

# THE HIDDEN EARTH

BOOK TWO

HEIGHTS OF THE DEPTHS

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*THE COLONEL HAD NEVER EXPECTED* that humanity would survive. He had not anticipated that he would be proven correct in quite this manner.

He takes no pleasure in the imminent extermination of mankind. His foresight offers neither satisfaction nor solace. After all, who in his right mind desires bragging rights about the end of his race?

But the colonel could never have guessed the manner in which this tragedy would come about. Who could have? Who could have imagined such an insane, nightmarish turn of events that even now, at the end, he cannot comprehend.

All around him there is smoke, blinding him to his surroundings. He stumbles, falls to his knees, and mutters a string of profanities. It is the exact sort of reaction for which he would have excoriated his troops. He has trained them to be focused at all times. To expect nothing while anticipating everything. The colonel would have expected them to remain focused rather than wasting energy in shouting imprecations or demanding that an uncaring God damn this, that or the other thing. Yet now he falls prey to the same weakness of will and spirit that he would have found so unacceptable in his soldiers.

*Perhaps it stems from the fact that all his soldiers are dead.*

*All his superiors are dead.*

*Everyone. Everything. Dead, dead, dead.*

*They are all dead, and he is in hell, consigned there because he was unable to lead them to victory.*

*There is no reason for the colonel to take the failure of his forces onto himself. Four branches of military service, hundreds, thousands of officers who outranked him, governments worldwide that acted*

*with confusion or bewilderment or denial when confronted with an enemy beyond any measure of human understanding.*

*And yet he does, because that is simply the way the colonel's mind is wired. He cannot help but feel personally responsible for the outcome of everything in which he is involved, even when nothing he could have done would have changed the way things turned out.*

*In the thick underbrush of the jungle through which he is running, he lies in the moist dirt, sweat streaming from under his helmet and down his face. His breath is rattling in his lungs, despite his best efforts to rein in his gasping lest he alert those pursuing him of his whereabouts. He is clutching his machete, the only weapon that he has left available to him.*

*The weapons.*

*What the hell had they done to the weapons?*

*When those creatures of myth had intruded so forcefully, so insanely, into the colonel's world, they should have been easily dispatched despite their considerable number. And dispatching them had been the only option available since their immediate actions upon arrival had left no question as to their purpose or priorities.*

*It had been an indelible image, seared into the consciousness of every man, woman and child on the planet. That moment when, all over the world, the skies had turned purple and swirled as if vast whirlpools had opened in the heavens. There had been cries that the Rapture was occurring, that Jesus was about to descend upon a golden chariot, or that it was heralding the arrival of the Prophet. Scientists attempted to analyze it and some were pointing accusing figures at a new superconducting supercollider that had been activated underground and yet supposedly had managed to open up a spate of black holes in the upper atmosphere.*

*They had swirled above the Earth, appearing in succession, one every hour until there were twelve of them. People huddled in churches, or in laboratories, or in their homes or home made bomb shelters, while others set up camps so that they could gaze upon the phenomenon and watch and wait and see the glory that*

*they were sure was to unfold.*

*The colonel was on alert at Fort Bragg with the rest of his squadron when the moment came, the moment that would be referred to subsequently as the Burst.*

*The holes had been churning in the skies, and suddenly every single one of them came to a halt. It was a sight to see, all those energy whirlpools slowing, slowing and then stopping. It was as if nature itself was holding its breath.*

*Then there was an explosion that was without noise. The first thought was that the light would be visible and the sound would follow shortly, like thunder after lightning. It never happened. The Burst was, as some wags dubbed it, silent but deadly.*

*No one was laughing minutes later, however.*

*Astronomers watching through telescopes were the first ones to see the vast containers hurtling through the holes. At first glance they appeared to be vessels of some sort, but they did not seem to have any manner of propulsion or guidance. They were just gigantic shells, ejected from the vortices like bullets from a gun. They hurtled toward the ground, and there was not just one or two of them, but thousands upon thousands. All over the world they spiraled down, at which point the sound finally came. It was the whistling sound typically associated with bombs dropping.*

*“We’re under attack!” came the screams from some, while others brushed off such sentiments as alarmist.*

*The whirlpools in the sky collapsed in on themselves and vanished moments after their contents had been disgorged. Down came the vessels, and although the world was three quarters water and thus random chance would have dictated that most of them would have had water landings, in fact only a relatively small percentage of them did. All the “bullets” that had erupted from one hole plummeted into the Atlantic ocean. The remainder came to rest on land. In every instance they managed miraculously to avoid major cities. Instead, without exception, they hit on deserts or forests or other areas that were unpopulated by human beings.*

*They came in at angles, not smashing straight down but instead skidding to a stop, leaving trenches dug up behind them that were miles long, crisscrossing each other like a gigantic hatchwork.*

*The first contact was made in the Nevada desert. The sun had set, the last fingers of orange light disappearing from the horizon. Army troops moved in, of which the colonel was still not a part. The gigantic shells lay there, smoke still wafting from them, and frost covering their surfaces. There was no hint of movement, no sound of engines powering down, no nothing. The soldiers approached carefully, their rifles out, believing they were ready for anything. Attempts to take readings of anything within the shells were thwarted by the vessels' exteriors. It was as if they weren't even there.*

*Suddenly there were sounds like guns going off, except none of the soldiers had fired at anyone. They were the sounds of the shells cracking apart, gigantic gleaming metal oblongs as if laid by an enormous mutated chicken. As one the troops stepped back, leveling their weapons. From the back, the commanding officers observed carefully, constantly reporting progress to the White House.*

*The shells broke wide, and a creature emerged from within that seemed to be stepping out, not from some manner of spaceship, but instead a book on mythology and legend.*

*It was a Cyclops.*

*It was gigantic, well over ten feet tall, shielding its eye and blinking against the fading light. Another Cyclops stepped out from behind it, and then more of them. There were audible gasps from behind the squad leader, a battle-hardened master sergeant. He told his men to shut the hell up and then, slinging his rifle, slowly advanced upon the foremost of the Cyclops. The creature looked down upon him with a single brown eye and a brow that seemed arched in mild curiosity.*

*There was someone of more normal, human proportions standing just behind the Cyclops, but it was also clearly not human. The master sergeant hadn't noticed it at first, which was odd because it was standing right there. Its skin was sallow, its face triangular in*

*shape, its ears long and tapered, and shoulder-length, purple hair fluttered around it in the breeze. The being fixed its gaze upon the master sergeant and there was nothing but contempt in its eyes, which should have been the master sergeant's first warning.*

*He willfully ignored it.*

*"Welcome," said the master sergeant, "to—"*

*The Cyclops stepped on him without hesitation. Before the master sergeant could react, the Cyclops simply took two vast strides forward, the ground thundering beneath him, and then it slammed its foot down on the master sergeant, crushing him with a sound that was oddly like a balloon popping. Blood spread from beneath the Cyclops' foot. It lifted his foot and scraped it on the dirt as if it had just entered someone's home and was availing itself of the welcome mat.*

*There was no hesitation as the assembled armed forces opened fire.*

*The Cyclops, looking positively stunned, went down in a hail of bullets. So did several behind it. Then the purple haired being waved its arms, gesturing widely, and just like that the weaponry ceased to function. More specifically, it functioned in reverse, as the rifles proceeded to backfire, exploding in the hands of the young men and women aiming them. Faces were ripped off, bodies blown backwards. Those that had mouths left went down screaming; the rest just went down. Any who attempted to throw hand grenades had them explode in their hands. Mortar shells detonated within the launchers.*

*As the human beings staggered around, bewildered, disoriented, unable to comprehend what was happening and how this amazing first contact scenario had gone so wrong, so quickly, the Cyclops charged. They came pouring out of the ship, a vast wave of them. Scientists who would later study video of the event would conclude that the number of Cyclops emerging from the ships far exceeded anything that the ship should reasonably have been able to contain. It was like watching a real life version of a clown car, except no one was laughing.*

*They continued to pour out by the tens of thousands, and then the hundreds of thousands, all from those same fallen shells of ships. And when the planes came swooping in with bombs, a goodly number of the monsters were blown to hell, indicating to most observers that there seemed to be a range involved in what the obvious magic-wielding creature could accomplish. (The scientists disliked the term “magic” intensely, preferring to substitute the phrase “Arcane physics.” None of this mattered as, over the long period of annihilation that followed, almost all the scientists were killed.) But many more of the creatures were not killed at all, and they swarmed across the face of the United States, up into Canada, down into Mexico.*

*Had that been the only arrival, humanity might have been able to cope. But there were eleven others, and all around the globe humanity found itself under assault. Minotaurs, satyrs, vampires, two-legged dragons and more. The attack was relentless, and merciless, and eventually, it was successful.*

*The colonel was witness to it all.*

*Now he runs and stumbles through a jungle, the branches tearing at his uniform, bites from random insects pock marking his skin. He falls back as something hisses directly in front of him. For a heartbeat he thinks it’s one of those dragon creatures—Mandraques, he believes they call themselves—and then he realizes it’s a homegrown snake. He whips his machete around and severs its head from its body in one clean slice. Then he keeps going.*

*He hears pursuit.*

*The speech is guttural and booming, and the trees are crashing down behind him. It is unquestionably the creatures.*

*They are coming for him. Not enough that his entire squad had been wiped out; they want to be sure to take them out to the last man.*

*He wonders if he is indeed the last man.*

*He has lost contact with headquarters. He has seen no other humans in days. For all he knows, the entirety of humanity has been destroyed and he is the last man standing. The final and only defender of the human race.*

*Your race is run, he thinks bleakly.*

*Suddenly there is a triumphant roar directly in front of him. It is a Mandraque, looming before him like a miniature dinosaur. It says something incomprehensible, and its forked tongue snaps out. It wields a double bladed sword that is as big as the colonel's arm. The Mandraque whips the sword around, and the colonel ducks under it, slamming forward with the machete. It drives home, and the colonel has the opportunity to see close-up what a Mandraque looks like when it is startled. The Mandraque reflexively tries to lunge toward the colonel, but the action only serves to drive the machete deeper into its own chest. The sword slips from the creature's now nerveless hand and it falls over. The colonel yanks out his machete, spits on the carcass, and then tries to lift the creature's sword. It is impossibly unwieldy. The colonel is not a weak man, but he can barely clear it from the ground. It is useless to him.*

*He hears more snarling, more shouting. He knows that he is doomed, but he is not going to go quietly. Leaving the sword and his enemy's body behind, he continues to run.*

*A creature drops from overhead. It emits a hellacious screech. Without looking he swings the machete and gets lucky, beheading the pale skinned monstrosity. Its head falls directly in his path, its lips drawn back in a frozen sneer exposing twin vampiric fangs. Its body flops around for a few seconds, clawing at the air, and then lies still. By the time it ceases thrashing about, the colonel is already gone.*

*He hears the sounds of his pursuers growing. They're getting closer, and they are making no effort to hide their progress. They do not care if he hears them or not. That is how confident they are in their eventual triumph.*

*And they are converging. The sounds are not just from behind him now, but from all around. They are cutting him off, using a pincer movement. It seems like a good deal of effort for one man. He should, he supposes, feel honored to some degree.*

*He does not. All he feels is anger. Anger and impotence.*



*He trips over an outstretched root, scrambles to his feet, keeps going, and bursts out into a clearing. There is a small rise up ahead. High ground. Go for the high ground, he thinks desperately as he sprints toward it.*

*He is halfway to the rise when his pursuers emerge, running, from the forest. Two Minotaurs, another Mandraque, two more of the vampires who are sprinting on their feet and knuckles. They converge upon him and he scrambles up the rise, hoping to lose them, knowing that he is doomed to failure. The magnitude of his failure is evident when he reaches the top of the rise only to see more of them coming from the other direction. "Get him!" shout the Minotaurs, which surprises him because he had been unaware that any of them speak English. Obviously they learn quickly, or at least the Minotaurs do.*

*The colonel braces himself, drawing his arm back, trying to see all around him at once, his head whipping back and forth. They know they have him now. They slow their approach, none of them interested in making a precipitous rush, because the machete is blood stained and they recognize that it is the blood of their fellows upon it.*

*Then slowly, carefully, they advance, with a combination of snarling and hissing and spitting and stray words of English that are doubtless hurled at him as epithets. And as they draw near, he holds his machete high in the air and bellows at the top of his lungs:*

*"Get off my damned world!"*

*And then he leaps upon them.*

## THE OUTSKIRTS OF FERUEL

KARSEN FOUX HAD ABSOLUTELY NO idea what his destination was going to be, or how he was going to reach it. All he knew was that he was getting there as quickly as he could.

