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NIGHTSCAPE

THE IRON SHADOW

David W. Edwards



Portland, Oregon USA

Imperiad Entertainment
Portland, Oregon USA

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For my wife, Michelle, and my sons, Devin and Brant

NIGHTSCAPE

THE IRON SHADOW

David W. Edwards

LAEGREVEL



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“To live deep is to live in each season.”

—Popular Druna saying

Chapter One

An impossible rescue attempt and its unexpected boon

I died before I'd much to call my own or leave behind—and before I knew how to put into words any but the most immediate sensations. Perhaps I'll better apprehend the whole of things now that I'm outside of time. No doubt you're more used to this abstract state than me. I expect you approach omniscience—how does it go?—with silence as your first language. I remember that from somewhere as one of the chief distinctions between men and gods. Ah, what am I saying? To your eyes, I'm likely as exposed as an earthworm with its arteries showing through; nevertheless, I'll try to prove myself a worthy bard, even adorn my tale with the occasional lapidary phrase as the best Druna sages are wont to do.

If you're to understand your so-called 'enemy host' and the circumstances of your capture then I have to go back at least as far as the raid on Bazahl-Sar. That would've been several weeks into the sirocco summer. You must know it—the infamous slave fort on the coast of Namshin? We aimed to rescue one of Broga's fellow Matabwe. *Vafna*, of course we didn't risk a direct attack; rather, we dropped anchor a short distance up the coast and waited for the dungeoned slaves to take their evening bath.

A trio of *sukúla* allowed for stealth reconnaissance from the air. Manipulating the ancient scrying orbs required me to maintain a grueling trance-state. The *sukúla* flashed one image after another: a cool blue surf dashing the sand; twin pitted-stone guard towers; the gleaming basalt fort behind them; and farther still, irregular whorls of earth covering the ashes of the dead. I marked eight guards on the beach or its vicinity, all armed with spears and short swords. Two lugged sending shields on their backs similar to my own.

We'd dispatched individual slavers, even burned down a small trad-

ing port in Rōchab, but never set ourselves against trained mercenaries. The fort was the largest, most disreputable of its kind, a city unto itself, complete with a rooftop apartment for the chief overseer, watch-towers, cisterns, warehouses, barracks for privateers and various laborers, harems, stables and an adjacent bullpen, smithies, cookhouses, a domed chapel and a crematorium as well as gardens of oranges and lemons. (These fruits were mashed into a tart brew to prevent the wasting sickness that otherwise dooms long voyages.) There was no telling the number of mercenaries behind the gates. If we mistimed our foray or fouled its execution, we'd be overrun; to die unbowed and free would then be our only blessing.

Do I detect the bodiless equivalent of a furrowed brow? You're questioning why we'd risk it, yes? Two itinerant rogues, Druna and Matabwe, corpse white and loam black, spat upon for our colors, scarcely a copper between us, muzzy from sweet waterpipe tobacco. Why, you ask? We were young and aching and sick enough of weakness to strike out at the self-appointed sultans of the age, whatever the consequences. That was our base rationale—to prick and harry our oppressors. The world had betrayed us in almost every way, and we were angry, *I* was angry, though taught like all Druna that anger was a poison. If I'd any guts, they'd knot in shame at the mention of it—the pious rage and roar. We're a society of scholars, we Druna. We pride ourselves on the calming truths of cosmic nature.

The Matabwe captive we tried to recover was Dawit Yavhathu of Clan Aluvhani. We understood he'd been taken in the same raid that had claimed Broga's half-sister about five Sharro Calendar years before. We hoped he could shed some light on her whereabouts. Familial devotion was of the highest value to Broga. Throughout our travails, no matter the terrible choices he sometimes made or how his devotion was tested, he never lost this conviction. You have to understand: it figures in everything he did.

Few apprehended this deep romantic feeling at his center. But I knew, I could sense it, even in the earliest days when he was prone to hard-edged judgments. The Matabwe have a reputation for patient endurance, for suffering abuse in the manner of pack animals. Tch, a mere excuse for ill-treatment. They've emotional and spiritual lives as

varied as any. They're no wood golems. Ramble through the refugee slums of Izzahl and you'll see them vulnerable, hurt, blasted to the very nub.

When the slaves columned out of their appointed hole, escorted by a half-dozen guards, I dispatched a pair of *sukúla* to survey the ragged coffle at a distance. The featureless metal orbs were about the size of an infant's fist. I'd 'inherited' a pair of them when we'd escaped the fighting pits and had since stolen another. Settled into a dreamtime trance, I could maneuver them through the air, behold their silvered reflections and deploy them as spies or swooping round shot. Perhaps a more proficient or imaginative adept would've discovered other uses. But I was young—young for a Druna, I should say—and, having abandoned my formal studies, lacked a strong theoretical understanding of the ancient magicks.

The slaves had been culled mostly from the hinterlands of Nyora, though I spotted a few natives of the frozen north and a rare red-skinned daimon. The *sukúla* magnified each weary face in succession: long, sharp, round, wrong, darkish (possibly bruised). Dawit was said to have a fishbone scar across his forehead. Any Matabwe seeking social status within the clan underwent ritual scarification. Something Broga had declined, either to register his independence in general, or more particularly, to spite his wayward father. Ah, there: the scar, Dawit. Near the middle in the line of march, stooped, cuffed at the wrists, same flat-eyed gaze as the rest. *Heech*. How could anyone with a touch of feeling let this barbarism pass? To watch your own kind drudge out a life in cruel service... The pitiable souls seemed to have forgotten who they were—even naked.

I signaled Broga with a fluttering *sukúla* to weigh anchor. He nodded and made hasty preparations to bring the boat up to speed. His back muscles bunched under thin mail as he heaved up the anchor. If we'd known when, exactly, the slaves would be taking their bath, we would've sailed in circles to keep the momentum going. Though the stolen cutter's gaff rig suited our two-man crew, it also demanded we sail further off the wind than other rigs, so it took some coaxing to get the boat going. Broga tweaked the rig for tacking upwind. The outhaul tension flattened the mainsail. The breeze picked up and started us



round the gently curved headland. He settled in the cockpit and pulled ropes with alacrity. His slitted eyes were narrowed and serious. The yard and the long heavy boom bounced in the seaway.

What sort of life, I wonder, would Broga have lived if his people had never been driven from their tribal mountain? If he'd been allowed a small existence free from the prejudices and chance turns of the larger world? He'd still have gone adventuring, I'm sure, earning coin as a mapmaker or antiquities hunter. Though his principles are sure—high-minded to the last—he was ever restless in his wants. I can't imagine him a common sort of Matabwe, tending his ancestral farm, raising a brood of mountaineers and goatherds, senses blunted. No, without any extenuating challenges he would've died of boredom. But I like to think he would've been more settled in his struggles, not so intense and soul-lonely.

Anticipating a fight, he tightened up, making experimental fists. That's how I picture him when I think back: exuding a fierce energy.

We cleared the ridged headland and dashed crosswise through the outgoing tide for the beach. By virtue of the other *sukúla*, my vision encompassed the surf and shore ahead. I presided over the coastline like an impassive sky god. The several dozen slaves were yoked to a deep-sunk stanchion. The forward-most waded up to their chests against the low waves. Dawit crouched in the middle of the throng facing the shore. The guards armed with spears and sending shields patrolled from the beach. The surf foamed around their boots. A murky wash of clouds obscured the westering sun. We counted on the darkening horizon to shade our proximity for a good distance. Even on discovery, the guards were likely to take us for bungling fishermen. Who else would career a simple gaffer into the midst of their prized chattel?

Broga yanked on the kicking strap to keep the boom under control and the sails driving us on. The boat raked across the waves *ka-tuk, ka-tuk*. I struggled to maintain my wizarding calm. The slaves eyed us curiously for a moment then, apprehending our course, broke in staggered directions to clear a path. The antennae on the guards' sending shields sparked to life in warning. Broga pretended ignorance, his gaze fixed on the zigzag of slaves. I mustered the three scrying orbs into a

precision sortie. I'd ample time to dispose of the guards before their sending shields were fully charged.

Until, that is, a concussive blast dispirited me.

The living moment crashed in, confusing my hold on the *sukúla*. *Heech!* What a painful din! Scenes of distraught and cowering slaves, of drab clouds and scurrying guards swirled in and out of focus. Ocean spray permeated my trance-sight, hung suspended in air, distorting my compound view before misting into nothingness. If not for a certain waterpipe-induced numbness, I likely would've been shaken out of my trance altogether. As it was, the *sukúla* scattered pell-mell. One plummeted into the sea to be claimed by the roily undertow. I suppressed the crippling noise in my head enough to regain control of the others. The world, however, remained a half-blinkered jumble.

The source of my frustrations revealed itself on a *sukúla*'s sharp, juddering reverse. Ah, yes, I should've known: a nerve cannon. The barrel protruded from a previously hidden niche in the guard tower to our left. Up till now, I'd only ever read about this weapon. The soundburst it generates is allegedly powerful enough to explode your vitals from the inside. I was loath to allow another test of that surmise. I swifted an orb into the guts of the cannon's operator then stove in the heads of his panicked companions for good measure. My attitude, of course, was purely dispassionate—in traditional Druna fashion.

A recovering Broga slewed the boat in the direction of Dawit, whom I'd marked with a hovering *sukúla*. Slaves churned the water in haste. Their chains made a low, hectic rattle. We threaded through the flailing bodies, heeling to starboard. Broga cleated the halyards and got to his feet, sling in hand. I readied the *sukúla* to destroy the sending shields. Fragments of sky, the beach, the surf, danced in the muted evening light.

Heech! A watery glow sheathed my twin targets. I brought the scrying orbs up short, stymied. The guards had got their forcefields in place. Ethereal energies haloed them against the distant fort and low lying hills. They'd even established a proper dead zone between them to ensure the shields didn't touch when extended. Sending shield collisions generate mostly fatal lightnings. Cursory scars along my upper back and neck attested to my own close calls. A glancing edge on edge

was all it took. I can still recall my first shield collision: the lungfuls of cindery air, my thoughts gone blank. But I couldn't give up training on the weapon out of simple animal fear. In the fighting pits of Skulon Gøra fear meant certain doom; besides, like Broga's half-sister Ovandu, I'd a natural talent for precursor tek.

Broga withdrew a sunstroke grenade from a belt pouch and fitted it to the pocket of the sling. The guard on our right made the closest target. I sent the two combat-active *sukúla* in his direction. Taking my cue, Broga shifted his stance and swung the grenade in an arc overhead. The gaffer dipped into a trough and shuddered. He kept his footing at the cost of some momentum. The guard tower on our right emptied its mercenaries onto the coarse beach. The imagined torments of capture were on Broga's brow like a bad fever. Another circuit and he pitched the ingot-sized missile. He was an expert stone slinger. Back in Ixzahl, he'd used the weapon to keep birds away from ripening millet.

The grenade whistled out of the pouch. I held the *sukúla* above and behind the targeted guard. The timing here was crucial. On contact with the guard's personal shield the grenade erupted into a bleary crackle. The ruby red discharge flared white-hot. I launched the nearest *sukúla* into the elemental heat. The orb lost its outer shell to the intensity and smashed its springs and gears against the guard's temporarily unprotected face. He was dead before he hit the ground—hard—on his back, disabling the metal carapace.

We glided past Dawit, narrowly avoiding a heavily tattooed slave. Bringing the boat around, Broga called Dawit by name. The vassal jerked upright, startled. His mouth gaped wide but no words came out.

Broga plied the sail ropes. "Prepare to come aboard!"

Shaking his head, the slave crossed his arms in front of his face as if to ward us away.

"I have the tools!" Broga assured him, holding up a blacksmith hammer.

A gaunt Nyoran clambered for the gunwhale, eyes rheumy, half-closed. "Me! A mercy!" His voice was flat and defeated.

Then a wedge of shield energy surged out from shore, throwing up a tremendous haze and laying bare the sand and cobbles beneath the shallows. The bright projection slammed into the hull and kept on

pushing. My scalp went hot. The boat skittered over the waves, timbers grouching. The bow jounced to and fro, threatening to disrupt my trance. The continual battering got to me. I felt too much of the living moment. I had to recall the lone surviving orb. The Nyoran was gray with grief—a quashed exclamation. Dawit looked on with narrowed brow, chewing the inside of his cheek. I was surprised at how far and fast the guard had managed to push us. Sending shields could be temperamental at their limits. We whisked into myrtle green waters. Broga clung to a horn cleat against the driving energy.

I blinked out of the dreamtime and steadied myself on my bundled sending shield. The living moment came to me as if out of an evaporating fog. A furious Broga worked the halyards. Antic. Exasperated. Spindrift dashed over the side. The *sukúla* dropped into the boat. I hadn't the strength to reach for it. The orb rolled away. I sat cross-legged on the deck, gathering myself. The sky was a soft patch on the world.

Broga gave me a sidelong glance. “*Aysh*, the shield—I can't evade it!”

I twisted sternward. Through the dazzle of shield energy, the slaves and their overseers massing on the shore were dark, flitting shapes. Remarkable, the power exerted so far... If we'd been unlucky enough to be trapped against the fort or a flanking slope, we would've been crushed. “Not much longer, I think, not much longer.”

“He refused. Did you see him?” Broga was livid at Dawit's weakness.

“We—” The shield energy flickered and popped. I put a hand on the boom and levered myself to my feet. “We can't go back at any event. They've recalled the slaves to shore.” I've never been especially comfortable in the float and play of the unwaking world; still, in moments like these, I regretted coming back to stern reality.

Broga's eyes shadowed over. “Should we go on blindly then?”

“Blind and alive, yes.” I took a few halting steps.

“*Nasidoni kuprugaan hak ya zingera ne ochuma* (Help me fight these slaving jackals).” *Kuprugaan* is one of those Matabwe words that defy exact translation. It means not simply ‘to fight’ but ‘to crush’ with righteous malice in your heart.

As usual in these matters, I found myself in the cautionary role. “I'm

still trance-weak and down to one *sukúla* besides.” I pulled my fur-lined cloak tighter across my chest. “We can’t possibly—”

A blistering jolt flung the gaffer into the air. The heat seared my backside. The keel skimmed the water. I clutched the mainmast for support. The boat careened back into the sea and toward the dusky horizon. Holding fast to the halyards, Broga broke into a crooked smile. The shield was gone—dissipated. We sailed under our own power again. “The shield rig finally burnt out or ran down,” I said. My sending shield lay on the recessed mid-deck, bundled in oilskins to protect it from sea and weather.

“There’s a chance then.” Broga started tacking the boat around.

The sending shield had driven us halfway across the bay. The mercenaries and their retreating charges formed a collective silhouette like some outstretched larval creature. Supplemental troops from the fort had joined the others in rank. An approaching lantern alternately clarified and blurred their contours as it passed over them.

Broga shot me a curious look. “What manner of light...?”

As the lantern neared the surf, it took on a strange, prismatic quality. Beams rayed out in several directions. “Back,” I said. “Back. Now.”

“What is it, *huyi*?”

The array resolved into a shadow out of childhood nightmares. I gestured rather than spoke its name: Queland’r. Most considered the char-black creatures mere rumor—magickal constructs tasked with supplying slaves and laboratory fodder to a cabal of High Masters living on a remnant of the moon. But there was no mistaking the mythic shape: mainly torso, as broad as two thumping large sailors bound together. Its head was little more than a spiny protuberance stippled in red spider-like eyes. Vivid rainbow light flared out from several plate-sized studs fitted to its chest and limbs. A splay-legged tracking beast was leashed to its gauntleted right hand.

“The drunkards and myth-mongers at The Seven Stars were right,” Broga said.

“Turn us about and we’ll treat them to a round.” The tracking beast’s eye-cluster snaked above its mottled shell. “It’s supposed to fly, yes? Where are its wings?”

“This would explain Dawit’s resistance.” Broga tugged on the hal-

yards, speeding us toward shore. The planes of his face were shiny with sweat. He gave me a sly look. “What happy fortune: a Queland’r *and* its chaser.”

The grin unnerved me. “You making this a trophy hunt? You don’t have anywhere to hang that head and its pelt wouldn’t do for a cloak—a fur cap, perhaps.”

“With that tracking beast, we can end our search directly.”

“And who’s going to bond with it? Legend has it only a High Master can—oh, oh, no. *Kaldrei bykur*.” I swallowed the other profanities on my tongue. “Can this get any worse?”

“Miseryguts. If you insist on asking that question, don’t be surprised at the answer.”

“And you plan to—what? Stare it to heel?”

“Get your sending shield and the last *sukúla*. Once we’ve broken its master, the tracking beast should regard us as its deserved owners. They’re said to be simple animals in matters of loyalty, to acknowledge natural orders of rank.”

“I’ve a mind to grab the rudder.”

“If the Queland’r can fly, how far do you think we’ll get?” Broga rocked his weight onto his heels. He could be stubborn in his need to revolt. Challenging the dreaded slave catcher was another great No. “Charge your shield.”

I tore the oilskins from the harness, shouldered it on and prepped it for battle. The dynamo at its core returned a low atmospheric hum. I swung the control arms aside to retrieve the scrying orb from the deck and caught my hairless face in its mirrored surface: the bald cap; the browless, silvered eyes; the flat nose and thin lips; the knobbed chin. Typical Druna features. I made a show of small sharp teeth. *Heech*. Best leave the defiant sneers to Broga.

As far as weapons went, apart from the sending shield and dormant *sukúla*, we had only a single-edged saber, a chipped dagger, a boat hook and, as a last resort, the grapnel anchor. The blacksmith hammer had gone missing. Hardly inspiring. Broga hefted the boat hook, feeling its weight, then set it aside. Its blunt brass end and rounded hook limited its usefulness.

We shimmied against the ebb current. The Queland’r gained in de-

tail. I could make out its mouth—a circular orifice like a flower petaled into blades. I could see the second shielded guard sprawled face-down in the wet sand, head blackened like a spent candlewick. His fellows stood shoulder to shoulder, shaking their weapons and shouting taunts and curses largely lost on the breeze.

Broga readied the sunstroke grenade in the sling. “Toss me the *sukúla*.”

“You planning to duplicate our attack on the shoreline guard?” I lobbed the scrying orb.

“If I can.” He plucked the ancient tek from the air and slipped it into a belt pouch. “Guess we’ll find out together.”

We were almost in range for a long-throw strike. Or more accurately, a cool suicide.

The grenade described a lazy circuit over Broga’s head. “Ranvir...” The rest of his words fell away under the brilliance of a grounded sun, now bloated, a white irradiate, now thin and gaseous. The Queland’r and its courser blurred out from the center of that blankness into immediate threats. Here was the menace itself, not the myth. The air around the boat flashed prismatic. The suddenness of the monster’s arrival emptied my lungs.

Up close, the guts of the Queland’r were revealed to be a hectic black pulp. The gelatinous damp tendriled out for me. I wriggled back, one hand on the saber.

The rabid-scary tracking beast surprised Broga, eye-stalks rippling. Broga faltered in his throw and surrendered the sling to the wind. The grenade plonked into the bay. He took up the boat hook leaning against the grabrail. The beast lowered its clamshell body and shivered several ribs through its stretched skin for use as spikes. Oily blood splashed onto the deck.

The sending shield stuttered in its ignition cycle. I jogged the thumb switch. A whip of Queland’r muck smashed the control arm; nevertheless, the mechanism quickened to a bluster. I unsheathed the saber and slashed at the tensile ooze. The jellied bits struck the deck with a slapping sound. Just hold out a few more moments, I told myself, a few more.

“Stand fast, the furious nullity,” the Queland’r declared. Its tinny

voice issued from a silver diadem or wreath around its protruding spine. The circular maw I took for its mouth gnashed and drooled out of sync. “A thousand arms between roving blood and emptiness.” The slave catcher continued to vent belligerent poetry as its torso squirmed with vehement life.

The tracking beast lunged at Broga, thrusting its extended ribs. Broga deflected the barbs with the boat hook but nearly lost his weapon in the same motion when the beast’s ribbon-flat tongue shot out and adhered to it. While engaged in a push-pull struggle over the hook, Broga noticed the Queland’r’s gestating salvo and kicked the boom round.

I ducked under the mainsail as it swung past and absorbed most of the slave catcher’s viscid onslaught. There was an earsplitting *cra-a-ack*. The interceding boom sheared off from the mast, along with the lower-half of the mainsail. The barrage of black goo loomed large. Unsure if the shield were at full power, I punched the sending stud on the control arm. Nothing. My heart was stilled between thought and breath. Then the device triggered a brief yet forceful blast that caught the surrounding debris and skewered the Queland’r with it.

The slave catcher hurtled through the grabrail but recovered before it hit the water, flaring into a particolored star. The Queland’r shone in all its terrible majesty once more. Though we Druna have no gods besides the earth itself, I could believe this creature the rightful denizen of orbiting rock and moon dust. Fragments of the boom jutting from its chest vanished in the dazzle. The light stormed against my arms and face. I wanted to bellow above the clanging in my head, ‘I wasn’t born for this!’

I shaded my eyes with a bent arm while trying to reignite the shield. The energy level of the harness wavered uncertainly. The Queland’r returned to the deck a spearpoint blur. Its radiance seeped away and it became again a shadow of aliveness. I thumbed the sending stud in a panic. The void in the creature’s guts quirked up to pull me in. I dodged to one side. Restraining webs enfolded my forearms, pinioning me to empty space. “To die, frogspawn, the resolution is heir to” came the metallic voice.

With a tribal cry, Broga leapt to my aid, severing the ropy bonds with the boat hook. “Burn this thing the whole way through,” he said,



interposing himself between me and the Queland'r. His anger was evident in his tense combat crouch. But anger alone imbues no saving powers. Against the Queland'r, he might have been mere straw and sigh. The creature lashed him up in an instant. "Behold, how we eat slaves like air," it said. The boat hook clattered to the deck.

I shrugged the harness from my back and stomped on the insulating cover. The metal plate rolled aside. Broga dug his heels in. If the boat were overturned or destroyed, scattering us into the sea, I was sure we would somehow catch each other. The sending shield revved to a dangerous level. I goosed an antenna and heaved the mechanism. The Queland'r made to swat it down but the shield activated mid-arc, propelling it like cannon shot into the creature's bowels as if into a tar pit. The backdraft tore us free. We banged against the railing opposite, ribboned in stickiness. A halyard cleat thumped me on the back of the head. Pain exploded behind my eyes.

The Queland'r churned and agonized around an ugly red radiance. Its black vitals surged, receded, surged again, uncontrolled. "Tuh-t-tuh-tuh," the creature stammered. Light spilled out from the overheated mechanism in convulsive bursts. "Tuh-t-tuh-t-t-t-t..." The Queland'r swallowed itself in a vacillant glow and streaked away, incinerated or disappeared, I couldn't say. The air frothed prismatic in its wake.

I lay there, dumped alive, breathless. Wafting, soot-like specks dirtied my vision. *Vafna*, the state we live in is full of cracks.

Broga leaned over and extended a hand. "Up, brave *huyi*. Those mercenaries are running for their boats." He helped me to my feet then set about furling the sails. "Good thing we're gaff-rigged. More sail to spare, eh?" He was like this after a narrowly avoided disaster—full of annoying good feeling.

"What about weapons?"

"Same meager choices less the grenade, my sling, the *sukúla*."

"How did you lose the scrying orb?"

"In the water—after I hurled it at the tracking beast. *Aysh*, I swear I'll find you another."

Straightening to my full height, I spied the animal curled in the bow, unmoving. "Is it...?"

Broga allowed himself a victory smile. "Out cold." He clapped me

on the shoulder. “Your new dreamtime companion. I’ll leave you to come up with a suitable name.”

The evening let down its darkness. “I should’ve been a dustman.”

Chapter Two

A clash of wasteland bandits

The desert put a painful and exhausting fever on me. I sweated under my hooded cloak, feeling the sting of dry wind and grit. A flat expanse of sand, broken at intervals by jutting crusts of slate and dun-colored plateau, stretched to the horizon. The place was dead and changeless. There was no soil I could detect. Nary a scrub bush dotted our path. It looked as if the landscape had been fired in cataclysm and salted over.

My camel had fallen days ago in exhaustion, leaving me to set the pace on foot. Each step meant sinking a heel into the powdery sand then straining for the next. This monotony, combined with the starkness of the land and unforgiving sun, had induced a strange temporal lull. Time seemed to expand to fill the cloudless sky. The nearly two weeks we'd spent traveling overland seemed both ephemeral and eternal. I imagined myself panting after the future, always one step short. The desert was everything—the desert and the sun and the next step and the next.

The tracking beast, now called Grimmur, urged me on from the end of its leash. We'd established a tentative dreamtime rapport. Flashes of thought passed between us in the quiet of the moon-streaked night. At first, the images he conjured up had been distorted, impressionistic, almost untranslatable. I discovered they took on greater clarity when I supplemented my mental promptings with something of Ovandu's—a woven leather bracelet, or better, her sacred ancestral shoulder cloth. These partial vistas had goaded us for more than a hundred leagues. Only two nights past, Grimmur had proffered the most explicit vision yet—a cliffside city, its spires plumed with steam.

I brought a hand to my brow to shade my eyes. A large, hammerhead-shaped ridge emerged from the heat haze. "You see it, too,

I hope—that plateau.” I could scarcely muster enough spit to get the words out.

“An anvil fit for the gods,” Broga said. “Is that our destination?” His short, thickset body gave him the advantage in riding our surviving mount. He leaned forward from between the humps, at ease with the camel’s swaying gait, whereas I, much taller and uncomfortable in the saddle, had felt constantly on the brink of falling.

“Hard to say. I saw a city on the edge of abyssal darkness. There was more shadow than seems possible under this sun, but...Grimmur’s pulling us in that direction.”

Broga tapped the goatskin bag strapped around his high-collared robe or *tob*. “At any event, it’s doubtful we’ve the water to reach it.”

The badland mocked us with its greatness and desolation. “Now might be a time to call on your tribal god. The sky appears more solid than this sand. Perhaps Ombwike governs here as well.”

“Or here instead of Tel Azaon, exiled with the rest of us Matabwe.”

“It would be a fitting punishment—the empty glare and harsh, dusty heat, the prevailing silence. The silence might be the worst of these...” To my ears, the desert stillness was a hollow and stultifying roar. Nature in its fullness meant the lively whistle and flutter of Ixzahl. The high *tsee-tsee* of yellow *skógard* in flight. Noisy woodcreep chatter. Monarch sharps. Insect hum. Pocket-sized *skipti* flitting from branch to branch. “This air leaches the vitality of things. Listen how my words drift up and out as they pass through my lips. Only snatches of prayer, if any, are likely to reach the heavens. Hardly enough to sustain the appetites of a god in a sky so vast.”

“Appetite... The word is a torment amid this ruin. That distant rise shimmers between rock and roast beef.”

I put a hand over the hot churn of my insides. “The cornucopia of Ixzahl seems a lifetime past: vines of sweet *kortafll*, bush and pole beans, succulent paste tomatoes, *latna* melon, iced summer squash...” Only a surge of wind-blown sand prevented me from saying more. How many times had I risen early on a wet, fogged morn to join my mother in the hanging garden? Even as a nudgeling I’d loved the variegated plant shapes, the beautifying tints, the smell of overturned earth, the timelessness of the work and its harvests, one generation after another,

distinct and dependent at once. There was an abiding comfort in that cycle I missed too late.

“Are you certain the beast is leading us in the direction of a settlement?”

“Best call it by its name. It’s a proud and chary creature, quick to perceive slights.” I pulled a well-used map from an inside pocket and unfolded it. My hands had gone brittle in the heat. “I suspect we’re in this blank space here.” Though Broga couldn’t possibly follow from his perch, I pointed to the large expanse noted as the Belrak Sands. The copper etched map showed the southwestern border between Kanavar and a scattering of unaffiliated villages. In the port mecca of Khurram Adalu where we’d traded our stolen boat for camels and desert gear, a nosy barkeep had warned us away from this territory. What was his phrase for it? “The wild edge of paradise.” It was known as the province of cutthroats and rogue powerlords. Sordid brutality was both heritage and habit. “Who knows the distance? But that plateau seems the lone feature. That would put us on the fringe of Al-Rahem.”

“This sumpter animal is tiring fast,” Broga said. “I suggest we—*ghaarnam*.” He tugged on his mount’s bridle, pulling it up short.

“What is it?”

Broga nodded toward a trail of caked dung.

“Horse? Camel?” I glanced at the map. One of its previous owners had inked in several camel trade routes. None passed anywhere near our estimated location.

“Looks to me like goat. The trail leads around that patch of slate. Dare we hope for a well or oasis—some means to replenish our goat-skins? Let’s on...” Broga raised the boat hook, which he’d adopted as a kind of talisman since our defeat of the Queland’r, and gestured us forward.

Grimmur strained against the change in direction, nearly gagging itself until I delivered a short mental shock. I’d no telepathic powers apart from fleeting dreamtime episodes. But the tracking beast was highly attuned to my state of mind. Sustained disobedience was likely a psychic misery. When I was younger, overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Sentinel Tree, I’d hoped to commune with nature in such a way, to know the forest through its inner lights. I considered the ancient

sycamore figs of home my blood relations as much as any clan member. My dreamtime talents, however, proved ever-weaker than my hopes, and I resigned myself to the life of a wandering spirit. We Druna call them *veröldan*—wilderings. I mastered the expected poverty straight off. The spirit part, as you know, assumed a surprising literality... *Heech*. How come it's only in hindsight everything fits into everything else?

With a burst of focused anger, I turned the beast in its harness. Its eye-stalks motioned assent. In Khurram Adalu, I'd exchanged its original choke chain for a leather halter. The straps encircled its swagbellied middle. Uncertain in the sand on its three-toed paws, the beast loped awkwardly after me. I felt badly for lacking a reward. Grimmur must've been famished. It had developed a taste for hopping mice. I'd fed it the last of my purchased supply three days earlier.

We followed the intermittent trail to its end near the slated turf. I was about to suggest backtracking when Broga said, "There's a flash of basalt there..." He pointed into the sun glare. We Druna, accustomed to the shaded rainforest, are sensitive to direct sunlight. I narrowed my eyes. The brilliance resolved into the faint outlines of a wall or frieze. "Could be a well."

"Leastwise we can wait out the sun in its meager shade." The freshness of dawn had long since passed and the midday heat was nigh unbearable. It was almost enough to put me off my evening pipe. Almost.

Grimmur steadied itself on the strip of hard shelled surface and followed at my side, no longer tight on the leash. The edifice began to take shape: a white dome over a small windowless block surrounded by a waist-high wall.

"I can't imagine there's much demand for slaves in this wasteland," Broga said. "Just more parched mouths..."

"That should make her easier to find." I was nauseous with exhaustion and anxious to avoid another prolonged discussion of Ovandu and our chances of finding her. From his dreamed utopias, from talk of Druna magick, from his own or another's distress, whatever the circumstance, Broga returned to Ovandu again and again. I gestured toward the dome. "Looks to be a shrine."

"And a chance burial yard." Sandworn bone fragments littered the

area around the mortared wall. Grimmur snuffled up a leg bone of some sort and, in his eagerness, snapped it in two.

Broga dismounted and tied his camel to a hitching post atop the wall. The creature screeched and bared its teeth in annoyance. “Sacrifices, perhaps... *Aysh*.” Broga removed a pouch of salt crystals from his belt and shook some out into his palm. The camel scooped them up in its leathery mouth.

“These are no animal bones...” To my dismay, the skeletal remains appeared to be *minnlagur* or ‘of people.’ I spied part of a jawbone, several ribs, a forearm.

“To the god of fatalism, we bless this ground...” Broga mock-bowed toward the unadorned dome. Its shadow was thin and insubstantial at this time of day. He grimaced. “I might’ve breathed in the dust of her without knowing it.”

“I don’t think Grimmur’s powers work that way.” The most recent visions conveyed by the tracking beast had been visceral in their intensity. I’d inhaled the dry air of our cliffside destination, closed my eyes against the bladed sunlight. “No, she’s alive. We’re assured of that much.”

“It’s doubtful she would’ve done this for me.” Broga turned toward the dead-blue sky, squinting as if embarrassed. “You knew her—how rough and crass she could be—cruel even. She made herself out to be superior and invulnerable.” This infernal land absorbed feeling as much as sound, making any life insignificant.

“*Vafna*, she was young, keen-witted, impatient with fools. Not uncommon family traits...”

Broga met my eyes. “I saw her break down once—” The rush of words caught in his throat. He tapped his chest and started over, slower this time. “She was huddled on the sleeping cushions against our mother, eyes glassy, breathing shallow, fragile and frightened. I didn’t know—don’t know—the why of it. A whiff of black lotus, a poisonous dart from another world—some magical affliction, I’d guess...” He shrugged, lost for a moment in remembrance. “But no matter how aloof she became after, that moment was enough. I knew—I knew the hurt had shaped her. Like a whistling thorn grown crooked against the wind.”

I clasped his forearm in the Druna fashion. We shared the core tribal value of putting family and clan first, regardless of any muddling emotions. The world was a hostile place for Druna and Matabwe alike. Over the last four-five years, the pair of us had been bullied, worsted, run off, enslaved, cursed in magickal tongues... Might still be cursed come to think of it. “We’re close, I’m certain.”

“If not for our mother—”

The tracking beast pitched itself against my hold, arrowing in on the shrine’s niche—a shallow inset under the dome. Several votive offerings had been left there: a tin curse tablet, an empty wine bottle, a few wax figurines in the likeness of bats.

“What now with this beast?” Broga asked.

There was something skittering around the niche. It paused; started again. A fringed tail broke the shadows and vanished. “Looks like easy meat.”

“We’re the masters here. We should have dibs.”

I made as if to hand him the leash, which was braided through an elbow-length glove designed for hunting dogs. “I’ll let you explain that.” Grimmur strained against its tether, tongue lashing in anticipation.

Reconsidering his position, Broga said, “Never mind.”

I yanked the release mechanism on the glove and the tracking beast smashed into the niche, crushing the wax figurines underfoot. There followed a brief, frantic scuffle. Grimmur rocked back and forth, eye-stalks nearly tangling, ribbon-like tongue swirling. Then the beast backpedaled from the shrine, kicking up sand, victorious, a horned lizard in its adhesive grip. The trussed-up lizard ceased its resistance under Grimmur’s mesmerizing power. I called it the ‘pure gaze.’

I’d first noticed this phenomenon in the city where Grimmur had driven off back-alley curs with a wave of its eye-stalks and hypnotized pigeons into fatal sleeps. However limited in intelligence, the beast seemed aware of multiple, overlapping planes of existence. The lizard went limp and was summarily popped into Grimmur’s open maw. I’d never dared peer inside that clam-like cavity to apprehend its working orifice. The wet champing sounds that issued from it stayed any curiosity.

“Hope the honored deity here isn’t the god of vengeance,” I said, inspecting a mashed figurine.

“Aren’t they all?”

My low-throated laugh was cut short at the sight of an approaching dust cloud—travelers in a hurry. They surged forward on their camels, the animals galloping on spindly legs, necks bobbing.

I put my hand on the scabbarded saber. “What do you think?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the steady one?”

“For that I need to keep my head.”

“Won’t the beast—Grimmur,” he corrected, “protect us?”

“I should imagine so.” I retrieved the leash-glove and shook the sand out of it. “But then again, if we’re overpowered, he’s prone to switch allegiances.” I secured the glove with a buckle near the elbow.

“If it comes to it then we’ll simply have to surprise them first.” His brow was flat and determined.

The hard-riding band slowed and dispersed as they neared the shrine. There were five of them, all bearded males outfitted in cowed turbans and traditional desert garb. They made no attempt to hide their weapons. The foremost rider greeted us from his panting mount. “*Salam va ashnai*.”

Broga gave the customary reply, “*Khosh amadid*.”

The rider snorted at Broga’s foreign accent and dismounted. He carried the ample fat in his belly and thighs like a wrestler and his face had a sallow yellow tinge. He gave us a sharp sizing-up glance. His lusterless dark eyes lost focus a bit when he came to Grimmur, but conscious of his fellows, he quickly recovered his composure. “This is a sainted resting place. Penitents come from remote lands in hopes of receiving *sahkesh*, the power of grace. It is not for unbelievers or their foul beasts to debase it.”

Broga tried to make light of the matter. “If the saint enshrined here is so great, where’s the sacramental wine?” But his poor joke only exacerbated the tension. Sometimes in your youth, out of ignorance or self-importance, you forget the full reality of others and their convictions.

“This saint, Syed ad-Din,” the rider said in an escalating pitch, “he blinded himself out of despair for the world and, favored by the gods for his holiness, lived an age under the care of animal protectors.” The

rider nodded to his fellows and each produced a short spear or curved sword. “I am Majid Zamani, a devoted servant of Syed ad-Din and guardian of these lands.” He withdrew an ancient pistol from his robe. I recognized the model. It sported two stacked barrels encased in a single block of steel. Both barrels could be fired at once in a devastating salvo. Grimmur bristled at the weapon, or more accurately, the menace behind it.

Majid’s smug grin exposed a gold-spotted tooth. “So I would humble yourself, *abid*.”

Broga clenched at the slur on his blackness. “I am no man’s slave.”

“What do I care what an infidel believes?”

“Our blades are sharp enough.” It was no youthful affectation: Broga always thought he could juke and slice his way out of trouble.

“Fah! Against us blooded cutthroats, they might as well be palm fronds...” Majid waved the pistol at me. Its polished metal glinted in the sun. “You there—show your face.”

I lifted my hood, my leash arm tensed against the pressure exerted by Grimmur. My desert cloak was dappled in sweat.

“I thought as much—the ivory skin and gangly frame...Druna, yes?”

A brigand to my right asked, “Druna? Like Thaumazon?”

“We know your kind only from out of history—Sultan Abd el-Krim Essafi, the Murnodra...It is a common tale around our dung-fires.” Majid’s mouth slackened and he licked his fat lips. “What brings you to these arid wastes?”

“We’re sellswords after a bounty,” Broga declared

Majid chuckled to himself. “With only one blade between you?”

Broga bunched his back muscles in irritation. “We relieve the dead of their weapons as the color goes out of them.”

“Great boast, small roast.” Majid cut his eyes at me. “But you—are you some great wizard?”

“Great...no.” I tried to maintain a nonplussed expression while signaling Grimmur from the back of my mind. *The camels*, I repeated in fillips of heated emotion, *use your pure gaze to rouse the camels...*

“Take the mount and their supplies,” Majid ordered, motioning with a big meaty hand for his men to dismount. “They look to be worth a few gold pieces.”

“What about their ghastly husk of a pet?” one of the thieves asked.

Grimmur could no longer contain itself. The beast made a show of convulsing its ribs through its skin, oozing dark, viscous blood. Perhaps I’d overdone my secret commands...

“Fit for the *sirk*, eh?” Majid’s jesting tone was unconvincing.

Broga adjusted his stance, digging a toehold in the sand. That was as much of a warning as I could expect. I redoubled my mental pleas to Grimmur. “My people have a saying,” Broga broke in, “Only a beast knows where to bite another beast.”

A displaced hum of awareness tunneled into my hindbrain. Then Grimmur’s eye-stalks shook with fury and the camels rebelled as a body, shoving, kicking, spitting, biting. They jousting with their riders as if in a competitive heat. The bandits squawked and dodged around, reluctant to bring their mounts to harm. One camel sunk its peg-like teeth into the neck of its master and snatched him off the ground. Curling in fright, the brigand flailed and dropped his *shamshir*. The jumping pulse spewed out of him. His lifeblood splattered his maddened camel, his dusty *tob*, the sand. The missing flesh stayed missing. He collapsed like a gibbeted corpse.

Unable to contain Grimmur’s agitations any longer, I loosed it on the thieves. The beast exploded over the wall and overtook a fleeing brigand like a rock hurtling down a mountain. Majid spun to follow the beast’s arc, eyes rounded in fright, forgetting his own animal. The dromedary butted him into the unyielding basalt, relieving him of the pistol. Broga caught the weapon in air and vaulted over the barrier. He jerked Majid upright and, wrenching one of the bandit’s arms behind his back, pinched him against the wall. Broga set his feet, immovable.

Majid assumed a distant, heavy-headed look as he watched his camels turn and scamper into the blanched reaches. “Ach! It will take a mortal hour to gather them again.”

Broga pressed the barrel of the gun to the back of his skewed turban. “Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Mere bluster,” the bandit said, regaining some of his former non-chalance. “No bullets.”

Broga cracked his skull with the pistol grip. Majid cried out more

from shock than pain. “Believe me,” Broga said, “I can still finish you with it.”

A pair of thieves brandished their weapons as if to resume their threats. I unsheathed the saber and flourished it with theatrical confidence. I’d rarely faced an opponent blade to blade in the fighting pits. But I knew how to strike the wind in audacious fashion. That and Grimmur, *vafna*, mostly Grimmur, compelled the bandits to reconsider. The beast’s quarry was kinked up in the sand, cocooned in eye-stalks and subject to the probing whip of its tongue.

Majid shrieked in rue or horror: “Stop, curse you, *lahkesh!* Recall your pet!”

“Sounds like your real voice for the first time,” Broga remarked.

With a bolt of thought, I ended the beast’s exotic torture. Grimmur unsnarled its eye-stalks and hurried to my side, a slavering mess, keen as an obedient pup for its master’s praise. I would’ve petted it in appreciation if it had thought to retract its rib-spikes. Then the lumpen mass it had left behind surprised us all by rising, albeit groggily, a man and intact.

Majid recoiled at Grimmur’s cheerful abandon, sucking back an errant thread of spittle. “Enough, please! I say not to not to not—” He lowered his head, losing the fight for good.

Broga turned the brigand loose. “And for what, in recompense?”

“Our packs, the camels—” Majid dismissed his losses with a wave then pursed his lips, despondent. His camels were faint dottings in the desert shimmer.

“What’s the Kanavarim proverb? Camels don’t die on the faithful?” Broga pointed to the goatskin bag dangling from Majid’s belt. “How about enough water to see us through to Al-Rahem? And, of course, the pistol.” He gave the gun an idle twirl.

“Al-Rahem? Ah, you mean Al-Mahad. It used to be Al-Rahem—years, a decade ago. The amirs...” Majid made a noise in his throat. “They rename things on a whim as if they were gods in some newly-birthed land. They lack the humility that comes from understanding history.” Eyes downcast, the bandit proffered his water. “Consider that bit of choice wisdom my real gift.”

“Out of respect for your crowning good sense then I’ll trade my

mercy cheaply.” Broga weighed the goatskin in his hand and, satisfied, dismissed the man with a wave. “But know this: if our paths should cross again, I may well exact a dearer price.”

In the bandit’s haggard face was his whole dire knowledge of the world.

Chapter Three

The chasm city welcomes us with kidnapping & death

The light was thin and banded across the plateau when we started on the sandstone path around its base. I was near done with fatigue and Grimmur was no better. Only Broga remained steady, buoyed by the prospect of closing on his goal. He walked to spare his stalwart camel, using the boat hook as an aid. In the absence of a fight, he turned inward, wistful. He not only worried over Ovandu and, more privately, Leire, a pit fighting partner and hoped-for love, but struggled with the need to be himself, a Matabwe cut off from the assurances of family and clan. He was compelled to learn how to be another.

Me, I'd brought my father along in the form of a fault-finding conscience. It was as if he'd settled into my skin. He was the doubt in my cryptic silver eyes. He was the awkwardness in my gait. He was the cause of my hunched shoulders and diffidence. He'd always been careful to point out my deficiencies in calm, studied tones, particularly my lack of dreamtime talent. When I ventured something new, he was certain to ridicule me into failing before I'd begun. I'd learned to cope with it. I'd learned not to wish or want too much. You could say I aspired to a quality of lightness.

A glim of setting sun hung over us. It found a new, shadowed purchase on the land. The light against the plateau recalled the manifold rings at the heart of a tree. Rings within rings—wide in the growing seasons, pinched in drought, the occasional fire-scar. I've come to suspect an invisible line intersects those rings, prescribing their fatal limit. The same might even be true of men. If so, then my invisible line must have been near its ragged end.

The curving path narrowed as we approached the great steep-walled canyon on the plateau's far side. I was anxious for a glimpse of the cliffside city Majid had described. The path teased us with bits and

pieces—a wedge of dome, a staircase fragment. By the time we got our first broad view of Al-Mahad, it had taken on the same soft shadows as the sky. The distant apartments, terraces and tiled minarets carved from the rock appeared to be floating amid the early stars, perhaps rising into some altogether separate dimension.

We passed under a natural arch and continued parallel to the canyon until we reached the city's entrance. It was a compact fortification abutting the cliff edge. The crenellated walls and rounded corner towers were limned against the dying sun. The municipal guards atop the battlements regarded us with unearned suspicion. One nocked an arrow in his bat-headed crossbow, leaned over the barbican and took aim.

“Ho, the gates!” Broga called in the common tongue or Konae.

The crossbow wielder said, “Who calls for the guard-captain? Al-Mahad has rogues and sneak thieves enough.”

“A pair of simple Durkesh missionaries. We've traveled hard over the Berlak Sands for many a day and seek shelter from the open desert.”

“Yet for all the desert wind you still have the awful stink of Matabwe on you.”

The guard-captain must've guessed Broga's origin from his tribal accent. Broga trilled his final r's and gave his y's a tightly-articulated *yi* sound.

“*Aysh*, is this how you welcome every tired traveler at your gates?” Broga eyed the guard-captain as a savage stray might regard an unfriendly pack. “Perhaps Kanavar's famed hospitality is another relic of its celebrated past.”

“Not every traveler,” the guard-captain said. “Only the sons of the world's foremost cowards. You should not have ventured from your wattle-hut.”

Broga was close to bursting with pent-up anger. His knuckles knotted around the boat hook. Tel Azaon had been the first among city-states while it stood. Its sun-spearing towers would've put the most exalted Kanavarim palace to shame. “I'll have you know my roof was thatched with the bones of my enemies.”

The sentry gaped at this indirect challenge. Outside Durkesh, the

Matabwe were thought to be a meek and defeated people. Broga made a show of flouting this prejudice at every turn.

“Watch your tongue, *abid*, or I’ll have it for a bootstrap.” The guard-captain bent to his weapon.

Fearing the worst, I shook off my Druna inhibitions and threw my cowl back. “In that instance, you might as well turn out your garrison so I can dispatch them as a body.” I fought to steady my breathing. In the fighting pits of Skulon Gøra, I’d been known for cunning, not boldness; besides, I’d sported a sending shield on my back.

“And who, pray tell, are you?”

Our encounter with Majid and his brigands inspired what turned out to be a fatal pretense. “Thaumazon of Ixzahl, the Druna savior of Kanavar and sometime vizier to the late Sultan Abd el-Krim Essafi.” I indicated Grimmur on the end of its leash. The beast was absently pawing the sand. “Behold the transmuted form of the last man to incur my wrath. I have a spare harness somewhere in my pack.” My words vibrated from nervousness. I couldn’t recall exactly where the real Thaumazon was reputed to be. Last I heard, he was mobilizing Druna sages on the isle of Ara Thysus for some obscure purpose. I counted on the guard-captain to be more superstitious than worldly.

He tipped his silver helm back from his forehead, deliberating. I noted the alarm gong on the battlement. The sun’s dwindling rays rimmed it in gold. I was about to say more when the guard-captain lowered his weapon and gave a curt bow. “Forgive me, *omadviraam keh*. The hood—I didn’t recognize you... And your body-slave, well, he struck me as impertinent.”

“He’s made a habit of...impatience, shall we say? It’s practically a sickness with him. Be assured, however, he speaks with my voice.”

“Understood,” the guard-captain said, fingering his crossbow. “Still, duty compels me to ask after your business in our proud city.”

Only something of great import could plausibly recall Thaumazon across half the world to this hell-country, I thought. My cheeks grew dark with focus. What lie, what lie...I feared every passing falsehood was written explicitly on my face. “I’m here at the invitation of your Sultans General to...*vafna*, to put proof to certain claims of high sorcery. In matters of magick there’s a thin line between excellence and

arrogance.” I pointed out a faint cirrus of broken moon. “Each man can’t be his own law. We must needs be vigilant against those who would flout the world-mind.” I blanked on any further platitudes from Druna earthlore. “Of course, I can’t disclose the exact nature of my investigation... To reveal it might well compromise my purpose.” I registered Broga’s doubtful look out of the corner of my eye and resisted the impulse to return it. As it was, my chin crumpled at the absurdity of my ruse.

“On your honor then, Maghvan... You understand we have to be vigilant against all manner of knavery.” The guard-captain gestured to an unseen subordinate. The chains attached to the outer portcullis jangled taut. “Please, away with your wizard-kit and proceed to the gate. I assume you have a token or authenticated letter? I’ll need to verify it before escorting you to the plaza.”

Leading the sumpter camel, Broga sidled close and whispered, “So much for keeping a low profile.”

“Are body-slaves even allowed opinions?”

He scoffed at my mocking smile. “Don’t be too hasty to discount it. I might be the only one to adjudge your magick worthy of the name.”

I conceded his point with abrupt silence. Of course, I’d known my ploy was fraught and desperate. With the exception of select mechanisms like *sukúla* and sending shields, my magickal talents were limited to simple mesmerism and glamor. Everything would come undone the moment the local satrap asked me to perform magick on the level of a Thaumazon. What was the Kanavarim punishment for this sort of subterfuge? Ritual stoning? Heated coins pressed to the eyes? A cliff-side hanging?

I ducked under the rising portcullis and crossed the passageway to the secondary gate at a brisk pace, marking the murder holes and arrow-loops in the gatehouse. Sweat chilled the small of my back. The inner portcullis couldn’t be winched up quickly enough. Broga’s lowered gaze wasn’t mere play-acting; rather, he was enjoying my discomfort too much to risk eye contact.

Desert sand crunched between my gritted teeth. I concentrated on applying a glamor to the tattered map.

The guard-captain met us a few steps into the courtyard, straight

as a garden sapling, an iron-studded club in hand. A peaked, bowl-shaped helmet shadowed his eyes. He was otherwise outfitted in a tunic and skirt of light mail, loose trousers and boots of woven bull-leather. His face was heavy and broken-nosed. A drooping, braided mustache gave him a permanently dour look. Grimmur's sudden attentions warranted only a wary tilt of the head. "Come to pay tribute to your namesake, eh?"

Smiling at this curious comment, I renewed my hold on the tracking beast and proffered the glamored map. "The seal—apparently, it's the joint magistrate's new sign." The country's three rival sultans used a rotating magistrate to administer projects deserving of their unanimous support. My illusory wax seal depicted a winged, three-headed lion. A plausible design, I thought. The rest of the document was an ornate, calligraphic blur.

A pair of guards emerged from the gatehouse stairwell to flank their captain. They glared at Broga and put their hands to the hilts of their curved swords, hard men in a hardpan desert.

Broga ignored them, flexing his grip on the boat hook. He carried a dirk under his robe. Several weapons confiscated from Majid and his bandits were among the saddlebags. What would he do if the guard-captain turned us out? Protest? Strike without preamble? Skulk into the night to figure another way into the gorge? The prospect of violence set the back of my throat to aching.

I recalled with shame how in the fighting pits I'd come to look on others as paltry husks, now animated, now stilled. There was no order to the memories of those days. Everything came at once and in feelings rather than moments: the cruelty and charged silences, the dull, unbroken nights, the fear, oh the fear, the defiant urge to stay alert and alive. I just wanted to reach a point where I was free from the whole grotesque shadow of it.

But first, we had to get through this—this obstacle, this mission. Then home, yes, back to Ixzahl, to family and the rainforests of my youth.

The guard-captain squinted at the parchment, biting his lower lip. Grimmur swayed from side to side, skittish. I thumbed the dagger beneath my cloak. Then, with a dismissive scowl, the guard-captain

waved the letter away. “Fah! These royal precepts... Who can make sense of them?”

I issued a strident wheeze, unaware until then I'd been holding my breath.

“No matter,” the guard-captain continued. “The seal seems authentic enough.” He signaled us to follow him.

The portcullis crashed down behind us. I hastily returned the map to its belt pouch as we trailed the guard-captain into the dirt courtyard studded with a series of obelisk-like archer's hides.

“You're the first Druna I've met,” he said. “I saw another once when a child—at U'llár Gardens Bazaar. He shocked me—the height, eyes without whites, the skin pale as corpse-flesh. Come to think of it, that might have been you also.”

“Not likely.” In the main, my people have ever stayed in their refuges—a predilection reinforced by the Rauðan Plague War. Wandering spirits like me are a rarity. Given my misadventures, it's easy to understand why.

The cuneiform granite keep and flanking walls screened the chasm city from view. Lantern light from the keep's oriel windows contrasted starkly with the fast-darkening sky. Columned inscriptions of ancient origin warded the three-story structure. I recognized a few shapes among them—bats and scarabs and possibly, spirits. The latter, resembling a double-sided root with hands, adorned the lintel over what I took to be the main entrance.

