

TRANSFER of POWER

By Brian Buckley

PART I: LINDOR

Chapter 1

“The Drii have taken our land!” shouted Marrott. “The Drii have captured our towns, they have terrorized our children, and they have made us prisoners in our own country! They take our money, and give us nothing in return! They leave us our kings to sit on the throne as they please, so long as they dance to the music of the Drii whenever their leader makes his wishes known! They do all this, and we sit back like idle cowards, watching it as if it were a play! What’s wrong with us?” he demanded. “Why have we grown complacent? Since when is it all right to complain and curse our oppressors while we run to do their bidding at a moment’s notice? Since when?”

Marrott was not a young man by any means, but his age did not seem to have hampered his spirit in any noticeable way. He flung his arms into the air as he spoke, beating his fist into his palm. His thin gray hair flew around wildly in contrast to the peaceful surroundings, but nobody thought this unusual; they were used to Marrott’s speeches against the Drii by now. For the most part they agreed with him, but the main problem – as in all oppressed communities – was that nobody was unhappy enough to overcome their fear and muster the courage to fight their oppressors. This sentiment was voiced by a member of the crowd.

A young man in the back stood up. “What you ask would throw Kylar into war the likes of which has not been seen since our grandparents were children! Would you have us oppose the Drii in the open, then? Would you bring them down upon us like an iron hammer, to take not only our freedom and our money, but our lives as well? Our

lives are not bad, Marrott! We need not send our friends and our brothers to die for a concept which is abstract at best!”

“Abstract!” snorted Marrott. “Freedom? Abstract? Yes, it is. As is truth, and justice, and hope, and fear, and pain, and love; but those are the things which shape our lives! There is a price to pay for everything. I am not afraid to die. Are you?”

There was a murmur in the crowd at that, and faces turned to see the man’s response. People enjoyed a show, and this was exactly the kind of duel of wills they loved. “What I *fear*,” the man said through clenched teeth, “is people like you; people who are afraid to face the truth.” He sat down, though.

Marrott smiled. “The truth is all around us,” he said. “The entire world is composed of truth. The only lies are those we make to fool ourselves.” He looked around. “It’s getting late. Those who haven’t yet forgotten what freedom is like may hear me speak again on the same time and day as always, next week. Thank you for coming.” He bowed slightly, and walked off. With that, the crowd dispersed.

Near the front, three members of the audience began walking back to town together. They were composed of a couple, a man and a woman in their twenties walking together, and another older man who appeared to be into his early forties. The young man was named Till, the woman was Aren, and the final member was Filador. Aren and Till had been married for three years; Till was a member of the Lindor Village Council, Aren was an artist and Filador was primarily a scientist. This was the first of Marrott’s speeches they had attended.

The trio walked in silence for a moment before Till made a comment. “He’s right,” Till said. “We’ve gotten complacent, and everybody around here accepts the Drii

as easily as if they were our elected leaders. But I don't think getting rid of them would be as easy as it seems. He makes it appear as if all we have to do is tell the Drii that we don't care for their presence, and they'll leave us alone."

"That's true," Filador replied, "but it would be a good first step. The way to begin a revolution is by wanting a revolt. People are apathetic to the cause, and nobody thinks they can win." He paused. "I'm not sure they can."

"But we have to try," Aren told him. "We can't just let them sit comfortably in power while we bow to their every command. Something has to be done."

"Something," Filador said, "but what?"

"I don't know, but what Marrott is doing worries me," answered Till. "He is attracting attention to himself, and that's dangerous. If the Drii decide he's a threat..." He trailed off, not wanting to mention the possibilities.

"Well, he said he wasn't afraid to die," said Filador. "If he is not afraid for his own life, our worrying about it is pointless. Although," he admitted, "I would hate to see anything happen to him. He's been the only one around here who's shown any willingness to stand up to the Drii."

The Drii Empire, as it was commonly known, was made of two distinct races. The first race was the Mires, creatures that resembled large gray centipedes. Although they lacked wings, they could fly through the air at will, attacking if necessary with large pincers on the front of their heads. These were the generals, the commanders, and the leaders of the Drii. They were quite intelligent, and spoke the human language when necessary in soft threatening whispers.

The second race, and the one more commonly associated with the Drii, was the Tikks. Tikks were completely black and consisted of a sphere that acted as both a head and a body at the same time. Six tentacles extended from the sphere. The three which sprouted from the bottom half of the sphere were used as legs, while the three attached to the top acted as arms. All six tentacles had retractable claws that could be extended at will. Tikks also had six gleaming black eyes that encircled their heads. No mouth was evident and Tikks had never been observed eating, breathing or speaking. Standing upright, a Tikk was at least as tall as a man. These creatures made up the terror army of the Drii, and they were a common sight wherever the Empire wished to make its presence felt.

Finally, at the top of the hierarchy was the mysterious Izm. Little was known of Izm beyond that he ruled from the Shadow Throne in the town of Atara. Atara lay across the Ivory Sea on the Island of Terror, apart from the mainland of Kylar. Few humans ever journeyed there and even fewer returned alive, but the rumors were more than enough to dissuade any frequent visits to the Island; it was enough that Izm lived there.

When Filador reached the door of his house, he turned to his companions. “See you tomorrow,” he said crisply and entered his house, shutting the door behind him quietly.

The remaining couple did not head straight for home, but wandered the streets for a while. Lindor was a beautiful town, especially in the evening. Its houses were generally white-walled affairs with red roofs and square windows, bordering brick roads laced with street lamps. Occasionally one would see the flag of Kylar flying outside a house, fluttering in the breeze. The Kylar flag was a white rectangle of cloth with a blue-

and-gold star in the middle. It was a symbol whose original meaning had been lost over the years, but not its significance. While not officially banned, the Kylar flag was definitely frowned upon by Drii authorities; therefore, the citizens of Lindor considered anyone who flew it outside their house something of a dissenter. In one sense, this was frowned upon, but such people were also respected for having the pride to want freedom and the bravery to let it be known.

Less common but still present were those who displayed the Drii flag. It was of a much more complex design than the simple Kylar banner, with a black background and a series of curving and interweaving green and red lines that vaguely resembled the claws of an animal. In the center was a tiny yellow circle, intended to show the supremacy of the one who sat upon the Shadow Throne. Idly Till wondered what Izm himself thought about the symbolism. It was clear, though, what the Lindor community thought. Such people were frowned upon by their neighbors, although they were theoretically behaving much more properly as citizens of the Drii Empire. It was ironic, Aren mused, that both those who flew the Kylar flag and those who openly supported the Drii were frowned upon. Only those who gave no opinion, she realized, were not disliked. It was logical, if nothing else.

Sitting on a bench in the middle of Lindor with his arm around Aren, Till watched the sun set slowly on the horizon. It was not until the last rays of the evening had glinted off the fountains in the center of the plaza that they walked home together in silence.

Chapter 2

By the time the sun had risen again, the news was everywhere. Neither Till nor Filador was any too happy for having been correct in their speculations, but it appeared they were. Marrott was not dead, but the effect on the town was virtually the same as if he had been; he was locked up in a Drii prison camp a few miles from Lindor.

He had apparently been taken in the night by a trio of Tikks, with orders from their superiors that Marrott had become a threat and must be dealt with. Aren shuddered to think of the old man shivering in some damp cell in a room watched by one of those beady-eyed creatures-

There were murmurs in the town that he had had it coming to him all along, that he should have known better before he started making speeches. The people who held these views were quickly silenced by others who mourned his loss, but even they knew it was true. They agreed with his motives but doubted his wisdom. And despite all this, the primary emotion in the town that day was shock. This marked a turning point for the people of Lindor. Always in the past the Drii had been a dark shadowy influence, to be spoken of well in public and cursed in dark whispers, but never a substantial presence. They were an abstract evil. This was the first time the affairs of Lindor had been directly affected by the Drii, and it produced a mixed reaction. Bystanders were afflicted with an outrage at the unfairness of it, exposed for the first time, while simultaneously horrified that it could happen to them. They kept quiet – it was exactly what the Drii wanted.

Till, for one, was not frightened into silence. When he heard the news, he went storming into the Lindor Council Hall. By the time the doors slammed shut behind him,

he was at the main secretary's desk. "I have a message," he said. "Tell all the other Council members that I want them to be there at the meeting tonight. 7 o'clock."

She shuffled through some papers for a moment, then pulled one out of a stack. "Sir, there isn't any meeting at 7 o'clock."