The Laocoon had never quite been the tracker his mother was. Zerena Foux, the leader of their hodgepodge clan of Bottom Feeders, had always had the true nose in the family. Many had been the time when she would stop the jumpcar dead, hop out and land deftly on her cloven feet, and sniff the air with endless patience. She would turn in a slow circle, as if she were listening to what the gentle winds of the Damned World had to tell her. Her nostrils would flare a bit, and then she would turn to her fellows and inform them in what direction a battle had just occurred and where dead bodies were lying, ripe for the picking. She had never been wrong, even though in some instances the site had been miles away.

Karsen came to the conclusion, however, that it wasn't that his olfactory prowess was so much less than his mother's. Instead it was simply the fact that he had never needed to employ his own abilities. Mother had always been there to take charge. Since Karsen had struck out on his own, leaving his fellow Bottom Feeders behind, he was in the unusual position of having to rely on himself for everything. On the one hand it was daunting. On the other hand it was exhilarating, even liberating.

He was on his own. Really, truly, at last, on his own.

It had not been an easy endeavor initially. When he had departed the jumpcar, his fur-covered legs had been quivering. He wasn't certain if his mother or any of the others noticed. He certainly

hoped they did not. At a moment in his life where he was trying to appear as strong as possible, he was appalled by the idea of seeming weak even in the slightest. He steadied his jangling nerves, however, gripping tightly the strap of the supplies-filled sack he had slung over his shoulder. A second strap, crisscrossing his bare chest, kept the war hammer that he had taken from a dead Mandraque fixed solidly on his back.

He remembered the look on his mother's face when he had made it clear that he was really going to depart their oddball tribe. That was what the group of them had become, even though—aside from he and his mother—no two of them were of the same race. An aged Mandraque named Rafe Kestor who, even on his best days, scarcely seemed capable of stringing thoughts together; Gant, a perpetually depressed shapeshifting pile of ooze who purported to have once been a member of that eldritch race called the Phey; and Mingo Minkopolis, member of a race called the Minosaur, whose formidable intellect seemed at odds with his massively powerful build. They had been as close to a family as Karsen and his mother, Zerena, had ever known.

And he had left them. For a Mort. He could almost hear Zerena's voice dripping with contempt. A godsdamned Mort.

Karsen stopped.

He'd been walking through grass, but it had been thinning over the last few miles and now it was gone completely. Instead a field of mostly rock stretched out before him. It was going to be harder on his hooves, certainly, which were already showing signs of wear and tear. But that was secondary to the fact that his quarry was going to be that much harder to track. Draquons left a distinct trail when they were moving through grassy plains and such. Everything from the bend of the blades to the faint smell of sulfur that accompanied them all acted as easy indicators. Everything became far more problematic on a rocky surface.

But Karsen didn't see any other choice.

He got down on his hands and knees. His legs were protected by

the thick, matted fur that thoroughly covered him. His hands were scraped up in places where the rocks were a bit jagged, but it wasn't anything he couldn't live with.

Karsen lowered his face to the rocks and started sniffing around. As long minutes passed, he fought to keep down his fear. He wasn't picking up anything.

The image of Jepp's terrified face was etched in his mind. The Travelers had shown up out of nowhere, their long black cloaks flapping and their faces eternally hidden beneath their hoods. Astride their draquons, they had plucked the frightened young woman from within their midst. Karsen had been barely conscious when the attack had occurred, having been flattened by a punch to the head by his perpetually dyspeptic mother. When the Travelers had first arrived, credit Zerena with at least attempting to provide some manner of resistance. She hadn't realized that they had been coming after Jepp; she was just trying to defend herself and her tribe. Had she realized that their target was the single human among them, she likely would have stood aside and told them to do with her whatever they wanted.

Karsen had barely had enough strength to lift his head when Jepp was carried away, his eyes narrow slits rather than open. Nevertheless he saw Jepp reaching toward him, screaming, trying to escape the firm grip of the Traveler who had ensnared her. Her screams seemed to echo in the still air long after she was gone.

As he continued his attempts to track her across the rocky surface, he remembered his mother raging at him, "That girl has done something to you!" as he prepared to take his leave of them. It hadn't been his first choice. He would have far preferred the Bottom Feeders to come with him. The task he had set himself was indeed daunting and he could have used his long-time allies along with him, watching his back.

But that had never been an option. His mother was too intransigent, too disapproving of Jepp and too determined to keep her clan as free from trouble as possible, even if it meant allowing her only son to head off into the wilderness on his own.

*That girl has done something to you!*

The damning thing was, he knew his mother was right. He knew perfectly well that Jepp had done something. And it wasn't even a matter of his not caring. He had, instead, embraced it.

So caught up was he in his musings that he almost missed it. But then his head snapped back and he retraced his steps a few feet.

There was a chip off a small section of stone, such as might have been left by a passing creature. The draquons had extremely hard feet, judging by the thunderous sound they made as they galloped across the land and their fabled imperviousness to injury of any sort. It was possible that the passing draquons had caused it to chip away.

And there. A second piece, also broken off. He held the chip closely to his nostrils. The faint but distinctive acrid aroma of a draquon wafted from it.

He continued to move a few yards more, and then his incredibly sharp eyes perceived a thin strand of hair lying on the ground. He picked it up delicately and he didn't even have to take a whiff of it to know that the black strand had fallen from Jepp's head.

Jepp and her abductors had come a long way by this point. Was she still struggling in their grasp? Was she screaming for help? Her throat would be raw and she'd probably have no voice left. But the mental image of her writhing in their grasp, trying to break free and not even coming close, drove him on.

He began to run again, convinced that he was moving in the right direction. His hooves beat a steady tattoo on the rocks as he sped across the barren plains, spurred on by the hope that he might somehow catch a glimpse of them. That was all he would need, a glimpse. And when he saw them, then pure adrenaline would enable him to overtake them.

And then . . .

*Then what, you idiot?*

It was his mother's voice, sounding in his head. The disdain, the contempt for him was so realistic that she might well have been right

beside him, rather than riding along like an unwanted passenger in his imagination.

Then what are you going to do? Zerena's voice persisted. You're going to fight a group of Travelers? Travelers, the good right arm of the Overseer here on the Damned World? You're going to challenge them with that hammer on your back? How stupid are you? Or, more to the point, how stupid has that girl made you? The absolute worst thing that could happen to you is that you in fact catch up with them. Because you will, in your dementia, stand up to them and try to fight them. I attempted that, only because I thought they were attacking, and they brushed me aside as if I was nothing. So can you imagine what they will do to you if you actually try to pick a fight with them? No. No, I don't think you are imagining it, because if you were, you'd realize that you have no business doing something so monumentally stupid. They will kill you, Karsen. They will kill you and whatever is left of you will be food for carrion eaters, and I will never see you again.

And he thought grimly, Good. That would probably be for the best.

It was at that moment that he realized he had lost the scent again.

He fought down panic once more as he methodically began to check around some more.

The shadows lengthened as the sun moved relentlessly across the sky, underscoring the passage of time, and still Karsen could find nothing.

Finally he backtracked, trying to pick up the scent yet again. Still nothing. It was as if they had vanished off the face of the planet.

Had they, in fact, done so? These were, after all, Travelers that he was trying to track down. The full extent of their powers was unknown. Could they have simply disappeared into some sort of hole in reality?

Or perhaps they had boarded a vehicle that had gone off in a completely different direction.

Or perhaps they had gone straight up . . .

He looked skyward, scanning the heavens. It was possible. He had never beheld a Zeffler at anything more than a great distance, but he knew they existed and knew what they were capable of. And even the Zefflers, or at least as they were commanded by their masters, the Serabim, would be as obliged to follow the dictates and demands of the Travelers as anyone else. So if the Travelers had issued commands—by what means they would convey their desires to the high flying Zefflers, Karsen could not even guess—then the Zefflers might well have airlifted them from their current path. Why? Had they detected Karsen's following them? No. No, that made no sense. If they wanted to discourage pursuit, they would likely have just turned back upon him and attempted to run their draquons right over him. The act of going airborne, courtesy of the Zefflers, would simply have meant that they were attempting to reach someplace that the draquons couldn't take them. Some high mountainous point, perhaps, or maybe over the vast ocean.

Karsen didn't even realize his legs were buckling until suddenly he was on the ground. A long, ululating scream ripped from his throat and he pounded the ground in impotent fury with his fists.

It couldn't end like this. It simply could not. What the hell kind of quest was this, to come up so miserably short? What was he supposed to do now? Return to the Bottom Feeders as a complete failure? After he had set off with such high-flown words and certainty that nothing in the world would stop him from finding Jepp and rescuing her from her captors? There was no question in his mind that they would welcome him back, but he would feel small, diminished. Puny and pathetic.

He lost track of how long he expended energy in the pointless pursuit of venting his frustration. Eventually, though, he flopped on his back, gasping for air, his throat raw from bellowing his fury. Karsen was relieved that his mother couldn't see him now. She would chortle at his relative helplessness and the absurdity of his predicament.

Karsen stared up at the blue-tinged skies. Thick clouds were

crawling across them, not threatening with rain but covering the skies nevertheless. Then, for a moment, some of the clouds parted, and a stream of sunlight filtered through. In Karsen's imagination, it was as if one of the gods was staring down from on high, the light issuing not from the sun but from the deity's own orb.

He had never been much for praying. Karsen was reasonably certain that as far as the gods were concerned, everyone down there was on his or her or its own.

Yet now, frustrated, hungry, thirsty, and convinced that short of divine intervention, he would never see Jepp again . . . Karsen prayed.

"Gods," he whispered to the nameless deities. "Gods, please, if you're listening: Help me. Help me, because I . . . I need her. I'd love to tell you that this is all about her, and saving her from the Travelers, and rescuing her, but it's not just that. It's about how she makes me feel when I'm with her. It's about having some sort of purpose in life instead of just being this . . . this creature who shows up on battlefields after it's all over and picks up valuables and supplies and trinkets. When I'm with her . . . when I see how she looks at me, and looks up to me, and sees me with such love as no one else in my entire life does . . . she makes me happy to be alive. I've never felt that way, and I don't want to go back to feeling the way I did before she showed up. Because I never realized before what a pointless and empty existence that's been. So please, I'm begging you, gods on high, please . . . no matter how many cycles around the sun it may take, I will wait. I will wait however long you require, even if it seems endless, I—"

He heard a low moan from a short distance away.

Karsen sat up, confused and distracted by the noise. He knew instantly that it wasn't Jepp; it was a male voice for starters. A Traveler? Possible, but not likely. Even if somehow a Traveler had been injured in some manner, they always rode in groups and would never leave one of their own behind.

There was a short cluster of rocks about three hundred feet



away. It was a scattering of boulders that looked as if someone had dropped them from the sky in a random manner. The moaning was originating from behind them.

Slowly Karsen got to his feet, dusting off his legs. His instinct was to call out to whoever was obviously in some form of pain. Something made him restrain himself, though. It was nothing more than his normal caution, honed from many years of trying to make himself unnoticed by bigger, stronger members of the Banished (as the Twelve Races collectively referred to themselves)

His situation with Jepp was certainly not forgotten, but he was intrigued by the timing of hearing someone in distress just when he was in the midst of praying for divine intervention. The gods were renowned for moving in ways that were not only mysterious but also downright incomprehensible. As unlikely as it seemed, perhaps there was some chance that whoever he was hearing now, might somehow be sent as an avatar of the gods as a means of aiding him in his quest.

Is this how desperate you've become? Karsen thought. That you would grasp at the flimsiest of possibilities? Karsen Foux, the grand adventurer, embarking on a journey to save his lady love, reduced to praying for intervention and hoping that someone who is clearly in even worse shape than you are might be of some aid. You've been stinking of the road and your exertions for some time, but now you're beginning to stink of desperation as well. And at what point did you suddenly start sounding like your mother?

He approached the boulders, not liking the fact that his hooves were clacking on the ground. It was impossible for him to make any sort of stealthy approach. Nor did he know for sure who or what he was going to be encountering on the other side. He could well be walking straight into some sort of ambush. At that moment, however, he really didn't care all that much. His concern was so focused upon Jepp and his inability to find her that his own fate was of no relevance to him.

