolishness. Hence, one reason why they were now so *few in number*...

For the past 12 quinteks, the migratory routes taken by these schools of fish had been drifting steadily farther from the safe waters surrounding the archipelago. Adding to that the decline in the size of even their finest catches, most of the islands' fishers had by now abandoned their nets to cultivate the few native crops which would grow in the nutrient-poor soils. Or to herd the toothy, three-legged Duoderls that once roamed wild and unfettered throughout the hilly native terrain. Or even to pluck the puckish, ill-tempered Zephyr Runt from the rocky shallows.

But not the family known as Te.Vidanth-Culur. As the barter rate for Peligarthe and Nerialuge soared in the archipelagos, they chose to keep their nets wet while the rugged hands of Sinheia spliced and mended each severed cord, every frayed and tattered line. All the while, her children drove their pirogue forward in relentless pursuit.

As the days progressed, though, their casts continued to come up as short as those of their neighbors who remained with them in the trade. In time, the last of their fellow fishers chose to beach his pirogue, to try *milking* the few compliant Duoderls he could round up, while the stomachs and the purses of Sinheia and her offspring continued to shrivel.

Soon, the day arrived that they all agreed would be their last. "Today, we cast our nets," Paetric urged his mother and his sister. "Tomorrow, I guess, we wade for Runts?"

Their nets remained dry at dawn of their last day of fishing. But at 40 degrees before Zenith, the Eusterian currents began to run stronger, the waters becoming choppiest, more frenzied than they'd been in half an untek. As the Lumens peeled off to norostre, they were encouraged to launch, propelled by a strange sensation that somehow, today would be different. Perhaps even better.

Guienne was the first to see it, to *estre*. A cauldron of whitecaps, 50 neurris off. While his sister shouted directions, Paetric, his oars in hand, urged the boat along as Sinheia dropped their nets, their buoys, then extended their ropes 10 neurris behind the stern of their double-ended watercraft.

Guienne and Paetric shared the oars now, their sail luffing above a glassy sea. Advancing slowly, Guienne could feel a surge, a gentle wave, lifting the bow of the boat. The stern, too, rose and settled. Guienne looked to *estre* again. The frothy waters had now stilled.

Turning to face the stern, Guienne's body was suddenly jerked toward the bow. She and Paetric were tossed from their seats. Their fragile little boat began to race, skipping and scudding backward at high speed along the sea's glassy surface.

Guienne pulled herself up to see her screaming mother, falling over the railing and into the drink. Sinheia's feet had

become tangled in the lines to two spare buoys, both of which went overboard with her.

By the time Guienne and Paetric had pulled themselves back into their seats, they were horrified by what they saw: a large, male Barutha, its dorsal fins caught in their net, its powerful twin caudals thrashing the peaceful waters. Guienne turned to spot her floundering mother as the giant beast dragged them and their helpless boat to estre. Then, the fish began to panic. In an effort to shed the cumbersome net from his fins, the fish started swimming in sharp zig-zags, diving, then soaring through the air, struggling to find his release.

“Don’t! Paetric, don’t!” Guienne called out as her brother tried to stand, holding his knife so he could move to cut the ropes to the net. He ignored her advice and clambered to his feet. The angry beast pivoted hard to its right, slanting the cockpit to the left, tossing Paetric into the Eusterian sea. The boat’s only knife was still in his hand when he hit the water.

Guienne, terrified and alone, looked behind her in disbelief. The boat began to bounce harder, gaining speed. In the darkening distance she saw the horrified image of her mother, clinging to one of the two buoys. Paetric, a strong swimmer, had already struck out for the other. Guienne threw herself toward what was now the bow of the craft, struggling with blistered fingers to untie the ropes to the net, to somehow sever this soon-to-be fatal connection between her and the equally terrified fish to her front. For 25 stratimers she fought with the tightening knots, but after 30 stratimers she realized that it was not to be. She cried out and fought so see behind her in an encroaching mist. Her mother and brother had by now vanished from sight.

Guienne thought for a moment of jumping from this careening watersled, but there were no more buoys upon which to hold. She was not the strongest of swimmers; this she knew. And so her fear of drowning kept her pinned to her seat.

Another 70 stratimers passed. As the boat continued to gain speed, its violent pivots and jabs growing more intense, her hopes faded with the dying light. She dropped to the floorboards, bundled herself into a tight fetal position and

stared up at the sky, now beginning to fill with the first of the night's Ione.

The boat sped along, and Guienne's eyes clouded over in despair. She turned to her right and noticed her mother's talisman, hanging above the floorboards from a peg driven into the widest rib of the boat's framing. Given to Sinheia when she was a youth, this tiny shard of raw, chelated Hagonite hung through a small hole from a rope made of dried Barutha tensor.

On its face it bore an intriguing glyph...etched in impeccable detail, as if by the hand of no living soul. This tiny amulet, innocuous in appearance, had always reassured, comforted Guienne's pragmatic mother, for reasons neither of them could explain. And so, just to be sure, on the boat it had always stayed.

The Ione seized the dome of the sky, and Guienne curled her body into an even tighter ball, the talisman held tight in her left hand, its cord wrapped around her wrist, its fine engraving pressed against her palm. It was in this position that she passed into a troubled sleep, rife with grim acquiescence, her fate now racing breakneck into the great unknown.

Later, after what seemed only a few stratimers, Guienne was jostled awake as the bow lunged forward with a loud crack, sending the stern skyward. She was thrown into the water. The pirogue had struck a submerged rock, somersaulted and landed bottom end up. By the time Guienne surfaced, she saw the Barutha scurrying off to norostre, finally having freed itself from the now severed cords of the net.

In a syrupy mist, she swam for the foundering boat and pressed her exhausted body against the overturned hull. Behind her, the first rays of dawn began to infuse the norostrean sky. To estre, the sights and the sounds of a heavy surf could be heard, pummeling a rocky shore. For five stratimers she pushed the capsized hulk toward the shallows until a crashing wave threw it and her against the rocks. For a while she lay on the rocky beach, her exhausted body and mind unable to rise up, to take the next step.

But rise up she did. And she was horrified by what she saw.

To her left, to her right, the scene was the same. Dozens upon dozens of corpses lined the beach, now appearing one by one in ascendant light. Their anguished, unrecognizable forms were preserved in the positions they had assumed at their demise, encased in a thin, glossy veneer. Some had perished trying to ascend the steep escarpment which ran straight up, no more than 10, 15 neurris to her front, to estre. Others lay on the rocks, just beyond her feet, while nearby, another 10 or so corpses bobbed about in the surf, forever beating against the lifeless shore.

Guienne's eyes were drawn upward as luments cut through the mists, throwing a cluster of scorching rays against the crags which hovered high above. Then, the ground, the air...began to tremble. A thunderous outcry, a violent upthrust, jostled her and threw her to the ground.

She stared up at the top of the peaks, and the deplorable truth finally dawned. Her eye, following the range from norostre to sorentre, saw hundreds, perhaps thousands of cascading billows of lavender air, spraying forth from their crests, all at once, under pressure from the warming air. In a final fit of terror, she realized that she had been thrown upon the very cusp of the Aurean rilles!

A portion of the mists near her shot skyward in this massive eruption, then a smaller fragment, closer to the sea, billowed and curled and began to collapse in giant, loopy cambers. Guienne gasped in fear, with nowhere to turn, nowhere to run or hide...until she remembered the overturned boat. Quickly, she made her way toward the craft, intending to crawl under the tight gap between the railing and the rocks. But it was too late. The Mists of Aurea now descended upon her, blinding her, covering her entire body and coloring her skin indigo.

She dropped to her knees, fought to hold her breath, but it was no use. She cried out, heaving, gasping, drawing huge clumps of poisoned air into her lungs; once, twice, three times and more. She looked around her as the thick billows that had

once encircled her body now withdrew toward the peaks, to be launched in a loud swish into vertical ascent; to follow the arc of the sky in the intensifying heat of day.

The air now thinned. She leaned against the hull of the boat and looked around her, hearing only the crashing surf. Feeling something strange crawling up the fingers of her left hand, she rubbed her eyes with the fingers of her right. Then, she saw it, imprinted into her left palm: a glyph, the epitome of the same perfect etching which had been carved onto her mother's talisman. While she had slept, it had etched itself onto her skin, inscribing its fathomless image into her tender flesh.

Guienne stood. A sense of serenity washed over her. She looked to wisoltre, noticing that only four or five neurris away, the boat's oars bobbed about in the foam. She waded out to reach them, and as she did, a splinter pierced her right hand. She held the hand above her shoulders and gawked at it in amazement, noticing a thick stream of blood, the color of dark lavender, trickling down her arm.

She washed and bound her wound and retrieved the oars, using one of them as a lever to right the boat. And so, Guienne Te.Vidanth-Culur pushed her little pirogue through the surf, tossed its broken mast and sail onto the shore and shoved off, rowing her craft on a wisoltrean course, bound at last for home waters.

The legend unfolds that after two days of backbreaking effort, this proud survivor of Aurea's curse, thought to be the first of her kind, plucked her mother and brother from the sea, returning them all to the safety of their native island. She lived out the rest of her days with her left palm, bearing her lifesaving Kabalyph, always proudly extended and in full view, for all to admire.

* * * * *

His face was etched with the grit of a blustery, wisoltrean dawn, his trailworn eyes still blinded by Hedeon's assurgence. He trudged at mid-day along the narrow traverses of the Saurostran highlands, just beyond the Philean border. And as

he did, Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest reflected on a memorable sight. Now seven days out of Astuverica, he peered to his left. A plateau presented itself, a low rise signaling his nearness to his native grounds.

Approaching the crest of the plateau, he saw it in the near distance. *It*, of course being nothing more than a squat, narrow, one-story terrabode, built of cut stone by his grandfather, 105 quinteks ago, above a hand-dug basement fitted into an abutment at the base of a shallow ravine. It was the product of another time, long before the old gleaner's grandson, at the age of 16, swore his allegiance to the influence of a charismatic, shoeless wanderer, an apostle whose fealties bent toward some odd little cult of Fulgency hailing from a coastal backwater known at the time as Pierk-Astuverist.

Dhulorei took a seat on a flat stone, gnawing in frustration at the twisted, frayed straps of his pack. Before rejoining this journey, he turned to catch a glimpse of the place from which he had come. The clarity of luments at this angle and the gentle slope of the terrain showed the panorama of the Serritara plain in all its brilliance. He squinted, imagining that he could almost make out the tapered silhouette of the Architrave, rising high above the Eusterian shoreline; not to mention the clogged viamars, funneling in the last of those who had been so honorably called...or rather, *coerced*...to participate.

Tomorrow, it would begin. He shuddered at the thought of it, regretting, and then maybe not, his choice to take his leave of Astuverica, to trust a vacillating corps of Muharic Ephriants to represent the priorities of the Medius in the manner that *he* would have preferred. Something unexplained but deep and resonant had told him that his terrabode, his only real sanctuary in this cursed Horizon, was where he belonged right now, and where he should ride this event out. But that hunch could not be rationalized to anyone, much less himself. "My presence at the Medius, in the Halls of the Architrave, indeed *anywhere* in Astuverica, would cause a distraction," he had told his fellow Muharics, feigning confidence in his own words. "And besides, talk will get us only so far with the Xaru-

Chalidaethras.” *But the twin stones; they will carry us far beyond those constraints...!* He gasped, pausing to take in the gravity of what he had done, and what was about to happen.

Cerys Lo.Uphliac! Can she be trusted? Will she utilize them as we had so often discussed, as we had agreed? Now, he knew, was no time to waste on doubts and insecurities, as nothing anymore remained within his control. He sighed, and the grip of helplessness began to ease. Yes! I’m sure of it. The Medius Athlamaru appreciates what lies beneath those matching entwines, the sinew of those two tiny, fragile wafers. And as for Lo.Uphliac...I have no choice but to trust her to carry our standard. To carry my standard!!

Um.Aara-Maest rubbed his hands together, well satisfied. Long ago, his brusque tone, his misanthropic rants, had cost him dearly. It had taken 22 quinteks for him to persuade his detractors to hear him out, to allow him back into the fold. Talk of errants had awarded him the return invitation for which he had fought so hard. Talk of errants, indeed, had brought the Medius, the X-C and even the Architrave itself to its very knees. But the time for him to speak for himself had passed. Now it was time for those little stones to speak *for* him.

“Kirio-Lutrenos!” he had urged Lo.Uphliac and the rest of the Medius before leaving Astuverica. *“Disseminate the stones! The Schimatariat will run three, maybe four days; that’s all. Encourage the X-C... The Order, the Council of Arduas...to touch them, but with the utmost stealth and control, availing too the immense throngs who will gather at the Architrave during this event. Pass them amongst the Regency, whether they hail from inside the Custody gates or from the farthest reaches of the Dimensional Horizon. Allow them to place their fingertips upon those harmless looking little entwines. Then, and only then, will the strength of the Xycloplast be melted...beaten...broken. Then, and only then, shall we arise!”*

Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest looked at his left hand; gloved, as always. Briefly, his confidence faltered; his thoughts turned now to darkness. The recent, nightly sightings of seven Ione, spinning at Zenith in tight perfection, troubled him beyond measure. As he began to remove his glove, the memory of his

always close alliances with certain Machaeran detachments, particularly in the infancy of the Triumvirate, gave him pause. Many a cult of Cimmeria had been exiled, cut down by the Machaera at his urgings, a reflection of his hatred for those who beatified Ionian light. The prospect that those against whom he had once lashed out might get the chance to lash *back* gave him one more reason to shudder.

He recalled, as a youth of eight, the tales told to him by a flail who traded goods along the artery between Pilobuthaer in the Phileans and Suromear-Anh, in the Pavatrias. A faithful practitioner of the Cimmerian cult of Maharest, the irascible old black marketeer never once failed to electrify and enthrall an impressionable young Dhulorei with the many prophecies and fables common to the estrean Seamounts, from where he had come. All the while, Dhulorei, inhibited by the constancy of his shame while in the presence of the flail...or anyone else for that matter...had always kept his left hand hidden from view.

One story, he remembered, was a cryptic fable of a circle, the seventh link, an eternal bondage of Ionian light. The other was the story of the first Vidanthric, a young fisher from a distant Eusterian island, who went by the name of Guienne.

Dhulorei removed his glove. His mother Achnea had knitted the first one he'd ever worn, and had pummeled him with admonishments meant to draw out his deepest fears, convincing him to keep his tiny entwine hidden from view. For she bore the same birthmark as he, also on her own left palm; what resembled a hybrid entwine, Nurespheric in nature. Hers, too, always remained buried beneath a veil of cloth.

Dhulorei tried to stand, to focus on the last 2000 neurris to his home, but failed. The burden of remembrance, of his mother's ethereal presence, always left him deadened. She had been nothing more than a child of 14 at his birth. All Dhulorei knew of his father was far, far more than he ever wanted to know. He too had been a Cimmerian, a wandering flail from Saurostra, who had pumped his seed into Achnea's virgin womb two quinteks before abandoning her battered, broken

body, never to return. Dhulorei came later to discover that this skantaro had fathered at least two others; one younger, the other older than he. The youngest sibling was a chirapsiat; he hailed from Tharadunin. The older was from some unknown corner of the Saurostrans. All he knew was that she had been brain-damaged at birth...strangulation from the cord. It was said of her, though, that she possessed a brilliant Malaeric intuition which for the most part had languished due to the weight of her incapacities.

Enough about them, he mused, done once and for all with useless remembrance. Achnea was the face, the name he preferred, above all others. The shame cast upon her by an unforgiving father, her fears and her misunderstandings of her birthmark, of her dark blood...the same somber fluid which flowed through her son's veins...had tormented her short life, brought to an end by her own hand when Dhulorei was 15. Dhulorei's raw hatred for his mother's defiler...his own flesh and blood...burned hot within him, and had become transferred upon Cimmerians in general. Nothing, he knew, was about to quench that fire, endemic to the youth who long ago had grown into the Muharic firebrand that he was today.

Shake it off, he told himself. And so he did, before his eyes dropped to stare at the flock, now peeling off in a flat oval, to estre. One last time, he glanced at the intricate entwine ingrained into his skin. It was the same tortuous baroque that had Kabalyphed itself onto those twin stones, now in the care, custody and control of one Cerys Lo.Uphliac.

That subalternate who traded them to me, the one under the command of that Machaeran Regent, Te.Sinian. What did she tell me they were called? Oh yes! Kuspegias...

Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest untwisted the straps, repaired a frayed stretch of fabric and came to his feet. He recalled the number of memory stones, Courderax's and Kyotrimlics which his hand, in his lifetime, had come into contact with. But the Kuspegias...and *only* the Kuspegias...had come to mimic the mark that his mother had so thoroughly detested. The mark that Dhulorei had, over time, grown quite fond of.

“The Muharadu may never shed the burdens of the Medius Athlamaru,” he whispered to himself, trudging along the foot trace, now within shouting distance of home. “But those stones carry *my* mark. *Mine!* And within a few short days, they will have infused the psyche of nearly every Ephriant and Regent in the Dimensional Horizon...!”

Um.Aara-Maest came to a stop. “...Hedeon willing, of course. And provided seven dim little obstacles don’t stand in the way.”

Plasmodic glass, when touched with a single finger, at just the right angle and degree of force, can produce an astounding ripple effect of colors, dimensions and contrasts, much like a rock being thrown into a pool of glassy water.

The pleasant distraction this created in the mind of Drauglaf3 Um.Eremon lasted all of half a stratimer. He gazed out toward the Helidrome, gleaming at mid-day, here from the 45th Cypliat. A voice could be heard from behind him, calling him back to the table. Vikram Lo.Jehan and Um.Eremon paused in front of the table, then came to a seat.

Um.Eremon fidgeted in his chair while his mind remained airborne, dancing above the Astuverican skyline. Tonight, a grand banquet, an illustrious convocation, would be held at the Helidrome. The arena would be filled to capacity, overflowing with just over 3500 Ephriants, Regents, Muharic priests, Courvesants, plus anyone with a blind cadre to his or her name, regardless of rank or affiliation. Not to mention their retinues: consorts, offspring or other heirs, supplicants, libertines, attendants, even the occasional drudge or hand usher thrown in, space willing. These cloying appendages served no other purpose than to bloat the numerous entourages which had descended upon Astuverica. But they were an impeccable mark of status, a hefty notch in the ladder of caste, presentation...unremitting mobility.

Um.Eremon’s Treflicat hummed, signaling 20 degrees post-Zenith. The dance would begin in 165 stratimers.

The conversation crawled. Um.Eremon cleared his throat. “A stryger fell two nights ago. Did you hear? Impaled! *Amaria...*!” he said.

“Yes,” Lo.Jehan said, palming his Treflicat. “A consequence of carelessness, I’m afraid.”

Khalaris Ve.Aztasur tossed them both a stern eye, not wishing to hear the matter discussed any further. She had lost a sizeable bulk of argency on that match. The wound, a gaping hole in her cadre, was still raw.

Um.Eremon waited on his two fellow Ephriants to collect their thoughts. He’d noticed something unusual about Gersul Um.Niall, who had left their table only a few stratimers earlier, bound for parts unknown. Of course, it occurred to him that there was a great about Um.Niall that could be called *unusual*. But this time was different.

“The thing is lost, I tell you. *Lost!*” Ve.Aztasur was no longer able to restrain herself. Um.Eremon noticed that Ve.Aztasur, an Ephriant with The Order, a failed Courvesant better suited to coaxing the pride and power of others than wielding the tools of a field assassin, had bitten her nails to the quick, leaving the tips of four fingers raw and swollen.

“Three days! He hasn’t left the 68th Cypliat in three days! He won’t grant an audience to anyone. We had a schedule, an agenda. Five days ago we worked it out...together...all of us; right? And what does he do? He *trashes* it! No alternatives; nothing! Not even a plan to come up with one. I tell you, this is...!” Ve.Aztasur’s words crumbled into futility.

Vikram Lo.Jehan, his stature still diminished since his failed attempt at verbal persuasion at his first Ahramishk, feigned optimism. “Khalaris, easy! This event is the Muharadu’s doing; true enough. But it could be to *our* advantage. Give them enough rope and they’re bound to hang themselves with it...eventually. So, we let the Medius play this thing their way, to start. See how it goes.”

Ve.Aztasur was unpersuaded. “Errants! That was their shrill up until...10, 12 days ago? Since then, nothing. They’re not even on the agenda anymore. Now I hear the Medius may throw something else onto the platform, something about the

Machaera burning out a Palialouge two quinteks ago in the Vengaos. I just caught wind of it this morning.” She gave Lo.Jehan the eye. “What do you know about that?”

Vikram’s face took on a defensive mien. His first instinct was to reach across the table for a vial, a fusion of tea and Widow’s Breath. But there was nothing, thanks to that incompetent hand usher who had failed to deliver the correct supply from Lo.Jehan’s khiromek that morning. His second instinct, to deny, turned instead to inquisition. “Where did you hear that? Did that come through Um.Taralon?”

“Yes. She’s the only mole we have left in the Medius. No doubt it’ll be on their docket, which I’m sure is otherwise quite full, errants or not.” Ve.Aztasur threw her head into her hands. “We’re going to look like absolute fools in front of those 3500! *Fools!*”

“Um.Taralon has been crawling around the Medius, under cover, for three unteks, and that’s all she’s been able to dig up? Please tell me there’s more.”

“Some talk about a couple of little memory stones that Um.Aara-Maest has gotten his hands on. But I don’t think that rises to the level of alarm.”

“Gersul knows her, doesn’t he?” Vikram asked, anxious for any juice that could deflect attention away from Machaeran actions, be they misdeeds or not. “She’s a Courvesant, right? We need to get him back here, get him to contact her, find out what else she knows. She’s holding out on us, Khalaris! Why...why did Gersul leave so soon?”

“Who knows? He’s ashamed. I’m sure he doesn’t want the issue of his son coming to light. He disobeyed direct orders, you know. Again! He’d been summoned by the Arduan Council to be here, to advise on Chronicle 398 operations in the Seamounts. *That* was supposed to be on the agenda, too. Forget it!”

For three stratimers, they stared at one another through blank eyes. A thousand priorities screamed for a voice, but without the assurance of support from the 68th Cypliat, most fell by the wayside under their own dead weight. One, though, having nothing to do with agendas or Schimatariats or any

regard for either, died in silence. That was a matter of a tiny cluster of seven Ionian lights, brightening the sky each night with the power of a thousand Lumens, a million unanswered questions tagging along in their wake. That issue would not survive the knife of fear and ignorance. There was plenty of that to go around.

The three of them stared toward the velum of the hall before them, toward the gate leading to the vrungleatrope that had carried Gersul Um.Niall to parts unknown. That same door provided sole access to the 68th and the cloistered sanctuary housing the fifth Suhm-Ephriant; the kinetic, inscrutable autocrat to whom they had bound their minds, their fortunes...their very lives.

The dance was indeed about to begin, and it occurred to them that, in at least one form or fashion, they had not been invited.

“Gersul Um.Niall,” Drauglaf3 Um.Eremon said, voicing a nagging concern. “Did any of you notice something unusual about his hands?”

“What do you mean?” Vikram asked.

“His hands. I watched him today. I’ve never noticed this before because he always keeps them concealed within the pockets of his cloak. But beneath his Kiracloth today, I could see it: a rhythmic twitch in his left hand. His right hand was steady. Never even flinched.”

Khalaris Ve.Aztasur perked up. *Tzadaku!* she mused. “Go on,” she urged Um.Eremon, who was also familiar with the condition, a debility that both of them had seen many times before, in the khiromek they shared.

“The last time we all met, Gersul’s left hand was as steady as a rock.”

“**Y**ou miserable pelлот! You...you *caquehead!* How long have you known about this! HOW LONG?!”