"There is now," he said.

She sighed. "I'll tell them," she said, "but I doubt if they'll come. Meetings have to be scheduled weeks in advance."

He nodded. "I know the procedures. Just tell them."

Back at home, Aren was looking at him worriedly. "Do you think they'll come?" she wanted to know.

"I don't know. I think some of them will, and those that do will tell the rest after they hear what I have to say."

"And what *are* you going to say? Till, what are you trying to accomplish? Organize a protest march? Burn a Drii flag? Start making speeches like Marrott – and end up like Marrott too?"

He shook his head. "Marrott had the right idea, but it takes more than speeches. It takes action. I want to get him out of jail."

"Jail?" She thought. "But – the Drii government would never agree to that..."

"The Drii government can stay in Atara, where they belong," he said firmly. "I have no intention of *convincing* the Mires of anything. I intend to get him out of jail – with or without their consent."

“*Without* their consent? Look, even if you succeed and get him out without getting yourself killed – which is by no means certain – even if you succeed, do you have any idea what they would do?”

“I imagine they would not be pleased,” he said.

“*Pleased?* Till, they put Marrott in prison just for making speeches! What do you think they would do to you?”

He sighed. “I know. There are risks. But I’m not going to just let the Drii do whatever they want while I sit on the Council and make progress reports to Izm!”

“NO, Till. You hear me? No. You are NOT doing this.”

He frowned. “Aren...” he began slowly.

“Don’t talk to me like that! You’re not going to do this because I’m not going to let you. At worst you’ll be killed, and at best you’ll be killed. Is that what you want?”

“Better a dead martyr than a living fool.”

“Oh, so I’m a fool now?”

“I didn’t mean-”

“I know.” The volume of her voice dropped. “I know what you’re trying to do. It’s wonderful and it’s terribly heroic, but this isn’t a fairy tale, Till!”

“I never said it was. But it’s necessary anyway.”

“Necessary! What about you?” Aren sat down quietly. “I don’t want you to die,” she whispered.

He sat down next to her and put his arms around her. “Trust me,” he told her slowly, “I don’t want to die either. But somebody’s got to make a stand to these things.

If people start getting quieted, we've lost. We have to make people see what's going on. We have to."

Aren pushed him away and stood up again. She thought a moment, then asked, "When is the meeting?"

"Seven tonight."

She looked at the clock. "Then you'd better get going," she said. "If you're going to die, you might as well be prompt about it."

He made no comment in return.

When he was gone, she turned out the lights and sat by herself in the dark, staring into the blackness. She loved Till, but he was an annoyance sometimes. There was a place for hopes and dreams, but this was not the way to do it.

And yet-

And yet, she had to admire his spirit. He was the only person in Lindor, save Marrott, who was willing to say openly that the Drii were a problem and the solution had to begin now.

She waited.

Chapter 3

Till surveyed the audience. The main Council chamber could seat around two hundred people at full capacity, but right now he had an audience of eighteen. Not as much as he had hoped, but better than nothing.

"Thank you for coming," he began. "I'm sorry for calling this meeting on such short notice, but this is an extreme situation. As you all know, a man named Marrott was

captured by Drii forces late last night and taken to a prison about two miles south of Lindor. He was taken without warning, without trial, and utterly without approval by the government of Lindor. This is an injustice in any sense of the word.”

“They are the Drii,” said a man in the audience. “They do as they wish. There’s no question of fairness, only submission.”

“Yes, that’s how it works, isn’t it?” replied Till. This was just the sort of reaction he had been expecting, but he didn’t know if he could turn them away from it. “That’s how it always works. But the Drii have gone too far! This isn’t right, surely you can all see this. We have to make a stand to them.”

“What do you propose?” asked a woman in the back.

Till took a deep breath. “What I propose,” he said, “is that we break him out of prison. We send over a group of Lindor’s finest soldiers and get him out of there before they transfer him to somewhere unreachable.”

There was a clamor in the Council after hearing this. For a few moments eighteen voices rose in quick and harsh debate, then just as quickly settled down again. They were quiet, and then someone said, “That isn’t feasible.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too great of a risk for one man. We can’t send in ten soldiers to rescue one person. You understand that as well as we do, Till. Is that all we were called for?”

“You can’t just leave him there to die!”

“It doesn’t make me any happier than you, but I’m telling you it just won’t work. Even if we got him out, what good would it do? Do you think the Drii would simply allow us to get away with it, and not interfere any further? So long as we allow them to

have their way, we have a good chance of survival. To go against their wishes is unwise.”

“Unwise! What kind of Council members are we if we let the Drii have their way whenever they wish?”

“The kind of Council members who care about the welfare of their citizens, Till. It doesn’t make sense to risk the entire community for a single person. We must consider all possibilities.”

It’s like listening to my wife all over again, he thought. “If I could just have a few men to at least try and-”

“NO, Till.” The man sighed. “Look, if it makes you feel any better, I agree with you. Something needs to be done. But the answer is no. Now, if there’s anything else...?”

By nine o’clock he was back at home. He would have arrived sooner, but he needed the time to think that the walk home gave him. By the time he arrived he had already decided what he wanted to do; it was only a matter of figuring out how to do it.

“What did they say?”

“They said the same thing you did.”

“Then the Council has some sense after all,” Aren responded. “Well. What did you expect?”

“I expected basically what I got,” he told her. “But I had to at least try.”

“So you’re going to forget about it, then?”

“No. I’m going to rescue him myself.”

She buried her face in her hands.

Till sighed. "I know how you feel about it," he said, "but I have to at least try. I would never be able to live with myself if Marrott died in that prison."

"Whereas I'm not supposed to be concerned if you die, is that it?"

"Well, if you've got a better plan I'd like to hear it."

"Stay home?"

"I'm going tomorrow night. I should be back within a few days. If I'm not, you'll know what happened to me."

"Oh, no," she said. "No, you're not doing this that easily. Going away on a mission to get yourself killed is one thing, but doing it alone is quite another. At the very least I'm coming with you."

He raised an eyebrow. "I thought you didn't approve of this."

Aren took a step towards him. "I don't," she said firmly. "But if it's going to be done, you need all the help you can get. I'm not going to sit around at home wondering whether you're still alive."

"Welcome aboard."

The prison where Marrott was being held was about five miles east of Lindor's city limits. It was a camp for political prisoners, so it wasn't as heavily guarded as the ones which contained violent offenders. It would still be a challenge, though. There were no maps of the facility, for obvious reasons, so Till had no real strategy for accomplishing his mission. He didn't even have any real idea in which cell Marrott was being kept, nor was he even completely certain that Marrott had been taken to this particular prison. He was, in essence, going into it blind. Aren, for her part, was more concerned with preventing their mutual demise than extracting the prisoner.

They had made preparations to leave town in the afternoon and arrive just after nightfall. The attempt was to be made at night, although nobody really knew how good Tikks' night vision was, so it was not certain this was even an advantage. But they had to start somewhere.

After they were well under way, an idea came to Till. "Is Marrott going to be our only target?" he wanted to know. "This camp will probably have hundreds of prisoners. Maybe we should try to free some of them too."

"Absolutely not," Aren replied calmly. "Our odds of success are bad enough with one objective. We don't need two hundred." And that was the end of that.

They arrived at their destination just as the first stars were coming out. The prison turned out to be a pair of fairly small white buildings in the middle of a clearing in a forest. The larger of the two appeared to be the area where prisoners were actually held, while the smaller building was the guards' headquarters. Both were guarded by a handful of Tikks, and a high wooden fence surrounded the entire area. The gate was closed. Till and Aren found a suitable tree and quickly climbed it for a better view of the prison.

"Nice," commented Aren. "Only five guards. That means if we try to get in we'll only die, as opposed to if there were a hundred guards, in which case we would die. What is the plan for getting in, exactly?"

"We figure out a way to get in, and then we do it."

"Nice," she said again.

“There’s got to be some kind of pattern to the guards’ movements that we can exploit. Remember, prisons are designed to keep people from getting out, not keep them from getting in. They won’t be expecting it.”

“They won’t be expecting it because, in the history of the world, we are the only two people stupid enough to ever try it. Remind me why I let you talk me into this.”

“Talk *you* into coming? You’re the one who insisted, remember? I was going to do this alone.” He looked back at the prison. “The guards don’t seem to be moving. We’ll have to do this some other way.” Aren merely shook her head silently.