Whoever was on the other side of the rocks must have heard his approach, because the moaning abruptly ceased. When it did,

Karsen froze in his tracks. He was unsure of what to do next. The entire concept of it being a trap returned to him once more. On the other hand, it was possible that whoever was there, presuming they were as injured as their pained voice made it sound, had lapsed into unconsciousness.

To hell with it, thought Karsen. He straightened up and boldly strode toward the boulders, no longer caring how much noise his hooves made.

Just before he reached them, an uneven voice came from behind the boulders. It sounded as if was trying to be threatening but didn't come close to succeeding. "You just . . . just stay back," it said with a growl. "Or I'll kill you."

Karsen hesitated. There was something about that voice that was extraordinarily familiar. He'd heard it not all that long ago, in fact. That voice, like several small rocks being rubbed together and slowly being crushed—

"Gods almighty," he said with a gasp. "Eutok?"

"What?" The voice changed, sounding startled. The belligerence had vanished almost immediately. It even sounded a bit afraid, as if the mere mention of the name had robbed him of his power somehow. "That . . . who . . . ?"

"It is!" Then he grew abruptly cautious. "Throw your axe out where I can see it!"

There was a pause and then the voice came with a great deal less belligerence. "You are an idiot," it said. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm hardly in a position to hurt anyone."

There was every reason for Eutok to be lying about it, but Karsen decided to take the chance. He vaulted the remaining distance, his powerful legs propelling him through the air like coiled springs. He landed atop the boulders, prepared to leap back instantly if the situation required it.

He looked down.

"I'll be damned," he said.

Looking back up at him was Eutok of the Trulls. "I can only

hope, Bottom Feeder.”

The short, barrel-chested, hirsute underground denizen looked as if he had been battered nearly to death. His beard was stained with what Karsen was quite sure was blood, although whether it was his own or someone else’s was impossible to determine. His already squat nose had been broken. One eye was swollen shut, while the other was halfway closed, although his pupil was visible through it, gazing hatefully at Karsen. His swollen lips pulled back in a sneer and several teeth was visibly missing.

“You’ve never looked better, Trull,” Karsen said with excessive cheer.

“Shut up.”

“As you wish,” said Karsen with a shrug, and he turned to leave. Before he could do so, however, Eutok suddenly growled, “Wait.”

There was no reason for Karsen to obey him, and yet he did. He turned back to the Trull and regarded him with open curiosity. “What am I waiting for?” he said when Eutok did not speak immediately.

“I am . . . injured.”

“No! Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

“This would be a great deal easier,” he said, his breath rattling in his ribcage, “if you could spare me what passes for wit in a Laocoon.”

“Spare you? Your people wanted to kill me and my clan.”

“And then I was the one who got you out of the Underground! My mother and brother would have annihilated you for your trespassing and your theft if it hadn’t been for me!”

“You are rewriting an interesting version of history, Trull,” Karsen said. He wasn’t angry. He was having far too good a time staring down at the helpless creature. “You helped us because you wanted us to slay your mother, the queen, so that you could take over as ruler of the Trulls. A fascinating little plan. The last I saw of you, your brother, Ulurac, was endeavoring to kill you. I see he did not succeed.”

“Not for want of trying.” Eutok tried to sit up but then winced, grabbed his chest and slumped back again.

“How did you get here? In one of your handy underground cars?”

Slowly he managed a nod. Even that action seemed to cause him pain. “Barely. I got away from my brother . . . barely.”

“And not without cost.” He craned his neck to get a better look. “I believe you’ve lost part of your right ear.”

“It’s not lost. I know exactly where it is. It’s inside Ulurac’s stomach.”

“I doubt that it was your brother’s intention to swallow it.”

“Ah. Well, that makes everything all right then, doesn’t it.”

Karsen put his hands on his hips. “What would you of me, Trull? We have no business ‘tween each other. You aided our escape in the hopes that we would dispose of your mother for you, you power-grabbing wretch. We left you and your cursed brother to your mutual attempts at destruction. You’re lying there in your sweat and blood and stink, and it couldn’t happen to a more deserving individual as far as I’m concerned. Why are you even up here on the surface? Your kind abominates the light.”

“Because if I’d stayed below, they would have found me. Found me and . . .” His voice caught for a moment and then he simply repeated, “They would have found me.” He paused and then added, “And it would not have gone well for me.”

“An attempted fratricide, matricide and regicide all rolled into one? Hard to believe you wouldn’t have been the most popular Trull in the Underground. You still haven’t told me what you would have of me.”

“Your aid.”

Karsen laughed curtly. “Good luck with that.”

“I’m serious.”

“As am I.”

“It is said that Laocoon have . . .” He coughed violently for a few moments. It didn’t sound good. Karsen suspected that there might be some fluid in the Trull’s lungs. When he recovered himself enough to speak, Eutok said, “. . . have a certain talent for

the healing arts. Is it true?”

“It can be,” Karsen said judiciously. Unconsciously his hand strayed to the sack he had slung over his shoulder.

“Do you possess this knowledge?”

“What if I do?”

“Thunderation!” bellowed Eutok and then he started coughing again, this time even more violently than before. Karsen felt as if there was no reason for him to be standing around watching Eutok suffer, as enjoyable as the experience might have been. Ultimately he decided there was no reason not to stand around watching Eutok suffer. “Stop giving me vague questions in response to my questions! Can you—?”

“I have some knowledge of it, yes,” said Karsen. It was true; he had some. As was usually the case, he was not quite as proficient in such things as his mother. But he had basic healing knowledge, and an assortment of medicines and powders derived from certain plants were in his bag. However, he had brought them along to tend to whatever wounds he might sustain during travel and, if necessary, in combat. He had no reason or desire to waste his supplies on a Trull. “What of it?”

“You can help me.”

“I can minister to your wounds. Facilitate and expedite the healing process. But why would I want to do that?”

“Because I can help you.”

“Oh really.” Karsen made no effort to hide his skepticism. “First, I assume that you are lying. And second, I don’t need your help.” This time he turned away, determined to waste no more time on an encounter that was accomplishing nothing.

He froze, though, when Eutok said, “You seek the girl, do you not?”

Very slowly, deliberately, he turned back and stared at Eutok with open suspicion. “What do you know of these matters?”

A smile spread across Eutok’s face slowly. It was the single most unpleasant smile Karsen had ever seen on any being, ever. “I

have your interest now, do I?”

“I said—”

“I heard you.” He took a deep breath and let it out to steady himself. “I have been here for quite some time. I saw a pack of Travelers go past. The girl was with them. The one that fought like no human I’ve ever seen. Like no person I’ve ever seen. They had her. They went past here. I saw which direction.”

“I lost their scent,” Karsen said. “I thought perhaps a Zeffer had . . .”

Eutok waved off the notion dismissively. “There was no Zeffer, you idiot. They flew.”

“Flew? Who flew? What are you talking about?”

“The Travelers on their draquons. Draquons can fly.”

“What? Since when?”

“Since always, I would surmise.”

“Then why don’t they fly all the time?”

Eutok shrugged. “I imagine conditions aren’t always optimal.”

“I don’t understand—”

Grunting, Eutok said, “Actually I suppose that ‘glide’ is the more accurate term. They have great flaps of skin between their arms and legs. If a sufficient wind arises, they are able to take to the air and glide distances. How far I could not say. I saw them take off and they were still airborne when they went beyond my sight line.”

Karsen sank into a crouch, amazement on his face. However much he thought he understood the rules and parameters of the world in which he lived, there always seemed to be something new thrown at him. Draquons could fly? Who knew?

And more importantly: Now what?

He looked toward Eutok, sudden hope on his face. “You saw which way they went?”

“I told you, they went beyond my sight line.”

“Yes, but you know what direction that was.”

Eutok managed a nod, even though he grimaced as he did so.

“Which way did they go?”

“And what possible . . . ?” He stopped, braced himself, and then continued, “. . . what possible reason is there for me to share that information?”

“All right, fine!” said Karsen in exasperation. He hopped off the rocks and landed next to Eutok. Yanking his bag off his shoulder, he began rummaging through the contents. “Just lie still.”

“Ah. And here I thought you were going to require that I get to my feet and dance for your entertainment.”

Karsen didn’t even glance at him. “You are aiding no one, least of all yourself, wasting breath talking to me. If you have something of use to say, by all means, speak out. But if all you desire to do is enjoy the sound of your own voice, then indulge yourself at the risk of your own health. Or, more accurately, what little of your health remains.”

Eutok’s mouth opened but then snapped shut. He glowered at Karsen, who neither noticed nor cared.

Karsen set about pulling out what he hoped was the right combination of leaves and berries to attend to Eutok’s wounds. He pounded the selected leaves into a paste and the berries into a juice. As Eutok lay there, regarding him with hate-filled suspicion and obvious frustration over his helplessness, Karsen spread the paste on Eutok’s more prominent wounds. Air hissed between the Trull’s teeth. “You bastard . . .”

“The burning sensation is how you know it is working.”

“Then it must be working beyond your wildest dreams. Gods damn it!”

“It will only last for a few minutes.”

“You had best hope so, or—”

“Or what? You’ll breathe heavily on me and fling drops of sweat at me?”

Eutok didn’t respond save to glower once more. As the minutes passed, though, his breathing regularized as the healing properties of Karsen’s ointments began to take their affect.

Karsen, in the meantime, finished preparing the juice, adding a few more ingredients. He wasn’t thrilled about being in such

proximity to the Trull. He'd applied the paste with a brush so as to keep some distance, but Eutok was still too weak to lift his hands. Karsen crouched next to him, his nose wrinkling from the Trull's pronounced body odor, and brought the juice to Eutok's lips. "You aren't going to be happy with the taste, I'm warning you right now."

"I am a Trull. As a rule, we don't do particularly well with the concept of 'happiness' even on our best days, which are never much in abundance."

"I'll remember that."

"How do I know you're not trying to poison me?"

"You don't. Now shut up and drink." Before Eutok could say anything else, Karsen shoved the juice, which was in a small wooden cup, between Eutok's thick lips. He poured it down Eutok's throat, and the Trull coughed violently several times but still managed to keep it all down.

"You were not understating it, Laocoon, I'll give you that much." He gasped a few times and then said, "Water."

Karsen stared at him and then said drily, "You could at least make the most minimal effort to be courteous."

For a moment Eutok looked as if he hadn't the slightest idea what Karsen was talking about, and then it dawned on him. With a look of derision, he grudgingly said, "May I please have some water? I have a water skin on my belt; I simply haven't the strength to reach it."

"Yes, you do."

"Idiot!" he said with a snarl. "When I say I have not the strength to—"

Even as he spoke, his arm moved as if on its own and brushed against the brown water skin that hung from his waist. He looked down in surprise as if the arm wasn't his but rather someone else's. "I'll be damned."

"One can only hope," said Karsen.

Eutok ignored the comment, pulled free the water skin and was about to drink from it when Karsen said, "Take only as much



as you need to minimally slake your thirst. If you drink too much, you'll dilute the juice's healing properties and make the process take longer."

He expected Eutok to respond with some dismissive or irritated comment, but instead Eutok simply nodded. In fact, he went him one better. He took a small swig, rolled it around in his mouth, and then spat it out. Karsen hated to see water wasted on principle, but had to admit that Eutok's way was the most sensible.

"How long before I can move as of old?" said Eutok.

"A day. Two. Your body needs time to fully recover."

"I'm not going to keep lying here, exposed to the elements or potential enemies," he said.

To Karsen's surprise, Eutok forced himself to a sitting position. Karsen was about to caution him to take it easy. Then he decided that it really wasn't his place to worry or his problem to worry about. He had other, far greater, concerns. "All right, then. I've fulfilled my part of the bargain. Tell me which way the draquons went."

"How would I be doing you any favors?" said Eutok. "She is a human. You're a Laocoon. Consorting with her will bring you to no good end."

"Your opinion would mean a great deal to me had I asked after it. Again: which way—"

"I heard you the first time. Again, how do I know you did not poison me?"

Karsen's eyes widened with incredulity. "You're still alive, aren't you?"

"For now, yes. But Laocoon are crafty, and Bottom Feeders have no scruples. You are both and thus doubly a threat. You could have given me something slow acting that temporarily energizes me but, after a time, kills me."

"I have no knowledge of a drug that would accomplish such a thing, much less how to prepare it."

"So you say." Slowly he hauled himself to his feet. He swayed as he did so, gasping for air at the exertion.

“We had a bargain, Trull!”