“*Gzadalugh. Te de fuerestre?* Bite your tongue. I need to concentrate. I need...*time!*”

“I cannot abide your clumsiness any longer. You’re going to ruin everything! You didn’t like the agenda we worked out with the X-C, the one we spent 15 days trying to perfect. ‘Burn it’ you told me two days ago! ‘Too conciliatory...too lax...plays too much into Muharic hands’ you went on. *Blah, blah blah! Builur Yrolethrius!* And now you tell me that there are *more* stones out there, just like these! And that you only recently discovered that Um.Aara-Maest had cut his own deal for...”

“She lied to me, okay. I admit it: I was duped! That Machaeran subalternate; she told me that this was the only pair of stones she’d traded. How was I supposed to know that wasn’t true? I had no time to vet her. I needed to do the deal. There was no telling who else could have benefited from what she had to offer. So leave me alone and let me finish my work. As for the agenda, just tell the X-C we’ll approve the final version. Or *not!* I couldn’t care less. Do you hear me?”

“Well, of course! Your approval is a rare and wonderful thing. It’s about time, too, considering we convene tomorrow morning. At least those three Ephriants down there on the 45th Cypliat will breathe a little easier. Now maybe they’ll leave. Oh, and don’t forget. We need to be at the Helidrome in 150 stratimers. What...?”

“Don’t give me that. Have you forgotten about our reconnaissance in the wisoltrean Andulkas? Is there a status report?”

“When was I supposed to have followed up on that? Don’t bother me anymore about that kiln; it’s not going anywhere. We still have three Machaerans keeping a close eye on it. And always from a distance, as ordered.”

“You just don’t understand, do you? There isn’t another forge in the D.H. like it. The Aquylur linings. The purity of the castings; how they’ve cured and energized over time. They are beyond comprehension, incapable of duplication! Once this event is over we must return there. The Xycloplast is failing us, and *these* stones, by themselves, cannot compete with their counterparts, which are now out there, somewhere beyond our reach. *Huerith... Quertro kalaladarma!*”

“Relax. You haven’t changed in quinteks. Still the same fidgety little deviant you always were. What are you doing now?”

“Asking you if you’ve received a dispatch yet, that’s what. The blind cadre. Any response from Puaolo Te.Mauxlur, and Ve.Than-Ulor?”

“Yes, something is coming in now. There’s a problem, though.”

“What is it?”

“It’s unauthenticated. The Rank of Signet is missing.”

“I won’t concern myself with that. Those Mnulorathean veins are quite schismatic. The codification may not have come through yet.”

“You were positively effusive over the last cog we received from Te.Mauxlur.”

“True. But it contained only one abstract. The sonority of the revenants in his prior abstracts was astounding, I’ll admit. And completely unfired! Actinetics seem so unnecessary in those norostrean reaches. And the farther they travel in that direction, the more voltaic they become.”

“*Cueve... Kuarele dhan rudul!*”

“Yes, I know. Let me finish elucidating this new abstract, okay?”

“Alright. By the way, you never told me what you did with the Xycloplast. Those new etchings; aren’t you worried about compromising the mid-lateral entwine?”

“Of course not! This glyph is called a Szikula. I’ve carved it onto the twin memory stones, as well as the Xycloplast. See? I’ve taken the abstracts Te.Mauxlur coggled to us five days ago, separated the subchattels and embedded them into all three stones through a double entwine. If all goes according to plan, the subchattels will transmute the Szikulas, and...”

“I get it, I get it. Whatever happens I’ll assume that’s what you intended. Or if not, you’ll whip out another one of your famous excuses.”

“*Fuduxica teroskto?* What gives? Your tongue is sharper today than usual. Is it the tribe?”

“Yes. *Amaria*, I’m at a loss for answers. They don’t belong to me anymore! Even now, her influence...it’s out of control! And as for them; my offspring are complete strangers to me. One is a complete insolent, the other a complete unknown. I’m at my wits end!”

“I understand. On one hand, though, you should be pleased that nothing worse had happened to them, considering the risks they’ve taken. But at the same time.... Yes, I agree. You have much to be concerned about. You know...”

“Well? What?”

“Sorry, but I wouldn’t take your place for all the argency passing through the Helidrome in a thousand quinteks!”

“*Ha!* And I used to feel sorry for *you!* But no longer. Before you decide to take a consort, take my advice. It’s nothing but a string of disappointments and unintended consequences.”

“So you’ve told me...more than once.”

“The Medius. They’re probably going to bring it up, you know. The Cimmerian phenomenon. The Ione! We shouldn’t have ignored that.”

“Let them dwell on it if they wish. Who can understand such things, much less that lazy bunch of Fulgents in the Medius, frothing at the mouth. Cimmerian hokum! It is beyond our ken. Let’s not speak of it any longer!”

“Fair enough. What was the name of that subalternate, the one who traded these stones to you?”

“Haruhn...something. Haruhn Lo.Vytris.”

“And what did you say they’re called?”

“Okay, I’m done elucidating this last articulation from Te.Mauxlur. Here. Place them on your temples.”

“How? Like this?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure this will work?”

“Of course. Your skills of articulation are strong; they should lead you to a connection with the Kuspegias. Go ahead!”

“There. The sonorance! It holds them in place. Wait! *Wait!*”

“What do you see?”

“I can’t...can’t describe it! It’s...It’s...!”

“Talk to me. TALK TO ME!”

“It...*SH...SHU...!*”

“*Creegh Amaria!* Your eyes. I’ve never seen so much...!
Suiruska; tell me what you see!”

“I...see...*SH...SHU...SHSHSHUAI!!*”

*T*he passages surrounding them were abundant with the sights, the sounds, the smells of torment and demise.

112 sick and dying lay prostrate now on the floors of the caverns. Cai Lo.Subira scurried about from one to the other, trying in vain to suppress their cries before they wafted through the porous rock and into the Swales of the Neroluer, bound for the ears of the approaching Machaera. Then, for the huddled survivors of Shulumethros and Sul-Withulea, time will have at last run out.

“Where are Jadox and Kiralu? Where is everyone?” Ekavias’s eyes drifted toward a series of clicking sounds as he spoke. His exhaustion, from having helped Cai bring solace to those who could find none, was palpable.

“Finishing the slings,” Nostra answered, walking up from behind. “We’ll each be able to carry about a third of our weight in supplies.” Arjun appeared from the shadows, panting for breath, still exhausted from having rushed from the furtive passageway into which they would soon enter. It was an opening which had been discovered that morning by Thaloux and Nostra, assisted by a couple of new additions; two of the few able-bodied survivors from Sul-Withulea who’d managed to elude capture.

“What about the injured?” Cai asked.

“We can each carry one,” Ekavias answered. “That’s all.”

Frantically, she ran the numbers. “That’s...20?” she said.

“No, 17,” Ekavias said. “Two of us who are otherwise able-bodied are missing limbs, remember? They’re only good to carry provisions. And Arjun here is in no condition to bear anything but provisions.”

Cai turned to peer through the gaps the rock. Few choices loomed in the near distance, a narrow gauntlet between life and death. And they were choices that only she was in a position to make.

Ekavias turned to Arjun. "How long? Did you tell them?"

"Yes. No more than 10 stratimers," Arjun answered. "They know. It won't take them that long, though. They're probably already done, most of them."

Ekavias put his hand on Cai's shoulder. "That means you have no more than six, Cai...*six* stratimers to triage the injured. Remember, we can only take 17."

"How...how do I do *that*?" Her voice broke in exasperation.

Ekavias handed her a roll of red Kiracloth, covered in smoke, smelling of decomposed flesh; all that was left from a lone soul who'd managed to escape the Actinetic dungeon that Sul-Withulea had become. Despite the severity of her burns, she had survived the trek to the caverns of the Mysoux, only to perish early that morning.

"Tear this into strips. Tie them onto the right arms of those who will make the journey with us." He paused. "Cai, I don't have to tell you..."

"No, you don't. Now *leave* me! Leave me and let me...let me do this."

Sporadic shouts, commands and retorts forced their way through the pervious stone. Smoky shafts of lumenescence were broken at random by the forms of passing subalternates. Ekavias, Cai, Nostra and Arjun crouched, held their breath and waited until the sounds of trudging bootheels vanished into silence, just as they had after the last onslaught of noise had materialized, 15 stratimers ago. This time, though, the sounds did not fade. They intensified.

Arjun, Cai and Ekavias stared out in disbelief.

"They're massing outside. They suspect something," Ekavias whispered. "Cai, you have *three stratimers!*" he said in a panic.

"What? Wait! I can't...!" Cai implored. "I can't do this in three stratimers!" She took stock of the injured who lined the

floors, using frantic hand gestures to emphasize what her desperate words could not. She turned to see the crouched figures of Ekavias, Nostra and Arjun, running now for the rear of the cave. Ekavias turned to look at Cai, mouthing the words, "*We'll be back in three.*"

Cai stood, nervously ripping shreds of red cloth, trying to time each tear with the strike of bootheels. She turned, noticing Arjun as he followed Ekavias, bound for the tiny notch where 16 more souls stood, awaiting their moment.

As they arrived, they found each of them fully equipped, their slings draped over their shoulders, loaded with food, water bladders, spare clothing, rudimentary tools and refuse, their only reliable source of fuel.

Jadox, his shoulders drooping under the weight, spotted Arjun, then turned to face the passageway which led deep into the claustrophobic bowels of the Mysouxlian range. His mind splintered in comprehension. After a final inspection of the lacings, knots and straps, he and the others laid eyes on Ekavias.

"As I speak, Cai is in triage." Ekavias called out in a loud whisper. He threw his load over his shoulders. "Don't go for the lightweights, leaving the heavier ones for someone else. Those of us standing here; we're all strong enough to bear the weight, and not a single one of us is alone. We'll help each other through this...or we'll all die in the striving. Those are our choices. So follow me..."

Ekavias, carrying Cai's sling on his arm, retraced his steps from three stratimers earlier. He rounded the turn and spotted Cai, standing alone in a gridlock of injured and dying. Her job was now done, her hands empty, the last of the red Kiracloth used up.

Suddenly, Ekavias's mind was ravaged with the notion that he had forgotten to do something. Then, it came to him.

Arjun appeared from behind. To his right, in a split shaft of twin luments, he spotted her on the floor, leaning against a wall. It was Hezhreon Te.Nisach...still scathed, scarred, now locked within the rigid chains of a lunatic mind. She writhed there, emitting only dull moans, victim to some imaginary

rogue toying with her at loose ends. When she saw Arjun, she awakened into a fleeting moment of lucidity.

Hezhreon raised herself up, as if levitated by some unseen force. She thrust the open palm of her left hand toward Arjun's bare neck.

"You...*pellot!*" she spat, pointing with her right hand at the burn scar over her right eye and cheek, now beginning to throb. "You did this to me. You...did...*THIS!*"

Arjun grabbed and held her left wrist in a strangular grip. She closed her eyes, trembled, melted back into a misty haze. He considered her fate. *If the Machaera finds her, he mused, someone will connect her with Shulumethros. They'll know she was its Regent. Hezhreon will be the first one they'll put to the blade; maybe the only one.*

Arjun then saw his fellow travelers, passing to the right. Each of them carried a sling on one shoulder and a casualty on the other, moving toward the entrance to the corridor through which they were all soon to enter.

All, that is, except Cai and Ekavias, who stood locked in a fierce exchange. A series of jolts and cracks ricocheted through the pockmarked walls, followed by harsh Machaeran tones. Arjun tiptoed in their direction, to hear their muted words.

"What are you thinking, Cai? This is...*insane!*" The whimperings of those who remained, for whom there would be no escape from this place, echoed behind them.

"I...I've thought this through, Ekavias. You know, maybe they won't find us. Maybe they won't, you know? In any event, even if they do, I can...I can stay here long enough to..."

He grabbed her by the arm. "NO! You cannot, Cai. I will *not* let you do this. Someone...a prisoner or a pellogroat, or even just an innocent loose tongue...will connect you to Odrahn, Arjun or Meiluris, or even Kerak. To the Architrave, they're *all* prime targets. Once they put the pieces together, you *will* be killed. Do you understand?"

One by one, Cai peeled Ekavias's fingers from around her arm, never taking her eyes from his piercing gaze. "I will take

the chances I choose to take, Ekavias. Do *you* understand? It's...it is my choice!"

"But...but you..."

"You, and the others. Get going! If the Machaera finds me, I'll tell them you went *that* way." With her back turned to the tunnel through which the others had just entered, she pointed toward a blind passageway to her front, one which twisted and eventually died into a tapered point, 5000 neurris into the darkest portion of the Subterranean Mysoux.

Ekavias struggled to control his emotions. "This is not fair, Cai. To *you!* You understand that the chances are..."

"Slim? That we'll ever see each other again? Yes, I know. We passed on that chance, too, when Kerak and Dijal and Meiluris left; remember? Only the 'Phemes know their fate. And ours."

"But if we could just *think*, we could find a way to..."

The sound of tumbling rock cut him off, the racket of bare hands and pickaxes pounding and clawing away at shard and slag. The ground shook beneath them. "There's no time, Ekavias. No time..."

Arjun approached, fighting off the urge to take Cai by the arm, to smother her stubborn willfulness, knowing full well that this tack would bear no fruit. Ekavias turned toward Cai one last time, touched her hand, then sulked off. Arjun caught a quick glimpse of her face; a caged light framing eyes of molten metal, now concealing a darkening void of complete, and utter, hopelessness.

Briefly, the shouts and footfalls beyond the porous stone walls faded. Before following Ekavias, Arjun looked down and saw Hezhreon, now returned to the hard ground, sucked into a fetal position. She reached out with both hands and grabbed his ankles. His first instinct, to place his hands around her neck, to relieve her of the misery of the *here*, the *now* and the even greater torment to follow, melted away. So he reached for her arms, lifted her up and threw her shrunken frame over his shoulder, carrying her toward the footsteps of Ekavias Lo.Schrae-Nur. *One less chance, too*, Arjun reasoned, *for the Machaera to blame Cai for harboring a scofflaw.*

Before leaving the chamber which had been their home for the past half an untek, he saw that Cai had returned to her own diversion, her hands once again at work, distracting her mind from her impending fate. She looked toward him as he passed. He tossed her a silent nod and a soggy wink. She returned both in kind.

The passage into which they entered twisted and arced from beyond these caverns, still just as sodden and cold as when they'd first found it. But before disappearing into the Mysoux, there existed a narrow cleft in the walls, a thin slit through which access could be gained to the tiny chamber which held the narrow bulge of Aquylur upon which Ekavias and Jadox had laid hands, seven days after the destruction of the Grottos.

Through the shrill of imminent intrusion, Ekavias waved the others on, promising not to remain behind for long. He could not bring himself to leave this place without having pressed one final articulation. So with the Myotrophus in his palm, he pushed hard against the clear stone. His arm trembled, his mind fastened in serrated focus. With his last miaric of angst and resolve, he heaved himself, body and soul, into the rock. A flash of bright light, then another, passed beneath his closed lids.

Exhausted, he pocketed the Myo, shouldered his sling and slid back into the tunnel. Taking off down the murky passageway, the din of strident commands and crashing rock reverberated behind him. He thought of Cai, and under his breath he implored Hedeon, the 'Phemes...or whatever source of latent intervention there existed in the Dimensional Horizon...to shield her, to shelter her. To see her through the coming onslaught.

As Ekavias ran, though, he realized that it wasn't ephemeral guidance she needed. For Cai's only salvation in this Sphere was now sprinting away from her, at full bore and into near total darkness, in tenacious pursuit of the one deity worshipped and coveted above all others: the God of Self-Preservation.

Standing in a thin ray of late day luments, Cai kneeled, mumbled.

"Kerak! Where are you...?"

IT HAD ENGULFED HER BODY LIKE a warm bath; graphic, inviting, palpable, and still very much alive.

She had started at her lover's toes, running her tongue up her calf, then along her inner left thigh, delicately nudging each anxious nerve ending with a varnish of warm drool. Nostra then took her by her thighs, driving her fingertips deep into bare flesh, sliding her hands together while running her fingernails along the meat of Dijal's buttocks.

Nostra nudged her lover's labia, then her clitoris with the tip of her tongue, twice, three times before leaving figure eights of gooey saliva along her abdomen. Then to each trembling, erect nipple, between her breasts, along her neck and her chin before planting a slow, wet kiss on her waiting lips. Their tongues danced together in careless abandon for what seemed like days before these motions repeated themselves...over and over and over again.

Kerak stared at Dijal, tapping his fingers on the table while she played with her breakfast, still absorbed in fantasy. Ligeia had prepared for her that morning a warm, aromatic cereal: roasted, boiled Syena, seasoned with Swerigess nectar, Numandriel milk and the dried, pitted fruit of the Guaerea. Dijal, though, kept the bowl at arm's length. She did not care to eat, nor to speak or engage in any way.

Somehow, her mind had managed to lift itself high above the spires of the Architrave, casting long shadows against the windows of Ligeia's terrabode. But it wasn't enough. *Astuverica!* She still could not believe that she'd been dragged back into this cesspool. Her mind reflected on something far more pleasurable: the mostly alluring, sometimes sentimental but always enjoyable sensations she had visited and revisited while under the influence of Meiluris's *dado*. The voltaic effect which Tyrupliak had played on her dormant synapses during her eight day "death" had been uncanny, without a doubt

rivaling the effects of the Trofliage spinoffs she'd been known to enjoy every so often at the Eroctriase, or even the Tyrgomec she had sometimes dabbled with, infused into the Treflicats of nearly every one of her former clients.

Kerak had pulled her out of catatonia a little more than a day ago. Since then, her appetite had been scanty, and remained so. Her stratimers had been filled with one failed attempt at Mnetharsis, a few flashbacks and rewinds, interspersed with the occasional throbbing headache or dry heave. Now, here he was, sitting opposite her, pushing that freighin' bowl back at her with a scowl that screamed *you need to eat!* She glared at him, picking away at the tattered threads still woven into her flesh, which had once held a Flapestone to her skin. All the while she realized what a complete pain in the ass Kerak could be.

Why fight it? she reasoned after the day's first spasm of hunger began to gnaw at her stomach. So she put the spoon to her mouth. Then again, and again, one eye on Kerak, the other on the window to the nemesis that to her, Astuverica would always be. *It was dying that brought me here,* she mused, finishing her cereal, *but dying, too, brought me back to Nostra, the hammocks of the Kurestreans, my family...and the Crescent, even if only for the briefest of moments. How I wish I was dead again. Wait! That doesn't sound right...*

Dijal's reverie was broken as she felt the ground shake beneath her feet. The litany of thousands, bearing down upon the Triage just outside the window, was distracting. She pulled the curtains back a bit, noticed that they were all traveling in one direction: toward the Architrave.

"Is it always like this?" Dijal asked. "I mean, all that clamor out there."

"No, normally it's about a third as loud," Ligeia answered. She sat down beside Kerak. "It's the Schimatariat; day one. We're in for more of this tomorrow. And then some."

"Any idea how long this thing will last?" Kerak asked. Quilla sat beside him, playing with her Brotuce. Her eyes danced to the tempo of a vaqchaser, the sounds of which had

been cogged into the stone less than an untek ago, played by a street vendor who pursued his trade at the Columns.

Quilla looked up at Dijal, crossed her eyes, giggled and blew tiny bubbles out of the corner of her mouth, vying for the attention of this disfigured but mildly amusing stranger. This was the first time Quilla's antics had come even close to amusing Dijal.

"Well, the handbills they've been posting at the 216th Register, the cogs coming through my Courderax; they all say three days. My mother says to expect five...or two, if the inevitable flare-up breaks out. Then they'll all kill each other and get it over with like they should have done a long time ago."

Kerak started to laugh, then felt a psychic jolt as Ligeia unconsciously slid all the way against him on the bench.

"But let's go with five," Ligeia said, thankful for a chance to talk, to find some semblance of release. "Eidia would know. My mother's got a good ear for what goes on in the Architrave, with or without Bourglo's help."

All the while, Ligeia never made eye contact with anyone at the table, especially Kerak. She had been reticent, evasive since her guests had arrived at her door; after Kerak's expression had told the tragedy of Drogran's fate. She sat with her elbows on the table. Sanir, her bodyguard, rested in a chair at the far corner of the room, peering through tiny, suspicious slits at Kerak and Dijal.

"So..." Ligeia asked, "what next?"

Sanir rose from his chair and trudged the creaky stairs to his room, to crack a window, to listen for the white noise of ovations and caterwauls which would signal the start of the Schimatariat. But first he would enjoy a few drags on his pipe. The abrupt change in his mood, since the arrival of Kerak and Dijal, was not lost on Ligeia.

Kerak winced. His injuries, his pain...they lingered despite his efforts to resurrect his talents for suggestion and denial; talents he had developed in his former trade, refined with a single plunge of his fist into a mound of hot coals at the Swales.

“That depends,” Kerak answered. “How do you feel?” he asked Dijal.

She closed her eyes. Dijal realized that the time had come for her to try it again. To prove herself. To justify the many risks that Kerak, Meiluris and even Ligeia had taken to get her to this place, to bring her back to “life,” to keep her free from confiscation and dismemberment, so that the affirmation could be achieved. The conduit, the link which promised to assure a successful Mnethartic transference? It lay within her. She had come to understand that, in reality, she *was* the link.

But she faltered, terrified of letting Kerak, and herself, down again. “Better. Actually, pretty good. But...have *you* tried it?” she asked him.

Kerak threw his hands against his forehead. “Yes, Dijal. I’ve tried it twice, remember? I pressed the Kuspegias against the Kabalyphs on the Ularic and I got...nothing. See?” He held the Kuspegias up for her inspection. The embryonic markings on the small stones were still unchanged, a mere snippet of the stylized etchings exhibited on the ores of Ligeia’s stone. This, Dijal knew, is where *she* was supposed to come in.

“I can’t do it, Dijal. Even if I was pain free, I’d fail every time. It’s not in me; I haven’t bonded with the stones in that way. But you have! If it doesn’t happen, though,” Kerak said, taking her hand, preparing both of them for the worst possible outcome, “then keep in mind, it’s not your fault. No one will be disappointed in you. But you...*you* have to take the Kuspegias into your hands! *You* have to press them and hold them against the Ularic. If it is meant to flow, then it must flow through...you.”

Dijal sighed, let go a thin smile and raised her eyes to the stones. She drew a deep breath and took the Kuspegias in her hands. As Quilla plopped herself into Ligeia’s lap, they all stared at the Ularic, resting on the table. Dijal closed her eyes, picked up all three stones, sandwiched the Kuspegias around the Ularic and held this assemblage between the palms of her hands. She kept them there for two...three...four stratimers. Then, she opened her hands, to witness their transformation.

Ligeia, Kerak and Dijal gazed upon the Kuspegias. The same expression covered their faces.

Defeat.

The Kabalyphs on the Kuspegias looked no different than before.

“Open! Open up *now!!* This is Council enforcement, official business, by order of the third Constabulary!”

Sanir stood behind Ligeia that evening, watching the knob and hinges tremble with each insistent beating upon the Carabyli-paneled door. She grabbed the handle, pulled it wide and presented herself.

“Yes, what do you want?”

Sanir sized up the four subalternates, now performing double duty as Constabularies. He took a couple of steps forward, making sure he remained in full view.

They had expected to find the daughter of Bourglo Ve.Daetran just as they saw her, in the protection of a guard; likely well paid, too. A well-formed, blemish-free torso like hers would bring a hefty sum, no doubt. The subalternate at the rear of the column ran the odds, then killed the notion of trying to overpower her bulky steward, to claim this prize for himself, and his associates...of course.