Suddenly a voice from behind startled them. “Whaaat are you two doooooing heeere?” it hissed. They whirled around and nearly fell off the branch when they came face-to-face with a Mire. It was about seven feet long and four feet around, and its gray eyes were looking at them more with curiosity than menace. Its fangs curved out from its head like a pair of sickles, dripping slightly with saliva. The creature was floating contentedly about twelve feet off the ground.

Neither of them answered for a moment, so the Mire continued, “Tresssspasssserss. The Drii do not tolerate tresssspasssserssss. You mussst be... dealt wiiiiith.”

“Um, Till?” Aren pointed behind them.

Till looked.

Twenty Tikks were approaching their tree, claws outstretched and closing in quickly.

Chapter 4

They'll be here in seconds, thought Till. He struggled to fight down the wave of panic that surged over him, at the same time desperately hoping that Tikks couldn't climb trees. *Can't take the chance*, he decided. *I've got to do something now or it'll be too late*. He drew his knife from its sheath at his belt and leaped from the branch to the back of the Mire. Making a safe landing on its armor-plated back, he held on tightly as it thrashed wildly. Till held the point of the knife against the thing's unprotected head, just close enough for it to be felt. "I suggest you stop that and do as I say," he informed it, "unless you want the Drii Empire to be short one commander." Reluctantly it agreed.

"Now. Tell those soldiers of yours not to attack." Nothing happened. "*Tell them!*" The Mire gave a low hiss, presumably directed at Till, but made no signal to the guards; however, they all came to a sudden stop just short of the base of the tree, looking a bit perplexed. "Good," Till said. "Very good. Now just stay that cooperative for the next hour, and we'll be fine." He looked up at Aren for a moment. She was simply staring at him, not saying anything. "I'll try to hold onto this thing," he told her. "You'll have to rescue Marrott."

"Ah. I was wondering how that was going to work."

"Well, I can't exactly let go of him and do it myself." Till turned back to the creature he was riding. He pressed the knife blade closer to its skull. "Now have your guards open the gate for us." Again, the Mire gave no perceivable signals, but the Tikks obeyed. *Probably some kind of telepathy*, thought Till. *I wonder if the Tikks are even conscious or just tools for the Mires*. "So far so good. Now tell the guards to leave. All of them."

“You willll not wiiin thissss way, humaaaaan,” it said, but the Tikks all left. The prison was empty.

“All right. I can see you’re getting good at this. One last command for you. Tell me where I can find a man named Marrott who you just brought here recently.”

“There issss no sssssuch persssson heere.”

“You’re lying.”

“Noo.”

“Yes, you are. Tell us where he is.”

“I refusse.”

“I’ll kill you.”

“No. You neeed me.”

“Ha! So Marrott *is* here!” He smiled triumphantly to Aren. “Go in there and try to find him. It’s a small prison so it shouldn’t be hard.”

She nodded reluctantly and climbed down the tree, making her way to the main entrance to the structure. Meanwhile, Till was speaking to the Drii once more. “Now listen. That’s my wife going in there. You make sure all your guards are out of there and you make sure no traps or anything are left in there, because if she is harmed in any way – in *any* way – I will make you wish you were dead.”

“You carrrrre for heerrrrr.”

The comment unnerved him, although he wasn’t sure why. Perhaps the observation gave him the uncomfortable proof that the creatures were sentient. “Yes, of course I do. I’m married to her.”

“Yesssss.”

“If I want your comments I will ask for them. Just see that nothing happens to her.” But he was nervous now, more so than before.

Meanwhile, Aren had entered the prison and was exploring its dark halls. The corridors were lit by torches that shone a pale gold. The air smelled damp, and she shivered. It was creepy, and she had the inescapable feeling that a Tikk was going to pop up and attack her at any moment.

The hardest part, though, was going past the other prisoners. As she passed the cells, she saw thin, haggard men and women sitting in tiny wet rooms with no light except that provided by the torches. Some clung desperately to the bars of their cells, while others lay curled up on the floor. Some were weeping; a few were dead. She was soon noticed by one of the prisoners, and he called out to her in a weak voice. “Help us!” he said. “Please! Help us!”

The cry was quickly taken up by the other prisoners as well. “You have come to free us!” they shouted. “Free us! Help me! Save me! Help! Free! Light!” The words flowed around her and into her, forming a ceaseless background of misery. And when they saw she was not obeying their wishes, they begged her. She continued her path through the prison, not trusting herself to speak as she listened to the plaintive shouts all around her. The cells were only locked from the outside, not the inside; she had only to open the doors and they would be free. But she knew that if she opened one, she would have to let all the others out as well, and that would be problematic. Aren knew that she and Till could not control over a hundred prisoners all at once, some of whom were in for legitimate crimes. So she forced herself onward, step by agonizing step, past the people who were calling her “angel” and “savior,” until she could take it no more.

“I’m not here to save you!” she screamed. “I’m not! I’m sorry! Be quiet!”

They said little after that, but only watched her with wide, hopeful eyes as she continued on her way through the dungeon. By the time she reached Marrott’s cell, she was sobbing.

Several minutes later, she returned from the building with Marrott close behind her. The old man was limping slightly, but appeared otherwise unhurt. He waved to Till. “Is that you, Till?” he asked.

Till grinned and waved back. “It’s me, all right,” he said. “How do you feel?”

Marrott looked at Aren, then back at Till. “What are you two doing here?”

“What does it look like? We’re here to get you out of this dump! Ready to come back to Lindor?”

Marrott shook his head. “I appreciate your help, but I wish you hadn’t done this. It wasn’t worth it.”

“I know it was risky, but we had to do something.”

“I don’t just mean the danger in getting me out. I mean the danger in what the Drii might do to you after you get back to Lindor. Making speeches got me imprisoned; I don’t want anyone else to have to pay for my actions.”

“Thanks for the concern, but I’m not too worried. I don’t think the Drii can touch me.”

“And Aren?”

Oh.

Till felt like an idiot now, for letting Aren get into this. Why hadn’t he thought of that? Of course the Drii would go after her now, too. But luckily, she seemed no more

concerned than Till himself. “I’ll be all right,” she said in a tight voice. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Marrott shrugged. “If you’re sure,” he said. “How are you planning on getting rid of your friend there?”

Till looked down at the giant gray creature below him. It had been silent for a while and he had nearly forgotten about it. “He was our hostage. We used him to keep the guards away while we got you out. But now...” He considered. “I’m not sure. If we let him go, he could call the Tikks and have them kill us before we could get away. If we kill him, the Tikks will have no reason to leave us alone and they’ll still attack. And we can’t stay here forever...”

The Mire itself provided the answer. “Have the woooman and the oold man leave firsst,” it said. “Give them a few hourssss’ time to get awaaaaay, then riide on my back to the city liiimits of Liiiindor. Once you are theeere, get off and let me goooo. The Tikkssss could not get there fasssst enough to harrm you.”

They stared at it.

“You are surprissssed?” it asked. “I haaaave merely provided you with the mossst logical anssswer, and the one mossst likely to enssssure our mutuiiival. We may meet agaaaaain; if we doooo, it sssshall be difffferent. For now, do asssss I ssssay.”

Maddening as it was, the creature was correct. It was the most logical answer. They did as it said and everything was as the Mire had predicted. By dawn, all three of them had arrived back in Lindor safely.

They were greeted by a flood of curious onlookers, but the trio refused to answer any questions until they had had some sleep. All three were thoroughly exhausted, and the Council agreed to allow them some time to rest. When Till and Aren had recovered from the experience, they explained what had happened and how Marrott had returned. All three were hailed as heroes, and the news spread quickly: the Drii were defeated! It was incredible. Never before in recent times had anyone attempted to go against the wishes of the Drii and succeeded without being punished for it. The couple had won great recognition for their heroism, and talk began to spread like wildfire of ending the rule of the Drii Empire once and for all. A week ago, nobody would have dared make such comments; now, words that a Mire would consider treasonous were flying around town. Only Marrott seemed excluded from the wave of spiritedness that was sweeping Lindor. He declined to make any further speeches, and stayed at his house most of the time.

For nearly the entire week following Marrott's rescue, the anti-Drii movement grew. Till and Aren tried to stay out of it for the most part, but willingly or unwillingly they became the inspiration for the movement; Drii flags were ripped apart and signs declaring "Lindor is Drii-free!" were flown in Till's name. There was even talk of sending a messenger to Kylar's capital, Kanigon, to begin building up an army to attack Atara. What happened was akin to a single spark landing on a field of dry grass; an amazingly small event can have powerful consequences when the circumstances are right. The feeling alive in Lindor that week seemed unstoppable.