“Yes, we did, and I intend to stand by it. I will take you in the direction I saw them go.”

“You cannot be serious! You can barely move!”

“I become stronger with each passing moment.”

“I am hemorrhaging time, Eutok! I keep falling further and further behind!”

“You are on hoof while the Travelers are astride flying draquons. If you seriously thought you ever had any chance of overtaking them, then you are completely delusional. And what did you think would have happened even if you had managed to sprout wings and catch up with them? Eh?”

“I would have found a way,” he said, but he sounded less than convincing, even to his own ears.

“You would have found a way to oblivion, is what you would have found,” said Eutok with a sneer. “You must know that your only chance was to pursue them to their destination, wherever that may be, and then try to rescue the girl from them at that point.”

Karsen hated to admit that what Eutok was saying made sense. Unfortunately, it did. “All right,” he said reluctantly. “Let’s admit that is the case.”

“Then time is not of the essence.”

“They could be bringing her to some place for the purpose of killing her!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. If that was their intent, they would have already disposed of her. She’s a Mort. A human. Why ride away with her if they didn’t have some use for her?”

“I don’t want to give them time to put her to that use, whatever it might be.”

“Well, you’re not really going to have a choice about it. The only choice you’re going to have is whether you are going to have the chance to catch up with her, and that opportunity in turn is going to rest on me. I will bring you to her. In return, if my health lapses, you will be able to attend to it. I want to remain in a position

where you need me alive and well.”

“That is unacceptable to me.”

“And undesirable to me. Yet here we both are. What do you intend, then, to do about it?”

“I—”

His voice trailed off as he realized he really didn't have any choice.

“Very well. But this business goes two ways, Trull. If I see any flagging in your cooperation . . . if I believe even for a minute that you are endeavoring to trick me or prolong our association beyond the point of necessity . . . then the last thing you see will be my back as I walk away from you while you're in your death throes. Do we understand each other?”

“I believe we understand each other better than you think we do,” said Eutok.

Karsen considered that. “I have no idea what that means.”

“Worry not. You will.”

# THE SPIRES

## I.

NICROMINUS HAD GENUINELY NO IDEA what to expect from the Overseer when he had put forward his admittedly radical theories.

The aged and wise Firedraque—arguably the finest mind of his people—had been taken forcibly from Firedraque Hall in Perriz and relocated here to the towering city simply referred to as the Spires. A lesser Firedraque would have been overwhelmed by the scope, the architecture, the sheer magnificent achievement of the Mort population in constructing this admittedly awe-inspiring city. But Nicrominus was who he was, one of the greatest and most senior Firedraques in the history of his people. There was very little that he was unable to take in stride.

However, even for all his experience and wisdom, Nicrominus had found himself in a situation that went far beyond anything he had ever known.

The Travelers, the right arms of the Overseer himself—the ultimate power in the Damned World—had come to him and given him a mission. They had demanded that he come up with a theory to explain why the hotstars, the primary power source of the Banished—not to mention of the Elserealms from which they had been banished—appeared, to be slowly diminishing in power. Eventually, after much research—not to mention some notions put forward by his gifted albeit fainthearted disciple, Xeri—Nicrominus had developed a working theory. At that point he had been whisked away via Zeffers to the Spires, and had found himself addressing none other than the Overseer himself.

Nicrominus had never before laid eyes upon he who had been

placed in charge of the Damned World by their home dimension. He did not, in fact, know anyone who had. Certainly no one aside from the Travelers had done so, or at least lived to tell the story. Yet here had been Nicrominus, finding himself standing in what seemed to be a vast theater, with none other than the Overseer listening in silence. It had always been Nicrominus's assumption that the Overseer was a member of one of the races who had dispatched the Banished to this enforced planetary prison. But the design and build of his armor was such that it was impossible for Nicrominus to determine which race he belonged to. For that matter, Nicrominus had no reason to conclude that he was in fact faced with a male of any kind. The creature in the encompassing armor could have been male, female, or anything in between.

The Overseer had been lowered from overhead in a massive throne, down to the proscenium at the front of the amphitheater. There he had remained in stony silence as Nicrominus had resolutely ignored his own uncertainties and laid out for him what he felt were the reasons for hotstars slowly losing their effectiveness and puissance.

The idea of responding to a physical problem with a metaphysical solution was preposterous on its face, and yet Nicrominus had put forward a reasoned argument for that very thing.

“To understand our present situation . . . one has to understand the previous occupants of what has been named the Damned World. I am speaking, of course, about the humans. It is undeniable that humans possessed a spectacular arrogance regarding their own status. According to our studies and their own histories, they took it upon themselves to befoul this world as they saw fit, with pollution and filth. They deforested entire sections, heedlessly slew other life forms into extinction, without caring how such actions would affect the cycle of life, and life interaction. That arrogance carried over into subspecies interaction, as different subspecies believed that they, and only they, were the right and true rulers of the Damned World. They would often endeavor to hunt one another into extinction as well.

“Even more intriguingly,” Nicrominus continued, “the humans had a tendency to be . . . how best to put this? ‘Human-centric’ in many of their philosophies. At one time they believed that the sun moved around the Damned World, rather than the other way ‘round. Their answer for life on other worlds was to dismiss the notion out of hand since no planetary neighbors had made a point of coming by . . . as if the universe considered them anything other than one single mote of dirt in a vast universe of similar, undistinguished motes.

“In short, Overseer . . . humans foolishly believed themselves to be the center of everything in creation.

“The thing is, Overseer . . . what if the humans were right?”

He had waited for some sort of response and got none. Resolutely he had soldiered on.

“It’s . . . this way. This realm that we’re residing in right now . . . it’s just one of many. Infinite realms there are, infinite dimensions. We know and understand that, even though most humans did not. And each dimension works in different ways, has rules that enable it to function. Rules that were put in place by the gods, blessed be they. Rules that are not handed to us, but instead we are expected to discern as we go.

“Different dimensions align more closely with some than others. As it happened, the Elserealm aligned closely with this one. ‘Neighbors’ is the way that the humans would have put it. When individuals are neighbors, that which happens in one realm can spill through to, or affect, what happens in the other.

“Part of the ‘spill through,’ in our case, are the hotstars. They were rare here, but commonplace in the Elserealm. What we did not realize, I believe, is that the source of their energy was here, in this plane of existence.

“I believe that the source of that energy . . . was the minds of humans. Which may on the surface of it, sound ludicrous. Then again, I should point out that it is documented fact that humans used, as their own source of energy, the fossilized remains of long-dead

animals. So I don't think that one is intrinsically more ridiculous than the other.

"Say what you will about humans . . . but they relentlessly used their imagination, their dreams, if you will, to shape this world to their liking. They thought, in their limited way, that this was simply a measure of their ingenuity. But it was more profound, much deeper than that. This plane of existence, for whatever reason—whim of the gods, if nothing else—was, and is, entirely shaped by the conscious and even unconscious desires of human beings.

"They thought that form followed function. They were wrong. The truth was the exact opposite: Function followed form. Humans would develop in their collective, dreaming minds, the sort of world they desired. One that did not exist. This unconscious desire would then sit in a type of 'between' state, a 'limbo' or transitory condition. And so it would remain until enough humans dreamed the dream, at which point they would then . . . through bursts of industrialization, or visionary philosophers and leaders, or even wars . . . bring the unconscious desires to reality. They would think of it as ideas waiting to happen, and in a sense, they were right. They just didn't understand that there was an actual, metaphysical structure behind it. The concepts would develop a nebulous form, and then the functions would follow to actualize it.

"In any event, Overseer," Nicrominus had continued, "here is the situation, and the problem. The human race has largely been purged from the Damned World. And if my theory is correct, those humans who do remain are remarkably dangerous. For energy cannot truly be destroyed; it simply changes form or concentrates elsewhere. Which means the pure power of dream and imagination, rather than being diffused over millions of humans, is now concentrated within the minds of a mere handful. Of course, they don't know it. They know of a time when humans dominated, but accept the status of their environment for what it is. But if they dream of greater things . . . if they take to imagining things not as they are, but as they could be . . . it could be disastrous for us. Through means we cannot begin

to guess, they could set events into motion—affect probabilities, develop devices—that could spell the end of the Twelve Races.

“But we cannot simply destroy the humans in self-defense, because therein lies our quandary. You see, naturally this sphere, this plane of existence, far pre-existed human beings. It was, however, chaotic. Unformed and void, almost unrecognizable. Humans were created to help bring it into sharper focus. They began as primitive specimens, but evolved over time. As they evolved, this sphere likewise evolved from the chaos that reigned to the relative order that now holds sway. The calamitous depopulation of humans has thrown this plane of existence out of whack. We are seeing, in the diminishment of the power of hotstars, merely the first step. If my theory is correct, if the few humans who are left should die off completely, the hotstars will not be the first things to give out. This entire plane of existence could come completely unraveled. It could well descend into the chaos that existed before humans were developed to hammer it into shape through their imagination, their will, their hopes and dreams and aspirations, and their odd obsession with ascribing names to everything. They even gave a name to the phenomenon: Entropy.

“Nor will it necessarily end here. The nearness of the Elseréalms, its dependence upon hotstars, and the effect the current energy depletion is having, indicates that the deleterious effects may ripple through to the Elseréalms as well. Both the Banished, and those who banished us, may well share the same fate.

“The depopulation of humanity may well be the single greatest calamity the Twelve Races has ever faced. There is only one solution that I can see: We must locate what humans there are and find a way to repopulate the species, all the while holding their dreams in check or turning them to serve us, lest they wind up—through sheer force of will—creating a series of circumstances that could lead to our utter destruction.”

For a long moment, the Overseer said nothing.

Then had come an explosive sound, like a crack of thunder. Lights



had flickered on and off, and the very air seemed to crackle as if a storm were building up within the structure itself. Nicrominus had fallen to his knees, whimpering like a hatchling in the face of the unfettered wrath of the single most powerful being in the Damned World.

And for the first time since Nicrominus had shown up, the Overseer had spoken.

“You,” thundered the Overseer, “Have *got*. To be *shitting me*.”

## II.

NICROMINUS, DURING HIS RELATIVELY LEISURELY voyage over courtesy of the Zeffer’s vast, dangling tentacles, had had a good deal of time to try and figure out just how the Overseer was going to react to his admittedly extraordinary theory.

*You have got to be shitting me wasn’t it*, or even remotely close to it.

For starters, although Nicrominus understood the basic words being uttered, he suspected there was some sort of vernacular twist that he wasn’t entirely grasping. Furthermore, it simply didn’t sound like something that the single greatest power in the Damned World might say. It was so startling, so bizarre, that for a moment Nicrominus suspected that perhaps he had been fooled somehow. Perhaps this was not, in fact, the Overseer at all. An imposter, maybe? Someone who had been sent to test his mettle? Except who would have sent this individual? The genuine Overseer? Or unseen warders from the Elserealm?

All manner of possibilities rattled around inside his head as he simply stood there and stared at the armored figure.

The Overseer vaulted from the proscenium. When he landed, the sound echoed through the vast theater, the thunderclap-like impact of his previous bellowing reaction only having just died down. As he moved, Nicrominus could hear a series of faint whirring noises coming from the armor. He had no idea what they were. The

armor was unlike anything he had seen before. It had an air about it, something that made him think of the Elserveralms, clinging to it lingeringly as did the scent of, say, a female's scent to one's clothes on the morning following a night of passion. But there was also something about it that smacked of Damned World technology. The Banished had very little use for such things, but still, Nicrominus could spot it when he saw it.

He strode right towards Nicrominus and didn't slow as he approached him. Nicrominus's bones may have been old, his muscles might have been sore, but he was still capable of getting out of the way of an oncoming behemoth when the need arose. He did so at that point, stepping aside and almost falling into a row of seats to his right. He stood there and watched as the Overseer strode past him.

Left on his own, Nicrominus was uncertain of what he was supposed to do. The Overseer had not issued any instructions, or even really acknowledged his existence in any way save to listen to what he had to say. What was he supposed to do now? Stand there and wait for further instructions? What if none were forthcoming?

Nor was it his nature to simply stand around and wait for other people to tell him what to do, even when one of the other people in question was the Overseer himself.

But he couldn't very yell out, "Wait!" to the Overseer. The Overseer did as he willed, when he willed it, and answered to no one. Or if he did, he certainly didn't answer to an aged Firedraque.