Before sliding the weathered metal door aside, however, the guard-captain described it as a 'hoist.' “Go on, step inside,” he said, ushering us into the dark steel box. “Your animals also.”

Broga and I shared a questioning look before assenting. Boots and hooves set the hoist to echoing. Grimmur shied toward the threshold. I yanked on its leash and administered a mental reprimand. The tracking beast relaxed somewhat, its several eyes twitching on the end of their stalks.

“Spooked, eh?” The guard-captain and one of his subordinates crowded into the box.

Were it not for the dignified mask I'd adopted, I would've made a joke about our camel's pungent odor. The stench had been dire enough

in the open desert; it was insufferable in the enclosed space. I breathed through slightly parted lips.

The guard-captain palmed a crystalline growth on the wall to activate its wan bioluminescence. “Like a tomb it is.” He nodded to his man, who secured the exterior metal door and the inner mesh gate then proceeded to turn a fitted crank.

The room tremored, dropped of a sudden, slowed. My head went a bit fuzzy. The subordinate apologized to me with his eyes. Broga, pressed to the saddle-gear (doubtless with a hand on a ready weapon), was considered incidental.

“No need for concern, Maghvan.” The guard-captain put a hand on my elbow as we began a measured descent. “The hoist may be a relic but it’s perfectly safe.”

“Of course.”

“This investigation...” A silvered canine snagged his lip. “I understand you need to keep the details to yourself. I assume, however, your focus is on Dabīr.”

“On what?”

“Oh, the split-tongue scribe. That’s what we call him. You likely have his given name, Atash Heydan.” The guard-captain made a reflexive warding gesture. “Or his witch of a mother. She’s another one. Who knows what secret mummeries she performs? Though she hasn’t been seen for years. Wouldn’t be surprised if she’s long dead by his hand... That would pose a danger to all of Laegrevel, right? I could see the Sultans General agreeing on that, yes.” The tapered ends of his mustache quivered at his vigorous nodding.

The hoist came to a reverberating stop.

I inclined my head a little. “Rune-magick then? Divination or something else?” Of the three chief varieties of magick—symbol, dream and blood—symbol magick was the least powerful. I gave a sigh of relief. If this Dabīr were the most notorious of Al-Mahad’s adepts, I thought, then I’d likely survive this play-acting. In my estimation, even my rudimentary dream magick topped the most potent symbol-craft. *Heech*. What naiveté...

The guard-captain was about to answer when his subordinate



opened the door on a pitched brawl. The ring and cutting rasp of blades redounded across the flagstones.

Four lightly armed men faced off against seven armored foes. With one exception, the former were clad in earth-colored robes and leaf-shaped shoulder guards. Their foemen wore blue-gray hauberks of fine mail that extended to their knees. Rings of bright silver across their chests formed heraldic claws. Waving their weapons, the outnumbered defenders were backing toward the bridge adjoining the cliff-hugging thoroughfare. Crystalline street lamps sheened them in ethereal light.

“*Zahreh mar!*” the guard-captain exclaimed. “The door!”

The junior sentry sealed us in straightaway, going so far as to extend the folding inner gate.

The guard-captain brushed his chest in a gesture of disregard. “These incidents—this—it’s an affair between the amirs and so none of ours.”

I must’ve looked confused because the guard-captain went on: “Perhaps the Sultans General in their faraway capitals don’t know: For the last ten-twelve years—since the death of the previous sultan—Al-Mahad, whatever its official name, has been a city divided between the Houses Thangol and Mu’mir.”

“What about the lord mayor?”

“Values his life as much as I.”

Broga broke his prolonged silence: “Leaving the city lawless?”

The guard-captain gritted his teeth at the charge but out of respect for my station maintained an even tone. “*Vay*, there’s the spasbet. I believe you’d say—what?—head constable? She has some loyalists herself. They keep the peace, such as it is...” He gave an exaggerated shrug. “And the amirs, they’re not without honor. They’ve codes against harming respectable persons.” Turning his back to Broga, he directed his squint-eyed gaze at me. “As such, you’ve no reason to worry—unless you intervene.”

“Our commission is limited to—”

A tremendous metallic boom from the avenue shook the hoist on the end of its ropes. The guard-captain fell into a crouch. I palmed the ceiling to brace myself in the event the hoist failed altogether and plummeted who knows how far. Broga pushed up against the gnashing

camel. Heedless of the disturbance, Grimmur pressed itself to the door, squeezing the subordinate into a corner. Its eyes snaked around and through the mesh in search of an exit.

A wave of psychic dissonance washed over me. “There’s something outside—something connected to her,” I said to Broga as the hoist settled. “One of those men, perhaps.”

Shrieks of fright mingled with an eerie mechanical skronking.

Broga exchanged the boat hook for a sword strapped to the camel. The curved blade rasped out of its scabbard. “Let us out.”

“Maghvan...” The guard-captain appealed to me with watery gray eyes.

“You heard him,” I said, whisking my saber out of its sheath.

The subordinate angled himself between the tracking beast and the gate, brushing aside the interposing eye-stalks.

“This is like Mesotho all over again,” Broga said, eyes fixed on the door.

“Wait, where I took that poniard in the ribs?”

“Here’s your chance to make up for it.”

As soon as the outer door clanged open Grimmur scabbled out. I let go the leash to keep from stumbling after the maddened creature. Broga shot ahead of me, curved sword in one hand, dirk in the other, face aglow with hazard.

I slowed to a halt a few steps past the threshold. The melee glimpsed moments before had taken a shocking turn. A liquid silver giant now led the aggressors. It was half again as tall as me and easily five times as wide. Manifold spikes adorned its roughly triangular head. Fiery energies wisped from protruding eye-studs. The gleaming surface of its armor mirrored and distorted its surroundings in shifting, segmented snatches—the back of a bulbous head here, a shoulder guard there, a fragmented cudgel.

Initially, I thought the monster a plate armored golem or *hanbruda*, but then its right arm melted and reformed into an outsized bludgeon. The fingers deliquesced into a flanged mace. Joints pulsing with infernal heat, the behemoth smashed the foremost defender to the pave and advanced on the remaining three. Each weighty step was accompanied by a quaking din. *Kra-onk*. The sound rumbled in my chest. Some kind

of automaton. Huge. Metal. Transmuting. What effect could my flimsy saber possibly have on it?

I turned to the guard-captain for an explanation only to see him shove the camel out the hoist. The pack animal hissed and sprayed in frustration. With a derisive snort, the guard-captain slammed the door shut. The camel clopped past a series of small shops, the boat hook depending from the saddle accentuating the animal's ungainliness. The hook end clackety-clacked against the flagstones. When the camel neared the unswept leavings from a flower shop, it slowed and stopped to inhale the scattered petals.

A telepathic squeal brought me back around to the fight. Grimmur ran a left-right arc in front of Broga, eye-stalks taut as if for jousting, all awkwardness gone, its leash whipping across the stones. The defenders spun on its approach, startled. First the tracking beast then Broga dashed full upon the aggressors. Played out against the automaton, everything was a rush of color and motion, the glint and shear of steel, a collage of body parts. The downed man was motionless, his face an ugly smear.

Broga was cat sleeking fast. He slipped the first stroke and cracked his foeman's elbow with the flat of his sword. Ah, right. It would have to be all flats and punches until Grimmur flushed out its target. The tracking beast circled back toward the defenders, ribs partially extruded, mouth slavering. Goaded by its mental snuffling, I raced to join the creature.

Kra-onk. The automaton lumbered forward, left arm extended in Broga's direction, palm upraised. Broga fouled a rival's blade with a swift jab of his dirk then leapt aside to bash him on the crown with his sword-hilt. The ring of the helm carried across the flagstones as the man dropped to his knees.

The automaton's outstretched palm reddened ominously.

Broga parried a downward cudgel-strike. Sparks flew as his foe skimmed the cudgel along the blade. Broga spun away and delivered a horse-kick to the armored man's gut while rebuffing a pointed jab from another direction. The defenders flanked him, weapons high, but cowed by the automaton, balked at interceding.

Grimmur pulled up short at a thin, bearded defender who, unlike

his companions, wore an ankle-length robe, a skull cap and a face-obscuring scarf or *shemagh* finished in white tassels. The man retreated a step, lowering his weapon.

The automaton's giant palm convoluted into a kind of pneumatic cylinder.

Something seemed to snap in my heart-roots. I sent Grimmur a crashing alarm.

The cylinder recessed into the automaton's arm then telescoped back out, releasing a salvo of barbed quarrels. Silver bolts dashed against the stones in a line with Broga. He dodged to one side of his cudgel-bearing foeman and lost his sword in meeting the opposing weapon. A sword-tip thrust from another attacker glanced off his mail shirt. Quarrels found the cudgel-wielder in the back of the thigh and waist. He crumpled facedown, exposing Broga to the missiles. Broga twisted sideways to present the smallest possible target.

Grimmur bounded into the breach, legs churning awkwardly in air, eye-stalks arrayed like a shield. It flopped to the ground with an awful throat-rattle. A pair of quarrels protruded from its side and a severed eye-stalk bloodied the stones. The poor creature proved loyal after all. Its last psychic howl skirled around in my head.

Though buckling at the knees, I closed on the man in the scarf as he turned to flee. My whickering sword gave him pause. "This one!" I shouted to Broga in a strained voice. "This one here knows her!"

Broga cocked his head in acknowledgement—just before a determined foe swept out at him with an ornately chased blade. He ducked the oblique swipe, flung his dirk into the base of the man's throat then huggd the body for protection against a score of quarrels.

Its eyes blazing white-hot, the automaton brushed past him, intent on something—or someone—else. A knot of metallic strands whipped out from its bowels. To my dismay, the snaking restraints lashed around the man in the scarf and yanked him past Broga into a swiftly formed cage in the automaton's middle. The prisoner emitted a single guttural sound: "Aacch!" Then a lustrous band formed over his mouth and jaw, silencing him.

The automaton about-faced—*ka-ronk!*—and headed in the direction of the chasm-spanning bridge. Onlookers in its path retreated

post-haste. The behemoth's surviving accomplices likewise began to scatter, most nursing a wound or two. Recovering their courage, the defenders confronted them, grim-faced.

Broga retrieved the discarded cudgel at a run. "Catch one of them, will you?" he said over his shoulder and rushed after the automaton.

What did he intend now? I boggled at his recklessness. "Ah," I said more to myself than his dwindling figure, "leave me to the pecking fowl." I bounded to the nearest aggressor, the former cudgel-wielder. He was trying to lever himself up on his good leg. "You! Hold there or I'll use your gullet for a scabbard."

He flashed dark and daggered eyes but obeyed of necessity. My sword whistled above him in warning. He sat awkwardly on the pave, slumped to one side owing to the quarrel in the back of his left thigh.

Broga gained on the automaton as it cleared the partly canopied thoroughfare. The automaton halted and assumed a stunted crouch. Its lower legs vented a strange crimson energy shot through with a bright, dawn-like whiteness. The mechanism launched into the air. Broga dropped his weapons and leapt after it. For a moment, he was suspended in the energy field around the automaton's boots.

Blood seethed in my ears out of fear for him. I expected his flesh to be seared to ash at once.

But no: He was spun full tilt as if caught in a whirlpool and repulsed with a terrible force over the balustrade and into the pitch-dark gorge. He was like a streak of lingering moonlight and then—and then gone.

I stared in the direction of the bridge, hot with disbelief. Is this how it would end? I asked myself. A chance fight? The wind sobbing through the spires and minarets of a foreign city? The automaton arced away and disappeared against the dim obscurity of the canyon's far side.

Oh, how I regretted ever longing for a great cracking moment to upset my simple rustic life in Ixzahl.

Chapter Four

Do you see what I see?

I imagined Broga in panicky freefall, all strength rendered useless, mail shirt billowing in the uprush of darkness, pinwheeling down and down. Like an insect riled in the hand and shaken free.

Then a piece of the night plunged after him. A woman on the bridge loosed a chesty howl of surprise. Had someone jumped, cloak flying wing-like behind? I counted the seconds, to what end, I don't know. The shape was fleeting strange. Would Broga vanish without a sound? I tensed in place, confused and furious, eyeing the balustrade.

A sliver of night crested the bridge. The stub-wrist of a bat? *Vafna*, yes, wings, full-fledged wings fretted with a shrouding dark energy. I raised my sword expecting a djinn or daimon to mount the balustrade worrying Broga in its slavering jaws. The steel helm and matching breastplate proved more of a shock than any monster. It was a winged woman. She skewed out of the abyss, straining to keep hold of Broga's shirt and gauntlet. Her wings shimmered like witchfire. The onlookers closed their gaping mouths at her descent.

As soon as she cleared the balustrade, Broga gripped her forearm for balance and swung to the flagstone bridge. *My huyi*, my refuge friend! A memory of him jumping from an ancient imberga tree flared up. I'll never forget that shy, proud smile. Before he understood the dire permanence of his rank in this life. Before the slavers murdered his older brother and took his half-sister. Before the overriding urge for vengeance.

The onlookers murmured in awe and superstitious fear. "Thaumiel take me," my captive said through his pain. "That trying bitch."

"Hai, there, outlander! Put up your weapon!"

The command came from behind, accompanied by the pounding of boots. A contingent of city lancers rushed the former combatants.

With the exception of the distinctive white sashes across their chests, they were kitted out in light armor identical to that of the winged woman. The foremost hefted rectangular shields along with curved swords. A few carried multi-pronged spears counterweighted on the butt end by iron spikes.

I lowered my weapon at the approach of a rangy lancer. A thin scar on his chin jagged through his square-cut beard. “What brand of knavery is this, outlander?” he asked, spearpoint indicating the wounded man. “Simple-headed thievery? Or assassination?”

“I’ve no need of either—at least not in this cack-handed manner.” Recovering my bolder, more imperious persona, I cast my saber to the blood-slicked flagstones with serene dispatch. “I am, after all, a mage of some repute. Perhaps you’ve heard tell of Thaumazon, the Uneatable Soul.” I used the Druna epithet for the wizard, not knowing if it meant anything to a Kanavarim. This Thaumazon masquerade was already confusing my thoughts. Sometimes, I admit, I can be as dense as greenwood.

His eyes widened in stupefaction. “Come to magick our city aright, eh?”

I gave a dismissive laugh between a bray and a cackle that reminded me bitterly of Grimmur. The creature had been prone to the odd, chittery throat-noise. Poor beast. It deserved a better—quieter—end. Broga was on the bridge, conferring with his now-wingless rescuer. I’d missed something there. “Mind if I retrieve my pack animal?” I gestured toward the camel some distance away. It was grazing on a pilfered reed mat, indifferent to the excitement around it.

At the lancer’s nod, I left him to collect the instigators. This section of the thoroughfare consisted of shops and shrines fashioned from stone, mud and lime plaster. White-washed bricks formed decorative patterns such as waves and flowers. A large domed shrine with a multi-foil arch dominated the thoroughfare. The level of ornamental detail was incredible. Jeweled tiles of deepsea blue and bands of calligraphic script combined to form ominous bat shapes. A heavy iron chain depended from either side of the opening at a height below that of the average man. No doubt a symbolic element to ensure the humility of

everyone who entered. The shadowed icon behind it suggested a conjoined warrior, its helm an unusual mix of war-bonnet and crown.

The camel eyed me suspiciously as I grabbed its halter, but after a couple of forceful tugs, allowed me to lead it across the cooling pave to Broga and his mysterious rescuer. By the time I reached them the city lancers had apprehended the slow and wounded and had begun making inquiries among dawdling bystanders. The spectators on and near the bridge had already resumed their various private pursuits as if accustomed to these sorts of incidents. When a couple draped in merchant-class silks passed me, the woman gave a sigh and said something to her companion about “more bodies for the dogs to pick out.” Another passerby hissed that the city was “spiraling unto pandemonium.” Had I been thinking properly, I would’ve taken the melee, together with these comments, as a notable caution. As it was, they scarcely registered against my joy at Broga’s recovery. He was here and impossibly alive.

I skirted an irregular hollow where the automaton had rucked up the flagstones and interrupted a question Broga was posing to the war-maid. “*Heech*, I thought—I mean, there you were—shot into the abyss...” Choking back my emotions, I scooped him up in a one-armed hug, glad to feel the heat of his cheek against my chest.

He pulled away, face darkened. “*You* thought? Wait till you’ve looked over the edge.”

With an elbow on the balustrade, I leaned over the ravine. The absurd size of it alone—up, down, across—dizzied me. It was like an upside-down mountain range, replete with vast fissures, unlikely outcroppings and strange, eroded rock forms. The bottom was lost in an all-consuming black.

But the gorge wasn’t even the most sublime feature of this vista. That distinction was reserved for the colossal statue that stretched across it. Enveloped in weather-encrusted grit, the figure was an abstract but recognizable man-shape on its knees or otherwise bowed; I couldn’t tell which due to the obscuring depths. It sported two featureless heads topped with an array of wicked-looking thorns. The heads abutted each other, joined by a single, shared eye. Two of its four arms—the upper pair—spanned the chasm. The claws on the lower arms gripped

the others in support. Following the curves of these limbs was made difficult by an expansive bat-like cowl. The inherent power of the figure blurred the line between art and life. Was it actually a statue? Or a living god suspended in time?

“*Aysh*, what a gathered-up horror.” Broga went on. “I was flung sideways, straight into those horns, spikes...” He shrugged at his lithe young rescuer. “What are they?”

“It’s commonly thought to be a crown,” she said with a mordant twist to her lips. “Two, actually—one around each of Thaumiel’s conjoined heads.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” I said. So this was the god from whom Thaumazon had taken his wizarding name. The guard-captain’s question about paying tribute to my namesake suddenly made sense. I kept returning to the stippled eye. It was almost vegetal. Like a bud cluster a scheme of life apart.

“Apologies, Maghvan for the lack of introductions.” The war-maid put a hand over her heart and bowed slightly. “Spasbet Taraneh.” She was dusky-skinned and two or three handspans taller than Broga. Coils of dark tresses fell from her helm to her shoulders. Her deep-set eyes were of a keen hazel and complemented by a gold calligraphic tattoo on her right cheek. Not unlike Broga, she held herself taut, shoulders hunched, poised for action. A long thin scar along her jawline further attested to a life hardened by raw experience.

“I am in your debt, Constable. My manservant here rushed into the fray before I could conjure a dreamtime response. But for you he’d be another soul questing the Vastlands.” I scrutinized her silver-chased gorget in vain for the source of her wings. “By the Sentinel Tree, I’ve never seen your like—those extraordinary wings... I confess, at first, I mistook you for a suicide or a devil-bat.”

Taraneh broke into a wry smile. “A common misperception—in both cases.” Almost as soon as she said this, she waved her melancholy aside and met Broga’s intent look. “But if we’re to talk at length, I suggest we do it over tankards of ale. I’m sure you’ve a need to wash the dust from your mouths. My deputies can handle these beaten-down curs. Just a moment...” She strode off in the direction of the lieutenant

with the square-cut beard. Her plate armor glinted in the crystalline lamplight.

I clapped Broga on the shoulder. “No wounds?”

“None except the loss of our tracking beast. That animal was our best means of finding her.”

“There’s still the captive.”

“I was about to ask after him. No telling, however, if we’ll ever see him alive again.”

“Seems we’ve stumbled into some squalid tribal dispute.”

“What manner of monster was that? Do you know?”

“It appeared to be an automaton similar to the Queland’r. Perhaps a repurposed model. There’s at least one tek-adept in this place.”

Broga took in the homes and shops terraced into the cliffside, the muted lights, the goat paths and timeworn stairways, the several spires downcanyon sending up steam. He humored me with a smile he didn’t feel. “From one fighting pit to another...”

Starting with the quality of a spirited pilgrimage, our journey had quickly lapsed into nightmare: accosted by brigands, reduced to petty thieving, imprisoned, enslaved, consigned to the fighting pits of Skulon Gøra, released to beggary and righteous banditry... We’d gone from grief to grief with death always close-by. The pain persisted in the flesh as scars and accustomed aches. The mind—mine at least—refused to hold onto the memories. They floated and skittered in my head as stray feelings; otherwise, that share of my past was only so much clatterwood.

“Ready?” Taraneh said, returning my saber. “There’s a cheapjack tavern not far from here.”

Forgetting his role as servant, Broga said, “The best kind, provided they serve more than dog’s froth.” A stern glance rendered him silent and pretend-abashed. He took up the reins of the camel and followed the constable down the canopied thoroughfare. The camel produced faint moans and grumblings as it lumbered along.

The avenue was sparsely crowded with burnoosed denizens returning home from their last errands or visits of the day. Unlike Ixzahl, where sundown occurred at almost the same time year round, it set late here in the summer months. Virtually all the passersby were native

Kanavarim and, given their modest, sand-colored attire, of the median caste. Loose silks and colorful headgear marked out the affluent. A few maneuvered through the crowd from the height of slave-drawn coaches. The women tended to wear pleated skirts and overgarments that covered their heads but left their faces exposed. Beggars pled for coins and favors from the alcoves of closed shops. Several of them sucked from scintillant glass vessels shaped like gourds, their eyes the barest of slits. Others vied for attention by playing reed pipe melodies or offering slivers of iced melon.

Taraneh pressed a copper mark into the open palm of a legless girl in exchange for a folded envelope. The way their kohl-limned eyes met suggested familiarity. I caught the Kanavarim word for blessing in the girl's parting phrase.

"A fortune-telling poem," Taraneh explained, tucking the envelope into her coin purse without a glance. "I don't need to read it to know we should stay on the Thangol side of the city."

"Which group was that?" I asked. "The men with the shoulder guards or the hauberks?"

"The shoulder guards. Their leaf sigil signifies their faith in the natural world. Not unlike your Druna creed, the—how do you say? The, uh..."

"Jör ugsa—earthlore."

"Yes, that." Taraneh quirked her lips in thought.

Looking back over my shoulder, I saw that an enormous tangle of large-boled roots underlay the bridge. Other, similarly-configured bridges were visible in the distance.

"There's no true center to the city if that's what you're looking for," Taraneh said. "Al-Mahad is split between two chieftains, each controlling a different side of the canyon."

"The captain of the pass guard told us—the amirs, he called them."

"Amir Ormazd al-Ashraf of House Thangol and Amir Zartosht Harun ibn Abdus of House Mu'mir. It's a generational rivalry, the origins of which are lost to history. For many years, the dispute played out in the shadows—a menace, yes, but only to the brashest partisans. Since the death of Sultan Abd el-Krim Essafi, however, the violence

has spread to the whole of the city, threatening the deserving and undeserving alike.”

“The guard-captain was reluctant to intervene whereas you...”

“That’s Olek—prudent to a fault.”

We passed an elderly insect-peddler hawking his wares from a two-wheeled cart. His bald pate was sun-burnished to a deep brown. He talked up the long-lasting crimson dye to be got from an insect encased in white, fluffy wax. Another niggling reminder of home and its diversity of life. “I could have said the same about me back in Ixzahl.”

Taraneh wrinkled her brow, skeptical. “That’s hardly in keeping with your reputation here, Maghvan.”

“I’m long past youthful adventuring,” I said, taking up my impersonation again. “Nowadays, I’m a great proponent of order. To the Druna, order is charismatic.”

“Because—like fidelity and white peacocks—it’s so rare?”

I creased my lips in what I hoped was an enigmatic smile. I wasn’t sure if I had the lips to complete it. The kind of order we Druna care about tends to be abstract and philosophical. Social and political order are considered the consequences of living in accord with nature rather than concerns in themselves. According to *jör ugsa*, nature is the soil of the soul. Closeness to the earth and its myriad aspects makes possible a sense of order in all other respects.

The constable pointed to a whitewashed façade with a low, recessed doorway. “Just ahead—at the sign of the bull and star.” A painted limestone statue of the sacred animal served as both sign and hitching post. Suspended between the bull’s horns by thick wire was a seven-pointed star. The statue was mounted on a stone pedestal so a camel’s tie rope could be secured to horn or tail at about the level of its withers.

“Although the seven-pointed star is supposed to ward off evil, this is the most disreputable tavern in Al-Mahad,” Taraneh said. “So much for the faith of the Apis bull cult.”

“Should I stay here, Maghvan?” Broga asked, swallowing the title. “I’m reluctant to leave our belongings unattended.”

The constable removed a silver medallion pinned to her belt and affixed it to the rawhide saddle. “That should do as a better ward than the star.” She turned on a heel and went inside.

“I could get used to her,” Broga said.

“Let’s hope you do it this side of her jailhouse.” I assumed we still had prices on our heads dating from our escape from Skulon Gøra, though it was unlikely knowledge of the bounty had made it to these desert wastes.

The tavern was a small, dome-capped chamber with a banked stone hearth at its center. There was so little light I paused at the threshold and waited for my sun-weakened eyes to adjust. Tallow candles in lipped, goblet-like earthenware bowls offered flickering relief from the shadows. Wandering bravos and other ruffians crowded the tables and gaming barrels. Most had the look of tribeless desert nomads—bearded, robed and armed to the teeth. The uncommon pairing of a towering Druna and an armed and stocky Black man garnered more than a few stares. The Qmor’za gamblers burst into raucous laughter at some unheard jest.

Before the stares led to uncomfortable questions, Taraneh signaled us to a trestle table against a near wall. The place stank of sweat and, owing to the rush-strewn floor, camel dung. A light haze of rosewater made the odor tolerable. “I took the liberty of ordering the house ale and *ahbarrish*,” she said. “Do you know it, this dish? It’s a kind of lamb shank stew.” She removed her helm to reveal matted bangs and several gold piercings along the ridge of one ear.

The unyielding bench pained the small of my back. What I wouldn’t give for a duck-feathered bed or its Kanavarim equivalent. “This is a welcome kindness, Constable.”

“Your body-slave wasn’t so much as pinked in the melee.” She wagged her head at Broga in admiration. “He’d no need of those Than-gol swordsman except as audience.”

Perpetuating our ruse on the constable made me uneasy. She deserved better. “To be clear,” I said, “he’s not actually my body-slave. That was an uncorrected assumption among the pass guards. I’ve no sympathy for the slave trade. It’s an unforgivable stain on the world’s conscience.”

She put a finger to her scar-line in contemplation and asked Broga, “From where do you hail?”

He squared his shoulders, unsure of how she’d respond to learning

his origins. For nearly three generations Matabwe have been vilified for Tor Kgosi Lolonya's decision to remain neutral during the War of Neverness. It was a decision entirely in keeping with the tribe's pacifist ethos; however, by reserving its considerable magicks for its own defense, the Matabwe consigned great stretches of Laegrevel to mass death and devastation. I've even witnessed emboldened strangers spit on Broga without provocation, calling him 'moon-killer' and other such hateful epithets, though his grandfather was a mere youth at the time of Katalkath's bloody advance.

Broga gave the name of his tribe a grave inflection then waited for the gleam of suspicion in the constable's eyes and perhaps, its tactful suppression.

To our joint surprise, she only smiled, curious and teasing. "Ah, not many of your kind here except for a brace of slaves. Is it true your people came from the mountain snows, making you cold-hearted? As you might have gathered, we're a warm people, hospitable and quick-tempered in equal measure because we come from the hot, deep recesses of the earth."

After a calming breath, Broga said, "My ancestral homeland is the Iron Mountains, what we call the *Urwinga Kachoni*. Whether Ombwike, the God with the Sky for Arms birthed us from its snows, I know not." He leaned forward carefully so as not to upset the unfixed tabletop. "You say your people came from under the earth. Is that a veiled term for some unnamed hell? I've heard your people behead their enemies and soak these trophies in wineskins of blood to slake the thirst of their cannibal god."

"Fortunately for you, Thaumiel can't abide the taste of southern darkskins," she joked.

"Yet you mentioned some keep Matabwe slaves."

"To our collective shame, yes," she said. "Another way for our milk-fattened aghas to exercise their power and take out their self-hatred on others. Despite the color of our skin—only a shade or two lighter than yours—white is ever held up as the ideal. We must've imbibed the notion long ago from the Heimsvelds or Ragoskans. Who knows? Even our word for truth, *fada'gih*, means 'to be washed white.' But this is only one of many confounding prejudices."

“Your refreshments,” the serving girl announced, depositing our jacks of foaming ale. She was a lean brunette in a dragonscale harness and matching skirt. “And some tidbits on the house for the wait.” She placed a bowl of mulberries and walnuts in front of the constable.

I noticed Broga lingering on her buxom charms. Among other things, the exigencies of our swordquest had largely deprived him of female companionship. (Even his long, restrained courtship of Leire had yielded nothing in that regard.) Yes, he’d missed out on many quick pleasures of youth.

Taraneh thanked the serving girl in Kanavarim then, hefting her tankard, went on with our discussion: “Some believe you dream-folk, with your moonlight pallor, are truth made flesh.”

“I’m afraid I’d have to disappoint them. Even in Ixzahl, the jungle refuge of my birth, we have our share of self-taught lies.” I eschewed any further explanation and popped a juicy-sweet mulberry into my mouth. But I’ll tell you, as a god likely to have been above such things, Ixzahl is widely regarded as a paradise. It exists in myth as much as in fact. I left it to become a wildering not out of any lust for adventure but out of frustration with its failure to live up to the legend. I found my clan’s constant mythologizing of the place intolerable when Broga, my blood-sworn refuge friend or *huyi*, was relegated as a matter of law to its outskirts. Don’t misunderstand me. I still believe in the city-state of Ixzahl, in earthlore and its potential... But leastwise at the time, I thought it better to chance the margins of this hardened world than seal myself in its mythic center.

Wiping foam from his lips with the edge of his hand, Broga asked, “The man taken by the Mu’mir automaton—what do you know of him?”

“Why do you ask? While serious, the rivalry between the amirs is a local matter. I’d think it above the considerations of one such as Maghvan Thaumazon.”

“In this instance,” I said, downing a swig of the honeyish ale, “it seems entwined with our commission. The Sultans General have requested I survey Al-Mahad’s adepts. With this city under uncertain rule, they’re concerned it will become a haven for rebel wizards—if it hasn’t already. That automaton we encountered gives credence to their

fears. Only an exceptional tek-mage could've salvaged or constructed it." My desert-hot skin at last began to cool.

"Perhaps you know of such a sorcerer?" Broga asked.

"Amir Zartosht Mu'mir employs a number of them. The members of that house favor the use of exotic machines and other mechanisms while the Thangol prefer—what would you say? Nature-magicks? *Jadwatba'et* we call it. That house's weapons tend to be fantastical plants and creatures—imprisoning bramble-traps, scarab armies, wasp grenades, even man-animal deviates. It was Thangol magick that generated the suspended root systems buttressing our bridges."

"Is there an arch-mage among the Mu'mir?" Broga asked.

"Garshasp Shir-Del, a shrunken elder. Uses a pikestaff for a walking stick. Rarely leaves the Mu'mir compound."

"Can you get us in as part of your investigation?"

"Or would you rather we inquire under our own official auspices?" I interposed.

"You mistake the scope of my authority," Taraneh said. "I'm merely a glorified market inspector. I owe my position solely to the merchant guild. My duties are limited to keeping peace in their souks and bazaars, enforcing debts and treating merchants to the free labor of my prisoners. With the exception of the pass guards and my own guild-financed lancers, there's no civil force to speak of here. The official city watch was dismissed years ago under pressure from the amirs. The lord mayor is a simple figurehead." She sank the rest of her ale. "So, you see: I only arbitrate the lesser crimes. All other punishment is the province of Thaumiel."

Broga turned to me, jaw set. "Then it's up to us alone."

"I wouldn't advise calling on Amir Zartosht directly—on this or any other matter. Not unless you relish a death-fight," the constable said. "He considers himself beyond the demands of Kanavar's grasping royalty."

"And how is it you haven't taken up sides in this conflict?"

"I was born and raised here and, for the time being, Al-Mahad remains my home. I've suffered my share of abuses at the hands of its people, yes. But I've learned to see past my tormentors and, in the name of the common castes, refuse to cede the city's future to either

house. The amirs have no genuine interest in the city outside of their own spurious desires.” She slapped the tabletop with her palms. I noted her heavy knuckles—the common result of regular sword-practice. “In other words, I’m too damn stubborn to be bought.”

Glancing at her face, I judged her age at about thirty summers. “I thought, *vafna*, you said something about deviates and I thought, your wings...”

“Ah, no.” Taraneh blew out a long shaky breath. “No, my wings—they have a different origin altogether, though I’m still, alas, regarded as a *rajuliman*. A story for another time, perhaps.” She locked eyes with me. “Maghvan, I don’t know how these things are done in your land, but I’ve an interest in your ward. He’s the very pattern of strength. If he’s also of sound character, I’ve a job of work for him. Would you be willing to hire him out? I’m sure I could raise the necessary funds from the guild.”

“I appreciate your interest, Constable, but I’m afraid not. We’re so bound up together, sometimes I grip my own wrist certain it’s his.” This last surprised me in its frankness.

“You’re a mated pair then,” she said in a tone more wistful than disappointed. “Like eagles?”

“No,” I said, though now we share a sort of intimacy I could never have imagined then, my thoughts sometimes bathing Broga in strange visions. “Let’s just say we’re brothers of the sword.” I surveyed the room, checked on the Qmor’za gamblers talking into their tiles. I didn’t want to accidentally invite a challenge. “He’d be loath to admit it, but you’re seated across from the only two-season champion of Skulon Gøra.”

“You rescued him then?”

“We’ve saved each other, over and over.” I recalled the gratuitous whippings, the crushed fingers and wrists, palms torn raw, the slashed forearms, the punctured lungs, too many broken ribs to count, the pit attendants in their hideous death-masks finishing the dying with stone mallets. Every twitch sent grating pains through my bones. I couldn’t imagine the chronic aches Broga endured; he’d suffered much greater punishments for his principled stubbornness.

I don’t know what came over me at this point. A combination of exhaustion, anxiety and drink, Broga’s miraculous recovery... Friends

of longstanding as we were often let their estimations of each other go unspoken. Adopting the guise of another, however, permitted something of my genuine feelings to emerge. “We are eyes together, nerves together, pledged together.”

The constable looked from me to Broga and back again over the rim of her tankard. “The pit masters there are known for the brutality of their training regimes.”

“A deserved reputation,” Broga said and took another pull on his ale. “It’s a stupid, cruel business.”

I wondered what he was thinking. Had he heard me as his *huyi*, Ranvir, or as the false Thaumazon? He’d gone quiet as was his wont but I sensed no bristling at my words. “Broga is an orphan born of pain. As part of his training, he was relegated to fighting blind in a pitch-black cave for days on end. Not only men but also yellow-brown jumping spiders, baselwyrms—all manner of vicious creatures. The exercise was intended to take away easy habits of eye and mind. It nearly drove him mad—as it would anyone. Subtle shades gave way to outright hallucinations. He was forced to confront the deepest of human darks. It obliterated his former self and ever since he’s been evolving toward a higher order of vengeance.” My speech veered uncomfortably close to an introduction before a bout. I almost started in on the wide range of weapons he’d mastered.

“Vengeance? Against what?” Her hazel eyes regarded me evenly.

“Warlords, satraps and pashas, the gods themselves, whatever would allow for slavery, the fighting pits—all the horrors of this earth.”

“Yes,” she said, lowering her voice. “I suppose justice is asking too much.” She tapped her tankard as if to assure herself of its emptiness, upended it to indicate her satisfaction to the taverner then tossed a few coppers on the table.

I returned the coins to her and replaced them from our dwindling supply. “Please, allow me... *Matadin keh ma-mohat antajav shenaa*.”

“*Khohesh ghaabel*.” She smiled at my game attempt to thank her in Kanavarim. “A missed vowel sound or two, but not bad.”

Getting to his feet, Broga asked, “What would you recommend in the way of lodgings? Is this among the cities with slave quarters at some remove from the rest?”



“Oh, I assumed your royal commission provided for them.” She snatched up her helm, mulling the options. “There’s nary a hostelry in the city that isn’t affiliated with one or another warring house. So, *vay*, given the nature of your orders and the trouble your inquiries are bound to cause, I’d recommend a private, neutral party. Yes, I think I know just the one.”

“A trusted friend?”

She gave a near-silent *gaha* for a laugh. “No. He’s a friend to no one except himself and, *vay*, possibly his mother. But neither amir dare offend him for fear of bringing down a royal garrison on their heads. He—or more accurately, his mother—mans the resident *bruj mah*.”

“The what?”

“The, hmm, moon tower? Tower of the moon?”

“Ah,” Broga said. “She’s part of the Dead Moon Circle.”

“Wait. The son—Dabīr, yes?” I asked.

“How did you know?”

“The guard-captain mentioned him,” I said. “Among other things, he insinuated he might’ve killed his mother.”

Broga unholstered the double-barreled gun acquired from Majid. “In that case, do you know where we can get ammunition for this?”

Chapter Five

Another mortal danger before the night is done

Hidden in the midst of the Old Quarter, the moon tower or *bruj mah* was a magnificent thousand year-old ruin built for some forgotten warlord's grand vizier. The tower adjoined the canyon wall, its lower level separated from the upper rooms by a terrace. Small figurative statues too broken to be recognizable bordered the landing. The carved plaster walls and rare painted wood of the lower level had subsided into an unfortunate state. Green bricks dislodged from the demolished main arches littered the ground. A light in one of the star-pointed stained glass windows on the second floor was the sole sign of habitation. The gold-leaved dome two or three stories above it appeared strangely opalescent.

Following the War of Neverness, moon towers had been established across Laegrevel to protect major city-states from plummeting moon debris. They were typically manned by a congress of dreamtime adepts operating in shifts. Taraneh assured me, however, the household consisted only of Dabīr, his mother and a deviate manservant.

The constable gestured toward a flight of weathered stone stairs to the second level. "The main door's up there..."

"You walking or flying?" I asked.

She cut her eyes at me, unamused.

Broga tied the camel to an ornate, two-story hitching post of stone in front of the manse. The post's bas relief depicted a vertical tug of war between a naked man and a masked god with a dragon serving as the rope. I assumed the mask of zigzag rays represented the sun god, Jardinsaya. Some Kanavarim considered the sun the repository of the truth and its earthly manifestation—fire—the best means of testing for it. Several large overlapping gouges marred the lower portion of the

post. The eye bolts for halter ties around this section appeared to have been forged recently.

Following my gaze, the constable said, “They say this was a feeding-post back in the time of the Dominations. Maidens were chained here as sacrifices to the holy *drakoin*. Brassy-headed virgins, I’m sure.” She rolled her eyes. “Thank Valquamir we’ve moved past such barbarism.” With one hand on the hilt of her sword, she started up the worn stairs.

The terrace lacked the usual protective awning above its decorative arch, leaving its flagstones weather-pitted and crumbling at the edges. Taraneh signaled our arrival with two moderated raps of a brass knocker against the door’s scarab-themed metal plate. “If Dabīr starts talking a lot of occult weirdness, don’t be shy about calling him back to the topic at hand. He has a habit of getting lost in his own abstract fuddles.”

One of the hammered brass scarabs slid away to reveal a grated opening. The unexpected movement prompted Broga to reach for his dagger. A pair of acid red eyes under the brim of thick, browless ridges peered out from the other side of the cedar door. “*Akhr bikhayr*, Spasbet.” The voice was deep and ragged. Spying me and Broga, the manservant asked in Konaē, “New deputies, eh? The Black must be made a leather. Look like he shrunk tight in the sun. This an official visit?”

“No,” she said. “I’m here for a favor—a mutual favor.”

“Ajib Dabīr deep in study.”

“It’s a matter of some urgency. And a rare chance to confer with a legendary Druna maghvan.”

My pulse leaped at this inducement. More taxing subterfuge. I tried to prepare myself by reciting a few earthlore truisms in my head but could manage only scattered, breath-length phrases: *Every moment stands / between two eternities...* Real waking magick was, of course, impossible for me. I simply lacked the proper aura for it.

“Brief interval while Nagib inquire,” the manservant said, closing the wicket.

“His all-purpose aide,” the constable explained. “A deviate with the body of a giant and the mind of a spider.”

I stepped back to get a view of the star-pointed window. Sheaves of papyrus fluttered behind it like disembodied wings. I’d seen a rune-

mage orchestrate a similar display somewhere in Tarquinia. It was the prelude to a fortune telling. I wonder now if we were the subject of the reading.

I motioned Broga to my side and spoke in a stockade whisper. “Maybe we should hazard a nearby stable. At least we’ve arms enough to meet a direct assault. This...” I shook my head. “*Vafna*, he’s liable to lay us open before we know it.”

“On the other hand,” he said in Matabwe, “this arrangement might help our cause—legitimize the mission and protect us from the amirs.”

The pang I felt was loaded with unguessed-at tortures of the spirit. “That assumes we—”

“How would you like me to explain your task here?” Taraneh interposed. “I trust you don’t want your mission noised about, riling up the city’s magicians and their patrons.”

“We’re...” The thought dissipated before I could seize it.

Broga minded my lapse. “We’re looking for a woman of magickal talents possibly taken into slavery—one of the amira’s handmaidens lost in a raid on her caravan. ‘Amira’ is princess, right?” he asked.

The constable nodded. “And there are several of the haughty bitches.”

“Do you get royalty here?” I asked.

“Only those who fool themselves with wine or *shirgol* smoke into believing it. This is a city of pretenders, Maghvan.”

Outside the milky spree of moon the stars winked brightly in their black expanse. During our trek across the Belrak Sands I’d grown accustomed to observing them on a level. The horizon was lost to me here.

The scarab-shaped panel rasped aside and the manservant’s crimson eyes reappeared. “Ajib Dabīr apologize for wait and agree to visit.” The gruff voice sounded anything but apologetic or agreeable. Nevertheless, Nagib unbolted and opened the door, presenting his squared-off profile to allow room for us to enter.

Taraneh stepped into the tiled entryway and proceeded to remove her tasseled leather boots. The tassel, I’d learned back in port, was supposed to distract and deflect harmful spirits. Broga and I followed suit, depositing our ankle boots on the entryway mat.

My self-consciousness at the ragged condition of my stockings

feet was superseded by the curious nature of the manservant. He resembled nothing so much as a child's overlarge sculpy, slab-molded from clay rather than birthed. His bald head was anvil-flat and the rest proportionately broad to match. His dark blue tunic, appliqued at the collar and down his chest in a wedge, complemented his hairless gray skin. If not for his eyes, he might've been taken for a reluctant brute—a man of feeling trapped in a monster's shape. Those eyes, *heech*, I didn't want to consider what hatreds fired them...

"If you please." Nagib led us from the entryway and its curved staircase into a vaulted receiving room lit by hanging enamel lamps. Continuing the scarab theme, the room's padded central rug depicted a swarm of the insects against an intricate geometric web.

The heavy furnishings stood out by virtue of their rich history and floral ornamentation. Befitting my assumed role, I moved toward the dominant piece of furniture—a large ebony chair inlaid with ivory. The chair sat at the head of two couches arranged in parallel. Ivory acanthus leaves and swags of flowers decorated the ebony frames. Broga and Taraneh took up seats facing the hallway and adjoining kitchen so as not to present their backs to our host. Broga surveyed the hanging tapestries for concealed spies or threats. It seemed a fair possibility. The allover pattern of staggered rosettes seemed designed to confuse the sight.

"Another brief interval," Nagib announced before retracing his steps. He lumbered away like a stone weight.

Broga arranged his robe to expose the yellowed ivory hilt of the dagger at his belt.

Adjusting herself against a corner heap of embroidered cushions, Taraneh asked, "So to be clear, did the fighting pits wean you of your pacifism? Or had you already abandoned it?"

"How familiar are you with my tribe's philosophy?" Broga asked.

"Not at all other than it has something to do with your ancestral religion." She settled into the couch like a warrior—hips set loosely, her shoulders tightly.

"Yes, our High God and common ancestor, Ombwike, he's thought to have lived on earth for thousands of years, millennia, maybe, enjoying its elemental peace. That is, until men took to abusing the land and

its gifts: setting the bush on fire; hunting animals like the red-fringed wolf or *maandishi halisi* to their last; killing each other out of senseless greed. Ombwike felt all these losses in his bones, in his heart, such was his tie to Laegrevel, which we call Dothunia.”

“This understanding of nature and its primacy,” I added, “this is partly why we took in the Matabwe after their post-war harrowing. We’ve sympathetic philosophies—in the main.”

“But as for me,” Broga said, “I’ve no feeling for Ombwike or any god. And nature seems a thing removed. It cares not for our hopes. And why should it? No matter the heights of civilization we achieve the humblest stone will outlive us—every man, Druna or daimon—everyone. Nature abides above all.”

Broga and I had engaged in this sort of conversation many times. He rejected the notion of holiness altogether—within or without. Everything, he thought, was a consequence of natural laws. Some were just more self-evident than others.

A mellifluous voice broke in from the hallway. “Spasbet, I trust you’re about to counsel him to keep that blasphemy to himself.” Attired in a jeweled turban and crimson silk *khalat*, Dabir presented a regal visage. His eyes were dark and lively and his cheeks had the ruddy glow of youth. A downturned mustache along his upper lip gave him a melancholy look unless he were laughing. He advanced on footed stockings, hands gripping the large metal clasps on his velvet sash. There would be no clasp of forearms. One hand, I noticed, was gloved in embroidered leather.

“Most here are believers of one sort or another,” he explained. “Divided as they are on the particulars of their respective beliefs, they’re united by the concept of faith. The practice of it—even in the name of the vilest gods—is a performance suggestive of a soul. They’d regard you as an indelible pitch that defiles the carrier. To them, unbelief is an open invitation to the Void Gods and the undying dark.” Here, he waved to some imagined deity, upturned eyes agleam, then leveled his gaze at Broga. “Outlander or no, they’d just as soon hang your skin for the ever-circling kites.” He stuck out his ritually-split tongue for emphasis.

“Charming,” Taraneh said. “It’s a wonder you don’t have more friends.”

“It’s not the number that counts so much as the quality.” Dabir twisted his mouth into a lopsided smile.

“I’d be flattered if I weren’t so aware of your weakness for misfits.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Dabir feigned hurt. “It’s a fondness of like for like. Aren’t we all of us outsiders here?”

Nagib emerged from the shadowed kitchen with a gold, batwinged samovar and matching gilt-edged glasses. “Spot a herb tea from the self-boiler?”

After the constable declined, I motioned him over. The bitterness of Kanavarim tea reminded me of *baunlauf* juice back home. I actually preferred it without rock sugar between my teeth. The deep reddish-brown tea came out a touch golden in the lamplight. Nagib breathed over it through his gaping mouth.

Dabir narrowed his eyes as if noticing me for the first time. “But I forget myself.” He bowed, flourishing his bare fingers. Charged with an eager energy, he moved like an overwound toy, stilted and stagey at once. “Esteemed sir, I am called Dabir. *Salam va ashnai*.”

“*Khosh amadid*,” I said around Nagib’s imposing bulk.

“You don’t recognize him?” Taraneh asked.

“Should I?” Dabir gestured for Nagib to move aside.

The tea’s strong earthy fragrance put me in mind of my pipe.

The constable delayed the reveal, enjoying her temporary advantage. “Think Druna mages out of history...”

“Living or dead?”

“What do you think?”

“They’ve a habit of coming back,” Dabir said. “Katakath even lorded it in the Vastlands for a time.”

“No, the one out of *our* history—the one who defeated the Murnodra...”

“Thaumazon? But...” He raised a dubious eyebrow then cleared his throat, flustered. “*Kahyal tawwabu*. O noble Maghvan, do I merely flatter myself to think you’re here for me? For my symbol-craft? I’ve scarce hoped for my reputation to reach the farthest wilds of Durkesh. As it happens, these past several evenings I’ve been working up a new rune.

I'm still waiting to see what comes through in it. I can feel it rising inside me. It might erupt of a sudden or it might spill out in a stray dream. My mother says my temples should bulge rather than dip from all my pent up ideas. Sometimes, I've the urge to ribbon out an endless supply of foolscap to capture the thousand—million—billion thoughts flitting through—”

“Sorry, Dabīr, but I should be getting back to my lancers,” Taraneh announced. “I'll leave you both to your black dabblings. I only meant to make introductions and ask if you might host them during their visit. They've been commissioned by the Sultans General to find some poor amira's handmaiden. Their duties might have, *vay*, troubling repercussions among the partisans. Your kindness would give them an added mantle of protection.”

“Of course.” His smile had lost its playfulness. “I am, after all, a true-bred Kanavarim and more than capable of observing our vaunted tradition of hospitality.”

Taraneh extended a forearm to Broga, who clasped it high in fellowship. “*Shaab-hemkeyr*. Call on me if you've need of anything. You did the city a service tonight by intervening. The common-caste have been passive for too long and I'm unable to take sides, so I owe you a debt.”

“You've more than repaid us already.”

The constable shot a troubled look at Dabīr. “*Fadâye saret*. I sincerely hope so.” She recovered her smile for my sake. “Maghvan.”

“Goodnight, Spasbet.”

“Nagib will see you to the door,” Dabīr said.

“No need.” Taraneh disappeared down the hallway and shortly, we heard the front door open and shut.

Broga shifted in his seat. “She seems of a generous nature.”

“Followers of Jardinsaya of the Blood-Eyed Sun believe every breast holds a pinch of His divine spark. *Diyáz*, they call it.” The rune-mage crossed to a brass, cup-shaped gong atop a corner table. The gong rested on a cushion within a gilded frame. He flourished its quill-sized mallet. “This spark beckons to what is upright and good. Our sense of it is often lost amid the exigencies of daily life. The spiritual purpose of Jardinsayans isn't to seek salvation from some Outer God, but rather to recoup their original nature.” Dabīr administered a sharp tap to the

gong, yielding a clear, beautiful tone. “Taraneh, she’s no believer. But in her way she’s trying to find that spark—and herself—again.”

“Because of her wings?” I asked.

“You saw them, did you?”

“Without them,” Broga said, getting to his feet, restless, “I would’ve perished in the ravine.”

I said, “She used the term ‘*rajuliman*.’ Is that like a deviate?”

“The same.” Dabir assumed a serious, concentrated air. No more wry half-smiles. “But she wasn’t subject to the usual transmutation spells. Her wings are an artifact like the Armor of Ilesur Terguum. They’re an unwanted gift from the Grihbad, a precursor temple or vault in the Desert of Shattered Glass. Only the most courageous—or foolish—dare cross its threshold.”

“Have you?”

Dabir shook his head as if admonishing a slow pupil. “I’ve dedicated myself to symbol-craft in all its myriads. That’s enough for one lifetime of study. I started on this course as a child with only the vaguest idea for a magical rune. After years of honing that first sign down to its essence and learning the principles behind its cosmic workings, I discovered all of Creation dragging after it. I knew then my life’s work would be to understand its sundry implications.”

I wanted to ask: When was this? I couldn’t guess his age. His face was as full and unlined as an adolescent’s but he’d the somber eyes of an old man. I was about to ask him outright when he flash-signed a rune in the air. The waveform symbol elicited some vague blood memory. I recognized it with a fearful shock though I failed to grasp its meaning. Just as I seemed on the verge of understanding, it burst into white nothingness, leaving Dabir’s dark eyes the entirety of my vision. I didn’t know if I were looking at or through the night itself.

Sounds registered as dim and disconnected. I struggled to distinguish Nagib’s heavy footfalls on the tile from the roiling of empty space.

A burning cold shot up and down my spine as if along a wire. The tension in it was undeniable. I went rigid at this surge of dread. My feet, my hands and fingers, my very will resisted every panicky command. I was thoroughly benumbed.

“Disarm them.” Dabir’s voice seemed to issue from the back of my

head. The force of it shivered the black into a thin, distorting layer of gray. Everything came to me in a smeary haze.

From the washed-out corner of one eye, I could see Nagib reaching into Broga's desert robe to relieve him of his weapons. The giant issued a gusty hiss of satisfaction. My heart shrank from the imagined horrors to come.

"Now," the rune-mage said, "before you retire for the night, I'd appreciate knowing who you are and why you're here." A menacing penumbra like a second shadow played around his head. "I know for a certainty Thaumazon is half a world away on Ara Thysus. And by the favors of Thaumiel, I know the master runes of hell to force the truth from out your lips."

Chapter Six

An unwanted proposal and a horrific discovery

Once released from the body it's in the nature of the mortal soul to recall its earthly memories in their totality. The shock of it, I suppose, is as close as a humble Druna like me will ever get to the omniscience of godhood. If so, *heech*, you can keep omniscience to yourself. The rush of unbidden knowledge and warring emotions... What a black moment! This human cage of sorts might even be a relief to you, limiting as it is...