It did not last long.

Seven days after Marrott had been freed from prison, the Tikks came. The archers killed a few of them before they reached the city, but for the most part they swarmed into Lindor by the hundreds, the thousands. Lindor had no walls and no real defenses, so it was an easy target for the Drii. They simply entered the houses and killed anyone who resisted them. The rest quickly surrendered. It was a swift and overwhelming attack, and within half an hour a Mire was in the main Council building, giving orders.

Till and Aren had been expecting the invasion, and when word was given that the Drii had been sighted they quickly escaped with pre-prepared supplies to last them until they could find somewhere safe to hide. Filador had insisted on coming with them, reasoning that he had no desire to remain in Lindor while it was occupied by the Drii. Together, the three of them managed to get out of the city before Drii forces entered their home and found them missing. By the time the lead Mire had ordered their execution, they were half a mile from the city limits with no witnesses to their departure and no pursuit that any real chance of finding them; any Tikk patrols sent after them had no trails to follow and nowhere to look.

They continued in silence until nightfall, at which time they made camp under a large tree. They went to sleep with their lives, but little else.

PART II: JOURNEY

Chapter 5

When Till awoke, Filador and Aren were already up. He looked around groggily for a moment, then got up and went over to Filador. “Tell me that was a dream,” he said.

“No such luck,” Filador told him.

A groan. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

He smiled. “Welcome to the real world.”

Till sighed. “Are we safe, at least?”

“As safe as anyone can be with a death sentence on their head in the Drii Empire. They don’t know where we are, if that’s what you mean.”

“And Lindor?”

“Taken. The Mires are running that place now.”

He leaned against a tree and sighed again. “Then it’s over.”

“Not over.”

“Not over? Filador, we are wanted criminals in an empire run by a race of creatures with spies and soldiers everywhere! Our hometown is completely ruled by them, and any other major city we go to will recognize us. We *might* survive as long as we remain wanderers in the wilderness, but that’s it. No prospects. No future. No hope.”

“You’re partly right. But things are not as bad as they may seem. For one thing, I don’t think the Drii have launched any kind of massive effort to find us. Kylar is vast, and we are only three people. I doubt that too many people have actually heard of us, especially in other towns. Besides, I think the Drii will quiet this as much as they can anyway.”

Till found that surprising. “Why?”

“Think about it. If the whole of Kylar worked together as a single cohesive unit to get rid of the Drii, there’s nothing they could do to stop it. And the Drii know that.

They reign by the ignorance of their subjects; everyone thinks that going against the Drii is suicide. Now, if they start spreading the word that we're wanted by Drii authorities for a successful raid on a prison camp, it's basically an advertisement that they went against the government and won. They won't want that. So I think any humans we meet should be safe."

Till pondered that. "But couldn't they just say that we committed some other kind of crime?"

"They could, but I doubt they will. Too many people found out about what we did in Lindor. It'll be a lot easier for them to simply deny the rumors than try to get people to think we're wanted for something else. I think they'll simply hush it up as best they can and try to move on."

"So other humans shouldn't be a threat. What about the Drii themselves?"

"Well, Tikks are the tools of the Drii, but they aren't very smart. You can tell them things like "attack this" or "guard that," but commands such as "stay on the lookout for someone who's dressed like this" doesn't work too well for what they can understand. And as for the Mires, they're intelligent enough, but they don't get around much. They usually stay in one place and travel only when necessary."

"That's good to know. But it still doesn't do much for us. We can't go back to Lindor, can we? We're outcasts. What've we got to live for?"

At that moment Aren interrupted. "A plan," she said.

"What?"

"Filador and I have been talking about it. We've got a plan, Till. We're going to fight." She flashed him a triumphant smile. "We're going to take back Lindor."

He closed his eyes once more. “Now I know I’m dreaming,” he muttered.

“I’m serious,” insisted Aren. “You were right about Marrott; we had to save him. We have to make a stand to the Drii.” She stared at him. “We brought this on Lindor, didn’t we? If it hadn’t been for us, Lindor would never have been occupied. So it’s up to us to take it back. And we’re going to.”

“All right,” he said. “You said we have a plan. What’s the plan?”

“The plan,” explained Filador, “is to rally Kylar behind us. We’re going to travel the land, making our case to everyone we meet. We’re going to get support from everyone we find. We’re going to collect armies and forces from the free peoples of the world, and show Izm that he isn’t going to get Lindor that easily.” He smiled. “And I know exactly where to start.”

“Where?”

“Kanigon. It’s the largest city for miles around, and we could certainly use their help. Kanigon is about... let’s see... thirty miles northeast from here, I believe. We can make it in just a few days if we hurry.”

“And the sooner the better,” said Aren. “What are we waiting for, anyway?”

“Well, breakfast would be nice, for one thing,” Till replied. “Maybe you two can walk from here to Kanigon and back on an empty stomach, but I prefer to avoid fainting from starvation somewhere along the line.”

“No need to be melodramatic,” said Filador. “We ate breakfast hours ago. Here, I think there’s some left... hurry!”

“Melodramatic,” Till muttered as he made a hasty breakfast from what was left.

“All this hurrying around. You’d think we were wanted for murder or something.”

Within the hour they were well on their way to Kanigon. The going was not difficult, and they laughed and joked with each other in spite of their peril. Perhaps that was what the Drii found so threatening about humans; they rebounded from any peril almost instantaneously without fail. It was the sort of quality that was both incomprehensible to Mires and lethal on the battlefield.

Regardless, they made good time to Kanigon and encountered no serious troubles on the way, and their supplies held for the duration of the trip. By the time they reached the great city a few days later, they felt as if they were ready to retake their hometown by themselves.

“Neither of you has been to Kanigon before,” Filador told them just before they reached the city limits, “so I feel it is my duty to explain a few things of which you may not be aware. I stayed here for a few months many years ago. Things have changed, I am certain, but nevertheless it will not be like Lindor.”

“I would expect not,” said Aren. “It will be much larger, I’m sure.”

“Larger, yes,” Filador replied. “But not only that. Because it is the capital of Kylar, Kanigon holds a particularly high status in the Drii Empire. It is the prize gem of Lord Izm. Therefore, the Drii presence will be much stronger than we were used to in Lindor, before it was overrun.”

“Tikks?”

“Well, there will be some of those in town, yes, and Mires too; but the Drii influence extends much deeper into the minds of the people there. That is not to say that the Drii Empire is well-liked in Kanigon, only that they are well-feared.”

“That could make it very difficult to gain support for an invasion of Lindor,” observed Till.

“Yes, it could. But the king of Kanigon is a good man, or he was when I was last here at least, and he might be willing to assist us for a good cause.”

“Who is the king of Kanigon, anyway?” asked Aren. “I’ve never met a king before. We just had the Council in Lindor.”

“And Lindor has the more sensible of the two governments, I believe,” replied Filador. “But Kanigon gets along well enough, I suppose. Their king is named Diaro IV. I will seek an audience with him once we arrive, and you must be respectful, both of you. He is a good leader, but he has power and that alone commands respect. And one other thing you should know. When Diaro came into power, he launched his own campaign against the Drii. He managed to rid his city of their influence for a few weeks, until Izm commanded an all-out assault on Kanigon. They were crushed.” Filador was silent for a moment. “He’s still a bit sensitive about the incident even after all this time, so be considerate.”

They nodded, and Filador led them to the gates of the city itself. Unlike Lindor, Kanigon was surrounded by a huge wall. The wall was of gray stonework, and of a size that would instantly dash any potential intruder’s hopes of scaling it.

Provided said intruders were human, of course.

The gates were massive. They were kept open in the daytime and the guards merely waved them through, but that made them no less impressive. Their size alone would have inspired awe in any first-time traveler to Kanigon, but Till was particularly impressed by the incredible level of detail in them. They were inscribed with, as it

seemed, the entire history of the city of Kanigon. Kings, queens, soldiers, lovers, sword and shield, politics, war; all was here. The beautiful carvings seemed to spring from the wood itself, cut into the brown doors and rimmed in blue and gold paint around the fringes of the gates. Till got the distinct impression that he was looking straight into the heart of the city, and its recent history was distinctly dark. But nonetheless, the gates were a marvelous way to greet newcomers to the capital of Kylar.