Nicrominus folded his arms, tasted the air with his forked tongue, and then shrugged and started off after the Overseer. His tail moved aimlessly in mild agitation, an outward reflection of his inner worries. The Overseer was making no obvious effort to leave him behind, but neither was he taking his time. He was simply walking, and so Nicrominus followed him.

There was a large set of double doors at the back of the theater. The Overseer swung wide his arms and knocked them to either side. He passed through them and they almost slammed shut back into Nicrominus's face before he caught them and stepped through.

There was a large lobby with broken mirrors and faded gilt lining it. The Overseer kept going, heading towards the main doors that led out into the street. Nicrominus continued right after him, wondering if at some point the Overseer would turn, notice him, and obliterate him with but a gesture.

Nicrominus considered that possibility further and came to the realization that the prospect did not bother him particularly. He had led a long life, seen many things, had mates, eaten them, spawned children, eaten them, allowed one of them to live almost on a whim and found the experience to be, on the whole, rather uplifting. There were still things he wished to see and goals he wished to attain. He had no overt desire for death. But if the next few minutes were to result in his being a red and green splotch on the streets of the Spire city, well . . . it wasn't as if he hadn't had more than his share of experiences.

He also wondered just how far he was willing to follow the Overseer before he gave it up as a pointless exercise.

The Overseer strode out into the street, his armored feet clanking beneath him. Nicrominus, following, heard a cessation of noise and wondered if the Overseer had simply vanished into thin air. It didn't seem possible that he could do such a thing, but then again, this was the Overseer they were talking about. Who knew what was and was not within his capabilities?

But no, he could see him through the large glass doors that led out. The Overseer had stopped dead in the middle of the street and he was just standing there. Nicrominus had been hurrying after him, so much so that he was getting out of breath. Now he slowed and then stopped, standing on the sidewalk and just staring at the armored figure.

"You should have seen it," the Overseer said abruptly. It so startled Nicrominus that he actually jumped, and his tail whipped around as if seeking to dispatch a foe that had snuck up on him hoping to catch him unawares. "Back in its hey day, I mean. What I'm doing here . . . standing out here on Sixth

Avenue . . . you couldn't do it back then. Far too many cars, packed with people honking their horns, on their way to God knows where. Like so many hamsters sprinting on their wheels, spinning and spinning and thinking they're getting somewhere when they're really not. Still . . . New York was just about the only city in the world that I could tolerate for any period of time." His voice trailed off and then he turned and looked directly at Nicrominus. "You have no goddamned idea what I'm talking about, do you."

Slowly Nicrominus shook his head. "I have . . . some goddamned idea, Overseer. I assume you are talking about this city at some point in the past. But . . ." He had no clue what else to say, and so said nothing.

"What the hell was your name again?"

"Nicrominus."

"Nicrominus. Hunh." He seemed to be considering it. "Good name. Sounds similar to Nicodemus. You wouldn't have any idea who that is, would you?"

"No, Overseer, I would not. Should I?"

"A Biblical judge. He helped prepare the body of Jesus for burial after the crucifixion. I don't suppose you know about any of that, either."

"I know of that, actually. I have done a good deal of reading into Mort philosophies and history. I know of the Bible. It was a book of mythologies that the Mort appeared to set great store by. This Jesus was one of the central characters. There are a number of pictorial representations of him back in Firedraque hall."

A strange noise came from the Overseer's armored figure and it took Nicrominus a moment to realize that it was actually laughter. It seemed a strange thing to hear the Overseer laughing. Nicrominus wouldn't have thought such a thing likely or even possible. The Overseer was like unto a god. Why would he be laughing? Then again, it had been the opinion of Nicrominus that the gods had been looking down upon the Banished and laughing at their fates for quite some

time. So it made a certain kind of twisted sense that their representative in the world would likewise enjoy some merriment at their expense.

“Notre Dame cathedral.”

“I’m . . . sorry, Overseer?”

“The place you call Firedraque Hall. Its true name is Notre Dame cathedral. I saw it when I was twenty-two, when I was stationed in Paris.”

“You mean Perriz?”

The Overseer had not been looking at him directly, but now he did. He turned and when he spoke his voice was tinged with anger. “Paris, goddammit. You could, at the very least, say it right. It’s pronounced ‘Paris.’”

“Pah-ris,” Nicrominus said carefully.

“Incredible. Earth was crawling with idiots, and then the idiots are damned near wiped from existence, and who replaces them? More idiots.” The Overseer was now walking back and forth, pacing, moving a few feet and then pivoting and walking back the other way in agitation. “They say that hydrogen is the most common element in the universe. But I disagree. I think it’s stupidity. I think that if the entirety of creation were left to fester and drown in the filth of its own ignorance, then that would be a good thing. Instead you’re telling me that I’m supposed to find the remaining humans and encourage them to breed so that we can make more and repopulate the Earth in order to save the whole of creation? And that’s supposed to be my job, is it? Well . . . what if it’s not? What if my job is to make sure that creation succumbs to the entropy it so richly deserves, and the first step along that path is to watch all life on Earth vanish?”

“With all respect, Overseer . . . I might better be able to answer that question—presuming it actually requires an answer—if I knew what ‘Urth’ was?”

“You know of the Bible, you know of Jesus, but you

don't know 'Earth'?"

"If it relates to Mort history or mythology, my readings and understandings are limited due to language barriers."

"It's the name of the planet you're standing on, Nicrominus. It's the name of the planet that fell to the Twelve Races."

"Is it?" Nicrominus found that extremely surprising. "I had repeatedly come across what I thought was an old Mort name for it: Ee Arth. But nothing called 'Urth.'"

"Ee Arth is Earth. It's pronounced Urth. Ee Arth would be how you said it if you didn't know how to read it properly."

"I see." Nicrominus shrugged. "Truthfully, Overseer, I—as do most of my people—have always simply referred to it as the Damned World."

"Yes. I know. Are you aware of why that is?"

"Well, the story may be apocryphal, but it is said that the last of the human defenders of the planet, when confronted by those who were about to destroy him, took a final stand and shouted something to the effect of 'Get off the damned world.' And that was taken by those present to be the name of this sphere."

Again the Overseer made that same strange noise that almost sounded like a laugh. "It is not apocryphal."

"With all respect, Overseer, how do you know? Were you there?"

At first the Overseer didn't respond. Then, slowly, he reached up to the wide collar that encircled his head and touched either side. There was a hissing sound, and white mist floated up from the connection point. He reached up and twisted the domed helmet. There was a loud "clack" as something disengaged and then he removed the helmet, lifting it off slowly.

Nicrominus trembled, so much so that he was almost unable to stand. He would have indeed fallen had his tail not managed to balance him and keep him upright. *This is it. I am going to die. To look upon the face of the Overseer is to die instantly.* He had no idea

exactly how that death was going to occur. Some said that beholding the face of the Overseer would result in bursting into flames. Others claimed your head would melt. Some even contended that not only did you yourself die, but any and all of your descendants would likewise be struck down instantly, prompting a brief surge of regret for the catastrophe he might inadvertently have visited upon his daughter, Evanna. *Look away! Look away! It still is not too late!* But he could not look away. His curiosity got the better of him.

He could not quite fathom what it was that he was looking at.

The face that stared back at him was lined and wrinkled and haggard and looked for all the world as if it would be perfectly happy to just shut its eyes in final repose but never, ever could. Those eyes were a dark green, and only one of them appeared to be functioning. The other, the left one, was nearly milky white, with only a hint of a pupil. A mass of gray hair clung to the head, sopping, like a lion that had been caught out in the rain.

It was the face of a Mort. A human. A gods damned human.

“It wasn’t just that I was there,” said the human. “I was the one who said it.”

# THE LAND OF FEEND

## I.

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE OF THE Ocular huddled for mutual warmth and protection deep within the woods. They were cold and tired, and they could not stop staring at the distant green glow that emanated from the far off city.

The children were looking to two of their own for guidance, the two oldest. One was named Turkin, a young, strapping Ocular lad. The other was a female, Berola. Berola had always been a precocious sort, and had far preferred to run with the males than associate with the females. Defying Ocular custom, she had actually shaved her head, which had infuriated her parents and made her quite the talk of the town.

Now she and Turkin were sitting a short distance from the others, and Berola was muttering, "This is ridiculous. We should just head back to the city, that's all."

"While it's glowing?" demanded Turkin. "Don't be ridiculous."

"So it's glowing. So what? A glow never hurt anybody."

"The captain said we wait here for him to get back," Turkin said firmly. "And here is where we wait. Did you all get that?" he raised his voice so the others could hear him. "We wait here until the captain returns." Then, once they nodded, he lowered his voice so that only Berola could hear and said, "Between you and me . . . I think this is all part of the training mission."

"Eh?" Berola looked at him skeptically.

"Yup. They keep coming up with all sorts of ways to try and keep us off balance. Why, earlier the captain had me follow the high adviser himself, Phemus."

"Really." Berola now seemed impressed, which pleased Turkin



no end. "Did you find out anything interesting . . . ?"

"He was talking to a Piri."

"No! You lie!"

"Gods' truth," Berola said fervently. "I told the captain, and that's why he went and left us here: to go back and tell the king himself."

"But why? Why would he have been talking to the Piri?"

"No idea. Not my job to—"

"Look!" one of the youngsters suddenly called out. "It's the captain!"

He was right. The captain of the guards was coming through the woods toward them. Berola and Turkin, who had been sitting, were promptly on their feet, shoulders squared, trying to look like capable members of the Crusade.

And then the captain began to stagger.

"Captain?" Berola said. "Is something wro—?"

"Stay back," said the captain, his voice thick and raspy. He'd been standing in the shadows of the trees, and the moon was covered by a cloud, but now it emerged from hiding and the children gasped. Even from the distance they were at, they could see his skin was blackened and peeling and falling off. His teeth were gone, and his eye looked like it was cracking.

"Don't . . . go back," he managed to say. "Nothing for you . . . everyone dying . . . all of them . . . all . . . dying . . ."

"Dying?" gasped Turkin. "Of what? Why? From what?"

"Humans," the captain of the guard managed to get out, and then he collapsed. Several of the children cried out as he fell, and they started to move toward him.

"Don't touch him!" shouted Berola, and the children froze.

They heard the captain wheeze horribly for long seconds, and then there was an ugly rattle, and then nothing.

"Is he okay now?" asked one of the children, and another one hit the first child upside the head and said, "No, he's not okay, he's dead, stupid!"

And then came wailing and sobbing and cries from all the

children that they wanted to go home, that they had had enough, that this was all too terrible. “Shut up!” shouted Berola, putting her hands to her head. “We . . . we just need to think!”

“Think about what?!” Turkin was clearly starting to panic. “You heard the captain! We can’t go back! Everyone . . . everyone is going to be like him—!”

“I want my mother!” cried one of the children and they started crying all over again for their parents, and Berola and Turkin looked helplessly at one another. Because, really, all they wanted to do, deep down, was break down and start sobbing as well.

And that was when a voice shouted over all of them, “You don’t have mothers, you don’t have fathers, and you’re not going back!”

They turned and stared, and Berola felt a surge of fear bubbling up in her throat. Turkin tried to control a similar sensation. It was all he could do not to bolt and run. Collective gasps were ripped from the throats of the remaining children.

A female Piri was standing there. She was tall and elegant, but had a haunted look. “All you have,” she said softly, “is me.”

“You?” said Turkin, trying to sound confidently arrogant. “You’re . . . you’re a—”

“I know what I am,” she said. “But you don’t know what I am. I’m your salvation.”

“You’re not serious,” said Berola.

The Piri nodded. “If you come with me, now, I will protect you from the others of my kind. I can do this for you. And I will train you and help you . . . and, in time, you will help me. We will be able to protect each other.”

“Us protect you?” asked Berola. “Why should we?”

“Because,” said the Piri, “like it or not . . . you’re the last of the Ocular. And you’re in trouble. And I’m in trouble.”

Berola studied her, tried to get some sort of sense of her. She noticed the Piri’s left hand. “What happened to your little finger?” she demanded.

“Nothing. It’s fine. It’s just not on my hand.”

“What’s your name?” asked one of the younger Ocular.

“Don’t talk to her!” Berola ordered.

But the Piri ignored her. “My name is Clarinda. What’s yours?”

“Kerda.”

“Kerda . . . will you come with me?”

“Will you hurt me?” Kerda asked guardedly.

“No. Never. I swear.”

“All right,” said Kerda.

Clarinda nodded, and started to walk off into the dark of the forest. Kerda followed her, and the others started to as well.