The subalternate at the front went on as Kerak and Dijal listened from a closet in the loft. “Two nights ago there was a security breach, an escape, at the Helidrome. One of the hasters *murdered* a stryger! That same night, just around the corner from your ‘bode, there was a break-in and theft at a repository owned by Scythian Um.Scuy-Turer, an Ephriant with the Council. We have reason to believe the two events are connected.” The subalternate who said this...*low on the food chain*, thought Ligeia...took great pride in his newfound authority. The word *murdered* caught the ear of everyone inside Ligeia’s ‘bode.

“And?!” Ligeia asked, flouting her disapproval at being bothered.

“*And* we need to search your flat for...”

“No! It’s late...my dinner’s getting cold.”

“This won’t take longer than three or four strati...”

“My father is an Arduan Ephriant, too. Are you aware? You work for the Arduans, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, but that’s not important. Losses have accrued, a crime has been committed, and it’s our job to...”

“If you want to search my house, go right ahead. But under one condition. I will allow it only if it’s done in the company of my father’s principal hand usher. His name is Ulerian Lo.Hyalik. Go get him and bring him here.”

Before he had arrived at her door, this cocky Machaeran had expected to see a wobbly wallflower; an apathetic milquetoast; the stereotypical Ephriant’s offspring. This time, though, he had been disappointed. He had no intention of dragging a hand usher from the Architrave, and all the way down to the Columns, for this mouthy skridlak. So he put Plan B into effect.

“Take this Treflicat. Articulate his features.”

“Whose features?”

“The haster. The security breach at the Helidrome. I just told you! This is our target.”

She held his stone with her fingers. Kerak’s image slid across her field of view; of course, she expected as much. But its stark reality, and the sudden comprehension, come more than a day late, that she was once again harboring a fugitive...not to mention one who had failed her, despite his most heartfelt assurances...was more than she could bear. Her reaction was not lost on Sanir’s watchful gaze.

“Contact the third Constabulary if you see him. 50,000 khirius for his return, alive, plus another 5000 for the torso he stole. That’s all.”

Kerak and Dijal came down from the loft after Ligeia closed the door. Sanir shuffled off, retreated to the kitchen and his cold dinner. Sliding past each other in the hallway, the eye contact between Kerak and Sanir was remarkable, to say the least.

Taking Quilla in her arms, Ligeia, Kerak and Dijal sat together at the table. Dijal continued to fumble with the

Kuspegias: on her temples, with her fingers, pressing them again against the Ularic, all with the same frustrating result. Nothing.

Ligeia folded her arms and passed a doleful glance at Kerak. "It hurts me, Kerak, to say this," she uttered in sadness.

"Then don't. I know what's on your mind, Ligeia, and I understand. I'm sorry; I really am! *Amaria*, I've done nothing but let you down. I've taken advantage of your kindness, eaten your food, put you at risk of exposure, arrest...for the second time in, what? Less than two unteks? And all for nothing. *Nothing...*!" He dropped his head and drove his fist against the table.

Ligeia leaned in, speaking now in hushed tones so her words would not carry to the kitchen. "You and Dijal. I can get you both out of Astuverica, Kerak. My mother won't refuse me. Give it two days and I know she can arrange transit out of the Andulkas, even."

"No! I don't want to get her involved in this. This is *my* problem, not yours. And certainly not hers!"

Ligeia rolled her eyes. "Don't be stupid, Kerak! If the two of you just walk out of here, it won't be 10 stratimers before you're in chains. And how do you intend on getting beyond the Custody gates? That Treflicat has got *you* written all over it. I saw your face, clear as day; same as I'm looking at you right now!"

It took less than half a stratimer for him to put the pieces together. The staggered indentions in even the most common Treflicat would sooner or later make the short leap from Kerak the fugitive haster to Kerak the fugitive Courvesant, even though his face now imparted a little more wear than it did the last time he'd paid a visit to Astuverica.

A sudden sense of urgency crossed his mind, and he knew it was time he shed himself of his pride and ignorance. He decided, after all, that another favor wouldn't hurt.

"Ligeia, can you cog Eidia? Now?"

Ligeia smiled, taking her Courderax in hand. "Of course!"

Sanir peered around the edge of the casing, fingering his own Courderax behind his back.

“And Ligeia, tell her...” Kerak paused, again weighing the possibilities, the risks.

“Tell her...what?”

“Tell her that two days is too long. We need to get out of Astuverica....*tonight!*”

One of the many valuable lessons that Ligeia Te.Nurasier had learned from her friend, Girdrahn Lo.Hualic, was that if you see a shaft of light splayed across an open patch of ground, it is sometimes better to crawl across it than to strut and prance around in total darkness.

And so, dressed in the cloak of avoidance, Kerak and Dijal stood in full view on the platform at the 208th Register, awaiting the arrival of the amleatrobe which would carry them to the 58th Register, beside the 12th Custody gate, third chain. Kerak held a medium sized cloth sack in his hands, unsure of its contents, handed to him by Ligeia just before they'd left her terrabode. Dijal carried nothing more than a small pouch in her pocket. The Kuspegias were its sole contents.

With Quilla nestled in a sling on her back, Ligeia stood close beside them. She was there to assert, when needed, the privilege of daughterhood to the Architrave, to wave off official inquiry or other unwelcome advances, of any kind. She had done it once that day already. Lately, she had found herself forced to play that card with increasing frequency, far more often than she knew she should.

Sanir was there, too. She had contemplated leaving him behind, but the return trip posed too many risks without his presence. He stood a few neurris away, his hands buried in the pockets of his smock, his eyes rigid, staring straight ahead, unblinking.

The Lumens had settled to sorentre long ago, leaving the sky to their antipodes. The racket from the Helidrome thundered in the distance, supplemented by the nearby commotion of the hundreds who milled about, on or near the platform. A minority of souls were absorbed with each other in furious engagement, their words blending into a milky white

noise. The rest were either stoned, tanked, embalmed in a Tyrgomec-induced psychic haze...or all three.

Kerak's head was covered with a hood. The lower part of his face was concealed with a thin scarf. He thought briefly of turning around, to absorb the riotous scenes around him. Then he came to his senses. For the most part he, like Sanir, maintained a strict forward gaze. Just once, though, he threw his head back to stare at the dome of the sky. The glare of thousands of lightstaves, spread out as far as the eye could see, drowned out the sight of the Ione, even at Zenith. For the first time since his return to Astuverica, Kerak began to experience his first sensation of full and complete immersion, deep within the belly of this noisome beast. He felt, for the first time since renouncing the ways of The Order, like the target that he was.

Less than five stratimers after they stepped onto the platform, the amleatrobe coasted up, riding a thin layer of magnetic air. Before boarding the first carriage in a chain of five, Dijal took notice of the levitation stones which had been laid out in the center of the thoroughfare, end to end. As soon as the doors opened, she and her companions were practically lifted off their feet by a bumptious horde, a raucous wave cresting from the rear of the platform. It carried them through the open doors before they closed with a loud smack. Their positions, as they had stood in relation to each other on the platform, had not changed in the slightest.

Then, the propulsion stones, set to either side of the line of levitation, were engaged. Nearly 200 souls stood in this carriage, packed shoulder to shoulder, as the conveyance pushed off.

The ride, as Ligeia ran the numbers, would take about 20 stratimers. She was glad it wasn't any shorter, for she planned to use their time in these tight quarters to take care of some unfinished business. Kerak, in the same frame of mind, beat her to it.

"Sanir?!" he whispered beneath the rumble of clanging doors, loud voices.

"Yeah, I know. My mother hired him. I couldn't afford the kind of protection I need so she stepped in and took care of

it. One of the many perks I enjoy for boiling my father's Chelomar."

"You need to tell her to hire someone to watch *him!* This is not good, Ligeia. What's she paying him?"

"A lot. 600 khirius a day. I mean, she vetted him, as best she could. Trustworthy guards don't come cheap these days."

"How long has he been working for you? I mean, for Eidia?"

"40, 41 days."

"How often does Girdrahn come around?"

"Every two to four days, on average. Last time he was at my 'bode was three days ago. I think he'd like to show up more often but the stall he runs now at the Columns keeps him pretty busy. Sanir has no idea when he'll pop in, which is good."

"Wait, Girdrahn's running a stall? How long has he been doing that?"

"About an untek."

"He's taking quite a risk isn't he, out in the open like that?"

"Not really. He seems to have dropped off the Machaera's screens for a while, since the Muricai were so well hemmed in around the Moirisois. He still mines Ciferiak, still distributes Kyos, on the sly. But he can do that a lot easier from above ground."

"So, what about Girdrahn, maybe, taking Sanir's place?"

"*Ha!* The ever-resourceful Girdrahn Lo.Hualic cooling his heels as a bodyguard? He's way too antsy for that. Besides, he prefers to spend most of his time in Empyrea, when he's not at the Columns."

Empyrea. Kerak thought of the companionway door to Level Five, now forever sealed shut. In the past untek, the Zurish-Triece had devolved into a sanctum of pestilence, pillage, murderous intent. The relative safety and convenience of ingress and egress through that doorway were now a distant memory. How anyone these days could prefer life below the streets of Astuverica baffled him.

"What does he trade?" Kerak asked.

“Whips and unguents, mainly. Stuffs the occasional Kyo into a bundle of Syena when a customer asks for one.”

As they spoke, Sanir finished fumbling with his Courderax and placed it in his back pocket. Kerak caught this motion out of the corner of his eye.

As for Ligeia, all this talk of Girdrahn made her think. She knew how starved he was for news from the wisoltreans, so she broached the subject.

“Kerak, you told me that you came into contact with Odrahn, in the Swales. Can you...can you tell me anything? And I think you know why.”

Kerak pursed his lips, thankful that Ligeia hadn't pressed him for details about Droган's death. Now he had to revisit what he felt was *another* failure on his part.

“One word. Savita.”

Ligeia gasped. “*Creegh Amaria!* That skridlak. How did she get to him?”

“You don't know the extent of Savita's talents. She found a way; let's just leave it at that.”

Her face took on a puzzled look. He could tell she wanted more, so she could pass it on.

“Girdrahn's already killed one Courvesant,” Kerak added. “So don't say too much to him, Ligeia, please. If he finds out who did his brother in, he might get cocky and think he can do it again. He wouldn't manage well attempting retribution on that scale. She's too well insulated. Not that she needs it, of course.”

Ligeia nodded in compliance.

The amleatropе slid through the air to its next stop, at the 110th Register. The five of them were jostled about as one wave of flesh exited and the other entered before the doors closed again.

The steady hum of forward movement, the tumult of sound, once again enfolded them. 10 stratimers was all they had left, and Ligeia knew it. She took Kerak and Dijal aside and leaned in.

“Let's get down to this while we still have time. My mother has arranged passage for both of you on a convoy of

aerospheres, bound for the Kurestreans. They're carrying supplies to the harvest colonies at the Thulitar flats, near Kadalese."

Dijal, upon hearing this, felt a knot begin to form in her stomach. "So we just jump on one of those things? Do we need to do anything or say anything to anyone?"

"No. You don't need to say anything. I'll stay with you well past the Custody gates, long enough to get you where you need to go. You'll be in a convoy of 12 spheres. There'll be four, maybe five transit drivers with you, no Machaerans or Regents or any of that. Eidia has managed to get a bribe through to the lead driver. Once we get to the platform at the 58th Register, we'll have only five or six stratimers before the convoy leaves, so we'll need to hurry. Once we get you there, the lead driver will sneak you onto the rear aerosphere."

Ligeia motioned to the bag in Kerak's hand. "In there is enough food and water for the trip, for the both of you. It should last about three days."

Kerak and Dijal found themselves unable to speak. Instead they mumbled, nodding a simple thanks for what Ligeia, and Eidia, had done for them.

Ligeia, though, wasn't finished. She ran her hands through the pocket of her coat and pulled out the Ularic stone, the one Drogran had given her; the same stone which had failed more than once to form a connection with the Kuspegias.

"This may not be worth as much as you'd hoped, but the two of you risked *so* much coming all this way. So, well, I feel like you should keep this stone. I don't know if it will ever be of any use, but maybe, someday, it will reveal itself. Maybe it will...complete the link; the link you so desperately seek."

Without speaking, Dijal nodded and took the stone in her fingers. She placed it in the bag with the Kuspegias.

"Ligeia, I don't know what to say..."

"Then don't, Kerak. I understand more than you think. You're carrying on *his* work!" Ligeia's eyes began to cloud over. "Drogran lives on in those little stones, in what you and Dijal are trying to accomplish. Anything that can enhance them, improve upon them...well, I'm glad..."

Ligeia's eyes remained steady, becoming locked with Kerak's. Speechless, the two of them shared a dusky whorl of images: bright and lurid, kaleidoscopic, resonant, dissonant and everything in between. Ligeia placed her hand on Kerak's face. She reached out, deeper now, until she could see his face...the face of Drogan Te.Sinian.

Kerak, in a moment of insight, finally understood the queasy sensuality he'd felt on the bench with Ligeia as her hips had rubbed against his. He'd always been agnostic where the subject of Chimierepha was concerned. But now...

He placed his hand on hers. He could feel himself giving in.

Drogan! his mind screamed out. *Let me go. Let me...GO...!*

A loud signal resounded, indicating that the next stop, and their point of exit, at the platform nearest the 12th Custody gate, was a mere two stratimers off. Kerak squeezed Ligeia's hand and placed it down at her side. Their eyes unlocked. The clamor of the crowd grew stronger, bringing them back to reality.

After they were scheduled to exit the amleatrobe, a short four or five stratimer walk would bring Kerak and Dijal to the convoy, the last link in their chain of a hasty retreat from Astuverica. Nearing their stop, Kerak's vision settled on Sanir, standing about five neurris away. Out of the corner of Kerak's eye he could feel the cold sting of Sanir's indirect gaze, the warp of his peripheral vision. He could almost see his own reflection in the whites of Sanir's eyes.

Kerak's pulse began to surge. He clenched his jaw, angry at himself for ignoring the signs, all too obvious. A 55,000 khiriu reward? That was far too enticing for a chiseler to pass up. And when Ligeia's Muscle was done betraying Kerak and Dijal, before it was time for Eidia to cut him loose after doling out the rest of his hefty salary, Kerak was sure that the pellet would try for all he could with his client's daughter.

He's done the math, and I'm sure he's got a plan, Kerak mused, taking one last hard look in Sanir's direction before

turning for the doors, *and likely, he's not doing this on his own, either...*

30 pulsimers before they reached the platform, Kerak's mind began to race through a range of scenarios, strategies. He made sure to avoid even peripheral eye contact with Sanir. To do so might tip him off, he feared, forcing Sanir to panic, to act before Kerak could form a lucid response. Avoidance, though, made it hard to gauge Sanir's movements, intents.

Their carriage slid to a noisy stop. The doors swung open, and the amleatrope began belching its contents into the night. Unable to think of a better idea, Kerak stayed put and held tight to the arms of Dijal and Ligeia. The conveyance then started to fill with a new round of passengers.

All the while, Kerak noticed, too, that Sanir was keeping an eye not only on him and Dijal, but on a distant stranger, a female who had boarded the amleatrope with them at the previous stop. She had exited a few pulsimers ahead of them and now stood alone on the platform, staring with anxious eyes toward Sanir, as if awaiting the next move.

Ligeia and Dijal remained quiet but grew more restless in Kerak's grip, puzzling at his odd reluctance to exit the amleatrope. Sanir, too, remained in place, growing more suspicious of Kerak's intentions.

Kerak's throat tightened. *If we wait to get off at the next stop, he thought in a panic, we might avoid Sanir and his accomplice, but we'll miss the convoy! But if we get off now...!?*

Kerak's mind ground to a halt. Choices, alternatives, eluded him. So just before the doors closed, he did the only thing he knew to do: he stepped onto the poorly lit platform with Dijal and Ligeia on his arms.

Except for a few stray souls milling about, the amleatropic platform was empty. Without saying a word, Kerak, Dijal and Ligeia walked in lock step across the alleyway to the Custody gate, past the stairs to a narrow artery, perpendicular to the adjoining gate. Approaching a rise to the front, they could see the lights of the 12th. Behind them echoed the distant chants of

the multitude, celebrating the successful lob of another Terruqlei, a defiant thrust through helpless, bloody flesh.

Kerak's grip remained firm on the arms of Ligeia and Dijal. His unblinking eyes shifted left, right. His pace quickened. Sanir and the female weaved in and out of shadow, staying no more than six neurris behind them.

Ligeia could not contain herself any longer. "Kerak, what are you...? Why are we going so fast? Let go of my arm!" She jerked herself loose while Dijal remained in Kerak's grip. The three of them continued along, coming to a sharp turn in the path, at the base of a set of high stairs below the gangway where they would meet their convoy and make their exit from Astuverica. A pair of footsteps approached from behind, nearing a dark gap, devoid of the glare of the lightstaves now flooding the amleatropic platform.

Other than Sanir and the female, they were alone.

"This doesn't involve you, Ligeia," Sanir said with a gravelly voice, half of his face covered in shadow. "I'm sorry you've gotten yourself mixed up in this..."

Ligeia turned. Kerak came to a stop.

"What...what are you talking about, Sanir?"

"Go back to the platform, Ligeia!"

"No, I will not! What are you...?"

"I said get BACK!" Sanir screamed.

Kerak turned to peer into the darkness. The sounds of shoehheels could be heard for four, then five clicks. Then...silence.

"If you want us, Sanir, you're going to have to come for us," Kerak said. A whisper, the light rustle of cloth, sounded about three neurris to his rear, between him and the Custody gate.

"Kerak, my friend." Sanir's tone was angry, impatient. "You amuse me, you know that?"

Dijal, still weak from her near-death experience, made a muffled choking sound. Suddenly her arm was jerked out of Kerak's grip, throwing him off balance. Kerak looked to his right to see the female from the amleatropic platform, her arms now locked around Dijal's neck. She was running sideways

with Dijal in tow, her left arm holding Dijal's hands behind her back.

Kerak bolted. From his left, Sanir sprang for him, throwing himself in front of Kerak's path. Kerak tumbled to the ground, tangling with Sanir in a jumble of arms, legs and fists.

Sanir freed himself and grabbed Kerak from behind. "Get...OFF, you PELL...!" Kerak's voice carried all the way to the Custody gate, arousing the sleepy attention of three disinterested subalternates.

Kerak wrestled himself loose. In the tussle, a small folding knife had fallen from Sanir's hands, leaving him with nothing to fight off the flailing limbs, the body thrusts and the fists of Kerak. So from his back pocket, Sanir pulled out his only remaining weapon: his Courderax.

Ligeia, rousing herself from disbelief, sprang to action. As Sanir began striking Kerak on the head with his stone, she pulled the sling from around her back, placed the newly awakened and equally stunned Quilla on her feet at the edge of the pavers and ran toward Sanir, lunging at him, throwing her fists at his head, his neck, rearing and pummeling him with all four limbs in rapid succession.

In a rage, Sanir threw his right arm back and knocked Ligeia to the ground. His Courderax fell and bounced along the Triage toward the platform. Quilla ran forward, screamed and threw herself at her mother. As she tried to regain her footing, Ligeia peered off into the distance. She could see no sign of the female who had grabbed Dijal. Or of Dijal, either.

Sanir paused to regain his senses. Emerging from shadow, Kerak reared back and heaved a five-fingered mallet at Sanir's head, jerking his neck back with a loud crunch. Sanir stumbled backwards, in the direction of Ligeia. She lunged at him from his left, balled her own fist and struck Sanir on his left temple. A spray of blood flew from the fresh wound to his head. Sanir tried to run; Kerak ran up and grabbed his ankles while Ligeia reared back and hit Sanir again, on the same spot.

“N...No..NO!” Sanir screamed, stunned, throwing blind, enraged punches into the night air before freeing his legs from Kerak’s grip and sprinting off into darkness.

“Dijal...which way??” Kerak called out to Ligeia, who pointed to her left, into a cloud of dusty air, stirred up by the exhaust from a row of circulation ducts running along the third chain. Kerak leaned forward, spat out a wad of blood, paused and panted for a pulsimer, then took off along a side channel, in the direction of the Architrave.

*E*USTERIAN MISTS CREPT IN ON rolling swells, thickening the voids with dampness, prophecy. It was now a mere 130 stratimers until dawn. The tenor of Astuverican life rambled on, unrelenting. But the amleatropic platform at the 58th Register, for the most part, remained quiet, except for the gurgling chortles of a peacefully sleeping Quilla Te.Nurasier, and the desperate murmurings of Kerak Um.Tiago.

By now, he surmised, their ride to the Kurestreans was probably approaching the Sanhexrian flats, 20,000 or so neurris to sorentre, gliding above the klegestones paving the Teukonic viamar. Kerak shoved that thought aside, rolled another bloody loogie around in his mouth and heaved it off to his left. He coughed and wobbled a bit as he leaned on Ligeia's shoulder.

Sanir's Courderax lay nestled in the palm of his hand. It was the best gift the befuddled skantaro could have bestowed on them, leaving it to lay no more than five neurris from the rise to the platform before he scurried off to parts unknown.

As Kerak articulated it, this stone had much to say. "Your bodyguard is a bounty hunter. His friend...her name is Hrisula Te.Ganajier. She's one too."

Ligeia was stunned. "*Amaria!* I can't believe what a lousy job we did in vetting that...that *pellot*. I don't know what to say, Kerak. This is all my fault. I'm just so...sorry!"

"Nonsense. How could you have known?" His assurance came off as less than sincere. Ligeia's head dropped into her hands. There was no need to discuss the matter any further. Her sense of guilt was punishment enough.

"Wow. It's been a bit of a dry spell for those two," Kerak said as he continued his articulation.

"What do you mean?"

"Collecting bounties. Looks like they nabbed some poor soul seven unteks ago, for an 8,000 khiriu take. Two unteks

before that they hit a prize worth 5,000 khirius. I guess I know why Sanir took the job of bodyguard when Eidia offered it. He's had a tough time collecting bounties lately," Kerak said with a sarcastic laugh.

Ligeia was irked at Kerak's tone. "You think this is funny? They got Dijal!"

"Yes, I know that." Kerak peered further into the Courderax. "*Amaria!* She wasn't kidding."

"Who?"

"Dijal. After we left the Bay of Teoramugh, she spilled that she'd worked at an Eroctriase here in Astuverica. Had a lot of clients in the Architrave. One day she came unhinged and killed one of them. What was his name? Oh yeah! *Gnaeklu* something. *Gnaeklu Ve.Szari...*? Something like that."

Stunned, Ligeia raised her head.

"Anyway, after that she took off from here and headed for the Seamounts. That was when someone put a 200,000 khiriu price on her head. She was tipped off about it at some refuge camp she visited before moving on. Now, it's up to 300,000! Huh. Looks like this line of work might start to pay off for them." He paused, troubled by his lightheadedness, his cavalier tone. He reeled in pain and tapped the wound on his head.

"Kerak, did you say *Gnaeklu*?"

"What a fool I've been, Ligeia! All the while, on the amleatlope, I'd thought it was *me* they were after, with only 50,000 around my neck. All along, it was Dijal. *Dijal!*"

Kerak leaned forward, laid the Courderax aside and pushed his fingers into his eye sockets. His mood flatlined. "How are we going to find her, Ligeia? She could be anywhere. She could be *dead* by now for all we know."

"Kerak, listen to me. Did you say *Gnaeklu...Ve.Szarisch?* Is that his surname? She killed *Gnaeklu Ve.Szarisch?*"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Well, I have a hunch where Dijal might be. And if I'm right...and I feel pretty sure I am...then I'll bet she's still alive. For now."

"Where? Where do you think she is?"

"The Architrave."