If the wall was an oyster, the city was the pearl.

It was not an exaggeration to say that neither Aren nor Till had ever seen that many people in one place at one time in their entire lives. The city stretched out before them in a dizzying array of colors, sounds, and aromas that meshed together like threads in a tapestry to produce a design that was both awe-inspiring and breathtaking. White houses with blue rooftops spread out before them for miles, a million sapphires gleaming in the sun. And in the middle of it all, in the exact center of the city and the focal point of all streets surrounding it, lay the palace. Whatever else might be said about King Diaro IV, he certainly had a splendid residence. It was a mass of towers, banners, windows and gates that dwarfed everything nearby. Red, gold, blue and yellow covered the walls and filled the ceilings in a multihued display of rainbow color and design which defied the imagination. It seemed almost sacrilegious that the Drii should have the mastery here.

They found an inn where they could stay a few nights and quickly made arrangements to see the king. His schedule was surprisingly free, as the Drii themselves did most of the actual governing; they managed to fit in an appointment a mere two days from their time of arrival. In the meantime, they passed the hours enjoying all the

fabulous displays and shows Kanigon had to offer. There was a theater there that Aren loved, playing everything from comedies to romantic drama and starring the most fantastic actors in Kylar. Entertainers wandered the streets, showing off the tricks their pet lizards could perform while jugglers tossed flaming torches into the air and caught them in dizzying arcs. Music seemed to be everywhere in Kanigon as well; dancers twirled to it, musicians played it, people listened to it, people hummed it when no instruments were nearby. And once a week, fireworks filled the night sky. Huge explosions of silver and gold flowed freely among the stars while green and yellow flowers blossomed nearby. The noise was deafening, and the colors were as vibrant as the sounds. All in all, it was quite a magnificent change from both their former lives in Lindor and their brief but disquieting time as fugitives.

And yet, in spite of all the noise and color of Kanigon, Filador had been right. It wasn't the same as Lindor. People smiled quick, strained smiles at them as they passed. Children played in the grass, but looked around uncertainly. The police were more than a mere token force to settle arguments. And nowhere was the flag of Kylar seen, only the flag of the Drii. It was even above the palace itself, a black cloth waving silently in the wind.

And then, of course, there were the Tikks.

They were not immediately obvious to the casual observer, but Till noticed them. They were watching from street corners, staring out of windows, and hiding behind trash cans. Till shivered every time he saw one, quickening his pace to get away from it. In spite of what he'd heard about Tikk intelligence, he still felt nervous around them. If even one recognized him, it would be over. The entire city seemed to have the same

uncertain, nervous feel about it. And that was in the daytime. It was bad enough then, but at night...

Nobody went out at night.

When the two days had passed, a messenger summoned them to the royal court. They were led through the streets of Kanigon and into the main gates of the palace, watched by curious bystanders who wondered what business such people as these could have with such as the king of the capital of Kylar. Till was a bit impressed himself. "I'm surprised that it was this easy," he told Filador as they were approaching the king's residence. "We just ask for an audience, and he sees us."

"I'll confess to being a bit surprised myself," Filador replied. "Some kings refuse to see anyone unless they're very important, but Diaro is something of an exception. He has an open-door policy because he wishes to know firsthand about the troubles of his subjects. Even so, it still usually takes a week or more to get in simply because he's so busy; sometimes it can take months." He paused thoughtfully. "I hope everything's all right."

The inside of the palace was no less impressive than the outside. Marble statues decorated the halls and the walls were filled with paintings of glorious battles and beautiful mountainsides. Few likenesses of the king himself were here; apparently he was not as vain as he was powerful, which was more than could be said of most royalty. And when they had finally bypassed the draperies, the curtains, the lamps, the chandeliers, and all the other wondrously unsubtle declarations of the king's wealth, they came at last into the throne room itself. It was a relatively small affair, and for the time being empty. Filador kneeled and motioned for his comrades to do the same.

They remained silent while Diaro looked them over for a moment. Till was suitably impressed. He certainly seemed regal enough with his flowing gray beard and his deep blue royal robes. His scepter was gold set with sapphire, and his eyes carried a look of command which cannot be imitated, only gained through experience. He would speak when he wanted to speak and not before.

At last he did. "You are Filador, and you are Till, and you are Aren."

"Yes," Filador replied humbly.

"You may rise."

"Thank you."

"Why are you here?"

"We are from Lindor, and our homeland has been overrun by-"

"Why are you here?"

Filador was annoyed with himself. Always answer quickly and directly, he thought. Aloud, "We wish to ask you for a small force to help retake Lindor from the Drii."

He paused, very briefly. "No."

Filador nodded. "Thank you for your time. We will go." He rose and turned to leave.

"What are you doing?" whispered Till.

"Quiet!" hissed Filador.

But Till shook his head. He turned around to face the king once more. "Your Majesty, pardon my rudeness, but we need your help very badly. Lindor has been

overrun. Our people are all but enslaved. With the support of Kanigon, we could perhaps drive them out.”

Filador bowed. “I apologize for this, we will be leaving now..” He shot a meaningful glance at Till.

“It’s all right,” the king replied. He turned to look at Till. “Normally such disrespect is not tolerated, but this is something of a special case. My answer will not change, but I will at least give you a reason why.” He sighed. “The Drii cannot be beaten. I have tried. When I first took office as king of Kanigon, I decided I wanted the Drii out. So I tried. I rid the city of Tikks, drained my offices of Mires, and fortified the walls. For an entire month, I held off their assaults. For an entire month, Kanigon was a glorious island of freedom in the midst of the Drii Empire. But the battles didn’t stop. They just kept coming, stronger and more powerful each time. Finally they overwhelmed us.” Another pause. “I think they only let me keep my job as a living proof; what better king for a city than one who knows the Drii cannot be overthrown?”

“But surely the Drii are not unbeatable!” This from Aren, who had been listening to Diaro speak for some time now and could contain herself no longer. “Any enemy can be overcome, it’s just a matter of having the proper equipment, the right strategy...”

“Let me tell you something about strategy,” Diaro replied. “When I set out to keep the enemy out of my gates, I planned it for months ahead of time. I made maps and consulted all my top generals. I had plans for all possibilities, armies deployed here, archers there, strategic point thus-and-such and backup plans for every occasion. But you know what? You draw your forces on your maps, and you make your little strategies, and you think you’re ready. But when the time comes, all you see is a black wave

coming over the horizon. That's it. No strategy. No resistance. No fighting back. Just a big, black wave of Tikks that comes over the horizon. They swarm your army, they swarm your walls, they overrun your city and they break into your palace. You can't stop a wave, you can only take shelter." He looked at them sadly. "I wish you well."

They left.

Chapter 6

By the next morning, they were on the road again. Till had expected Filador to be disappointed, but he was not. "I didn't think it was all that likely he would help," he explained. "We had to give it a try, and we did. But there are many other places we can search with much greater promise of achieving results."

"Speaking of results," Aren replied, "what's our next target?"

Filador pulled a map from his backpack. "Here," he said, pointing. "Mount Avalanche. A good way south from here, should take a few days to get there."

"Mount Avalanche. Nice," commented Till. "And why, pray tell, is it called Mount Avalanche?" He shook his head. "This ought to be interesting."

"Well, regardless, it's the home of a very mysterious race of creatures called the Klickers. Just about the only thing we know about them comes from what we don't know, which is everything."

"Which means...?"

"Which means that they are very good at keeping themselves hidden, and that alone says something about them. Anyone who can keep that inconspicuous for that long is worthy of our attention."

“And what makes you think that you can succeed in finding these... Klickers... where others have failed?”

Aren grinned. “Because we have, shall we say, a very strong motivation for finding them. If the Klickers are there, we can find them, one way or another.”

Till was dubious. “Assuming, of course, that we survive long enough to get to the top of Mount Avalanche and find them.”

“Of course.” Filador pointed. “This way. Are we ready?”

They were off.

It took them two days to make the journey, and they made it in the shadow of the gargantuan mountain ahead of them. It was not actually that huge, but the prospect of climbing to its top made it seem much larger than it actually was. Still, though, spirits were as high as they had been since the beginning of the journey, and packs were still full from the stop in Kanigon. They made camp at the base of Mount Avalanche on the night of the second day of their journey.

The next morning, the trio awoke feeling refreshed and alive. Mount Avalanche constituted a genuine challenge and they were eager to face it. They made their way up the mountain largely in silence, with Filador leading, Till following him, and Aren last. It was not a difficult trek and the path was easy to find, so they made good time.