“Are you insane!” shouted Turkin. “We were being trained to kill her kind! You can’t . . . this is crazy! Berola, tell them they’re crazy!”

“You’re crazy!” Berola called.

But the youngsters didn’t stop, following Clarinda. And as the last of them disappeared into the woods, Turkin and Berola exchanged nervous looks, shouted as one, “Wait for us!” and sprinted off after them into the endless night of Feend.

## II.

### *YOU ARE OUT OF YOUR mind.*

The thought kept flitting through Clarinda’s head as she led the Ocular children away from their ancestral home without the faintest notion of where she was leading them to. The only thing she knew that was important was that she had to get them as far away from the immediate area as possible.

She heard huffing and groaning from the children after the third hour of the rapid pace she was maintaining, and she turned and looked at them with obvious annoyance. “I thought,” she said tersely, “that you were all supposed to be warriors. What is all this whining I hear? This complaining?”

“We’re tired,” moaned one of the younger males. Clarinda hadn’t taken the time to learn all their names. There were several dozen of them. Chances were she would never need to know. As soon as they

had gotten her clear of Feend, beyond the reach of the Piri, she would take her leave of them and that would be the end of that.

Before Clarinda could chide her, however, the younger female, Kerda, cuffed the complainer on the side of the head. The complainer stopped and looked balefully at Kerda with his single eye. He was at least a head taller than she, but she wasn't the least intimidated by him. "Stop it," she said. "Clarinda is doing the best she can."

"How do we know that?" he said, rallying. "How do we know what she's doing? She's a damned Piri! A ground-dwelling, blood-sucking Piri! Are we so desperate for leadership that we're following our enemies into who-knows-where?"

"Leadership? You think I give a damn about leadership?" said Kerda heatedly. "Right now I'd just be happy to be with someone who knows what she's doing! Who knows something about the world!"

"And you think she knows aught of the world? She lives underground, for gods sake! What is someone who roots around beneath the dirt supposed to know about anything above it?"

Clarinda hated to admit that it was a perfectly valid question. She had been to various places in the Damned World, but consistently had remained underground. Even when she had wandered so far afield that she had wound up in Trull territory, she had remained safe within the cooling confines of subterranean lairs.

When her mind wandered to her explorations in the land of Trulls—the Underground, as the residents had so dubbed it with the characteristic Trull lack of imagination—naturally her thoughts turned to Eutok. As they did so, her hand drifted to her belly. There was not yet any telltale bulge or swelling as a result of the tiny half-breed dwelling within her. The only reason she knew for certain that his issue was growing within her was what her mother, Sunara Redeye, Mistress of the Piri, had told her.

Sunara had known. No shock there; Sunara always knew.

Clarinda had paid dearly for the knowledge that Sunara had acquired through simple observation. Sunara had tied her up,

beaten her so badly with lashes across the back that Clarinda would have collapsed to the ground had ropes not bound her tightly to an upright rock. And then, in order to coax the name of the father from her, Sunara had bitten off the little finger of her left hand and assured her there would be more dismemberment if the name were not forthcoming. Clarinda had screamed then, louder than ever before, and she had howled, “Eutok! Eutok of the Trulls! We met and he was my lover and I did it because I hate you, mother! I hate you! I hate our race! I hate this life! I hate living in fear of mating and being mutilated and turning into a sick, twisted, perverted *monster like you and why not just kill me now and get it over with!*”

In that moment of heat and passion and livid fury toward her mother, she had meant it. The life of the Mistress of the Piri, the title and rank that was hers because of her birth, was not one that she coveted. For the Mistress of the Piri was supposed to be all things to all her people, and thus was required to be turned into some . . . some asexual thing. Once it was her turn to take on her birthright, she would have her breasts removed, and her nether regions would be burned away, leaving nothing but a scarred and desensitized mass of flesh. She had wanted no part of that, and if her dalliance with Eutok was a means of rebelling against it, well, so be it. She hated her life, she hated her people, she hated the fate that awaited her.

And yet, insanely, for all that, she still didn’t hate her mother. Even though she had said it at the time. Even though her mother had beaten her and maimed her.

*What the hell is wrong with me, she wondered, that even after everything she did to me, part of me still wants her approval?*

The young Ocular were still arguing and the noise brought her attention forcefully back to their situation. “Shut up,” she said tiredly. “Just . . . shut up.”

To her surprise, that brought the young Ocular to a halt. They stopped their arguing and stared at her expectantly.

*They want you to say something. They’re an aspiring army and you’re their leader, and they’re waiting for you to rally them.*

She spoke without actually knowing what she was going to say.

“You’re all tired. You’re all hungry. I understand that. We have no shelter. Get used to it. For the time being, we’re going to be living under the stars. As for food,” and she paused and then continued, “which of you is the best hunter? Or at least fancies himself as such?”

Turkin’s hand immediately shot up. A couple of the others were more tentative but joined him in claiming that dubious title.

“All right, then,” she said. “You three head off into the woods. Stay together; this is no time to separate from each other. See what you can find in terms of game for the rest of us.”

The young Ocular had spears and wooden swords, the simple weapons that they had been given by their trainers who thought they would have a lot more time with them before meeting their demise. But they also had bellies that were becoming more familiar with the pangs of hunger with each passing hour, and Clarinda knew that that could be a superb motivator. They headed into the woods, disappearing with as minimal sound as giant beings could make.

“What should the rest of us do?” said Kerda.

“Make yourselves comfortable. We’re going to be here a while.”

“Why here?”

“Why not?” she said reasonably. “Have you a better idea as to where we should be?”

“Back home,” one of the Ocular males said. There was both challenge and frustration in his tone.

Clarinda was in no mood for arguing. “If you wish to return home, feel free to do so. You should be able to find it without too much difficulty. There. You can see the glow in the distance.”

“The Captain said not to,” Berola said firmly. “Or have you forgotten that, you great addled fool?”

“What if he was wrong?”

“You saw what happened to him. You saw how sick he was.” Berola strode toward him and stood there with her hands on her hips, her single eye glaring balefully at him. “You want to end up like him? Do you?”

The male met her glare for a time and then lowered his gaze. He did not respond. He didn't need to.

Clarinda felt the eyes of the Ocular upon her. Furthermore, she was feeling as hungry as any of them, but she knew that—presuming the others found any game—it would very likely not satisfy her. She had neglected to tell them to bring it alive, and she was not ecstatic about the notion of drinking blood from something dead. The blood of dead creatures, even if the source was only deceased for a few minutes, had a rank and bitter taste to it. Cold blood held no allure for her; she needed warm blood.

And even if they did indeed bring something to her alive, she was not comfortable with the notion of eating in front of the young Ocular. She knew that many of them were still uneasy with the fact that one of the predatory Piri was now in a position of leadership. They might well start to worry that she would turn on them in their sleep and feast on their blood while they lay helpless.

For that matter, she had no more reason to trust them than they had her. She could no more do without sleep indefinitely than they. All that was required was one suspicious Ocular—and there were quite a few to choose from—who would take the opportunity to dispatch her while she slumbered, figuring that it was wiser to take their chances with the evils they didn't know than with the evil they did.

Taking all that into account, Clarinda felt that at the very least it would be wise to hunt and eat separately from the rest of the pack.

“Stay here,” she said to Kerda. “I will be back.”

“Where are you going?”

“I have matters to attend to.”

“What sort of—?”

“Gods' balls, girl, stop asking questions and learn to do as you are told! If you do not, then rest assured that I will put my back to you and you can just as easily tend to your own needs for the rest of what will assuredly be your short lives! Do you understand?”

Although she was still a child, Kerda was a head taller than

Clarinda, and she was one of the shorter ones. It was a ludicrous sight, the pale Piri bellowing at creatures that towered over her as if she could somehow physically dominate them. Yet they recoiled from her and Kerda said meekly, "Yes." The others bobbed their heads in unison.

"Good," said Clarinda, who momentarily felt sorry for snapping at them. They had, after all, been through a hell of a lot. They had lost their parents, their homeland, everything in one stroke and were still trying to cope with it. But then her regret passed as quickly as it had come. She had her own problems to worry about: She was hungry, she was pregnant, she was tired, and she had left her people behind for an uncertain future.

She turned away from the Ocular and headed into the forest.

### III.

HUNTING WAS A NEW EXPERIENCE for her. As a privileged child of the Mistress, obtaining sustenance was never anything that she had needed to concern herself over. There were others in the tribe who attended to such things. But she had every confidence that she would be more than up to the task.

She penetrated deep into the forest, further and further until she felt that she had left enough distance between herself and the Ocular. She felt no need to mark the trail, confident that she would be able to find her way back.

Clarinda believed she could count on the fingers of one hand (*even my left hand*, she thought ruefully) the number of days that she had spent outside. The vast, vast majority of her existence had been underground, hiding away from the upper world with dirt just everywhere. Dirt under her fingernails, dirt permanently staining the bottoms of her feet, the smell of dirt so pervasive that she felt as if she could smell nothing else.

She stopped and looked toward the skies. The stars glittered down at her.



They made her wonder.

Her mother seemed unable to understand that Clarinda aspired to so much more than Sunara's view allowed for. She wondered if perhaps that was because of the circumstances under which they lived. Dirt in and of itself was not the end of things, because it was possible to cultivate the dirt, grow things on it, bring life from it. But beneath the dirt was indeed the end of things. The dead were buried beneath it, and when you lived in Subterror, there was darkness and limited vision. You couldn't look up. And when you couldn't look up, that was somehow, in some way that Clarinda could not articulate, the end of aspirations. The skies were limitless, and represented equally limitless possibilities. They were the beginnings of dreams. They practically cried out, "What if?" and dared you to aspire to them. A perpetual roof of dirt over one's head was antithetical to dreaming.

It was nothing short of remarkable that she had encountered another soul—Eutok—who seemed to feel the same way. Trulls were as loathe to engage the surface as Piri, although the sunlight wasn't as damaging to the Trulls as it was to the Piri. The great burning orb in the sky was hurtful to Trulls' eyes, whereas for the Piri it was painful head to toe. Still, Eutok likewise dreamt of more than the life that he led dwelling beneath the ground. She knew that his goal was to become leader of the Trulls so that he could in turn lead them to a greater and glorious destiny than was available to them as permanent cave dwellers.

*At least that's what he tells you. Who knows what is truly in his heart?*

Suddenly a scent wafted to her, causing her to salivate and driving all other thoughts from her mind. She wasn't accustomed to hunting, but she certainly knew the range of animal scents since hunters brought food to the colony. She quickly identified it as a creature known as a bir. It was big, covered in brown fur, and absolutely filled to the brim with blood. Birs were huge favorites of the Piri since, even when they had been dragged down into Subterror and were

half dead, they still tended to put up a struggle. That naturally made the feasting all the more worthwhile.

Best of all, she was downwind of it. The breeze was bringing its scent to her, but it was unaware of her presence.

A tall tree stood nearby. It was the Piri way either to attack in numbers, or else hide below and try to pull the prey down to them. Neither option presented itself to Clarinda, and so she chose a third option: Height.

She leaped upward, light as air, gripped the lower branches of the nearest tree, and quickly gained some altitude. Then she crouched there, immobile, cloaked in shadow. She heard a distant growling and her fingers wrapped tightly around the branch. Poised in a feral crouch, she remained unmoving. Clarinda was amazed to discover just how much she was enjoying the sensation of the hunt.

She heard the bir drawing ever closer and slowed her breathing so that she wouldn't be rushed. She knew she had to time this perfectly. Birs were big monsters with impressive strength. Once she had seen one on the edge of death, and yet a random sweep of its paw had been sufficient to crush the skull of a Piri that had gotten careless.

Closer . . . closer . . . all the time in the world. That was what she kept telling herself, and yet it was difficult to maintain that degree of levelheadedness as her growing hunger try to compel her to be precipitous. She realized her legs were shaking and she stilled them with effort.

The bir was growling low in its throat; she could hear it even from her perch. Then the bir stopped moving. She became concerned that it had caught her scent somehow, even though there was simply no way it should have been able to. There was a long pause that seemed to stretch out forever, and she was about to cry out in hunger and frustration when suddenly the bir was moving and it was there, right below her, lumbering into view. Padding forward on all fours, it stopped dead again, looking around, sniffing the air as if certain there was something in the vicinity that posed a danger but unable

to determine precisely what.