Ligeia had forgotten very little about this place since the days of her misplaced youth. The vestibules, foyers, chambers, halls and alcoves of the Architrave, most of which she had toddled among, broken into or skipped through, despite her parents' stern remonstrations, had been constant, captive ground for one such as her. Unrestrained defiance to the left of the tightrope, enforced compliance on the right: those were the choices which had surrounded her, even now. She was still inclined, though, in solemn tribute to her attachment to the *hard way*, to lean a little to the left.

Now, though, she was leaning a little to the right, against the wall of a dark control room at the 28th Cypliat. In her left hand she pressed her father's Treflicat against the articulum which manipulated the propulsion stones at each level. Each click of the braking mechanism signaled that their polarities were drawing the vrungleatrope up the narrow shaft.

She articulated its position. *21st.* *Ligeia* yawned so wide it made her cheeks and jaw sore. When she opened her eyes, she gave a longing thought to Quilla, now dozing away in her parents' flat, in Eidia's bed. This was the first time *Ligeia* had seen her mother in four unteks, for owing to Eidia's stifling insecurities, along with her fear of somehow being prohibited from returning to her flat if she ever left it, Eidia rarely ever ventured from her plasmodic perch, far above her daughter's stomping grounds. *Ligeia* wondered, when the time came, if Eidia would be able to let her go. Her mother's desperate sense of isolation, *Ligeia* had not failed to notice, had grown that strong.

27th. The doors to her front began to tremble. So did *Ligeia* as the vrungleatrope came to a rumbling halt. The gates swung open, and nervously, Kerak peered through the opening before stepping out. *Ligeia* then closed the door with a whisper. She and Kerak tiptoed from one corner to the next, looking for no one, anyone. Once she found a clearing, she led him through a series of dim corridors, toward Eidia's flat. They rounded the last corner, catching a glimpse through a narrow hall window of the days' first luments, a brilliant sorentrean dawn.

Ligeia pulled her father's stone from the pocket of her shawl to place it against the articulum to her parents' front door. When she did, the thought occurred to her again. Ever since she had heard Kerak drop his name, her fond recollections of two impetuous misfits, making the Architrave their own, had not ceased. Her former partner in mischief, her fellow rogue, had always gone by the epithet *Radiu*, a condensed version of the family name. But to the Horizon she was known as Iaga2 Um.Venes-Radiuth.

Before they had gone their separate ways, long ago driven apart by conflicting loyalties, Radiu had been a companion, fellow traveler...friend. But to her father...the fallen Ephriant known as Gnaeklu Ve.Szarisch...and his memory, she remained a stalwart ally and defender. Now it seemed that Radiu's pursuit of justice, as she would define it, had come full circle.

With the velum drawn to her back, Eidia sat with Ligeia and Kerak at her dinner table, fumbling her stone for a short list of detention cells in the Architrave, a roll call of new detainees.

Kerak stared at the narrow clerestories that ran along the top of the wall, now sealed shut, a casualty of morithules which had been broken now for four days, unrepaired due the outright neglect of the tenants. Through the stifling air his eyes surveyed the flat...cramped, disheveled, scorned. It was clear that the morithules weren't all that needed work in this flat. To his right he spotted a red and gold embroidered sash, the credentials of Arduan Ephriancy, intended to be displayed only at the Schimatariat. It lay on the floor, wadded and filthy beneath the leg of a chair, forcing its imprint onto the cloth.

Kerak was impressed with only one thing he found in this place, and that was Eidia's skills with Bourгло's Treflicat. These were skills she was forbidden to possess, considering her lack of rank. Kerak had given up trying to understand how she was able to navigate is tangled indentions, other than to surmise that perhaps she had touched it so often that it's aegis had somehow become erased, replaced with a sort of

epiphanous efflux or voltaic pneuma that seemed to flow from her grasp. This, he surmised, is probably what allowed Ligeia to control the motions of the vrungleatropé without even a hint of rebuff.

Eidia put the Treflicat down on the table. A sound caught her ear. Was it Quilla's snores, which by now had grown to resemble the sound of a raspy, buzzing whistle? Or was it something else?

Bourglo, too ill to rise, slept like the dead in the next room. In defiance of Eidia's objections, he had ingested a small but potent batch of Widow's Breath the night before, passed down on day one of the Schimatariat by some sycophantic Regent plying him for one favor or another. Bourglo's body had grown accustomed to the tone of Ligeia's boil. Anything else was far too much.

"Ve.Szarisch!" Eidia said in a loud whisper, gripping the Treflicat harder this time. "His appetites were insatiable! There isn't a vestibule, alcove or foyer from here to the 56th Cypliat where he hasn't tripped *eroiche* with any number of chirapsiats. I heard him once in a supply vault, just around the corner from here, tearing away at some wretched creature, her head banging against the door. Poor little thing was *screaming* for mercy. *Huh.*"

Ligeia was surprised by Eidia's chattiness today. But, of course, she hadn't lately spent much time with her mother. Maybe Eidia's words came from the relief of knowing that anything said here could not be dissected by some circulat or guard on Bourglo's payroll. Or maybe these base recollections were being triggered by her own memories of her childhood in the Eroctriase: of being pounded, day after day; her jaws, her swollen tongue burning with hot cum. Her naked frame buried under three times her weight in sweaty flab, reeking with B.O.

"Mother, when was the last time you saw Radiu?" Ligeia asked, anxious to get the conversation back on track. Loud choking and wheezing sounds emanated from her father's room. Eidia and Ligeia cringed with each wretched ululation.

"Radiu." Eidia drew a deep breath. She dropped the Treflicat on the table and seemed to drift off. "Wasn't that

Gnaeklu's synulariat? You know, he raided three of Gnaeklu's blind cadres right after word got out that your friend...the one in detention. What's her name again?"

"Dijal, Mother. Her name is *Dijal*. But Radiu isn't a Synu..."

"Oh yes. Well, after Dijal crammed a fistful of Chelomar down his throat and beat him with his own stone, his daughter hired a bounty hunter to go after her, and another to find that synulariat of his. She got her hands on her father's stolen hoard, and while she was at it she managed to snatch the sanction codes to five dormant cadres, all of them in the names of dead owners, all of them still loaded to the hilt. My, what a pucino she turned into after her father's death! But at least she was able to snag enough argency to keep his flat. That was smart. What's her name again?"

"Radiu, Mother. Gnaeklu's daughter is *Radiu!* Not the synulariat."

"What about the synulariat?"

"Nothing. Let's try this again, please. Now think. When was the last time you saw her?"

"Who?"

"Radiu!"

"*Amaria*, I...I don't know, dear. Can I articulate it, on the Treflicat?"

"Mother, I just want to know the last time *you* saw Radiu. That information won't be on the Trefli..." Ligeia, exhausted, went silent. She looked again with bewilderment at these filthy surroundings, at the stone nestled between her mother's wanting fingers. Ligeia noticed that Eidia's murky mind was far more lucid when her hands were touching Bourglo's Treflicat.

She examined the stone more closely. It was then that she and Kerak, at the same time, noticed a small bore in the hasp of the stone. "Tyrgomec!" Ligeia mumbled under her breath. *She's infused father's Treflicat with Tyrgomec.*

"What's that, dear?"

Ligeia did not respond but acknowledged a nod from Kerak, who understood now as much as she did. While Ligeia

tried to gauge Eidia's disoriented mien, a half-dozen loud heaves could be heard from her father's room, far more violent than the last round. They reminded her of the cries which had so often troubled her ears, coming from the dens crowding the Miristiom crosscut, at Level Five; the sounds made by skirueics in the final throes of addiction, before the parting threads of life had been torn from their bodies.

Now, Ligeia mused, helplessly. Now I understand what's happening here. My father's Treflicat has become Eidia's sanctuary, her release, her addiction. As for Bourglo...his body is failing him. My father is going to die, and soon. Eidia knows this and she knows that if...or rather when...it happens, she has no idea what's going to become of her. And there's nothing...nothing that I can do to help either of them...

Eidia returned her hands to the stone and happily drew herself inward. "There are four detention cells in the Architrave, Kerak. Looks like they're on the fourth, eighth and 22nd Cypliat, with a small one at the..." she squinted to make sure she was seeing it correctly, "...at the 41st Cypliat. But, I can't...I can't tell if any of them have been opened in the past couple of days," she added.

Ligeia reached for the Treflicat and took it from Eidia's grasp.

"Something's wrong, Kerak," she whispered, "Why can't she see it? These abstracts she's reading: they're communal. Anyone who can use a Treflicat, like her, should be able to access the detention rosters, don't you think?"

Kerak dredged his memory of the Treflicat, its structure, its advantages and pitfalls. "Yeah, I would." He pondered whether Eidia's inadvertent erasure of its prime indentions was preventing a proper articulation.

Ligeia pushed the stone in his direction. "You used to have one of these things. You want to try it?"

"Uh, no!" Kerak threw his hands up. "She's found a way to supersede its indentions; that I can see. But if *I* touch it, maybe trigger a dormant loop somewhere in there; who knows? We don't need the unwanted attention that might bring; okay?"

“Superseded indentions?” Ligeia said. “That explains a lot. I was wondering why it didn’t go off when I touched it.” Ligeia paused, rolled her eyes. A knowing grin lit her face. “But I guess I’m not quite the heretic you are in the eyes of the Triumvirate, am I?”

“Not yet.” Kerak laughed.

“So why shouldn’t I give it another try? It didn’t betray me when I used it to manipulate the vrungleatrope.” As she said these words, Ligeia found herself being drawn back into the pupils of Kerak’s eyes, back into Drogran’s halcyon gaze. Her blank expression turned to a smile...comforting, reassuring...as she easily pulled herself from those eyes and back to the Sphere surrounding her.

Kerak returned her smile. “Do it!”

Ligeia took the stone in her hands. After four stratimers of fluttering lids and jittery facial tics, she placed the Treflicat back on the table.

“Well?” Kerak asked.

Ligeia dropped her eyes and said nothing. She pushed the stone back to the center of the table. “I can’t see it, Kerak. I just...*can’t*.”

Eidia stared at a blank wall to her front. “Radiu,” she blurted out.

“Yes, Mother?”

“I...I remember her!” Eidia grabbed the Treflicat, pressing her palms tight against the grain, flexing her fingers in and out. “She petitioned the Council after her father’s death. Two unteks ago she took his place, in the X-C. She’s an Ephriant now.”

Eidia leaned forward and went on, her tone more rigid. “The 41st Cypliat...”

10, 15 pulsimers of silence followed. “Mother, what about the 41st?”

“That’s where the Schimatariat is being held. Your father told me that they had removed the velums separating six adjoining Halls to make room for all the attendees.”

Kerak and Ligeia glanced at Eidia, at each other, wondering where all this was going.

“That detention cell on the 41st Cypliat. It’s a small, sealed chamber, behind a door trimmed in red, about 12 neurris from the norostrean corner of the Hall of the Purges of Meso-Sczelis. Strikes me as kind of odd, you know, to put a detention cell that high up in the Architrave.”

“Mother, can you tell if there’ve been any recent additions to that cell?”

Silence. Then she looked at her daughter with sad eyes. “No...I can’t, dear. I’m sorry.”

Kerak’s curiosity led him in another direction. “Eidia, can you tell how many detainees there are in that cell?”

“Which cell?”

“The cell on the 41st.”

Her grip on the Treflicat eased until only two fingers remained upon it. She paused for half a stratimer to make sure she hadn’t misinterpreted the read. Then she spoke.

“One.”

A SURGE OF VOLTAIC TRANSFORMATION coursed beneath the timid expression of Kerak Um.Tiago, standing shoulder to shoulder with thousands at the now expansive 41st Cypliat, here at the start of day two of the third Schimatariat.

15 stratimers ago he had wandered into this place completely unnoticed, for all intents and purposes a spurious legacy of what he once was: the protégé of Sorchu Ve.Sian and Elunid Te.Mirin, the son and brother of true ascendancy, here in the locus of all things Triumvirate. As soon as he took his place, though, he realized that an imposter stood in his shoes. For he had at last become what he was: the consummate bastard child, bereft of standing, place and belonging, and devoid of any choice in the matter. He dropped his head even further, struggling to erase the self-deceptions that he had walked in with: a scattering of words and images, encased in a bewildering psychic *mélange*.

Consistent with his nature, it took little time for him to realign his focus. *Which one is it?* he mused, under a clenched jaw. *Where is she?!*

Along the nooks and niches at the periphery of the norostrean side of the 41st he had found at least six red-trimmed doors, any one of which could have been *it*. Owing, though, to being locked and silent, or open and crammed floor to ceiling with anything *but* Dijal, none of them were. And so, in trying to make his way unseen through the uncharted corners of this Cypliat, he had become the fleshy equivalent of a dagger: plunged, trapped, deep within the heart of the organism; this massive, mephitic swarm, awaiting the blessings and the curses that day two was certain to bring.

He tried now, without success, to move his body to the left, the right. Breathing and concentration came in short spurts, so he kept his eyes to the front, always to the front,

blowing the sweat from his forehead, spewing tiny jets of moisture into the air.

The glare of early morning luments, unusually strong today, streamed in through hundreds of arched clerestories, open to the silent breezes. Shimmering waves of evaporating sweat, surging consternation squeezed their way through the open clerestories of the Hall, soon to become one with thick clouds of mist, detritus and protoplasm, hanging in suspension this morning at Zenith.

Muffled threats, counterfeit praise, cantankerous debate ricocheted between the boundaries of the newly created *Hall of the Third Schimatariat*. At the far end he could make out the Cathedra of the Suhm-Ephriant, that consummation of resonant plasmospheric crystals and Ularic/Phylox alloys, frowning upon the chaos and clamor over which it laid claim.

Kerak fought to suppress the air of blatancy he felt around his shoulders; that is, Bourglo's sash. He wrapped himself in an invisible cocoon, trying to suppress his native urge to survey his surroundings, and in doing so, risk recognition. He was conscious, though, of the disadvantages of this choice, lacking a complete picture of his place in the company of the largest collection of grasping, guileful bootlickers, assailants and plunderers found anywhere in this vast but well-bounded Dimensional Horizon.

The more you try to avoid being seen, the harder it is to see. He adjusted the sash, displaying the colors, the mark and the motifs that had gained him access to this convocation. He tried to sharpen his peripheral vision, and as he did he could almost feel it bearing down upon his neck: the hot breath of Iaga2 Um.Venes-Radiuth.

She was here; he knew it. *She's expecting me.*

Ligeia and Eidia had done their job well. Bourglo, of course, was silently thanked by Kerak for his own contribution. His absence, due to his ongoing illness at the start of the second day of this event, had enabled Kerak to take the Ephriant's place. That and a quick bath, some salve to the wounds on his face, a change of clothes, a vigorous press to remove the chair leg imprint from the embroidered cloth and a

short lecture on how to perform two seemingly simple tasks: behave like an Ephriant, and recognize Radiu.

Talk of waiting for safer surroundings, until Radiu returned home that evening, had been relegated to the dustbin. "If Dijal is still alive," Kerak had told Ligeia and Eidia before leaving their flat, "she won't be for long." The time to act was now. And *now* had finally arrived.

Like a giant wave, the crowd around him started to creep forward, to press itself harder against the front of the Hall as the Suhm-Ephriant emerged from behind a pair of double doors to take his seat. The sound of voices could be heard above the din, voices of self-imposed authority, calling out the name of the fifth, calling and then *begging* for order, for reason, for at least the illusion of respect for the Cathedra and the vague impersonation of superiority to which it aspired.

As witnesses to the unraveling of the structure which supported the Triumvirate, one fact was obvious to anyone standing in this Hall. And that led to a question which would not relent: who was in charge of these proceedings? After day two had begun, it took Kerak less than four stratimers to see it for himself. It was the Muharadu...but with a little help.

Kerak was horrified when he saw them: a pair of wafer-like memory stones, bonded together under their own volticity, each of them imprinted with a matching pair of Kabalyphs. Passed from one attendee to the next, their journey was monitored by two alert Muharic Ephriants who scanned not only the intensity of the grasp of those who touched them, but the eyes as well. Lagging five rows behind these strange yet familiar looking twins, the Xycloplast weaved its way through the crowd. The Suhm-Ephriant's stone, though, fell with comparative indifference into the palms of those whose minds had first been imprinted with the voltaic patina of the Kuspegias.

The stones soon made their way to the fourth row from the back of the Hall: Kerak's row. His pulse began to race. The lead Muharic priest, with his eyes on those whose hands were about to receive the stones, tossed a scowl at the attendees to

Kerak's left. This was the direction from which the stones would come.

Kerak blinked. In a panic he slumped, bending his knees so that his head dropped below the level of the shoulders of those around him. He silently backstepped until he was pressed against the rear wall, then slid to his right until he could reach the periphery of the Hall.

He stood now at a more favorable vantage point, shifting his gaze from side to side with little fear of notice. He looked up, through the clerestories, now open to their widest level. The Lumens were about 30 degrees from Zenith. Kerak drew his eyes to the dome of the sky, noticing what appeared to be an oddly bright protoplasmic cloud, thick and damp, on the verge of breaking apart.

His attention dropped, and his survey now ran the length of the Hall, to the Cathedra. There, the fifth Suhm-Ephriant sat muzzled, garbed in a cloak embroidered with thousands of crystallized fragments of Ularic and Hagonite, sewn with the multicolored strands of the gut of the Gyradarakur. The Suhm-Ephriant's face was concealed behind a skin-tight, grey-black veil, covering the whole of his head. Both of Kirahmoor's hands appeared firm and steady, but his shoulders drew into a weak slump, as if their owner had forever lost the ability to retreat, as was his custom, into the private sanctuary of supremacy.

Kerak's field of vision slid past the Cathedra and landed on a narrow point, no more than 30 neurris from where he stood. He realized then that the sense of foreboding he had earlier felt, of the hot breath of Iaga2 Um.Venes-Radiuth, was not there at all. It was, in fact the *eyes*, but of someone else, someone he now knew was in Radiu's employ; someone he immediately recognized as the bounty hunter known as Hrisula Te.Ganajier. And that pair of eyes, followed by a female who embodied Eidia's description of Radiu, was headed his way.

*K*erak darted through a series of tight corridors, crammed with furniture, crates holding food or vials of clear or colored liquids, removable partitions and velums which only a few days earlier had formed the boundaries of the sanctums and chambers of the 41st Cypliat. He coughed, panted, hurdled one obstacle after another, beating his shoulders and knees against the jutting mishmash blocking his path.

The sound of their footfalls grew louder. Kerak jumped a folded partition in a dark passageway, lost his balance and skidded into an alcove to his right. He tumbled against the wall, tripped over a stack of wooden crates and hit the floor with a painful thud.

“Keep on him. Keep going! I’ll go around!”

Laying silent, he heard these muffled words, sounding more distant than the nearest pair of footsteps. They came to a sudden halt, no more than five neurris beyond the corner to his left.

That’s Hrisula, he thought, fighting to hide the rattling wheeze of his actinetically-singed lungs. *Radiu’s going for my flank.*

Kerak stood, cringing as the cloth of Bourglo’s sash made a crumpling hiss. He looked around. Five doors could be seen in the dim light filling this alcove. Two of them were trimmed in red. Neither of them, it occurred to him, looked familiar.

Give me a sign, Dijal. Please!

Another low sound could be heard to his left, this time at ground level. He peered through a gap in the boxes, making out the cloudy appearance of Te.Ganajier. With one subdued breath after another, she tiptoed closer toward him. Then, a single thought, of the overpowering hands of Hezhreon Te.Nisach, came alive within him. He assessed the odds, the apparent hopelessness of his situation, and came to just one conclusion.

You have no weapons, he chided himself, *but two. Use them!*

She was now no more than two neurris distant, separated in near darkness by nothing more than a stack of crates. He

raised his left hand, his sweaty palm open wide at the center of five twitching fingers. He ran it up along the edge of the stack.

Kerak watched Te.Ganajier's eyes, the movement of her pupils, as she crept around to her right, in his direction. Just before their eyes locked through a thin gap, he thrust his open hand toward her neck with a single, staggering lunge, knocking the crates against her shoulder.

Right away, fingers fastened to flesh. Her clipped scream turned to a sharp, drooly gurgle. Plugs of her spit shot out and struck his eyes, blinding him as his right hand went for her shoulder, pinning it to the wall. With the force of fear heightened by an impatient rage he pressed harder, darkening the redness in her bulging eyes, her protruding blue tongue, her quivering lips.

As the life began to ooze from the pores of Hrisula Te.Ganajier, Kerak heard another sound behind him; the mechanical rasp of breathing...in, out. He turned to the right for half a pulsimer. Out of the corner of his eye he saw it: a thin loop of metallic twine, dropping from the top of his field of vision, even with his nose, then down and out of view. A gust of warm, damp air struck the back of his neck.

The last thought which passed through Kerak's mind as the vice of Radiu's grip tightened the loop over his trachea was that of a tiny perch, nestled high above a bright Eusterian sea. A wide-brimmed woven hat sat atop his head. A horn, cut from the jawbone of a Barutha, lay nestled in the palm of his hand. He kept his eyes fixed to estre, ready to raise the call should a stir unsettle the distant waters.

And close beside him, she sat.

Cai! Where are you?

Through the door she could hear, feel the commotion of spite and struggle: pushing, shoving, threats, strangulation. One voice, despite its muted tones, sounded familiar to her, but she couldn't be sure. She placed her hand over her mouth, closed her eyes, terrified that the rancor beyond would spill over into her dark little shell and swallow her up.

Dijal furrowed her brow and tried to unwind herself from the fetal ball she had become upon arrival, the night before. She straightened her legs, arched her back. She heard a hand beat twice on the door to her cell, just above the knob and the articulum stone beside it. Then, silence, followed by a rustling of feet, and a stratimer later the sound of another hand, rattling the lightstaff in the hallway. Suddenly, it came on, and a wide shaft of artificial light crawled along the floor and under the door. Another din of shuffling feet, voices, resounded in the distance. Then they were gone.

With the return of silence and a nominal measure of light, the futility of her predicament became ever more clear. *Nothing good is going to come from this*, she thought, closing her eyes again. *So what in the freigh am I going to do?*

Dijal looked up and spotted a hole on the opposite wall, the size of a fist, taped over, as if by a careless amateur. Right away she was struck with recognition. *I've been in this room before, with Gnaeklu*, she mused. *I remember it now! He made that hole.* She could not recall the fit of anger or delirium which had prompted his outburst that day; regardless, it was enough. This consortium of past and present threw her deeper into the bottomless pit she was already in.

Dijal shuddered, convinced that whatever had just happened out there would soon be visited upon her a thousand-fold. Again, she could feel her body begin to curl up, to will itself into a tiny, invisible spot. Maybe then, she hoped, her captor might open the door to her cell and find...nothing. *What's this? Dijal has vanished into thin air? Might as well just leave and go home. What's the use?*

The voice of reason, though, screamed in her ear. She threw her legs and arms out and reached again for her bag, tucked inside her pants pocket. She sat up and retrieved Ligeia's gift stone. Then, the Kuspegias. Dijal placed all three stones on the floor in front of her, inside the thin shaft of light coming from under the door. She stared at the stones with a glaze of hollow anticipation.

Suddenly, her head was filled with recollection.

The Architrave. She remembered how much Gnaeklu relished his eroiche in the cramped little nooks and niches that filled the Cypliat; and the higher above the Triece, the better. He had told her once that if he couldn't have this mighty edifice all to himself, at least he could savor a few conquests of another sort, here in these airy sanctums, in which the act of tapping a chirapsiat was frowned upon. Gnaeklu liked to take chances, to live on the edge. It made him *so* hard, she recalled. That attribute (of mind, not of member) was without a doubt the *only* thing she admired about him.