About halfway up the side of the mountain they began noticing the crystals.

Aren was the first to find one. It was hidden largely by plants and almost covered by soil, but she saw the gleam out of the corner of her eye and was intrigued. She began clearing away the debris that covered it, and her mouth dropped open in awe. She stared

for a moment, then quickly uncovered the rest of it. “Till!” she shouted. “You have to come and take a look at this!”

They had been resting after a more difficult section of the climb, and now he was perched on a large moss-covered rock. He climbed down and ambled over to her.

“What?”

Aren pointed. “That!”

And there it was. A crystal, as large as a watermelon and gleaming brightly in the afternoon sun. It was generally spherical, but covered in gleaming facets as though it had been cut. His reaction to this brilliant gem was no less than hers, and Filador was quickly summoned to have his turn at viewing this marvel of geology.

“Incredible,” he said. “I’ve never seen one that big before. Let me measure it...” He ran ahead to retrieve his pack, and came back quickly bearing a tape measure and various other assorted instruments the use of which Till could not begin to fathom. “Now, let’s see...” he murmured. “Diameter... 28... surface texture... I’d say it’s a 17.2 on the Turble Scale... now, how to test the color...” He rambled on for a while longer, making all manner of measurements while the remaining two members of the party remained to admire the beauty of the crystal itself.

As they pressed on, however, they began realizing that the crystal they had seen was not an isolated incident by any means. Other gems began showing up everywhere, lodged in rocks, covered by vines, and occasionally just sitting in the middle of the trail waiting to be found. They varied greatly in size, but none were smaller than the one they had first seen. Huge as it had appeared at first, it now seemed a tiny speck compared to some of the monstrous jewels they later encountered. They found many that were larger

than Till himself, and a few the size of horses. However, the larger the crystals were, the more irregular they tended to be. The only ones that looked vaguely round were the small ones.

They set up camp that evening about two-thirds up the side of the mountain, determined to make the remaining climb the next morning. Together they decided not to risk a fire lest they attract attention to themselves and perhaps scare off any of the mountain creatures. They went to bed, therefore, at sunset, but Till did not fall asleep immediately. He lay awake on his blanket, comforted by the warmth of his wife sleeping peacefully next to him. He turned slightly to study her face for a moment, then looked back up at the sky once more. The stars had always held a certain fascination for him. He was not an astronomer in the usual sense of the term, and knew only a few of the basic constellations, but nonetheless the view above him captivated his interest. Each star seemed separately and brilliantly alive, each star a distant beacon that called out to him quietly. The crystals on the mountainside were breathtaking, but they were nothing compared to the majestic panorama that spanned above him. He simply lay staring at the sky above him for a few moments, contemplating nothing in particular.

Till looked to his left and noticed Filador equally fascinated by the sky. The scientist noticed his gaze and smiled. “Quite a collection, isn’t it?” he asked.

“I’ll say,” he whispered, not wanting to wake Aren. “Make you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Wonder? About what?”

“I don’t know. Nothing specific.”

Filador laughed. “It makes me wonder too, I guess. All those stars up there, and us down here. Where’s the stairway? How do we get to where they are?”

Till shook his head. “No idea.”

“Well, neither do I. I’ll let you know if I find it.” He turned away again. “I’m getting tired,” he told his companion. “Good night.”

“Good night,” he returned. And with a last look at the sparkling view above him, he too closed his eyes and faded quietly from consciousness.

And an hour later, none of them were awake to hear the quick, chattering clicking noises echoing in the darkness around them. The clicking lasted for nearly an hour, shooting in bursts of muffled noise from concealed areas all around them. And then abruptly it was gone, leaving only the quiet radiance of the crystals in the background, glinting in the starlight.

Aren stirred uneasily and blinked her eyes open. She sat up and looked around for a moment, verifying that everything was all right. Her eyes focused on Till, sleeping silently beside her, and she pondered briefly whether she should wake him. But as much as she strained her ears, she heard nothing out of the ordinary, and saw only the stark figure of the mountainside silhouetted against the moonlight. Satisfied, she lay down again and quickly fell asleep once more.

Chapter 7

They resumed their journey with renewed enthusiasm the next morning, enjoying the cool mountain air as it swept cleanly across their faces, cleansing them and pulling them forward. The path was becoming a bit more difficult, rockier and steeper, but they

enjoyed the challenge. And the farther up they went, the more abundant the crystals became. By the time they reached the peak several hours later, there seemed to be more crystal than normal rock. Till also noticed that the birds and occasional small animal that had crossed their path earlier no longer appeared; it was amazingly quiet near the top.

Just before they came upon the actual summit, a cave was discovered the likes of which they had never seen. It was high enough for them to enter without ducking and not very deep, but it was incredible nonetheless; for it was completely covered and filled with the crystals of the mountain.

They grew from the ceiling and sprouted from the floor, covering the walls in a transparent glow. The crystals seemed to have a light of their own, filling the room with a pale sparkle even in the shadows. Filador in particular was fascinated by the display and filled whole pages of his notebook with scribbled observations about the cave. Aren and Till simply stared in wonder. They stayed there for nearly an hour in admiration before completing the last remaining section of their journey.

When they did reach the peak, it was extraordinary. They had caught glimpses of the view as they climbed, but nothing compared to the sight of Kylar below them in all directions. Kanigon was visible from the top, a tiny speck now in spite of all its grandness before. They had their lunch there, at the summit of Mount Avalanche.

But in spite of all, Filador remained rather quiet and detached. When Till inquired about his well-being, he explained. “The whole point of coming up here was to find the Klickers. But we haven’t seen anything alive besides animals yet, and we’ve climbed all the way to the top. I’m not sure what to think.”

“We might still find them, on the way down. And even if we don’t, I wouldn’t call this a wasted trip.” He gestured to the grandiose spectacle around them.

“No, but we haven’t achieved our goal yet, and I don’t want to fail twice. But there’s something about this place...” He paused, uncertain. “I have a theory. I’ll test it later.” And that was that.

When lunch was over and they were finished enjoying the view, the three of them began the long, slow voyage downward. They had not gotten far, though, before Filador stopped them again. Nobody complained, as their legs were tired from walking, but clearly he had another purpose in mind.

He walked a little way ahead from his companions and found the crystalline cave once more. This time he did not enter the cave, but stood at the entrance for a few minutes studying the interior. And when he was finished, he tested his theory.

Feeling like a fool, he addressed the crystals themselves.

“Hello,” he said.

Nothing happened, so he repeated his greeting, with the same result. He shrugged and continued. “We’ve come a long way,” he explained to the cave. “Our town is called Lindor, and it was taken over by the Drii. We need your help. Will you help us?”

Nothing.

“We’ve heard you are called the Klickers. Whether that is your right name or not, I cannot say. I’m sure you want to be left alone, and I would like to respect your privacy. But if you are powerful, we need your help. Will you help us?”

Still nothing.

“Please! If you won’t help us, at least speak to me! At least let us explain our situation! Please!”

Nothing happened. By now he was feeling extremely silly and beginning to think that the crystals were nothing more than they appeared. He decided to make one final attempt at communication with the creatures he suspected were the Klickers.

“I apologize for interrupting your solitude. I know you wish to be left alone. But hear us out! The Drii will conquer you, too, if they are not stopped. We seek allies in our fight against the Drii. Will you not at least give us a chance to discuss this?”

Again the crystals were silent. Filador sighed and turned to go. He had begun walking away from the cave when he heard it.

Wait.

It was the strangest sensation he had ever had in his life. The word was not spoken aloud. In no way did he perceived the word “wait” as such. Rather, the concept of waiting was inserted directly into his mind. It was simply an idea, a suggestion that he should not go, presented so subtly that he almost believed he had thought of it himself. He turned back to the cave.

“What did you say?” he asked.

Wait. We will listen. We will speak. Wait.

Filador stared at the cave in wonder. “Who – what are you?”

We will show you.

One crystal dislodged from its place in the ceiling and fell to the ground. It rolled out of the cave and assumed a position a few feet away from Filador. The crystal made a sharp clicking sound and a large portion of it jutted out. Another click, and part of it

became thinner. Through a series of transformations accompanied by a chorus of clicks, it assembled itself into something which vaguely resembled a foot and part of a leg.