*Perfect*, she thought, and Clarinda released her hold on the branch. She descended, straight as a perfectly thrown spear. The bir must have had a second or two warning caused by the air rushing past her as she fell, but she couldn't do anything about that. It wasn't going to matter, though. The bir was big and slow moving and there was no way that it was going to be able to dodge her.

She was right.

Clarinda landed on the bir's back. The bir roared and tried to claw at her, but she had her arms wrapped around its throat so that its flailing claws couldn't reach her.

To her astonishment, the bir suddenly reared back and stood on its hind legs. *It can stand on two legs? Shit.* She hadn't known they could do that. She had only ever seen them down in Subterror where the ceilings were so low that the bir standing upright had never been a possibility. Even as she processed this new and distressing bit of information, she dug her fingers into its fur to prevent herself from sliding off. Her legs wrapped around its midsection and then Clarinda, baring her fangs, sunk them into the creature's throat.

The bir roared and threw itself backward against the nearest tree.

Pain ripped through Clarinda's body, the sheer weight of the creature nearly being sufficient to crush her. Originally she had intended simply to take enough of the creature's blood to satisfy her hunger. That was rapidly becoming no longer a possibility. If she released her hold on the bir and it was still alive, the thing was so fearsome and full of power that it would turn upon her and rip her to shreds. This was no longer simply a meal. This was Clarinda fighting for her survival.

Howling, the bir staggered forward from the tree. She braced herself for another impact, drinking quickly, greedily, blood dribbling down the sides of her mouth and onto the creature's fur. The bir did not repeat the maneuver, however. Perhaps it was just too damned stupid to realize that it had hurt her and that repeated impacts of

that nature might well be sufficient to—at the very least—shake her loose.

Instead the bir dropped to all fours and then threw itself to its side. Clarinda barely had time to yank her leg clear, repositioning herself. Had the creature landed with its full weight upon her, she would have been permanently crippled.

Even as she shifted her position atop the bir, she never lost the solid hold of her fangs in its throat. As the blood flowed from the creature and into her, the bir became weaker while Clarinda became progressively stronger. Toward the end, as the bir writhed in her grasp, it became less and less aggressive and she knew that she had it. The danger was past and she had provided sustenance not only for herself but for her unborn child.

Suddenly, with no warning at all, something grabbed her by the back of the throat and flung her clear of the bir. She sailed across the space and slammed into a tree, rebounding from it and hitting the ground. She had enough time to get her hands and feet under her and she landed, in a crouch like a wolf preparing to spring.

“Bartolemayne,” she whispered.

That was indeed who was standing in front of her. It was Bartolemayne, the most formidable and dangerous of all the Piri. He had taken advantage of her in the same manner that she had managed to catch the bir unawares; he had approached her from downwind. And she had been so engrossed in her meal that any sounds Bartolemayne might have made as he approached on foot went completely unnoticed.

Bartolemayne was rarely seen around Subterror. He was considered the right hand of the Mistress, and because of that, he best served Sunara as a ranging spy. Bartolemayne came and went as he wished. None were more adept at hunting, fighting, or accomplishing whatever Sunara Redeye required.

Unlike most of the Piri who were wiry and lean nearly to the point of desiccation, Bartolemayne was massively built. Not on par with an Ocular, but a head taller than any other Piri and as wide as

three of them. His hair was long and flowing rather than a stringy mess as was the case with most males, and his eyes burned a pale green, which was a most unusual color for a Piri and an indicator at an early age that Bartolemayne was destined for achievements far beyond those of most Piri.

That, and the fact that all his teeth were fangs. Not just tucked in neatly on either side, as was typical for Piri, but every single one. When he grinned, which was often and never good news for the individual he was grinning at, they were frightening even to a Piri.

A half dozen more normal Piri were clustering in around Bartolemayne, jumping around excitedly, their knuckles dragging on the dirt. They were whispering her name, "Clarinda, Clarinda," dodging and moving as if she were attacking them.

The bir was lying nearby, trembling. It tried to get to its feet and fell over, still too weak to move. The Piri noticed it and looked hopefully to Bartolemayne. He gave a single nod and they sprinted toward it, covering the poor suffering creature like army ants. The bir howled as the Piri bit down wherever on its body they could, seemingly not even caring if they hit veins. They just wanted to feast.

Bartolemayne did not bother to join them. He was far too superior to the rest of them to engage in such a group meal. Instead he returned his attention to Clarinda, who was frozen in the defensive position she had assumed.

"Your mother misses you, Clarinda," he said softly. That was how he always spoke, sometimes so quietly that it was barely above a whisper. "She misses you ever so much."

"And that's why she sent for you." It was all clear to her now.

He nodded slowly. "Of course. To bring her wayward child home."

She knew it was a waste of time to try to appeal to Bartolemayne's sense of mercy. It was well known that he had none. But she needed to do something, just to buy herself some time. "I have no future with our people. You must know that." She had to raise her voice to hear herself above the slurping of the Piri and the

dwindling and pathetic moans of the bir.

“Your future is of no interest to me. All that matters is that the Mistress warned you what would happen if you ran.”

Clarinda slowly crawled across the ground toward him. She smiled up at him with as close to a look of seduction as she could manage under the circumstances. There was blood visible on her lips, her cheeks, her chin. She hoped that would serve to make her more alluring. “Come now, Bartolemayne. That cannot be all that matters to you. Certainly there are other things of equal importance.” She drew close enough to run her hand along his bare leg, straying up to his knee. “Those others,” and she inclined her head toward the Piri who were finishing their meal, “will do as you command. Command them to return home. Then it can be just you and me, and together we can . . .”

“Together?” His double row of fanged teeth drew back in derision. “Together?” He lashed out with his foot and caught her on the side of the head. Clarinda fell to the side, hitting the ground heavily. “You are damned lucky that I am sworn to do you no serious harm. Not as long as you are with child. Still . . . do you seriously think there can be any ‘together’ with one who has defiled herself with a Trull, no less? A Trull? Or do you think your mother neglected to tell me that?”

“Lies, Bartolemayne,” she said desperately. “She lied to you. Or she was mistaken. Either way. You cannot believe that I would do such a thing.”

“Tragically, I can believe it all too readily. I know you of old, Clarinda. You always had nothing but contempt for your own people. And every Piri male and female knew that, and tolerated it because you were daughter of the Mistress and heiress to the title. That is not going to continue to be the case, however, and I assure you of this, Clarinda: As much as I journey this land, I will take time to return and be there for when you are finally made to pay for your arrogance and smugness. Once you have pushed that child out through your nethers, then there shall be a reckoning.

The hybrid freak will be destroyed, and as for you—”

Clarinda did not wait to hear. Instead she abruptly lunged forward, hoping to catch him unawares. Perhaps sink her teeth into the tendons behind his ankles, rip them out, hamstring him, render him helpless.

She had no chance. Bartolemayne yanked his legs clear, deftly stepping out of her way. He grabbed her by the nape of the neck, yanked her to her feet and twisted her around so that she was facing away from him. He was handling her so effortlessly that one would have thought her a child having her parent’s will forced upon her. She tried to drive a foot back at him, but he caught it and lifted her off the ground as if she weighed nothing. He started to bend her backwards and she cried out.

“Have you had enough?” he said patiently. “Are you through fighting?”

Seizing bravado as her only option, she grunted through her pain, “You have absolutely no idea how much trouble you’re in. All I have to do is cry out and my army will descend upon you.”

The other Piri, having sated themselves on the bir, were moving toward her and chuckling to each other.

“Very well,” Bartolemayne challenged her. “Summon them. Let us tremble in fear at your army.”

He could have throttled her, preventing her from drawing breath. He did not do so. That was how confident he was that she was bluffing, which of course she was.

Nevertheless she filled her lungs and cried out as loudly as she was able, “To me! To me, my followers!”

Nothing. Dead silence, save for the snickering of the Piri and a soft, almost disappointed sigh from Bartolemayne.

“All right, Clarinda. Now it’s time to—” Suddenly Bartolemayne’s head snapped around. He looked bewildered. “What the hell—?”

He had detected the scent first, but even if he had possessed no nose at all, the steady trembling of the ground that made it seem as if an earthquake was approaching would have alerted him. The Piri

were looking at each other in concern as trees were heard crashing in the near distance.

*I'll be damned*, thought Clarinda.

With a roar of pure fury, Turkin smashed out of the underbrush.

He had a bir in either hand. The birs were smaller than the one that Clarinda had attacked, but they were still wild and furious and looking for someone or something to attack.

Turkin was perfectly happy to accommodate them. He hurled the animals at the Piri, first one and then the other. The first of the birs landed atop two of the Piri, crushing them beneath its paws and roaring so loudly and furiously that the other Piri immediately backpedalled. The second bir had not been quite as well aimed, thudding to the ground and spinning toward the nearest of the Piri. It opened its mouth and roared so loudly that the Piri were falling over each other to get out of its way.

Bartolemayne looked annoyed. "A child, Clarinda? Your army consists of one Ocular child? Do you seriously . . . ?"

Then he heard them. More thundering of huge feet stampeding their way, and the noise of the approaching Ocular was combined with the bellowing of the birs and the terrified cries of the Piri. Piri were perfectly capable of bravery when they significantly outnumbered their prey and could overrun it with minimal risk to themselves. This was not the situation they were being faced with now, and they had little taste for it.

Clarinda saw the concern in their faces, and cried out over the oncoming thundering, "And that is simply the first wave! Call them children if you wish, but how do you plan to stand up to a hundred of them!"

"You are bluffing," said Bartolemayne.

"Try me."

Bartolemayne hesitated and then, with an angry snarl, threw her down. The Piri were busy trying to keep away from the two angry birs, both of whom were doing their best to take down whatever Piri they could get their teeth on.



“If you fancy yourself the head of an army, Clarinda, know that I will raise up an army against you,” said Bartolomayne. He did not sound the least put out by this reversal of fortune. If anything, he seemed pleased, even excited by the prospect of having to rise to a challenge. “And we will take you and your children down, and feast on their carcasses for many months.”

He called out a brisk command to the remaining Piri, who would happily have fled earlier if anyone save Bartolomayne had been leading them. But they were relieved to have the opportunity to vacate the area, and they did so without any further urging.

As a result, more of the Ocular hunters came pouring into the clearing just as the Piri vanished into the shadows. Bellowing their anger over the disappearance of their intended victims, and wanting to have nothing to do with the Ocular if they could help it, the younger birds charged away into the shadows of the trees.

Berola came running up behind Turkin, with several more Ocular behind her. “You’re letting them get away! Those birds were our dinner!”

“They’re serving us well enough sending the Piri scattering,” said Clarinda firmly. “Let’s take advantage of it. Gather the others. We need to leave.”

“But we haven’t eaten—”

“Better that than being eaten!” Clarinda shouted at him, having no intention of discussing the matter at length. “We haven’t gotten far enough from my people!” She didn’t add that she wasn’t sure it was possible to get far enough. The reach of the Piri seemed very long indeed. “If you value your lives, then we need to distance ourselves!”

“We were being trained to fight them,” said Turkin heatedly. “We’re not afraid.”

“Nor are you ready. And you’re going to need time to get ready, and that’s what I need to provide you now. Not another word! We go or you die! Make your choice and be prepared to live with it, or not!”

## IV.

HER VOICE HAD BEEN SHARP enough and her attitude clearly brooking no argument from them, so Turkin, Berola and the others fell into behind her. When they had returned to Kerda and the others, there had been questioning looks and attempts to discern what had just happened. Clarinda had shut it all down and led them away from the immediate area.

They continued to move through the darkness, and it seemed to Clarinda that every shadow from every outstretched tree hid an enemy. Every branch was like a giant outstretched hand with long, wooden fingers, threatening to grab them and hold them.

The Ocular continued to run as quickly as their huge legs would carry them. Hour passed into hour, and darkness continued to hold sway as was typical for the land of Feend. They were, however, heading steadily south, and Clarinda knew that sooner or later they would leave the land of perpetual darkness behind them. When that happened, travel would become more problematic. Ocular were damned near blind during the day, and Clarinda would likewise require shelter from the sun's rays lest it threatened to burn the skin from her body. Meanwhile Bartolemayne, less daunted by the sun than average Piri, would not be likewise constrained. He would no doubt lead the Piri in continued search of her, finding passages, caves and the like in which they could hide while they mounted their continued pursuit. There would be no place to rest. She had told the Ocular she would train them, mold them into a fighting force. The truth was that she had little concept of how to do such a thing, and no time in which to do it. The Piri had them on the run and there was no end in sight, unless one considered the Piri falling upon them during an unguarded moment, killing all the Ocular and stealing Clarinda back into the depths of Subterror to be an end. *I suppose it is. It simply isn't an end that I would welcome.*

Yet that was very likely the end that awaited them, unless they could find sanctuary.