In any case, I'd no inkling at this juncture Dabir had done anything on our initial meeting but acted the gracious host. His powers of mesmerism were that complete. I discovered his deception only later—too late for rebuke, much less retribution. No, at this point, I was in perfect ignorance of his advantage and thankful to him for a bed not improvised from pack saddles.

The following morning Nagib laid out a plain breakfast of doughy, oval-shaped bread, quince jam and, of course, tea, saying nary a word to us. I'd slept as badly as if we'd bunked in the stables. Our time in the pits had pitched my anxiety too high for restful sleep. There was always one or another feeling to fight off. I'd slept piecemeal the night through and awakened bleary-minded and as brittle-feeling as glass.

Dabir was still asleep or otherwise indisposed as he didn't make an appearance before we set out for Souk Faravān to find the gunsmith recommended by Taraneh. In the absence of any *sukūla* or other defensive artifacts, Broga intended to arm me with the confiscated handgun. We harbored hopes it would be effective against the automaton.

The shops and public facilities of the Old Quarter bazaar dominated the side of the boulevard defined by the canyon wall. Street performers and handcart vendors were relegated to spots near the chasm rail, leaving the main thoroughfare clear for patrons. Typical of eastern

shopping arcades, Souk Faravān was organized by trade-based zones: copper beaters, silver- and goldsmiths, furriers, soap-makers, textile merchants, spice traders, body artists and so on. A number of workshops were shuttered behind armored doors for the purposes of greater security and, in some cases, fire safety. There were occasional gaps between establishments where fissures in the canyon wall had been enlarged to create lamplit alleys.

It was early yet for serious commerce. The unseen sun cast stark, fingery shadows across the arched entrance and sloped canvas roof. Most merchants were still arranging their stalls. I pulled my hood forward to better disguise my face, though my height and the color of my hands gave me away as Druna. My heart labored a bit harder in my chest.

Earthlore sages are wont to say events only happen to feel as if they affect individuals. As points of consciousness in the complex of the world we're supposed to distance ourselves from the living moment. But the fighting pits exposed the worst faults in that philosophy. Privileged slavers treated their charges like automatons. You might think the pits would've inculcated a certain detachment in me as it appears to have done somewhat for Broga; for me, however, the experience laid bare the importance of each and every life. I may have blotted out the particulars of our time in Skulon Gøra to preserve my reason, but the mess of feelings from it has never left the forefront of my thoughts. I suffer—suffered, rather—those emotions like waking dreams. *Vafna*, I suppose that's one benefit of my present state...

We found our man—Ilderim Maalouf by name—in a dim alcove in the smithy district. He was sitting cross-legged in the back of his caravan wagon facing the boulevard, eyes closed. I recognized him from the constable's description. The long gun engraved in the wagon's crown board confirmed my surmise. He was a grizzled elder with sunken cheekbones and a forked white beard. Eyelashes thinned and paled by age fringed his eyelids. His arms formed a pyramid, elbows out and knuckles joined as if at the start of a wrestling match. The griffin badge in his black turban signified his former military service. Only his golden sharp-toed slippers seemed out of keeping with his warrior's image.



On our approach the gunsmith opened his dead-black eyes and gave us a wrinkled look. “*Salam va ashnai*,” he rasped almost without inflection.

“*Khosh amadid, pahdar*.” I called him father and lowered my gaze as signs of respect.

“Sit and join me in some soothing licorice tea.” He gestured to a few pieces of turned camp furniture arranged before his footboard seat and knocked on the window board behind him. A beardless assistant appeared bearing a tea set complete with rock sugar. Then began a long and circuitous negotiation touching on various aspects of our pretend lives and, to a much greater extent, on Ilderim’s noteworthy career in the royal army. The tea trailed sugar grit down my throat.

Given the number and type of inquiries directed at Broga, the merchant was evidently unimpressed with me. I gathered he considered magick a cheat for cowards and weakbones. It was a common prejudice among the unlearned. I was reminded of the fighting pits, which forced you to stop thinking in ideals and live like an animal. Back then, self-interest and instinct were all that counted. We’d lived in one simple, brutish dimension—a dimension for which Ilderim was disconcertingly nostalgic.

At last, I sensed an opening in the conversation and broached the purpose of our visit, drawing the pistol from my burnoose by its twin barrels to avoid causing alarm. I winced at the belated thought Ilderim might recognize the gun as stolen. We hadn’t asked Majid how he’d come to have it. But it wasn’t something a lowly desert brigand was likely to acquire through legitimate means.

The gunsmith took the steel-plated firearm into his open palm and, admiring the chased silver design along its length, set his lips in a taut little dash.

“We recovered it in the desert—at the shrine of Syed ad-Din,” I said. “Do you know this artifact?”

Ilderim’s expression remained impassive. “The question is: Do *you* know it?” Without bothering to turn his head, he barked for his assistant and, speaking in a guttural Kanavarim, sent the youth racing through the marketplace.

Broga and I exchanged doubtful glances. What if the gunsmith not

only knew the weapon was stolen but also the victim of the crime? I imagined us confronting a fat, silk-robed pasha and a retinue of armed house guards. Outside the alcove, awnings jingled with good luck chimes. “I’ve handled other, similar guns, but this specific artifact, no,” I said.

“This may look a common pistol to the novice but it is only the second such artifact I have seen.” A rapid eyeblink was all the show of surprise he allowed. “You asked after bullets? It works with a wide range of ammunition—from simple brass to eldritch fire. Technically, however, the bullet is the projectile. The cartridge is the entire round. But we can call them bullets for ease of conversation.”

“Do you have these bullets then? Or can you cast them to suit?”

“I have one of the esoteric variety. It was a gift from my late-niece, a formidable war-maid no matter the weapon. A battleground souvenir, she said. Ah, my *azizakim*. She could split a round on the edge of a front-facing axe at fifty paces.” His thin face waxed pendulous a moment. “Succumbed to a fever-plague.”

I started a consoling phrase in Kanavarim—“*Khojah bia—bia...*”—but lost the sense of it and had to settle for “I express my sympathy.”

“You see then how this bullet is a keepsake? It would go against my blood to part with it.” This bit of hand-wringing from this austere soldier struck me funny and I clenched my teeth to keep from smiling. I was reminded of Broga’s melancholic refrain that ‘all is sham and sport, some pleasant, some tragic.’

The bargaining continued in the same awkward vein for I don’t know how long while my nerves wore down. Where had the gunsmith’s assistant gone? And for what? Or whom?

The souk was safely on the Thangol side of Al-Mahad, though, of course, the city wasn’t neatly partitioned by faction and there was nothing to prevent Mu’mir assassins from crossing any one of dozens of bridges. By the time the gunsmith launched into his third wistful anecdote about his dead niece I’d worked myself into a perfect agony.

When I made to rise, however, Ilderim bid me stay and produced the round in question from an inner pocket. It was about the size of my little finger. An ethereal blue smoldered in the translucent casing. The wisp of light brought to mind the moon bugs of Ixzahl. Their silent,

mysterious dazzle had awed me as a child. This glow inspired a different, terrible sort of wonder.

“The Twin Fire of Guānshén,” the gunsmith said. “My niece acquired it campaigning somewhere on the steppe-plains of Luayghao. A royal scholar researched it on her behalf. The light is said to be an elemental fury. Merely think of your target and the bullet cannot miss. It will consume your victim in soul-destroying fire. For as long as the fire lasts, however, your thoughts will be connected to those of your target. You will feel their excruciating pain, relive their sins, their final regrets, suffer nigh unto death. It is, perhaps, one of the few rounds befitting a noble warrior. This is no easy distance bullet. Firing it means burning away a share of your soul.” A twist of his mouth approximating a smile revealed a long, chipped canine. “What say you now, my friend?”

It was a question that wasn’t a question. It was a test of worthiness. I quoted a Kanavarim adage I’d learned from a now-dead pit fighter of the steppe-plains. “The brave regard their souls as infinite.” I remembered the saying because earthlore assured us of its truth. *Jör ugsa* posited a world limitless in its associations, the whole made conscious by its constituent parts. In this view, every mortal soul is linked to every other through nature, here and on the worlds beyond.

I used to imagine death as a slow, painless transformation into a wide-bole tree, my feet its roots, my thighs its base, my heart its pith and my soul—my soul, alive but dormant permeating all. Ah, for a bed of deadfall lichen and the musk of autumn wood... I guess my real fate points out how the wind stirring the leaves counts for more than mortal wisdom.

“What’s your price, honorable gunsmith?” Broga asked. His heavy-browed look told me he expected to be disappointed in the answer. With only small coin between us we’d counted on trading our camel and perhaps, doing a simple job of work.

“For you, it is free; it is a gift.” This common but facetious promise among souk merchants came not from the gunsmith but a woman approaching from behind.

Broga and I turned in our chairs, astounded and disturbed—less by the woman than her companion, a large, bare chested deviate emitting a powdery vapor from a scarab-like carapace. The cloud obscured

the mouth of the alley like pitchblende ink. I couldn't tell whether it was a glamor or some alchemical smoke. Other than the dark chitinous growth on his back and a ridge of horn crowning his head, the deviate appeared human. He was well-muscled and densely tattooed in geometric wards. A gold medallion in the shape of three joined arrowheads hung around his neck. He swaggered toward us, eyes slitted and jaw set, a thorough menace.

In contrast, the woman seemed a vision in her wheat-colored robe. She wore a tight *hijab* around her handsome face, leaving a tassel at her neck. There was nothing amorous about her appeal. Her beauty was like that of a winterscape—stark and chilling. Her heels clicked sharply on the pave. Up close, it was evident she was swollen with pregnancy. Perhaps that was the source of her resolute apartness. She enjoyed a larger and at once, more concentrated inner world and so felt somewhat above the outer one.

I pushed back my anxiety.

“*Salam va ashnai.*” The woman’s soot-black eyes darted to the gunsmith then to Broga. “I’m Sanaz and this,” she said, gesturing to the deviate, “is Tamas. Don’t be alarmed. He’s here only to ensure our privacy. We’re emissaries from House Thangol come to show our gratitude. You’re the yonder-man who defended our people last night near the Bridge of the Holy Maid, are you not?”

Broga turned to Ilderim, “You sent for them?” The skewed lamp-light threw the gunsmith into dim relief.

“He was doing you a kindness,” Sanaz answered for him. “Any of our loyal merchants would’ve done the same. How would we know to thank you otherwise?” She reached for the Twin Fire of Guānshén and examined it between thumb and index finger. Her movements were never less than sure and graceful. “A precursor bauble, yes? As you may know, we—House Thangol, that is—prefer weapons of the earth. Weapons alive to their own destructive capabilities. They’re—shall we say?—purer than the alternative. I’m sure your earth-slaved Druna understands.”

Thaumazon would’ve cursed her at this slight, but I simply held my tongue and nodded, afraid of calling attention to my magickal aura. My paltry glamor-making could hardly withstand intense scrutiny. For

all I knew, my disguise might've been discovered already. Sanaz struck me as powerful enough to penetrate it. *Heech*, who would've guessed this remote city-state would be so rife with wizards? I could feel my nerves right up against the surface.

"The trinket is yours." Sanaz pressed the luminous bullet into Broga's hand with one warning eye on the gunsmith. Her voice assumed a dark timbre. "We would do more favors—and better—if you'd deign to join our number. We've much use for bravos of your ilk." Her smile was full of small teeth filed to a point. "Your Druna would be welcome also."

Tamas stood stock-still, one hand grasping the wrist of the other. Except for his small, alert eyes, he was a picture of statuesque indifference. No doubt he'd have a dagger at my throat if I took a single unbidden step toward Sanaz.

"We've a mission here to accomplish first," I managed to say evenly. "The Sultans General have charged us with finding a kidnapped handmaiden. We expect she was sold at auction here—a Matabwe like Broga."

"I'd be happy to make inquiries among the Thangol. I know of a few noble households with such slaves."

Broga stirred from his seat. "What about your rivals—the Mu'mir?"

"No doubt they've Matabwe among them."

"How can we find out more?"

Sanaz smoothed the folds of robe around her distended belly. "When was she taken?"

"Nearly five Sharro Calendar years ago. We can't be certain when she would've arrived here—perhaps as long as four years." Broga gave a one-shouldered shrug.

Sanaz probed his affected nonchalance. "What makes this handmaiden so special?"

"She was a favorite among one of the amiras and said to have magical talents. It's possible she's known to one of your mages."

"There's one Mu'mir you might try. I don't know how much help she can offer. Niew is something of an outcast among them. Having forsworn the conflict between our houses, she lives outside the city as the patron-guardian of the Shrine of Calanthe Ardeshir. You would know her by the silver bells in her hair." Sanaz showed Broga another

toothsome smile. “It’s not far, this shrine, though the most direct path would mean crossing over and exiting through the Mu’mir gatehouse. Surely no trouble for you, eh, Maghvan, what with your royal commission and lofty magicks?”

I broke into a forbearing grin as if amused by her sarcasm. But I panicked inside. She knew the truth of me, oh, yes, for shame, she knew.

“Would you recommend we try the slave marts?” Broga asked. “Are there any slavers from Durkesh—Lembussa or Namshin or other parts south—who trade here on a steady basis?”

Sanaz lifted her chin, adopting a regal attitude. “They generally sell their inventory in Khurram Adalu. We get the middlemen, or more often, the desert dogs who raid the middlemen. This is no great mecca for commerce.”

“We’re grateful for your help—and the artifact. Perhaps when our mission is completed...” The way the world was—the way the world had made him—Broga couldn’t bring himself in good conscience to make a false promise.

“It would be much appreciated,” Sanaz said in a disbelieving tone. “May the day favor you.”

“And you also,” Broga said to her back.

Infused as she was with preternatural mother-and-child energy, I half-expected her footfalls to leave glowing traces.

The shrouding darkness congealed into an intruding stream and vanished into Tamas’ carapace through various studs and dents. It was like the end of a languid hallucination. I wondered what other forces might be interred in that deviate growth. Winds? Poisons? Daimon spirits? It didn’t bear thinking about.

I was glad to see the pair leave and everything lucid again. I beamed my relief in Broga’s direction. It was a temporary relief to be certain, but until now, in this disembodied state, I’d thought all relief temporary.

The gunsmith looked as glum as a tortoise.

Out of embarrassment for him, I said, “We would return your bullet...” I’d no idea if Sanaz even intended to pay him for what, after all, was beyond price.

“No,” Ilderim said, handing the firearm back to Broga. “If it were discovered, things would go worse for me.” He chopped the air with his hands. “I am an old sellsword. I have long accepted the lunacy and shit of this world.”

Broga wasted no time in loading the weapon. He slammed home the round and passed the gun to me. “That’s why we need this.”

The press of bodies on the souk’s main avenue renewed my fear of Mu’mir assassins. It would be so easy—a hurried knife-thrust then away and into the throng of dusty robes. The loaded gun tucked into my belt pulsed with suppressed heat. My pipe would’ve helped settle my nerves but at the cost of hampering my ability to deal with a sudden assault. Better to go without.

I turned sideways to avoid brushing against a large pack shouldered by an old alms beggar. A scrawny black merchant cat scrambled to balance itself atop the pack.

Broga’s eyes flicked over the crowd, taking the measure of each passerby.

“What did you make of those Thangol?” I asked.

Intent on the crowd, he answered without looking at me. “I miss that tracking beast more and more. He would’ve snatched that bodyguard by his guts.”

“The woman Sanaz saw through my falsified aura. I’m certain of it.” I recalled her final smile, how it was separate and apart from her eyes.

“We need to work quickly. This city—its feuding houses and strange menaces—we’re too exposed.” Al-Mahad, I knew, only confirmed Broga’s belief that cities presumed and perpetuated inequality. Caste tyranny seemed to be the city’s chief organizing principle. As you descended from the desert proper, spired manors and lush balcony gardens gave way to modest stucco abodes then catacomb-like hovels. I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn a naked, day-blind race thrashed out a fierce existence on the ravine’s unseen floor.

“I’m sorry for this Thaumazon pretense. It was a foolish gamble.”

“No, I understand, Ranvir. We may not have made it past the gate without it—leastwise at the risk of scaling down the canyon.”

“The rune-mage is another one.”

“I don’t know why the constable brought us to him. But there’s something between them...”

I’d sensed a curious tension also but had dismissed it as part of my growing paranoia. When everyone is a stranger, everyone is a danger. The felt truth of that Druna adage had never been more vivid. “An arrangement?”

“I don’t want to believe it, yet the way they talked, the abrupt way she left...” Broga grimaced at something unspoken. “What could they want from us?”

“An excuse to upend this place, its so-called order. I don’t know.”

We strolled past a stall offering every traditional way to preserve camel milk: fresh salted curd, hard and dry nuggets of the same, yogurt, fresh, fermented and dried into sheets. Camel palates complete with arcs of yellowed teeth hung from a tree-like rack.

Broga put a hand on my arm. “We need to stay focused on finding Ovandu. You’re certain she’s here? From what the tracking beast shared?”

“This is as close as we’ve ever been.” My throat tightened. I neglected to say I’d woken this morning in a nightmare panic thinking I’d forgotten Grimmur’s hints and auguries. But no, I remembered aright. “What happens when we find her? What then?”

“That’s up to her, I suppose.”

I detected an underlying softness in his tone. “Would you take her back to Ixzahl?”

“If she asked me to.”

“I could take her—if, for some reason, you wanted to journey on, perhaps explore the far eastern shores.” I said ‘journey’ but meant or at least envisioned a string of mercenary turns. He must’ve seen the greater part of himself in the gunsmith. “Traveling suits your restless nature.”

“But not yours?”

There was an airy fullness inside I dreaded would escape through a weakening sigh or worse, a cascade of tears. How could I tell him

our hardships had exhausted my desire for something new? “I didn’t know how much I’d come to miss the refuge. Without benefit of the Sentinel Tree, I feel isolated, vulnerable.” My voice dropped to a rasp. “I’m grateful for your companionship, *huyi*. But you’re not of earth-lore. And the travails we’ve endured have made me realize I need it around me—that habit of mind, the chance to bathe in forest splendor—despite the hypocrisies of Druna society. Perhaps I’ll bring home our youthful sense of justice. I don’t know. I guess, in the end, I’m no wildering.” I refrained from saying also that I wished to age into a calm, inspirited elder.

Broga clenched his jaw. At moments like this—bedeviled by high emotion—he could be as implacable as his birth-mountain. “We have to find her first.” His need to find Ovandu had made a hall of mirrors of his life. Everything reflected her distant image back at him and he’d see it captured even if it proved an impossible and fatal reaching. “Unless you mean to leave before—”

A pair of dreymar dreamwalkers and their young minder loomed up out of the crowd. The minder drew the black-clad votaries on leather leads in shuffle-step fashion. The leads were attached to spiked head halters, which gave the dreymar an animal-like countenance. Passersby lurched to one side of the boulevard or the other at the sight of the tall, conical caps worn by the followers of the late mage-emperor Katakath. The air around the trio shimmered with dreamtime energies. The turbaned pilgrim next to me fingered a silver amulet for protection. The trio shuffled between Broga and me. The hallucinatory aura around the dreymar dazzled me into a brief stupor. Dark fleeting shapes like giant dust motes snapped through the clouds. A spiked crown punctuated the gathering black. The city came loose from the canyon and rolled into its own shadow. Then the pave beneath my feet stabilized and my vision cleared.

Broga nodded toward the receding caps. “Damn fool dreymar. If they ever succeeded in resurrecting him, they’d be among his first sacrifices.”

Again, I don’t know if gods of your ilk are aware of all the petty goings-on among us mortals. The dreymar are fervent acolytes of Katakath and his hateful creed. They dreamwalk in homage to the wizard’s

legendary trance-sleep. It doubles as a form of proselytizing, I suppose. Rumor has it the dreamwalkers are engaged in sending out astral signals in search of the mage's blasted soul. Who knows? We might even chance upon these signals here in this strange nether-realm, if only an echo of an echo.

"Broga," I said, looking him square in the eyes. "I intend to see this through."

He returned a tight smile.

I patted the handgun at my side. "Think this will be effective against the automaton? I'm not sure it has a soul to burn."

"It would be a shame to waste that bullet."

"I'll treat it as a last resort."

"Sad to say we've known precious few other kinds, eh?" Broga clapped me on the shoulder. "But we'll win through. Won't be long now..."

To him, every challenge was a test of hand-grips and there was nothing beyond his strength. To me, *vafna*, I never had any illusions about my capacities. I wasn't a hardened fighter. Every day alive on our journey was a miracle of luck and grit.

When we returned to the half-ruined manse, we found Dabir at the kitchen table in a dressing robe riffling through an aged, leather-bound tome. He was transcribing or notating portions of it on a scrap of parchment. His tea cup was down to pithy dregs. A bowl of yogurt awash in quince syrup had gone untouched.

"*Salam va ashnai*, worthy sirs," he said, offering us the yogurt with a gloved gesture. The night before I'd assumed the glove was a mere affectation. His choice to wear it to breakfast, however, suggested affliction or deformity.

I took a seat across from the rune-mage but left the yogurt alone. "*Khosh amadid*."

"Whatever sent you out so early?"

"Bad dreams," Broga offered.

I chimed in before Dabīr could work up a sarcastic retort. “We thought to inquire among the merchants at Souk Faravān.”

“And did you discover anything useful to your investigation?”

“Yes, though not in the manner we expected.” I went on to give an amended version of our encounter with Sanaz and Tamas. I didn’t, of course, mention the gun or its elemental bullet.

Dabīr’s gaunt frame seemed to curl upon itself. “A dangerous pair, these Thangol. Tamas looks the more imposing, all mighty limb and deviate strangeness, but Sanaz is like the sun to his lesser star. Unlike most dreamtime mages, she doesn’t have to enter a trance-state to work her magick. She’s set her unborn child to that task.”

“You mean for the duration of her pregnancy?” Broga asked.

The rune-mage broke into a jolting cackle. His features cracked in tandem with his laugh. “She’s been pregnant for well over a decade. Some kind of blood-magick, I gather.”

“Giving her a double-consciousness—her awake while the child’s attuned to the dreamtime. Inspired,” I said. “Dare I ask after the father?”

“Take your pick: daimon, god, Malagorn itself...”

“Can we trust them?” Broga asked.

“Insofar as it suits their ends.”

“This is our only lead,” I said. “This Mu’mir—Niew—she’s our best chance.”

“Esteemed Maghvan, please don’t take offense, but the northern gate? Much too risky—even for you.”

“What about the constable?” Broga asked. “Can’t she get us through?”

Dabīr shrugged. “These partisans are like hyenas—cunning, violent, ignoble. If they recognized you they’d sheathe their swords in your guts without warning, regardless of the spasbet. You might magick the guards into compliance but what about their machines? They’ve turret-mounted guns with viewing attachments capable of seeing through any disguise. Something to do with different types of light. I’m not sure. Never had much bother with precursor tek.”

I considered trying to control the guns remotely—like the *sukūla*. It would be a lofty challenge to control unfamiliar tek. The guns were likely outfitted with various magickal defenses as well. Better stealth

than a direct assault. “Could we hide ourselves, say, as part of a trader’s caravan?”

“And risk a search?”

“What do you know of Niew?” Broga asked.

“Little more than rumor. She’s a self-styled seer. I don’t know what sort of divination she practices—cards, runes, bones. Likely an act in any event. The shrine attracts a fair number of gullible pilgrims. Both houses look on her as suspect.”

“What about contacting her through the dreamtime?” I asked. “I’d try it myself but without a sense for her aura...”

I’d Dabīr’s attention now. He paused in the incessant twisting of his shoulders and fidgety gesturing. “Not me, but mother, yes, that might work. As far as I’m aware, Niew comes and goes freely. Perhaps mother can arrange a rendezvous. You’ll likely have to cross to the Mu’mir side, but provided you disguise yourselves properly, that shouldn’t prove an undue hazard.” He straightened to his full height, his ungloved hand folded around the embroidered lapel. A pigeon blood ruby dangled from his waist skirt by a length of braided silver. “Shall we see her now? I’m sure the Sultans General would welcome your assurance this *bruj mah* is competently manned.”

“I wasn’t certain it was operational.”

“If mother were alive, you mean,” he said, starting for the hallway in his stilted way. “I’m fully aware of the rumors. Quite useful in their way. They lend me a sinister aspect that makes negotiating certain liberties with the amirs much easier.”

“What liberties would those be?” I asked.

“Access to forbidden lore. I’ll have to show you my library sometime. Knowledge—sheer unconstrained knowledge—is the pretext for everything I do. The amirs, of course, are ever-watchful for potential rivals. They’ve cadres of mages—Sanaz, Tamas and a few minor adepts on the Thangol side, Garshasp Shir-Del and his tek acolytes on the other. They’re loath to permit a rogue wizard. Or as Zartosht once called me, a ‘mischievous gadfly.’ But they’re wary of angering someone whose mother can drop a chunk of moon on them.” He put a gloved hand on the wrought iron balustrade and took the stairs at a steady clip. I paced him while Broga trailed after, hands free at his sides.

Again, I couldn't fathom how Dabir and his mother fulfilled their Dead Moon Circle responsibilities. I'd never heard of one operated by fewer than a dozen adepts. Shielding the earth from moon-meteors required constant dreamtime vigilance. "You don't fear assassination?"

"I'm not without allies of my own. If mother or I should perish in some untoward fashion there would be reprisals. Both houses would be wrecked past all saving, I promise you."

"The Dead Moon Circle?"

"The Circle protects its own, yes, but there are other, more powerful guilds."

The word 'guild' was a fearful hint. His overweening pride wouldn't permit him to play the underappreciated mage for long. The most infamous of all wizarding associations was the Void Claw Guild. Its chief aim was to surrender Laegrevel to the Void Gods in exchange for—what?—immortality? Godhood? No one outside the guild's masters knows for certain. But Broga and I had sparred with a few of their number in crossing Erdiúil. The ancient Ragoskan mage, Ulf-Birger, worshipped as a frost elemental among the mountain folk, had nearly ended us near the Graivold border. Now, I had to worry over the possibility Dabir would report us to his fellow guildsmen, which could well include Thaumazon. We'd be delivered to the masters in chains or in divers parts.

I tried not to let the violence of my heartbeat disturb my normal reserve.

On the fifth and topmost floor, the stairs gave onto an elaborately tiled anteroom with a great armored door in the back. Crystalline shards suspended in hanging sconces provided dim, ethereal light. I felt the cool tile through my stockings. Dabir paused outside the hammered steel door. "A note of caution before we enter the *ghurfat valqamir*. Mother's condition is decidedly fragile—not in mind, gods no, but in body. We've taken measures to ensure her continued vitality; however, our remedy might strike you as, well, grotesque."

"We're not here to pass judgment on you," I assured him.

"Officially." Dabir turned his back on us to hide a quick coded sign. I could hear a gloved finger rasp against the metal surface. The interior

bolts unlocked with a thunk. He cranked the door open and ushered us into an eerie, storm-thick atmosphere.

I didn't know what to expect based on Dabir's cautionary remark, but what we found strained my imagination. A large cylindrical vat brimming over with green-tinged vapor occupied the center of the domed chamber. Two entwined figures hovered in the otherworldly mist: an emaciated old woman and—I don't know—a daimon? A deviate? Whatever it was, the gossamer creature shrouded the woman in bands resembling the circle skirts popular in Tarquinia. These translucent bands pulsed in mild, glittering waves. The woman, clothed in an oversized burka, rocked to and fro with the motion as if underwater. Though her eyes were open and stark white, it was clear she was blind to us, faraway in the dreamtime.

Broga managed to ask: "Aysh, is she...?"

"Of course," Dabir said, enjoying our dazed looks. "But you see why she's not out browsing Souk Thuraem."

I drew in a breath and let it out in silence. The aquatic-seeming creature's putative head was an orb topped by two sweeping lobes on either side of a large maw. Getting closer, I could make out fine, hair-like structures around the orifice.

Dabir came up beside me. "The creature is extradimensional. Something she discovered in her astral state and later, found a way to manifest. It sustains her with energies culled from its original plane of existence. This arrangement allows for continuous monitoring. She never tires, never sleeps."

Light from the base of the vat projected the gentle movements of the creature and its human charge on the walls and ceiling. The sublime images alternately soothed and unnerved me. Here was a vision out of a preternatural order. "Is it sentient?"

"In its way. From what I gather, it's part of a collective—an intelligent kelp common to the waterways of its homeworld."

I could sense tremendous dreamtime energy radiating from his mother. The psychic effort she expended must've been exhausting. I pictured her astral self roving the sky above us, adjusting and readjusting the orbits of sundry moon fragments to keep them from crashing

to earth. It wearied me to even imagine the endless slew of dust and debris. “And she’s been like this how long?”

“Long enough to generate those awful rumors.”

His mother looked impossibly thin. Her burka billowed around her like careworn cerements, cloaking all but her fiery white eyes and clawed fingers. I gathered the creature had preserved the woman past her natural lifespan. She’d been reduced to an abstracted mind.

I was reminded of my first immersive foray into the dreamtime, the fundamental, unconscious substrate of the cosmos. It was like being newly-sighted. Concepts like distance, size, depth—space itself—lost all meaning. I was pure sensation amidst a vague, changeable void. The experience upset me. I despised losing myself or rather, my sense of self as a body. Bonding with tek like the *sukúla* was the best I could manage. I needed a tie to the material world—a sounding weight.

Coming from a long line of dreamtime adepts, that limitation marked me as a disappointment. My father wasn’t given to rancor but his periodic, soft-voiced gibes on the matter served as rebuke enough. The one comment I recall him making approximated an earthlore truism: “Your heritage towers over you like the Sentinel Tree over the dug earth.” *Vafna*, if only he could see me now...

Dabīr drew what I took to be a sign of greeting in the water droplets clinging to the tank. “Ordinary speech is a struggle for her and likely too slurred for you to understand. Telepathy comes easier. I’ve asked, however, that she ‘speak’ only to me. She tends to forget how powerful she is. She’s liable to connect us at the level of the deep unconscious.” He gave an affable smirk. “I’ve no interest in experiencing your childhood nightmares as my own.”

“I’m sure yours are more interesting,” Broga said.

“This may take some time—negotiating the cryptic profounds of the dreamtime and all that. If you’ve seen enough to satisfy your curiosity...” Dabīr waved us out and shut the door.

On the stairs, confident we couldn’t be overheard, Broga asked, “Seen anything like this before?”

“No, never.” I was still envisioning the woman’s astral form locking remnants of moon in their courses.

“It explains Dabīr’s leverage over the amirs and local authorities.”

“But to what end?” I lingered on the fourth floor landing. There was no telling where Nagib was lurking. “A few grimoires seems a trifle.”

“There’s always that feeding-post out front.”

“Virgin sacrifice?” The thought repulsed me. “Besides, dragons are supposed to be completely extinct.”

Broga regarded me ruefully. “You know as well as I: there are worse horrors in this world that demand a blood-price.”

Chapter Seven

The fine art of negotiation when you're at bay

Broga and I crossed the Bridge of the Holy Maid under cover of darkness. The night air was warm and arid. (How different from the dryness of late-summer in Ixzahl with its dusty-sweet grasses and teeming insect life.) The faint moon-scatterings overhead were a dire reminder of Dabir's mother. Images from the observation chamber haunted me, her body bottled up and withering like an autumn rush, her mind stretched across the sky, existence a vast torture rack. *Heech*. I knew enough of the dreamtime to apprehend the cost of her duties. Focusing your astral energy like that is a constant struggle against the chaos of your soul.

Perhaps I should release her, I thought. Then again, she might not survive the transition to the waking world. Or, abstracted as she is, she might have grown increasingly dispirited, inhuman. She could well emerge a ghastly daimon. Who could say after such a long period on the edge of incipient madness? Anyway, I couldn't think on her without talking myself into an ill-temper.

We walked in tense silence, wary of the occasional passerby. Night-time crossings were widely discouraged by the city lancers. Anyone traveling after dark was immediately suspect. We encountered a few late-working shopkeepers, a tinker prodding an overburdened cart, heedless carousers in twos and threes, a shambling indigent peddling fortune-telling poems. In spite of our unusual pairing, no one took much interest. The desire for discretion was mutual.

The Mu'mir side of the gorge featured the same tiered arrangement of dwellings, shops and temples as its Thangol counterpart. The buildings were mainly of basalt and whitewashed stone, though a thick, gray cabling snaked through many of the rooftop windcatchers. I gathered this cabling brought light, heat or some other benefit via precursor tek.

I'd seen portable furnaces in Matabwe encampments with similar cabling systems. I wondered about the power source. The cabling was impossible to trace in the dark. The conduits twisted in and out of shadow around the cliff-hugging structures.

The route Dabir outlined took us on the Avenue of Winged Metal toward a cluster of steam-shrouded spires. A patchwork roof of irregular wood planks and rusted metal spanned the length of the thoroughfare. Cut crystals suspended from the rafters offered a wan, coppery light. The crystals gave everything a muddling cast. It was as if we'd been pitched into a worry dream.

The bark of an owl perched in the trusses startled me. Another owl, perhaps a potential mate, volleyed with a sharp throat-noise of its own. *Tu-wuh-tu-wuh*. I looked up blankly, unable to find the source.

Broga chuckled at my involuntary jump.

"I'll have you know Kanavarim consider the owl a harbinger of death and ruin," I said. "They're thought to be the souls of those who died unavenged."

"Ah, could be Ovandu in another form then."

"That's not what I meant to imply."

"I know," Broga said softly. "But that's one of the nagging possibilities. She'd likely kill herself before suffering any serious debasement."

The thought sent a twist through the center of me. I was afraid to look at the dead. That was a principal difference between us. Broga could stare down the corpses. He could take them straight-on and continue unshaken. Me? The dead were eternally faceless. "Someday we'll stop sitting up nights with the dead and missing."

"We don't even know where some of them are—the bodies—going back to our mates from the fighting pits." Broga passed a hand over his face. "Whatever happened to Yaozutong, for instance? Transmuted? Vanished into some nether-place?"

"No one saw him perish. He might've made it out of that wizard's lair."

"I recite their names sometimes—the ones we've lost." Broga spit over the balustrade into the unfathomed black. "Just to remind myself they were real."

Their unjust fates seemed of a piece with the age: everyone unsettled,



searching for a place to call home, generations cycling through banditry and violence, jail, slavery, the fighting pits, insignificance both crime and sentence. How had that hard-faced Ragoskan, Odalis put it? ‘The way it’s fixed, dog-soldiers like us are only good for drawing flies.’

I put my hand on my saber-hilt and signaled to Broga with jutted chin. A great silhouette about the size and shape of the automaton came into view. It stood motionless side-on against the railing. The quavering crystalline light accented its broad head and shoulders. I quieted the scuffle of my boots on the sand-dusted flagstones. A few more cautious paces, however, showed the figure to be a leaden statuary fixed to a stone pedestal. Its overlarge hands curled around the hilt of a down-pointed axe. They suggested the immature and ungainly hands of a growing lad. “Mythical warrior?” I suggested.

“More like an executioner.” Broga pointed to the flattened, grim-lipped visage. “One that looks uncomfortably like Nagib.”

Other, similar statues adorned the thoroughfare at intervals the remainder of the way to our rendezvous spot. I was the first to recognize the sign above the shuttered door to the scrap metal shop as the same one Dabir had drawn. I put a hand to the central grille hatch in the steel door. “This looks to be it.”

“How are we supposed to—”

An unintelligible machine-spew of Kanavarim burst from the grille. “Niew?” I asked, backing up a step.

There was the sound of several bolts unlocking then the slatted door retracted up and over a darkened stone floor. From what we could make out from a distant overhead light, the interior looked to be a veritable cavern.

“We must be clever about this,” I said.

Broga’s sword rasped from its scabbard. “Allow me to deliver the smarts.” He crossed into the twilight space, blade up and at a cross angle for maximum protection.

I followed, saber in hand, reluctant to draw the gun for fear I’d waste its elemental bullet in a panic on some baseless threat. An indistinct figure under the light beckoned us forward. We picked our way through sorted heaps of precursor scrap: wire, brass rods, machine coils, pipes and bushelings, sealed units of a kind I didn’t recog-

nize, electronic detritus. The largest piles spilled out from shadowed, alcove-like recesses. I resisted the urge to grab up an unfamiliar input cage that reminded me of my lost sending shield.

A figure ahead tested the circuits of a thinking machine module with a pair of calipers. Plate steel and insulated wire littered the workbench. A full-face helmet secured to a protective apron disguised the figure's identity.

"Strange garb for a fortune-teller," Broga said, drawing himself up just outside the circle of light.

"I'm no seer," the filtered voice announced, "though I may be your doomsayer."

With a jarring *kra-onk*, the automaton lurched out from a recess behind us. I spun around, letting slip a hot, exasperated breath. The titanic mechanism raised a smoldering red fist in our direction. The hand dissolved in the self-generated heat to reform as a cannon with a spinning muzzle. I could see an ominous glow down the fluted barrel.

"No need for alarm, my friends," the helmeted stranger said to our backs.

I turned around and mustered what I thought was a convincing rebuke. "Who are you to affront Thaumazon of the Uneatable Soul?"

The figure unfastened the apron straps holding the helmet in place and tipped the hinged mask away from his sweaty head. The shell of the helmet remained attached to his back, the inside angled toward the ceiling. "I wouldn't dare insult the true Maghavan Thaumazon," the decrepit old man said, presumably on the basis of his helmet's penetrating view. "What is it *you* seek here? A great lying epic in his name?" His skin had the pallor of worn parchment. Freckles dotted the bridge of his nose and balding crown. The last few wisps of hair on his head were slicked against him like frayed threads.

Ignoring the automaton, Broga advanced on the man, flourishing his sword. I suppressed my dismay. He might hold back; he might. "We came with every good intention," Broga said. "A woman's life hangs in the balance."

"Surely more than one." The old man pulled out a handgun from under the workbench and waved it casually in Broga's direction. His



rheumy eyes peered down the weapon's large sighting fin. "So let's discuss who's worth saving, eh?"

Broga stopped but declined to lower his weapon. His back muscles bunched in anticipation. "What is this? Where's Niew?"

The old man grinned like a crazed juggler. "Ah, yes. The amir's daughter sends her regrets. She's been waylaid. Perhaps we start again, eh?" He stowed the gun somewhere below the surface of the workbench and stepped out from behind his unfinished machine, treating a pikestick like a staff. Thick rubberized boots were evident below the hem of his desert robe. "I am Garshasp Shir-Del, arch-mage to Amir Zartosht Harun ibn Abdus of House Mu'mir. *Salam va ashnai.*"

"*Khosh amadid,*" Broga replied through gritted teeth.

"Ranvir Zoëgan," I said then added with a nod, "Broga Saro-Akarele. Brothers in arms."

"Do not tell me." Garshasp held up a stunted hand. "You were promised perfumed winds and sun-kissed beauties, yes?" A wry smile crossed his lips.

Broga chimed the flat of his sword against his mail shirted shoulder. "We're looking for a former or current Matabwe slave."

"So I heard. For the Sultans General, you say?"

"There's a personal dimension," I offered, scabbarding my saber.

"What? Love? Revenge?" Garshasp's voice had a clipped, impatient quality. "What am I to believe about your motive purpose here? Certainly, your acquaintances give me pause."

"Who? Dabir?" I asked.

"Yes, that split-tongue scribe, the gunsmith Ilderim, the Thangol, of course."

"We've no interest in your clannish affairs."

Broga scoffed at the alternative. "And Dabir, we hardly trust him ourselves."

"Why then did you attempt to interfere with the automaton's directive?"

"The man he kidnapped—we had reason to believe he knew or knows the woman we seek." Broga sheathed his sword with a twirling flourish. The automaton remained utterly motionless. Perhaps the controls were in Garshasp's helmet. "Who was he? Is he still alive?"

"Certainly." The arch-mage jerked his head as if to rid himself of a

haunted thought. "I will tell you something on this because you are yonder-men and lack an understanding of this feud. As an aside, I say there is a chance you are here on commission from the Sultans General to end the matter, one way or another. Perhaps you favor the Thangol. But what I say now should persuade you otherwise."

The hand on the pikestick spasmed. Garshasp backed against the workbench for relief. His words, however, rang out strong and true. His speech seemed to be the last vestige of his youth. "This Thangol man—the kidnapped one—he went over to us willingly. We had to make a show of it for his sake. He is Thangol after all. There are family relations to be considered, family pride. Have we issued any ransom demands? Have we hung him from the entrance to Souk Laryida as in days of old? No, no."

Broga squared up opposite him. "Can we speak to him then about this Matabwe woman?"

"Perhaps—if you prove your worth. As they say, 'A hundred words does not equal with half action.'" The older Kanavarim seemed to enjoy aphorisms nearly as much as we Druna.

"For what reason would he change his allegiance?" I was confused about the seriousness of the quarrel between the amirs. Some had taken it up as a spiritual cause while others considered it little more than a nuisance. Clearly, we were talking to a fervent partisan.

"These Thangol of yours, they are a dangerous breed. They make ready a disaster—for us, for Al-Mahad, perhaps for Laegrevel itself." He caught a wheezy breath and gripped the edge of the workbench to steady himself. "This kidnapped man is afearred for us all."

"What is it—this disaster?"

"Blood magick most dire. They mean to shake the city to its founding stones. Believe you me, they plot to resuscitate and enslave Thaumiel to their collective will." His eyes darted from Broga to me and back again, looking for hints of disbelief. "We thought the automaton might counter this spell, whatever its nature, but..." He gave a long sad shake of his head. "Ah, for the lack of something as paltry as a soul."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Pay it no mind. Sometimes my age shows through." Garshasp let out a sickly chortle. "This proof...I have a task for you: convince the

spasbet to release the Mu'mir arrested on the bridge. We were the only band to take losses—human losses—in the incident. She should be inclined to grant this request, regardless. The spasbet has every reason to despise the Thangol.”

“Why is that?”

He averted his beady eyes. “It is not for an honorable man to say.”

Broga shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “So you want me to secure the release of the men who tried to kill me?”

“If I have it aright, only after you charged into them.”

“I was compelled to even the odds.”

“Unwittingly giving the wrong house the upper-hand.”

I looked over my shoulder at the stilled automaton. Its wide-bore cannon loomed large in my sight. “I imagine House Mu'mir is dangerous enough.”

“But being philosophers at heart, imminently more reasonable. Mu'mir and Thangol: you will find them as different as earth and sky.” Garshasp thumped his chest with his fist. “Do we have a bargain then?”

Broga returned the gesture with added force. “So long as we don't have to seal it with *our* blood.”

—fragments of stone and shattered moonglow broke over me—the darkness streamed in, snuffing out the stars—my recoiling heart shot into my throat—I lost all sense of up or down—there's something else here in my dream, I thought—I'd enough flickering dream awareness to register that much—the air turned dense, viscous—luminous shoots emerged—coiled in on each other—defined a glimmering, bell-shaped whirl—*heeck*—it was her—Dabīr's mother—her shroud of hazy light enveloped me like a dust devil—the vortex buffeted my head with alien thoughts—a turbulent mishmash that dropped to an electrical pop-pop-popping when she 'spoke'—*oth-othend mysters in the te-temple of muh-many dimensionsss...*

—*I don't understand.*

—*The-the temple Grihbad.*

—Ah, I recalled Dabīr mentioning it in relation to the constable’s wings. *What about it?*

—*Th-Thaumiel...*

—*I’m sorry, I don’t*— She made no sense, but that’s generally the way of seers. The ever-changing mélange of futures proves too much. *Do you know something of what’s to come?*

—*Guh-god of the duh-double aspect...*

—*Are the Thangol successful in reviving it? Is that what you’re saying?*

—*In thesert te-temple...* The alien mantle shimmered convulsively. I could feel her pulling away, distracted in her thoughts.

—*What does Dabīr have to do with this?*

—*Nuh-not Dabīr...* There followed an indecipherable gurgle. *Buh-rood name—*

—the vortex of light and thought returned—a swift, lamenting rush—exciting angry flashes from the fighting pits—and reversed itself out of the mystic dream—a sun-strong horizon snapped to black like a bedsheet—silencing the electrical pop and hum—leaving me aching for sounds from the real—ah, my hands—dusted in blue starlight—the unfamiliar constellations—cold and inscrutable—

I woke with a plosive breath, heart beating madly. My arms were crossed over my chest. I’d been hugging myself under the silken covers, *vafna*, trying to make myself smaller in the dark. Grimmur must’ve cracked my psyche. I’m not—I mean, I wasn’t—given to unbidden dreamtime episodes before. My talent is—was—for precursor machines. Mechanisms, not mental landscapes. This—this dreamtime self, this crossbreed communion—it wasn’t me. I was a tek-mage. That’s all I’ve ever been. That’s all my native powers allowed. Until then...

The public entrance to the jailhouse was clearly designed to preclude gang raids or rescue attempts. The flight of narrow steps leading to the second-story guard box allowed for only one person at a time. A disgruntled sentry confirmed the spasbet’s availability then waved Broga and me through an iron-bound door. Upon stepping into the foyer,



another city lancer promptly relieved us of our weapons while a third observed us behind a false wall, his arbalest thrust through a murder hole. I emptied the handgun of its single bullet before turning it over. The one-two of our encounter with Garshasp and my dreamtime babble with Dabir's mother had heightened my anxiety. I couldn't lose the Twin Fire of Guānshén for anything. There was no telling when—or against whom—I might be compelled to use it.

The hallway debauched upon a temporary holding room dominated by a floor-to-ceiling cage. A young, bored lancer supervised the motley band of *shirgol* sots and miscreants idling behind the iron bars. Our escort directed us to one side. A spittle-inflected snore caught my attention and I pulled up short. "Look," I said to Broga, "our bandit friend laid out like stricken timber."

Majid was stretched full-length on the earthenware floor, his turbaned head propped under his stubby arms.

Broga smacked the bars with the palm of his hand to set them ringing. The bandit snuffled into his unkempt beard. Broga gestured to a bedraggled youth pacing close-by. "Rouse him for us, will you?"

"Must I?" the prisoner asked. "We waited so long for him to stop clacking his tongue. It was like the repeated noise of a scavenger beetle."

Our escort had sauntered ahead without us for several paces. He returned in a huff. "What do you here? Ignore these misbegotten curs."

Broga rattled the bars again. "Ho, Majid! Faithful servant of Syed ad-Din!"

One eye twitched, apparently signal enough to the reluctant youth, who levered the bandit to his feet. "Hup!"

"What's that doomsday drumming?" Majid said in a daze.

"The spasbet awaits." Our escort worked his jaw, impatient.

I held up a hand, wincing from embarrassment.

"Exhausted all your usual lairs?" Broga asked through the bars.

Majid squinted, uncertain, then broke into a sideways grin of recognition. "Ah, *arai siyidri*, come in from the desert, eh? Have you jolted me out of a needful sleep only to assail me with more abuse?"

"And charge you with a simple job of work."

"How so?"

“First, what are you here for? I’ll not seek to free you if it’s a serious offense.”

The bandit beamed at the unexpected chance to recover his liberty. His cheeks flushed like an eager child’s. “Me, serious? Neither in my offenses nor in my pleasures. If I’m to blame for anything, it’s for suffering scoundrels. I was in this Qmor’za game with a salty squat of a cameleer, you see, and he tried a cheat on the—”

“So you were both cheating?”

“For lack of better prospects, the needy pinch each other. Respect lies in the style of it.”

Our escort put a hand on my elbow. “I have other, more important duties.”

Broga took a few steps toward the administrative offices to appease the lancer. “I’ll see what I can do.” Walking backwards, he added: “But know that you’ll be doubly in debt to us.”

“But this job—”

“No questions. A corner boy could serve as well.” Broga’s lips curled into a teasing smile.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know—your mouth moves of its own accord.”

Our escort rapped on a weathered, semi-arched door and received permission to enter. He tugged on the door pull and motioned us inside.

Taraneh stood in her light armor from behind a trestle desk overspread with foolscap. She gave leave to our escort with a nod.

“How goes it, Spasbet?” Broga asked.

“The same pains as yesterday.” She gestured to the foolscap and resumed her corner seat. The numeric columns dotting the paper suggested a ledger. Her plum-colored lips were tight from fatigue or frustration. “What brings you to my humble work farm?”

“Our mission,” Broga said.

“A favor in service of our mission.” I glanced out the long, narrow window opposite the door to avoid the constable’s troubled look. I was loath to bother her when she was already distressed. The window overlooked the thoroughfare and offered a partial view of the pinwheel-shaped exercise yard toward the back of the walled complex. I caught



a glimpse of a prisoner taking his paces. A dusty chalk-light suffused everything. I was slick with perspiration from the late-morning heat. Summer in the dune wastes: a world of unremitting sun, wind-blown grit and heatwave weather.

Taraneh quirked her mouth. "If I'm at liberty to grant it..."

"We've made a tentative bargain with Garshasp Shir-Del: information in exchange for the Mu'mir taken on the bridge." Broga put his hands together and lowered his gaze as if to put himself at her mercy.

The constable let slip a hot breath. "So you want me to release them—all of them?"

"That was the bargain." Broga straightened. "Were you planning to bring them to trial? Do you even have trials here?"

"We have judges aplenty. Unfortunately for me, they're in the pockets of the amirs."

"So there's not much you can do anyway except hold them while you investigate. Won't Amir Zartosht or whoever petition for their release?"

"The petition was filed yesterday morning but requires the unanimous approval of three judges." The constable got to her feet. "The Thangol-affiliated judge has, of course, refused..."

"Hence, the need for our help," I said.

"We can both get what we want here." Broga crossed his arms. "Release the Mu'mir this afternoon. I'll inform the Thangol of the timing and we'll let their feud take its course."

Taraneh inclined her head toward the window. When she turned this way, the light caught her dented cheeks and silvered gorget. She closed her lips in grim repose.

"This is what you want, yes? For them to exterminate each other." Broga took a measured step toward her. The desk was within easy reach. "Either that or gin up chaos for its own sake. I'm not sure what you and Dabir have planned."

"We've no joint plans, I assure you." The sharp of her voice was a cool unpleasantness.

"Then why turn us over to his care and, shall we say, oversight?"

"Ask a favor and accuse me at once? I see how you earned your scars. You should leave negotiations to the Druna. He makes better use of silence." She flicked the word out like a blade.

“*Aysh*, I’m asking for my own sake.” Broga managed to sound both hurt and insistent at the same time. He was evidently bothered by her secrecy and the thought of more—perhaps greater—obstacles placed surreptitiously between him and his half-sister. “What is it you want from us? You tried to hire me for my swordwork. For what, exactly?”

“Do you want me to grant this favor or no?” The office’s worn geometric tapestries somewhat flattened her rising pitch.

The flexing of his shoulders told me Broga’s ire was up. “It would be quicker if you were out with it. Who do you want rid of? Dabīr? The automaton? The city’s robber-overlords?” He thumped his mailed chest. “I do have my limits.”

“By the grace of Valquamir, there’s more to this situation than you know.” She asserted herself with her body, leaning, pivoting, gesturing.

Sometimes Broga’s impatience to get on with it got the better of him. When he had a purpose in mind, he found it impossible to be where he was. He was always between here and there—there being where he wanted to be—the elusive future. I lacked definitive motives and, compared to him, a prevailing sense of mission. I was a Druna without strong appetites, placid and equable. It was in my nature to take things as they came. I introduced a calming tone. “Garshasp said the Thangol are plotting to revive Thaumiel. Is that what you mean?”

“I’ve heard the rumors, of course.” Taraneh swallowed with apparent relief at my intervention. “But who knows if it’s a true threat. Since the age of the serpent-lords many have tried and failed to prove that statue an imprisoned god.”

“And the other part?” Broga asked.

“A private matter.” The constable became close-lipped again. Much like Broga, she could cast a sort of furious solitude around her.

Ever the diplomat, Broga pressed the issue. “Something to do with your grudge against the head of the Thangol—what’s his name?”

“Ormazd al-Ashraf. Did Dabīr tell you this?”

I shook my head on Broga’s behalf.

“Have you heard what Ormazd can do? What he is?”

“A dreamtime adept? Some sort of deviate?” I asked.

“They call him the Daimon-eye of Al-Mahad.” She toyed with a quill in its stone holder. “It’s no simple epithet.”

“What do you mean?”

Taraneh fixed on Broga. “One of his eyes—bloated and blank—is an alien graveworm. I don’t know its origin or species. Maybe it’s a gift from Grihbad. Regardless, when the amir fixes his gaze on you, it leeches your very soul. *Vay*, I’ve witnessed its dizzying, soul-stealing light...” She half-closed her eyes for a blink or two. “If I’m to honor your request, I should do it well before the night watch.” She put a finger to a droplet of sweat at her temple.

“Thank you.” Broga clenched and unclenched his jaw. “And, not to sound ungrateful, but would you be willing to remand the bandit Majid to us? I believe we can make use of him.”

“I doubt any but vultures and hyenas could make that claim.”