A din of shouts, catcalls resounded. Dijal fought the urge to return to the womb. The three stones lay before her, unmoved. Again, she stared long and hard at them, running through what she felt was her failure...yes, *hers*...to engage the Kuspegias the day before. But the lack of privacy in Ligeia's terrabode, the disapproving tones, the intense pressure that had been heaped upon her through the pushy, judgmental eyes of Kerak Um.Tiago, had rattled her. Here, conditions were better. It was quiet. The dim lighting suited her mood. And Kerak wasn't around: a double-edged sword indeed.

But her anxiety over the threat of imminent removal from this tiny vault, to what would amount to a far more dismal fate beyond that door, would not relent. Neither would her thoughts of Gnaeklu.

Take a chance! she chastened herself. *Because you're not getting out of here alive otherwise.*

She bent forward and reached for the Kuspegias, holding them in the palms of her hands. With a grimace she placed Ligeia's gift stone between the twin stones and bore down with both hands, pressing the three of them together within a hardened grip. Into them...downward, ever downward...she drove her focus, her anger, her force of will and her most savage instincts, from the center of her cortex, down her neck, across her shoulders, her arms and into her hands.

She could feel her fingers begin to quiver. The turquoise crystals in the stones began to burn. A light humming sensation emanated and crawled up through her hands. Her

grip tightened until her limbs went numb and her vision grew hazy.

She dropped the Kuspegias.

Depleted, Dijal fell forward, greasy with sweat, sunken to a depth far greater than she had ever been in her entire life.

Slowly, she arose. She pushed her hands forward to touch the Kuspegias. She turned them over and ran her fingers back and forth across the grain of each stone. They were coarse, far rougher than before. She picked up all three stones and pressed them against the crack in the door, against the glow of the lightstaff in the hall.

Her eye ran from both sides of the Ularic stone, then to the Kuspegias, back and forth, a dozen times or more. Etched upon the twin stones lay the exact impression of a pair of finished Kabalyphs, a perfect match in comparison to those on the Ularic. She rubbed her hands together and looked at her palms, at their markings, still just as primal as before.

The humming sensation in her fingertips, which she had first felt only pulsimers earlier, remained, intensified. She took the gift stone and wrapped her bare hands around it, holding it there for less than a stratimer. She dropped it, threw her hands out in front of her and noticed that the markings on her palms were now complete; an exact duplicate with those on Ligeia's gift stone, and the Kuspegias.

She placed the Kuspegias on her temples. As soon as they touched her skin she was struck with a sudden sense of release, evacuation, as if the miasmas which had infested her existence, lifelong, were being sucked from her body, tossed into nothingness, incinerated in a towering, tapering tongue of flame.

Dijal crossed her legs and came to her feet. Placing her hand on the door, directly opposite the articulum stone, she sighed and gave it a gentle push. The door clicked and creaked open.

She poked her head around the Bittermoor casing. The hiss of voices, tones of umbrage, slander, indignance, echoed from beyond the corridor, empty now except for the same

tumble of jumbled rubble she and her captor had navigated the night before.

On buoyant feet she tiptoed around a maze of dismantled partitions, away from the source of the clamor stinging her ears. She walked between chambers, through darkened passageways and crosscuts, all the while guided by recollections of her journeys with Gnaeklu Ve.Szarisch as they had so long ago run their own salacious gauntlets through the schematics of the 41st Cypliat.

Working her way toward quieter surroundings, Dijal peered off to her right, through a clear, almost soundproof plasmodic wall. Through it she could see the Cathedra of the Suhm-Ephriant, shining opalescent in the approach of late-morning luments. She stood there, still as night, for two, three stratimers, watching the Suhm-Ephriant re-emerge to take his seat, then to fall back and disappear again as fresh, hot vibes of menace were directed at him and his altar.

In front of and to the right of the Cathedra, Dijal noticed a matronly looking female holding a small hand, the hand of a child she thought she recognized. She blinked, rubbed the mucus from her eyes and realized that it was the hand of Nalani.

She gasped, and it was then that my own eye fell, quite by accident, upon this derelict stranger. I noticed that her face was beginning to show a reaction to what she had just seen. A knot tightened in her throat as another round of voices forced her toward a series of passages to her left.

Darting now along a maze of twisting corridors, she was struck again with recognition, arriving at the door to another crib which her most libidinous client had once introduced her to. She noticed the door's articulum stone. Despite the pounding her desecrated genitals had taken in this chamber, she recalled it as a place that stood alone, oozing familiarity, natural light and an abundance of quiet; a place where she was sure she would not have to endure the rancor she was hearing right now.

With the Kuspegias still bound to her temples, she placed her hand on the articulum and pushed the weighty door open.

She found the room unchanged. It was, as it had always been, the ganglion, the epicenter of the articulum which maintained override control of every functional morithule within every official structure in Astuverica. This included the Medius Athlamaru and, of course, the Architrave, from the first Cypliat all the way up to the 68th.

Before her, they were positioned: two rows of dark, finger-sized, cylindrical articulum stones, bound together in tight clusters; 1578 in all, held together by a pair of forged controls rod called Vital Temperans. The ores of which these apparati were comprised, interspersed with flecks of Menshar and chelated Hagonite, gleamed in the reflection of mid-day lumenesence, as if they were on fire.

Dijal shuffled into the room, reached behind her and closed the door. Placing her hand just above the knob, she elucidated the sonorances coursing through the door's articulum. Then, one by one, she erased them.

She turned her back to the door and cast her vision skyward, noticing that the Lumens were now about 15 degrees from the crown of the sky. She closed her eyes and could feel the back of Nostra's hand tenderly brushing her cheek. Then she opened them, realizing with sadness that it was nothing more than a light breeze coming through the single open clerestory above her head.

Dijal stood there, steeped in willfulness, her eyes still affixed to the sky. She could see that the fracturing of the thick cloud of protoplasms which had been clogging the sky at Zenith was nearly complete. Above it, through a narrow gap, she noticed seven Ione, soaring together in a tight circle beneath a lavender haze. Then, the protoplasmic separation below them resealed.

With her back to the wall, her knees collapsed. She slid down, hitting the cold floor. The Kuspegias forced themselves against her skull with an even greater intensity.

Dijal closed her eyes.

"What," she asked in a quiet, anxious tone, "is happening?"

*D*IJAL PICKED HERSELF UP FROM THE FLOOR, watching the door to her chamber swing open. It crashed to a halt against the wall behind her. She held her open palms toward the clerestory, lumens turning now to darkness. A blinding light shot through the open door, stabbing her eyes. The floor, the walls, the ceiling began to roll and quiver. She jammed her fingers around the edges of the Kuspegias, struggling without success to ease their grip upon her skin until her frustrated hands fell to her hips.

One cautious step at a time, her feet carried her through the open door. A few steps beyond the casing, into the hallway, the light intensified, and the walls and ceiling around her melted away like seawater dripping off a wave-tossed rock. A broad plain was revealed to her now...golden, wind-swept, expansive. Beams of radiance rushed toward her from every direction; blazing yellow, orange, red, infused here and there with black, white and every shade in between. Others, a smattering of colors, tones, shadows, sensations of touch, taste and sound repeated themselves in a dazzling, kaleidoscopic pastiche.

Without warning, the floor fell from beneath her feet, and Dijal could feel herself plunging headlong into the dome of the sky. Her mind was transformed by the sight of billions, trillions of airborne specks, wave upon wave of dissonant subchattels, soaring upward to crowd the sky at Zenith. The caress of millions of delicate fingertips clung to her skin. A gust of wind struck her face, the vast sweep of wings...Ionic, Lumenescent...jostling her, beating against her body.

Then, silence.

Dijal could feel herself coming to a halt, then reverse course to ascend downward, soaring now into impenetrable stone, crag and ore, through the swirling vacuums of hundreds of Kiyfer domes, beneath lofty mountaintops, undulating

plateaus and moors, rugged coastlines, their waters running the gamut from dull and dry to bittersweet from the hefty infusion of Aurean saturates.

Her psyche was transformed once again, this time along a plenary of veins, opaque and transparent, stanhic and otherwise. She could not make out the thoughts and sensations they conveyed, but the farther she traveled along them, the greater the distance ahead of her she was able to see.

She sped along, her arms extended, close together. Dijal watched in calm detachment as her appendages began to conjoin, taking on the appearance of the veins through which she travelled. 10 then turned to 100...1000...a million, *ad infinitum*. Before her eyes now lay what she had become: the capillary magnitude that formed the Subterranean lifeblood of the Dimensional Horizon.

To her left she could make out the Aurean rilles in the wisoltrean Seamounds. Suddenly, her body began to mutate into a helical transparency, in triplicate, interspersed with void and shadow and the chiseled remnants of precious ore. She approached a slight rise: the unification of this triune. Nearing it, she could feel her movements slowing, her body beginning to warp, to tremble, shaken to its core by the sonorance of a billion tongues, an onslaught of voltaic ferocity. In a flash her eyes were blinded, stunned, and her movements came to a violent halt in a misty yellow haze.

Her vision cut through this gauzy veil, where she could see a divergence, of two paths.

One, beneath her, bathed in warmth and brilliant illumination, signaled a paradigm shift, an exquisite release, far and away beneath the rilles of Aurea, beyond the confines of the Dimensional Horizon. This path, she knew, represented a journey of utter certainty; a complete and thorough emancipation from the agonies which had become endemic to her young soul.

The second path lay above her. A sensory enigma. A cold, narrow tunnel, choked in darkness, helplessness, filled with cries for mercy, succor, absolution.

Dijal could hear a clutch of familiar voices, desperate and afraid, calling out from deep within this daunting void. She reached out for them and called back, unheard.

Unsure if she had chosen her path, or if her path had chosen her, she closed her eyes and could feel herself being levitated, compressed, squeezed into the tunnel above, to begin this final leg of her transformation: a journey into the unknown.

Once inside, she could feel her body coming apart, then rejoining as it had been before her journey began.

Rising above it, she looked down now upon a vertical landscape. To her left lay the Swales of the Neroluer. Blue smoke, flashes of light, cries of torment could be heard ahead of hundreds of Machaerans, slashing and burning their way through the ambits of the Mysoux. To her right, farther into the distance, lay the Shalu'doc.xhu. Beneath her, she could see an enormous magnitude of pockmarked catacombs; the estrean boundary of the Mysouxlian ambits.

The voices of familiarity grew more intense as her motion slowed and her altitude dropped. She descended, passing through slurry and stone and into a dark cave; low, narrow, damp, overgrown with ancient root and vine, Pragash and Kalmuth.

She blinked and found herself standing, shivering in near total darkness. The murky glow of firelight could be seen through a slit in the rock before her. She moved toward it, turned her body sideways and squeezed through a narrow slit, as wide as a pair of fingers. The sound of voices grew louder, their echoes passing in distortion off these waterlogged surroundings.

A few more steps and she rounded a corner. There, she saw them, sitting beside a fire, huddled over a Myotrophus covered in fracture lines and glue joints. A tome, once misty and ephemeral, drifted through her mind. And as Ekavias and Jadox spoke these words, their meaning suddenly became clear to her in a torrent of revelation.

She repeated them...

“*Observe, for when the Hemlet of Coda rises up to touch the UnCairn...*,” said Ekavias.

“You will see that when the stain of dissonance rises up to touch the sky at Zenith...,” Dijal said.

“*...then will the Trath’ul Bri.Duc seize the Domnium...*,” said Jadox.

“...then will the ‘Aureole,’ the Circle of Seven, seize the light of day...,” Dijal said.

A tumult of thuds and shrieks, the pounding of hands and fists echoed in Dijal’s ears.

She opened her eyes, sticky and tear-stained. Dijal found herself standing before the bank of articulums, her hands clutching the Vital Temperans, her body drenched in brilliant light. She shook uncontrollably, burning hot, dripping with sweat, struggling to catch her breath. A strong gust caused her knees to buckle, but she remained upright.

The thick, solid-core Bittermoor door to her right shook beneath the heavy blows of two, then three determined pairs of fists. Its leaden panels began to split, the level of urgency on the other side approaching climax. Dijal leaned her head back and stared again into the sky as curses and reprisals seeped through the cracks in the door.

Above, the thick cloud of protoplasm she’d seen earlier had disappeared. Dijal batted her eyes, refocusing skyward, trying to see what was happening at Zenith. Fierce winds and glaring light impairing her vision. Above, it appeared to her that the circle of seven had expanded, pushing out now toward the periphery of the sky. She looked outward, downward, and could see yet another, much larger chain of Ione, vaulting from the Aurean rilles, racing upward at full speed.

She squinted, noticing that the Lumens had fallen from their arc of traverse. Now back at 30 degrees, they appeared stunned, panicked, fluttering away from each other in deranged loops, trapped between two Ionian rings, racing from opposite directions toward a full conjunction. All Dijal had ever known, indeed all *anyone* had ever known in this life, was the

Lumens as a relatively tight, steady cluster of light, a life force far greater than the sum of its parts. But the once deliberate unit she had so admired as a child, arising as it had in the estrean dawns above the Aquina Sul-Ataurea, had now fallen into utter chaos.

Her heart pounded. A leviathan roar ricocheted across the sky, echoing now from Zenith, all the way to the scorched, wind-swept land below. The plasmodic surfaces on all sides of her trembled and cleaved. The pounding on the door slowed, then ceased. And she continued to gaze upward.

Above, Dijal could see Hedeon's flock becoming even more separated, pinched in a merciless clutch; a fluttering press of radiant, winged flesh. A now singular band of light encircled the sky at 45 degrees, a writhing mishmash of Lumens and Lone, thrown together in bitter entanglement. This ring continued to widen, to fall, farther and farther from the dome of the sky, racing toward the rilles. Toward the fringes of the Dimensional Horizon.

A heavy burst of downdrafts fell leaden to the ground. The sky began to darken, dissolving into a swarthy mauve as the Aurean mists which had remained in the rilles began to thicken, to boil and rise under the intense heat now approaching the fringes of the sky. At Zenith, the depth of these lavender tones became heavier, more pronounced.

And as Dijal continued to witness this phenomenon, the Kuspegias began to burn...

Again, the door shook, this time beneath six, eight, 10 pounding, terrified fists. Cursing, pleading voices conveyed urgency, panic, raw desperation. With an explosive shudder, the dusty atmosphere filled with shards of wood and metal. Just before five pairs of hands began tearing through the splintered opening, Dijal, in a singular moment of perception and awareness, tightened her grip on the Vital Temperans and began to erase their voltaic sonorances. Within less than half a pulsimer, an expulsion commenced within each of the 1578 articulum maintaining override control of the functional morithules belonging to every official clerestory in Astuverica. Eight pairs of hands reached for Dijal, and as they did, the

sonorances in the morithules controlling over 12,000 clerestories, nearly all of them now wide open, evaporated into nothingness.

Violently, Dijal was dragged away. An intense pain wracked her shoulders as her arms were yanked from their sockets. She was pulled through a crowded corridor, pummeled by two, then three pairs of enraged fists. Ligeia's gift stone fell from her pocket, left to be trampled by a dozen pairs of feet before rolling to a stop against a plasmodic wall.

Her captors struggled to move forward but found themselves beaten back by a panic-stricken horde, thrusting and crying out in fear and disbelief. No more than half a stratimer after she had been pulled from her tiny lair, Dijal was thrown against a wall and abandoned in a bloody heap.

The sensations surrounding her body and mind grew exponentially more chaotic. She lay in a wide hallway. Its floors shook beneath hundreds of pairs of feet, scurrying off in all directions. She turned her face skyward again, toward the open clerestory above her head. The Kuspegias felt as if they were attempting to merge into one, forcing themselves to become an essential part of her being, pressing toward each other now with a mind-splitting vengeance.

In a fraction of a pulsimer, she was once again transformed, returned to that dank cave beneath the Mysouxlian ambits.

Ekavias's face appeared before her, warped in a mask of indigo.

"...The trial of choler and sinew, of Nugnui and Tolos'thetumos..." he said.

Dijal's eyes fixated upon the sky. "...and the great struggle, of Lumens and Ione..." she whispered, seeing Zenith now cast in near total darkness, the horizons reflecting an ever-thinning circle of light.

"...will pass beyond the purlieu, and the Curtain of Neblach will descend upon the sweep of Cre'lurrgia..." Ekavias finished, his face now disappearing from her vision.

“...will be visited upon the Dimensional Horizon,” Dijal mumbled, “and the Mists of Aurea will descend upon the sweep of our existence...”

She could see that the clerestories above were becoming coated with a lavender screen. Her skin took on a similar tone, strands of Aurean toxicity filling her eyes. She licked her lips, reminded of the saturate-laden waters of the norostrean seas. Booming shrieks pierced her hearing; strained, screaming voices, fewer in number now but still leavened with panic and fear. She struggled to rise, and when she did she rammed her left shoulder, then her right, against the wall beside her.

Dijal screamed, reeled in pain and passed out.

She revived, noticing that the air in this corridor was thick with a mauvy haze. Dijal forced herself to her feet and stumbled along, bound for the control room from which she'd been pulled. To her right, through the windows surrounding the Architrave, she saw that the atmosphere outside had taken on the same lavender wash as the air she now breathed, thrusting its devastating effects far and away from Astuverica, into the distance, beyond her realm of vision.

She stopped, stood on shaky legs and pressed her face against the plasmodic wall of the Hall of the Third Schimatariat. There, she witnessed a scene of mass, unrelenting carnage. Hundreds, thousands of corpses littered the floor. The stifling air continued to choke those who were mere pulsimers away from imminent death. She turned to her left and could see that the Cathedra, secured to its elevated platform, stood empty.

She turned away and reached the control room. Four souls lay prostrate over the morithules. Two of them twitched once or twice, then ceased, having failed in their mission to close the clerestories of Astuverica, to preserve their own lives and the lives of countless others, here within the Horizon's seat of Sovereignty.

She continued to walk, dodging the numerous corpses blocking her path, their faces contorted in silent screams, their

mouths agape, their swollen tongues thrust outward in a desperate, futile effort to breathe. To her right she peered out the window, onto the Andulkan panorama. Under an ever-darkening sky, the scene was profuse; except for a few stubborn souls still writhing and gasping for their last breath, everything she saw, everywhere she looked, was bestrewn in death.

The chill of mid-day darkness fell upon the land, and she found herself cocooned in a vast and overwhelming silence. Dijal Um.Diastre-Mur walked quickly toward the end of the hallway. At the lobby, she pressed her hand against the articulum to call the vrunleatrobe. Afflicted by the sting of memory, she pulled a lightstaff from the wall and adjusted it to full intensity.

She realized that her time here was not yet done.

AYU RAISED HER RIGHT HAND TOWARD the open clerestories, into the pitch-black sky. With her left she rubbed a raw, bloody wound on her head, painful to the touch. She struggled to breathe, filling her lungs with the sweet-smelling air that filled the Hall. The weight of three adult corpses bore down upon her. Two of them she managed to wiggle out from under, writhing in serpentine contortions. Then she grunted, pushed the last body from atop her small frame and rolled free.

For three stratimers she sat in silent apprehension, trying to put the pieces of her shattered mind back together, to understand what had just happened. She recalled standing no more than 25 neurris from the Cathedra, her hand joined with Tyrilia's, overshadowed by the adults pressing in around her, like massive trees in a dense, noisy forest.

Suddenly, she recalled it: a chorus of frantic voices turned to screams, all eyes and hands pointing skyward. She remembered being separated from Tyrilia, fighting to mend their broken grip, then being jostled and jerked and trampled as luments dimmed to lavender and lavender to darkness. She recalled passing out from fright, or panic...or *something*.

Then, memory faded to black.

Ayu straightened herself and dropped her right hand, to push herself up from the floor. It landed on a face. She felt the features of a nose, lips, a cold, swollen tongue and bulging eyes. She continued to run her fingers along its features and realized, to her horror, that it was the face of Tyrilia.

She squinted to her right, to the sudden, jerky glow of an approaching lightstaff, creeping now from the back of the Hall. Ayu was overcome with terror. She jumped to her feet and rubbed her eyes, to better focus her vision. She lifted her hands to her face, touched her left palm with the tip of her tongue. She recognized a sweet palate, yet stronger than she'd remembered during her days at the Crescent. She rubbed her

hands against her arms and shook herself off, spewing clouds of fine purple dust.

The glare of the approaching lightstaff grew stronger, sweeping back and forth, everywhere revealing scenes of stark annihilation. She covered her mouth and began to run now, stumbling over torsos, limbs and faces, their clipped features a grim mirror of sudden surprise, abject fear.

In the near distance, tucked behind the empty Cathedra, Ayu noticed a pinpoint of vertical light. She walked toward it, each step heightening her terror, combined with an eagerness to know what lay ahead. After vaulting kneewalls, more corpses, littered platforms and a pile of overturned furniture, she passed the Cathedra and dropped to her knees to enter a narrow tunnel, about four neurris long. At the end of it she came to a tiny, square door, less than a neurri on each side. The vertical light could be seen at the left edge of the door, above the latch. She held her ear to the panel and heard the garble of two voices, flush with panic and fear.

She knocked on the door; the voices came to an abrupt halt. Four or five pulsimers later she heard the squeak of a distant hinge, then the hiss of urgent, angry whispers. She saw the latch jiggle slightly, then the door opened to the width of an adult hand. Through the gap she saw a pair of eyes, glassy and phobic.

The door flung open. At once she recognized the face of her father.

“AYU! What...? Get...get IN here!”

She froze. He thrust his left hand toward her and pulled her in with a jerk. A thin sheet of mauvy dust rolled in, then out again before he slammed the door with his foot. Inside, a single lightstaff, set to a low level and held by a jittery right hand, revealed that they were in a tiny vault, no more than four neurris on each side, about three high. Its surfaces were finished in dark tones. Its walls were lined with two benches. At the opposite side of this small room she could see another door, equal in size, built around a plasmodic window, concealed by a curtain. It was slightly ajar and had been in the process of closing as she was being pulled in. Behind it,

skittering shadows, shuffling footsteps and light, cursing whispers revealed that they were not alone.

“Where...where did you *come*...? What are you *DOING* here?” His chest heaved as he spoke, gasping for breath. His tone was halting, angry, hysterical, concealing nothing of his fear and surprise.

“What has...HAPPENED?!” he cried out.

She remained silent, unsure, staring into his pupils, swimming now in tapering spirals. She tried to form a response, but she had no idea where to begin. The sense of unease she had felt before being pulled into this place had reached apogee.

He returned the lightstaff to its wall mount, and at once Ayu’s vision became clearer. Beneath his nose, around the edges of his mouth, she could see that a thin layer of lavender dust, mixed with drool and sweat, had begun to build. She approached him, licked her fingers and raised her hand, sensing the need to wipe this coating from his face. He recoiled at her movements and threw his head against the wall behind him. He grabbed the back of his skull, reeled in pain and forced his lids shut, preferring to see these grim circumstances with his mind rather than his eyes.

“Where is your mother?”

“She...she’s in bed. In our flat,” Ayu said. Two slimy tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Who brought you here?”

“Tyrlia.”

“*Why*...WHY did you come here?”

She paused, wary of his tone, fearful of worsening his mood. Outside the door leading back to the Cathedra, they both heard the distant echo of a muffled thud. He flinched.

The glow of the lightstaff further revealed what she had not before seen. She scanned his clothing, noticed that he was wearing a cloak, embroidered with crystallized fragments of Ularic and Hagonite. Its fabric was resplendent with prismatic threads of Gyradarakur gut. On the bench beside him lay two leathery veils, both identical, greyish-black in tone.

On the bench to her right, she noticed two small, wafer-like memory stones, stuck together. Except for their peculiar etchings, they bore a striking resemblance to Droган's little stones. Curious, she reached for them with her left hand, hovering her fingers over them. She was deathly afraid, though, to touch them.