Sanctuary.

“I know where we have to go,” she said abruptly. “I know where we will be safe from the Piri.”

This brought the entire squad of Ocular to a halt. They grouped around Clarinda in a manner that could only be considered protective. She found it honestly to be somewhat sweet. It surprised her that she was thinking of Ocular in that manner. These brainless children who had only been a means to an end, to be used and disposed of when it was convenient. Yet now she thought it almost charming the way they were clustering around her as if to shield her from any harm.

“Where?” said Kerda with hope in her voice that she almost seemed afraid to acknowledge was there.

“Perriz.”

The Ocular looked at each other, their single eyes blinking rapidly in both awe and amazement. “The home of the Firedraques? Really?” said Berola.

“Yes. Really. The Firedraques are the great peacemakers. They always have been. If they agree to take us under their wing, we will be safe.”

“And if they don’t?” said Turkin.

“They will,” Clarinda said with a firmness that she did not feel, but at least was able to sound convincing over when she said it. “I know it. And if I know it, then you can know it, too.”

“My mother always wanted to see Perriz!” said Berola. “Apparently she read about it a great deal in her youth! She told me all kinds of stories about it! But isn’t it far?”

“Very,” said Clarinda. “But we will move as much as we can without resting, and find food along the way, and we will make the journey faster than any others possibly could. And we will find safety there, and sanctuary, and a home.”

“Home,” the children whispered to each other, and that was all the incentive they required to keep going.

She just prayed that she wasn’t leading them astray.

# FIREDRAQUE HALL, PERRIZ

## I.

ARREN KINKLASH DID NOT ENTER Firedraque Hall so much as he was propelled into it. The infuriated Mandraque, his skin even greener than usual and his forked tongue flashing out, yanked his arms away from the trio of armed guards who were escorting him, if forcing someone to go somewhere that they were not remotely interested in going could be defined as “escorting.”

“Keep the hell away from me!” he snarled at them, and the guards backed off.

One of them stepped forward, looking nervous and fidgeting slightly. “Lord Kinklash, please understand. We are Mandraques, as are you, but we are in service of the Firedraques and had no choice. We were merely following orders—”

“You were ordered to treat me as if I were nothing more than an enslaved Mort?”

“We were ordered to return you here, whether you wished to come or not.”

Arren had a leather carrying bag slung over his back. It contained all of the supplies he could quickly gather and collect on short notice. He unslung it now and dropped it to the ground. “Whether I wished to come or not? How is that even an issue? Of course I did not wish to come! That should be obvious considering that,” and he indicated the leathers he was wearing, “I am dressed for the road and am carrying supplies for a journey! What did you think was going to happen when you caught up with me and dragged me off the road to return here?”

And a sharp female voice broke in. “They were not required to think. They were required to do as their duty commanded them.”

A tall, imperious female Firedraque strode in, her head held high, her maw outthrust, her long and elegant tail twitching in anger. “For that matter, they did as I commanded them. At least some around here understand that which is required of them. And in case you haven’t figured it out yet, Kinklash, these good soldiers are concerned that, as head of the Clans, you are going to seek some manner of retribution against them. Or worse, against their family.”

Arren looked at them. “Is that true? Is that a concern to you?” When he saw them glance at one another, each of them clearly hoping the other would say something, he rolled his slitted eyes. “You and your families need not worry. You did as Evanna, daughter of Nicrominus, instructed you to do. There will be no retribution taken against you, now or ever. You have my word.”

“Satisfied?” said Evanna. When they nodded, appearing distinctly relieved, she gave them a leisurely gesture and said, “You may go.” They backed out of Firedraque Hall, bowing and scraping as they did.

Arren waited until they were gone, the huge doors of the cavernous hall shut behind them, and then said angrily, “What the hell did you think you were doing?”

“Kinklash—”

“What the hell did—? Damn it all, Evanna, what gave you the right—?”

“Nothing, Arren! Nothing gave me the right! Are you happy? Nothing gave me the right, and so I took it. And the reason I took it was because you were tossing it aside because you wanted nothing to do with it! Except I didn’t feel like giving you that option!” When he did not respond immediately, Evanna made an angry growling noise and turned from him. She strode away, heading toward the cavernous inner hallway. Sunlight beamed through the vast multicolored windows. It was as if a rainbow had taken up residence within the building.

Arren’s impulse was to turn around and bolt from the hall. He knew that would do him no good, however. She would simply

dispatch guards to haul him in and return him to Perriz, and it would be even more humiliating than it had just been. And that had been pretty damned humiliating. Arren Kinklash, leader of the Clans, being escorted shouting and frothing like a lunatic through the streets of Perriz while other Firedraques looked on in amazement and perhaps even pity. He was not particularly anxious for a replay of that mortification.

So instead of going with his instinct, Arren reluctantly followed Evanna into the main hall. She stood there, bathed in the prismatic light, staring up at one of the large decorations left from the days when Morts ruled over the Damned World.

Arren stood next to Evanna and glanced sidelong at her. “Are you taller?”

She stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“You seem taller. A couple of inches.”

“Oh. Yes. That. I’ve gotten into the habit of slouching. When I’m with Xeri, when I’m with my father. I slouch. Otherwise I tower over them and they have to look up at me to make eye contact, and they find that disconcerting. So I compress my spine a bit. Salves their egos and it is no consequence to me. But when they’re not around—or when I’m yelling at idiots,” and she looked pointedly at him, “I tend to stand upright.”

“Ah.” He switched his gaze to the large monument mounted at the far end of the hall. Carved from some sort of wood, it was a representation of a scantily clad human male who was resting with his arms outstretched upon a cross.

“What do you think he represents?” said Evanna. “Xeri and I debated about it at length. My father believed it to be religious iconography of some sort.”

“It’s possible. On the other hand, it could also be agricultural.”

“Agricultural?”

He nodded. “Morts used to mount similar constructions made of straw or such like materials in their fields. They were designed to keep scavenging birds away from crops by making them think that a

human sentinel was standing guard.”

“Did it work?”

Arren shrugged. “The birds likely ignored it and the humans felt they were being proactive, so I suppose everyone benefited.”

“So that statue,” and she indicated the one in the hall, “is intended to keep birds away from here?”

“Are there, in fact, any birds here?”

“No.”

“Then obviously it’s working.”

Evanna smiled at that and then slowly shook her head.

He regarded her for a moment and then said softly, “How are you holding up, Evanna?”

“How do I look like I’m holding up?”

“You look terrible.”

“That’s your answer then.”

“Evanna—”

“Everyone is looking to me for solutions, Arren! My father was kidnapped by a Zeffer! The bell tower has been shattered! There was rubble and debris everywhere! We have no spiritual leader, Xeri has crawled over to a corner and curled up into a ball . . .”

“Literally?”

“Metaphorically, but the principle is the same. And everyone is looking to me for solutions! Me! I have no idea what I’m supposed to tell them. I’ve no clue when, or even if, Nicrominus will be restored to us. The only ones who might know are the Travelers, and they are long gone, and even if they were standing right in front of me they would still tell me nothing. With all of that happening—with all of them hanging upon me—you go running off!” She swung a hand around and cuffed him on the side of the head.

Arren let out a cry of pain and clutched at his earhole. “You didn’t have to do that!”

“Apparently I did! Apparently you have to be reminded of your responsibilities! No one forced you to become head of the five clans, Arren,” and she wagged a finger in his face. “You maneuvered

yourself into that position of power all by yourself. And you did it by dropping a gods damned giant bell on your closest competitor for the title. You have no one to blame but yourself for having responsibilities here.”

“I have responsibilities to my sister as well!” he said. “In case you’ve forgotten, the same Zeffer that made off with your father also took Norda with it!”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten. Except if I know that addled sister of yours, the Zeffer didn’t take her. She doubtless grabbed on thinking it would be entertaining to—”

Arren’s hand clenched into a fist and he brought it snapping around toward her head. But he was slow and Evanna caught it before he could connect. They stood frozen there for a moment, glowering at each other, but then Evanna slowly released her hold on him. “I beg your pardon,” she said formally. “I should not have disparaged Norda in that way. Whatever else she may be, she is also your sister and worthy of respect.”

“Thank you,” he said, still offended but otherwise opting not to push the issue. “And frankly, knowing Norda, if she did grab onto the dangling tentacles of a Zeffer, it wasn’t out of whim or caprice. She was quite fond of your father. She spoke of him often. If she saw him being threatened and being carried off, that would have been more than enough motivation for her to grab on.”

“If that’s the case . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“What? What were you going to say? If you have a thought, finish it.”

“If that’s the case—if she thrust herself onto the Zeffer—then there’s every possibility that she is beyond saving. Your impulsive rescue mission, for which you would have abandoned your responsibilities as head of the Clans, would be for nothing. The Zeffer would be taking care to transport my father safely to wherever it is that the Travelers wanted him taken. But it would have had no such responsibility for Norda’s well being. She could have lost her grip—”



“No.”

“—fallen asleep, perhaps, or—”

He shook his head and repeated firmly, “No. Norda did not lose her grip. Not ever. You never saw her bounding around the rafters of this place. Heights are her second home. There is no one more confident, more sure footed. Norda does not lose her grip. I have come upon her up in the bell tower . . . when there was a bell tower,” he added ruefully, “and found her sound asleep hanging upside down, dangling from her tail curled around a beam. I admit that Norda can be flighty. Difficult to understand. Bizarre, even. But if she did indeed grab a ride on the Zeffer in order to accompany Nicrominus—and I have no reason to believe that is not the case—then wherever he is, she is.”

“And perhaps, upon her arrival, the Travelers or even the Overseer dispatched her since she was not supposed to be there. Or do you think that Norda would be capable of surviving the wrath of the Overseer as well?”

“I think Norda can survive anything she . . .” Then his voice tapered off and he looked downward. “No. Unlikely.”

“Very unlikely.”

“But we can pray to the gods. Pray for both your father and my sister.”

“And we can agree,” said Evanna, “that you will not be embarking on any more foolhardy rescue missions? The five Clans, given the slightest opportunity, would go to war with each other in a heartbeat. The Firedraque treaties seem to mean nothing to them. And with Nicrominus gone, they will doubtless consider our people to be at a low ebb, and would not be far wrong to do so. The only thing keeping the Clans in line is you, and if you are gone—”

“All right. You have made your point.”

“Have I? I have not heard you foreswearing any further rescue attempts.”

“When would I have done so? You have not ceased your yammering.”

“Very well,” she said. She folded her arms and waited.

“If I may ask: how did you know about this one? Soldiers were waiting for me when I was on the road, before I’d even left the city limits of Perriz. How did you dispatch them?”

“You were hardly subtle about it. You stormed about your keep, yelling that you were going to go after your sister. And the Firedraques have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“So my mistake was in my own yammering.”

“Yes. Which means that there is naught to stop you from trying to go off on another such fool endeavor and this time eluding detection through the simple method of keeping your big Mandraque mouth shut. Nothing save your word of honor, which I am still awaiting.”

He growled. “I will not,” he said, “go running off on my own to try and save Norda.”

“Good,” said Evanna with visible relief. “That is what I needed to hear.”

“And that is what you have heard.”

“It was a stupid idea to begin with. Where did you think you were going to go, anyway? How were you going to find her? You had no means of trailing her. She was airborne and long gone.”

“Well,” said Arren calmly, “I was figuring I would find a Traveler and beat the information out of him.”

“Brilliant plan.”

“Thank you.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“I know. But I know that you have disdain for most Mandraques, and so will take my compliments wherever and whenever I can get them.”

“As you wish. And by the way, Kinklash,” and she stepped in close to him and further straightened her spine so that she was practically a head taller than he. “If you ever raise a fist to me again, I will shove it up your bung hole. Is that clear?”

He inclined his head slightly. “Abundantly.”

He bowed deeply to her and took his leave, knowing all the

while that his word of honor be damned, and the rest of the Clans be damned, he was going to go after Norda. If all the Mandraques left in the Damned World embarked upon a great war to end all wars and annihilated each other, leaving nothing behind but scorched ground, then Arren Kinklash—who had spent so many years manipulating situations to gain the amount of power he currently enjoyed—would not have cared.

Norda was all that mattered.

All that mattered.