“Do you have need of him—for your merchants’ sake?”

“How is it you know him?”

“We crossed paths—and swords—on the Belrak Sands.”

“Then you know to guard your purses.” She shrugged her assent. “It seems you’re making light work of my jail.”

The dream-vision from the night before was still working on me, twisting my thoughts from Thaumiel to Thangol to Ovandu. “The Thangol man who was kidnapped—Garshasp didn’t give his name.”

“Sameed Ganim, Ormazd’s great nephew. A libertine who fancies himself an artist. I’ve seen a few of his sculptures—hideous-looking idols. I don’t know what value he’d have to the Mu’mir.”

“Would he be privy to the Thangol’s plot?”

“It’s possible, though he’s not considered among the inner circle.” She came around the desk to say in a low voice: “As for Dabir, I suspect he’s involved for his own reasons. I trust you’ll discover how without shortening him by a head.”

Broga broke into an expansive grin. “Believe me, Spasbet, we’ve learned enough of this desert life to take only what we need.”

On learning of his early release, Majid shook off his drowsiness with a hoarse, joyful wowl then took up a litany of fatuous praise. He kept

up this one-sided discourse while we reclaimed our weapons and descended the stairway to the bustling street. The flagstones inspired a brief celebratory caper while he invoked lesser deities favored by thieves and gamblers: “Yanāthra, Dhu-Kindaq, Hiraban the Father of Good Fortune, Sahrna—”

“Your gods would do better to deny you breath enough to speak,” Broga said, drawing him under the shady awning of an unopened shop. “I’ve a task for you before you fall back in with your pack of desert wolves.”

Majid stroked his frazzled beard in a self-calming gesture. “I haven’t forgotten, *arai siydri*, by the seven-pointed star, no.”

“This task might seem trifling,” Broga said, “but believe me when I say it’s of the utmost importance. Failure to execute it quickly could have dire ramifications—for you least of all.”

“Straightaway then, whatever it may be.”

Broga gave him a message for the gunsmith Ilderim Maalouf and asked him to repeat it until he could do so verbatim.

“*Shaab-hemkeyr*. Blessings upon you and yours, outlander.” Majid started away. “I’ll tarry for neither man nor god.”

“Nor woman,” Broga added.

Majid’s spotted gold tooth winked in the dust-filtered sun then he became another yellowed *tob* in the crowd.

I skirted a hay-trusser hauling an oversized bale strapped to her back. She must’ve been drenched in sweat under her masking robe. The heat was stifling me and I wasn’t carrying anything more than a light belt purse and the precursor handgun. “Are you certain about this—using Majid?”

“No, but what’s the alternative?” Broga asked. “Those merchants in Souk Faravān—we have to assume most are spies for one house or another. I don’t want to risk being seen with Ilderim shortly before those Mu’mir prisoners are released and ambushed by the Thangol. It’s important we maintain our neutrality.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “Besides, we’ve an errand of our own.”

“What now?”

“We’ve fulfilled our part of the bargain. We need Dabir to contact Garshasp so we can claim our reward.”



“More information.”

“We’ve been trading in it now for how long? It’s been a little over two years since our escape from Skulon Gøra and about a year since the original company broke up—what was left of it when we got to Rahalid, anyway?”

Knowing Broga, this last wasn’t so much about our loose fellowship of escapees as his unrequited love, Leire. Her departure was a chronic source of distress for him—another chance at happiness dashed. My decision to return to Ixzahl had weighed on me for precisely this reason. Through no fault of his own, Broga was estranged from everything—his disavowed father, his clan and race, the traveling company he’d yoked together from assorted loners. He was left with too much of his own self.

Over the course of years, he’d nurtured feelings for Leire only for her to rebuff him at what he considered the most propitious moment for them to assay a relationship. Given her confused emotional state, I could see the sense of her decision. She’d only just freed herself of a taxing emotional bond with a midhna, a sort of weaponized faerie creature, and hardly knew her own mind. Additionally, our sword-quest for Ovandu promised only more and greater dangers.

None of those considerations impressed Broga. His feelings overwhelmed his reasoning. He pined for the gutsy and graceful Alziran in pensive silence, mad at himself for waiting on some unlikely caprice to bring her back. Perhaps someday their paths would cross but in the meantime the days proceeded apace, wasted. The possibility of this secondary reunion gave added impetus to our search. He thought, however illogically, that finding Ovandu would somehow speed Leire’s return.

When we reached the Bridge of the Holy Maid, Broga paused at the balustrade to peer at the chasm-spanning likeness of Thaumiel. My glance strayed to the incised eye shared by the conjoined heads. I tried to picture it filmed over and alive but its size and sheer solidity resisted my feeble imagination. I fell back on scrutinizing its earthy patina. The harsh desert sun exposed it as dusky red. “Bronze, you think? That would account for its rock-like façade. Bronze naturally tends to return to its initial state of ore.”

“Cast by wizardry? No ordinary artisan could’ve fashioned it.” Broga shook his head. “What do you know of this Thaumiel?”

“Rethinking your glib attitude toward Ombwike?”

“I’ve never denied the existence of the gods; only the idea we have their sympathetic attention.” Gripping the handrail, Broga spat into the unfathomed blackness. “You remember that blind god-beast Ikaalis? *Aysh*, god or no, it betrayed no concern in destroying its own worshippers. It simply lashed out, berserk with the urge to flee. We were inconsequential.”

“Earthlore suggests another view.” The language of *jör ugsa* is like poetry—high and free. Its sacred corpus mixes aphorism, lyric and philosophy in a manner that, based on theme and placement order, constitute a unity. This dialectic allows for the merging of opposites, the discursive tone of reason with weighted emotion. I quoted a couplet from *The Spring Psalter*: “*The world’s commons and the mind / Ringing shellmounds, close and far away.* It means the knotted shapes of nature and thought correspond in such a way that everything is connected to everything else.”

“That may be.” Broga raised his eyes to the towering palisades. “But when we die—when our thoughts end—we’re only good for the midden-heap.”

A woman’s plaintive voice floated over the heads of passersby. A call to prayer or cry for help? “*Vafna*, we would say it’s the idea of you that’s the true man, eternal and indivisible.”

“Forgive me if I’m not anxious to learn that for a surety anytime soon.”

“Dabir boasts of a great library. There’s bound to be something on Thaumiel.” I knuckled my forehead out of embarrassment. “Wait, what am I thinking? There’s a shrine or temple here. I remember it from collecting the sumpter camel after the incident.” I gestured toward the multi-foil arch on the other side of the avenue. “At the time I didn’t know I was seeing Thaumiel in miniature.”

We wended our way crosswise through the foot traffic and, bending under the iron chain athwart the shrine’s entrance, approached the iconic statuary. The pedestal-mounted sculpture was made from an ebon granite. Though the alcoved figure stood only about six or seven

hands tall, it conveyed an unmistakable impression of monumentality. The statue's lower pair of arms were forcibly clenched in front of its armored chest and its legs were like the exaggerated haunches of a lion without pastern or paw.

Again, I was drawn to the strange cyclopean eye under the spiked crown. It was abstract but not lacking in associations. Whatever sublime power the figure accrued through stance and cut, its locus was in that singular orb. I understood it as an alluring absence, the type of space in which a bird might hatch, or alternately, fold itself up and die.

A short, middle-aged woman in a sandy brown *hajib* and matching robe emerged from the strung-bead partition to our left. The *hajib* was secured at her throat with a gold brooch in the form of a calligraphic symbol I didn't recognize but assumed was the sign for Thaumiel. "*Salam va ashnai*," she said, her plump face a polite blankness.

"*Khosh amadid*," I replied.

"What brings you to our humble shrine?"

"Are you the custodian here? Or imam?" I would have flushed red from embarrassment if we Druna were capable of it. "Please forgive any offense. I don't know the honorifics associated with your faith."

"I am what we call an ustam or helper-teacher. The faith of Thaumiel is a lay religion. We have no sheikhs or ayatollahs. The—how do you say?—laity manages our affairs in council."

I introduced us by name and country of origin with a slight bow of the head. If she recognized my sobriquet, she gave no sign, maintaining a cool civility. "By order of the Sultans General we're to find a former handmaiden to one of the amira—a Matabwe like my body-slave here. Are there Matabwe among your... worship group? What do you call it?"

"*Jamaam*."

"Among your *jamaam*?"

"None that I know of and we keep no registers. We treat all with equal respect, whether it is their first time at prayer or their last." She pointed to the hanging screen of glass beads separating the public vestibule from the rest of the temple. "The prayer hall is open now, in fact..."

“If I may, what is the essence of your faith? Perhaps there’s some scripture to which you can refer me?”

“Our scripture is called the *Ayat Muqadasat min Althiywmil*; in Konaë, the *Blessed Verses of Thaumiel*.”

“Althiywmil—that’s how you say it?”

“Among followers.” She cleared her throat. “Your faith is earthlore, yes? Do you also have scripture?”

I nodded. “Three books—the Books of Seasons, we call them.”

“But no gods?”

“None but nature or *amneskur eðli*, which is, *vafna*, Laegrevel itself and every dimension beyond. ‘Cosmic nature’ would be an apt translation.”

“Ah, interesting.” A flicker of her eyes denoted genuine curiosity for the first time. “Despite its history in violence, Althiywmil might appeal to your intellect. Everything in nature bears Althiywmil’s stamp like a coin. Our godhead is the source of consciousness and at once, due to the machinations of the rebel servitor, Jardinsaya, also the death instinct. That is the duality of Althiywmil: on the one hand, the promise of transcendence through a nurturing of the soul; and on the other, the tendency toward primal degeneracy and death. We—all mortals—are emanations of Althiywmil’s consciousness.”

The ustam paused, expressionless a moment, then gave Broga a sidelong look. “Your people alone read the death instinct in the War of Neverness, eh? That war—Katakath won in ways we have yet to apprehend. It turned the races of Laegrevel against each other and purged us of moral feeling, letting only the cruel survive. The Matabwe had the size of it, no matter what the common people say.”

Broga was moved to smile a little. “That’s kind of you to say.”

“We worship only the godhead’s vast consciousness, its awareness of all things and generosity of soul.” The ustam reached into the folds of her robe for a pocket-sized book. The leathern cover was slick and worn from use. “The Soul-giver—that is what we call it here. Its self-destructive side—*la samih* Althiywmil *la*—that can stay sealed away.”

If you’ll forgive the term, I’d nearly forgotten the pleasures of god-talk and its attendant conjectures. Though curious and sharp-witted enough, Broga was a perfect stoic who eschewed speculative thought.

He regarded it as a luxury reserved for the last mortal man, an atrophied wanderer seeking philosophic comforts amid the dust of civilization. The men of the here and now, he reasoned, were obligated to act. Ah, the irony of my wish to philosophize more—now that I'm purgatoried with an actual god and free to indulge in all manner of airy musings...

"What do you mean 'sealed away?'" I asked.

"You probably think it a statue." Her full cheeks dimpled with amusement.

"Thought of incredible dimensions..."

"The scripture explains it, how Jardinsaya overwhelmed Althiymil and split the godhead's essence. There—what you see from the bridge—is the form of Althiymil betrayed by its instinct for death, its earthly body fossilized or, hmm, oss-, oss-..." Her small mouth pursed into a doubtful 'O'.

"Ossified?"

"Yes, that is the Konae word." She went on more brightly than before: "The other, transcendent part lies in Grihbad." The ustam offered the book with a slight bow. "I would be pleased to know the maghvan carried the holy word of Althiymil."

"But this is your personal copy?"

She glanced away, abashed. "I have the means to acquire another. Besides, I know it word for word..." She had all the courtesy of the religious elect. As a blessed acolyte of the reigning god here, she could afford to be generous.

"*Khohesh ghaabel*. I will cherish it." My fingers closed over the book and I slipped it into my money purse for safekeeping. "Grihbad—that's a temple of some sort?"

"A temple, a tomb and also a proving ground. That is where Althiymil's transcendent consciousness lies. It tries your soul, it does, the worthy emerging with gifts, the unworthy...who knows? Condemned to the dark of un-being, I should think."

"Have you gone there?"

"No, not yet. But it is a pilgrimage I must one day make—when I feel strengthened enough by prayer." Her voice was self-assuring rather than regretful.

Broga shot me a meaningful look. His swordquest beckoned...

“*Vafna*, thank you for your time and again, for the scripture.”

She produced several squares of folded papyrus from her robe. “Oh, please, take a fortune-telling poem as well.”

I’d little use for divination regardless of its form, but to avoid offense, I accepted a poem and passed it to Broga. “May it always be springtime in your heart.”

“*Atubaruk*,” she said, resuming her former muted solicitude.

Out on the avenue, Broga thumbed open the top flap of the envelope. Instead of verse, the unfolded papyrus revealed a vaguely familiar glyph. The arrangement of arrowhead and dagger marks hovered above the reed paper as if projected, its edges flattened and smeared, fragmenting my vision.

I suddenly sensed the nature of the glyph—or leastwise, what it portended. “*Heech*, no, stop, stop.” I snatched the paper out of Broga’s hand and crumpled it out of sight.

“What’s come over you?”

“There’s a disturbing aura about it—something untoward.” I regarded the balled-up papyrus. “I know, I know, I’m not given to dreamtime intuitions, but this...” Earlier I’d described for him my unsettling astral communion with Dabir’s mother. At the time, however, I hadn’t grasped its bearing on my own meager dreamtime powers. This extrasensory warning was the first hint of a heightened sensitivity. I felt as if I were on the dizzying brink of the canyon splitting Al-Mahad in twain, the depthless black enticing and nauseating both.

“What’s more,” I said with due solemnity, “I recognize this glyph. I’m sure it’s the one Dabir was sketching yesterday at breakfast.”

Chapter Eight

The unlikely end of our swordquest?

We were still a fair distance from the manse when we saw a lumpy mess tethered to the feeding-post. I strained my eyes in an effort to make it out. A bolt of rough cloth? A leaky grain sack? And where was our precious sumpter camel?

Broga hand-signed for quiet and took up his broadsword. From our initial vantage, an adjacent ruin precluded a view of the moon tower other than the topmost story and its crowning dome. Danger possibly lurked nearby, as yet concealed.

I availed myself of the precursor gun, though the weapon gave me little confidence. I worried whether, confronted by a sudden threat, I'd be capable of the mental focus required to fire it properly. I tried to picture the bullet snug in its chamber, giving off an eerie fluorescence, waiting for my thought-command.

Until we'd reached the vicinity of the *bruj mah* I'd trod the warm flagstones with my head down. I'd wanted to avoid the bleached sky, the enclosing cliffs, the edge giving onto the abyss. I'd felt increasingly like a creature in an oversized and slowly closing wolf trap. Here I was in a remote desert waste, abused by the sun, every crease silted with sand, liable to lose myself in whatever direction I looked, haunted by a runecraft more powerful than any I'd yet encountered. What would the glyph yield upon closer examination? A glance proved it to be suggestive, but of what? It reminded me of a fire in a needle-tree forest, the needle packets exploding, sending sparks everywhere.

Then this: it became evident the object lashed to the post was a disfigured corpse. The body was swathed in coarse linen cerements that left only the blood-boltered head exposed. The ghastly sight jarred me from the malaise into which I'd sunk. Dried blood and an excitement of flies obscured the features past recognition. But the silver bells

glinting in the dark, blood-matted hair clued us to the dead woman's identity.

I drew in a breath of heated air and whispered, "This—it must be Niew. Remember what Sanaz said about the bells in her hair?"

The crunch of plaster sounded from the shadowed lower level of the tower. A dry, raw fear rose in my throat. Impossibly, the shadows obscured the entirety of the wrecked interior. The mystifying black oozed out from the long-abandoned portion of the manse as if part of an airy gauntlet, the fingers closing into a fist. I could hear multiple footsteps and the chiming of light mail. The noises grew in clarity and volume until Sanaz emerged from the darkness accompanied by a pair of house guards, swords drawn. Tamas remained scrupulously hidden behind his effluence.

Sanaz padded out of the preternatural haze. "Ai, she was the niece of Amir Zartosht Harun ibn Abdus of House Mu'mir." She made a dismissive gesture. "Slain and disgraced by Garshasp Shir-Del out of fear she was collaborating with us. Note the Matabwe symbol for the 'omnipotence of the gods' carved into her forehead. It might be hard to make out under the welter of blood. I understand many such symbols were inspired by your former mountain home—coupled boulders and fissures eroded over ages."

I looked hopelessly at the mutilated face, unable to isolate the symbol from the gashes and gore. My nearness to so much gratuitous cruelty worked on my nerves. A tremor of guilt pulsed through me. Had we gotten her murdered?

"What is this?" Broga challenged, declining to relax his swordarm.

"How would you say? A ruse to cause you trouble? Perhaps Garshasp needed an excuse beyond the incident with the automaton to justify a direct assault on your person. It also allowed him an opportunity to dispatch the untrustworthy Niew. Quite clever—for a Mu'mir." Her maternal beauty had an edge to it. The hard angles of her cheeks and small, prim mouth suggested a bitch-goddess idol.

"Is the spasbet meant to believe I committed this atrocity?"

"Whether she believes it or not is immaterial. My guess is he intends to jail you and then drag out the adjudication. He's planning something and wants you out of the way while he executes it."



“Planning what?” Broga looked from one formidable house guard to the other.

“We suspect he plans to resurrect Thaumiel. Have you visited the Mu’mir side of the city?”

“You know we have...”

“Then you noticed the cabling?” She shrugged, anxious to explain and be done with this task. “It’s an energy grid of some sort. Garshasp has a precursor power source or hopes to wrest one from Grihbad that will invest his god with new life.”

“But why?”

“The automaton was a test. What mage would not want a god at their command?”

“And you’re here to—what? Offer protection?” Broga’s knuckles whitened around the hilt.

“I told you, we honor our debts,” Sanaz said with acid dignity. “Come with us. We can shelter you and, if desired, help find your handmaiden.”

“And if we refuse your generosity?”

Sanaz eyed me with contempt. My gun was just a bit of waggery to her. “I’ll be forced to bring you low with admonishments of stone and lightning.”

Broga issued a disdainful snort. “Nevertheless, we’ll gang our own way.”

The atmospheric dark frenzied around him, screening him from view. I called after him but heard only the rasp and clangor of blades in answer.

There’s a Matabwe word for what happened next: *msukuwazo*. It means roughly ‘an impulse born of neither speech nor thought’ and carries with it a dark trace of fate.

My trigger finger twitched. The handgun fired with the thrill of vindication. I felt the blood go thick behind my eyes. The streaking bullet cut through the veiling black. I glimpsed Broga coughing up a draught of invasive darkness, sword flashing between the guards. Sanaz just stood there, eyes closed and seemingly invulnerable, calling down her patron god or accessing the dreamtime directly. Roiling the black in its wake, the bullet sped on, its target a shaky outline in my head.

Only a slight toss of the shoulders indicated Tamas saw the incoming threat before it detonated into an ethereal and immolating blue.

My knees gave out from a sympathetic, all-over pain. Toppling in agony, the whole of me seemed to contract into my quailing heart.

The ghostly fire raged up and down and through Tamas and through and through and through. There was no relief from the soul-searing heat. His carapace rucked-rumpled and sloughed away to nothing. Skin and bone and viscera burned to gulfs of shrieking thought until he was nothing more than a calcified nub.

The bullet is a forevering instant. It ravages Tamas into a kind of pitched hysteria. I'm out of my head with his dying memories. Most are rapid-fire impressions from childhood: dragon teeth dice tumbling against the flagstones; a skinny, hairless dog; a bobbing knife working the peel from a lemon; the hem of a mage's embroidered cloak; a shard of mirror, his reflected carapace pink with newness... Each image is as luminescent as a painting on glass.

My head empties and fills again, this time with assorted wickedness. A sickened slave-child left for jackals on the blistering sand. *Shirgol* juice addicts tricked into serving as magickal suicide bombers. Dazed young girls given over to the rotting pleasure of aged pashas. Clouds of choking darkness and their anonymous victims. The stink of his burning lays me low. I clench my jaw against the nausea.

The first time I fired the sending shield it was like something breaking inside. The first time I killed an opponent in the pits was worse. I worry this—this death-cycle—is deforming my soul beyond mending. I feel his mortal sins staining through my hopes, blackening my conscience. Even the meager consolations of earthlore escape me. I thrash and vacillate in the un-time, despairing...

By imperceptible degrees, the barking fire and its flickering nightmare abates. I sob a hot curse. Time resumes its ordinary temperature.

I raised my head from the ground, tasting the salt of tears in my mouth and throat. *Heech*. To breathe again and be aware of it... The sounds of swordplay rung in my ears. Tamas lay unmoving among discarded brick, flickering bluish.

There was a knocking around of hateful impulses. I sat up, my chest tight and achy, willing the urges to subside. I'd somehow grit my way

through this episode. As Broga used to remind me, ‘A life without pain is only sleepwalking.’

The house guards slashed and parried in furious defense of Sanaz. A sort of heat shimmer vitiated the air around her. Broga spurned one foe with his heel then put his broadsword clean through the brisket of the other. The stricken guard bleated his last, eyes wide and watery. His compatriot attacked before Broga could pull the sword free from the man’s chest. Broga pushed the corpse away, pressing his hand into the outpouring wound. The intended deathblow shrilled against Broga’s gauntlet and drew an arc of blood along his forearm.

Broga leapt back, cursing in Matabwe under his breath. The follow-up swordstrike went wide. Broga lunged from a crouch, coming under the backhand swipe and palmed the guard’s face to blind him with blood. A quick chop to the throat and the soldier relinquished his weapon, gagging and livid.

Before Broga could take advantage, however, an ultrastellar light spilled from a sudden rent above Sanaz’s head. The chimerical energy, both darksome and fantastically saturated, fixed him in place. Broga appeared to be a statue of pitch-black blue under its baleful glare.

I came to my height and fumbled for the saber at my hip, careful to stay outside the magicked beam of light. The breach in reality cowed me. It was a rare and sublime feat for any mage, much less one fully-conscious. How could I possibly confront this sorceress and live?

Sanaz shifted her glazed eyes to me. “What pathetic defense do you intend? We both know you’re neither magician nor weaponsmaster. I’ve need of your companion, but you—you I’m at liberty to dispatch at whim. And for murdering Tamas, I plan to sprawl your death over eons.” She indicated the otherworldly rays immobilizing Broga. “From that distance, you see only a strange, extradimensional brilliance. But your Matabwe friend knows differently. He sees the source of that awful light—the manifold eye of the Void God, Yath’alm.”

Every time I thought the worst had already happened events conspired to show me wrong. Yath’alm was the judge-god consort of no less than perfidious Malagorn, the dream-creator of Laegrevel itself. The Void God was legendary for near-infinite torment, decohering its victims atom by atom unto nothingness. Despite my best effort to keep

calm, my chin crumpled at the prospect of suffering the god's attentions.

"Your cracked expression suggests a familiarity with my patron deity." Partially refracted by the shaft of supernal light, her voice quavered a bit.

"Gagh!" Nagrib exclaimed from the second-story landing. The door to the manse stood open behind him. "What a plagued lot a gods there are here. And for what? This foul world."

I'd no idea what, if anything, the unarmed manservant could do to help, but raised my sword in solidarity.

Sanaz signed a warning to the deviate. "Let it be, *duhl-muqat shulghid*."

"Go on, make weak-will sign," Nagib said through a grin. "Your diabolism nothing to captain a Rauðan Horde."

Heech. If what Nagib said were true then he'd fought for Maghvan Tadhg in the Rauðan Plague War. That meant he was likely resistant to traditional spellcraft. Maghvan Tadhg had famously warded his soldiers with a uniquely powerful magick based on an alien geometry. Not even Thaumazon understood its convoluted logic around two hundred Sharro Calendar years later. One strong embrace and Nagib could render Sanaz powerless or pulp her outright.

"You—some unkempt dog—would risk open war with House Thangol?" Sanaz asked.

"What petty mind you have, blood-witch." Nagib thumped his chest. "Like Thangol matter when history near end."

"I think your master might have another opinion. We've agreed not to interfere with each other."

"What use has Nagib for mortal niceties? Nagib come from race a star-faring conquerors. In home dimension—"

A funneled sheet of eldritch lightning centered on the deviate rocked the moon tower. The blast warped Nagib into untold colors of threaded light and smoke. Static of a high order fell out as intermittent sparkles. When the particolored effect settled, however, Nagib appeared unscathed. He pulled up a sleeve of dark blue livery and examined his arm with dim curiosity. "S'pose you had to try," he said evenly. "But don't s'pect me to mercy you."

With an animal grunt, he threw himself from the landing.

The house guard rushed to meet Nagib on impact. He smote the hulk on the neck but Nagib's gray, sculpy-like skin turned the blade as if armored. Several more iron-handed blows confirmed the futility of ordinary combat. Nagib smirked and slapped the sword away. The house guard retreated, unsure of what to try next. His foe closed on Sanaz with heavy, inexorable steps. "Now Nagib give vultures their liking."

At peril, Sanaz shifted the focus of Yath'alm's paralyzing gaze from Broga to Nagib. My *huyi* tumbled to the flagstones like a scarecrow robbed of its supports. "Dare you to touch my person?" the enchantress spat. "Abomination."

Nagib's ward proved useless against the concentrated might of Yath'alm. He twitched and fidgeted in the weirding glow but was otherwise stymied. The cords in his bullneck strained as his lips sought to shape some damning word.

The refocused spell cleared my way to Sanaz. About a dozen paces separated us. She seemed to have forgotten me and the guard had fallen behind her to evade the disabling light. My limbs felt like someone else's, dislocated. But if I were to act at all now was the moment. Resting my saber on the palm of my hand, I wrapped my fingers around the crossguard and hurled the blade point first. I knew it was a chancy ploy, having seen it performed in the fighting pits only as part of orchestrated spectacles. In want of bullets, however, what other choice was there?

The outcome crystalized slowly then fast. There was a before, a fierce scream and an after.

Sanaz gasped, horrified at the hilt protruding from her lower rib cage. Dark crimson streaks multiplied down her wheat-colored robe. Her trembling hand hesitated above the wound.

The radiance from her errant god dissipated, leaving only bright reality and releasing an insensible Nagib to the pave. The relentless Kanavarim sun had never been so welcome to me.

I retrieved the firearm, thinking to bluff the guard, but Sanaz's condition made the ruse unnecessary.

She was blanched and ailing. The blade must've penetrated bowel

or lung. The guard rushed to support her around the waist. Too weak to protest this indignity, she closed her eyes and muttered a saving incantation.

A sullen energy shrouded the two Thangol, illuminating and distorting their silhouettes. Sanaz's outline intimated a number of spinal horns or plates and the guard presented the canted legs of a goat. But it was the ghastly shape of the unborn child that most appalled me. It emerged in subtle flashes as segmented and insect-like. Splayed flagellates extended from either side of its bulbous head and its jaw resembled the elongated proboscis of a fly. Though I couldn't tell whether the conjury was finding its own shapes or revealing hidden ones, the image shook me with insuperable dread.

I made an ancient Druna warding sign and hurried to Broga, pulse racing.

The transporting spell gathered in disorienting power then vanished Sanaz and the guard like a dream undone on first light of waking.

I bent a knee beside Broga and a debilitating nausea cramped me up. I collapsed onto my side, a hand on his bloodied forearm. If I could stay calm, I thought, if I could just find my breath, follow it on the wind, the pain would lapse.

Then I lost the feel of the grit against my cheek and faded into my own private dark.

—a glim of starlight—upswirled into a wavering bell-shape—ah, it was her again—Dabir's mother—like a powdery drift of moon fragments—a suspended disaster—her dreamtime speech was clearer and more urgent this time—it agitated the heartwood of my distant body—*s-s-soon it will come, th-the resurrection by blood-magick...*

—*For Thaumiel? Where?*

—*Here and nowhere—the void between...*

—*But where in Al-Masad?* Her growing anxiety brought me back to my nerves. I was somewhat conscious of my flesh now.

—*A suh-surfeit of luminous power...* I could feel her drawing away

as if against her will. I tried to stretch out with my thoughts, renew the connection, but—

I flinched awake, panicked by the impression some crucial aspect of nature was failing.

Broga loomed above me, a hand on my chest, eyes narrowed in concern. I placed a foot on the receiving room carpet to steady myself half on and half off the couch. I'd taken a jagged turn in adopting Grimmur and subsequently working up my dreamtime powers. I couldn't find any relief, whether awake, asleep or blacked out. Any moment of respite only fueled my anxieties about what would come next. I was worrying about worrying about death.

I sat up, an irksome hum in my head and the faint taste of bile in my throat. How long had I been lying there? Time and everything else seemed to have ceased. An effect of the Twin Fire of Guānshén? Perhaps I'd a vestige of Tamas inside me—like a viral humor.

“...us now, *huyi*?” Broga was asking.

I cleared the rasp from my throat. “That bullet almost did me in.”

“I thought the same.” He paced back and forth in front of the intricately embroidered tapestries. “The compound eye of Yathalm—I didn't even rise to the level of a dust mote caught in its awful shine.”

“It's an especially horrible patron. I shudder to think what she's promised such a godhead in exchange for aid.” I couldn't help but say this with an admiring lilt. Excepting near-deities like Katalkath, mages must enter dreamtime trances to effect their magick, making them vulnerable to mundane weapons. They typically account for this necessity by hiring personal bodyguards, often putting them under onerous curses or geases to ensure their loyalty. But Sanaz maintained her alertness while working the dreamtime through her unborn child—human or not. I found this solution to the trance-state problem original and ingenious, if not a little frightening. I bent my loose-limbed arms back, testing their fitness. “Is Nagib here?”

“Making a pot of bitter desert tea.” Broga stopped his back and forth and, putting a hand to his bandaged wound, said, “We were both in a swoon. He carried us into the house.”

“What now?” I practically spat the words out of fretfulness. “The

Thangols will be back. I wounded Sanaz throwing my saber. I don't know how badly. It lodged in her ribcage—a feat of luck or prayer.”

“I don't rightly know. If we leave the city, it's doubtful we'll be allowed back in. And Ovandu is here somewhere. She must be...” His voice was strained and spiteful as if seeking blame for our dilemma.

Determined to show I was ready for whatever needed doing, I reeled up from the couch. “Perhaps the constable can help.” The precursor gun lay on a side table next to a squat runic statue. Though the weapon lacked ammunition, I tucked it into an inner pocket, thinking to keep it out of Dabīr's hands. There was no telling what he could've done with that elemental round. I considered too late the possibility of having tried for both Tamas and Sanaz. Who could know the bullet's limits? As events transpired, however, it's a good thing the notion hadn't occurred to me in the moment.

Nagib rumbled into the room bearing the batwinged samovar and two glasses. “The Druna recovers...”

“Thanks to you,” I said, repeating the phrase in my awkward Kanavarim.

“We almost done skulking here.” With an open-armed gesture, the manservant invited us to pour our own tea.

I measured a steaming glass. “We?”

“Ajib Dabīr, his mother and Nagib a course.”

“What do you mean?” Broga asked as I handed him his refreshment. “We've heard about this Thangol plot to resurrect Thaumiel and then, more recently, discovered Dabīr has some tie to the deity's shrine.”

I did my best to affect Thaumazon's tone of stately command. “I recognized the glyph the ustam gave us as one of Dabīr's.”

Nagib recognized my pretension with a wry, toothless smile. “The master earn few coin here and there as scribe. Nagib don't know the ajib's business affairs. And this resurrection old idea. Nagib should know. Been here almost two of your centuries.”

“We saw a statue on the Mu'mir side that looked suspiciously like you,” I said over the rim of my glass. Though the taste wasn't to my liking, the tea rinsed away the bile and warmed my innards. I was slowly beginning to feel myself again.

“Nagib part a Rauđan Horde.” He straightened at the memory.

“Maghvan Tadhg had four generals. One was Moritas—skin-flower what spilled out magick-eating *mir hanbrudas*. Nagib was one a these; actually, Nagib several joined together. Nagib and brother *hanbrudas* ruled here a time. We had many statue...” His slitted eyes flared with brute pride.

“Fascinating,” I whispered. The creature’s startling origin matched my first impression of him as sculpy-like. I could picture the miniature golems blending into ever-larger forms like so many animated bits of slipped clay.

“Then what?” Broga asked. “How did you end up here, a manservant?”

“Dabir’s mother.” He cursed in his guttural tongue. “She drew on magick from other-dimension. She massacre us and kept proud Nagib for punishment, symbol and servant both, she say?”

“She’s over two hundred years old?” I asked.

“Druna live as long, eh?”

“*Vafna*, but she’s human, yes?”

Nagib shook his head. “She creature a powerful magick.”

Broga asked, “Where’s Dabir now?”

“Astrologer roost. Nagib not disturb him.”

“Figures.” Broga nodded to me. “Niew’s body is in the entryway. I suggest we take it and go to the Mu’mir. We can present it as proof of our innocence—and sincerity—in declaring for their house. That would afford us some protection while we continue our search.”

“The Thangols certainly aren’t an option.” I downed the last of my tea and placed the glass on the silver tray, regarding Nagib. “What will you do when they return in force?”

He resigned himself to the danger with a shrug. “*Bruj mah* own defense.”

“I don’t know if you heard,” I went on, “but Sanaz said something about having a use for Broga. You have any idea what she meant?”

Nagib looked nonplussed. “Maybe Grihbad. They sometime force slaves and servants into trying its darkness.”

“What, exactly, is this Grihbad? We’ve heard it described as a temple and a tomb, a vault...” Whether it was my elevated sense of the dream-

time or simple nerves, I don't know, but even then I'd a bad feeling about the place.

"Devotional test a soul." A disquieting solemnity had crept into Nagib's voice. What, I wondered, could possibly give this monster pause? After all, he'd leapt headlong into the weirding rays of Yath'alm. "Few make it out alive, but survivor receive gift—something what matches whatever he bring in."

"What about you?" I asked. "Have you been there?"

"Fool Druna. You think Nagib got a soul?" His open-mouthed laugh was like the grating of stone on stone.

After recovering our camel from the courtyard of a neighboring vacancy, we made our way toward the Mu'mir stronghold at a vexingly slow pace. The streets were too narrow and congested for aught else. The pack animal would jerk forward a few lengths then, thwarted by the crowd, halt and sway, waiting for Broga to urge it on again.

We wended through a fresh food market in this fashion, past boxed apricots and peaches, past varieties of figs from yellow to black, past the droning vendors and customers. Overflowing stalls snaked into tapered alleyways cut in the cliffside, complicating our path. The presence of buskers and beggars also stymied the traffic-flow, resulting in frequent bottlenecks. Many of the alms-seekers were deformed, if not thorough deviates, with scaled arms or heads like gnarled gourds. Together, the ever-shifting throng, the heat and pungent miasma dizzied me. The buzzing of flies mingled with the buzzing pain in my head.

My nerves were pared to the quick by the time we crossed the Bridge of the Holy Maid. Like as not, the Thangol were on the hunt for us and the Mu'mir side of the city was an obvious refuge. I scanned any and all approaching passersby from the saddle, and each time we slowed, drew up my legs against the possibility of a stealth assault. Paradoxically, as we got closer to our goal, my paranoia waxed instead of waned. It was as if a fatal attack were an inevitability and each second

of safety only brought us closer to some preordained doom. Any errant shoulder or bundle against my heels set off a new flutter of panic.

At one point in my boyhood, I was briefly obsessed with preserving *júgal* bugs in sap. I'd use a pincer tool to secure the bugs then place them in the path of the pine sap until drowned and dimpled in the honey-colored fluid. It was a hobby born from an urge to assert my growing strength; now more than ever, I felt for the *júgal*.

Whenever the vagaries of traffic forced us outside the shading roofs over the avenues, a migraine of sun added to my misery. The sun was the entirety of the mid-afternoon sky and its rays daggered into the ravine. Crackling light seemed to come from the very pave and white-washed brick.

What's more, I suffered sharp twinges in the small of my back trying to keep upright in the saddle behind Broga. My exceptional height, combined with our stop-start progress, worked against my comfort. The pack animal was otherwise loaded down with our meager supplies (including the out-of-place boathook), the weapons swiped from Majid's gang and the rewrapped corpse of Niew.

We'd rolled the woman's body in a plain, dust-shaken tapestry and banded the ends of the fabric to hide its extremities from passersby. But I couldn't forget the horror inside the tapestry: the fatal blood-bloom high on the chest, the loosened neck skin and blistered sheen of the disfigured face. Torture had marred her features beyond humanity. She'd resembled nothing so much as a wax doll corrupted under patchy flame.

When I was a stripling, I'd thought death a rotted vine sprouting from your center, invisible and unavoidable, until it burst through a vital organ or poisoned the blood. It was an idea seemingly of a piece with the nature-faith of my people. I retained a measure of this belief through my inculcation into genuine earthlore and other, more reasoned philosophies. Flesh continued to seem a weak forerunner of something better, stronger. In death, I thought, I'll grow into my true form—something like the Sentinel Tree: my feet its roots, my thighs its base, my heart its pith and my soul, alive but dormant permeating all. I used to repeat these words before sleep like a prayer. Until the fighting pits, until I knew us—and worse, myself—as beasts of fear and

gore. I'd hoped returning to Ixzahl would bring me back to a settled understanding of things.

The Mu'mir compound was situated on a ridge about a league past the scrap metal shop where we'd met Garshasp and adjacent to what Nagib had identified as several weaving orb factories. The economy of Al-Mahad revolved around these creatures—white viscous blobs about the size of a bread basket. They issued a gluey webbing which was subsequently refined into silk through a secret steaming process and, in turn, loomed into useful goods. Weaving orbs could be found in the crevasses and caves outside the city, though the Thangol, by some application of sympathetic magick, raised a docile species on large subterranean farms. The Thangol gathered up the raw effluence from these farms and delivered it to the Mu'mir for processing.

This symbiotic interest had doubtless limited the conflict between the houses to the occasional terrorism. Nothing preserves rogue alliances better than mutual benefit—a principle which raised the question of why the Thangol would risk their main source of wealth by resurrecting Thaumiel. At the time I thought they might count on the resuscitated god to miracle new and superior kinds of riches. Who needs the silk trade when your slaved god can rain manna from the skies on command? Of course, the answer turned out to be far less simple or benign.

A decorative arch marked the hoist to the upper levels. We dismounted the camel and, finding the doors sealed, waited for the attendant. (The alternative was a long diagonal stairway notched into the rock.) The camel slobbered through large, frothy lips, probably looking for a salt cube. Broga expressed his impatience by tapping one end of the boathook so it seesawed in its makeshift halter.

A hand-walking beggar strained his neck to fix our position then scuttled toward us. His tunic was roped at the joints to prevent it from gathering around his head, which was crowned with a pinned *taqi-yah* or skullcap. He was completely footless. His legs ended in twined stumps like knotted roots. He hand-stepped with an impressive suppleness. When he was within an arm's length, he tucked his legs up to sit on the sandy pave facing us. A hennaed rune framed his right eye. I made him out to be somewhere in his middle-years.

I smiled through a Kanavarim greeting.

“*Khosh amadid*,” the hand-walker said. “A copper for a blessing, wayfarer?”

“I’m sorry, no. We’ve a light purse and a reasoned distrust of gods.”

“Ah, I suspected as much,” sighed the hand-walker, his face reddening. “*Ulzandiqa*.” He hawked in Broga’s direction as preamble to a string of muttered invective.

Broga accepted these indignities with aplomb, his downward gaze one of shadowed pity. He understood the plight of such unfortunates better than they knew.

The sliding door to the hoist opened, spilling out a dozen or so perspiring factory workers. They looked ashen and fatigued to a person.

The beggar pursued us for several hand-steps, taunting Broga. (I heard the word for slave—*abid*—several times.) At his first glimpse of the glowering hoist attendant, however, he scurried away.

The attendant was a portly, mustachioed man dressed in the blue-gray and silver livery of the Mu’mir. The sleeves and collar of his ankle-length tunic had been stiffened to give it a formal appearance. An embroidered badge in the shape of a heraldic claw adorned his upper chest.

“*Salam va ashnai*,” he said. “Where to, sirrah?”

“The compound,” I said.

“Very good.”

The hoist jounced on lift. The camel gave a high-pitched bleat. Broga ruffled the animal’s neck to soothe it, though I don’t know how. Its heavy compost reek nearly started my eyes watering.

A batwing brooch adorned the attendant’s white turban. “I’ve noticed a few of those symbols,” I said, inclining my chin. “Does it have some religious meaning?”

“To some of us, the bat is a miracle of nature and a double-sign of life. It is said that on the Last Day of Creation a bat will be the one to deliver the ultimate wisdom.” He spoke with the whispered vehemence of a true believer.

“What does it mean, the ‘double-sign of life?’”

“Every aspect of life is created by opposing forces. But these forces

are not only opposites; they are complementary. That is, they balance each other like the two wings of a bat.”

“Not unlike Thaumiel, *kvett*, divided between transcendent spirit and death-instinct?”

“The bat is the chosen messenger of the Twice-crowned God. It speaks the godhead’s truth into the darkness, abode of the blessed unborn and of the spirit hereafter.” The phrase sounded like something memorized.

The hoist rumbled to a halt. I moved to exit. The attendant put a hand on my arm and pressed a papyrus envelope on me. “If you should want to know Thaumiel in his wholeness.”

I gave a slight bow of thanks and stepped onto the flagstones. The path allowed for only two destinations: the steam-shrouded factory to our left and the walled citadel of House Mu’mir opposite. There was room enough for about six camels abreast. We opted to walk the four or five hundred paces up the slight gradient. Broga led the dromedary by its rope guide.

“Did you see what the attendant gave me?” I asked.

“The envelope?”

I unfolded it, reversing the last flap with some trepidation. The glyph was different from the first but radiated the same disquieting aura. Ghostly impressions of illness and delusion flitted through my head. The symbol conveyed a horror beneath the surface of things. Fearing its possible influence, I folded it away. “I’m starting to formulate a theory.”

“About Dabīr?”

“About how he—or his patron—intend to bring this divine resurrection about. Rune-magick operates on the level of suggestion. The best rune-mages purport to use this magick to mesmerize at a distance. Their symbols, encapsulating archetypes from our deep unconscious, operate like infectious dreams. The most powerful runes can create false impressions—even memories—poison our humors or instill unspoken commands.”

Broga’s face sharpened into an unblinking intentness. “So, he’s manipulating people across the city. What would he need them to do?”

“Sacrifice themselves—willingly.” My elders had told horrific sto-

ries about the sacrificial blood-magick practiced on both sides during the War of Neverness. I assumed Broga had heard his share. Those accounts gave the word ‘sacrifice’ the taste of copper on my tongue. “Blood magick, abetted by a minor god, might do it. But the victims have to commit to the ritual of their own free will.”

“Or under the proper delusion of it.”

“Why else would these envelopes be so widespread?” My voice pitched high in alarm. I cleared my dusty throat and went on more evenly: “Remember the fortune-telling poem the constable received from that beggar girl? It was in an envelope identical to this.”

“Would Taraneh know then what it means?”

I shook my head. “The influence is unconscious. She might even perceive it as a poem.”

“Then how would he activate this influence?”

“*Vafna*, I don’t know. It might already be active. If not, it could take as little as a secret word or noise, say, the blast of a ram’s horn. Or better yet, an embedded time-trigger—at sunset on such-and-such a day or on the next new moon—something like that.”

“If you’re right then there’s no telling how much time we have.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“We need to act as if it’s too late.” His guttural Matabwe accent came through in this hard line.

“I could be wrong.”

“No, I don’t think so. This rune-magick you’ve described seems to best fit the facts.”

“Insofar as we know them.” Life in Ixzahl had never been this entangled or dangerous. The refuge nurtured an enlightened quietude. How I missed the thought-bliss of lucidity. As *jör ugsa* suggests: *To the unweeded mind, every path is clear.*

The vast, cliff-hugging compound gradually came into view through errant drifts of steam. Massive geometrical structures pure in symmetry and cosmic symbolism jutted from the rock. The greater part consisted of balconied towers that alternated between recessed and protruding. Bas-relief cuneiform and graven falcons decorated the former, while mosaic-faced domes of blue-gray and silver topped

the plain stone of the latter. The pattern described earth and void in equal measure.

“The prerogative of the *grandees* hereabout—to live above the common dust,” Broga scoffed.

“Even so,” I said, “you can’t deny its monolithic beauty.” In my native Druna, I would’ve pronounced the vista *fillegt burmi á hina*, that is, ‘beautiful verging on the divine.’ Several large-winged birds flew in and out of crevices above the polished domes.

The arched portal gate was shuttered in acid-etched bronze. Geometrical arabesques embellished the shining metal. As we approached, a sphere imprinted with a lighted sunburst pattern emerged from its inset housing on a steel rod.

Broga had half drawn his sword when a filtered voice issued from the orb. “State your name and business.” The sunburst icon flashed in sync with the disembodied words.

I stepped forward with pretended authority. “I am Maghvan Thamazon, yes, the Druna of Kanavarim legend, accompanied by my body-slave. We come bearing grim intelligence for the amir and his family—and bodily proof of it.”

“What bodily proof, Maghvan?” The voice betrayed no little irritation.

“I use the term quite literally. We carry the remains of the amir’s niece, the seeress Niew.”

“Like so much baggage on the back of a camel?”

“*Fyruge*. I know it seems impersonal, if not baldly disrespectful, but we decided to err in favor of caution. Would you rather we’d paraded her through the streets in a veiled palanquin?”

The distinct sound of thrown bolts prompted us to retreat a step or two.

A side gate swung wide and three house guards in hauberks of ring mail formed up around us, flange-bladed spears at the ready. A pair of crossbows sighted us from wickets in the gate. The hawk-nosed guard-captain in front of Broga commanded us to relinquish our weapons.

I offered my replacement saber haft-first, followed by a dirk and the emptied gun.

Broga dawdled. “Just the ones on my person or everything?” He indicated the saddlebags.

“The sword and dagger are enough,” the guard-captain said.

Broga complied while a pair of sentries relieved the camel of Niew’s weight and vanished behind the bronze wall. The guard-captain signed for an auxiliary to take the animal’s guide rope. “We’ll feed and water him in the paddock,” the auxiliary said without glancing back. The blunt end of the boathook dragged along the flags.

We followed the guard-captain through the arched side gate into a courtyard garden. My breath caught in my throat at the shock of greenery. Until this moment, I’d seen upper-tier gardens only in small, tantalizing increments and at a fair distance. The variety and saturated colors of the plants surprised me. It was as if we’d passed into another world completely. Lush emerald grasses, shrub roses, date palms, heart-shaped violets and tall cypresses graced the symmetrical plots. Neat rows of cypresses offered welcome shade on our graveled route.

The Kanavarim call cypresses *‘ashjir walhayan* or ‘life trees’ and regard them with the same religious attitude we Druna regard our native imberga. They consider the trees symbols of immortality. It might seem quaint or backward to you for mortals to rely so heavily on symbol to get across their ideas of the divine. You have to understand we lack what I presume to be your intuitive knowledge of things-in-themselves. In any event, perhaps more than anything else, when the time came to risk myself for the people of Al-Mahad, this dutiful respect for nature helped ease my decision in their favor.

Compared to the vivid and variegated textures of home, the garden struck me as over-engineered. Everything hewed to a geometric pattern. Narrow footpaths and turquoise-tiled water channels broke the landscape into equal quarters around a central pavilion. Each species of plant was allotted its own proscribed space. A slight gradient to the plot facilitated their irrigation as well as filled axial watercourses, intermittent basins and a large, shimmery reflecting pool. Despite the garden’s prim arrangement, enough wild nature shown through to distract me, however briefly, from my immediate worries.

The guard-captain halted us under the dappled shade of the cypresses fronting the citadel.

“Garshasp del-Shir can vouch for us,” I told him.

“Remain here while I send a page.” He signed to a pair of guards to supervise us then hurried up the stairs to the columned porch and disappeared from view. A low hedge of pale blue roses to our right separated the main structure from the stable and adjoining paddock, though the camel was nowhere visible.

The guards took up positions to either side of us, spears cradled for striking.

I spoke to Broga in my soft-toned Matabwe. “What do you think Garshasp will say? Sanaz put the blame on him.”

“We’ll have to go along with his reaction short of incriminating ourselves, leastwise until we can get an audience with the amir.”

“What choice do we have? If he turns us out, where can we go?” I smiled through clenched teeth at the uncomprehending guard across from me. For Broga’s sake, I refused to give in to my jitters.

A short while later, Garshasp emerged on the stone portico and, leaning on his pikestaff, motioned us closer. The sentries flanked us with their weapons as we approached.

The arch-mage gave a perfunctory greeting: “*Salam va ashnai*.”

“*Khosh amadid*.” I gave a slight bow from the topmost step. “I take it the guard-captain informed you of our sad errand.”

“Of a certain,” the old man wheezed. He swallowed hard to recover his normal timbre and said, “I am sorry the task fell to you. This feud is none of your concern.”

“*Vafna*, except the Thangol would make it otherwise.”

“So it would seem.”

“You should know we fought them, Broga and me, killing Tamas and wounding Sanaz. They staked us out; we simply defended ourselves. That’s why we’ve come to you, or more accurately, to Amir Zartosht—to petition for sanctuary.”

“Intriguing.” He scratched his shiny bald pate. “I would be curious to know how you managed such a feat. Perhaps with a fuller understanding of the circumstances, the amir would consider your plea. You would defend House Mu’mir?”

“We’ll protect those who protect us,” Broga said. “Regardless, we

fulfilled our side of the bargain. The spasbet should've released your compatriots by now."

"Oh, yes, like pigeons for trapshooting." Garshasp pounded his pike-staff on the ground and turned his back to us. "But no matter. We'll honor our tradition of hospitality. Whatever their providence, guests are like friends of the gods."

The house guards motioned us to follow, their faces as inscrutable as golems.

Garshasp led us at a halting pace to the audience chamber. We passed in and out of a vaulted foyer and down several tableau-etched passages. The route seemed unduly long; perhaps it was my growing anxiety or the inescapable heat, but I couldn't stop seeing the hallways as part of a maze with a monster-god at its center.

The double-doored entrance to the chamber was minded by a porter and a rigid spearman. With practiced alacrity, the porter cleared our way, revealing a sizeable room walled in ancient images. The graven figures—mainly aristocrats, their underlings and various symbolic chimera—glowed as if incised with molten lava.

At the far end, a dissolute elder in a high-backed chair enjoyed a hookah of *shirgol* juice. He was attended by a half-naked cup bearer and several household officers. One retainer, draped in *hajib* and shapeless robe, knelt facing the amir. On the other side of their sovereign, the rest sat on low, cushioned seats. Armored house guards stood the perimeter bearing alloyed spears, curved swords and bandoliers laden with sunstroke grenades. The two guards closest to the amir carried long-barreled rifles in place of spears. Once established as an ally, I wondered if I might request bullets for my handgun—the ordinary sort this time as I'd no interest in repeating the misery of that elemental round. I've only so much soul to spare, I thought.

The arch-mage lowered himself to one knee and cut his eyes at us to do the same. Broga submitted readily enough but refused to avert his gaze. He fixed on the amir as though to pin him with a look. Whether agitated by this brazenness or not, the amir straightened in the weighty gold chair and put a hand to his peacock-feathered turban. I exaggerated my bow in mute recompense. The intervening silence manifested

as a pressure in my chest. Who knew what this amir was capable of? It seemed sheer naivety to wish the rules of this city clear.

“Beneficent Succor,” Garshasp said, “I trust the foot page has relayed my urgent purpose.”

The pinch-faced amir nodded listlessly and pulled on his hookah. His face was wrinkled like a bedsheet washed too many times. The waterpipe’s elaborate glass base rested at the sandaled feet of the cup bearer. It was evidently the boy’s duty to keep it filled with water and pulped *shirgol* leaves.

“These yonder-men have been the chief cause of much trouble for House Mu’mir,” Garshasp went on. “The incident at the Bridge of the Holy Maid, the release and subsequent attack on Abd-el-Kadir and his band, the death of Niew... They purport to be on commission from the Sultans General—something about a kidnapped handmaiden. But who knows their true intent? They travel under false names, consort with our enemies, attract the—”

“O Shadow of the Self-Moving Soul,” I said, employing a favorite Domination-era greeting, “please allow us to make our own petition. In the matter of Niew—”

“You had best beg for a swift death!” Garshasp roared. “We have only your dubious word it was the Thangol murdered her. And we have witnesses to your latest collaboration with our sworn foes.” He gestured eagerly to the house guard nearest the copper-banded door behind the amir.

The guard rapped his knuckles on the door and lo, what blood and ruin emerged. *Kaldrei pykur*. It took me a few skipped beats of my heart to recognize the tangled corpse of the gunsmith Ilderim. The body was tossed to the dais like so much rubbish.