The light coming around the edge of the curtain over the opposite door began to dim. She could again hear the creaking of its hinges.

He forced his crusty, tear-stained eyes to open. "Place your...your hand on the back of your neck," he whispered.

"Why?"

"Just *DO* it!" he barked, his breath growing shallower, more pinched with the deterioration of time.

Ayu lifted her right hand and did as she was told.

He leaned forward a little and noticed that her pupils, piercing and narrow only pulsimers earlier, had dilated, becoming cavernous apertures of endlessness, dark perception. His breathing began to even out, becoming more sedate.

"Tell me," he whispered, closing his eyes, "what you see..."

Ayu gasped. The fingers of her left hand, still hovering over the Kuspegias, dropped to touch the tiny stones. Out of the corner of her left eye she saw movement near the curtain of the rear door, saw the fingers of another hand creeping around the edge of the cloth. She began to grow dizzy, to feel her vision splintering, carrying her into a halcyon realm beyond the confines of this stagnant void.

Suddenly, her mind exploded into a panoply of radiance, reflection, burgeoning with millions upon millions of ancient Erasotran truths, arcane idioms, ashen and lifeless. These axioms, she observed, had once been locked away within spiraling veins of precious ore and Aquylur, pure and elemental. Now, ripped from the Subterra, they melted away, their revenants scattered to the winds.

As quickly as these images appeared, they faded into a muddled patchwork, replaced by a singular vision: the sight of an open hand, hovering over a smoky fire; the promise of a

merciless fate, of absolute closure. The hand held what appeared to be a forged stone, vaguely familiar to her, covered with cracks, the residue of dried mucilage seeping from their edges. Above the hand lay a clear sky. At Zenith, there could be seen an open door, a gateway to another sky, more expansive than the first. Above that, she could see yet *another* open door, then another...on and on into a broad continuum.

Between these two extremes, the hand continued to hover... immovable, static, suffering as if near death, but still brimming with life.

She withdrew her right hand from the back of her neck. The fingers of her left hand, though, remained affixed to the Kuspegias.

"I need to know what has happened out there...*WHY*...this has happened. *Gzadalugh. Gui de Kyouradu!* Tell me what you *SEE!*" he screamed, noticing the open wound on her head, the Vidanthric tones in her blood. One piece of the puzzle had revealed itself to his panic-stricken mind.

She raised her head and closed her eyes. "*Friubavi...Ryu. Kaladurama...ak tra MEDIEUSZ!*" The words spilled, detached, from her mouth and her mind.

He threw his body back in disbelief. "No! N...NO!! You're wrong. That...that cannot *be!*" he raged.

"*Aka suj tra, Medieusz...ak tra duklai Medieusz...!!*" she said, repeating the same word over and over again, her conscious mind unaware of its meaning. It was one, though, that was in no way lost on him. *Finality, culmination, consummation*....it was the Pavatrian word for *Eclipse*.

He trembled, lost in reflection. At last, he knew that she was not wrong.

"*Medieusz...!*" he whispered, raspy air hissing from his lungs.

Ayu opened her eyes, pulled her hand from the Kuspegias and began to choke on silent sobs.

"*Please...Ayu. Help...ME!*" he pleaded, his eyes again filling with tears, falling to his cheeks to form a thick lavender paste.

She reached into the pocket of her frock and pulled out her small stone jar, etched with numerous glyphs, panoramas of mystic Philean landscapes. He pressed the bulk of his weight now against the wall, slithering into full recline against the bench, whispering inaudible sounds of praise, pride and regret in a thick accent.

Ayu opened the jar and pulled out a small ball, about the size of a pebble. She placed it on his neck, leaned over him and allowed a single tear to fall from her cheek and onto the ball. Suddenly, it came to life, unwinding its six legs. Between two of them, a thin protuberance emerged.

Ayu leaned over further and kissed his forehead. She placed her hand on his right cheek and watched the Liaramar drive its thin shaft deep into the moist surface of his neck, pausing there no more than two pulsimeters. Then, it pulled itself free, crawled onto dry skin and curled up again. She returned the now seemingly lifeless speck to the jar, sealed the lid and placed it back in her pocket.

Ayu pressed her hand against his skin. Over his eyes, the visage of static decline eased. His breath ground to a halt, falling into stillness. At that moment, a crashing sound could be heard behind her, on the other side of the door leading back to the Cathedra. Ayu turned away from it, toward the opposite door instead. Behind its window the curtain was pulled slightly. There, she could see a dim light and a pair of eyes; sad, trembling, stricken with fear.

“Nalani? Where are you? Please...answer me!”

Struck with awareness, her throat became clutched. She dug deep, forcing a response.

“Dijal. I’m here!”

Ayu...Nalani...turned to face the door to the Cathedra. A single foot broke it into splinters. Blinded by the glare of a lightstaff set to full intensity, she squinted to see an exhausted, worried, familiar face.

“*Creegh Amaria!* Are you alright?” Dijal called out.

Ayu...smiled and nodded.

They hugged, and Dijal stole a quick glance at her surroundings, at the stiffening corpse lying at the rear corner of

the chamber. “How did you wind up in a place like this? Let’s get out of here, okay?”

Dijal, the Kuspegias still clinging to her temples, crawled out of the vault and through the narrow tunnel, back toward the Hall, her young traveler on her heels. Before Ayu could push herself out of the vault, she heard a creaking sound coming from the door behind her. She looked around to see a pair of hands pulling the curtain away. A pair of wounded, fearful eyes. A face.

It was a face she immediately recognized.

It was the face of her father.

“Nalani...let’s *go!*”

Lost in confusion, Ayu complied, scurrying through the broken hatch and out of the tunnel.

Passing the Cathedra, Dijal’s knees buckled. “Na...lani. Help me!” she cried. Her face dripping with sweat, Dijal blacked out and fell to the floor. The Kuspegias dropped from her head and rolled back toward the tunnel.

She threw up her hands, and with Ayu’s help, Dijal returned to a pair of wobbly feet.

Together, the two of them stumbled over an obstacle course of sallow, expired flesh, making their way to the lobby of the 41st Cypliat. To the waiting vrunleatrope.

They boarded, and with a sense of resignation, Dijal pressed the articulum to begin their descent.

Epilogue

*T*HEIR REAWAKENING BEGAN AS little more than a whisper, standing in stark contrast to the modus by which their light had been stolen from our eyes. Throughout the ubiquitous expanse of the Dimensional Horizon, a miasmic darkness, blood-letting in its sweep, had settled over the land, the seas and the skies.

Just before what would have been Zenith of the third day after the Eclipse, a solitary light...invigorative, brimming with hope...burst forth from the norostrean Aeries, carried on a single pair of illuminated wings. For three days this solitary Ione surveyed the realm over which its kin had claimed dominion, soaring close to the surface, driving its warm downdrafts against the cold veneer of Cre'Lurggia. For those who had survived this cataclysm, inhaling themselves in airless enclosures or the cavernous Subterra, the brief presence of winged light gave them a fleeting sense of rebirth.

This solitary creature made its first pass above Kuwhan'Xalu, lifting protoplasmic clouds high into the air, stirring the yellow dusts that beat against the tiny cave into which Puaolo Te.Mauxlur had taken refuge. Starving, broken, delusional, he crawled from this fissure to watch it soar off to sorentre. The Ione then pushed on to the Swales of the Neroluer, splitting the Mysoux-Xyklian ranges. Three days earlier, at a trash-strewn encampment near what remained of Shulumethros, Diarmad Te.Sinian, Cai Lo.Subira and a sole surviving subalternate had watched in horror as hundreds of prisoners and Machaerans had perished around them. Now, Diarmad crawled from the collapsed estrean access to the Grottos, peering through swollen, tender eyes, eagerly following its light as it pushed on to estre. Cai, still inflamed from the beatings she had received at her capture, thrust her arms and cried out through the grates of her underground

prison. Its warmth and light lasted mere pulsimers before passing out of sight.

The Ione exited the Swales and turned toward the ravines and acclivities lying to wisoltre of the Cryostrilic Plains. It surveyed the devastation there with indifference as the refugees from the Crescent crawled from out of the ground to catch a glimpse of it before it vanished. Ekavias Lo.Schrae-Nur, Jadox Um.Dematsur and Arjun Ve.Jalu shouted their approval, just a few neurris from the remains of Thaloux Ve.Urgek, who had perished four days earlier from his injuries sustained in the devastation of Shulumethros. Most of the other refugees from the Swales had too succumbed, their Actinetically-singed lungs now pasty and still from the suffocating mists which had seeped through the porous cave surfaces. Kiralu Um.Kiruvor was among that number. But three others were not.

Far below the spot where Kiralu's remains now lay, Nostra Lo.Mhastreac, Arucha Um.Yrgos and Hezhreon Te.Nisach sat huddled together there in a twisted, Subterranean cavity, unable to see or feel its presence, but still aware, now awakened from three insidious days of hibernation. Nostra, infused with an unbridled will to sustain, contrasted with Hezhreon, still captive to the same shattered psyche that Arjun had scraped off the floor of a Mysouxlian cave only days earlier.

Over the wisoltrean Andulkas it soared, high above yet another scene of cataclysm and suffering. To norostre of Fhydalaku, it threw a tiny shaft of light into a fissured stronghold, striking the afflicted form of Meiluris Ve.Jarkonen. Rising to his feet, he was invigorated to its promise, then forced to watch it disappear in ascent toward the sore-wisoltrean plains.

On to the Saurostrans it flew, funneling sharp gusts of warm wind through the echoburths dotting the highlands, over a dusty terrabode and its lone occupant. Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest dug himself out of his tiny hovel and watched it wheel off to sorentre. He grabbed the Kyotrimlic stone upon which his first Guderaph had been articulated, many quinteks past. *The Age of Fulgency has passed. The Muharadu is no more!* he

mused, inflamed with hatred and disgust. He stood on his roof and tossed the useless Kyo into the darkness. "What is my place now in this accursed Sphere?" he screamed into the twilight sky. At that moment, the Ione neared the remains of a hammock colony at the Fuerthian Sweeps, reaching out to illuminate the lavender-tinged corpse of his sister, the Malaeric known as Muerthu Lo.Kestria. Her remains were surrounded by shards of stone, covered with her etchings, including the Zylux, conceived of her mind, created by her hand. Dhulorei's face was once again shadowed in darkness, and a torrent of glyphical images began to infuse his mind while the Kabalyph on his left hand, and a cocksure promise to reclaim what was his, burned with a fiery glow.

Near the close of its second day aloft, this single Ione finally made its way to the nucleus; the place at which most of the collateral damage accruing from its battle for supremacy had been left to rot. Gliding with ease over Astuverica, the heat radiating from its body created a new eruption of blight and decay, rising up from the Triage in mighty cresting waves. This sole Ione wheeled and spun for 200 stratimers, hurling its sultry downdrafts against the ground; thawing, accelerating the putrid fogs which swelled and burst from the bloated remains lying beneath its wings. Corkscrews of noisome vapors and protoplasm vaulted skyward, toward Zenith, settling aloft in loopy concretions.

Suddenly, a series of shaky lights appeared from the rilles...from sorentre, norostre, estre, wisoltre and all points between. The Ione...after five days of feeding on familiar toxins, holding the Lumens in subjugation, relegating their antagonists to the same bondage which they themselves had endured for eons...broke free. As a unit they arose, soaring toward the peak of the sky, chased by the reawakened Mists of Aurea. For 8900 quinteks they had longed to again taste the protoplasm which their brothers in opposition had kept all to themselves. Now, at Zenith, there were plenty of them to feed upon.

At last, the Ione clustered close together, and the sky was again filled with brilliant light. Skeins of Ionescence fell upon

the panorama below, seeping through plasmodic glass, through grates, vents and reticles, through slits and gaps in the Triece, to infuse and enliven the catatonic Subterra. There, thousands of survivors groaned, stretched, unwound themselves from each other, imbued with a renewed desire...and the freedom...to crawl from their tomb. Guymoun Te.Zhaktavor was there, locked within Level Five after having been expelled from Savita's flat six days earlier. For a moment, the familiar sights of Empyrea were replaced by the images of a billion Malaeric inscriptions. He staggered, then found his gait, the image of a Fuerthian hammock colony drifting through his cortex. Now, he and hundreds of his fellows in bondage stormed the hatches and tunnels, bound for the vrunleatropic platforms at Level Five, to rise up; to see and feel and taste the light of a new day.

Girdrahn Lo.Hualic was somewhere in that crowd, bristling with curiosity for what lay above. His mind had become more focused, steeped in purpose, the face of Odrahn clear and true before his eyes at every turn. His mind, too, was on the A.30.B Quarter loop, at a small terrabode beside the Columns. He reached out to those around him, to embrace the swelling crowd, surging strong in his direction, eager to follow his lead, above and beyond the Zurish-Triece.

At the cavenders and corridors beneath the Helidrome, another restless horde shook off the cold and darkness to begin its exodus. Schavaht Um.Gyer-Tulur, otherwise known as "Stryger Five," stretched her sore muscles and clamored for the exits with her fellow captives, soon to fill the field with hundreds, hungry for much more than simple sustenance and the assurance of a quick and glorious death.

At the Architrave, Eidia, Quilla and Ligeia surfaced from their inertia, their visions of the Horizon clouded by a frost-covered plasmodus, beneath the broken morithules which had sealed the clerestories and spared their lives. Huddled beside a hungry, dying Bourglo Ve.Daetran, the Te.Nurasiers joined hands, crying out in Metephistic praise for the privilege of being allowed to live another day.

Lying on the floor near her bed at the 36th Cypliat, Savita Te.Sinian gathered the last of her empty vials, still rank with the residue of Shirascur's elixirs. With all that remained of her waning strength, she heaved them over and out of the open clerestories, toward Zenith. She spat out a thick wad of lavender blood, over a mucus-encrusted tongue, cursing the Ione for their malice, the thoroughness of their ascent. Stumbling through her flat, she called out their names through the clogged filter of a mind blown to shreds, steeped in delirium. "*Ayu... Guymoun... GERSUL! Where ARE you?!*" Her screams bounced off the walls of her flat, unanswered, in agonizing staccato.

At the 41st Cypliat, in a tiny, mephitic chamber, Iaga2 Um.Venes-Radiuth unwound herself and trembled in fear. Bands of natural light seeped through the edges of the casing. She disengaged the articulum stone to the door of her tiny enclosure, forced shut by the panic-stricken crowd which had filled the hallway beyond, five days earlier. Now, starved, sick and dehydrated, Radiu opened her cell and began to wander the 41st, stunned at the devastation she saw all around her. Her captive, Kerak Um.Tiago, remained in the same enclosure, tied, bound and gagged. Many stratimers after Radiu had wandered off, Kerak began tugging at a loose knot behind his wrist. To free himself from his bonds. To crawl beyond the open door which remained so tantalizingly close.

*T*he Hall of the Third Schimatariat.

Five days earlier it had stood alone in the Dimensional Horizon as the pre-eminent symbol of strength, deference and rebirth; just as the Arduans, the Courvesois and the Muharadu...either as the Triumvirate which they professed to be, or alone as they most often were...had intended. Now it was nothing more than a defiled shrine; a nauseating, overcrowded tomb, littered with the aftermath of the holocaust that our ancestors had promised their ignorant offspring, albeit in their own cosmically distorted way.

Tongues of Ionic radiance burned through the open clerestories. I wandered the center of the Hall; my nose and mouth were covered with an improvised scarf, my satchel flung over my back. Now and again I paused, at times struggling to stand, to breathe, to walk. Onward, though, I trod.

My eyes stayed down while I prodded one bloated corpse after another. Soon I spotted a dull cobalt reflection out of the corner of my left eye, bent down and found it: the Xycloplast. I picked it up, rubbed it to remove a coating of decomposing fluids, then tossed it into my satchel. Not far beyond lay a tiny cloth bag, sewn with a reflective thread, containing the twin stones bearing the imprint from the Vidanthric hand of Dhulorei Um.Aara-Maest. I knelt, found the bag and its contents clean, and placed it in a second compartment of my satchel.

Hearing the trudge of footsteps but seeing no one, I made my way back toward the Cathedra, riffling through the lifeless remains of countless others along the way. Near the platform at the front of the Hall I knelt once again and at last, I saw them: two tiny memory stones, speckled with fine dark purple flecks and turquoise crystals. Two distinct, dissimilar Kabalyphs could be seen, etched cleanly onto the surface of each Kuspegia. A thin coating of Dijal's sweat was still upon them, giving them a reddish tint. I picked them up, rubbed each stone with a dry cloth before placing them into another pocket of my satchel.

I stood, and through a pane of plasmodic glass I spotted Radiu, drifting away from me, through the perimeter corridors, unaware of my presence, or for that matter, her own. Her eyes, like mine, were cast downward. I watched as she paused, trembled, knelt and picked up a small stone; Ularic, imbued on two opposing sides with obscure Kabalyphs. She picked it up, brushed it off and disappeared.

I returned through the narrow tunnel, to make my way back to the tiny vault which lay behind the Cathedra. I sat on one of the two benches, reached into my satchel and pulled out the two pairs of Kuspegias I'd retrieved from the Hall, plus the Xycloplast. I laid all five stones on the opposite bench.

Sitting beside me, on the far side of the bench, lay the third pair of Kuspegias. Like the Kabalyphed stones which had once belonged to Um.Aara-Maest, and the ones which had been carried by Dijal Um.Diaestre-Mur, these isolated stones bore their identical, hand-carved etchings with an insecure pride, always aware that within their own private triumvirate, their deficiencies left them embryonic, still wanting in so many ways.

There, back in that tiny, low-hung chamber, its surfaces covered with an almost invisible dusting of lavender, I remained within the still, fetid air, beneath the glow of the lightstaff. I leaned forward, my head buried between my knees, wiping the dust from my mouth, feeling my strength fade with each mucky cough, each painful spasm. My eyes flashed for a moment, leaving me transfixed, submerged in time, visions of Moorar and the Exos of Pavatria passing before me like shafts of light dancing through a clear lagoon.

I closed my eyes. In my darkened vision, I was five quinteks of age, lying on the floor of our cave, surrounded by faces etched with concern. A scratch from the poisonous thorn of the Kithrakeet, an indigenous weed, had sent me tumbling headlong into the path of an early death. Only through crude unguents boiled from Guiptokyr berries, skins of Stuloslith and my mother's care was my raging fever suppressed and my health restored, less than 10 stratimers before certain death.

As I laid there during my illness, drifting in and out of consciousness, I recalled the sound of my mother's voice, recounting the tale of her sister's death and her compelling belief in the mythos of Chimierepha, which the writings of Kirsai Lo.Ydriasch describe so well...

Through this phenomenon, the characteristics of the deceased shall pass through to his or her surviving siblings.

If one of those siblings is an identical twin, this effect occurs immediately, and with far greater intensity than otherwise.

As a young adult, I had articulated this anecdote from its Vengathlian aggregator, and I remember it as if it had been whispered in my ear only yesterday. I don't know if my impending demise had brought this phenomenon to her mind,

but my mother's confidence in Chimierepha was far from misplaced.

Five quinteks later, the Exos, as I had known them, were to become a distant memory. And the path that he and I had taken after our family had been marched from our home in Moorar, far from the Pavatrias, is one that I have never regretted, even now. We were...and always will be...brothers: benefiting from, burdened with and complementing each other's successes, failures, strengths and weaknesses, in every possible way. To us, we were as different from each other as night and day. To the Dimensional Horizon, though, we were nearly as one.

Now, we are.

I opened my eyes, staring at the small windowed hatch behind which I had huddled in fear and apprehension for two days, at the doorway which had shielded me from this onslaught. The two leathery veils were still there, on the opposite bench. I took them in hand and placed them in my satchel.

From the Hall, beyond the shattered door to this chamber, the sound of searching, stumbling footsteps could be heard. I hunched over, intent on taking him into my arms, to carry his remains away from this place, from this city, forever. I tried to find my balance but stumbled forward, my mind growing dim. Moments before passing out, I noticed his upper neck and face, and saw no sign of the Liaramar bite which had brought him to a merciful end.

Around the pale, decaying edges of his lips, his face wore a thin, plaintive smile.



Glossary

Author's note: pronunciation is provided for most terms which are proprietary to this story. However, if no pronunciation is provided for a term, please defer to the phonetic.

Abstract: a cluster of mnemonic filamentation.

Actinetic Triurate (Ak-tin-eh-tik Trahy-yur-eyt): the act of burning stanhic veins with a select concentration of amalgams.

Aeries (Eh-rees): outcroppings along the Aurean rilles which serve as the nightly resting places for the Lumens. There are four of them, one at each end of the compass.

Aerosphere: a land-borne magnetically impelled conveyance.

Aggregator: a metallic medium, imbedded in a vein, used for the storage of mnemonic filamentation.

Aggrete Micromics (Uh-greet Mayh-kron-iks): Thermionic devices which magnify the voltaic pulsations between aggregators.

Ahramishk (Aw-rahm-ishk): a scheduled gathering of Ephriants.

Amleatrop (am-lee-uh-trohp): a horizontally oriented, multi-passenger, magnetically-impelled conveyance.

Amnic Circulat (Am-nik Sur-kyoo-let): a builder of aggregators, memory stones and other Thermionic devices.

Andulka (An-dool-kuh): the coastal region at the center of the Dimensional Horizon.

Aquasphere: a water-borne magnetically impelled conveyance. It propels itself using the numerous veins which line the sea floor.

Aquina Sul-Ataurea (U-kahy-nah Sool-ah-tahr-ee-uh): the sorentrean sea.

Aquylur (Aw-kwil-ur): a.k.a. Waterstone. A translucent ore.

Architrave (Ahr-ki-treyv): the headquarters of the Triumvirate, located in Astuverica.

Arduas, Council of (Ahr-doo-uhs): the legal/enforcement arm of the Triumvirate.

Argent (Ahr-jent): currency.

Articulat (Ahr-tik-yoo-laht): a specialist who coerces or analyzes the voltaics contained within certain ores or Thermionic devices.

Astuverica (As-too-ver-i-kuh): the capital of the Dimensional Horizon.

Aurean mists (Awr-ee-ahn): the toxic clouds which emanate from the rilles of the same name.

Aurean rilles (Awr-ee-ahn rilz): a series of gorges which run the entire circumference of the Dimensional Horizon.

Azimuth: a geographical location measured by its position between three or more aggregators.

Azupran salts (Az-oo-pran): bitters used to refine Trofliage while it is being cured in preserved torsos.

Baeroguslur (Bey-row-goos-loor): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Baethrugant (Bey-throo-gant): a small, spherical fish which propels itself with tiny jets.

Bakadado (Baw-kuh-dey-doh): the dung of the Guirabaka.

Barachat (Behr-uh-kat): a plant with tiny red leaves and an edible root, found in caves or other damp climates.

Baraslute (Ba-ruh-sloot): a very deep, thin Subterranean vein, highly sonorant.

Barutha (Bah-roo-thuh): a large carnivorous fish, the only kind of marine creature which swims the norostrean seas.

Belgorslo (Bel-gohr-sloh): a marisatria in the Pavatrian region.

Benathliu-Phuriga (Ben-awth-lee-oo Fur-ee-guh): an obscure Muharic holiday celebrating the mythic conquest of the cults of Fulgency over the cults of Cimmeria and the Incarnate.

Bhatrathur (Baw-trah-thoor): a plant with narcotic qualities, native to the Vengaos.

Bittermoor: a species of tree which grows throughout the Dimensional Horizon but is found mainly the Saurostran region.

Blind Cadre (Kaw-drey): sealed, private niches, kept in clandestine locations throughout Astuverica.

Blunt Trampler: a laborer who refines Broutish Clays.

Blute (Blood): the shield used by hasters in a game of Pilects.