Another crystal broke free from its place on the cave wall and rolled over to a position near the first. It transformed from spherical to foot-shaped in similar fashion, though a bit more rapidly this time. The clicking sounds came closer together as it assembled itself into a near copy of the first, a foot and part of a leg that looked as though they had been sculpted out of glass.

Two more crystals rolled over now and turned themselves into the upper portions of legs, and with another click attached themselves to the knees of the first two crystals. Slowly at first, but with growing rapidness as the bizarre statue neared completion, a human being was formed out of crystal. Torso, chest, arms, and neck, all took shape through a series of quick clicks and metamorphoses until, at last, a crystalline human lay on the ground, eyes staring up at the sky.

And then, slowly, uncertainly, the creature rose. And it was then that Filador realized what it was. It was a life-sized representation of him, he saw. The pseudo-Filador approached him and spoke once more in Klicker fashion.

Hello.

For a moment he could only stare in wonder at the sparkling, multifaceted creation in front of him, marveling at its framework and admiring its design. At last he worked up the courage to speak. “Ah, hi,” he said. “Would you like to see my friends?”

Yes.

Filador, still uncomfortable in his role as ambassador for the human race, led the Klickers to Till and Aren. At least he understood now why they were called Klickers;

they clicked constantly. Whenever they transformed, whenever they moved. Every time the creature took a step, all its joints clicked, forming a constant background noise that was oddly not annoying. Filador only hoped the Klickers could be convinced to help.

“Till!” he called out when he came near. “Aren! I have someone I’d like you to meet!”

Curious, they came quickly and looked in amazement at the thing behind him. “This,” he said simply, “is a Klicker.”

“That’s a Klicker?” asked Aren.

“Well, actually it’s a bunch of them together. The Klickers don’t look like this, normally. They are transformers. Normally they look like...” He pointed at one of the myriad crystals lying around the trail. “Well, like that.”

Till approached the crystalline creature. “You – represent the Klickers?”

It nodded, its head gleaming and clicking as it moved.

“And – will you help us?” Aren inquired.

The thing considered. *We have not decided yet. Explain your situation to us.*

“What was that?” Till asked, surprised. Aren glanced at him.

“You heard it too?”

“That,” replied Filador, “is the Klicker method of communication. I think. They speak in thoughts and ideas rather than actual words, and they don’t say anything out loud.” He looked at the pseudo-human. “Makes sense, I guess, when your natural form doesn't have a mouth. Anyway. To answer your question, Klicker, I would be happy to explain our situation. It’s really rather simple; as I said, we are from Lindor. Lindor is the name of our hometown. Do you know where that is?”

Yes.

“And do you know what the Drii are?”

Yes.

“Well, the Drii recently overran Lindor, and we barely escaped alive. We are trying to build up a force to retake our home. Will you assist us?”

It considered. Assist how?

“Any way you can. Anything you could do to help would be appreciated.”

The Drii rule Kylar already. What difference does it make if they are more strongly concentrated in one area? They still rule.

“Yes, but life is most unpleasant for the citizens of Lindor right now, I am sure,” broke in Till. “If we could drive them out, things would improve.”

The Drii would not allow it.

“If we win the battle, they would have no choice!”

It would not stop there. The Drii would not allow it.

“Just like Diaro,” muttered Aren. “Listen, Klicker, or whatever you’re called, if we don’t make a stand to the Drii, they will simply rule us forever. Eventually they will take you over, too. Is that what you want?”

No.

“Then help us! Help us fight them! If we have a strong force, we can beat them! It’s just a matter of trying hard enough.”

There was a long pause. We will assist you.

Filador breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you!” he said. “We were afraid nobody would listen to us!”

When and where will the battle take place?

He looked to Till uncertainly. “Till?” he asked. “When do you want to attack?”

Till thought for a moment. “How about Misselon?”

Aren nodded. “That should give us about enough time.”

“All right, then.” Filador addressed the Klickers again. “Meet us at Silver Rock on Misselon Day, and we will plan our attack from there,” he said. “Do you understand?”

Misselon Day, or simply Misselon, was a holiday celebrated by all the human cities of Kylar. The holiday had been around so long that nobody knew exactly what it celebrated anymore, but the traditions remained and it was a good excuse to sing, dance, and throw parties. Filador was not entirely certain that the Klickers had heard of the holiday. He suspected, though, that they had other means of gathering information.

Yes. We agree. We will be there.

Its business completed, the humanoid figure began to separate into its component crystals once more. Aren watched the process in fascination. When it was almost done, a thought came to her suddenly.

“Wait!” she said. “I have a question.”

The crystals did not stop their transformation, but responded nonetheless. *What is your question?*

“Why is this mountain called Mount Avalanche?”

The creatures gave what she could only call the Klicker equivalent of a laugh. *We wish to be left alone, it explained, and not all visitors are as friendly as you.* And with that they rolled away.

The trio exchanged glances. The ability to create avalanches at will? Perhaps their newfound allies against the Drii were more powerful than they had first believed!

They resumed their journey with greater confidence now that they had convinced someone of their point of view. The trip down was much easier than the way up, and by that time the next day they had reached the bottom once more. With a last longing glance towards the mountain, the group began traveling south towards their next destination.

They had not gone far when they encountered a man camped out near the base of the mountain. When he saw them, he rose and approached the group. A sword was sheathed at his belt, and he carried a shield in his left hand. “Good afternoon,” he said cheerfully. “I was wondering when you’d get here.”

Chapter 8

“Who are you?” inquired Till.

The man bowed. “Bardon,” he said. “From Kanigon. I’ve been following you ever since you left. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Following? Why?” Aren demanded.

“Because your cause intrigues me, and I wish to join it. That is my request; that I be allowed to accompany you on your quest.”

Filador paused. “How do you know about our quest?”

The man who called himself Bardon shrugged. “Not many people oppose the Drii. When someone does, word spreads quickly.” He drew his sword. “If allowed to join, I would not be dead weight on your journey. I am well-equipped to travel, and I can

defend your party from attacks. I am a master of the sword, the shield, and the bow. Observe!”

Bardon reached for his bow and drew an arrow from his quiver. He pointed to an apple hanging from a tree a hundred feet away. “You see that apple?” He nocked an arrow to his bow. “Watch in wonder as I split it in half with an arrow!”

He lined up his eye with the arrow, studied the apple for a moment, drew back his arm, and let loose the shot.

It missed.

“I, ah... Even a master of combat makes mistakes from time to time. Watch in wonder as I split it in half on my second try!”

The trio watched as he pulled out another arrow, lined up his target, and fired once more. It also missed, this time by a larger margin than before.

“Ah. Well, mastery is a difficult thing. Still, though, I have much to offer you. If you would like to see my skill with the sword-”

“That will do,” Filador assured him carefully. “And we need support of any variety, regardless of skill level. If there are no objections from my companions...? Then you may join us. Welcome aboard.” He shook the man’s hand, smiling.

Bardon nodded. “Certainly. Thank you for having me. Now, if I may ask... where is our current destination?”

“South,” said Filador, “to Saliban, my hometown. Perhaps we may find better luck there than in Kanigon. At least we must try.”

Bardon nodded. “Saliban. Good choice. But it won’t be a simple matter of convincing a king; Saliban is run by a council, like Lindor. You’ll have to convince them.”

Filador nodded. “Yes, I’d thought of that. But our friend Till here is quite a persuasive speaker. I think he can convince them.”

Till grinned. “Well, I can’t make any guarantees, but I’ll give them a run for their money. We shouldn’t have too much trouble.”

“Which reminds me. What were you doing on Mount Avalanche?”

“We were, ah... drumming up support for the cause,” explained Aren.

Bardon’s mouth dropped open. “The Klickers?”

“The same.”

“They’re real?”

“That they are.”

He shook his head. “I never knew... I mean, I’d heard, but...”

“We didn’t know either, until we met them. They’re, ah, quite unique.”

“I would imagine.” Bardon looked around. “So, are we ready to get going?”

As they set out on their journey once more, Bardon entertained them with stories from his own rather extensive travels across the land of Kylar. He had been born in Kanigon and spent most of his life there, he said, but he had traveled abroad extensively as well. He, too, had climbed Mount Avalanche, or so he said, albeit more than ten years ago. Among his myriad other self-proclaimed exploits were the exploration of the Ivory Sea, defeating a Tikk in single-handed combat, and riding a unicorn. Filador snorted at the last one.

“Unicorns,” he said. “There aren’t any unicorns in Kylar. No such thing as a unicorn.”