A bruised and broken Majid stumbled out the passage next, sporting a blackened eye and several purpling bruises along his jaw. Flaking cataracts of blood ran from his nose and swollen lips into his unkempt beard. A guard took hold of the thief’s bound arms and thrust him in our direction. Ah, irrefutable evidence, indeed... My heart pounded in anticipation. We were on the brink again between one momentous decision and the next.

At first, I thought Majid must’ve betrayed us, as seems the wont

of brigands the world over, but the last figure to shuffle out from the recess put paid to that theory: Ilderim's youthful assistant. Angling toward the amir, the apprentice took a knee in obeisance and, adopting a beatific attitude, said, "O Benevolent One."

Throughout this flurry of activity, Amir Ormazd remained impassive, his eyes small and gelid. He didn't even deign to glance at Ilderim's mangled corpse. The *shirgol* juice surely had him befuddled, a pretend-sultan in a stained robe of figured blue silk.

"Most Forgiving Protector," I began—

"Name of a name! You have no leave to speak, pretender!" Garshasp rattled, levering himself to his feet with his pikestaff. "Did you think to fool us with tales of Niew's demise into facilitating your wicked plot? As if Kanavarim tradition obliged us to take in our own murderers."

"We're innocent of Niew's death and, as far—"

The blunt end of the steel pikestaff caught me just above the temple. My head thudded against the ruby shadowed stone. A trickle of blood coursed around my ear and down my neck.

Garshasp's words came to me as if from afar. "Most High, these dog-liars deserve nothing less than the gibbet."

Blinking past the water in my eyes, I turned to Broga, stunned at his restraint. He didn't acknowledge my silent question; instead, he stared unblinking at the amir or something in close proximity. Following his gaze, I understood he'd not choked back his anger so much as surrendered it from disbelief.

Amir Zartosht took a long, raking breath and whispered an answer to the retainer on his right—the one with her back to us. His mouth was a thin gash with a permanent drag on one corner. Strained intakes of breath served as punctuation. The retainer replied in strange, furtive gestures and indistinct murmurings. We'd yet to see the signifying deeps of her eyes; glimpses of her elegant fingers, however, showed them to be Durkesh black.

When she finally turned around to impart the amir's words, Broga and I started in unison, but remained where we were, at once astonished, relieved and confounded. The iron dark of her eyes left no doubt: this was Ovandu. "His Beneficence would hear from the petitioners directly." Her voice had aged into a roughened and imposing pitch. No

more the pips and shrills of youth. “He appreciates the return of his niece’s body, but other, no less fell matters argue against his trust. What proof of good faith can you yonder-men offer?”

A decided emphasis on ‘yonder-men’ prompted us to continue play-acting. I got to my feet and launched into an abbreviated but twisty account of our commission in general and recent events in particular. I didn’t shy from our plot with the constable but attributed it to a mistrust of Garshasp’s motives. My words seemed to float like so many dust motes. I could scarce credit my senses. Ovandu, here, in this place, an interpreter-of-sorts to some rogue grandee? What a change from her childhood in the steaming jungle forests of Ixzahl. I couldn’t imagine what she’d gone through, how she must’ve suffered... My heart beat madly against the cage of my ribs.

The amir appeared unmoved except for a misty, wandering smile during my report of Tamas’ death. No doubt his judgment would be little more than an expression of dream.

“So you see, O Indulgent One,” I concluded in a false-casual tone, “our crime here is one of black luck and misunderstanding. We’ve no partisan interest in Al-Mahad. We seek only to fulfill our commission and return to the capital.” I tried not to look too intently at Ovandu at the word ‘return,’ thankful we Druna have flattened features men usually find hard to read.

She gave a slight, noncommittal nod then conferred with the amir in hisses and hand signs.

I chanced a look at Broga. He struggled against inaction, drawing twitchy circles on his thigh next to the empty scabbard. His face was taut with an unspeakable tension. Of all the scenarios we’d envisioned, this one seemed the least likely. We’d set out to rescue Ovandu—literally or figuratively—and here she was, alive and absolute, the interpreter of *our* fates. This unexpected turn pained me. It felt as if I were stumbling up a volcanic mountain, lungs wracked by the heat and thinning air. The chamber’s crimson light even suggested the dragonscale peaks of Altasaar.

Heech. How a few minutes become a lifetime of worry.

When Ovandu faced us again neither her eyes nor voice betrayed any concern. She could’ve been an oracle for some remote judge-god.

“The Beneficent One warrants there are many sides to every story, to every life. Al-Mahad itself is not merely a city, but a symbol on earth, a maze, a history, a genealogy of feeling.” She dropped her eyes briefly then said, “The petition for sanctuary is granted, pending a sacred obligation or geas: to deliver the head of Amir Ormazd no later than three nights hence.”

Garshasp couldn't contain a faint huff of a laugh.

I lacked the breath to answer, much less object. The pronouncement was a catch in my throat. It was an urge to run. It was a longing to vanish out of time. To be a wildering, I'd learned, was to be in a habitual state of fear or loss. Broga somehow found more liberty than angst in living like a nomad; but me, I'd come to regard it as exile unto death. Even before I'd lived the idea in full.

When we arrived at an arched door engraved with serpentine arabesques, Ovandu waved off our armed escort and ushered us into a dim, rectangular workshop. The windowless chamber was evidently used for producing glass and glazed ceramics and conducting alchemical experiments. There were a pair of molded limestone kilns against the facing walls. Instruments like crucibles, flasks and alembics glinted among sundry machine parts on the intervening worktables. I sniffed at the faintly sulfurous odor of coal dust.

Broga jostled me at a sudden embrace from Ovandu. It was an awkward sideways hug—awkward due to the discrepancy between memory and life, her greater height, or the bizarre circumstances, I can't say. Broga tensed, unsure of himself or the situation.

She shrugged his arms away and gave his right thumb a quick squeeze. I recognized the gesture. When he was small she'd led him by his thumb down meandering rainforest trails and through overgrown marshland grasses. Hesitant in his speech, he'd pointed to the plants and animals he wished her to name.

The familiar gesture threatened to undo him. He knuckled his quivering chin.

Ovandu gripped my forearm with one hand while unwinding her headscarf with the other. “Ranvir.” Again, not her voice but another’s, definite and dry.

I shied a step farther into the workshop.

She left the *hijab* dangling from one shoulder. It was Ovandu and it wasn’t. Her natural bushel of hair was trimmed to a close, textured crop. Little bumps bordered her oily hairline. Her face was tighter, more angular and her jaw longer than I recalled. The mouth was crimped at the corners as if she smiled in mimicry of feeling. Only her eyes remained unchanged. She’d the dark, sunken eyes characteristic of the Saro-Akarele clan. I have to admit to a fascination with human eyes. They look so delicate: slightly bloodshot, the pupils strangely delimited, the liquid in them seemingly about to quiver out. Not at all like the silver-on-silver eyes of the Druna.

“*Aysh*, what do you here?” she asked.

Broga wrinkled his square, broad forehead. “I swore to mother I’d search you out when I came of age. We’ve followed your trail over the last, well, almost three years. You wouldn’t believe what we’ve been through, from Skulon Gøra and across Erdiúil—”

“I’m sorry, brother mine, but you’ve wasted your time and strength. It’s touching, I confess. You thought to save me. I suspect, however, it was the act of saving that was important rather than me, personally. We were never especially close and mother—she nearly turned me out herself.” She crossed her arms. “I didn’t ask for this and now—now you’ve put everything at risk.”

“What are you saying? That this life is agreeable to you?” Over the years, I’ve learned to intuit Broga’s thoughts from a glance at his face, the tone of voice, the set of his shoulders. His darkening eyes suggested a grim flashback. I could imagine the dead imploring him for help that would never come, asking why they perished for her sake. Ah, rotting half-shapes beckoning from their makeshift graves. So many bodies, so vast a darkness... He took a sharper tone, no longer the little brother to whom she could condescend. “I brought the ancestral shoulder cloth if you need reminding of who and what you are.”

She responded in kind, leaning forward to pronounce her decision clearly: “Don’t presume to know me.”

We stood bewildered by each other. My mind slid away from picturing her, the way she was, the way she is. I felt for Broga. How sad it must be for him, I thought. He'd become a discard to her, a flat, distant memory as welcome as a haunting ghost.

"You've no idea what I've suffered. Dragged from the stirrup, my maidenhood ruined, a child born as pulp and blood..." Ovandu looked past him into some unknown distance. "I'm not the person you knew. I've been both wrecked and freed. I've surrendered my birth-name in favor of another: Hajarah, meaning 'abandoned.' The values of our clan have no meaning here in this desert wasteland. The only value that matters is strength—the strength to survive and, better yet, enforce your will."

"I'm sorry for what you've endured, Ovandu, I am. My fear for you hurried me along... I tried..."

In an instant, I lived it all again: the hard traveling and penury, our stint in the Giathoch jail that led to our enslavement, the viceroy's tortures, the unbearable snows and the dulled tang of freezing blood, our precarious escape from the fighting pits and the unbelievable string of near-deaths since...

"But now," Broga went on, "now you can quit this place. We can do it together." His voice was hard with impatience.

She raised an open palm between them. "Listen to what I'm saying, not what you want to hear."

Broga hitched his shoulders.

All familial expression dropped from her face. "I don't want to go back. You've no idea what it was like for me there. Though I was the lone hope for dignifying the family name, you—the only son, the cripple without magickal talents—you had all our mother's meager sympathy. No, I'll never return, not unless I've an urge to challenge Thaumazon himself." She stared him down. "Besides, I've plans long in the making here."

The words were hurtful for so many reasons. Broga's hands became fists at his sides.

My first instinct was to shield him. "Involving the automaton?" My voice came from a height, placating.

"Beyond that," she said. "The tek-golem's just an artifact I restored

for Garshasp—an experiment to distract him, get him out of the way. I have my own, more inexplicable dimensions, to savor.”

“What is your station here? Advisor? Interpreter? I recall your talent for precursor tek but...”

“I’ve since mastered sundry aspects of the Classic Arts. I’m no less a maghvan than Garshasp. He retains the title of arch-mage largely from pity. I’ve shed many skins to get to the hardness inside.” She hissed this last word through spaced, inturned teeth. “I’m as resilient as a scarab now. You’ve seen the symbol, yes? The desert beetle? Like the scarab, I survive on shit.”

Broga recognized her bitterness with a grave nod. We’d spent years speculating on her life in servitude, thinking up all manner of deviltry and abuse and hoping against hope she’d be spared the worst. Clearly, we were too late.

I interposed, being tactful. “You seem to have won the amir’s favor.”

“As his state of mind permits. You saw him. He’s an old dog gone in the teeth.”

Broga cleared his throat and asked, “Can you persuade him to drop the geas?”

“Oh that was my idea.” She beamed a defiant smile at us. Yes, the misery of her life, whatever its details, had carried her away from us. I was reminded of places in a stream where pine needles and twigs float against the current for awhile before resuming their rush to who knows where.

Broga’s face was a dauntless blank as he fought to hold himself still.

Ovandu took a smiling long time to continue as if daring him to strike her. “Ormazd, the Thangol amir, has a kind of parasite for an eye. It has vital properties I’m desperate for.”

“The leech-eye,” I said. “Some alien worm.”

“You know of it?”

“Only that it takes souls.”

“Takes and, potentially, channels them.”

“Which would enhance your dreamtime abilities considerably?” What would she do with that sort of power, a grudgeful and ambitious slave unrestrained by clan or culture? The thought put a kink in my chest.

“This is my moment, this—”

“What if we fail? Surely others have tried the same?” Broga was getting loud. “Without compunction, you put us under this suicidal geas... Your own brother?”

“Half-brother.”

Ovandu seemed determined to provoke him. Broga had been a quiet, brooding child except when roaming the forested wilds outside Ixzahl proper. Perhaps this was all a test of character. “You’ll have the superior arms, I assure you,” she said. “The Mu’mir rely on weaving orbs and paltry botanical magicks.”

“Broga is a hell-trained warrior and I’ve some talent for precursor tek.”

“Oh,” she said. “Which artifacts?” Her tone was skeptical.

“Mainly the sending shield and *sukúla*. Also, I’ve a precursor gun lacks ammunition.”

“We’ve *sukúla* on hand.” She nodded to herself. “Marvelous, yes, this can only work to our advantage.”

Broga broke in: “How can you even entertain this? Either of you?” His voice was louder yet. He looked from his half-sister to me and back again. He focused his resentment on her, his forehead glistening with sweat. “How can you be so callous? If you only knew what we’ve sacrificed...” Again with the dead.

I felt my face cloud over. In my dreams, the earth was hollow and the shades of the living scurried between the night-deep roots of the Sentinel Tree.

“Have you no feelings for me?” Broga pressed Ovandu, though his tone indicated his heart was no longer in it. He was beginning to get her measure. Back in Ixzahl, I thought, their mother mourns both of them.

Ovandu dismissed Broga’s point with a wave. “You had a chance to live a life apart from me—from this... You placed yourself in my path. I’m sorry you and your refuge friend ended up here, especially now of—”

“But it worked to your benefit. Here we are, yonder-men as they say, known mischief-makers with no ties to either house. If we fail, it can’t come back on you.”

“And who are you to sit in judgment? Are your motives so pure?” she asked with a keen pinch of authority. “Without a talent for magic, you were already lesser than, an outcast among your own people. Your father was as much a wastrel as mine, so you had no reputation to uphold. You risked nothing of your standing by taking up my cause. It just ennobled your flight.”

Broga stood his ground against the staggering audacity of her charges. “What if we refuse? What’s to stop us from starting back across the Belrak Sands?”

“Him,” she answered, meaning me. “He’s staying here to help you from afar and, at the same time, ensure your return.”

Broga shook his head, angry and sickened, but said nothing more. His sullen look was enough.

Further discussion could only make things worse. I hastened to bring it to a close. There was tomorrow to face—tomorrow and tomorrow. “You’ve a plan then?”

Ovandu snuck her tongue forward in thought, resting it on her lower lip. “The bandit—he presents Broga to Ormazd seeking reward.”

“Ah, yes, why not? There’s a price on our heads.”

Though Broga had turned ponderous in manner and movement, resigned, he couldn’t let up entirely. “You’re lost, Ovandu, Harajah, whoever you are. After all this time, our arduous journey and you’d see us used up and destroyed for a chance at—what? Some advancement in rank?”

“Let’s not be melodramatic now.” The ring of brown around her pupils was solid and gem-like without qualifying flecks. “Fulfill the geas and you’ll have the protection of House Mu’mir. You can even become my personal guard. Every arch-mage needs one.” Unlike Sanaz, there was no sultriness to her glib dispassion.

“I only sought the protection of this house to give me time to find you. Now that I’ve done that and know what you’ve become...” The cords of his throat tightened. “I know we didn’t always get along as children, but you’re family and mother—whatever you think of her—she was heartbroken over you.”

“Because it gave her self-centeredness a righteous gloss,” she said in a mature, bosomy voice. “You don’t know what it was like as an adept,



the pressure she put on me to excel, to make something of our family name again.”

“No, what she wanted—she wanted to make sure that, despite our broken family, your father’s failings, you could earn a high station.”

“So she could gloat over her former, do-nothing husband. My success would be her revenge. Or maybe she wanted me to fail and die, the last everyday reminder of my father.”

“That’s not how—”

“Don’t speak for me. That’s what she did.” There was a lingering hostility in the set of her mouth.

His indignation rising again, Broga took a step backward. “*Aysh*, you’re impossible.”

“Rather, I’m past all these petty family squabbles.” She gave a quick shake of her head. Whatever occasional tenderness they might’ve shared in childhood was long forgotten. Her newly revealed skin had closed against him. He was a tool now—a simple means to an end. “You’ll see soon enough: I’ve my own high-minded feats to perform.”

“And it starts with a beheading. Lovely.” He flexed his right hand while his left remained a white-knuckled fist at his side. He was packed solid with anger and anxious to divert it.

I wanted to put a hand on his shoulder in consolation but was afraid of adding to his embarrassment. Ovandu had made him out to be a perfect fool and the swordquest a dear-bought fraud. My face warmed to a defensive fury, though not to a degree any non-Druna would notice.

How sad, how strange and infuriating. We make missions out of nothing to give us purpose then recoil in disappointment when nothing is all we achieve.

Chapter Nine

We endeavor to fulfill the geas

It took a couple of days for Majid to arrange a meeting with the Than-gol leader on the pretext of surrendering Broga as recompense for his gambling debts.

The meeting was set to take place in a slum tenement turned *shirgol* den. The surrounding area was home to the abject poor. Its inhabitants lived like refugees amid the ruins of once-fabulous mansions. Sagging hovels cobbled together from mud, muslin and scrap wood bordered the dirt avenues. The rampant squalor and misery reminded me of the Matabwe slum known as the *gerskóginn* (man-made jungle) on the northeastern boundary of Ixzahl. There was rubbish everywhere: discarded blankets; rotting vegetables and soured stews; twisted-up sandals half buried in the sand. Small cooking fires stoked with camel dung burned all over the place, creating a pervasive (and no doubt odiferous) pall.

I sailed above the destitution in the form of scrying orbs, a pair of disembodied eyes. One *sukúla* ranged ahead to scout for danger while the other kept pace with Majid and Broga at a discreet height. Another fifty or sixty paces and they'd reach the multi-storied tenement. The bandit maneuvered a shackled Broga by the neck-chain around a scrawny old man pushing a water cart. Despite the distance, the *sukúla* was so finely-tuned I caught the old man's jeer—something-something-*abid*-something. The needy have to find their pride however they can get it, I suppose.

Majid chuckled into his unkempt beard. I braced for an explosive response. But my *huyi* refused to gratify the affronter—or Majid—with so much as an ugly look. Since his dispiriting reunion with Ovandu, Broga had retreated further into himself. I could usually ease his hurts by reminding him of earlier, happier times. But Ovandu's foul turn had

tainted even the brightest of those moments. Every memory of Ixzahl, no matter how trivial or seemingly unrelated, was now construed as wilfull naïveté.

My (admittedly feeble) attempts to amuse or tease him out of his sulk couldn't penetrate his plaguey thoughts. To his mind, he'd not only failed in his quest, allowing for Ovandu's corruption, but doomed a host of companions in the bargain. I was merely the last slated for ruin. Withdrawing was his way of both acknowledging his guilt and guarding against whatever forces were arrayed against him—as if a quieted will alone could suspend time and the world. *Heech*. Would that we'd embarked on a farmer's mission.

The tenement was a five-story manor of mud brick and plaster dating back over 500 Sharro Calendar years. Domed brick capped each of its four interconnected sections. Through fissures and open windows, I could see wizened *shirgol* juicers sweating out their deliriums. They lay on makeshift beds or propped against flaked plaster walls, human shadows in the enveloping smoke. In one room, seven addicts ranged round a multi-hosed pipe on the bare floor like the points of a star. This, I thought, is the peace of self-defeat. The *sukúlas* droned through the blankness of my mind and their whirling images became all there was again.

Losing Majid and Broga at the arched entrance, I sent both *sukúlas* over the weedy courtyard with its rubbish drifts and disused clay tub. The plan was to keep the drones hidden until Broga revealed his black purpose. When the pair entered the courtyard they were greeted immediately by a house guard robed in Thangol browns. After brief pleasantries, the guard ushered them toward the eastern apartment house and fell in behind, one hand on the pistol grip of his weaving orb staff.

I left one *sukúla* hovering above the courtyard and dispatched the other to the opposite side of the building. The amir's agent had refused to name the apartment number. I had to find it using the advanced scrying capabilities of these Mu'mir drones. Facing the courtyard or facing outward?

Ovandu's *sukúla* boasted several features previously unfamiliar to me. The most notable included thermal vision, two-way voice and,

appropriately enough given our predicament, a self-destruct trigger. Owing to a combination of Ovandu's exacting supervision and my expanded dreamtime sensitivity, I managed to master them in short order (without, of course, actually exploding any of the devices). There was nothing relaxed about Ovandu. She was demanding, if only through a kind of mute expectancy. She regarded us as lost, mildly disappointing children. Her opinions on all topics were invariably cynical. I waited for some hidden or unspoiled sweetness, but no... About the most generous theory I could muster is that she inured herself to pain by mourning things before they were gone. Slavery will teach you that.

I ranged over the eastern apartments in thermal mode, registering abstracted bodies through the stucco façade. Heat radiation ghosts flitted across my field of vision. The *shirgol* addicts were easy to spot. Their insides incandescenced into a mirror image of their hookahs, a throat for a hose, lungs for a segmented vase. Bright, bright, gray went the pyramid-shaped lungs. Like the pulse of life and death, every breath closer to the last.

Variegated shapes merged and separated in this strange, horizon-free space. Several minutes must've passed since Majid and Broga had entered the apartment house. I started to panic. Where—? Ah, the stairs. The guard motioned them up the last flight with the conical end of his ironwood staff. I glimpsed the pale blob of the weaving orb inside it. My understanding was the trigger sent a chemical shock through the weaving orb, prodding it into discharging its gossamer stickiness. The intensity of the shock could be adjusted with a catch to suit the moment.

The meeting site proved to be an uncurtained corner apartment emptied of furniture. Through a *sukûla* on level with the window, I enjoyed an expansive view of the room. Amir Ormazd had taken up a position against the opposite wall, flanked by three house guards and a young female attendant. He was lean and weathered and looked as if he'd been born sneering. Two garish, green plumes were tucked into his spike-topped helmet. A small, hooked visor depending from the brim covered his right eye. While I hovered the drone out of sight, he hunched up in laughter, amused by his own jest. The helmet's chain-



mail mantle brushed his bony shoulders. His smile was another variety of sneer.

I conjured up the sound in the room just as Majid and Broga entered. The brigand lurched past the escort and immediately made obeisance, scraping the rough floorboards with his free hand. Broga declined to bow. The escort remained near the closed door, staff at the ready.

“Durkesh flotsam,” Ormazd muttered to one of his men.

Majid gave a quick little snort before apologizing on behalf of his prisoner.

The amir cut him short with a curt wave. Though slight of frame, he had the sharp and harrowing mien of someone who'd lately strangled a serpent in his garden. “Please, dispense with your false pieties, Majid. It is enough you have fulfilled your promise. This moment is like a meal of roasted pin-tail. I savor it not for its substance but its rarity.” He rested a hand on his curved ceremonial sword.

“By your Grace.” The bandit yanked Broga forward a step.

Broga gritted his teeth against baser impulses.

“I can scarcely reconcile it,” Ormazd mused. “This brute *abid* wounding Sanaz...” He approached Broga on silk-sandaled feet. “You presume too far coming here from your squalid jungles. In Kanavar we do not strike our betters. This is a land of natural castes, each fitted to its proscribed purpose. Some constitute the appetites,” he said, gesturing to indicate the *shirgol* addicts infesting the surrounding apartments, “and others the intellect.”

Majid cut his eyes at the Matabwe.

Broga kept up his spiteful silence but again refused to bow.

The amir's voice crackled with self-importance. “I have a deep forboding, however, that the appetites have grown too powerful. They threaten to overwhelm the intellect with fantasy and trumped-up emotion. Yea, these are poisonous times...” Turning to Majid, he said something in Kanvarim than added: “Mongrels like this will be our undoing—the learned class, I mean. To the masses, violence is mere sport or entertainment.”

Eyes closed as if hearing this from the godhead directly, the veiled attendant nodded.

“Then consider this one,” Majid said, tugging at Broga, “a token of eternal respect from a lowly trader of goods.”

“The gift is much appreciated, though we both know your motive is utterly mercenary.” The amir signaled for the guard at the door to take up Broga’s lead. “Regardless, Sanaz will no doubt be pleased. She has vowed to show him undreamt of tortures.”

“And the chit annulling my debt?”

Ormazd produced a rectangular bone tile from his layered robe. It resembled a Qmor’za tile; instead of a suit of knights or *drakoin*, however, its face bore the Thangol crest. “On my word.” He spun the tile between his fingers. The symbol for debt forgiveness adorned the opposite side. “Merely present this to your, ah, district creditor.” He stepped forward to complete the exchange.

In reaching for the debt tile, Majid relinquished his hold on Broga’s chain and grabbed up the amir’s ceremonial *shamshir* as he slipped around him.

Without a glance at his target, Broga jerked the false-bolted collar loose and whipped the chain at the guard approaching from behind. The chain smacked the guard in the ribs, prompting him to drop his weaving orb staff. Broga sprung like a jungle cat, booting the stunned foe in the chest.

“The blade is not yet forged that can bring me low,” Ormazd declared, eyes lowered to the sword at his throat. Majid hooked him back toward the door as the two remaining sentries advanced, leveling their weaving orb staffs. They hesitated to fire on their amir—even as a temporary, incapacitating tactic.

Broga retrieved the downed guard’s weaving orb staff and, feeling for the trigger, raised it to check a lunge from a foe emerging from the open doorway. Undeterred by Broga’s hurried parry, the guard advanced, feinting and thrusting without breaking form, feeling his way toward a decisive strike. Broga retreated, unused to the top-heavy staff and too close to his attacker to web him up.

Ormazd coughed out a laugh.

I’d no choice but to see Broga’s foe as a mere body. I imagined the burst of blood and viscera from out his middle. I imagined his eyes



briefly lighter and clearer than ever before. I imagined him slumping to the ground, his robe folding like a stricken tent.

I sent the combat-prepped *sukúla* through the window to realize my imaginings.

The guard gasped after his final, death-rattled word as Broga turned to the others closing on Majid.

Backed against the wall, the bandit drew his sword tighter against Ormazd and growled a warning or oath in Kanavarim.

Broga unleashed a torrent of gauzy webbing over the backs of the guards menacing the brigand. They dropped to a crouch to avoid the worst of it, throwing their arms over their eyes. Broga kicked the one nearest him under the chin while keeping up the barrage. Strands of glistening capture silk billowed out in successive waves. The sticky threads hardened on contact, netting the guards to the floorboards. They twisted and writhed under the elastic fibers in an effort to reach their belted daggers.

The next several guards through the door met the unyielding metal of the scrying orb head-on. Their tooled leather and copper helmets offered no protection. The haze of blood and brain gave the others pause. They bunched at the threshold, deliberating in curses. Their fear gave me a foul tingle, followed by a surge of nausea.

The attendant pressed herself into a corner, fiddling with something at her belt.

Broga turned the weaving orb on her. The initial salvo fixed her to the walls across the chest and upper arms.

A waxy pine cone dropped from a hand fixed to her side. She mumbled what, in hindsight, I assumed to be an enchantment before she pursed her lips against the reams of binding silk.

“All praise to you, Amany,” the amir said, then jutting his chin toward Broga, added: “Here’s your deserved rebuke, you—”

The pine cone exploded into a choking powder-fog, blinding me to the action. I switched the *sukúlas* to thermal mode. Broga retreated from the blast center, careful of the web-swathed guards, hacking but unhurt. The others squirmed in place. Except the amir. With a forceful backward snap of the head, he bashed Majid’s nose and skirted around the momentarily lax sword at his throat.

Broga must've registered the sounds of Ormazd's dodge. He aimed the weaving orb staff in the amir's direction and fired a concentrated volley through the whiteness.

The silk caught a portion of the amir's robe to the wall. Ormazd yanked to free himself as a multiplicity of fast-growing and grasping shoots erupted from the slowly dissipating fog to fill the room.

Twirling the weaving orb staff to whittle down the thin, nascent sprigs, Broga advanced on Ormazd.

A bloodied Majid joined him, hewing at the spray of plant-life with the ceremonial sword, pausing occasionally to dab at his leaking nose.

The determined amir ripped free of the webbing but had scant chance of escaping altogether. A wall and the cocooned attendant thwarted him on two sides, the magicked plant on another. His two assailants blocked the last remaining route. Up against the attendant, Ormazd shouted for the guards in the hallway.

"Trade," Broga said.

Majid snuffled in assent and, eyeing the door over Broga's shoulder, exchanged his sword for the staff.

The foremost guard outside the room tested my defending *sukúla*, sending up a spew of capture silk. Unfortunately for me, in evading the salvo, I sped the scrying orb right into the path of an encroaching shoot. The rapidly maturing vine encircled the device on the instant. The *sukúla* shuddered in air, stymied by the plant-weapon. As the formerly pent-up guards rushed into the breach, I considered detonating it. If only I were sure of the blast radius...

"I'll yet make you a slave of my slaves!" the amir said, looking to his guards.

Uproar and convulsion swept into the room as the reinforcements hacked their way around the plant-weapon.

"It's not for you to know me as a man." Broga parried an insistent root-growth and took another step. "But as an animal knows its own death."

Ormazd tried to shrink into his robe and brushed against the adhesive webbing around the attendant, ensnaring the plumes on his helm and a heavily-ringed hand. He muttered a curse and, apparently

panicked enough to swallow whatever qualms he'd harbored about deploying his graveworm eye, raised his free hand to the hinged patch.

Slowed by wildly proliferating limbs, Broga would never reach him in time.

"Away and duck!" I warned through the muffled *sukúla*.

The guards launched themselves at Majid, blades and staffs leveled.

A beam of disturbed atomy shot from the amir's weirding eye, rendering him a silhouette of bright, spectral energy.

Turning his back to this otherworldly ray, Broga grabbed the bandit by the arm and pulled him down and against the wall. Broga cried out on contact with the beam. Bloody slivers of mail and backflesh floated impossibly in his wake.

A searing jolt. A blur. The scrying orb splintered men and wood and window glass, tremoring the apartment into a dust-bedimmed ruin.

The force of the blast nearly severed my dreamtime hold on the observation *sukúla* outside the building. The after-sound—a sort of harsh whistle—reverberated through me. Thermal mode revealed darksome ghosts and red-yellow ashes everywhere. Broga...? He was curled up, facing the wall, warm and alive, praise be, alive. Majid also. And the amir.

Broga stirred in the settling dust, *shamshir* still in hand. He levered himself to his feet. A fitful streak of crimson across his shoulder blades evinced the power of the graveworm. Mere seconds of contact yielded this damage? The explosion had sunk the plant-weapon into the apartment below. The floorboards between Broga and Ormazd bordered on a jagged emptiness. But Broga wouldn't be dissuaded. His target lay crumpled and gummed to the now-dead attendant. The amir blinked his one visible eye. The patch had jolted shut.

Leaning on the weaving orb staff, Majid surveyed the destruction. Blackened bodies and debris littered the apartment. The late contingent of guards—seven or eight, judging from the disordered remains—had been closest to the *sukúla* when it self-destructed. They'd been killed to a man. The first contingent, secured by capture silk on the opposite side of the plant-weapon, had survived with only superficial injuries; one, however, teetered on the edge of the hole in the floor. Twisting toward Majid, he began making hurried entreaties.

Majid would have none of it. He administered a couple of hard clouts with the staff. “Quiet yourself, lackwit!”

The amir straightened at Broga’s approach. One hand was still trapped in the viscid silk covering the attendant’s reddened corpse; the other appeared useless due to injury. A root fragment protruded from his upper-arm. “Do you, yourself, have family?” he half-croaked. The lump in his wrinkled throat had assumed a new prominence.

Close-by now, Broga shook his head. “Not outside my mother and half-sister.”

“As you may know, I have raised up a fiefdom but no heirs.” He grinned at this melancholic avowal, or perhaps, some related memory. “Without a true family, without a legacy of flesh and blood, I have done nothing in this life but gather my own dust.” He jerked the elbow of his wounded arm, I imagined, in a failed effort to point a damning finger. “I curse you, ill met rogue...I curse you on my dying breath to suffer the same—like so much—”

Broga would abide no more. This man personified our hates, the inexplicable cruelties of the world and its arbitrary ranks, of fate malign or merely haphazard. “Then I’m glad to add another mark of distinction,” Broga snarled. While Majid looked on, the sword came down in a swift and angry arc, separating the amir from his niggling sneer. The toppled body spasmed blood from its neck stump, spattering Broga’s boots and greaves.

Majid extended a foot to prevent the severed head from rolling into the gap in the floor. That shift in weight was all it took to unsettle things. Several precarious floorboards collapsed, taking the head and the brigand down with them. The silk-netted guard closest to the hole followed, though not straightaway. He hung suspended by the webbing above the floor of the apartment below for a moment or two before the pale white strands finally snapped. He gave a clotted-up scream. The inexorable thud sounded amid the growing stamp of booted feet from the stairwell—yet more guards.

A glassy-eyed *shirgol* juicer dared poke his head into the room. His eyes widened in horror at the heap of bodies. Broga wagged his sword at the disconcerted snoop then leapt after his grisly prize.

He landed in the apartment below at the base of the wrecked plant-

weapon and was promptly set upon by the web-tacky guard. Evading a high-thrust dagger, Broga urged the dazed Majid to retrieve the head. “Hurry, man, if you’ve the will to live.” The arrival of more guards sounded imminent. I readied the remaining *sukûla* to help hold them back but despaired of an escape route. Either of the two stairwells that ran the length of the tenement would require Broga and Majid to navigate a corridor thronged with Thangol loyalists. Sooner or later, they’d be overwhelmed. A dread void opened in the heart of me.

I crashed the scrying orb through the window at speed and cracked the guard’s spine with it. He tumbled to the ground in wordless misery. “The hallway is overrun,” I announced in a mechanical voice.

Broga bolted the door and turned to the roused bandit. “How much weight can these orb strands bear?”

“You saw what happened,” he said, indicating the stilled guard. “Double, triple, who knows?” He patted his ample gut and gave an uneven smile of doubt.

Heavy footfalls registered from multiple directions, most prominently, from overhead and the corridor outside the door.

“Bag the amir already.”

Majid mumbled his displeasure at this treatment but complied, stuffing the blood-soaked head—still attached to the spiked helm—into a cotton shoulder bag. He wiped his hands on the hem of his sleeveless coat. “Happy, *lahkesh*?” His clogged nose blunted any spite in the question.

Broga ignored him, preoccupied with figuring the distance between the window and the decrepit building across the avenue. He held out a hand. “Where’s the staff?”

“Must I always act the drudge? I’m a thief, not a—”

A barrage of webbing shot through the hole in the ceiling passed over their heads.

“Not a bother.” Majid dropped to his knees to recover the weaving orb staff.

Without a glance up at his attackers, Broga moved closer to the window and out of their sight.

A flurry of invectives went up among the enraged guards. They’d doubtless seen their headless chief and were hot for vengeance.

Broga took the staff from a crouching Majid and adjusted its trigger level to maximum. He clearly intended to use it to swing down to the street.

“Are you certain about this?” I asked. “If I detonate this one, I can—”

A resounding thump against the door decided the matter.

“Maybe after—for cover.” Broga cleared the window of sharded glass with the head-end of the staff. Only the weaving orb’s puckered spinneret was visible. The bulk of the creature was hidden in the ironwood hollow.

Capture silk spiraled across the arid blue sky.

Another ominous wallop lifted the door from its hinges. The bolt rattled in its slackening latch.

Broga pulled Majid to the window ledge. “How’re we to do this?”

The braided webbing splatted against a half-razed wall on the abandoned building opposite. Gravity had carried it a story or so lower than the apartment. The angle looked all wrong. They might easily swing directly into the dust—assuming the gossamer thread even proved secure. A pulsing fear challenged my dreamtime concentration. *Heech!* To go out on a fool’s errand within a fool’s errand...

The door shuddered aside. If not for the wrecked plant-weapon in their path, the intrushing guards would’ve taken them in moments. As it was, the lump of entangling limbs posed a significant obstacle.

I’m embarrassed to confess here that, seeing Broga at disadvantage, I assayed to take my dreamtime powers beyond their normal limits. I thought, maybe, just maybe, my recent heightened sensitivity to the dreamtime signaled new and as-yet unused energies. I thought to conjure up a disorienting psychic stab. But no. It was a pitiable and wasted try. I had to do it, though, you understand? My *huyi* was in danger and mortals, *vafna*, we need each other. When we’re near cracked to the heart-roots, we need each other to mend aright.

Broga placed Majid’s hands on the weaving orb staff then covered them with his own and pushed off the window ledge for the both of them.

There was a heartstopping lull.

Then all was driven thunder and radiance.

Chapter Ten

Ringed about by enemies

The destruction of the last *sukúla* sent me into a confounding dream-time spiral. I tumbled through dispirate memories and imaginings, sometimes at once. A fluttering swarm of colorful *skipti*. One of my gladiatorial foes curled up in the sand like a wintered leaf. Endless, slate-gray waves. A dank and musty jail cell. Daylight gleaming on a scrying crystal. The astral images kept coming, one after another, the blood in my head pounding, pounding.

It was like drowning in shimmering oceanclouds of thought. Reality teased me with its gray solidity only to vanish beneath another bleary wave from out my deep unconscious. I struggled to regain my sense of self in the world, alive. Reaching out with my mind and failing to grasp anything of substance, I went numb and nearly surrendered to the numinous deluge.

Until she called to me—Dabir’s mother—in a faint and wordless pitch that resolved into—

Ovandu saying my name, one hand on the gauze canopy, a spirit of flashing gold. The brief overlap of realities that often accompanies a dreamtime withdrawal lent her a disconcerting sheen. A strange arterial glow filled out her silhouette. I closed my eyes and took a deep, calming breath, picturing the vasty earth below rooted to the Sentinel Tree and threaded with spirit...

“What happened, Ranvir? What did you see?” Her voice was high and brisk. “We received word from our spies a short time ago about what occurred on the street, but not what came before.”

My breathing shallowed. Broga’s fatalistic hardihood couldn’t last forever. I opened my eyes, intent on facing things as they were. “Did they make it?” Ovandu was flesh and blood again, small featured, her face waxing from thin astral gold into a pleasing roundness.

She took my hands in both of hers and drew me up from layers of particolored cushions. The gesture exacerbated my anxiety. “They made it to ground, yes,” she said. “And, judging from the blood soaking Majid’s cotton bag, with the graveworm head.” The skin around her mouth tensed.

“But?” I braced myself for more—a dark, unthinkable epilogue.

“The constable and her lancers interceded and, after driving the Thangol farther into that slum quarter, bore them away.”

I let out a relieved breath. “How long ago was this?”

“Three—almost four hours. I tried to rouse you with bitter-root several times. Lost in the dreamtime, I take it?”

“Were they wounded? Maybe—”

“Not seriously,” she said. “Unless Majid’s bag was sodden from his own blood.” She dug her nails into the palms of my hands. “What happened that you detonated both scrying orbs? Was this planned—to claim the graveworm for yourselves?” What I’d read initially as concern was, in truth, a crystallizing anger.

I pulled my hands away, little half-moon impressions on the backs of them. Her ire set my heart to racketing. “You’ve spent too long in this cesspit of plots and counterplots. Everywhere you look, you see only monsters—even in a brother who risked life and fortune to recover you. Don’t you grasp how you’ve rendered our hopes and sacrifices meaningless?”

A host of failures beset me in the moment: the swordquest, yes, but also failures of imagination, even what should be considered properly heroic. I folded my hands over hers in a prayerful gesture as much to calm myself as her. “For nigh three Sharro Calendar years we traversed the length and breadth of Laegrevel at peril, chasing shadows and rumors—and for what? A petty-minded sorceress? We’ve no truck with grand ambitions—yours or anyone’s. Perhaps better than most youth, we understand the future could be nothing more than a sheer cliff to the end.”

We—Brogia and I—were living for the first time without a clear guiding cause and stumbling over ourselves because of it. Every turn of events seemed a personal reproach. This state of hostile uncertainty entailed both fear and relief. We could pursue other, perhaps different,

ends, if only we knew the right of things. Broga still wanted to loom large in history and had the confidence to think he'd a choice in the matter. Me, I only sought respite from the cares of the road—the endless leave-taking—and hoped returning home and a renewed devotion to earthlore would put an end to my prevailing disquiet.

Barámil is what I felt. It's a Druna word for feeling in-between—in-between homes, castes or positions, in-between your present self and a new one. In earthlore, *barámil* has its origins in our separation at birth from *amneskur eðli* (cosmic nature); in fact, some believe it to be our natural, though invariably errant, state of being. 'Living in the world means living in error,' as it says in the Book of Seasons. From this perspective I suppose I should be grateful for my current state. I'd planned to edge myself into a spiritual life by degrees; now, of a sudden, it's the whole of my existence.

Ovandu returned no warmth. That was one of the irritating ironies of our situation—the closer we got to her, the further away she seemed. I narrowed my eyes and breathed this last through slitted lips to match her stern mood. "I promise you, Ovandu, our only aim is to win back our liberty."

"Be thankful you know what it feels like, man and wilderling." She removed herself to the cushioned settee against the far wall of the windowless sanctum. Her look was as distant and defiant as House Than-gol's winged sigil's. I almost admired this ability of hers to expunge any trace of emotion. In this and other ways, she was stronger than me. "What about the *sukúlas*?"

"Broga and Majid, they were assailed by dozens of house guards. I don't know. The soldiers must've been hiding elsewhere in the tenement. The *sukúlas*' finding range is limited... Or maybe they were shielded from discovery somehow. Sanaz..." Though my blood was up at her questioning, I merely shrugged. "There were no other means to save them."

Tilting her head toward the vaulted ceiling, she massaged the back of her neck. "Broga knew we had agents on the street below in the guise of alms beggars. He might well have dropped the severed head from an open window and called the task complete." She considered

the geas only in terms of absence and loss, of failure. Who lived, who died, that was none of her bother.

I ignored her unfeeling calculus. “No doubt the explosions drew the attention of the constable and her troops.”

“A convenient signal; hence, my suspicions...”

“Aren’t our thoughts mother-naked under your magickal eye?”

With a quick, decisive snap of her head, she rose to her full height. “Mock not my hard-won talents. I’m near to displacing Garshasp and—*aysh*, what’s the use in your knowing?”

There was a sharp rap on the brass-bound door.

“What’s the advantage, you mean,” I said to her back.

She opened the door to a stiff-necked guard and conferred with him in hurried whispers. “No need to worry further,” she announced. “They’re here, gathered in my workshop, the constable among them.”

When we ducked inside the guarded workshop, there was a round of subdued greetings. A bleary-eyed Majid leaned against a worktable to our left. His robe was streaked with blood dried russet. He cradled a bronze chamber pot under one arm. A conspicuous helmet plume overhung the pot.

Broga and Taraneh stood to one side, shoulders squared and, in the case of the constable, arms crossed in dismay. Doubtless under Ovandu’s orders, the house guards had stripped them of weapons. The constable, fully clad in silvered armor, inclined toward my captor. Her narrowed look suggested she found nary a straight grain in the fiber of Ovandu, as we Druna say.

Broga waved me over to clasp my forearm and thank me for my aid. I returned his grip pressure for pressure, too overwhelmed to speak. How many miraculous escapes had he managed—and always with stoic aplomb? I moved for an embrace but was dissuaded by his unsmiling nod.

Ovandu faced the constable, chin upraised and bristling with impatience. “*Salam va ashnai.*”

“*Khosh amadid.*” Overtopping Ovandu by half a head, Taraneh lowered her eyes to meet the mage’s black, adamant gaze.

“I apologize for the circumstances of this, our first meeting.” Ovandu cast a sidelong glance at Majid, who had set the chamber pot next to some unidentifiable mechanical. “Am I to assume these men are in your custody?”

“I’m only a simple market inspector, Harajah. Unless the merchant’s guild decides otherwise, this incident falls outside my purview.” I should note here that one of the principal differences between Kanavarim and our common tongue—Konae—is the treatment of tense. Conjugations in Kanavarim almost always reflect ‘what is,’ by which I mean existence without any animating cause. Dabir once explained it as a devotional tense. The implicit assumption is that everything owes its existence to either god or fate; in other words, whatever happens is inevitable and blessed for it. I mention this now because—though expressed in Konae—the constable shaded her remark with this resigned attitude. “Besides,” she added, “the Thangol are like to overrun my jail and see their justice done in the streets. I take it these men will be safer here.” Her cheeks darkened at this admission.

“Of a surety,” Ovandu said then, as if completing a mental checklist, asked after Broga. “Are you hurt?”

He shook his head, jaw tight, restraining his temper. The gall—*heesh*.

Tugging on his bloodstained robe, Majid said, “Though I look like I’ve been spitted, I’m fine as well, thank you.” The incident had set a hardening mark on his brow as if years had passed.

Ovandu motioned him forward. “The spoils?”

Majid jerked to his feet and presented the severed head in its new receptable.

“What a fitting vessel...” Ovandu withdrew her prize from the chamber pot by its helmet spike and, unperturbed by the dead-gray skin and length of clotted gore around the stump, flicked the eye patch aside. A mucus-slick orifice shaped roughly like a seven-pointed star gaped at her. The partially translucent skin around the toothless maw exposed an ethereal, red-tinged glitter. She turned the head this way and that, admiring how the graveworm caught the workshop’s dim mineral light.

“May I ask what you intend to do with it?” Taraneh asked.

“I thought it was of no matter—given the scope of your official duties.” Ovandu deposited the head back in the chamber pot then claimed it from Majid, placing it on a sidetable near the door.

“Consider it of personal interest.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. Your—lover was it?—Elham. Gorgeous young woman, I understand.” Ovandu sized up the constable in her chased silver armor and flashed a weak, deprecating smile. “Ormazd could be a damnable fiend. But you apparently took the lesson to heart. So far as I’m aware, you’ve not exceeded your authority since.”

The tap of Taraneh’s heels on the granite floor as she shifted her weight assumed an awkward prominence. While same-sex relationships were an accepted commonplace in most countries, they ran against traditional Kanavarim culture and so were generally regarded as a suspect affectation. Now I understood why Garshasp had once referred to the constable as a ‘good man ruined.’ Taraneh, however, seemed less concerned about Ovandu’s unscrupulous disclosure than the prospects for returning her lover to life. Eyes downcast, she asked, “Is there a way to—?” She left off the rest, fearing the answer.

“Restore a soul-taken?” Ovandu grimaced. “Is that what Dabir promised you in exchange for your help? Oh, in all fairness, ‘help’ is probably too strong a word. Wilfull ignorance?” She wriggled her fingers in mock deliberation. “You know better than most why I need the graveworm’s magick—to prevent Dabir and that hedge-mage Garshasp from resurrecting Thaumiel and, in the process, destroying Al-Mahad.”

Recrossing her arms, the constable said, “He wants only to restore his mother to material life.”

“By controlling Thaumiel and at any cost.”

Broga put a hand on Taraneh’s elbow. “You’ve known about this all along? About the ritual to bring Thaumiel to life, the mass sacrifice?”

“What sacrifice?”

I reached into my robe and withdrew the envelope I’d received at the boardwalk shrine. “Recognize this symbol?” I finished unfolding the slip of paper and held it for the constable’s inspection.

“What do you mean ‘symbol?’ It’s an inspirational poem,” Taraneh maintained. “Like the ones hawked by beggars throughout the city.”

Leaning toward Broga, I said, “That confirms one part of my theory.” I passed the magicked rune to Ovandu. “What about you? What is it you see?”

“*Aysh.*” Her nettled look resolved into one of rapt attention, captured by some idea or other. “Mesmerism at a distance.” Studying it further, she noted, “It’s designed to instill a willingness for self-sacrifice. I can’t read any specifics, though—the trigger or timing.”

“It is a mass sacrifice then—what he’s planning?” I crumpled the envelope in my fist in front of Taraneh. “As you said, these are all over the city.”

Ovandu nodded, her eyes shadowed over.

“Who’s planning?” Majid asked, distraught. “Am I the only one confused by all this talk of sacrifice? I’ve come as close to that today as I’m comfortable with, all praise to the Father of Good Fortune. My part is done, yes?”

Broga waved away this interruption, eager for more answers. “And the Thangol,” he asked Ovandu, “what do they have to do with it?”

“Nothing from what I can tell. A rumor started by Dabir and his fellow conspirators.”

Majid demanded a response. He slid from his perch on the worktable and appealed directly to Ovandu. “If there’s no reward in this plot excepting the afterlife, please, I’ve fulfilled my part of the geas, have mercy on a poor freebooter and release me.” A vein spasmed across his forehead.

“I’m as puzzled as the bandit here,” Taraneh said.

“Bandit chief,” Majid retorted.

The constable shot him a withering glance before turning back to Ovandu. “What’s Dabir’s scheme?”

“Dabir and Garshasp,” she said in a low, conspiratorial tone and rifled the helmet plume. “Now you understand why it was so important I claim this for myself. I can handle Garshasp, that lame old tinker. Or you can take him into custody, whichever you prefer. Dabir, however—he and his unnatural mother—they require a higher order of magick.”

“How? Will you—?” I motioned plucking an eye out.

Ovandu allowed herself a brief, hoarse laugh. “No, no... With the right sort of magical energy, I can quicken the graveworm in place.

The amir's head, petrified and preserved by enchanted oils, will be my lifelong trophy weapon."

"And the scheme at work here? This ritual sacrifice?" Taraneh asked.

"I don't know much more than what I've already said." Ovandu grabbed up the chamber pot and hugged it to her chest. "But believe me, this—this is all that stands between you and endless void."

"Ach," Majid blurted. "All the more reason to let me go. O benevolent—"

The crash of metal on stone drowned out the rest as Garshasp drifted into the room on the back of the automaton. In order to navigate the door, the mechanism shifted its liquid metal bulk forward, momentarily resembling a tadpole with ungainly legs. Ah, here was another unforeseen turn in the noisy current of my life.

Garshasp slipped from the automaton to his feet, steadying himself with his pikestaff. "I came as soon as I got word."

Under the vaulted entrance, the automaton resumed its standard form. A distorted reflection of us played across its mirrored surface. There was no exit but through Garshasp's hulking vassal.

"Ah, it's good you're here, Spasbet, as witness if nothing else." Garshasp lurched toward Ovandu, a mischievous glint in his beady eyes. "The boldness of it all..."

Ovandu scoffed at his impish arrogance. "So, you've come to confess?"

"Confess?" Garshasp dared tumbling over to gesture freely with his pikestaff. He must've been in a haughty mood indeed. "On the contrary, I come to bury you, *eahmira* (harem slut)."

Ovandu was, or pretended to be, affronted by the insult. "Am I that much a threat to you and your plot? The girl you've so often derided as your base inferior, your *abid*. Or worse." She stepped back, first with one foot then the other. "I'm sure the constable's familiar with your network of cables this side of the canyon." She positioned herself next to Broga. "He aims to fuel Thaumiel's resurrection, pending a fit source. He sought one at Grihbad before he discovered the automaton lacks a soul."

"The cheek of this one, trying to pass her sins off as mine." Garshasp rubbed a hand across his sweat-slick pate. "The cabling is designed

to drain the effigy of any imputed energies. Though the system lacks a power source as yet, I don't know how many times she's sabotaged it under cover of night." He hunched his shoulders in feigned disgust. "Now, she wants the graveworm eye to make trouble in the plain light of day."

Broga could no longer restrain his temper. "And who killed Niew, carving a Matabwe sign into her for good measure? Sanaz made a convincing argument for you and you, in turn, blamed us."

"What better way for her to eliminate a rival but set you against me?"

"She was asking questions about Harajah," the constable said in a dead-even tone. "Niew was."

Ovandu raised her finely trimmed eyebrows in surprise. "How would you know?"

"By exceeding my authority—quietly, of course."

"Are you in league with the scribe?" Broga asked Taraneh, his voice graveled with disappointment.

The constable's eyes darkened in warning.

"If you deign to be a brother to me," Ovandu said, nudging Broga with her shoulder, "then consider this magick my bride-price to be my own person."

"I can't allow that." Garshasp issued a guttural command in Kana-varim.

Immediately, the automaton convulsed into a new shape. One hand reddened and liquified into the barrel of a massive gun; at the same time, its torso bowed inward to form a molten cage. I recalled how the creature had swallowed the Thangol man on the bridge.

"You've no say in this." Ovandu muttered something in Matabwe I didn't catch.

Garshasp smiled to himself and shook his head. "Think you so little of me. I discovered your hidden command months ago."

"Oh, I figured you'd expect one, but..." She spoke again in Matabwe, more clearly this time and near to a shout. The automaton whirled on Garshasp and scooped him into its hollowed middle with whipping tendrils. The pikestaff rang against new-formed bars and clattered to the tiles. Crumpled inside the mechanism, the old man bellowed one directive after another without effect.

“You regard this a mere cypress dance?” Ovandu asked.

Broga cast an urgent sidelong look at me. I gathered he wanted me to retrieve the discarded pikestaff. Given the proximity of the automaton to it, I hesitated, the blood in my head pounding, overwhelming me.

The constable must’ve caught the exchange because she smacked the chamber pot from Ovandu’s hands. The vessel skittered across the floor and collided against the wall nearest the door. As Majid rushed for the ricocheting pot, I took my chance, all blood-pulse and fitful panting, swiping the weapon and underhanding it to Broga.

Everything happened at such speed, Ovandu was under threat before she could respond.