Bluurtheyn (Blur-thahyn): a six-legged mammal, native to the Hirusovran region.

Borealic Fetors (Baw-ree-al-ik Feh-tuhrs): tightly packed revenants which rise up from the ground, creating strong hallucinations or other psychotic responses. Potentially fatal.

Boric Pier (Bohr-ik): a hillock containing a tight cluster of veins which rise up from the ground.

Bourget (Bohr-zshey): a large woven basket.

Bourhead, the (Boor-hed): a passageway through the fifth level of the Astuverican Subterra.

Brandishments, the: a series of vertical escarpments in the wisoltrean Seamounds.

Braugnor-Zeprel (Brawg-nohr Zip-rel): a marisatria in the Kurestreaan region.

Braylimunt (Brey-lih-munt): a small cavender, only large enough for a single soul.

Breomear (Brey-oh-meer): a swarthy mineral speckled with a fine magenta powder.

Briodonshe (Bree-oh-dahn-shey): a marisatria in the Philean region.

Brotuce (Broh-too-shey): a Kyotrimlic stone carved into a distinct shape.

Broutish Clays (Brow-tish): minerals which are processed into a variety of building materials.

Bruthmic salts (Brooth-mik): minerals used as food preservatives.

Buaristic Alkali (Bwahr-is-tik): an agent used to refine Trofliage within a preserved torso.

Builhern (Bool-hurn): a mammal with a wiry coat and 2 pairs of eyes. Native to the central regions.

Bulaerekanth (Bey-throo-kant): a fungus found in coastal areas.

Burgensleath (Buhr-gehn-sleeth): an Erasotran blade of legend.

Burnish Hagonite: a variety of high-grade ore.

Calamous (Kal-ah-mus): a marisatria in the sorentreaan Seamounts.

Calu-Duaringe (Kal-oo Dwar-eeen-gay): a marisatria in the Andulkan region.

Caque (Kawk): excrement.

Carabylis (Kar-uh-bil-is): a species of tree common to the Hirusovraan region.

Cathedra (Kah-thee-drah): the throne of the Suhm-Ephriaan.

Cavak-Tysekrian routes (Kav-uhk Ty-sek-ree-uhn): a series of trails that run through the Pavatrian region.

Cavender (Ka-ven-dur): caves which are dug by hand, as opposed to those which are naturally occurring.

Centris of Divaesh, the (Div-aysh): a cult of the Incarnate.

Ceveaesh (Se-veysh): an Andulkan term of respect for a superior.

Chabender (Chah-ben-dur): a bush with dark green edible leaves.

Chalister (Chah-lis-tur): a specialist in the interpretation of obscure, ancient languages or Thermionic references.

Chalovertrite (Chay-loh-ven-trite): a burrowing worm found in the Seamounds.

Chandalith (Chan-dah-lith): a religious monument in the marisatria of Fhydalaku.

Chantrathir Obelisk (Chan-truh-theer): a monument on the outskirts of Astuverica, honoring the Muharadu.

Chara-Dulathrea (Cha-ruh Doo-luh-threy-uh): a marisatria in the Andulkan region.

Chelated Hagonite (Kee-lay-ted Ha-gun-eyt): a variety of high-grade ore.

Chelomar (Kee-loh-mahr): a powerful narcotic, one of the byproducts of Trofliage.

Cheulawort (Choo-luh-wawrt): a painkilling narcotic found in caves in the Seamounds.

Chimierepha (Shi-meh-ri-fah): the metephistic process by which the soul of the deceased passes to a surviving sibling.

Chi'ot.Vuloar (Chee-oht-woo-lahr): a dense mist common to the Seamounds, usually found near the wisoltrean terminus.

Chirapsiat (Chur-ohp-see-yaht): a prostitute.

Chivet-Pradur (Shi-veht-prah-dure): a widely patronized web of black market operations.

Chuloric Brine (Koo-loh-rik): a curing agent used to refine Trofliage within preserved torsos.

Ciferiak (Sif-her-ee-ahk): a grainy mineral found mostly in coastal areas. Used to make Kyotrimlic stones.

Cimmeria, cults of (Sim-eh-ree-uh): religious cults who worship darkness and deify the Ione.

Cincture (seenk-tyur): a term meant to describe the act of articulating a vein with the fingers or through a Myotrophus stone.

Circonic, the (Sir-kah-nik): the mythic objective which constitutes the stated mission of the Triumvirate.

Circulat (Sur-kyoo-let): a generic term for a maker of craftwork, or any kind of processed, metallic goods.

Ciroghyb (Seer-oh-gib): a type of worm found in the coastal Andulkan Subterra.

Clerestory: moveable, overhead windows found in official buildings in Astuverica.

Cluroswevitch (Cloo-row-sweh-vich): a marisatria in the Saurostran region.

Clysophicus (Kly-sah-fi-kus): phosphorescent reptiles found in Subterranean waters.

Cognition: the act of communicating to another through a memory stone or other Thermionic device.

Collonade, the: the portion of the Grottos used for meeting, dining.

Columns, the: the provender markets in Astuverica.

Coming of Dhufaer, the (Doo-fay-ur): a cult of Fulgency.

Concreal (Kon-kreel): a type of building material.

Constabulary: a law-enforcement station.

Coquent (Koh-kwahnt): a brewed alcoholic beverage.

Corisoor headlands (Koh-rih-sohr): a landmass in the estrean Seamounts.

Courderax (Kohr-duh-raks): a Treflicat with blended loop indentions, intended for use only inside Astuverica.

Courvesant (Kour-veh-sahnt): an operative with the Courvesois.

Courvesois (Kweh-veh-swah): a.k.a. “The Order.” The arm of the Triumvirate responsible for assassinations and covert operations.

Crescent, the: the nickname for a beach at the Bay of Teoramugh.

Croepings, the (Krep-lingz): the third level of the Astuverican Subterra.

Crosslinks, the: the fourth level of the Astuverican Subterra.

Cryostrilic Plains (Kry-oh-stril-ik): a wide, flat landmass in the sorentrean Seamounts.

Cryptic Myst (Krip-lik Mist): an hallucinogenic drug, cooked from the seed of the Thilerowhip.

Culturist: a grower or herder.

Cycloptic (Sahy-klahf-tik): describing a glyph with resonant effects. See also “Nurespheric.”

Cypliat (Sip-lee-uht): the name given to each level of the Architrave.

Cyriklian Thrusts (Sahy-kril-ee-uhn): a landmass found in the sorentrean Seamounts.

Cythrop-Preara (Sahy-throhp-Pree-eh-ruh): a marisatria in the sorentrean Seamounts.

Dado (Dey-doh): excrement.

Detrus Scorcher (Deh-trus): a worker who processes Thulitar.

Dharun-Xyloph (Dah-roon-Zahy-klof): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Dhurgeshad (Duhr-ji-sahd): a marisatria in region of the Vengaos.

Dhuthaer (Doo-thahy-ur): a healer.

Dimensional Horizon: the known world.

Dissonance: Sonorance with a mostly negative effect. See also "Resonance."

Divarishk (Dih-vahr-rishk): metal rod driven into the ground. A religious symbol used by some cults of the Incarnate.

Doctrines of Night, the: a Cimmerian cult.

Duoderl (Doo-oh-durl): a shaggy, three-legged mammal with large protruding teeth.

Duroleau (Doo-roh-ley-yu): a marisatria in the Andulkan region.

Echoburth (Ehk-oh-burth): a ravine with a tapered end, deep on one side, shallow on the other.

Echelot, Bay of (Ehk-oh-laht): a bight located along the Eusterian sea in the sorentrean Seamounds.

Eclipse: a cataclysmic event.

Emex Ranges: a nickname for the Mysoux-Xyklian mountain ranges.

Empyrea (Ehm-peer-ee-ah): the fifth, and uppermost, level of the Astuverican Subterra.

Enclave, the: the organization of Chalisters in the Architrave.

Entwine: a combination of glyphs which are interconnected in order to achieve maximum voltaic effect upon a vein or a Thermionic device. See also "Glyph."

Ephriant (Ef-ree-uhnt): the second highest level of rank in the Triumvirate.

Erasotra (Eh-rah-soh-trah): a population of ancient tribes which once dominated the Dimensional Horizon, largely exterminated in the Eclipse.

Eremostepe (Eh-rehm-uh-step): a tree found mostly in coastal areas.

Eroctriase (Eh-rok-tree-ahs): a flat which houses and consigns chirapsiats.

Eroiche (Eh-roh-eesh): sexual intercourse.

Errant: evidence of degeneration within the stream of filamentation.

Estre (Ehs-trey): one of the four compass points

Etrifaction, the (Eh-trih-fak-shun): a cult of Fulgency.

Eusterian Sea (Yoo-steh-ree-uhn): the central and norostrean sea.

Exos (Ehk-sohz): a nickname for the Xalmi-Ouorutho highlands, in the Pavatrian region.

Explitore (Ehk-splih-tore): the outer layer of a revenant. See also “Subchattel.”

Fathidi (Fah-thee-dee): a 12-legged crawling insect found in the Seamounds.

Felithuche (Feh-lih-thoo-shey): a marisatria in the region of the Vengaos.

Fhydalaku (Fy-dal-ah-koo): a marisatria in the Andulkan region.

Filamentation: the manifestation of mnemonic substance which passes through a vein and/or into an articulator. Also known as *Mnemonic Filamentation*.

Filiablade (Fih-lee-uh-bleyd): a type of knife with a straight blade and a serrated edge.

Flail: one who deals in salvaged goods on the Chivet-Pradur. See also “Spike.”

Flakliner: oblong wooden disks with metal edges, used by strygers in certain Pilect matches.

Flapestone: a stone sewn into the skin, used as a homing device.

Flurswath Buttes (Fluhr-swahth): a landmass near the marisatria of Suromear-Anh, in the Pavatrian region.

Frishkit: Andulkan border slang for a youth of any gender.

Fuerthian Sweeps (Fwer-thee-uhn): a landmass in the region of the Phileans.

Fulgency, cult of: worshippers of light.

Furthkit: Andulkan border slang for an elderly male.

Galmorth: a marisatria in the sorentrean Seamounts.

Garamoss: a plant with stringy, reddish-orange leaves which can be processed into cloth or boiled to make unguents.

Geducich (Geh-doo-sich): a marisatria at the border of the Seamounts and the Vengaos.

Ghuardanthia (Gwar-dan-thee-uh): a marisatria in the Andulkan region.

Ghurodenthre (Goo-roh-den-they): a Muricai cell, based on the Vengaos.

Gleaner: a hunter/gatherer.

Glyph: a rune or etching when, if carved into a metallic vein or Thermionic device, can realign the voltaic impulse to create a desired effect. See also *Entwine*.

Glystolyth (glis-toh-lith): a dense fungus. Can be used to make tools or furniture.

Grist of Caruvalus, the (Kah-ruh-va-lis): revenants bound together in a concentrated wavelength, easily visible to Mnemonasts.

Grottos, the: a nickname for a large cave system in the Neroluer Swales. See also *Shulumethros*.

Grouswhip: a variety of grain, mid-grade.

Guaerea (Gwah-reh-yah): a fruit, native to the region of the Phileans.

Guderaph (Goo-deh-ruf): the sacred writings of the Muharadu.

Guiptokyr (Gwip-tuh-keer): a variety of berry, edible when cooked, which can be fermented into a salve.

Guirabaka (Gih-roo-bah-kah): flat, toothy worms which burrow through rock infused with Menshar crystals.

Gyradarakur (Gih-ruh-dah-rah-koor): a cyclopean, predatory, cave-dwelling reptile, native to the Pavatrian region.

Gythrit (Gith-rit): Andulkan border slang for an elderly female.

Hagonite (Ha-gun-eyt): a variety of ore, medium-high grade.

Hammer vein: a stanhic vein which is a combination of two or more ores.

Hammock Colony: a work camp or temporary settlement.

Hand usher: a personal servant.

Haster (Ha-stur): a defensive player in Pilects.

Haudric Kurstr (Haw-drik Kur-stur): a large, ugly carnivorous reptile found in the Kurestreans.

Hedeon: the Lumen who flies at the center of the flock.

Heliscara: a mineral used in Actinetic amalgams.

Hellespheres, the (Hel-es-feers): Level One of the Astuverican Subterra.

Hest-Feurilian Monoliths (Hest-Fwih-ril-ee-uhn): a series of large peaks in the Xyklian ranges.

Hirostruvite (Hih-roh-struh-vite): a carnivorous mole, native to the coastal and sorentrean regions.

Hirusovra (Hih-roo-sov-rah): the region at the sorentrean boundary of the Dimensional Horizon.

Hraklian Argency (Rak-lee-un): a promissory note.

Huir-Tzalurar (Hih-zah-lah-ruhr): a Muricai cell based in the Phileans.

Hygl-Muristre Intermediary (Hi-gul-muh-ris-treh): the nexus of the three viamars in Astuverica.

Hzakull (Zah-kuhl): a form of execution in which two condemned souls are forced to slay each other.

Iatricals (Ahy-a-trih-kuhls): a series of medical compendiums imbedded in various aggregators throughout the Dimensional Horizon.

Incarnate, cults of the: worshippers of the physical realm, i.e. the land, the Subterra, etc.

Ione (Ahy-oh-nee): illuminated, winged creatures who fly through the skies at night. See also “Lumens.”

Iotrean Nearings (Ahy-oh-tree-uhn): a series of trails in the estrean Seamounts.

Iraphliap (Ihr-ahf-lee-ahp): a turbid brew concentrate made from Wissoria leaf.

Jaspheris (Jas-feh-rihs): an herb found in dry climates, used as a food seasoning.

Jyriaglip (Jih-ag-lee-ihp): a tall bush with black, edible leaves that turn reddish-orange after they’ve been cut.

Kabalyph (Ka-bah-lif): a naturally occurring glyph.

Kablature (Kab-luh-toor): mineral compounds used to realign magnetic polarities.

Kadalese (Kah-dah-lees): a marisatria in the Kurestrean region.

Kaebixt (Kay-oh-bikst): a Thermionic compendium of glyphs and entwines, gathered and stored within a series of Saurostran aggregators.

Kalamirlo (Ka-lah-mihr-low): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Kalasliph (Ka-lah-slif): a tree found in coastal areas.

Kalmustur (Kahl-muh-stur): the larger, inedible variant of the Kalmuth mushroom.

Kalmuth mushrooms: a species of edible fungi, native to the Seamounts.

Kalu-Duarek (Ka-lu-Dwah-rek): a mythical marisatria, location unknown.

Kasida (Kah-see-duh): a stone platform which supports Neneric stones.

Kaurovethen (Kah-roh-vee-thun): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Kedari (Keh-dah-ree): a small bush native to central regions. Its leaves are used to brew a type of tea.

Khalizud (Kah-lih-zood): a six-legged mammal, native to the Seamounts and the Pavatryan region.

Khepra Hound (Keh-prah): a small mammal found throughout the Dimensional Horizon. It has a distinctive shriek or barking sound.

Khiri (Khir-ee-yoo): a unit of currency.

Khiromek (Kih-roh-mehk): a.k.a. “boiler.” A maker of Trofliage derivatives, i.e. Pentumus, Chelomar, etc.

Kidrokael (Kid-roh-kayl): the Kurestean name for Tyrupliak.

Kiraclath (Kih-rah-kloth): a densely woven cloth, made from a thread of elongated grains of Menshar.

Kirahmoor (Kih-rah-moor): the nickname of the fifth Suhm-Ephriant.

Kirio-Lutrenos (Kih-ree-oh Loo-treyn-ohs): the Pavatryan custom of touching certain types of Thermionic etchings in order to achieve a desired psychic effect

Kiromasith (Kih-row-mah-sith): a marisatria in the Kurestean region.

Kirzek (Kur-zek): an oily vine used by Courvesants as a killing tool. It is native to the Quistrian Hills of the Pavatrian region.

Kithrakeet (Kith-rah-keet): a thorny, poisonous weed, native to the central regions.

Kiyfer Dome (Kahy-fur): a Subterran, water-filled, vacuum-impelled chamber.

Klaretzu (Klah-reht-zoo): a hard mineral with swirling colors, used mainly for decorative purposes.

Klegestone (Kleej-stone): flat stones used as pavers for trails or roadways.

Klerojie (Kleh-row-jee): a species of burrowing insect found in the wisoltrean regions.

Klikshier (Klik-sheer): a small folding knife.

Klystip Reeler (Klih-stip): a species of flying insect found in the Mysoux-Xyklian ranges.

Knordric Piquants (Nohr-drik Pee-kwants): a preservative used in the processing of Trofliage.

Krabash (Kray-bahsh): a table game in which a player tries to use voltaic pneuma to temporarily realign or adjust the polarities of magnetic gamepieces. The objective is to move gamepieces across the table and into an opposing player's zone, without touching them.

Kratasiph (Kra-tah-sif): a dealer in stanhic dusts.

Krylaric Shift (Kree-lah-rik): caustic amalgams which, when combined, emit toxic gasses.

Kuorosith Channel (Kuh-roh-sith): a passageway through the fifth level of the Astuverican Subterra.

Kuraphic Unguents (Kuh-ra-fik Un-jents): healing salves derived from various crushed, boiled leaves and berries, sometimes combined with certain ores or amalgams.

Kurestrea (Kuh-res-tree-uh): a region which borders the Aquina Sul-Autarea, to sorentre of Andulka.

Kuspegias (Koo-spehy-zhee-uhz): highly sonorant twin memory stones

Kuwhan'Xalu (Koo-hahn szah-loo): a landmass of intense sonorance, located in the wisoltrean Seamounts.

Kwapreth: a bulbous tree with a hollow trunk, native to the regions of the Vengaos and the Andulkas. Now extinct.

Kwaaeriuth (Kweh-ree-ooth): deep-swimming fish, found mostly in the Eusterian sea.

Kyhmeqx (Kahy-meks): the proprietary Thermionic code used by the Courvesois.

Kyotrimlic stone (Kee-oh-trim-lik): a.k.a. "Kyo." A stone capable of carrying a specific mnemonic message or imprint.

Kyruliax (Kah-roo-lee-aks): a hard spirit, distilled from Myenreawhip.

Laevenant (Leh-veh-nant): a grower of fibrous fungi.

Laparis of Tomes: another name for the Guderaph.

Legent: an expert in the properties of certain plants.

Levitation stone: stones used to lift aerospheres.

Liaramar (Lee-ah-rih-mar): a small insect with a fatal bite. A common tool used by older Courvesants.

Lightstaff: a forged instrument capable of giving off light.

Lineage: generation.

Lumarathear (Loo-mah-rah-theer): a brew made from Scabric pestle and various fungi. Not as sharp as Coquont but made from more commonly found ingredients.

Lumenatra (Loo-men-ah-trah): the daily religious service held in Astuverica.

Lumens (Loo-mens): illuminated, winged creatures who soar above the Dimensional Horizon in a tight cluster. See also “Tone.”

Machaera (Mash-ay-eh-rah): the enforcement arm of the Council of Arduas.

Magnomeara (mah-g-noh-mir-ah): a climbing vine, native to the Seamounds.

Maharests, the (Mah-hah-rests): a Cimmerian religious sect.

Malaeric (Mah-leh-rik): one who has the gift of Malaerosch.

Malaerosch, gift of (Mah-leh-rosh): the innate ability to create glyphs that can elicit a voltaic effect on the materials upon which they are etched.

Malmoux (Mal-moo): a disc-shaped, aquatic creature, common to the sorentrean regions.

Maquit (Mah-keet): A specialist who combines certain materials in order to capture the usefulness of their volatilities and similarities.

Maralithlea (Ma-rah-lith-lee-uh): a marisatria in the region of the Vengaos.

Marasai (Ma-rah-sahy): a bushy plant with a sweet, purple fruit. Native to the central regions.

Marastith (Ma-rah-stith): an herb found under cave ledges in the Seamounds.

Marcelic Viamar: the pathway into Astuverica from the norostrean regions.

Marisatria: a term to describe a geographic community.

Marrowhip: a variety of grain, lower to mid-grade

Marulaphre (Ma-roo-law-frehy): a Muricai cell from the Hirusovrans.

Mauglia-Dursla (Mah-gee-uh-dur-slah): a marisatria in the region of the Vengaos.

Medieusz (Meh-dee-oosh): Pavatrian term, originally meant to define a paradigm shift, or polarity reversal on a massive scale.

Medius Athlamaru (Mahy-dee-us Auth-luh-mah roo): the inner sanctum of the Muharic faith.

Memory stone: a forged or chiseled rock, used to articulate aggregators or store information.

Menemwort: a small bush with tiny leaves, common to estrean and norostrean regions.

Menshar: a type of ore, low-medium grade.

Mephistaff: an arrow with heat-seeking capabilities.

Meso-Sczelis (Meh-zo-zy-kлис): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Mestophleac (Meh-stof-lee-ahk): a marisatria in the region of the Vengaos.

Meteclystic Stone, the (Meh-teh-kлис-tik): a cult of the Incarnate.

Metephemes (Meh-teh-feemz): the coercion of fate which is thought to arise from certain Subterranean voltaic impulses.

Miaric weight (Mee-ah-rik): a unit of measure equal to the weight of an adult hand.

Mierlu-Swaaric Routes (Meer-loo-swah-rik): a system of trails in the Seamounds.

Mirinueth (Mih-rin-yoo-eth): a species of tree native to central regions. It is commonly used to make Terruqleis.

Miristiom Crosscut (Mih-rihs-tee-um): a passageway in the fifth level of the Astuverican Subterra.

Mirumattre (Mih-roo-mah-trey): Kirahmoor's code of allegiance to the Cathedra of the fifth Suhm-Ephriant.

Mnemonast (Nee-moh-nast): one who is gifted with the ability to articulate the subchattels found in revenants, with or without Thermionic assistance.

Mnemonic Aggregator: devices which are imbedded into stanhic veins, for the storage of mnemonic filamentation.

Mnemonueric Tremon (Nee-moh-noo-rik): a convulsion caused by exposure to strongly sonorant mnemonic filamentation. Can occur when two or more Mnemonasts touch the same memory stone.

Mnemosis (Nee-moh-sis): the veil of revenants which is felt but not necessarily seen by Mnemonasts.

Mnetharsis (Neh-thahr-sis): A Malaeric technique whereby glyphs can be transferred from one stone to another through a form of psychic transference.

Mnokathic Viamar (Noe-kah-thik): the pathway into Astuverica from the wisoltrean territories.

Mnuloratheia (Noo-loh-rah-thee-uh): ancient name for the region known as the Seamounds.

Moirisois Highlands (Mor-ih-swah): a landmass in the sorentrean Seamounds.

Moorar: a marisatria in the Pavatrian region.

Moors of Dharoun: a boggy flatland in the Saurostran region.

Morithules (Moh-rih-thoolz): magnetic rods which control the movement of clerestory windows in official buildings in Astuverica.

Muharadu: the religious/spiritual arm of the Triumvirate.

Muhryr (Moo-reer): a marisatria on the border between the regions of the Vengaos and the Seamounds.

Muriadants: stone collection pots found at the Plain of the Palamonts.

Muricai (Moo-rih-cahy): the organized resistance movement.

Muyleanth (My-lee-anth): a poisonous crawling insect, native to the Pavatrias.

Myenreawhip (My-ehn-ree-uh-wip): a type of grain found mostly in sorentrean and central regions.

Myotrophus (My-uh-troe-fus): a stone which is held in the palm of the hand and pressed against a vein for a cinctured articulation.

Mysoux ranges (My-soo): a mountain range which borders the Swales of the Neroluer, in the wisoltrean Seamounds.

Narwasetot (Nahr-wah-seh-laht): a large mammal with three eyes and four pairs of legs.