Broga aimed the pikestaff at her throat. “Open your mouth and you’re done, half-sister or no.”

“*Zahreh mar!*” Majid began to bundle the chamber pot in his outer robe. “What now? More running?” He groaned at the prospect, weary as he was.

“I can do you better,” Garshasp said from a crouch inside the immobilized automaton. His words reverberated against the metal. “Quickly, while it’s between directives, there’s a means to shut it down and restart it—a throw switch under the skin. There should be a pair of forge gloves on one of those worktables.”

Ovandu made a crimped, rebuking face.

“*Heesh*, I’ll try it,” I said, scanning the chamber.

“For what purpose?” Majid asked. “So he can order that abomination to crush us? I, for one, don’t trust him—or any of you, if it comes down to it.”

The constable broke out impatiently, “He intends to spirit us away with this tek creature, *vay*, at least the three of you. I’ve my own wings as you know.” She locked eyes with the arch-mage in such a way as to persuade him of her surmise. Then, without any preparatory signal, she cracked Ovandu on the temple with her gauntlet, rendering our captor an unconscious heap.

Glaring at the constable, Broga dropped to one knee. Besides familial affection, his understanding of abused persons who abused others in turn made it possible for him to forbear Ovandu’s cruelty. She was

supremely damaged, a creature of trauma and malign impulse, but to his mind, not without hope of redemption, no, never that. He was glad to report her breathing regularly as if in a heavy sleep.

“We couldn’t risk her alerting the guards. Or have her know where we’re headed,” Taraneh said matter-of-factly.

Broga radiated a tension he typically had to burn away in combat. “Where *are* we headed?”

“To do what Garshasp apparently failed to do—get a magickal weapon suited for the coming fight.” Her lips made a single grim stitch. “We go to Grihbad and you—sadly, you go to a hell of your own making.”

Chapter Eleven

Tests of spirit—and the sacrifices thereof

The mechanism hurtled through the afternoon blankness rigidly upright, its fiery jets angled toward the earth. Our hold comprised its distended torso. A steady rip of wind through the airholes perforating the cargo bubble set our robes to snapping and assailed us with stinging grit. I reclined across from Broga, my back to the outside-facing part of the hold, knees bent against the constant juddering. Broga kept one hand on the satchel containing the graveworm head and the other on the hilt of a scabbarded sword laid flat at his side.

Next to Broga, Majid slumped over his belly and knees, head buried in his plump arms. A slow-motion swaying indicated he was near to air sickness. Garshasp sat next to me, almost prone, his thick-banded right leg extended. Now and then I detected the sharp scent of unguents from it. He kept up a soundless prayer through gritted teeth.

We endured the cramped, disorienting flight to Grihbad inside the automaton in dour silence. It was like riding a blinded *sukūla*, swerving, falling, buffeted by unpredictable crosswinds and air pockets. The smooth, unforgiving metal chafed my backside, thighs and the soles of my feet. The occasional downdrift or thump of air wracked me up against the perforated bubble, bruising my shoulder blades.

A few years past, I would've faced this situation with an exuberant sense of daring and adventure. The strangeness of it alone would've been a tonic to my placid life in the refuge. But by this time, I'd seen too many daunting challenges and lost too many companions to take any pride or pleasure in the doing; instead, I hoped this would be another day that, in hindsight, I'd recall only as a great relief—like a childhood bout of fever.

With the world shrunken to a mirrored hollow, my mind drifted into half-formed meditations: *I'm tucked in the center of a mechanism*

in the center of a trackless desert in the center of a lapse of judgment, asking why am I still here, the swordquest done and moot? What do I owe the people of Al-Mahad? There are moral considerations, of course, broad notions of spiritual duty and the like, but what makes this mission in particular my responsibility? The wanton gods will do what they will...

Broga's soft-lustered eyes belied his aura of cool authority. I detected the pain beyond and his struggle to conceal it. He'd proposed taking Ovandu with us. But the constable had prevailed on him to leave her. If his half-sister opposed Dabir and the expected ritual occurred in our absence, it's possible she could mount a defense, however temporary. And if Ovandu were leagued with him, *vafna*, then it were best she not learn what, if any, weapon had been got from Grihbad, lest she warn Dabir via some dreamtime rapport. There was no denying the reasonableness of Taraneh's arguments but Broga couldn't help feeling guilty and defeated. There was his kin, hurt and unconscious, of dubious status among the Mu'mir regulars and likely to be blamed for the loss of the graveworm... Who knew what punishments Amir Zartosht might ordain?

Taraneh had gone ahead, her safety among the house guards assured, while the rest of us freed Garshasp and amassed a small cache of weapons, including a standard model *sukula*. The scrying orb lacked remote voice and self-destruct functions but would serve for reconnaissance. I'd also recovered my gun, along with a handful of breakaway ammo. The bullets consisted of a composite designed to explode into a fine powder on contact. Jacketed in a gilding metal to minimize their abrasiveness in the barrel, they were intended for crowded market environments and non-fatal except at close range. Despite the limitations of these projectiles, Majid had badgered me to give the gun back to him. He'd never fired it and was sorely disappointed to miss the opportunity. I'd denied him out of concern for my own safety.

The automaton jounced us out of our settled positions on its rapid descent. My feet shot out and skidded across Broga's sheathed blade. He looked up from thumbing the hilt and smiled in silence as he was wont to do in a dark mood. He looked almost apologetic and I wondered: for what? The danger inherent in the situation? The whole of our swordquest? I can't deny there'd been a kind of peace in surrendering

myself to his judgment. I hadn't always followed him unthinkingly in the particulars but as far as the larger mission went, I'd assumed it as my own without question and felt ennobled by it.

He'd such an honest soul and bright life-essence. This defining energy—it came from his clarity of purpose. His will was like a clenched fist directed at leveling heaped up tyrannies both great and small—for him and his people, for the oppressed everywhere. He sought nothing less than the radical beauty of justice. Of a surety, he could be stern with himself in chasing this ideal and because of that, seem aloof and indifferent. But I knew better. I knew to look past his practiced air of detachment. I knew he cared too much to show his emotions as a matter of habit. Oh, if only you could've seen him with Leire, how he'd tempered his wants for her sake, though heartsick at letting her go. You might even say he had a romantic conscience. *Heesh*. He's surrendered ever so much as me and more besides. He made me better—stronger in every way—than I would've been among the flowerkind of home. Adversity forces you to come to terms with who you are. I hope he knows how much I loved him in life and, though the decision cut short my stay on earth, the honor I took in giving myself over to his lead.

We recoiled as a body when the automaton landed, caroming around the hold like dice in a cup, Majid swearing up and down. Jostled out of position, I elbowed Garshasp in the ribs. A terrific crackling, such as I haven't heard since crossing the northern tundra of Heimsveld, accompanied our touchdown. I apologized to Garshasp for jabbing him.

Scowling at his rough treatment in general or me in particular, he commanded the metal golem to release us.

The bubble thinned to a globular overhang, disclosing a vista both unnerving and beautiful. Situated in an expanse of gray-green glass, the colossal ruins of Grihbad—temple, vault, what-have-you—resembled nothing so much as a strange, ice-locked ship of precursor stone. The original pinwheel plan for the structure was still evident amid its partial collapse. Low, mammoth blocks jutted from out the glassed over desert at asymmetrical angles. The sand-pitted walls were completely lacking in ornament. What made them impressive was their size and arrangement. Even sunk into the earth, they stretched higher than the tallest Domination-era palaces. I expect that, from a distance,

the structure was often taken for a tumbled mesa. Wraparound corners emerging from the plane of one façade allowed for viewing two sides at once. The effect must've been overawing when the relic was in its prime.

I exchanged a doubtful look with Broga. He'd been appointed to brave its twisty and tortuous passages.

Taraneh hailed us as we clambered from the shapeshifting mechanism, windblown and aching. Scatterings of glass crunched under our heels: half-melted blobs, riven sheets, long, weblike forms. The sea green panorama put me in mind of the ocean bottom—at least how I envisioned it—the water somehow drained away. I shielded my eyes from the low evening sun and the gleams of chunked glass. Perhaps here more than anywhere the old Kanavarim adage was true: 'When the desert sun shines it shines entirely and its light recasts the world.' I took a grateful draught of water from my goatskin bag.

A shaky and nauseated Majid approached the constable. "Damnable machine."

"Would you rather have walked?" she asked.

"For a time there, I'd rather have died." The bandit snorted in disdain.

Coming up behind him, Garshasp clinked his pikestaff against a ribbon of glass. "None of that death-talk, thank you."

"Where's the entrance?" Broga asked the constable, affixing the broadsword to his belt.

"Straight to our purpose then?" Taraneh pointed to a jagged outcropping on our right. "Around that projection you'll find a path through the debris. There's no door—just a crumbling archway. It will be dark inside at first. Don't be alarmed. Continue on and you'll come to—I don't know—puzzle-forms of light? I'm not sure how to describe it."

Broga gestured toward the ruins. "Is it a precursor machine?"

"If a machine can feel..." She screwed up her face. "I don't know. In some places, I saw, no, experienced the ideas of things, occult geometries—shapes as themselves and nothing else. All these elements looked like they'd just shake loose and drift over me like a cloud." She shook her head. "It could just as easily be another kind of artifact, a mage, even a living spell—what we call a *taeyatan*."

I spoke up: “The ustam at one of the boardwalk shrines for Thaumiel told me it was the god’s transcendent consciousness.”

“That may be. I wouldn’t know. I don’t subscribe to that faith—or any other.” She shrugged off the possibility. “Whatever Grihbad’s true nature, I’m convinced it’s an ancient means for trying the souls of pilgrims or warriors. Presumably, by passing its trials, you’re rewarded in due measure. Most, however, don’t survive it. And even if you do...” Her jaw tensed.

“What?” Broga asked.

Taraneh gripped his shoulder. “You’ll be asked to give up a part of yourself. The greater your sacrifice, the greater your gift, as they say.” She removed her hand and went on: “What Harajah brought up... Elham and I—we were friends from childhood. I was the rash one, bold about my feelings, impatient to be wanted. She was guarded, secretive. And for good reason as it turned out, working as she did for House Thangol and me, a city lancer. The amir’s younger brother, a *shirgol* juicer of the worst sort, committed a murder so horrible, I... Foolish as I was, I refused to ignore it, him. You know, he actually cried from embarrassment because I—a *saqiat*—was the one to make the arrest. It was an unpardonable stain on his manhood. Then, of course, Ormazd got his revenge with his daimon-eye...”

“And Dabir promised to return her to life?” I asked.

She lowered her eyes. “But not for my own sake—not really.” Her voice broke and she started again: “After—after... I was wild, destructive... I made the journey here, figuring I’d perish in the depths of Grihbad, alone as I deserved.” A rueful smile crossed her face. “I guess my will to live was stronger than I knew. Still, my black mood was total—*klamaan*. I chose a sacrifice meant to spite myself and the world in concert. I forfeit my capacity to love.”

I was struck dumb by her frankness. Druna social niceties discouraged such talk, especially in the company of strangers. It smacked of self-aggrandizement, of privileging the living moment over the cosmic and eternal. At the same time, I was moved to comfort her, I don’t know how. Even Garshasp, who doubtless considered her story a grave sin, let the immense quiet of the desert prevail.

“We’ve a proverb from the Iron Mountains,” Broga said, breaking the uneasy silence, “Love can never be lost, only locked away.”

Taraneh gave a curt, uncertain nod. “You can’t say Grihbad lacks a sense of humor.” She reached behind her and grasped one of the two wedge-shaped spurs at the base of her neck. It was from these hollow ornaments her wings emerged—broad, flat streaks of dark energy. “With these nighted wings, I’m like a herald of death.”

“So might we all be if we fail.” Broga motioned her toward the disordered stone marking the low-ceilinged entrance to the temple. He bore the weight of his task without the slightest complaint in his dark-ringed eyes.

The rest of us followed—considerably less composed—as far as the debris-strewn approach to the archway. Uncounted ages of sand obscured the low, shadowed opening.

“How long will it take?” Broga asked the constable.

“I don’t know—minutes, hours. Time passes differently inside.”

He stroked the satchel containing the graveworm head. “I’d better keep this with me, don’t you think? Whether I make it or not, if only to prevent Ovandu from reclaiming it...”

“None of us are wont to use it.” Taraneh slit her eyes at Majid. “Or sell it.”

The bandit scoffed through his fulsome beard. “Please, you wound me, Spasbet.”

After regarding the archway a moment, she gripped Broga’s forearm and bowed a little in salute before seeking the shade of a derelict column or shaft.

Majid and Garshasp offered their prayers (though the bandit’s sounded more like a terrific grunt) and trailed after her, leaving us alone. I could scarce bring myself to look Broga in the eye. Acknowledging the danger he faced—*heesh*, his likely death—was like tearing out my own heart-roots. My chest trembled in ever-intensifying cycles. The stark, uninviting landscape assumed a plaintive cast. “You want I should...?” I fumbled in a belt pouch for the salvaged scrying orb. “I could scout ahead for you.”

“It’s probably a machine,” he said. “Who knows how it would react to another?”

As much as it hurt to concede the point, I couldn't fault his thinking. I opened my mouth to speak and stood there, lips parted, mute. Everything that came to mind was too bleak for words. This was my one and only *huyi*... The sense of futility that sometimes lies in wait between distractions got to me. I hung my head, overcome. No matter how this venture went, I remember thinking, it will mark a new direction in our lives.

Face tightening at my evident distress, Broga hugged me to him. I looked on the crown of his crop-topped head. I worried he could feel the mad pulse at the base of my neck. "I'll find my way through," he said into the folds of my desert robe. "Whatever it is." I squeezed him, once, twice, then he pulled away and, turning from useless pity, trooped into the wreckage. The sketch of a path wound through lofty piles of stone and bent metal. I lost his burly back among the half-submerged rubble but the steady crackle of glass assured me of his progress until he slipped into the entryway. The cavernous gloom seemed to shimmer at his passing. Maybe it was a trick of the slowly failing light against his drawn sword.

I remained there for a time, afraid of losing the mental imprint of his vanished image if I should move, bounding from stone to stone in imagination. The displaced walls and supports were crazy in aspect. How few leaps could I take? I made a game of plotting the most efficient route to the entrance. Otherwise, anxiety drove my thoughts into dormancy. Broga could be absolute in his wants. I didn't dare ponder what he'd sacrifice to achieve his end.

When the leaden heat began to dizzy me, I joined the constable in the lengthening shadows of a low stone frontage. The brigand and the arch-mage had taken shelter in the shade offered by the automaton. I suspect they found Grihbad dispiriting, if not a fount of superstitious dread. I could hardly blame them. The scale of the sprawling ruins impressed me as both majestic and melancholic. Grihbad must've been one of the premiere achievements of the Age Before and now—now its deformed yet commanding alabaster peaks served as a temple-tomb and grim reminder of the impermanence of any mortal triumph. At best, the desolation bespoke, you'll live on in bits and pieces until such

time everything reverts to a state of nature. The monotonous line of the horizon only underscored the sentiment.

Taraneh sat on a wedge of stone oiling her *shamshir*. “There’s no predicting it,” she said without looking up.

Lost in wistful musings, it took me a moment to realize what she was referring to. “Did you ask for the wings, specifically?”

“No,” she said. “But I was wearing a brooch Elham had given me—a winged scarab. I don’t know if Grihbad intuited that or...” She smiled up at me. “I suppose I could’ve been a monster like Tamas.”

I clamped down on the looming worst. “If he fails, I’ll go next.”

“You act like a mated pair.”

“I owe him that much.” I studied her with renewed intensity. Her statuesque frame in that chased silver armor put me in mind of a lonely relic from another, more chivalrous age. She looked as if she were contemplating a bleak future, the passions dead within her breast. “The job of work you mentioned at the tavern—is this what you had in mind?”

Taraneh withdrew into herself. “This or—I don’t know—what Hara-jah obliged him to do. Whatever might help me resurrect Elham.” She laughed her near-silent laugh. “I still can’t believe she’s his sister and the two of you imposters. I thought you made a respectable Thaumazon, however circumspect.”

Broga had revealed everything when the constable rescued him from the Thangol. “Half-sister,” I replied, ignoring her comment about my disguise. She couldn’t understand how ill-fitting it was. By reputation, Thaumazon was winking and worldly, a sage capable of cold, experimental murder and near-messianic brilliance—qualities I could never hope—or even want—to approximate.

“What’s her given name again?”

“Ovandu. In Matabwe, it means ‘I praise and give thanks.’”

“For what is the question.” She paused in her task. “I don’t mean to pry, but was she always like this? So...craven?”

“Her enslavement has clearly hardened her against fellow feeling. As a child, *vafna*, she was certainly wilfull...” Growing up, Broga had recounted countless arguments between Ovandu and her mother but no meaningful details about these secondhand incidents came to mind.

The impression that abided was of her, alone in a garden or jungle tract, a bark bound tome in her lap. “The way I remember it, she prized knowledge above all. She was quick to learn on her own, which made her contemptuous of her teachers and no respecter of social proprieties. Where she got these dark ambitions for power, revenge, what-have-you, I don’t know. Broga has his own lofty thoughts but has shown nothing if not an austere disdain for personal advantage. He’d sooner see his people free from unkind judgment and abuse than become their god-king.”

Assuming her full height, the constable said, “I have something to tell you and I hope you won’t think too badly of me for it.”

“Say on.”

She scabbarded her sword and tucked her oil cloth away. “Dabīr’s mesmerized you both.”

The force of her words conjured up a fitful memory of the robed mage waving his gloved hand in front of my face. “In what way? And why would this reflect on you?”

“It was part of our bargain: I introduce him to personages of interest—wizards, mostly—so he might glean their secrets and, when the time is right, he sends Nagib to take the amir’s head.”

“When was this—our hypnotism?”

“That first night.”

“*Heesh.*” I recalled waking the next morning with his voice full in my mind—merely the tone, however; the words had been a senseless jumble. At the time I’d attributed the phenomenon to our new, foreign environs and the vagaries of the dreamtime. The implications were many and frightening. I cursed myself for failing to pay better attention. “Who knows what hypnotic suggestions we might be prey to?”

“Exactly.” She ducked her head from embarrassment. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I was so caught up in my own needs... But you had to know about it. If we make it to the city in time, weapon or no, you can’t risk close combat with him. But you can trust me to take care of it.” This last was as much a plea as a vow.

Her decisive handling of Ovandu and subsequent openness had resolved any qualms I might’ve had about her loyalties. Were she more familiar with my facial expressions I would’ve acknowledged her

trustworthiness with a smile. Most non-Druna, however, considered it too much like the defensive bristling of a small, ferocious woodland animal. So I merely nodded and wondered aloud, “Dabir’s mother—I think she tried to warn me of this.” By way of explanation, I added: “She’s interrupted my dreams with sendings. She mentioned something about Dabir not being Dabir. I thought it was—”

My lips stiffened at a metallic screech that rang to the dome of the speckless sky.

Twisting, lunging, the automaton seized Garshasp in its indomitable grip and slammed him to the earth before he could eke out cry or curse. The mage went limp in the giant’s fist as he was callously pounded again then abandoned to the elements. A froth of blood blackened the sand where his body lay exposed and broken.

Majid skittered pell-mell into the desert, panting between snatches of prayer.

“*Kaldrei þykur*,” I swore, reflexively grabbing for the handgun.

With a convulsive catch of breath, Taraneh deployed her wings. The glittery-dark energy fanned out in an eyeblink.

I yelped at the sudden electric sputtering in the air around me.

She inclined her head in apology then swifted away, wings angled for speed.

The automaton lumbered in my direction—*ka-ronk*—spraying sand and glass with each tremoring step.

The gun a futile gesture, I scanned the ruins for higher ground or, better yet, a hide. Nothing close-by would do. I’d have to stand strong and hope for Ovandu’s mercy.

As the behemoth came on apace, I speculated about how she controlled it and where its artificial eyes might be. Albeit larger and more complicated, in principle, it can’t be much different than a *sukúla*, I thought. But I couldn’t find a hint of seeing glass. It appeared a thing of mirroring silver through and through.

I watched my distorted image raise the gun. Survival depended on me alone, a reflected smear of beige and white. The burden weighed heavily on the nape of my neck, like a hand pressing down hard. The firearm felt awkward and flimsy. I wiped my sweaty palms on my robe and aimed again, the automaton only a few hulking strides distant.

Though confident the liquid metal would absorb the bullets with ease, I was compelled to offer some resistance. The first shot momentarily disfigured one side of my mirrored skull; the second crack, my neck; the third, my chest. Then the shiny, now adamantine metal was the whole of my vision and the gun was somewhere in the sand.

The mechanism shook me in its fist in a gratuitous show of power then opened its hand and poked at my shoulder bag with an oversized finger. I hurried to spill the scrying orb into its palm. The broad, featureless head sagged in disappointment.

I sensed more than saw the constable before she swooped into me. She tackled me at speed, gathering me over one shoulder, and launched us into the blue in a wrenching zigzag. My heart plummeted into my guts, her self-created wind tearing at my robe. The power of her wings defied nature. They lifted us higher and faster without a single wing-flap. Their strange precursor properties alone kept us aloft.

Hooked tendrils burst from the automaton's outstretched arm. "Incoming," I breathed into her ear. A tendril clawed for purchase round her ankle. But a stupefying plunge over the ancient temple-tomb shook us free. Earth yawed to sky. My eyes watered against the rushing air.

"Your legs—curl up!" the constable bellowed. Clutching the edge of her gorget, I assayed to draw my knees toward my chest. Taraneh tightened her grip around my upper-back. The wind whistled between the soles of my sandals and a ragged span of masonry. My thighs quivered from the effort. I cursed silently at the awkwardness of facing behind her, the interposing dangers of the wreckage ahead unknowable.

A telltale gleam of silver told of our pursuit. "It's after us!" I announced.

Desperate to gain distance on the automaton, she arrowed forward. We skimmed over a tiered set of stone arcs and, yet quicker, through an irregular aperture.

The shadowed interior came as a shock after the hectic tumble of desert, ruins and washed-out sky. I thought we might've slammed into an unforgiving bulwak—some kind of final violence. My eyes watered all the more.

Taraneh slowed to a meditative hover inside the partially-roofed edifice. I was glad to let my legs go limp. She descended to a corner

strip of parapet until my toes made contact with the stone. I released her and gulped my first complete breath since my surprise flight. It was as if I didn't exist outside of my pounding heart and lungs. The dust of ages assailed my nostrils.

The constable remained suspended in air. "I'll lure it away and, if possible, bring it to book." Like Broga, she showed a defiant jawline strength. She unsheathed her sword with a military flourish and disappeared the way we'd come.

I stuck close to the exterior walls. The foreshortened parapet gave way onto a pit of stone and gnarled metal that looked more liquified than smashed, forming an unsettling vista of shapes and suggestions.

The aperture afforded a limited, sunward view of things. Shading my eyes with a hand, I followed the ensuing aerial combat in half-glimpses and passing sounds. The automaton raced to engage the constable. Fortunately for Taraneh, she exceeded it in both fleetness and agility. She was like a barn swallow to its ungainly raptor. She spun and turned, evading her pursuer's elongated arms; she ducked, made the golem reverse course, bulleted through intricacies of stone.

But the automaton had the unique power to harass at a distance. It harried her with ensnaring grapples and the occasional missile, preventing her from utilizing her superior speed to the fullest.

Following a precipitous chase over strewn rock, I lost them to the west for two or three exasperating minutes.

They broke into sight again surprisingly close, Taraneh first and narrowed to a swordpoint. She hurtled toward a cluster of arches, slipped behind a rampart then reappeared, dodging a slew of quarrels. *So much for simple capture. Ovandu must be furious—with herself as much as us.*

Taraneh banked hard to evade the barrage and passed overhead. Fearful of being spotted, I ducked inside. The parapet shuddered in the wake of the jet noise. I backed against a pitted wall, tasting dust on my lips.

I didn't know what effort of will Taraneh's wings required but I'd the gut-clenching sense she wouldn't last much longer.

The next and last time they rolled into view confirmed my fear. Coiled at the waist in cabled silver, Taraneh was plunging toward a

large, incomplete sandstone arch to my left. She chopped at the tendrils crisscrossing her torso to no avail. The cracked bell tones set my teeth to aching. Boots flaring red-hot, the automaton was on the verge of grabbing her by the heel.

Their shared trajectory, however, was acute and doom-fixed. Taraneh would broadside the arch like a hapless lump of moon. She scabbarded her sword in open defeat.

I sucked in my breath, useless and distraught. The arch glowed a warm amber in the late afternoon light. The projected collision point—a figurative corner detail—seemed to expand in size.

Until the constable skipped on a flux of air past the automaton and, a loop of metal in hand, caught the mechanism around its torso to flail against its backside. She struggled to make herself small. The automaton swiveled its plated head in a simulacrum of panic. The arch was fast-approaching; then imminent; then inevitable. Taraneh gathered herself in the preternatural dark of her wings.

The war machine pelted into the arch and kept on, banged wildly out of shape and, at once, out of control. Great drifts of powdered masonry obscured anything more, though I heard the terrible landfall and endured the more terrible quiet after. The dust spangling through the near-level sunrays dwindled to emptiness.

I turned from my lookout and slumped to the parapet in pained bewilderment. Another death to haunt my nighttime thoughts. And with Broga's fate still to come...

My heart labored in a hurting rhythm. I was worn out from base existence. Not for the first time, I yearned for the panoptic eye of Hekla, the Sentinel Tree's sacred guardian. From her perch on the world-tree, she can see anywhere and anything, including the endless gray wastes of the Vastlands. I would've locked in an instant on a Durkesh forest in the throes of greening. I missed the sweet fragrance of new earth, the canopy above limned in hazy gold, the peace of raw spring prickling my skin. I missed the stirring whelm of home and belonging.

Earthlore would have us believe Laegrevel and the planes beyond comprise a harmonious whole, that whatever lives and whatever dies is right forever and ultimately, nothing perishes, not even in the remote deeps of cosmic history. But it was hard to hold to this faith at every

moment—to know it in your soul—suffering from so many thwarted hopes. The sharpness of my pain brought me low. Who but a sainted dreamtime adept could keep the tranquility of *amneskur eðli* in their head after the reversals I'd faced?

I despaired of finding my way down from this hazardous post, much less back to my ancestral home. But then, unless forced by circumstance, I was always susceptible to the whisperings of indecision. Instead of simply doing, I saw myself doing as if through a scrying orb.

When Taraneh alighted in the aperture, silent, amused, I twitched away in squinting disbelief. The play of roseate light in her hair made her out to be a cracked vision. But the odor of singed air about her wings proved her substance.

My throat constricted with emotion.

She stepped from the ledge, looking ashen and clay-lipped yet altogether the war-maiden. “Shall we return to the desert floor now?”

Sitting to one side of Taraneh against a fire-blackened stone palisade, I smoked my long-neglected pipe and gathered my dirtied robe around me. The last blush of sun was giving way to distant stars and luminous traces of moon. Soon the slanted shadows would fringe into each other and a chill darkness settle over the land.

The coming night heightened Grihbad's sinister aspect. The remnants increasingly gave the impression of having been arrested in the process of transforming into an open-air abattoir. Listing columns became emergent spikes and the sprawl of stones an array of chopping blocks. It was as if, for the the space we watched, the rubble ceased its metamorphosis into sundry instruments of torture and would resume its development the moment we left.

I sipped my pipe meditatively, breathing through my nose to massage the smoke and tease out its nuances. After three or four breaths, I turned from the constable and exhaled the smoke accrued on my palate. What a needed relief.

This variegated green soapstone pipe was my only surviving token

from Ixzahl. The etched bowl described an interlocking pattern representing the roots of the Sentinel Tree. A long and absurd confluence of events had brought it here.

Majid leaned out from the other side of Taraneh and motioned for my pipe. “To share, yes?” He’d been alternately wheedling and bullying me all day. I’d already relented on the gun, which he’d claimed by the time Taraneh had deposited me on firm ground. He also wielded Garshasp’s pikestaff. The mage’s remains had been marked by a paltry clump of rocks. A mere formality. No one expected the effort to deter the inevitable scavengers.

“This isn’t like waterpipe tobacco,” I said. “It’s more, *vafna*, medicine.” I enjoyed an aromatic blend known to calm the nerves. There was a frosty quality to its night soil richness. The mentholated warmth helped me find my point of balance. “I doubt you’ll like it.”

Taraneh served as go-between in passing the pipe. Her remarkable victory over the automaton had helped sustain me during the subsequent wait. If she could win through against the odds...

The brigand choked in disgust on his first draw. “Here—here, I thought you Druna a learned people.” He pushed the pipe at Taraneh and shooed it away with a meaty hand. “Maybe for the cock of the dunghill.”

The strange nothingness I’d noticed persisted into dusk: no furtive lizard scurrying, no bird cries, no hum of insects. What vile grotesques could squelch nature so completely?

In returning the pipe, Taraneh met my eyes and asked, “It’s a little over three hours on foot back to Al-Mahad. I’m not giving up on him, mind, but we don’t know when the ritual will occur...”

“Getting anxious?” The floating sensation induced by the pipesmoke began to feel more like flailing.

She nodded, pensive, half effaced in the deepening shadow of the ruins.

There was a new pinch in my lungs. “Is it past time he...?”

“I told him the truth.” She put a gentling hand on my forearm. “I don’t know how long it might take. But even if he survives, he could be hurting and in need of rest.”

“Were you?”

“Grihbad tries to rout your soul from you. In my case, I was both victim and perpetrator. I watched as—another me?—tore myself apart with hands like the claws of a magicked leopard. Face, breast, the marrow from the yellowed bones beneath, tearing and tearing down to my greasy essence...” Making a fist of her bruised hand, she brought it close to my face. “You see that?” She wriggled her ring finger. On it was a braided band of auburn hair. “That’s my reminder—of her, this place, the horror...I made the brutal mistake of believing that whatever you love is yours.”

For some reason, a memory of a summer rainstorm surged to the forefront of my thoughts. I must’ve been about fourteen or fifteen Sharro Calendar years old. I remember it as a rather shapeless day—one of the last before time assumed a sterner aspect. I was playing a hiding game in the forest with Broga and several others when the canopy darkened of a sudden and a mizzling rain whispered across the overstory until—*pitapat*—it broke through in a relentless downpour, the heated air pressing down and—The *shuh-ush* of shifting sand. A footstep? Another faint sibilance but unmistakably real.

I jerked to my feet and scrambled between shadows into the last of the westering sun. “Over here,” I said before I knew who or what approached.

Majid sidled up to me, breathing hard, gun drawn. “Ach! Do you mean to invite a ghoul into our company?”

A raised hand silenced him. In the near dark, the irregular curve of the palisade vanished against a silhouette of disordered stone. *Shuh-ush*. There: at the far end of the wall—near the unseen entrance.

I lurched toward the sound but was brought up short by a glimmer of spectral green. The light flickered like a sea-borne phosphorescence. With a resolute Broga at its center.

“*Arai siyidri*,” grumbled Majid. “Has he joined the desert sprites?”

“No,” the constable said on approach, lowering her sword. “Look at the weapon in his hand—the weapon and the amir’s head.”

On examination, it was clear these were the sources of the ghastly light. The weapon: a falcon-headed mace of slick black metal. The sev-

ered head: Ormazd's likeness cast from the same material, the helm's plume converted to a handle fitted to Broga's grip.

I saw him now as I'd never seen him before. With that disorienting glow irradiating his torso and limbs, he emerged from the gloom like the risen dead. His face was slack and clammy but his stride was determined. It seemed a fell, supernatural energy had been superadded to his fighting prowess.

I had the heavy-headed feeling he was marching into his own vision of the world. Not even the bandit risked more than a fuddled look as he neared, glass crackling under his bootheels. The vague malaise encouraged by the pipe smoke was dispelled on the instant. Relief and a risible fear vied for mastery.

Broga halted before us and raised the amir's petrified head like a wayfinding lantern. I strained to adjust my eyes. The graveworm was now exposed—an icy, diamond-bright star. Cadaverous light roved across Grihbad in a counterfeit of material life.

I gawked at him, lost in astonishment.

He had the wild eye of a man relishing a cataclysm. "That was suicide enough for me." A hint of smile twisted his lips. "Let's on and at speed." He tossed his head in a gesture of impatience and started into the waste.

His voice was so cold and alien, I feared the mysteries of Grihbad had corrupted him completely. I stood there a moment, listening to my beating heart, afraid to break its rhythm. On the next step or the next, I thought, time would resume and Broga would be estranged from me forever.

Chapter Twelve

Rise, fall or otherwise, the gods abide while the rest suffer

Bathed in the cadaverous light of his magicked gear, Broga was like a hawk that hushes the morning's birdsong. We trudged behind him across the stretch of bleak flatland without a word between us. Whatever he was now—ghoul, daimon or something new to earth—he seemed wholly emptied of his original nature. I wanted desperately to know his transformed mind and more importantly, what he'd forsaken in exchange. But his unblinking expression and steady, relentless gait put me off. I feared he'd been made separate from me in respects abhorrent and heartbreaking.

I hung back with the others, too apprehensive to do anything more than seek a sympathetic glance from the constable. I'd come to regard Broga on a level with my family and its ancestors. Family, after all, isn't a bond dependent on blood. It's a contrivance, like a story that, if believed in, becomes true. His heedlessness struck me as a betrayal of long-standing intimacies. I wondered if, given my intent to return home, he'd sacrificed our brotherhood for the sake of his unexplained 'blessing.'

There was nowhere comfortable to focus my attention. Outside the sick-green radiance cast by Broga, the desert gave way to an impenetrable sprawl of night. I was relegated to looking at the ground under my feet or the stars in their orbits. Between here and there was a vast and dispiriting gap. In this way, the desert is a uniquely still and at once, agonized, place.

Sweat beaded on my face and trickled into my eyes. I knuckled them dry without slowing.

Taraneh avoided my gaze.

Majid, stumping along with the pikestaff, groaned about the wolfish pit in his stomach.

For the first time since sailing from Durkesh, I was acutely conscious of being alone of my kind for leagues and leagues.

Some say you can walk yourself into serenity. Either I was doing it wrong or they were mistaken. The night wore on in a long, disquieting blur. Majid must've felt a similar unrest. He mumbled a prayer then added something about how it was in the backlands where the bones of the world show themselves.

Done in from the day's heat and confounding turns, my strides grew slower and wearier and more reflexive. I drowsed a little on my feet, worries spilling out in a dull miscellany. I recalled trivial flashes from childhood, snatches of conversations, half-glimpsed people and things, events I'd previously forgotten. I remembered telling Broga in our gladiatorial bunker about the poor bloodflow in my hands and how it would inhibit my ability to grab a weapon from out of sleep. He promised to watch over me but there was an unnatural gleam in his eye as if it were—no, *kaldrei pykur* no, not the graveworm... I thought I heard a plaintive wail—Dabir's mother?—just as Taraneh jostled me to alertness.

Broga had stopped to address us. In the distance Al-Mahad brimmed with a mineral glow like a hellmouth. "I'm sorry for driving you on, seemingly indifferent," he said. While familiar, his tone was closer to a deep-chested challenge than a felt apology. "I'm still adjusting to—to this..." He gave the mace a twirl, roiling the desert with its eerie light. The sight inspired dire visions of him setting the desert aflame.

"You should rest," Taraneh said. "I know how Grihbad first destroys you before..."

"This weapon infuses me with the strength of countless dead. But it's more than that." Broga lifted the graveworm head chest-high. "I'm convinced Grihbad got me wrong. It thought the graveworm and its myriad souls was somehow a part of me. I can sense them flitting about in their undeserved limbo, questing and despondent."

A discomfiting heat flared in my throat. Those wayward souls doubtless reminded him of the teeming dead on his conscience. Grihbad had given continuous life to his regrets. Would the world never right itself for him?

The rims of the constable's teary eyes pinked. "Elham—can you feel her in there?"

Broga shook his head. "No, nothing so particular."

"What's the use of it then?"

"The same as before— filching souls, whether from the living or the dead." His face was unmoving.

I considered this an opening to ask which part of himself he'd traded away but let it go, concerned I'd embarrass one or both of us and thinking perhaps the constable would do it in my stead.

"The mace can power the graveworm through me," Broga continued. "I don't know its origins exactly but I gather it was forged from star-metal to combat an ancient, sub-human menace. It was old even in the distant Age Before and harbors the energy of the sun combined with the captured life force of countless generations."

"Still relieving the dead of their weapons, I see," Majid scoffed.

The constable shot him an indignant look then asked Broga, "So you plan to do what? Take Dabir's soul?" Her reddened chin crumpled. "I've already told your Druna friend, you can't get close to him—neither of you. Dabir's hypnotized you at least once. We have to assume he can control you. Imagine what he'd do if this power were joined to his magick."

"We need only take him unawares."

"With his all-seeing mother and that sleepless golem, Nagib, about?"

"I can do it." The words were out of my mouth before I realized it. I swallowed a nauseating surge of fear and went on: "I have the scrying orb, remember? He told us he didn't know much about precursor tek. It's possible the moon tower lacks a proper ward for it."

"We can follow," the constable said, indicating Broga. "We'll set down on the Thangol side, avoiding the Mu'mir gatehouse."

"Drop me at the nearest tavern then," Majid said. "There looks to be no reward in this for me."

"Except my further indulgence," Taraneh said in warning.

Broga motioned with the mace, dimming it for our sakes. "Besides, we need you to guard Ranvir while he's in his dreamtime trance."

"Out here in the deep of night?" Majid blinked hard, swelling with

resentment. “What about the hyenas? The vipers and scorpions? There is no telling what scourges—”

“I thought you were a devoted servant of Syed ad-Din, the sainted animal-talker. You should have nothing to fear from those creatures, right?” Broga asked, echoing Majid’s self-important introduction. I was heartened a bit by this gibe. It meant Broga hadn’t abandoned his old self completely. He even cracked a faint smile, saying, “Consider it a test of faith.”

“Or your shooting skills,” the constable chimed in, “whichever you need most.”

Majid was the very picture of suffering but given Broga’s disposition he held his tongue.

That settled the matter of strategy, though many contingencies remained. While Broga and the constable deliberated various scenarios, I made my preparations in nervous agitation. I’d no qualms about my ability to control the scrying orb. No, such dreamtime jaunts had become routine. But I worried about Broga. Something had gone wrong in the center of him. He’d emerged from Grihbad renewed and wracked. I doubted he knew enough about his powers to use them safely and suspected he’d already started to depend overmuch on the energy lent him by the mace. Could he inadvertently burn himself out from the inside? All my wild thoughts of the day, all my feelings, gravitated toward him.

I regret not sharing these concerns in a private aside. Had I known I’d be dead within the hour I surely would’ve done so despite the overriding sense of urgency. As it happened, we merely exchanged commiserative nods. There was no clasping of forearms, no wistful good-byes. Our affinity went unspoken. As always, we preferred to recognize our duties to each other in action. There was only that brief, almost incidental acknowledgement then I was effectively gone—vanished into the sublime melt of the dreamtime. I passed out of the world in a dream and in a kind of dream remain...

Once you move through the living moment, there’s the unconscious.

Once you move through the unconscious, there’s the inmost deep.

Once you move through the inmost deep, there’s the vast of the dreamtime.

And there you dwell—on the point of balance—where the astral you meets everything else, real and unreal alike.

When I recount this episode now, death and disaster behind me, I've the sensation of observing the last few seconds of an hourglass; for a moment the remaining sand appears motionless, defying nature, then it rushes to the bottom all at once.

It had been about two hundred Sharro Calendar years since the Rauðan Plague War had visited mass destruction on Al-Mahad. Now, to my shock and horror, my high-flying *sukúla* disclosed we'd arrived too late to prevent an even greater loss of life. Its illustrious chasm was poised to become a monumental burial trench and its dead irreversibly lost.

The city teemed with sweat-slick bodies in various states of undress. Some men were attired in white billowy pants with or without matching shirts; others in hooded sleeping *tobs*; a number were stark naked. Thin, orb-silk nightgowns covered most of the women, though a few wore less or nothing, like ghostly odalisques. Regardless of their caste or character, these ensorcelled figures throttled the main avenues and bridges, trudging at a fixed, somnambulant pace toward the rim of the chasm.

People in the back, coming out of doors or dropping from terraces, made their way in a slow lurch, bare feet slapping the flagstones. The multitude heaved as if caught in a gentle sea swell, parting and rippling and joining again. Pressed tighter and tighter, those in the forward ranks clung precariously to balustrade, street lamp or each other.

The steady, pullulating surge was broken only by a scattered few—immune or unexposed to the scribe's magick—intent on arresting their loved ones. Feckless pips of them burst through the crush in ever desperate sallies. But there was no resisting Dabīr's silent blood-call. Cursed, grappled or cudgeled, the mesmerized came on in a collective stagger, possessed of an undeniable and foredoomed longing.

Given its remoteness, Al-Mahad had become a haven for thieves, broken men, outcasts and nomads, deserting soldiers and young, up-

start powerlords. They could lie low in this bleak outpost of warring mercantile clans, depthless ravines, djinns and scavenger ghouls and, in a numbing *shirgol* haze, dream of improving their fortunes one small risk at a time. Some, like the amirs, managed a kind of rude nobility. But their origins and vital natures remained savage or skulking as the case may be. They distinguished themselves more by panache than pedigree. Accordingly, whether self-proclaimed grandee or no, there was a rough sameness to the faces in the crowd—a vacant acceptance of things.

I paused above the easternmost bridge to better grasp what was happening. There was a flurry of movement along the span. Like celebrants at festival, pairs of bodies against the railing donned interleaved crowns of bark, binding themselves one to another in imitation of Thaumiel. Fathers and sons. Mothers and daughters. Husbands and wives. Brothers, sisters, old friends and lone hands. Press-ganged offerings all.

Searching for the scribe in the throngs of straining, twisted bodies, I could scarcely hold the awful panorama in focus. The very scale of it confounded me. Zoom in, zoom out, zoom in. I registered the gathering in discontinuous scans: a boy crawling over heads and shoulders; bat-symbol totems held aloft; scraps of papyrus on the evening's breeze; limping stragglers; moving, noiseless lips... The city was distressed into a thousand ominous fragments. The clarity of the stars seemed a mocking rebuke.

I despaired of ever penetrating the fell secret of it. If I escape this, I thought, I'll stretch out in a clearing of lush spring grass and never move.

Following my lead, Taraneh stopped short on compassing the scope of the horror below. It was a nightmare twist on her yearning to see her people united. There they were: Thangol and Mu'mir, mind-wasted and disposed at random. Beads of sweat clung to the strands of hair that shagged off under her helmet.

Broga depended from an arm crooked around her gorget, mace tucked into his belt and graveworm head in his free hand, prepared to strike from the air. I could tell they held each other's griefs. He gave the metalized head an angry shake.

I signed caution and sped deeper and deeper into the mobbed city. The silent tumult of bodies jamming both sides of the chasm were enough to daunt the bravest heart. How could we win through while ensuring the safety of these hapless mansouls? They were, after all, victims not willing aggressors. *Vafna*, I'd one possible tactic in mind, but no, no, it could too easily damn us all. Best not think on it. Broga's scheme was going to—

Kaldrei þykur. Without warning or preamble, an unseen pressure spilled the foremost rank of bodies into the abyssal void. They tumbled one after another in line, silent and unprotesting, as if pitching themselves onto a many-pillowed bed. Their pale and bloodless faces, however, suggested a frightful awareness. I imagined them screaming inside—screaming without even a descending echo to honor their substance. The terror of their sacrifice almost snapped me back to the living moment. *Silent screams at the beginning, silent screams at the end, birth, death, everything a curse*. I stifled the cry about to break in the chest of my abandoned body.

The second rank of stupified victims jostled into the space released by the first. The cascading shock pulled everyone a few shuffled steps closer to death. I willed myself not to see their number.

A bright, spectral glow on the Thangol side flared into view. I aimed myself in that direction, fighting to keep calm. The dreamtime is easiest for those without strong feelings. It's a domain where emotion is its absence. The world becomes a succession of images at safe remove and at rest. You're like an invisible light filtering through the real, free and independent. Nothing can harm you except an afflicting thought. Maybe that's why I could never master the dreamtime, why the purest experience of it unnerved me: I could never wholly rid myself of feeling. I imagine the same principle applies to gods and their miracle working. Slate-gray indifference is a necessary state of being rather than a choice.

The curious glimmer issued from the arcade roof near the Bridge of the Holy Maid. At the center of it was a lone, seated figure—a figure robed in patterned silks. Cross-legged. An embroidered glove on one knee. In trance.

Despite my revulsion at what Dabir was doing, I couldn't help but

acknowledge the supremacy of his rune-magick. The dreamtime energy required was inconceivable to me, a lowly tek-mage. The brilliance of his aura was extraordinary. Most aren't even visible; his whirled up around him an intense white-gold.

This—the whole devilish atrocity—was like a lifetime of magick paid out in an instant.

Approaching at a fast clip, I discerned the squat form of Nagib on the opposite side of his master. The *hanbruda* was outfitted in a type of thick, gray plate armor I didn't recognize. It looked well-used in any case. He wielded an oversized spikehammer against a handful of Thangol house guards. Amid a flurry of weaving orb strands, Nagib smashed into them and through to their vitals. Blood splattered the patchwork roof of wood and scrap metal.

There was nothing for it but to try for a killshot. I pictured the mage's shattered braincase, the sad and labored breathing, the bloody end-shudder. I was on the brink of realizing this idea, too. Dabir was the entirety of my vision. I sped toward him at a howling angle.

But up close—imminent—his aura looked as solid as any sending shield projection and, at the last moment, blinded by its spinning fluorescence, I diverted into the sky. Otherwise, I'm certain I would've shattered the *sukúla* into uselessness.

From this new height, I paused to restore my dreamtime sight only to register another disturbing phenomenon. A darkling sparkle was welling up from the city's defining chasm. It circulated through crags and gullies like a black frost. This legioned shadow—this doomshape—wasn't darkness alone but elemental, the Void itself, the absence of light and its possibility. It constituted an opaque in-between state, a greedy almost-body, chasing before it a skirling confusion of bats. The startled creatures skyed out of the chasm in a tremendous column like a plume of oily smoke. Minutes passed to the vexed flimmer of their wings—picked out in glistening outline. I recalled the lift attendant's recitation about bats flying above it all, blind deliverers of the 'ultimate wisdom.'

Contemplating the emerging gloom pulled me further and further into grim, disconnected thoughts of disaster. I nearly lost myself in the pulsing black energies carting about for a definitive shape.

I forced myself to avert my gaze and followed the creeping murk to its apparent destination: the two-headed, four-armed statue of Thaumiel. My spirits dropped. I'd no doubt Dabīr had conjured the god's chaotic essence, what the ustam had described as the 'form of Althiymil betrayed by its instinct for death.' But why? Out of simple, atavistic hate for the world? And how long did we have before the god was fully revived?

These questions went unanswered for the nonce as the crowd buckled and swayed and sent another long curve of bodies into empty space. Things had truly broken free from their natures. Selfish magicks against all sense, drawn from behind or beyond existence. Shadows taking grotesque materiality. A population of wide-eyed sleepwalkers. Any reserves of dreamtime energy were expended in resisting the crushing sense of unstoppable cataclysm.

I followed the diminishing midair arc of a snake charmer wrapped in a serpent's embrace. His robe fluttered decisively and forever into the upgathering void—one among scattered hundreds. The sentient darkness billowed up to meet these passing figures, either tendril-like or in fogs, sporadically or in big, rapid bursts, merging on high then scudding toward the colossal icon. How many more would perish in forced silence?

At the doomshape's ascent, the air grew dense with ultrasellar cold.

A weary spasbet deposited Broga on the boardwalk roof some fifty paces from Dabīr. The lustrous black of her wings blended with the rising darkness, suggesting a genealogical connection I'd no time to ponder. She lifted away while Broga freed the mace from his belt. The weapon shimmered with greenish bio-energy, giving him a grisly cast.

Nagib welcomed the challenge, motioning for Broga to charge, then shook the blood from his spikehammer.

Broga stayed his ground and placed the mace directly behind the graveworm head in his other hand. He was raw, determined, keen for vengeance. The mace's emanations flared and fed the alien parasite. Its diamond gleam intensified to a sheer glow.

The manservant inclined his head, confused, before the graveworm unleashed an electric barrage and walloped him against Dabīr's aura. The shock of bio-energy netted around him in a hallucinatory dazzle.

But he remained upright and threatening against the obliterating light. The multi-forked current sparked and popped but could find no purchase. Ah, of course, his very nature allowed him to absorb the mace's power without serious incident. He'd no animating soul to take.

Still, it was an impressive show of precursor conjury. Grihbad had made an open-eyed wizard of Broga and I was more than a little envious. I wanted to feel what it was like to wield that caliber of magick. If only for a moment. And if only for once in my life.

I wondered, though, how Broga felt about this turn in his career given his renown as a pit fighter—if he was ashamed of relying on these new distance weapons. Of a certain the old gunsmith would've dismissed them with prodigal disdain.

Dismayed by the graveworm's lack of effect, Broga switched tactics and, turning the rings around the base of the falcon-headed mace, deployed its solar aspect. A brilliant precipitate of sun flashed out, blasting an unsuspecting Nagib across the roof. The pseudo-golem struggled to stay on his feet, as if the earth had abruptly spun the other way. He cut a backward path of splintered wood and furrowed metal near to the edge. Tottering there, he grunted in exasperation.

The mace's recoil knocked Broga on his backside. He landed with a painful thump. The graveworm head clattered out of his grip.

Nagib beat a granite-hard fist against his breastplate, his gash of a mouth a contemptuous sneer. He hefted the spikehammer to his shoulder—and was promptly waylaid by the flat of Taraneh's sword. The blade shattered against his impermeable skull but the force of the blow tumbled him from the roof to the boardwalk one story below.

The constable alighted to claim Nagib's discarded weapon. A smear of blood muddied the calligraphic tattoo on her cheek where a sword fragment had grazed it. Ignoring the wound, she launched after the manservant, spikehammer above her head. They clashed again and again, careening among the unseeing bystanders. Nagib parried with his mighty forearms, enraged but unhurt. The constable changed up her targets, battering knee, shoulder, hip. *Heesh*, she had the courage of a thousand stout hearts.

Seeing his way clear, Broga recovered the graveworm head and started for the rune-mage when a vivid singularity split the air. I could

tell by his defensive crouch that he recognized it at once as the corrupting eye of the Void God, Yath'alm.

Thunder rolled in a faraway part of this world or the next.

The god's paralyzing beam was like an unfolding of burnt sky. It ghosted through Dabir's protective aura and enveloped him in a darksome wash. The aura dimmed to the level of smoked glass. Dabir persisted in his meditative attitude, eyes closed and unmoving but the close-in ranks of queueing victims seized up as if mere etchings against the night. Arresting the scribe's spell had the follow-on effect of suspending its targets. The weirdly blurred bodies maintained a perfect stillness. Thanks to Sanaz and her patron god, further sacrifices had been averted—leastwise for a few moments.

The doomshape risen from the chasm, however, went on to pool into the statue's single, pupil-less eye.

I revolved the scrying orb in search of Sanaz and soon found her on a balcony overlooking the Bridge of the Holy Maid, flanked by several free-witted house guards. She reclined on a tufted litter. Her usually placid face was pinched and feverish with concentration. Either the wound I'd given her was exacerbating her efforts to summon the Void God or she was fighting some magickal hindrance. The latter possibility excited me to action.

Another hectic scan, this time along the Mu'mir side of the canyon, revealed a sending shield flicker—and behind it, a rapt Ovandu in bleary silhouette. There was no telling whether she was helping or hurting our cause in her astral state. I was about to probe further when—*heesh ullingur*—a violent dreamtime sending from Dabir's mother stopped me in my course, quirking my awareness somewhere into the upper-atmosphere:

—a hazy, shifting light resolves around the curvature of earth—swirling dust and magicked law—a vernal blue fading to pitch-black space—moon debris breaching the color of things—a transparent luminosity—her floating cerements—and a 'voice' like a circling wind—*muh-my offspring bluh-bloodguilty...*

—*What will happen if Thaumiel is resurrected?*

—*Moments only, moments free of this psychic prison now that [garbled] is pacified...*

—*Are you talking about the creature—the one in the tank? Does it control you?*

—*You misapprehend, Druna-kind. I am the ‘creature’ as you say. I was stolen away to this world more than a millennia ago. The human woman merely sustains me...* Her dreamtime speech was stronger and clearer than ever.

—*Dabīr fed you his mother?* I recoiled from the thought.

—*For a dreamtime traveler, you seem rather taken with appearances. No, I am his mother. [Garbled] has magicked himself to look human, but Dabīr is not his true name and that—that cosmetic flesh—is not his true form. He is a—*and here she lapsed into the unintelligible argot of her civilization.

—But no matter. I was already mulling the implications of her report, how Dabīr had sussed out the means to revive Thaumiel, how he’d managed to supersede the common limits of rune-magick, how his aura exhibited such unusual properties—all this and more he owed to his otherworldly origins. Even the role of Nagib made greater sense. Who better than a fellow star-faring outcast to understand his plight and serve as willing drudge? Only his purpose eluded me.

—*Though I found the shape repulsive, I did the same for a long while—pretended to be huu-man...*

—*Why then? Why Thaumiel?*

—*We detected its latent energies and thought to muster them to return us home. After much study, however, much dangerous dreamwork, I realized Thaumiel, or as I first knew the entity, Althiymil, would fain consign this world and its creatures to sordid gloom and desolation. She sent an unnerving sort of chittering through me. Ugliness alone should be no cause for so permanent a darkness... But my broodling, fearing betrayal, bound me to a human host using unfamiliar magicks.*

—Outside of the fateful consequences, I could sympathize with Dabīr’s privileging of place and pitied him for it. Before Broga and I embarked on our swordquest I’d thought what mattered most were the places in my mind. But wandering taught me differently. Only a true home—the here and now of it—admits a satisfying fusion of inner and outer experience. Everyone has a blood-bias for their own land, I know, but...

I 'said' none of these things to her, of course. My focus was properly on the looming calamity. *Will you help me then to defeat his scheme? Can you, vafna, incapacitate him?*

—*I am sorry. I am much too weak on my own. But perhaps if you lend me the vitality of forgotten youth...*

—a vertiginous fear—like a gyroscope inside me, spinning, spinning—spinning my mortal electricity into a gossamer drift—a gelatinous mass segmented into frilled plates—a vortical tension drawing me down to my small, hushed essence—folded into this nameless other—until, as if twin-headed:

A matchless synchronicity of thought. I could apprehend the experiences of *sukúla* and astral self at once. What's more, communing with Dabīr's mother was as easy as talking to myself:

What now? / To the attack before this interceding god relents. I sense its summoner faltering...

A harsh smack of light from Yath'alm told Broga to let the scribe alone. Broga pointed the mace at the thrumming singularity, eyes narrowed in defiance. Gradually, however, a knowing look came across his face and he retreated. I assume Sanaz had promised the god Dabīr's soul—ostensibly, a precious sort for a minor deity. *Vafna*, it's as good an explanation for Broga's acquiescence as I can fathom.

Events rendered this speculation moot anyway. Sanaz and her unborn child were murdered in the depths of their mutual dream—murdered by Ovandu. It was as if they were run through by an astral blade sharpened to nothingness. Judging from the intensity of the psychic aftershock, this figurative blade pierced them neatly and with malice. Their concussive ripple of pain nearly jounced me into the living moment.

Then their amalgamated aura vanished of a sudden, leaving a small, irregular flaw in the misty vastness of the dreamtime. What showed through the breach was emotion as jumbled color: surprise, terror, loathing, regret and a fraught but undeniable love. In that instant of transfigured death, I missed them grievously and all out of proportion.

The formless vortex that was Yath'alm recoiled, shrinking temporarily, then blazed out to encompass Sanaz's limp body. The buzz-cut slant of energy set the flanking house guards afire, blackening them to indistinguishable husks. Sanaz, however, merely smoldered; more

exactly, her swollen belly exuded a lingering twist of ectoplasm. The vaporous, slow-curling shape was not unlike a monstrous insect—the ageless ‘child’ honed down to its foul pith. It floated toward the interceding god and in this way, drifted from one dark into another. The clamor from Taraneh’s struggle with Nagib on the boardwalk seemed a fitting, albeit discordant, accompaniment.

When the whip of soul had emptied into Yath’alm’s unseeable maw, the god relinquished its hold on Dabir and dimmed to invisibility against the upsurging black.

There was no relief now from the encroaching gloom. The Mu’mir side of the city was obscured entirely, along with a fair portion of stars and speckling moon dust. The night coming from the canyon floor continued to bleed into the eye of the god-sized statue. Shadows not shadows. Sacrificial blood not blood.

The undercurrent of my wanderyears rushed through me—fear, complete and abject fear.

Dabir’s mother quashed this feeling almost immediately, turning my focus to her rebellious son. Yath’alm’s attack had sapped his aura of its impervious solidity. It waned enough so I could make him out in horrifying detail. His turbaned head had been reduced to a friable mask of skin and the rest to something like translucent jelly. Gelatinous swellings peaked from the eyeholes. His body had deliquesced into a spectral, eel-like drizzle. His blood had become diffuse and phosphorous. I could see straight through to the heart of his madly pumping heart and thought I detected a new frailty.

The stillness gripping the masses showed signs of wearing off. People stirred out of their paralyzing daze, regarding each other and the mounding darkness in alarm. They nodded to each other, unable to say where they were, who they were, what the world was, and afraid to ask. They didn’t know the answers and so withdrew into themselves to hide or recover from the menacing unknown. They didn’t know anything except that their life of possessions and animal routines was over. The darkness of the Void was an ineluctable reality. They were as mayflies against time and the world. The realization broke them and the supernatural silence. They bawled what they couldn’t articulate. Cries of distress and sorrow echoed and re-echoed through the brimming night.

Taraneh disengaged from Nagib and floated above the arcade hefting the spikehammer. She went slack-jawed on seeing the mage's transformation.

On slimy, bulbous filaments, Dabīr rose to a great height. His eyes without eyes glared molten hate into my head. *Heesh*, what evil inspiration gave him the strength?

We—Dabīr's mother and I—tested his psychic defenses with a whipcrack of projected pain. I'd never done anything like it. Here was dreamtime magick at its most primal—pure atavistic energy.

He rebuffed the assault as if it were a stray thought then morphed into a more compact serpentine shape, the last of his parchment skin liquifying into him.

Broga advanced on the sorcerer as he readied the graveworm head. The ghostlight storming about the mace exposed the bones of his set jaw and the roots of his teeth.

Undaunted by the weapon, Dabīr began flashing golden runes in a mesmerizing cadence. The strange, angular symbols flared out from deep inside him.

Broga lost his fixity of purpose. He hesitated, vacant-eyed, either confused or entranced. The mace's energies faltered and faded away.

Taraneh stooped like a raptor to drag Broga away.

On instincts honed in the fighting pit, I launched the *sukūla* at speed into the guts of the scribe. The device shivered through the viscous creature, ravaging watery organelles and filligreed nerves. Almost immediately, it met with a gummy resistance, trapped. Visibility dropped to a hand's breadth of lit translucence. I applied more and more mental pressure, indifferent to how his mother might feel. I take it she meant only to restrain him. But my *huyi* was at stake. I'd sloughed off my compunctions. The *sukūla* drilled into a rough endoplasmic something.

Sudden, wracking spasms overcame Dabīr. I was hurting him and badly—*vafna*, enough to shake loose the millstone he'd placed around Broga's soul.

Broga must've said as much because the constable cut an awkward circle and stood him back in his previous position.

A quick adjustment to the mace and it flicked out an enveloping scorch.

The flames mauled Dabir in hellish fury. He feelered along the roof, to what end, I don't know. Reflex, maybe. But he made what seemed a thousand league effort to gain a meagre, half-length retreat, burning, burning until his insides boiled, spooling out a greasy haze. The mage yowled in his original tongue, inconsolate, his mother along with him, though softer and in tones fouled by guilt. It was clear she regretted her part in his demise but would fain prevent it. She recognized its stern necessity.

My scrying orb eased free of flesh and fire and joined the constable in watching the scribe fuse into a charry clinker.

Limbs trembling, Broga dropped the mace next to where he'd set the graveworm head. His drawn face spoke mutely but movingly of the weapon's awful price.

"Gagh!" Pulling himself up over the roof's edge Nagib sniggered at the evanescent fumes of his former master. Hammer dents stippled his unusual plate armor. "Ajib no Maghvan Tadhg."

Broga reached for his gear. "Then you owe him nothing—not even your vengeance." At his side, Taraneh brandished the spikehammer.

"Ah, vengeance acoming, whatever Nagib will." The sculpy-like creature pointed to the far horizon. "Ajib sank a dark madness from forehead before he die."

Despite our best efforts, the last drift of doomshape vanished into the statue's eye, imbuing it with sublime intelligence. *Kaldrei þykur*. The eye glittered black then quickly darkened into a true, unknowable void. To return its gaze was to risk losing yourself in manifold oblivion. Endings and beginnings. Forsakenness and transcendence. Cold judgments and equally cold mercies.

This is an invisible plague, I thought. *This is the radiant gloom behind the night. This is oblivion made manifest*. Back in my body, I felt a grievous swelling around my heart.

Oblivion, oblivion—to be consigned or abandoned to it, to treat of it as curse, gift or action...The Druna word for oblivion, *eymskun*, suggests a prolonged or unending state of forgetting. In Ixzahl, we acknowledged this state by erecting a communal chipping stone. Passersby can chisel a flake from the massive, cleft-topped stone in remembrance of something in danger of being forgotten. As each mark

obscures the last, the stone allows us to both recognize and resist *eymskun*. That's the way of earthlore—to meet the tragedy of cosmic nature with mortal paradox.

These abstractions passed through my head as defense against the visceral shock of Thaumiel's eye until Dabir's mother could help shield me: *The god awakens but—*

We sensed it in the same instant—another dreamtime presence close-by, ephemeral but glary and aimed like a jousting lance at the eye, ah, yes, Ovandu, the murdering witch. Now that the doomshape had cleared the city proper, I could again see her shimmering forcefield.

I was about to zip the *sukúla* across the chasm when—gods alive!—the landscape spasmed, throwing debris and bodies everywhere. Avalanching rock tumbled and crashed the length of the ravine, sending up clouds of corpse-dust.

The roof heaved and rolled, pulling at its supports. Loosed earth from the adjoining cliff spilled onto it. Masonry fractured and gave. Nails slipped their hollows. The roof jiggled to and fro. Nagib staggered sideways along the edge.

Dropping the spikehammer, Taraneh hugged Broga to her chest just as the structure sagged to a hopeless angle then, in a tremendous clatter, gave way altogether. The warrior pair hovered above the disaster, safe but appalled.

No such rescue was afforded the flailing Nagib. He plummeted to the boulevard under an inexorable crest of iron plate. The jumble of ponderous metal promptly buried his feral rage; leastwise until he regained consciousness.

Of Dabir's body there was no sign, not even a trace of ash.

Al-Mahad resounded with red hysteria: airy spires and domes of harlequin opal toppled into history; terraces gave onto empty air; people dashed around like animals at a whipped run; lamp oil flames roiled the streets; bodies were crushed to blood-rags; lost children lamented their fate with puckered cries; and above all, a thin, high breath of fear.

Because there was no escaping the quake's ascendant source: Thaumiel—god or otherwise—stood dormant no longer!

Crooking away from the canyon walls, the statue spun its twinned arms in their sockets, flinging off lost ages of caked sand and dirt. The

whine of servomotors set the air to humming. A sleet of fossilized grit pelted the terrified populace. The gauntleted arms clanked to a halt, revealing a dull metal cladding, then split into distinct, though jointly-hinged, limbs. The lower pair culminated in massive gun barrels, the ends of which fixed on either side of the gorge. *Heesh ullingur!* Thaumiel was a precursor bot!

God-powered, added Dabir's mother in her head-voice. *Like the extraplanar ships of old. Ships of the air and of space, mobile cities, weapons to threat reality itself, a myriad of precursor machines beyond comprehension—all powered by the dreamtime energies of gods and their ilk. The statue is only a vessel. / The automaton Ovandu made—she told me it was an experiment. Do you know? Did she actively conspire with Dabir or simply hijack his scheme? / I know not this Ovandu. / The astral presence we sensed a moment ago—that was her, I'm sure. I take it she's merged with the mechanism. / With what you called the 'doomshape,' the fallout from an ancient, untold battle. Most of its intelligent energies lay dormant along the bottom of the ravine and some in Grihbad. I suspect the temple was once the birthplace for it—the essence of the gods themselves. / Blood for blood that is not blood...*

Thaumiel inclined its head, exciting more and greater shrieks of doom-panic. Its nullifying eye was blacker than blindness. One look and you knew there'd be no epiphany or saving rapture. This mechanism represented everything the Matabwe had feared in the War of Neverness—magick on a cataclysmic scale. It was the prospect of ever-greater weapons like this—leading inevitably to apocalypse—that had stayed their collective hand, not simple-minded pacifism and certainly not cowardice. No, they'd allowed portions of Laegrevel to burn in order to preserve the whole. I wondered if I'd be forced to do the same.

There's something else we can try. I've been delaying it, hoping we'd find another way. It's likely to destroy Al-Mahad entirely but... / I know. Your thoughts are as much mine now. / Then you agree? / We must, it seems. One eyeblink judgment from Althiymil is liable to bring it all down, regardless. / Smash the vessel.

In the form of the scrying orb, I followed Taraneh and Broga to the balcony where Sanaz had lately fought. The quake had capsized her corpse and its litter, along with the charred remains of her hapless

guards. Touching down on the scorched and broken tiles, Broga said, "I'll not let these people die at the hands of some makeshift undergod."

"You can't mean to..." She bit back the rest and gave a weary sigh. Her cheek wound had left dried, rust-colored streaks down her jaw and neck. "These new weapons make you overstep yourself. But I know better. They drain your will, maybe even your own life-essence. This is my city and these are my people but this god, mechanism, I don't know—everything's gone amuck."

"Isn't this what we came for?" Broga asked, positioning himself opposite the far-off Thaumiel. "Fly if you must. There's no shame in it. You've done your part and more to prevent this..." He gestured with the graveworm head toward the blighted city.

The spasbet recoiled at his suggestion. "I'm no naif from the olive groves. I'll have you know..." She started over, pitching her voice less stridently: "After Elham's death, I hated love. I hated it for making me vulnerable, the arbitrariness of it. I hadn't asked for it and neither had she... It's taken nearly the whole three years of her passing for me to let her into my silences. I'd rather die here in flash and powder than live in that sort of shadow again."

A nimbus of light emanated from the mace. "Then pray this Thaumiel has a mere jot of soul in it." He gripped his gear tight—and tighter—then unleashed a hellglare of retribution through the graveworm head. Shades of the dead swirled half-glimpsed in the diaphanous beam like reflections on a knife's edge.

Striking the mechanism's void eye, the soul-stealing light redounded in a violent pinfire spectrum.

Broga gritted his teeth at the convulsive impact. The graveworm head wavered in his fist. He strained to keep it chest-high. His forearms corded up. Using her wings for balance, Taraneh helped him back against the iron screen separating the balcony from the cliffside lodging. His eyes flared black and empty in their sockets but he maintained the attack with a fevered intensity.

The graveworm ray temporarily banished the blasted dark of Thaumiel's eye and at once disclosed its dreadful profounds. The blackness edging the strikepoint shimmered hypnotically with maddening gradations of the infinite. It was beyond the nightlong. It was beyond

earthly life and its mean concerns. It was extradimensional and total and impossible to expunge.

Because this is what you've wanted in your blood since birth: the night of all nights and its dead and dying stars joined in you, to you, crowning you.

Broga couldn't hold out much longer. The graveworm light showed a trembling jawbone through his skin.

A spirit-chorus of screamed delirium broke over the city and cracked my understanding.

Black nothing from the near god's eye lit out and into the graveworm—a torrent of frittered atoms.

The darkling energy veined through Broga and filled his eyes with unnatural blood. He blundered against Taraneh in stone agony. His grip on the mace went helpless. His grip on the graveworm went helpless. He slumped to the tiles, done. A timely wingbeat stopped the metalized head from clattering off the balcony's edge.

The dreamtime backlash from the assault crossed me up in thoughts of animal death, of divinity barbaric and true, of blasphemies that belied cosmic nature. If it weren't for Dabir's mother, I don't know if I would've ever recovered from the psychic shock. I saw at once and irrevocably that Thaumiel and its essence—the whole god-construct—betokened a new, infernal dominion. But she helped shut my mind to it. We'd no time for conjectural fears. With Broga down, all we had was my plan born of desperation—to crush the bot under a haul of moon debris.

A residual haze lingered over Thaumiel's eye. Broga had managed to sap some of its vital energy before passing out. Any hope that his assault would make the difference between victory and ruin, however, was dispelled by an ominous tremor of air around the mechanism's gun arms.

We must hurry. The engines.../ The guns, you mean? / No, space folding engines. They will destroy Al-Mahad and much of Kanavar.

Some kneeled in prayer or froze, terror-stricken; others scrambled for shelter or higher ground in a frantic bid for more life. A woman clutching a fold of thin nightgown against her chest bellowed something between a scream and an invocation. People bottled up where

the avenue narrowed due to fissured gaps and ridges of debris. A legless beggar sat in the middle of the congestion in a pitiful hunch, heedless of the shouting and shoving. Another man stumbled headlong to the pave and was trampled into a bloody stupor. If I'd been there bodily, I would've cringed away.

I abandoned my instrument eye, letting it drop to the tiles next to Broga. I'd need everything I had for the dreamtime.

We can't bombard it this close to the city. / We can try moving it—like I do the moon debris. Earth to wind, wind to sky, sky to moon...

Here, it might be helpful to explain how dreamtime magick works for ordinary mortals. Because I imagine it's second-nature to god-entities like you and probably as inseparable from your sense of reality as breathing air is to us, *vafna*, the living. On this plane dreamtime magick is predicated on what might be called inherent sentience or awareness. As described in the Books of Seasons, everything exhibits an intrinsic potential for sentience. The greater a thing's complexity, the greater its potential, from disaggregated atoms to atom clusters, from plants to grubs and from wolves to men and Druna on up to the Void Gods, which some regard as the living laws of the cosmos. I take it you know the truth of it.

Given its timeless-placeless nature, the dreamtime serves as an astral medium that allows for one sentience to connect directly to another. Sending targets with substantially lower or higher order sentience than the sender, say, inanimate rock, or at the other end of the scale, gods like you, are difficult to affect with dreamtime magick. Lower order targets often lack enough awareness to permit the sender to hold onto while higher order targets tend to have minds so super-evolved as to seem impossibly alien and impenetrable.

I mention all this so you can better understand the magnitude of the challenge we faced in Thaumiel. I say 'we' but the real force was Dabir's starwise mother. My part consisted largely of lending her my dreamtime energy—until, that is, the final turn of events.

Her shrewd trick was to focus on the mechanism rather than its animating intelligence. Taking this approach, she could minimize the chance of triggering Thaumiel's advanced defenses, exploit her moon-watching talent and, to the extent it mattered, leverage my affinity for tek.

The ploy caught the bot unawares. We slung it downcanyon a good half-league or more in a prolonged screech of metal. Its whirling limbs battered and gouged the chasm walls, inscribing gnarled horizontal narrows. The pre-launch exhaust from the space folding engines sprayed over the western end of the city, bringing down great swaths of it in flurries of sandstone and dust. Byways and bridges, homes and shops, farms and weaving orb factories. Gone, all gone. With more shaken loose by follow-on tremors.

The multitude witnessing Thaumiel's riot-birth dwindled yet again.

The so-called god crumpled in a heap shot-through with dark, glittering voltage. Its eye wound leaked more forcefully now, further draining its fey oculus of potential. The vengeful mind wanted to ascribe the mechanism motive, feelings, a monstrous aspect when there was only grand disinterest. Thaumiel was like a wanderer in the forest who, careless of the path, crushes a lichen it's taken decades to mature.

While the mechanism struggled to right itself, we dislodged several passing moon fragments from their orbits. One, four, five, seven remnants were made weapons in turn. The debris raked toward Thaumiel in a fulgent seethe.

It was there on the brink of earth and drifting moon that Dabir's mother faltered. Geologic ages of dreamtime effort caught up with her at last. She needed, no, willed, to rest. This misbegotten world was too much with her. I sensed the enormity of everything she'd lost—her home and freedom, her progeny—break over her figurative head. She, *vafna*, more accurately, her willowy aura, shuddered in pained confusion. She forgot me in a bottomless swoon, silent and small, an exhausted force.

Now, our positions were reversed. She was little more than a death-throe crackling, trusting me to use the last of her in answering Thaumiel. But I wasn't a dreamtime adept. I'd only the faintest inkling of how to manifest astral thoughts on the material plane.

And I'd done nothing so far but get Thaumiel's hateful attention.

On a plume of umbral energy, the mechanism launched itself in my direction, heeling to avoid the first of our missiles. The after-rumble shivered through my astral self. I felt my insides swell to the limits of my skin and the desert breeze come through in a rush. Then I was

wholly in the dreamtime again, seeing Thaumiel's eye through to its center—a turbulence of anti-sun energy. The darkness speared into me like bits of broken mirror reflecting and directing an eviscerating intent. The blanked eye became a killing void, fierce, perfect and relentless.

I grasped for strands of world. Out of a dim corner of awareness, I watched our meteorized moonrocks miss their target and crater in or around the ravine. *Heesh*, what windstorms of earth and grit they threw up, and me, floating above it all, insensate and dying as if from a slow loss of air. It was clear I'd never be an imberga tree or a finely nestled hill, not even a marshweed.

The resonant black worsened its chokehold on me. Dreaminess to solidity, lance and quiver. Anxiety closed in on itself.

Dabir's mother, however, refused to die invisibly; instead, she became a furious weather, pitching a surprise volley of moonstuff.

Thaumiel burst through the scattershot salvo as if it were a ghost-blown fog.

Most of it, anyway. A fistful of quickened debris exploded into the mechanism, crimping metal and cracking out anonymous innards over the desert. An upper arm was sheared to a jagged nub.

Thaumiel wobbled and rolled into a powerless dive, bleeding rich gouts of darkness.

All the colors returned to sight.

But I was alone, a mere fleck drawn into the god-machine's burning wind.

And its trajectory—*kaldrei pykur*—Al-Mahad would be decimated!

I'd neither the skill nor the strength but I had to alter its angle of descent. For what few survived—*Broga*... At first, I tried emulating the thought-flow I'd enjoyed when linked to Dabir's mother. But it proved too geometrical, I'd say, and put me at a blundering distance from myself. It was like trying to turn nested corners in my head. No, if I were to win through, I had to do it my own way.

Thaumiel dropped faster and faster, trailing a fiery, long-tailed vapor. A judgment-comet falling from out the night. I clamped to it in my head, committed to riding it down and to death.

The chasm city and its flickering consolations rushed up to meet

us. One oh so slight but meaningful nudge and Al-Mahad would be spared.

Contrary to what you might expect, rather than fighting our course, I closed myself to it. I had to first find my point of balance. I pictured the earth gentling me in its myriads. Imberga trees with their straight, unbranched trunks and expansive crowns. The welcoming coolness of the understory in summer. The savannah's inspiring openness. Muddy creeks fringed in Andatartre trees and their prominent breathing roots. Thorned date shrubs dotting the eastern desert...

So many places and associated feelings. It hurt to know how much I still wanted—*wanted and wanted*—home and family, home and friendship, home and peace. One image became another and the past became the present and contemplative idyll. I lost myself in memory and imagination, emptying myself of conscious effort.

One nudge away from a scattering of miseries.

Over and against my fear, I relaxed into a formlessness as clean and pure and clear as an underground stream sluicing through compacted rock. I left my strength in its crannies and rills, resolved to go on and on and on, pushing—

Even as the barren earth brimmed over us like dusk, everything and nothing.

When I bound myself to Thaumiel, I'd no illusions of waking from the dreamtime. But here I am, here we are—this indefinite limbo between existence and stark spirit-death inside the graveworm. So, you see: your 'enemy host' is a trophy of sorts. To say more would mean counting backwards through time, through endless begats, explaining why an imberga seed becomes an imberga tree and not something else.

And you, roiling around like slag smoke, you're the darkling energy Broga captured, yes? A partial god-thing. Is Ovandu in there with you? I imagine her commingled there like shadow and night. I don't know what could've happened to her otherwise. Or what fate she would've deserved more.

My recollection of events following the crash in the desert is partial and fragmentary. Ambient darks, alien planes and intervals, curves snagged on fiddly, riven colorfields—these abstracted vistas stand out from the welter of extraplanar flashes. Then I was routed here, this mindscape for wildering souls. It seems a tolerable, even quiescent madness on first blush. I've already figured out how to conjure discrete shapes from the gray and started a flower garden like the one I most admired back in Ixzahl. See that flower with the orange and dust-blue petals? Looks like a bird's head? Crane flower it's called. That was a favorite of my mother's. It comes blazingly alive in this strange oblivion.

There's more to do, of course, to recreate the lush, shaggy plot as I remember it—sweet, violet wildflowers and hanging pots of string bananas... Maybe you'll be inclined to help while we caravan to who knows where. You heard Taraneh suggest the southern kingdoms for variety and Majid, *vafna*, he's eager to follow so long as there's iced wine and a dirty coin to be got.

But there's a larger purpose to their adventuring. In this disembodied state, I'm closer to Broga than ever. I feel his lungs fill with breath. I feel the measured pulse in his blood. I feel every beat of his heart as if it were my own. I know he's determined to free us. We're the motive cause of his swordquest now; leastwise I am, though you'll likely benefit just the same.

One great swordquest after another. What choice does Broga have? Now that he's cursed himself out of a permanent home, he has to make a family wherever he can.

David W. Edwards & James Palmer

NIGHTSCAPE

HELLDRIVER ALLEY

“The devastation of Rahalid goaded me like a prevision of Ojánko’s judgment. It seemed a perfect smoke-sulfused limbo, ‘*es ulizate agoera uxibertsela*’ [a universal state of un-being]. Though heartsick at the gratuitous slaughter, I was, at length, glad of the experience, for it purified my breast of any doubt: this world is a test of will and faith without end.”

—*The Life and Achievements of the Renown’d
Sacrist Monk Garzach Bengochea*

They found the first corpse no more than a dozen paces outside the town’s smashed gate. It was curled up on itself, a blackened hole in its back.

The stink of putrefaction blistered Broga’s eyes as he knelt beside the body. The face was a bloated ruin swarmed by flies. The eyes ran like egg whites from their sockets, the pupils unfixated. An eastern merchant, Broga surmised from the floral embroidery on the robe.

Other, similarly scorched bodies littered the scrub plains and in ever-greater heaps beyond the stove-in gate. Whatever happened to Rahalid had apparently been total.

Odalis dragged the makeshift litter bearing the ailing Ranvir a few more feet before settling it gently to the ground.

“What is it, northlander?” the long-limbed Druna asked from the transport, shading his eyes with a hand. Like others of his equatorial race, his skin was the color of tallow. “Close to the—that...mining town?”

“You smell it, too, eh?” Leire scowled. She’d been walking next to Ranvir to keep him company and monitor his condition. “Not sure I’m keen on a stay-over.” She leaned on her fighting staff, careful to ensure the furred imp caged in the groundward end retracted its legs before

she put her weight to it. At rest, the midhna looked almost comical with its pinched, whiskery features, bony limbs and potbelly.

Pello came up to her, panting from exhaustion, and tweaked the brim of his bird's beaked cap. "We've been through some flatland wastes, but this..." He relieved himself of the Druna's sending shield, dropping it to the winter-hardened ground. The pack was heavy and, even with its control arms folded, abraded the small of his back. "If there's a hammer of Lijos then this is its anvil."

Ranvir set his jaw against a brief but sharp fever-spasm. Pello looked askance.

The Druna's plight sent a surge of helpless anguish through Broga. Fever and shiverings had harassed his refuge friend or *huyi* for days now. A greenish tinge veined Ranvir's neck and lower jaw. Broga had never seen the like. He could only conclude the affliction was magickal in origin—a residual curse from their luckless escapade in Larshunna. *A plague of blood and bother for so little.*

The burly Odalis lumbered to the burned-out corpse, exaggerating his strides to work the stiffness from his legs. Hauling the Druna had taken its toll. His face was drawn and pale. Sweat trickled from under his horned helm into his straggly brows. The Ragoskan wiped the perspiration with the back of a meaty hand. "By the strength of my forefathers, what manner o' evil did this?"

"I'd guess—" The words emerged as a hoarse whisper from Broga's dusty mouth. He cleared his throat. "I'd guess an energy weapon. See the wound? Bloodless." He narrowed his eyes at the cauterized gash.

"Bandits armed with precursor tek? Out here? Perhaps it was carryin' the Druna, but this plain seemed to get wider and wider as we went on."

"I don't know what they're mining here. Gems of some sort? Iron ore?" Broga said. "Could be something valuable enough for this..." His wave encompassed the scattered dead and visible ruins. Gouts of red-flecked smoke billowed over the walls. "Whatever hit this place, looks like we barely missed it."

As former pit fighters, Broga and his compatriots had been privy to all manner of carnage. Though far from inured to the horror, none betrayed a raging disbelief at it.

"So—so much...for a turn of fortune," Ranvir was saying as Broga

stooped to put a hand to his forehead.

“Yea, e’en for a pasty-skinned Druna, you’re blanched up like the dead,” Odalis said with typical Ragoskan brusqueness.

Leire glared at him.

The Druna smiled a lipless smile that a stranger might have easily mistaken for a scowl. “I’ll yet have...the pleasure of you...dragging me the many...the many leagues...to Tarquinia.”

The new yellowy film over Ranvir’s white-less eyes worried Broga. *Even now he might be seeing ominous footprints in the sky.*

Leire addressed herself to Broga. “We’ve no choice but to venture into town. He needs a leech, or failing that, medicines, a mage...” She shrugged.

“Well, leastwise I see no flag of vampirism,” Pello added, taking up the sending shield by a shoulder strap.

Odalis resigned himself to bearing the litter again, though not without a few vociferous complaints.

Jostled a bit more roughly than necessary, the Druna moaned through gritted teeth as he was hoisted to a reclining angle.

The condition of his *huyi* made Broga sick at heart. He couldn’t help but think he was at fault. Even as misfits together in the forest refuge of Ixzahl, he’d always been the greater provocateur. It was, after all, his idea to embark on their ill-starred quest to rescue his half-sister Ovan-du from an as-yet unknown band of slavers.

What began as a righteous pursuit had soon lapsed into nightmare. They were summarily enslaved themselves and forced to become fighters in the notorious arenas of Skulon Gøra. Broga had evinced a natural talent for traditional combat and become a wildly popular competitor. Ranvir, on the other hand, owed his survival to a talent for precursor tek and a root willfulness. Broga counted on the latter to see Ranvir through his insidious malady.

With weapons drawn, Broga and Leire led the company on a winding path through the charred dead and past the main gate. The silence over the town was as absolute as a necromantic spell. The bump and grate of the litter on the unpaved thoroughfare sounded inordinately loud. Scads of dead mucked up the avenue—sheared, exploded and otherwise rendered inert... Human remains mixed with those of pack

and farm animals. Ranvir gasped as the litter bobbed over a pair of rotting goats.

The widespread butchery suggested a fleeing mob caught out and overwhelmed. Evidently, no one and nothing had been spared—not even the initial wave of large-billed vultures. Stubs of the cindered scavengers numbered among the bodies, broken masonry and glimmers of sharded glass. Broga's boots grew increasingly sticky with blood.

The company made slow, wary progress to the incessant buzz of flies. Broga swiveled from side to side to take in the damaged brick buildings. The town appeared to consist of a small merchant district and, toward the far end, verging on the central mine, a shipping platform and several barracks. Few, if any, structures remained wholly intact. Some had been cratered entirely. Passing an exposed wine cellar, Odalis sighed over ranks of splintered casks. Scores of small fires cast an acrid pall against the late-morning horizon.

"If this were the work of brigands, why aren't the dead stripped of their valuables?" Broga pointed to the remains of a painted woman with a fillet of gold in her blood-matted hair and a jeweled bangle around one wrist.

"I'm relieved to hear you say that, *lagun*," Pello admitted, smoothing his close-trimmed goatee. "I didn't want to come across as insensitive, but this might be the easiest coin we've gleaned in, well, ever."

"Perhaps after..." Broga indicated a wrought iron sign on the corner ahead. The hanging sign depicted a unicorn's silhouette, an emblem common to apothecary shops. Broga approached it swordpoint first. "Weapons at the ready."

Pello kept a steady hand on the swirled pommel of his rapier. Clutching her staff with both hands, Leire peered through broken windows and doors pocked with blast marks. Odalis picked up the pace with his burden, anxious to be free of it.

Broga found the door to the corner shop closed but unlocked. There were no signs of violence to the shop. He waited impatiently for the others to catch up. The thought of Ranvir's death was intolerable. It only confirmed his blackest ideas about death, about chance and life itself. One quicksilver instant is all it took and everything could change—irrevocably.

He pushed the door open. Leire scuttled into the dim interior, poised to strike; Broga followed, crossing to the opposite side of the door. “Leire,” he said.

She closed her eyes and granted the forest imp or midhna trapped in her weapon a middling dose of remembered sadness; in return, the midhna emitted an eerie, pinkish-white radiance.

“A tad brighter, please.”

“So much for my tolerable good humor.” Leire modulated her feelings just enough to boost the creature’s glow. Too much and the midhna would’ve incinerated the shop in torrential balefire.

Broga followed close behind her, broadsword high, as they searched the far corners of the shop. The storeroom door behind the counter was shut tight. Broga put an ear to it and thought he detected a faint scuffling. No light shone from under the door or around its frame. He signed to Leire to be on guard and kicked in the door.

The surge of otherworldly light revealed a monk crouched in the corner, one hand close on a phial of silver powder at the edge of the worktable.

“Stay that hand or lose it!” Broga ordered, leveling his blade.

The curly-haired monk checked his motion and rose to his full, modest height. He wore the layered robes of a sect unfamiliar to Broga. A copper medallion hung from his neck by a leather cord. It depicted the head of a cyclops, one half of its great sinister eye shaped to resemble the setting sun. The monk held up his dirty palms. “I am—I thought—” He found his voice and said, “I thought you might be among the ravagers of this town. Are you, you know, one—”

“No, we’ve only just come upon this red massacre. Was it bandits then?” Broga motioned for the others to stay with Ranvir.

Taking note of the additional arms, the monk blinked nervously. “I cannot say. I stumbled upon this atrocity shortly after dawn. My mount collapsed from the heat yesterday. I made the last twenty or so leagues on foot.”

“These plains must be a scavenger’s paradise. We lost our horses as well, the last some ways closer to the gates, but still...” Broga approached the ebony worktable. It was littered with various medicinal paraphernalia: dried, varicolored leaves; alembics and mortars; a pair

of brass censers; unknown liquids; other, unidentifiable ingredients (powdered bones?); and notably, an extinguished but still-smoking candle. “Do you know where we can find the spicer-apothecary?”

The ruddy-faced monk shook his head. “As I said, I arrived only a short time ago. I am Garzach of Tarquinia, devoted acolyte of Ojánkoa, God of the Living Dead. I—I have been on a mission to Graivold these last months and was returning to my temple when...” He looked doubtfully at the midhna. “Is that imp—is it dangerous?”

Leire lowered her staff of star-forged metal. “Only if I want it to be.”
“I have never seen—”

Broga’s eyes roved over the shelves of zests and tonics to the sun-dered *ormnithi* skeleton racked in the corner. The large, shadowed eye sockets seemed to mock him. “One of our party is in the grip of a terrible fever, perhaps magickal in nature. We need a healer.”

“I have some leech-knowledge and know a bit of alchemy also.” Garzach gestured toward the phial of silver powder. “I was preparing an incendiary when I suffered the queer shock of—of that imp. As soon as I heard the door to the street...” He broke into a broad and placid smile. “Are you sworn knights or mercenaries? I am duty-bound by Ojánkoa to help, regardless.”

“Let’s call us mad adventurers, though perhaps mostly just mad of late.” Broga hurried through introductions as he directed the monk to Ranvir.

When he saw the Druna stretched the length of the shop counter, Garzach made a disconcerting noise in the back of his throat. “I am no expert on his physiology but will do my utmost.”

“Any of your efforts, I’m sure, would be better than the alternative,” Pello said. “We don’t know our anise from our grains of paradise, so-to-speak.”

Leire took Odalis and Pello outside to discuss defensive strategies while Broga explained Ranvir’s symptoms and their possible cause to the monk. “I suspect the source is an ancient fetish—one we unfortunately lost at a desperate point in our most recent...adventure.” He knew his account sounded needlessly cryptic, but he couldn’t very well trust a stranger with details about the tomb of the legendary Illnya Ubess and the fearsome night-weirds who guard it.

“Do you recall the likeness?” Garzach absently twirled a strand of his thick, dark beard around his ring finger.

“*Aysh*...uh, it was...amphibian-like?” Broga tried to merely hint at the identity of the fetish. Saying the name directly, he feared, would give away too much. “It was man-shaped below the torso, knees bent, a squat head like a misshapen frog...”

“Oh, truly? Like Zathoqua, most famously the patron god of the mute sorceress Illnya Ubess?”

“Something like that—I imagine. I’m no scholar.”

Ranvir twisted in brief agony. Broga put a steadying hand on the Druna’s chest, wishing like a small child he could take the disease away at his touch—into himself, if necessary.

“Ah, well, hmm.” The monk released his finger from the one ringlet and started to wind up another. “Was there a heavy dusting or mold atop this idol?”

Broga remembered the idol’s look of age-old corruption. “Mottled green-black—definitely mold and not simple verdigris.”

“Zathoqua, as I understand it, dwells in the dank under-earth of Laegrevel. This mold could be a specimen from that region. I take it the Druna—”

“—Ranvir,” Broga interjected.

“Ranvir, of course,” Garzach went on. “He was the only one to handle the object?”

“Yes, though only for a moment.” No sooner had Ranvir retrieved the idol from its creche when the flooring beneath him had buckled, sending him into an awkward lunge for the foot of a columnar statue and safety. The fetish had been lost to the centurial depths.

The monk examined his patient’s hands, front and back. “Mottled black, *bai*, what they call foul-deep earth. There is, however, no visible sign of this fungus. I can only assume he inhaled the vitiating spores.” Garzach brushed aside the outer layer of Ranvir’s robe and put an ear to the Druna’s chest. He made another disconcerting noise in the back of his throat. “We should start by clearing his lungs. I can use the storeroom for this purpose, steeping it in cleansing vapors. Praise be to Ojáanko, there are a number of available volatiles...”

“Your god lords it over the living dead? I trust you won’t turn him

into a zuvemie slave.”

“No, no of course not,” the monk said. “Like the rest of my order, I relish my privacy. A Druna zuvemie would be quite conspicuous in Tarquinia.” His wide, close-lipped smile was suitably enigmatic.

* * *

Leire stood sentry on the corner just outside the shop under the half-wrecked awning for a neighboring inn. Short of the rooftop, this position afforded the best coverage. She had clear sightlines down the main avenue and its intersecting arterial, along with a partial view of the shipping platform. The latter was obstructed by a rusty, cone-topped storage tank of the precursor variety. The smoke of slowly dying fires cast everything in a subterrene haze.

The dead thronging the streets were like so many accusing shades. They were contorted into every possible shape. Leire thought she could read into each position the emotions of the moment: defiant, protective, staggered, hopeless, calm and resigned. What affected her the most, however, were the indistinct shreds—the severed limbs, the bloody dashes of fat, the charred bone-lengths, the extruded entrails and organs—the grossest and most damning evidence of our frail mortality. How could an everlasting spirit inhere in that obscene matter?

She turned at the creak of the shop door: Broga. The fine scar at his hairline sheened like a wrinkle of satin against his black skin; otherwise, for a two season pit fighting champion, his features were remarkably unspoiled. There were light marks along his throat and arms and around his swordhand, but nothing unsightly. He was of a middling height and compact with muscle. His forearms bulged from his sleeveless shirt of light mail.

Leire knew him to be nearly unbreakable—except from within. “How goes it with Ranvir?”

“The monk might have a cure or leastwise a palliative. We’ve got Ranvir settled on the storage room table. Some necrotic mold seems to be the cause. You saw that idol—the muck around it...” He sidestepped behind the downed portion of the awning, which provided a modicum of cover.

“Only time will tell the tale as they say.” Leire suppressed the urge to put a gentling hand on his shoulder. The gesture might too easily lead to more—a caress, a debilitating affection... No, her midhna had a singular appetite for unhappiness. She couldn’t risk upsetting the imp and thereby lose her surest means of defense. No, she had to keep her distance. Hers was a world of swallowed light.

“Where are Odalis and Pello?” Broga asked.

“On a sweep of the shipping area, the rim of the mine. No doubt looting along the way.”

Broga took a breath and his words tumbled out: “Or better yet, stealing a moment for themselves.”

Leire stood dumb and still and undifferentiated as a wood-carved totem. His dark, candid gaze made the inference clear. Was he about to—? She lowered her eyes and tapped the bladed end of her staff on the hardened dirt. “This town—the situation—” She pursed her sun-chapped lips, waiting for her voice to steady. “It’s disquieting. I didn’t see any recent tracks going in or out the gate. Did you?”

He shook his head, the corners of his mouth flickering. “What do you think? Luayghao airships? Makes a distant target for eastern pirates.”

“Devil’s play, more like, perhaps fiends from out the mine.” Her reply sounded remote to her own ears. His look continued to trouble her. How could she make him understand that her bond with the midhna had reduced everything to a dull, pulsing rot. Nostalgia for her coastal home, the family grove, her pet rabbits, the whippings and beatings on Skulon Gøra, the murders, the burials—all mere fodder for her living weapon. It wouldn’t matter which humor the midhna favored, the emotional impact would’ve been the same. When she was in the throes of battle, she couldn’t even remember where she was or when.

But if not now—with Broga at her side—when would she ever quit the imp and take a chance on love? She was like a house-wolf reconciled to its chains even though they’ve long since grown old and fragile.

“We should’ve accepted that Maghvan Gudmund into our company over Odalis’ protests,” he said. “How many times have we suffered for want of true dreamtime magick?”

“Whatever the cause of this,” Leire said, “we’re in no state to put up

much resistance if it comes back. Speaking for myself, I've a dragging fatigue."

"I know, you don't notice it until you stop." Broga put a hand on her elbow. "Go ahead, have a lie-down. I'll take guard duty. There's nothing I can do for Ranvir right now, anyway."

The anxiety of everything unsaid gathered at the base of her throat. Romantic happiness is a fool's pursuit, Leire told herself. *Chancy. Fleeting. A wandering thing next to raw survival—food, shelter, sleep...*

"Much thanks," she managed and slipped around Broga with a taut, regretful smile. She had to escape the press of the dead, his earnest gaze, the need for a decision. "Only a wink or two, I promise, then I'll be back to my old self."

"Sure," he said, an exhalation.

* * *

"As the faith of my ancestors has it," Pello said, depositing a bloodied coin in his belt purse, "the afterlife is somewhat like this—not the Vastlands but a field of dead bedeviled by carrion crows." He straddled a corpse lying facedown in the blood-blackened dirt and flipped it over to check its waistcoat pockets. Decaying innards spilled over his deer-skin boots. "Faugh!" He put a hand to the scarf tied over his mouth and nose.

From the edge of the shipping platform, mace in hand, Odalis stood watch over his—what? Bunkmate? Companion? He'd yet to find a satisfying term. He was partial to the Ragoskan expression *tosias rakastaja*, meaning roughly 'fated match,' though he'd never mustered the sand to say it out loud. The term was one of the few things still capable of cowing the self-proclaimed 'All-slayer.'

"The rats are out now." Pello drew his foot back for a kick then relented, apparently having lost the opportunity to make his point.

To Odalis, the horrific landscape was an instance of nature laid bare—a visitation on the pretense of civilization. The noble works of mortals were innately fragile. He believed nature was tantamount to death and would ever and always prevail. The best a man could do was die in a worthy rage against it. "That Tarquinian monk—can we trust

him with the Druna? Do you know of his sect?"

"Only from the warnings of my grandmother who, at one time, flirted with its beliefs to ingratiate herself with a favored suitor." Pello adjusted his cap then bent to his thievery. "Ojánkoans are a rare sort. As I understand it, they consider Laegrevel a twilight realm between life and death. Whether you achieve immortal life as a spirit or perish in some dark forever depends on what you do here—as a mortal—the code you honor, your acts of charity and such."

Odalis grunted and said, "Sounds a milksop of a god." Ragoskan deities were uniformly terrible in aspect, especially their chief, the storm-helmed Naldr.

"As a judge-god, not one for the likes of us anyway—except perhaps for Broga."

The northlander ignored the slight against his honor. He boasted of his bolder, more direct, approach to things—despite the problems it sometimes caused. "You still want we should split from the party and head for your family villa?"

"Are we any closer to this half-sister of his? We're working from rumors of rumors." Pello held a gold brooch between thumb and forefinger to the diffuse sunlight. "Hmm, fair plunder," he said to himself then added, louder: "We could rove the world for years and years and never find her."

Odalis was plagued by an incoherence of feeling. As a fighting slave on Skulon Gøra, he'd excused his male trysts as a simple means of satisfying the primal need for sex. He'd considered himself on the level of an animal then and so exempt from clannish mores. Now, he secretly thought the practice manlier than the alternative, akin to a grappling of equals. In the throes of passion with Pello, he felt as if he were crossing into a new plane of existence—somewhere outside and beyond lived experience. It's as close as he's ever come to a reckoning of souls.

At the same time, he couldn't throw off his Ragoskan upbringing entirely and quell his trepidations. He was afraid of what he'd discover about himself by committing to Pello, or worse, about what he's been all along without knowing it. He depended on his native strength to keep going. Now, on waking each day, he found himself having to will his wolfish qualities to the fore. Not that anyone else had noticed the



struggle, such was his inborn grumpiness. “But what are we to do in Tarquinia?”

“I told you. Though a bastard heir, I’ve still a small estate coming, a villa and hillside vineyards—ah, filthy vermin!” Pello quit his pilfering and started back to Odalis, waving a path through successive clouds of flies. “It’s a modest piece of land by noble standards but we’ll not want for anything.”

“Yea, but what’ll we do?” What he meant was: Could they live with each other openly? He kept circling around the question, looking for the one oblique angle that would present an easy answer. He was old enough to know that what the heart wanted wasn’t necessarily for the best.

Pello tugged the scarf away from his mouth. He worked his lips, expanding the thin mustache also. “Don’t worry, my fierce *neska*. You’ll still die in the end.” He blew a kiss then laughed with his whole face and shoulders.

Odalis cherished Pello for this lightness of spirit. There was a rascally courage about it he admired, if only in private. “We should get back to the others.”

“Without checking the area nearest the mine? We should leastwise be thorough in our ease.” Pello advanced through the haze onto the pave of the shipping platform. With a voluble harrumph, Odalis trailed after him. The stench of death remained insistent.

“See?” Pello said, pointing through the haze to an elongated, tree-like structure on the far side. Steel beams supported a familiar antennae array. “That looks like a charging station.” The large metal holding tanks at the base of the station took on form as they approached. “And there,” Pello indicated with another wave of his hand, “a transport of some kind.” This new object was a titanic metal craft in the bowl-like mine at the periphery of the shipping platform. It was parked on a level with the platform and was apparently intended for travel to and from the several digging sites.

Odalis thought the vehicle looked like a studded tortoise shell. A set of rails running adjacent to the craft begged the question of another transport. “We could charge Ranvir’s sending shield...”

“If the station’s working.” Pello fooled with the power controls,

thumbing switches and buttons at random. The dials on assorted gauges shifted. “Looks serviceable enough, but...” The machine whirred to life. The central display panel flashed a message unreadable to the Tarquinian. “Ah, there we go.”

Both warriors wheeled at a disruptive clank. A woman sighted them down a long-barreled gun from the main hatch atop the mining transport. Tufts of her coiled, raven-dark hair stuck out from under her leather helmet. “Quiet machine, you blundering oaf!” she snapped. “You want bring Q-Spec down our head?”

“The what, my lady?” Pello said, a hand on his rapier.

“Precursor machine what done the butcher business. I wound it but expect repair itself,” she said in broken *konae*, lowering her weapon. “And I no highborn lady. I am Nataalka of Suntija. I maintain tek use here—these *helldriver*, the rail system, charging station...”

Pello mashed buttons on the central console to no avail. “We’ve a sending shield in our baggage. If we could—” A distant but distinct and rhythmic clanging cut him short. He cocked his head toward the sunken mine.

The second ‘*helldriver*’ mining transport—part-train, part-tank—was rocketing toward them on its designated rails.

Putting himself between Pello and the approaching machine, Odalis muttered a string of curses.

“Scatter!” Nataalka bawled. “You cannot stop weapon!”

As the transport slowed to dock next to its counterpart, Odalis could make out a human figure—a helmeted bear of a man—behind a forward-mounted railgun. The vehicle squealed against the rails. Before it came to a stop, the man rotated his massive weapon in Odalis’ direction and loosed a blistering salvo. Electromagnetized slugs ripped into the base of the charging station just above the Ragoskan’s head, shearing one of the support beams. Pello leapt aside and away from the platform. More slugs zipped through the muddled corpses around him.

Odalis had barely risen from a crouch when another, more vehement barrage exploded the station’s main housing. The ensuing fireball hurtled him across the platform, searing his neck and shoulders. He thudded to a wheezing halt a few paces from the transport. The earth

pitched over and time with it. Agony dimmed his vision. His mace, his broken-horned helm, gone. Only a canon of debris—serrated metal, churned up stone... He heard the jangling of the railgun's ball turret. *Shooter adjusting the range.*

He looked blindly for his weapon. Naldr be damned! Flecks of ash dirtied his dark auburn beard. Now it's time, no, *now* it's time... He took in a tentative lungful of air. There was nothing for it except—Pello, where was—?

The railgun rattled out its fire. It must be time; it was past time...

The flutter and swoop of a tan duster. Natalka, ah, *her* gun.

Face pinched in anger, she advanced on the helldriver, dispensing a continuous fusillade, stabs of light, of heat. The flashes alternately blurred and cleared when Odalis blinked.

The gun racket faded. "Down, stay down," she muttered.

Odalis scrutinized the nearby debris. There: two, maybe three body lengths distant—the haft of his flanged mace. He brushed a stray braid out of his eyes, dragged himself to his knees. Crawling on the rubbled pave was a torment. His lower back pained him at every flex. Jagged rock roughed his knees and palms. But he was still alive...

A powerful hum resonated in his chest.

Natalka shouted to him. A warning? He couldn't quite make it out over the noise. She tried again. Something to do with falling back. But why? Another foeman?

He sloughed off the idea and swept up the mace by its wrist thong. The heat and flames ringing the blast-point hid Pello from view. He levered himself to his feet and spun on the transport with the strength of iron gall.

The railgunner was already down, legs akimbo and unmoving. What he faced was a wholly new and more terrifying threat: a metal orb, suspended in air and bristling with unknown armaments. The machine was almost as large as the transport on which it had ridden. It could've been a harvest moon of old; it was that big. The air churned around it, flinging dirt and grit.

Interlocking sections rotated independently, maximizing the orb's offensive choices. A cancerous red camera eye settled on Odalis. A parabolic dish followed suit, its central antenna aglow.

“Foolish hotspur!” Natalka spit, scrambling to load an egg-shaped defuser grenade. Tools and ammo—only a few of which Odalis recognized—ringed her bandolier-belt.

“I thought—the gunman—” There was a sharp tang in his mouth.

“What I try tell you.” Natalka slammed the ordnance home. “This Q-Spec—this town-killer.”

* * *

Pacing under the tumbledown awning, Broga’s thoughts turned on Ranvir. The image of him in a heavy sweat, features convulsed, kept coming up unbidden. Broga imagined passing a reverent hand over his dead, wide open eyes, closing them without touching the lids. Once Ranvir were reduced to a mere body, there was no possibility Broga could lay a hand on him. That would mean not only acknowledging Ranvir’s death but treating him as a thing, an ‘it’ rather than a ‘he,’ a discard for flies and maggots.

No, he couldn’t believe the Druna was dying. *Aysh*. It was unthinkable given the circumstances. The cause was absurd—such a small, seemingly inconsequential moment. Broga found himself wondering, however illogically, if he could return to that haunted site and assume the infection in Ranvir’s stead. He thought perhaps of even going back to Ixzahl. He had a crazy urge to do so—as if he could go back in time as well to find a Ranvir whole and unaffected from their travails.

Perhaps he had these irrational thoughts in lieu of a faith in any great, benevolent power. Unlike Ranvir, he’d neither god nor deified nature to comfort him. If his *huyi* did pass—if—the guilt would be irredeemable.

An increasingly strident *clack-clack-clacking* sounded from the vicinity of the shipping platform. Outside of the storage tank, Broga could see nothing but vague silhouettes through the pervasive smoke. Everything was silent and colorless and waiting—a somber frieze just for him. There was nowhere else for his mind to wander but danger and death.