Nearings: a term to describe any widely traveled trail system in the Dimensional Horizon.

Nemeric stone: stones which are polarized to make loud shrieking sounds. Made of the same compounds as vaqchasers.

Nerialuge (Neh-ree-uh-loozh): a fish with green, slimy skin and a single protruding eye.

Neurri (Noo-ree): a unit of measure equal to the length of an adult arm, wrist to shoulder.

Nichotoosh (Nik-oh-toosh): Vengathlian term which means “parallel lines.”

Norostre (Nah-row-stray): one of the four compass points.

Nuer Locuh (Noor-loh-koo): Saurostran term which means “many fingers.”

Nuerautio (Noo-rah-shee-oh): an unfiltered chelomeric extract.

Numandriel (Noo-mahn-dree-el): a medium-sized mammal which produces a loud, shrieking sound. Produces a milk with a slightly bitter quality.

Nuolat, Bay of (Noo-ah-laht): a bight in the estrean Seamounds.

Nuremic Thrush (Noo-ree-mik): a medication derived from the flower of the Tythien plant.

Nurespheric (Noo-rehs-feer-ik): describing a glyph which is dominant in dissonant effects. See also “Cyclophitic.”

Nuruls-Areat (Noo-rulz-Ah-ree-aht): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Nysimrean peninsula: a landmass on the coast of the Seamounts.

Octothet: A Kyotrimlic stone infused with obscure information or arts which are difficult to access through standard memory stones.

Oolarathis (Oo-oh-lah-rah-this): a marisatria in the Kurestean region.

Order, The: the nickname for the Courvesois.

Orphus mushroom: an edible fungus found inside damp caves, mainly in the central regions.

Osetys, the (Oh-seh-tis): a 200 quintek old glyph, created by a Pavatrian Malaeric.

Paeaduriap (Peh-doo-ree-ap): a mineral used to distort magnetic polarities.

Paelremite (Pehl-reh-mite): a crystalline mineral.

Pakyrium (Pah-kee-yoo-ree-uhm): a disease in which blood rots and seeps through the pores of the skin.

Palamonts, Plain of the: the Astuverican field on which Lumenatra is held.

Pale (Peyl): a term to describe a very dense mist.

Palialouge (Pah-lee-uh-loge): a lodge/worship center for Muharic priests.

Palick Raptor: disc-shaped, airborne weapons.

Palmuric disorder (Pahl-myur-ik): a respiratory ailment.

Paragai (Pah-raw-gahy): a tree which produces a blue-green fruit. Common to the central and sorentrean regions.

Parusaedria, Bay of (Pah-roo-sehd-ree-uh): a bight on the coast of the Andulkan region. Astuverica is located on its shores.

Pavatria: a mountainous region along the wisoltrean border of Andulka.

Peligarthe (peh-lih-garth): a silvery fish, covered with long tentacles.

Pellogroat (Peh-luh-grote): a turncoat, betrayer or informer.

Pellopharut (Peh-loh-fah-root): a Vengathlian term for “hypocrite.”

Pellot (Peh-lot): a term of derision.

Pentumus: a powerful but crude narcotic, derived from Trofliage.

Peonage Camp: a prison.

Peres-Surhofrian islands (Peh-rez-soo-hof-ree-uhn): a Eusterian island chain.

Pericule (Peh-rih-kyool): the top of a Kiyfer dome.

Pharonemlik divides (Feh-row-nem-lik): a range of steep cliffs in the norostrean Seamounts.

Pchemes (Feemz): the nickname for the Metephemes.

Phedoplic archipelago (Feh-oh-dop-lik): a cluster of small isles to noro-estre of the Bay of Nuolat.

Phileans, the (Fil-ee-uhnz): a region located at the central-sorentrean portion of the Dimensional Horizon.

Phylox (Fy-loks): an ore, low-medium grade.

Pictelic (Pik-teh-lik): a sweet pastry made from the pulp of the Paragai fruit.

Pierk-Astuverist (Peer-k-az-too-veh-rik): the fishing village which in time would become Astuverica.

Pilects (Py-leks): a field game in which an implement is thrown by an offensive player with the intention of striking a

defender, who can instead deflect the implement, while it is still airborne, back toward the offensive player.

Pilobuthaer (Pih-loh-boo-ther): a marisatria in the region of the Phileans.

Pirelthesur (Pih-rehl-theh-soor): a marisatria in the region of the Phileans.

Pirogue (Pih-rohg): a water-borne vessel which can be sailed or rowed.

Plasaic Nearings (Plah-say-ik): an Andulkan trail system connecting with the Mnokathic viamar.

Plasmodic Glass (Plaz-moh-dik): high-tensile glass which is made from Thulitar and other compounds.

Plasmodic Melts: plasmodic materials in the first stage of processing.

Plunt Chamber: a mixing station for scabric compounds.

Pnumiphric Pale (Noo-mif-rik): the heavy mists which are common to the central Seamounts.

Pnumoslith (Noo-moh-slith): a drug produced from a blend of Trofliage root and seed.

Pnumoterns (Noo-moh-ternz): tiny fissures and voids found at ground level in certain portions of the central Seamounts.

Praeleoturs, the (Prey-loh-toors): processing depots for mid-level stanhics and Broutish Clays.

Pragash (Prah-gash): a fungus found in shaded areas in the various parts of the Seamount region.

Pras'demnos, gift of (Prahs-dem-nos): the ability to engage the act of Pras'pheratu.

Pras'pheratu (Prahs-fer-ah-too): the term describing the mnemonast's prime skill and talent, i.e. the ability to see or interpret the subchattels of a revenant, with or without the aid of Thermionic devices.

Prath'amreis (Prawth-ahm-rehs): a refugee camp in the Swales of the Neroluer.

Preklomith (Prehk-low-mith): a powdered depressant.

Principiate: a term to describe the sphere of influence which surrounds Ephriants and their constituents in the Architrave.

Propulsion stone: magnetic stones arranged so that their polarities will drive an aerosphere or an Aquasphere.

Pryest-Mestoph (Pry-est-mes-tof): a marisatria in the region of the Vengaos.

Pucino (Poo-chee-noh): a term of derision.

Pulaethria (Poo-lay-three-uh): a gastropod found in clear shallows along the Kurestreaan coast.

Pulatheas (Poo-lah-they-as): a cluster of rolling hills in the estreaan Seamounds.

Pulsimer: a measure of time equal to the span between heartbeats at rest.

Putsplat (Poot-splat): an expression of disgust or revulsion.

Puzamaralur (Poo-zah-mah-rah-loor): a toothy, burrowing reptile found within the Kurestreaan Subterra.

Quadric spear (Kwah-drik): a throwing weapon with four blades that can separate in mid-air.

Quagdurosep (Kwag-doo-roh-sep): an ancient fungus, now extinct.

Quarter loop: a segment of a Register in Astuverica. There are four Quarter loops to a Register, designated A, B, C and D.

Quintek (Kwin-tek): 305 days.

Quisoluria (Kwih-so-loo-ree-uh): a refugee camp in the Swales of the Neroluer.

Quistrian hills: a landmass in the Pavatrian region.

Quordrof passages (Kwor-drof): a series of tunnels at the fifth level of the Astuverican Subterra.

Rank of Signet: an abstract which is Thermionically stamped so as to guarantee its authenticity.

Receptif Articulat (Reh-sep-tif Ahr-tik-yoo-laht): a specialist who bends and adjusts the polarities of magnetic ores.

Recondite, the: an extremely deep vein system, consisting mainly of Chelate Hagonite, used proprietarily by the Triumvirate.

Regency: a term to describe the leadership caste.

Regent: one who is in a position of authority.

Register: a city block in Astuverica.

Resonance: sonorance with an effect leaning toward the positive. See also "Dissonance."

Revenant: the residue left behind when mnemonic filamentation passes through a vein.

Rhiocalamide (Ree-oh-ka-lah-mide): a cheap knockoff of Rhiodaramir.

Rhiodaramir (Ree-oh-dah-rah-meer): a narcotic used mainly by the Machaera; a blend of Trofliage and Carabylic leaf extract.

Rugliapod (Roo-gee-uh-pod): a crustacean with retractable legs and a pair of eyes that spin within a gelatinous skull.

Ryaklokath (Ree-ak-loh-kath): a tree with a yellow seedpod and a bitter nut, used to make distilled spirits.

Sallowrith (Sah-low-rith): a simple narcotic produced from a heated mixture of saliva, blood and Menemwort.

Sanhexrian flats (San-hekz-ree-uhn): an arid steppe in the sorentrean Andulkas.

Saurostra (Sah-roe-struh): a region in the wisoltrean Dimensional Horizon.

Sav'onishta (Sah-vah-neesh-tah): a Vengathlian term signifying redemption, relief or absolution.

Scabric dust (Ska-brik): finely ground scabric. An excellent preservative.

Scabric Pestle (Skab-rik Pes-tuhl): a tart seasoning, mined from cave walls and shallow waters.

Scales of Mueridal, the (Moo-rih-dahl): an infectious skin condition. Usually fatal.

Scharolif (Shah-roe-lif): the mythic “stone of light” in Erasotran folklore.

Schimatariat (Shih-mah-tah-ree-aht): a council of state involving all who hold positions of title or authority within the Dimensional Horizon.

Seamounts, the: The largest region in the Dimensional Horizon, a.k.a. “Mnuloratheia.”

Sendele (Sehn-deh-ley): a round sheet of lumpy flatbread, crisscrossed with grooves that are filled with spices or oils.

Serritara Plains (She-reh-tah-rah): a large rolling flatland in the Andulkan region.

Sethelesq, the (Seth-eh-lesk): Astuverica’s public bathhouse, built by order of the second Suhm-Ephriant, Darmek Ve.Muirgen.

Shaestip (Shey-stip): a species of tree, native to the Saurostran region.

Shalu’doc.xhu (Shah-loo-dok-zoo): a mountain range in the estrean Seamounts.

Sharoluix (Shah-row-loo): a marisatria in the sorentrean Seamounts.

Shatulatien (Shah-too-lah-teyn): a deep swimming fish.

Shavinder (Sha-vihn-dur): a thorny vine common to the central Seamounts. Produces an oil which can be consumed only if heated.

Sholodephre (Show-low-def-rey): an Andulkan term for “betrayal” or “disloyalty.”

Shulumethros (Shoo-luh-meth-rows): the farthest norostrean refugee colony in the Swales of the Neroluer. Also known as the “Grottos.”

Silcture (Silk-chur): a stanhic compound which has been heated, pulverized and rolled before it has cooled. Used to manipulate polarities in certain ores.

Skaer-Trofliats (Skair-trow-flee-ahts): a hilly landmass in the Pavatrian region.

Skantaro (skan-tah-row): a term of derision.

Sk iarawhip (Skee-ah-rah-wip): a type of grain common to sorentrean regions, medium grade.

Skirueic (Skeer-oo-ek): a drug addict.

Skridlak: a female Khepra Hound.

Skulerean Pale (Skoo-lehr-ee-uhn): a type of mist common to the coast of the Seamounts.

Skuritic Alloys (Skuh-rih-tik): a blend of Thulitar and certain stanhic dusts or compounds.

Slariague (Slah-ree-ah-gwey): a species of vine, native to the Vengaos.

Sonorance: The voltaic pneuma which infuses the veins of the Subterra. See also “Resonance” and “Dissonance”.

Sorentre (soh-rehn-trey): one of the four compass points.

Spike: one who deals in stolen goods on the Chivet-Pradur. See also “Flail.”

Stanhic (stan-ik): a term generally referring to ores in an unrefined state.

Stirrup Moss: a type of lichen which is native to central and norostrean regions.

Strategic Chronicles: the prime directives issued by the Architrave.

Stratimer: a span of time equal to 112 pulsimers.

Stringworm: a type of lichen found in the Seamounds and the Vengaos.

Stryger (Stry-gur): an offensive player in the game of Pilects.

Stuloslith (Stoo-loh-slith): a fungus with a very rigid, fibrous tuber. Can be cured and processed to make clothing and medicines. Native to the Saurostran region.

Sturethenes (Stoo-reh-theenz): an archipelago off the coast of the Hirusovran region.

Sturivias (Stuh-rih-vee-us): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Sturosphere Gradient (Stuh-rus-feer): a landmass in the estrean central Seamounds.

Subalternate: a Machaeran conscript.

Subchattel: the core of a revenant. See also “Explitore.”

Sublimation of Autarchy, the (Aw-tahr-kee): a cult of the Incarnate.

Subterra: the realm which lies beneath the surface of the ground.

Suer-Karslo (swair-kar-slow): a marisatria at the border between the Vengaos and the Seamounds.

Suhm-Ephriant (Soom-ef-ree-ant): the prime Ephriant.

Suhm-Kaolisch (Soom-kay-oh-lish): an ancient reference to the principal priest in the early days of the Muharic faith.

Sul-Withulea (Sool-with-oo-lee-uh): a refugee camp in the Swales of the Neroluer.

Suromear-Anh (Suh-row-meer-awn): a marisatria in the Pavatrian region.

Swaarics, the (Swah-riks): a system of trails running through the sorentrean Seamounds.

Swaaric-Tanolean routes (Swah-rik-tahn-oh-lee-uhn): a trail system traversing the Xyklian ranges.

Swales of Neroluer, the (Nee-row-loor): the valley which lies between the Mysoux and Xyklian ranges, in the wisoltrean Seamounds.

Swerigess (Swair-ih-jes): a flowering tree which produces a sweet nectar and a small, elongated fruit. Native to the Philean region.

Swirilishere (Swih-rihl-ih-sheer): a marisatria in the Pavatريان region.

Syena (See-ehn-ah): a high-grade variety of whip, or grain, common to central regions.

Syncreothophy, the (Sihn-cree-ah-thoh-fee): a cult of the Incarnate.

Syndroqlast (Sin-droh-klast): natural gnarls in stanhic veins which act as portals through which articulations can pass.

Synthet (Sin-thet): the structural composition of mnemonic filamentation and revenants.

Synulariat (Sin-yoo-lah-ree-aht): one who keeps and protects the argency of others.

Syphtisarium (Sif-tih-sah-ree-uhm): the facility in the Architrave where certain Thermionic stones and aggregators are conceived, forged and indented.

Syriphada (Sih-rah-fah-dah): a bushy vine with edible seedpods, found in the Seamounds.

Szikula (Zih-kyu-lah): a glyphical expression created 300 quinteks ago in the Hirusovrans.

Tanaskith (Tah-nah-skith): an aged, superheated extract of Widow's Breath. See also *Tzadaklu*.

Tarandru (Tah-rahn-droo): a large mammal with five legs, native to the Philean region.

Taurence, Bay of: a bight along the coast of the norostrean Andulkas.

Telorskra: a marisatria in the Pavatريان region.

Tensor: a fibrous strand of flesh found under the skin of a Barutha.

Teoramugh, Bay of (Tee-or-ah-moog): a bight in the norostrean Seamounts.

Tephrom-Anh (Tef-rahm-awn): a marisatria in the wisoltrean Seamounts.

Terminus: the term used to describe the outer edge of the Aurean rilles, particularly near the Aeries.

Terrabode (Teh-rah-bode): the most common type of above-ground structure; residential or light commercial in nature.

Terraces: the center of commerce and public gathering within a marisatria.

Terruqlei (Teh-ruh-kley): the spear used by offensive players in Pilects matches.

Teukonic Viamar (Too-kah-nik Vee-uh-mahr): the primary avenue leading to Astuverica from sorentre.

Thaeuxdukep (They-doo-kep): a seasoning; the powdered, sautéed remains of Thisklean Buzzers

Thanatafuor (Thah-nah-tah-foor): a marisatria in the Andulkan region.

Thana-Yarelu (Thah-nah-ya-rah-loo): a marisatria in the Andulkan region.

Tharadunin (Thah-rah-doo-nin): a marisatria in the Saurostran region.

Tharusiad (Thah-roo-see-ahd): a marisatria in the Kurestrean region.

Theosphora (Thee-ahs-for-ah): a mineral which is commonly used to make lightstuffs.

Thermionics: a term referring to any aspect of mnemonic or magnetic elucidation.

Thesolance, Bay of (Theh-sah-lance): a bight along the coast of the Seamounds.

Thilerowhip (Theh-leh-row-wip): a type of grain found mainly in colder, norostrean terrain.

Thisklean Buzzer (This-lee-uhn): a small orange and black biting insect.

Thraph-Niscal (Thrahf-nee-skawl): a Cimmerian cult.

Thrifleanur (Thrif-lee-ah-noor): a moss with anti-hallucinogenic properties, found only in select areas of the Seamounds.

Thrushwhip: a variety of grain, mid-high grade.

Thulitar: a mineral which is used primarily to produce building materials.

Thuracians, the (Thur-ay-shuns): a steep, hilly landmass in the region of the Vengaos.

Thyloshist (Thy-loh-shist): a type of vine which produces a bitter fruit. Grows well in dark, dry conditions. It is native to the Vengaos.

Toriklo-Vuram (Tor-ee-klo voor-rahm): a marisatria in the Kurestrean region.

Tor-Sulethrip (Tor-soo-leh-thrip): a marisatria in the sorestrean Seamounds.

Tramplings, the: Level Two of the Astuverican Subterra.

Treflicat (Tref-lih-kut): the proprietary memory stone of the Triumvirate.

Tribethians, the: an undulating landmass in the region of the Vengaos.

Triece (Tree-ehs): the stones which are used to pave most of the streets in Astuverica.

Trimethric stone: a type of memory stone used primarily for short-range cognitions.

Triumvirate: the entity formed by the merger of the Arduan Council, the Muharadu and the Courvesois.

Trofliage (Troh-flee-ahj): the plant from which Pentumus and its offshoots are derived.

Tromean Extensors (Trow-mee-ahn): the largest mountain range in the norostrean seamounts.

Truliat-Vengathlo (True-lee-aht-vehn-gah-thlow): a marisatria in the norostrean Vengaos.

Tsurithean Helidrome (Zur-ih-thee-ahn-hee-lah-drome): the largest sports arena in Astuverica.

Tuerinsian Observatory (Too-rihn-see-ahn): a platform near the top of the Architrave used for surveillance and visual research.

Tuir-Phystrians (Toor-fis-tree-ahns): a hilly landmass along the Andulkan-Vengathlian border.

Tulerioc (Too-lehr-ree-awc): a type of ore, high grade.

Turo-Zephreis (Too-row-zef-rahys): a marisatria in the Kurestrean region.

Tyrgomec (Tir-goe-mek): a stanhic alloy, liquefied in its natural state. When infused into a memory stone, it can produce a strong hallucinatory effect.

Tyrupliak (Tih-roop-lee-ak): the dung of the Guirabaka. In its processed form it is used to simulate death.

Tythien (Tie-thee-ehn): a bushy plant sometimes used as a decorative hedge. Its seedpods can be eaten and its young leaves can be made into tea or medicine.

Tyzeriosch (Tih-sehr-ee-och): a mark which is incised into the skin of newly minted Machaeran Regents.

Tzadaklu (Zah-dah-kloo): a constant twitching effect of the left hand, brought on by an overdose of Tanaskith.

Ularic (Yoo-lah-rik): a type of ore, medium-high quality.

Uloyisthea (Oo-low-yis-thee-uh): a marisatria of legend in the Saurostran region.

Untek (Oon-tek): a measure of time equal to 61 days.

Uropliet (Yoo-rope-lee-eh): a powerful toxin used to coat Quadric blades. Like Trofliage, it is native to the Andulkas.

Uscopic Jetties (Yoo-skor-ik): a series of breakwaters and docks at the Astuverican shoreline.

Valodustre (Val-oh-doo-strey): an Andulkan term meaning “fellow traveler” or “brother.”

Vaqchaser (Vak-chay-sur): an elongated stone with distorted polarities, used to create music.

Vengaos, the (Vehn-gowz): a region along the norostrean border of the Andulkas.

Vepreste (Veh-pres-tey): a thorny bush with produces a tart, juicy seedpod.

Vhagrivol (Vaug-rih-vohl): a weed with mildly narcotic qualities. Native to the wisoltrean Andulkas.

Viamars (Vee-ah-marz): the major arteries into and out of Astuverica. There are three: the Mnokathic (from wisoltre), the Marcelic (from norostre) and the Teukonic (from sorentre).

Vidanthric (Vih-dan-thrik): a term to describe one whose blood is heavily laden with metals or Aurean saturates.

Vilarosa (Vih-lah-roe-sah): a bushy plant found in the sorentrean regions.

Vireskolian (Vih-res-koh-lee-ahn): a Muricai cell from the Hirusovrans.

Vital Temperans: metal rods supporting the articulum stones which control the morithules to the Architrave and the Medius Athlamaru.

Voltaic Pneuma: a magnetic impulse.

Vriklian Ascents (Vrik-lee-ahn): a hilly landmass in the wisoltrean Andulkas.

Vrunleatrope (Vroon-lee-ah-trope): a vertically oriented, magnetically-impelled conveyance.

Vuarset (Vwar-seht): a measure of fluidic weight. One Vuarset = $1/15^{\text{th}}$ of a cubic neurri.

Waeriaj, the (Weh-ree-ahj): a long, thin, superheated needle which is coated with a lightly poisonous compound and driven into a victim's body through the tips of the fingers.

Whip: generic name for any kind of grain.

Whistoph-Karnash: a marisatria in the region of the Phileans.

Widow's Breath: a very pure cut of Chelomar.

Windswort: a type of moss found in the norostrean regions.

Wisoltre (Wih-sohl-trey): one of the four compass points.

Wissoria: a leafy plant, native to the Seamounds.

Writhlic Culturist (Rith-lik): a grower of grains and tubers.

Xalmi-Ourotho highlands (Zal-mee Oo-row-thow): a.k.a. the *Exos*. A hilly landmass in the Pavatryan region.

Xaru-Chalidaethras (Zah-roo Shah-lah-dey-thras): the Architrave's council of Ephriants.

Xhalamears, the (Zah-lah-meerz): a mountain range along the border between the regions of Pavatria and the Seamounds.

Xilianur (Zih-lee-ah-noor): a marisatria in the Hirusovran region.

Xycloplast (Zy-kloh-plast): Kirahmoor's memory stone.

Xyklian range (Zy-klée-ahn): a mountain range bordering the Swales of the Neroluer.

Yaroslith, the (Yah-roh slith): a cult of the Incarnate.

Yellow Marist, the: a cult of Fulgency.

Yicarusch (Yih-kah-roosh): a thick, woody vine found mainly in the Seamounds.

Yrgotrea (Ir-goe-tree-ah): a marisatria in the region of the Vengaos.

Yurslip: a mossy plant with tiny yellow and black leaves, native to the Andulkan region.

Zaphraela (Zaf-rey-eh-lah): a type of lichen found in dark, damp caves, mainly in the Seamounds.

Zenith: the peak of the sky.

Zephyr runt: a small, ill-tempered crustacean found on the coasts of certain Eusterian islands and the sorentrean boundaries of the Eusterian sea and the Aquina Sul-.

Zhalugrifts, the (Za-loo-grifts): a cult of Fulgency.

Zhile-Karpathria (Zeel-kar-palth-ree-ah): a marisatria in the region of the Vengaos.

Zsadaktathet (Zah-dahk-tah-thet): a Cycloptic glyph eliciting a strong impulse for manipulation, disruption, influence.

Zualoslet (Zwah-low-slet): an incision carved or burned into the skin of any drudge who lives and works at Levels One and Two of the Astuverian Subterra.

Zurish-Triece (Zur-ish-tree-es): a nickname for the Astuverian subterra.

Zylix (Zy-likes): a recently created glyphical expression.

Zyn'hetreal (Zin-het-ree-ahl): the missing book of the Guderaph.

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This is his first novel.

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