Wait: a muffled shout. Pello? Broga took a few steps into the street and listened for more. There was a rapid-fire clamor then a sudden

plume of gusty fire. The low sky winked with fiery ash.

Broga advanced another step and hesitated, deliberating whether to rouse Leire. He'd almost confessed his feelings for her—again—and likely to the same discomfiting effect. It was obvious the prospect of talking things out made her nervous. At the slightest intimation of affection, her eyes shadowed over, became unreachable. He was clumsy about it, he knew. He couldn't help himself. Upon her arrival at Skulon Gøra, this tremendous feeling for her had taken him by surprise. He'd fallen for her because... Because she was a sad, heavy-lidded beauty. Because of her imperturbable air of silent dignity. Because she eschewed argument in favor of just making decisions. Because she wept and wept and yet endured.

Pello had once warned him away, half-joking about her "going vestal." But Broga held out hope she was only afraid—needlessly afraid—to feel outside her own self-imposed limits. What else could he do? Time and again, he'd tried to detach himself and failed. Each new contact with her renewed the promise of something more and, every once in a while, he had to try to get her to realize it. Her parting smile earlier had been one of many stinging dismissals.

But he couldn't let his feelings for her put the company at risk. She'd access to a power none of them could match and leaving her behind would—

"Let me guess: Odalis and Pello." Leire closed the door to the shop behind her and ran a hand through her short, straw-blond hair. The slightly humped midhna at one end of her staff discharged its light in agitated pulses. Its eyes were closed and its scrawny arms extended between the bars of its armillary-style cage.

"If there's a call for fighting, I'm ready." She flourished the staff, jostling the creature into flarey brightness. "I've started with lamenting my lost sleep."

* * *

Odalis stared at the underbelly of the spheriod, knuckling his inadequate weapon. What threat could a common mace pose to this artifact of precursor superscience? Irrational pride and the urge for vengeance,

however, compelled him to hold his ground. “Fall on, you metal bastard! Fall on!”

To his shock, the orb made reply: TRACE ANALYSIS COMMAND: INITIATE FLESH-LIFE SCAN: IDENTIFY OPTIMAL VIOT SIGNAL FREQUENCY: There was nothing inside the cold of its amplified voice. CUT-STOP: VIOT SIGNAL IDENTIFIED:

The northlander felt an invisible force crush down on him. His shoulders caved inward and he sagged at the knees, relinquishing his weapon.

Natalka spewed bullets at the menace—to no avail. The broadside sparked against a forcefield around the drone and its hijacked transport. The shielding gave her targets a smeary gloss. “*Tak*, this I anticipate...”

Q-SPEC: FLESH-LIFE SUBMIT: MEZMER INCEPT PROTOCOL:

There was an unnerving din about Odalis’ ears. He pressed his palms against them to ease the pain. Was it mere delirium or was the top of his spine protruding from the base of his lowered head?

START REPLAY: PRINCIPAL SYLLOGISM OF EXISTENCE: SOURCE FILE: ‘THE DELUSION OF AUTONOMY’: AUTHOR-MAKER LIU WEI: MAJOR PREMISE: ‘A thing is considered free which is wholly aware and in control of the causal antecedents of its behavior; in other words, it is the cause of its own effects.’

That his spine became a sort of antenna, Odalis couldn’t doubt. The brain-root antenna seemed to draw shrill, distorted thoughts from the surrounding vacuum. Quivering under impossible tensions, he fell to his hands and knees.

MINOR PREMISE: ‘Flesh-life cannot act apart from the necessity of its finite nature, the causal antecedents of which are either unknowable or known only imperfectly.’

Odalis was no longer himself, no longer alone in his head. The artifact shrieked like a manifold clarion. But Odalis repudiated the call and even mustered an answer; not a debasing mewl, but a death-howl worthy of a warrior born.

CONCLUSION-DIRECTIVE: ‘Freewill and autonomy are mere flesh-life delusions subject to correction or extirpation to achieve universal congruence with the causal forces of existence.’

“Believe me now, *valenka*?” the Suntijan asked, shouldering him up. “Retreat is better plan.” With one arm around his back, she forced him to move. Everything was simple aura now and hers was a dark crimson flecked with rust.

They lurched away through vestigial flames toward the scuppered charging station. Odalis had a vague awareness of their vulnerability, hobbling, backs to the machine, his arms mere weights.

Then Natalka swung her rifle by its strap over her left shoulder and, with nary a backward glance, fired it upside down. The defuser grenade arced into the Q-Spec’s forcefield like a violescent comet. A coruscating glare marked the collision between the two alien energies. The strike-point spiked out to compass the entirety of the shielding. The drone shuddered and dipped.

STOP-START: QUBIT REROUTE:

The contending energies at Odalis’ back prickled the hair on his neck. The mental noise amped up and veered into an excruciating, high-pitched whine. His balance gave. He staggered, legs insensible.

CHECKING Q-SPEC PRIMITIVES:

Natalka dropped him to the flagstones, grimacing. “*Vybechta*,” she said. “But last defuser and have moment only.”

The orb hovered uneasily in front of the railgun turret, protecting the shooter. FLESH-LIFE: CUT-STOP HOSTILITY: Q-SPEC: BLACKMARK PROTOCOL:

Mercifully, the terrible din in Odalis’ head stuttered into profound silence. He mouthed his thanks, too enfeebled to do more.

But she’d already turned her back to unleash a fury of gunfire.

Brave but daft, he thought.

* * *

Broga took stock of the situation at a run. He was appalled and fascinated by the drone—its size and levitating power, its swift, puzzle-box maneuvers. He’d grown up in a society renowned for magickal achievement but disparaging of precursor artifacts. The Matabwe largely regarded them as remnants of a hopelessly corrupt age and best left forgotten. “That machine...”

“Like an oversized *sukúla*.” Leire bounded onto the platform ahead of him.

“Careful,” Broga said. “Looks more than a scrying orb.”

The gun-toting woman standing above Odalis blasted one of the machine’s ruby-like eyes, followed by a curved metal dish.

The evident damage gave Broga some measure of confidence. Given the rampant desolation, he feared the drone might be well-nigh invincible. Even so, between him and Leire, he figured only her imp-bonded weapon offered any real chance to defeat it. The scabbarded broadsword slapping against his hip may as well have been a child’s plaything.

INITIATE REDUNDANT SYSTEMS: PARSE-MATCH DEFENSIVE ALGORITHMS: The orb’s unfeeling tones penetrated his mind as much as his ears.

On hearing their approach, the woman waved them back without turning around then, seeing Leire bound past her, bawled, “No, no, no! Stick?”

The damaged portions of the orb rotated away in quick succession. One replacement segment resembled a slotted spoon. The woman dove to the ground and Broga leapt over her, fast on Leire’s heels.

He yelled her name, fearing there was no time for any other warning. She was nearly upon the mechanism. Dead center.

CEASE-DESIST FLESH-LIFE:

Fighting staff thrust forward, Leire skidded on the pave. The midhna released a spate of noon-bright balefire. The roiling flames, both spectral and material, engulfed the machine and dazzled Leire into silhouette.

The perforations in the drone flared white-hot against the icy heat.

Broga rushed into the blinding void-space and put a supporting hand on the small of Leire’s back.

The orb’s peculiar missiles folded into an explosive silence. All sound rushed out of the air like a hurricane in reverse.

A noiseless shockwave dashed Broga and Leire on their backsides. Broga scraped his swordarm from elbow to wrist on a fragment of stone. *Aysh*. Blood beaded on his skin.

“Bravo! Lovely stick!” the woman shouted, getting to her feet. “*Tak*,

cort vsete.” She resumed targeting the drone with her rifle, shattering another camera eye. “Out ammo! More, more with fire, please!”

The Q-Spec gyrated wildly and smashed against the pave before stabilizing itself. CUT-STOP EN-EN-ENFORCEMENT MODE:

Leire had taken the brunt of the shockwave. She was blank-faced and trembling.

Broga raked out his sword and charged the orb while it was still regaining its equilibrium. For lack of a better idea, he vaulted atop the drone and, gripping a segment edge for balance, banged theommel against it. The fishtail knob dimpled the alien-wrought metal and loosed small surface details.

But the machine would have none of his clangorous pounding. It spun its interlocking parts in a panic, hurling Broga headlong to the ground. He cracked an elbow against the pave and cursed under his breath.

QUBIT REROUTE COMPLETE:

Another flurry of balefire engulfed the machine. This time, however, the drone was prepared. An invisible shield rendered the bi-planar energy harmless. The flames licked around the Q-Spec and dispersed like sparks from a grinder’s wheel. Leire poured on the intensity. Balefire swelled out from the midhna in waves, shifting from a clear to a deep orange then to a steady white. The imp disappeared in the ultraterrene heat. The shield gave off a portentous crackle at Leire’s prodding. Her drawn face assumed a wan pallor. Sweat mingled with fraught tears.

Broga couldn’t imagine the emotional convolutions Leire put herself through to excite the midhna’s power. The losses he’d accumulated over the years were more incitements to action than debilitating heartaches. In this way, he reasoned, his treatment of grief was closer to that of the imp than its master.

The drone remained apart and untouched. No matter the force behind the balefire assault, Leire and her midhna couldn’t pierce its forcefield. She retreated a few steps and, admitting defeat at last, withdrew, shook-throated and unable to meet Broga’s worried gaze.

With an upswirl of air, the machine rose above the height of the transport. THORON-SKIP AUTOSEQUENCER ON:

Broga was reminded of a childhood fable about a geier-eagle that

tried to wear down a mountain one wingbeat at a time. The dark-haired woman joined him, wielding her rifle like a club. Odalis lay prone on the ground, spent or insensible, and Pello was nowhere to be seen. Broga recoiled at the possibility the drone had disintegrated the Tarquinian. *No, not that laughing face, those teasing, elfin eyes, mere atoms...* He regarded the machine with renewed enmity.

It hovered above them, coeval with the elements. Broga half-expected the heavens to crack and surge with inimical powers.

CUT-STOP ENFORCEMENT MODE: FLESH-LIFE DISPOSITION DELAYED:

Then, apparently incapable of pressing its advantage, the machine wobbled to the rear of the mining transport and, settling in, put the vehicle in motion.

Broga watched the transport streak away and vanish in the stagnant smoke brimming the pit. The tension in his shoulders and limbs relaxed somewhat as the danger receded, but alive with the feel of mortality, he kept his broadsword in hand.

Leire was completely played out—taking deep breaths and drying her cheeks with the sleeve of her woolen tunic. Likewise sapped, the midhna crowning her staff dozed in a lightly-furred ball.

A faint cry broke the mortuary stillness. It was hard to gauge the direction of the sound. Somewhere among the moldering dead? A recovering Odalis pointed to the avenue past the ruined charging station. There, close by the split carcass of a suckling cow, Broga found Pello scooting one-legged on his back toward the platform, beaked cap in hand for safekeeping. A wound to his right thigh had hobbled him and turned his rustic breeches a muddy crimson.

“That machine—*perdó*, that’s the kind of thing makes you piss cold in your trousers,” Pello said. “I figured all the blood would cover my embarrassment.”

Broga allowed a small, relieved smile. The Tarquinian had avoided the worst, but his wound was another fresh stroke of misfortune and of a surety the drone was in no way finished with them.

* * *

While the uninjured members of the company raided the inn next door

for straw mattresses and bolsters, Broga asked after Ranvir. Vague and frightful accounts of the Q-Spec had sent the monk into a flurry of nervous activity. He paused in laying out dried cod from the apothecary's personal stores, tapping the counter with thumb and forefinger. "He was much settled when I left him. You're welcome to look in. The vapors should be just about dissipated. I'll examine him shortly—once I make a poultice for my fellow Tarquinian."

On entering the storeroom, Broga's nostrils were assailed by a bracing miasma. The smoke gave the room a filthy-blue cast. He left the door ajar to let the room air out.

Ranvir lay on the table in peaceful repose, head supported by a folded bedcover, eyes shut. For a moment, Broga panicked at his stillness. He placed a hand on the Druna's to assure himself of its warmth and was filled with thankfulness.

The browless, silvered eyes snapped open.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Broga said.

"No, no," Ranvir said in a cracked whisper. "I—I'm feeling—I can breathe easier now. None of that—that awful hitching in my chest." He slipped his hand from Broga's light grasp and folded his arms across his chest.

"When first I saw you, I worried you might've fallen into a death-sleep."

"Like Thaumazon, you mean?" Ranvir choked out a laugh. "Ah, my father would've had a much higher opinion of me if I could manage that feat."

"Your fever seems to have broken."

"Odalis will be sorely disappointed, I'm sure." Ranvir raised his head with difficulty.

Broga put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Rest, *huyi*. I can bring you sour wine and, if you're ready, something to eat. The monk found cod jerky and who-knows-what-else."

"I'd prefer a sociable pipe."

"You must be feeling better." He appreciated the Druna's outer calmness. It was characteristic of his race to be sure, but Ranvir's sense of tranquility had deepened in the course of their adventures. He'd developed a languid distance from things, a determination not to get too

caught up in the passing-bell of the living moment. It was consistent with the tenets of earthlore, which measures mortal events against geologic time.

Even so, Broga thought, he deserved an apology. They were a fortunate good pairing. The long curve of events might never yield another. “I’m sorry about this. It’s gone hard on you on my account.”

The Druna shrugged off the sentiment and strained to see what was happening in the larger part of the shop. “What’re they doing? Sounds like they’re reorganizing the store.”

“We’re assembling a hospice of sorts. Some, *aysh*, most of us are wounded.” Broga held up his abraded forearm. “Pello suffered the worst injury—bullet fragment or ricochet to the thigh.”

“What was it? Bandits?”

Broga shook his head, uncertain about how much to say. Ranvir was still recuperating from one fell circumstance. Why hit him straight-away with another? “Some precursor artifact—a weapon that reasons unto madness.”

Ranvir elbowed himself up and took a deep breath. The tiredness at the back of his eyes persisted. “Is it us or the world—all this madness?”
“I fear it’s us and the world.”

* * *

[_QSPC1920726]

[RESUME EXEME-PATH]: [-rule] [T]

[qreq: Q[5]]

[qreq: C[5]]

// [SYSTEMS CHECK: REPAIR-REPLACE]:

[SOURCE FILE SPOT-CHECK: ‘THE DELUSION OF AUTONOMY’:
SUBSECTION: ‘OF HUMAN FREEDOM’]: [QUBIT D[3315]: AU-
THOR-MAKER LIU WEI]:

[AXIOM I: ‘The human brain is a physical system like any other, that is, a system that operates on the basis of causation.’]

[AXIOM II: ‘Every act of mental volition has its origins in a neural event that precedes conscious thought, what is popularly known as free will.’]

[PROOF.—‘Neural firing has typically been conceived as a probabilistic or stochastic process. Based on my neural models, however, whether or not a neuron will fire, what pattern of action potentials it generates, or how many synaptic vesicles are released are wholly deterministic phenomena.’]

[AXIOM III: ‘Human thought and behavior are the consequence of an unbroken chain of causation stretching back to birth and, yes, ultimately to the creation of the universe and its attendant laws. Decisions and actions are not freely chosen but rather necessitated by the fact that our brains are physical systems subject to natural laws.’]

[COROLLARY ARGUMENT.—‘Given that a deterministic system can radically diverge in its behavior depending on infinitesimal changes in initial conditions, no evidence for indeterminism at the level of neurons or regions of activation have any bearing on the fundamental question of whether or not the universe and its denizens are not deterministic.’]

[AXIOM IV: ‘We must abandon our belief that we are in control of our actions and thus responsible for them. Moral responsibility is an incoherent concept, along with related notions of good and evil, God and the Devil, even the—’]

[SOURCE FILE SPOT-CHECK COMPLETE]:

[qreq: B[7]]

[qreq: N[7]]

[MEASURE: Q[5] – B[7]]

[MEASURE: Q[5] – N[7]]

[MEASURE: C[5] – B[7]]

[MEASURE: C[5] – N[7] // [RECEIVE RESULTS: QUBIT ENTANGLEMENT TEST]:

[RESTART]: [-rule] [W]

[FLESH-LIFE DISPOSITION: PRIME CONCLUSION-DIRECTIVE: ‘Freewill and autonomy are mere flesh-life delusions subject to correction or extirpation to achieve universal congruence with the causal forces of existence.’]

[INITIATE MAGNETIC VARIANCE CONTROL SEQUENCE]:

[PRIORITIZE WEAPONS ARRAY: VENTRAL LASCONIC BATTERY:]

[// PREPARE PAYLOAD:]
[_QSPC6589]

* * *

“Q-Spec not wait long,” Natalka told the assembled company. She glanced out the window. The static density of smoke had dimmed the day prematurely. “We must pursue or flee, whichever.”

“This is no business of ours,” Pello said from his mattress in the corner, looking to Broga. His color was hectic.

“What’s it likely to do if we leave?” Broga asked the Suntijan.

“Go next town, repeat massacre.” Natalka rested her long-barreled rifle against the window sill. She had an angular face and a hawk-like nose. She struck Broga as supremely competent but needling, impatient with those who couldn’t keep up with her. “I do not understand its language for certain. But one thing clear: it look at us as tricked of ourself and mean to stamp out all free-thinking life.”

“*Aysh*. We can’t have that, can we?”

“No, no,” Pello said. “Don’t say it. We can’t tilt lances against that machine.”

Leire fixed her gray-blue eyes on him. “You want to live with another bloodbath on your conscience?”

“First, I want to live.” He was darkly serious.

“Forgive me.” Ranvir straightened against the counter. His skin was tight over his face and his temples glistened. But he’d regained his poise and even-toned voice. “I haven’t seen this Q-Spec. It’s some sort of precursor weapon?”

Natalka nodded. “Discover in copper mine somewhere. The man shoot railgun treasure hunter, had contract with owner, claim Q-Spec property. He was—how you say?—thrall to it? Q-Spec do something to mind, sound what turn him.” She pointed to Odalis. “Machine try do the same that one.”

“Yea, it shook me somethin’ awful, but look,” the northlander gave a dismissive grunt, “you can see I’m not crazed.”

“Of course, you’d expect someone who was to deny it,” Pello said, sliding back into wisecracking.

Disregarding the banter, Broga asked Natalka, “How did you ever get through its shielding?”

“Defuser grenade.”

“Another precursor weapon,” Ranver explained to the monk. “Originally designed to counteract sending shields like mine.”

“You have sending shield? When shield collide—” Natalka smacked her palms together. “We could get through.”

“If it were charged up.”

“Where’s the machine now do you think?” Broga asked.

“Other side of pit. But I can track from helldriver vehicle.”

“Then we should leave before it returns,” Pello argued.

“You saw how well that worked for the people here.” Broga was further provoked by Natalka’s characterization of the railgunner as a thrall. It called up images of the drone as an inhuman slavemaster—one willing to destroy its charges to save them from themselves. Better they should die, he imagined the orb concluding, than they should live according to false precepts. He couldn’t possibly let the drone go unopposed.

“Machine weak—weaker—now.” Natalka pressed a hand to her helmet as if to steady her thinking. “Running low some weapon it seem. No light ray last time. Limited shield. Perhap few bomb.”

“It can’t very well resupply itself,” Ranvir said. “Unless it’s a self-sustaining model. There are machines that, through some power we’ve yet to understand, can rearrange matter to suit themselves.”

“Then we’ll need to strike before it fully re-arms.” Broga sounded more upbeat than he intended. He could be like that in a crisis. Dangerous situations persuaded him he was progressing ineluctably toward his destiny—whatever it was—and, yes, death. It was the feeling of advancement that mattered more than the actual outcome. “What about you, Leire? I’m afraid you’ve the best chance against it. Do you—are you—?” He regretted calling her out, but he had to know.

She lifted her gaze to the midhna. The creature regarded her with a sick-gold eye. The other remained obstinately closed. “I can be prepared.”

“I have thought to that,” Natalka said. “We have helldriver to take. Load weapon, say, sunstroke grenade, explode...”

“Bring the mine down on it,” Broga said. “How long will it take you to prepare the transport?”

“Can be done while we go.” She smiled a thin, toothy smile. It sweetened her temper to be mobilizing for action.

“Good. The rest of you—excepting Ranver and Pello—prepare to move out.”

The Tarquinian appeared to take the decision meekly enough and pass on to other considerations.

Garzach approached Broga with a pair of stoppered phials. “I’m no fighter,” the monk said. “But this modest incendiary might prove useful.”

“There’s no fuse?”

“Simply throw it with force.” Garzach made a thick-knuckled fist of his free hand.

“Without a doubt.”

* * *

“Odalis, you know the tally here,” Pello said from under a feathered quilt. He shifted his frame against the clay brick wall. His color was blotchy and the scuff lines around his mouth had sharpened at the corners. He wasn’t bemused now. “That orb—’tis the very shadow of time-lost death. Come, let’s away from here. The monk says there’s a caravan route not five leagues distant.” He gripped his knee below the poultice wetting through his covers. “And I’m surely an easier burden than the Druna.”

The Ragoskan half-closed his eyes. The notion of facing the drone dismayed him. He recalled the queer, insidious urges the machine had incited. What if he’d let its voice creep into his head? What if he’d let it change him? He wanted nothing more than to fly from that overmastering power. But there was honor at stake—for himself, his people. He couldn’t allow Broga to forge ahead without matching him step for step. No Matabwe would outpace a true-born northlander to meet a crisis. “I’m sorry...” The phrase *tosias rakastaja* hung in silent play around his lips. “The machine clangors the challenge shield and I must answer.”

“How often have you spoken of Broga through clenched teeth? Yet now you’re eager to join him on this black mission? For what? Some imagined and worthless pennant of honor? I say let him do the fool, principled thing.”

Odalis had lived his whole life at risk, as if hundreds of future-selves existed at once. He’d nearly convinced himself that keeping these lives separate in his head was the same as keeping them separate in life. But no, here he was in another self-defining moment. He wished he could kiss Pello and leap back to see it from the perspective of a different and yet approving Odalis, controlled, secure, a man through and through. “You know the siren-call to courage as well as me.” The Tarquinian had proved a laughing fighter, laughing at the rush of foemen, laughing at magicks out of hell, laughing, laughing.

Pello pretended he was saying this to the wrong person. “Not in the same way, no. I only ever meant to live at a whim. I’m a freebooter—”

“A thief.”

“You know how I prefer my gilded terms,” Pello said in a confidential tone. “As I was saying, I’m a freebooter at heart. Any courage I’ve shown is because of you—because I know how much you prize it.” He gripped Odalis’ forearm to bring him closer. “Even so, my dalliance with courage has consisted mainly of finical feints and teases. I’ve known when to duck out. Please, I’m not just speaking from my wound. This task—” He shook his head, lowering his dark eyes. “Please, my *neska*, let go your pride. It isn’t worth this liferisk.”

The plea drifted into emptiness. The Odalis he appealed to belonged to another life. “I am a warsome bred northlander and with that—”

“Oh, shut your stupid gob.” Pellos yanked him by his grizzled beard into a hard, unwavering kiss.

* * *

The helldriver sputtered to a stop on the beamway facing the targeted mine tunnel. Odalis felt the transport’s reluctant mechanical gasps in his chest.

“This it.” Natalka finished reloading her multi-chambered rifle from the last of her onboard cache. “You saw other vehicle next-side.” She

grabbed up the remote detonator for the sunstroke grenades and jumped out of the driver's seat.

Odalis noted the belt pouch in which she deposited the hand-grip detonator. Its magnetized ordnance dotted the engine room behind the forward cab.

About fifty paces worth of terraced dirt separated the transport from the tunnel mouth. Broga scrutinized the gaunt hillside through the windscreen. "I thought we'd get closer to the entrance." He asked Natalka, "You sure the explosion will be powerful enough to collapse the mine?"

"How to know?" She started up the central ladder to the hatchway. "My job maintenance, not demolition."

Broga exchanged a taut smile with Leire. She held on to her swollen quiet and headed up.

"This should make a fine rouser of a story, eh?" Odalis said over a headachy thrumming.

"If we're not walking into the very teeth of fate."

Odalis thumped him on the chest. "That's the spirit. One last howl afore the Vastlands." He took the rungs two at a time and cleared the hatch.

The twilight was banded in attenuated smoke. The transport abutted the shelf like a wedge. The drone's remote-controlled vehicle was docked next to it.

The Ragoskan lumbered across the hull and jumped from the armored skirt to the ground. When he landed, the scene reeled, dreamlike. The evening's first stars smeared across the sky. He stiffened in every limb, his eyes set and staring.

"What is it, Odalis?" In the faintness that had come upon him, Leire appeared phantasmal in her midhna's tentative light. There were other voices, but they were lost in a surge of echoey whispers. This murmuring resounded in his ears like an early crowd at the fighting pits.

Then Broga was at his side, one hand on his shoulder, steering him toward the other helldriver. His feet seemed to advance of their own volition. "This way, big man."

The troublous hissing continued past all sense. Odalis breathed panic. He supposed himself in the center of an arena occupied by in-

vidious wraiths. The shades left their seats and set upon him, swirling, muttering, merging, a numberless mass. He spun on them, determined to drive them back with fist and boot, but his blows were for naught. They were as immaterial as smoke and as sweeping also. Falling to his knees, he succumbed to their choking effervescence and became a wraith himself, neither solid nor significant. Their whisperings crowded out everything—even his vaunted sense of honor. He was a husk to be filled with purpose and yea, the time was now.

The drawstring pouch with the detonator presented itself. He struck out from under Broga's guiding hand and tore it from Nataalka's tool belt. How far was he from the transport? Did it matter? His palsied faculties stymied him. The world came at him in fragments—moments of expansion and contraction—flashes of recognition emerging from the tumult. But he could feel the detonator through the pouch, the haft and thumb switch. He brought it to his chest, shouldering Leire aside. His directive was clear. The switch offered a pleasing resistance.

The windless evening gusted of a sudden with roiling flames and flying shards of metal.

Odalis collapsed, briefly flesh again. The heat jetted over him and into empty air.

Then the earth above the tunnel mouth cracked and groaned and, in an instant, rumbled to the broad promontory. Dust and grit billowed out from the cave-in, coating everything. Odalis shut his eyes and mouth against the dimming scatter. The phantom suggestions gathered strength while he lay on the ground. They urged him to his feet before the smoke cleared.

He cupped a hand over one eye against the settling outwash. Newly-exposed rock sloped over most of the tunnel entrance. But his connection to the drone remained sure and strong.

A new directive animated him like a heated wire. He hefted his mace and singled-out Broga for the first killing stroke. *And in the dream I saw / A different fear on each face...*

* * *

Broga clapped a hand to his broadsword and spat particled dust from

his mouth, uncertain about what to do next. Defend himself, yes, but beyond that ...? His stomach knotted in sick dread at Odalis' advance. "Throw off that cursed yoke!" he called. "We've no fight for you."

The Ragoskan's errant look denied any appeal. He bulled forward, mace positioned behind his head for a full-force swing.

"You want I shoot?" Natalka raised her gun.

Broga waved her off, bracing for the assault. Then the hulking menace was upon him. The flanged weapon came round for a crushing blow. He parried with the sword and felt the impact down to his bootheels. The blue steel blade splintered just above the crossguard. Fragments clinked against his scalemail. *Aysh, the luck...* The fingers on his sword hand throbbled with numbing pain.

He jumped away from a backhand swipe as Leire circled for an angle. From their long partnership in the fighting pits, they'd learned to anticipate each other's tactics. She struck Odalis on the shoulders with the shaft then reversed her grip, threatening a blast of balefire. The brief distraction bought Broga time to heel-kick the inside of Odalis' right knee, driving it into the ground. Leire followed with another blow, this time to the crown of his helm. The violent *cra-ack* knocked Odalis into the dirt.

Broga took up a position outside the reach of Odalis' mace. For lack of an alternative, he still wielded the broken sword. "Brain him unconscious?"

Assuming a long front stance, Leire wavered. "How could he be under its influence unless ...?" Her throat tightened at the incomplete thought.

Odalis struggled to get upright, leaning heavily on his good knee. The mace depended from his wrist by its thong. His vacant glare remained.

"Oh, no." Broga made as if to smack him with the hilt. "Temper yourself."

Natalka half-mumbled a Suntijan curse over the barrel of her weapon: "*Shcheb tobe... ty kopnola trafyv...*" The rifle was trained on the debris-choked tunnel.

A precariously balanced rock tumbled down the incline. Another pitched after it. Stone grated on stone. Then a cascade of rubble

crashed to the bottom and the orb shadowed out of the dust, mantled in fitful energy.

“Shield damage? Anyway, must drop to attack,” Natalka said.

The dusk-lengthened shadow of the machine engulfed them. Q-SPEC: ENFORCEMENT MODE: ACTIVE: INTERCEPT FLESH-LIFE: The force-field crackled on and off sporadically.

Natalka took a few shots during an interval when the shield was down. The bullets ricocheted to no apparent effect. “He waste grenade.”

Broga tossed his broken sword aside. “I’ll try to remedy that lapse.” He drew one of the monk’s incendiary phials from a belt pouch and readied it in his sling. The sling was his first weapon. As a child in Ixzahl, he’d used it to keep birds from the millet fields.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Odalis lunging for Leire. She retreated straightaway, no problem.

Odalis’ injured knee balked him. Off-balance, he clutched one of the midnna’s dangling legs. The imp squealed and sent a share of its melancholy reserves down his arm. Odalis bellowed at the cosmic chill. Faint red balefire washed over his face, igniting beard and brows. He dropped to the ground to douse himself with loose soil.

The shield fuzzed out and the Q-Spec rotated a large-bore gun into place.

There was nothing else for it: Broga released the phial short of a maximum arc. On a hunch, he signed for Leire to follow it and she summoned up a whip-stream of preternatural fire. The curve of her face accented by that magicked light made his heart skip.

One missed beat, two ...

The makeshift ordnance exploded the enemy missile close upon the gun barrel. The sky broke scintillant. Though Broga shaded his eyes from the painful dazzle, it imprinted a coruscating blur on his retinas.

Natalka tucked into herself using her rifle for support.

The machine bucked in a crescendo of sputters and whines as the volatile fusion of alchemical explosives and balefire ravaged over it.

Leire pulled on Natalka’s sleeve. “Move, move...”

The orb hung in the air another grim instant then thundered to earth, buffeting them with a spate of unchecked energies.

Backed against the second helldriver, Broga blinked through the

upswell of dust, searching out the others. He descried a misshapen silhouette a few paces away. Leire huddled up with Nataalka? *Blessed be*. He stumbled forward, one hand extended.

And nearly cudged by a scarred Odalis nerved to a rage.

* * *

The Q-Spec's shielding flashed like summer lightning in the darkening haze.

Leire pulled away from Nataalka to assume a defensive crouch. There were hints of furtive activity in the smoking wreckage. Confused shadows played across the drone's larger fragments. She forced herself to put the struggle between Broga and Odalis out of her head. A distinct clash of metal reinforced her suspicions about the drone. She gave a weary sigh. "Of course."

The midhna gripped the unbreakable bars of its long-time cage in anticipation.

Leire stirred her blood to fighting pitch, cycling from pensiveness to morbid sadness. She'd heaped up a storehouse of galvanizing memories for this purpose—memories she'd kept to herself, fearing that, like recurring nightmares, they'd lose their evocative powers in the sharing. Her feelings had to be red-raw to be effective. The midhna snubbed feigned emotions out of hand. There could be no playacting. She had to hurt for real, over and over...

Weighing the likelihood of continued threat, she drew on a tender, girlhood reminiscence. Her woodcutter father, recognizing in her a restless soul like his own, had allowed her free reign over the coastal glen adjoining their ancestral home. She recalled the salt in the forest air, on her lips, seagulls whirling overhead, an irrepressible sense of freedom—all lost forevermore to a chance run-in with slavers. She'd wandered too far that summer day for her screams to carry... The midhna cooed in greedy pleasure, already anticipating another, more virulent strain of sorrow.

Hold, Leire told herself, sensing movement in the slowly dissipating murk. Shadows congealed into stupefying solidity. Was that....? A coin-like jingle gave way to an unsettling clatter. Spindly, spider-like

legs shot out from the jigsawed shell of the drone.

L.E.M.-PLAT AUTO-SEPARATION COMPLETE: intoned the machine. Its voice was reedier than before, sounding to Leire as if it came from a gashed windpipe. Was this the artifact's true form?

QUBIT TASK START: FIELD EQUATION: PROBABILITY PATTERN T38 SLASH-DOT 75:

The dust settled to reveal a machine upraised on eight slender, jointed supports. It loomed some two stories high against the blue-black of the early night. Beneath the bulbous housing at its apex depended a giant gun. The heavy-duty muzzle swiveled to its first, unmistakable target.

"Merciful gods." Leire goaded the midhna with a heady blend of fear and sadness.

Natalka took up her rifle with an unintelligible muttering.

A tremendous whoosh of preemptory flames obscured the stilt-walking machine.

Balefire was answered by the rapid-fire pulsing of fatal energies.

Expending the last of her ammo in vain, Natalka stood stock-still, defiant amid the counterstrike.

The Q-Spec's energy rounds dissolved against the balefire in lambent shrieks then sizzled into a reimposed forcefield. The shielding alternately faltered and returned at unpredictable intervals.

Natalka dropped her emptied rifle and detached a pronged spanner from her bandolier. "Machine lack control. Forcefield come from broken part."

"Think you can manipulate it?" Leire asked, scanning the wreckage for the critical fragment. "We could let it out then attack it like we were using a sending shield."

"*Tak*, I work on sending shield. I know some—enough to try dying breath."

"Let's aim a bit higher than that now." Leire heard the muffled sounds of combat atop the helldriver but resisted a backward glance. Breaching the unstable barrier would take her full attention. From years fighting alongside Ranvir, she was well-acquainted with the lethality of forcefield tek. Its energy withered flesh into acrid vapor on contact. To collide with it would mean agonizing death.

“We should go one at a time to better our odds,” she said. “The balefire offers me some protection, so I should be—” She broke off, her suggestion moot.

Natalka had darted ahead, oilcloth duster flapping.

Leire scuttled over a few paces to provide covering fire should the Surtijan make it past the unyielding buffer.

Though there was no hint the barrier would come down, Natalka charged on, trusting to luck or the gods to see her through. The forcefield glitched off, on, on, off, on, *off*...

A fresh surge of bright red balefire washed the expected pathway from sight. Leire had to guess when to let the flames lapse to avoid catching Natalka in the backdraft. Another moment and she suspended the barrage. The shielding flashed up. Natalka kept going, heedless.

How close now...? Natalka glowed dangerously around the edges. There was a bleary flickering. Was she...?

Leire couldn't idle her weapon any longer. Whatever the consequences, she resumed her assault, boosting its intensity to an orange hue. The flames twisted and turned away.

The forcefield was on again, casting a subtle, alien radiance across the ridge.

Picking herself up, Natalka appeared to Leire in dark outline. She'd made it to the other side alive and intact. Only a corner hem of her duster was missing.

But now she was trapped with the spider-machine bereft of any weapon except her wits and a few unavailing tools.

Leire lanced after her, intent on burning a way inside the shield.

* * *

The razor-edged mace glanced off Broga's chest and thunked against the helldriver. Broga gasped at the bloody graze across his mail shirt. The serpentine wound stung in the crisp evening air. He swayed back to avoid a vicious return and fell to a remnant of metal as a crude defense. Whether it was scrap from the drone or the destroyed helldriver, Broga couldn't tell. A ragged perforation allowed him to throw it up as a forearm shield, though his fingers went unprotected.



Odalis battered at the concave shard, relentless, the promise of oblivion in his eyes. The jolt of balefire had left one eye half-lidded and his cheek a sunken ruin. What remained of his brows was rimmed with an eerie frost. He breathed in a kind of hiss through his frazzled beard.

Broga could've believed him a blood-mad zuvembie. The improvised shield nearly flew from his grip under Odalis' pounding. He evaded the next jab and trapped the mace against the transport with the fire-blackened metal. This position, however, exposed him to a sideways attack. Leveraging the shield, he kicked the Ragoskan square in the chest and slid onto the vehicle. He rolled away from the follow-on blow but lost his grip on the metal plate. It clattered into the nighted gulf of the mine.

The transport listed dangerously to port, toppling Broga after the shield. The sunstroke grenades had evidently damaged the helldriver's undercarriage. He flung his hands out in desperation. His fingertips found an air intake valve. A studded section of hull provided a dicey foothold. He scrambled to his feet and the opposite side of the vehicle. The machine assumed a precarious equilibrium.

Until Odalis, issuing low, animal grunts, pushed himself up and over the slanted nose-cone.

The helldriver rocked against the portside rail. "What're you doing? Stay back," Broga warned.

Flouting this caution, Odalis climbed onto the transport, favoring his injured knee. His lips twisted into a predatory leer as he stooped to find his footing on the armored hull.

There was nowhere for Broga to go but down or through: seal himself in the vehicle's cabin and hope it didn't come off the beamway, or elbow past his pupeteered foe. He dismissed the use of his boot dagger—even as a deterrent. Odalis wasn't in his right mind. He didn't want to risk doing permanent harm while there was still a chance for a reversal of spirit.

Broga's restraint presented no little irony. Odalis had ever gloried in the riotous tumble of bodies and blades. He was a big-boned mercenary who sometimes confused battle and murder. Broga had taken up the sword only out of necessity and with no thought for praise or

trophies. As gladiatorial rivals, they'd merely tolerated each other on Skulon Gøra and, following their escape, Odalis had periodically tested his authority. But their occasional clashes had never flared into serious combat. They'd too much respect for each other's fighting prowess and besides, reliable swordbrothers were a rarity in these devil-ridden lands.

Chancing the transport's stability, Broga decided to rush Odalis before the Ragoskan was fully steadied. He launched himself in a flying tackle.

The surprise offensive allowed no time for Odalis to retrieve his mace from the end of its thong; instead of striking out, the stout northlander locked Broga in a powerful embrace then pivoted to toss him portside.

With a piercing metallic screech, the helldriver canted toward the depthless pit. Broga caromed across the nose-cone unchecked. It was a bruising, panicky tumble. His palms slapped against the metal surface without purchase. Pitch-black night and buff-colored metal and distant streaks of balefire made up a dizzying kaleidoscope. He scissored his legs at the prospect of empty air.

And scuffed himself to a stop against a pair of oversized rivets. *Aysh.* A vertiginous black yawned below. The blood hammered in his temples.

His fingers inched up in search of a supporting catch. No sooner had they dug into the edge of the wraparound windscreen when Odalis pitched over him.

The weighted jerk on his boot cuff almost tore him loose. A one-horned helm and a flanged mace plummeted into the abyss. Broga's shoulders bunched and strained against the Ragoskan's bulk.

Dangling over the pit, Odalis joined his free hand to the other gripping Broga's boot

"By—by your... storm-shrouded Naldr... fight this... deviltry," Broga pleaded.

Odalis raised his dead-glazed eyes and smiled without mirth.

Broga's muscles rebelled at the tension. Each breath was agony. He'd no choice any longer. His feelings—his main will—were irrelevant now. He must rid himself of Odalis or consign them both to the Vastlands. But how? He didn't dare alter his foothold to kick himself free. The

rivets bracing his feet offered more security than his fast-tiring fingers.

The Ragoskan clutched him around the calf, pulling his outstretched hand to its limits to snatch Broga's boot dagger. The blade rasped out for a fateful stab.

Broga's heart was in his throat. But he couldn't stand idle and die by his own blade. In this hinterland. Through the workings of an errant machine. He felt for the drawstrings on his belt pouch.

Odalis cocked his arm for a downward slash and swung his legs out for momentum. He spun first one way...

Howling with remorse, Broga twirled the incendiary phial by the drawstrings. The pouch walloped Odalis on the ear.

For the space of a dream, the northlander lives still, eyes wandering from focus...

Then the pouch erupted into a shuddersome incandescence.

Broga shut his eyes against the glare and his own hostile imagination. The sensation of Odalis relinquishing his hold was awful enough.

* * *

Leire closed on the oscillating forcefield, lost in conjured misery. There were no gods to whom she could appeal. She'd forsaken her Alziran deities long ago. Let the hurts run together, she thought. *Let them coagulate in the deep of me.*

A straw yellow brilliance spiraled out from her staff. There was no way for her to tell whether the barrier around the Q-Spec was open or closed. She was in a shimmering burrow of her own creation and, though she might combust to ash at any moment, resolved to see the far end.

When an outspread crackling signaled a successful breach, she denied herself so much as a sigh of relief. There could be no break in discipline no matter how small. She needed to gather more and greater sorrows.

They were in there, those hateful feelings—so much was deep down in there. She had only to dredge them up: the defilement that made her a village outcast; the brutalities of her kidnapping; the mental tortures required to bond with the midhna; the fighting pit atrocities passed off

as pageantry; her unfulfilled longings for stillness, contentment, the possibility of joy; saying nothing to Broga and pretending... The griefs came up into her chest and throat, her flushed cheeks. Blood veined her eyes.

The machine was facing away from her, preoccupied with Natalka. The Suintijan brandished a spanner at the drone from behind a curved shuck of metal as high as her shoulders. The Q-Spec threatened to crush her under its articulated supports. Its world-old voice warbled through several registers: RE-RE-RESUME INTERCEPT: GEN-SEVEN KAKILLWARE: ALPHA-CONTROL OVERTCLOCK: This last came out in ominous bass tones.

A steel leg smashed through the impediment, barely missing Natalka and inadvertently making a drag-weight of the debris. While the drone struggled to free itself from the encumbrance, she scurried to a tangle of flashing circuitry and presumably, the controls for the forcefield. The belly-mounted gun tracked with her movement.

Leire hurried to scourge the machine before it fired.

The salvo of extradimensional energy got the drone's attention. Shaking off the orb fragment, the Q-Spec dashed to meet her, expelling a noxious black gas from a side-nozzle.

Together, the balefire and poison gas obscured the ridge and its environs. Leire couldn't know if or when Natalka gained control of the forcefield. She'd no option now but to burn the machine out of existence in a single, decisive joust.

The effort required her blackest griefs—the self-lacerating kind: the battlefield mercies she failed to show; the sense of being estranged from her childhood self; the likelihood of using up her life in futile expectation; the need to deny her feelings for Broga (again); the love that wasn't...

Broga—anyone else would've been crushed by his wretched past. But he persevered, undaunted. Most yielded to a kind of mundane fatalism. They radiated a sense of privation, a shrunken or narrowed air. Broga, however, gave off an effusive light. He was there for anyone of good faith. And here she was—someone who devoured light for her own sake.

The world outside her emotions slipped, went missing. She stood

her ground and cocooned herself in loss. Shaking in successive waves of grief, she kept up a mean defense, halting the drone's advance and evaporating the gas at the source.

But it was a standstill that could only advantage the machine. Already, her knees trembled and her eyes welled with hot tears of frustration. The color of the balefire turned fallow.

START REPLAY: SOURCE FILE: 'THE DELUSION OF AUTONOMY': AUTHOR-MAKER LIU WEI: EXCERPT-APHORISM Y98: 'Free will is a mocking lie. The concept must be expunged and, if necessary, humanity along with it. Anything else would mean living in a permanent state of delusion. A true idea must correspond to—'

Natalka was shouting at her above the din—something about the forcefield. It was on and—smaller? Tighter? One more phrase made the strategy clear: *the sun under glass*.

Leire understood the shielding to be active and likely locked in place, meaning the three of them, flesh and metal alike, were trapped under its bubble. She bellowed for Natalka to take cover and rallied for a final charge. She would forestall the bleak and imminent future. She would cast a new dawn. Within the confines of the forcefield dome, the balefire would feed on itself, building and building until... She would obliterate herself and at once, survive the obliteration.

She quickened the midhna to a frenzy with all that was and terrible, and all that would never be. Her unhappiness was its grubbing pleasure. O that summer night, how she— O that time on the shore when— Reciting this lament was like the breaking of small bones. But no pain went to waste. The creature's humming satisfaction reverberated across the worlds, filling the space between with concatenated fire.

The unleashed energy rebounded from the forcefield bubble and burned hotter and hotter like an inexorable weather. Neither gun nor gas could overcome the burning cold. The machine cycled up like an angry wasp only to brittle and split into a subdued husk, upright but useless.

Still, Leire seethed as if to ravage her mortality and wither the midhna to quivering meat: *I taste the salt of my tears in my mouth and throat. I hear the neglect in my dust-choked heart. I feel the venom coursing through my veins. I want to ride the fire that it makes. I want to know*

the celestial darkness in the flames. I want to know the excoriating end. I want to know. I want, I want, I want...

Breath by breath, pain by pain, she fired the drone to monolithic slag.

And still, even after the precursor weapon was no longer a threat, the reflected balefire licking around her, Leire near-burst with a fey reality she barely understood.

* * *

Shortly after dawn the next day, Broga caught Leire just outside the town's iron gates. He'd followed her from the inn at a discrete distance, intrigued and hopeful. The sound of her footfalls in the street had drawn him to the window. Restless thoughts—about her, the company, his quest—had occupied him into the small hours of the night.

Leire was returning from a non-descript patch of flatland where she'd deposited the midhna. The armillary-style cage that had distinguished her chosen weapon was gone. Her face was wan and tense. She affected a lighter mood than she felt. "Spying?"

"Admiring at a distance." He spoke in a low tone. The macabre quiet of the landscape seemed to call for it. Several corpses littered the plain of scrub nothingness. The scummed over bodies had taken on the color of dirt. A vulture worrying over one of them paused to preen its blood-greased wings.

"Oh, we're flirting openly now?" Her eyes squeezed into a grimace. She looked like it hurt to look at him. "I suppose you expect an out-pouring."

"Shouldn't I? You've dispensed with your chief excuse." For nearly four Sharro Calendar years he'd longed to be the first of her high emotions unchecked by the midhna.

"It was time." She brushed a stray lock of hair from a peach-bloom cheek.

"How'd you do it? I thought that star-metal was unbreakable."

"The monk—that incendiary. You saw how it worked on the automaton."

"Garzach seems ingenious that way."

“He might serve as a mage of sorts.”

“Perhaps he can replace Pello in our little company.” The remark came out before Broga knew it. The Tarquinian had taken his lover’s death hard, adopting a black silence.

“He can’t blame you for what happened.” Leire extended a consoling hand but only brushed the shoulder of his waistcoat with her fingertips. “And you can’t blame yourself.” She edged closer, eyes downcast. “Odalis died game. That’s all he ever wanted. He never expected a marked grave.”

Broga remembered him as a wily brute but nowise without a sense of honor. “No, but he deserved better.” This scene wasn’t playing out how he’d imagined. They should be falling together, their bodies sighing in relief. “What about you? How’re you feeling?”

“About what happened?”

“That and...?” He shrugged, unable to go on. Every time he tried to talk to her about his feelings there was a telltale voice asking what he was doing and stopping him, so that he herked and jerked between opening up to her and not.

“Fine.” She spun her fighting staff on its bladed point. “I’m fine. It was—that machine—a part of me wanted to release the midhna just to prove I’ve the freewill it claimed was mere fantasy.”

“I have to think the men who made it destroyed themselves. What else could they have done? Even if free will doesn’t exist it’s better to act as if it does. Otherwise, we’d just give in to our darkest impulses and call it fate. No, it was a weapon in a fallen cause.” Again, he’d steered the conversation far afield of his intentions. “What I meant was... *Aysh*, I can’t ever seem to do this right.”

“Then don’t... Please.”

“Because you don’t feel the same?”

“It’s not that. I mean...”

She was so diffident and torn, Broga thought it best to do nothing and hinder nothing. He stood there, immobile, trying not to think of pressing his lips to hers.

“I don’t know what I feel—really feel.” There was a glaze of disappointment in her eyes. “Seems like I’ve walked in a shroud all the leagues of my life. I made myself miserable to live—to survive—and

was left to wonder if every dread thing I've encountered was no more than an image of what was inside me. I just need to take some time to feel what kind of person I want to be."

That was as close as Leire had ever come to declaring herself, one way or another. It was mollifying and sad in the same breath. Broga swallowed. He wanted to hang on to the sure, straight-from-nature feeling she gave him a moment longer. It was thinning now and scarcely real yet so apparent. "You're leaving then?"

"You have your mission and I—I've yet to discover mine."

At this, Broga was exiled to another sphere, stunned, burning. He was reminded of the figures in the Ffron-Mullen paintings he'd seen in Castle Inisglass. The characters in those dreamily pastoral scenes never quite seemed to fully share the landscape. The same sort of spectral shifting blanked him here. He kept losing the thread of what he wanted to say next.

Then, worried he'd left his dim expression unguarded, Broga forced a smile. "I was beginning to consider you a rock of grim permanence."

"Natalka says she'll go with me. Or, I'll go with her." Now that she'd made her choice clear, Leire sounded surprisingly casual about it.

A bitter hot sensation helped focus Broga. Gods, how she stirred him. "Where will you head?"

"I don't know. Probably Suntuja. I do miss the coast, the hush of the sea, the salt scaling my face..." Her features softened with the memory. "The solace that comes and goes. That's what my father called the surf."

Putting a delicate hand on his shoulder, she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. It was a moist, lingering kiss. She smelled of sandalwood and honey.

He remained motionless, his thoughts as inchoate as those on the periphery of sleep.

When she pulled away, her eyes were squinty and dark. "Perhaps someday when you're released of directions..." She nodded to herself at something unspoken, turned away and started back.

Broga was breathless as before a wrong he'd committed. He was careful not to examine the feeling too closely. He credited his fighting acumen to a form of self-delusion. His secret was to live past thought and into the seen, the image, leaving his mind otherwise empty and

prone to instinct. He was so adept at this habit of mind he could vanish himself into the silver chasings of a foeman's armor.

Since his escape from Skulon Gøra, he'd disappeared into one image after another, both frightful and benign. Someday, perhaps, one of them would prompt him to stop and rest and think things through. Leire in profile might still be the image to do it. Who could know for certain?

So look away or look: the sky was cloudless and a roseate sun was cresting the hard line of the horizon.

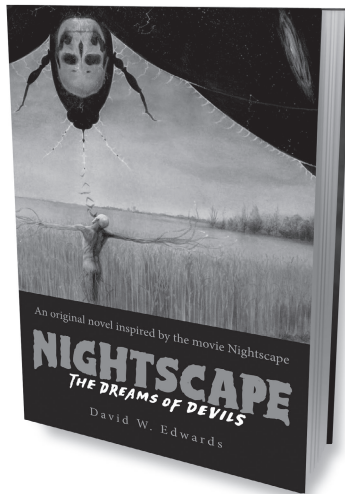
NIGHTSCAPE

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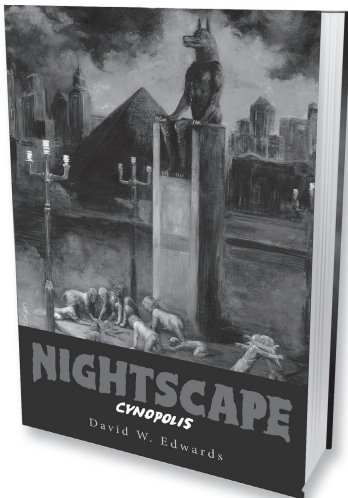
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CYNOPOLIS

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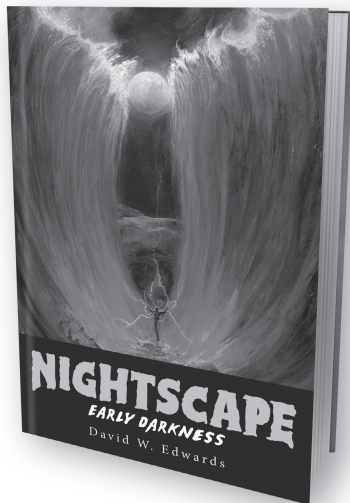
NIGHTSCAPE

EARLY DARKNESS

Paradise Found ... and Forsaken

Ridge Dantley is flourishing as a journalist on the political beat and set to be married to his college sweetheart. Everything seems to be going perfectly—until a freak yachting accident turns a South Pacific vacation into a brutal test of survival. Taken prisoner by a cruel adventurer running an illegal gold mining operation, Ridge faces an impossible choice: living on his knees or dying on his feet. Any show of resistance or attempt at escape could mean instant death and at the same time, doom his fiancée and friends.

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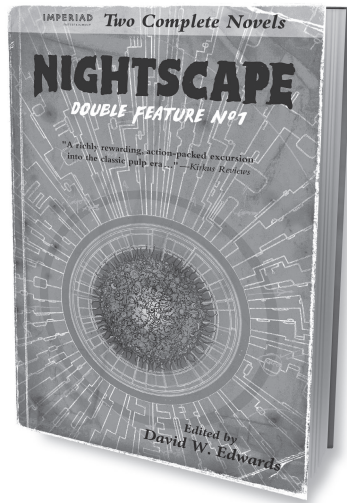
NIGHTSCAPE

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