“And how do you know that? The Klickers were real, weren’t they?”

“The Klickers were real, yes. But I’ve never heard any two stories of a unicorn coming out the same. In your story it was little more than a horse with a horn on its head, but in other tales unicorns had all sorts of other fanciful properties such as teleportation, healing, telepathy... No limit to people’s imaginations.”

“How do you know it’s imagination?” asked Aren. “Kylar is a magical place. There’s no telling what people might have seen, when magic is involved.”

Filador muttered something under his breath.

“What’s that?” she said.

He shook his head. “Nothing.” But seeing their inquiring looks, he felt obliged to explain. “There isn’t any magic in Kylar,” he told them.

Aren blinked. “Of course there is. Magic is everywhere. The entire world is magic. Every leaf, every rock, every animal. It’s what makes things work.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. How can you say everything is magic?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, slightly annoyed.

“How would you define magic, Aren?”

“Well, I... I hadn’t thought about it much, I suppose. Let’s see... Magic is something wonderful that defies the normal laws of science and the way we understand things to work.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. If everything in the world defies the normal laws of science, then what point is there in even trying to understand our lives?”

“If we understand the nature of magic, we can understand our world. Are you trying to say that something as miraculous as a flower blooming happens completely on its own, without the help of magic?”

“Yes.” He stared at her for a moment, then looked to Till. “What do you think, Till? Is there magic in Kylar?”

“Well...” He gave an uncertain glance at Aren. “I don’t think that the entire world is magic, exactly. But I can’t believe the other extreme, either – that there’s no magic anywhere. We just saw the Klickers, didn’t we?”

“And what makes you think the Klickers have magic?”

“You saw what they did! The mental messages, the transformations... how can such feats as those be performed without magic?”

“In the same way that a man can be made to die when he is far out of range of a sword. That is called a bow, not magic. Ignorance of a subject does not make it magical.”

“I, for one, agree with the scientist here,” commented Bardon. “I’ve seen a lot, but nothing yet that tells me for sure that magic is behind what we see. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“A dismal attitude,” Aren returned dryly, but she made no further comment. The journey continued.

The more he talked to Bardon, the more Till liked him, but Aren seemed to be ignoring him for one reason or another. Till did not pretend to understand the minds of women; Aren, for her part, spent more time with Filador than with her own husband. The scientist seemed not to notice.

When they ended their travels for the night, Aren brought out a notebook and pencil and began sketching the scenery. Till and Filador did not comment on this, being mostly used to her occasional artistic flashes, but it drew Bardon's interest. He ambled over to where she was sitting on a rock and watched her over her shoulder for a few minutes.

"What are you doing?" he asked finally.

"Drawing," she told without turning around.

"I can see that."

"Then why did you ask?"

He shook his head but did not respond audibly. Aren continued her sketch. Mount Avalanche was still visible from where they were, and she was doing a hasty pencil rendition of the sun setting just over its peak.

"The Klickers," he said finally. "What were they really like?"

"The most incredible things I've ever seen. Made of pure crystal, able to change shape at will, and speaking without mouths or voices."

"I'd like to see that myself, someday."

"You could see it right now if you wanted. It's just a day's journey back to the mountain."

"Someday," he repeated. "Not today. I want to come with you."

She put down her pencil and turned to look at him for the first time. "And why is that, exactly?"

"I told you. I want to help you fight-"

"The Drii. Yes, so you said. But why?"

“What do you mean? The Drii took over your town. That’s not their right. It’s just basic justice.”

“So that’s it? You’re helping us because you’re in a charitable mood? Yes, I can see you just radiating benevolence. It’s incredible,” she said dryly.

“I don’t have to be helping you,” Bardon snapped. “Why should I justify my assistance?” She didn’t say anything, so he sat down on the ground nearby and looked at the sun setting over the mountain. A moment later he muttered, “Diaro is a fool.”

Aren arched an eyebrow. “Ah, so now we have it. What about Diaro?”

He shook his head. “Not a fool, perhaps. But he’s grown soft. He won’t fight the Drii anymore, and if he won’t, neither will anyone else. There’s no resistance anymore.”

“What can he do?”

“Free Kanigon!” He slammed his fist into his palm. “Drive out the Mires and their slimy Tikk lackeys. Take back the capital of Kylar!”

“He tried. Forty years ago, in the Battle of Kanigon. He fought for a month. But they couldn’t hold out against the Tikk armies. There was nothing they could do.”

“Nothing they could do. How do you know? Were you there?”

“No. Were you?” she demanded.

“Yes!”

She paused, and Bardon continued. “I was five, but I remember it. The Black Wave on the horizon, just like Diaro is always telling everyone. One defeat is no excuse for forty years of surrender. We need to wash Kanigon clean of the filth that sticks to it. You’re the only ones with any real spirit around here any longer.” He stood up. “I’ll leave you to your drawing.”

Bardon left, and Aren remained behind staring at the sunset until it was too dark to draw anymore.

Chapter 9

Saliban was a large town, larger than Lindor, although nowhere near the massive sprawling streets of Kanigon. There was no wall around the outer edges and few guards even at the main entrance, but it felt safer than the capital city nonetheless. No Tikks hid in dark corners here, no secret eyes spied on the unwary. It felt...cleaner, somehow, than Kanigon.

The streets were laid out with geometric precision, all right angles and no curves. Each block was exactly the same as all the others, excepting variations of absolute necessity, and those were minimal. The houses fit in perfectly with the overall design; each one was a perfect cube. The doors were perfect rectangles in the center of each house, and each house had one window on each side except for the front. The roofs were slanted almost imperceptibly downward as a way for rain to drain off; if the city had been built in a desert, the houses would no doubt have been flat on top as well. Any part of the city that was not in perfect formation with the rest was as it was only as a minimal concession to the twin necessities of nature and the human population. It seemed more like a giant checkerboard than an actual human residence.

At first.

The stark, sterilized feeling gradually disappeared as the group saw more and more of the city. The appearance, they realized, was mostly superficial. Filador led them to an inn he knew, a place he said had good prices for wandering travelers. The others

followed him carefully, wondering how he could find his way around in a place with so few landmarks, but his memory served him well and he led them there in good time. From the outside, the inn looked almost identical to all the other gray cubes in the town, but inside it was entirely different. It was, in fact, mostly the same as any other inn they had visited; music played, people talked, and the innkeeper showed them to their room with a smile. The buildings all seemed larger on the inside than out.

Once arrangements were made for a place to stay, Filador became their willing guide to the city of his birth. He led them around town eagerly, showing off this or that bit of town history with an unrestrained fondness. It was odd for Till to come here, having heard about it for so long in Filador's stories but never having seen it before. Saliban had a great deal more history surrounding it than might be believed at first sight. It seemed that the city had been largely ignored by the Drii, for reasons unknown to locals. At any rate, Saliban had a legacy of science and reason that dated back to the area's earliest records. Unlike Kanigon, which held soldiers in high regard and littered its streets with entertainers, Saliban's cubic residences held some of the greatest minds in Kylar. It was rumored that the first wheel had been made in Saliban.

The pride and joy of the city and Filador, however, was the Great Library. Like all the surrounding buildings, it was a gray cube, but it was a cube that took up an entire city block and towered over all the surrounding buildings. In a rare splash of color, a bright red border surrounded the main entrance. In Saliban, this tiny area of red had the same effect as a solid gold sign would have had in other cities, so stark was the contrast with the surrounding buildings. "The Great Library of Saliban" was inscribed in deep gray letters high above the front door.

The interior was no less impressive, filled with more books than most people would see in a lifetime. Every shelf showcased an array of colorful book covers, ranging from tiny thin paperback books to bound monstrosities of the printed word. A hundred colors spread across the sides of the shelves in a brilliant rainbow of multicolored hues and textures that dazzled the eye and boggled the mind. It was the intellectual equivalent of a house of gold.

Filador led them breathlessly through the hallways, past walls stacked to the ceilings with assorted volumes of every shape and size, past avid readers climbing ladders to get to their favorite stories on the top shelves. They pressed on, past long tables filled with open books being examined by Saliban citizens of all ages, past all the wonders of the first floor, up the stairs and into the next room. Past the entire collection of books on the second floor, through the heaped up stacks of pages on the third floor, past the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth floors, each containing information in magazines, maps, every type of book imaginable, newspapers, and all manner of publications that Till had never even heard of before. Past all this, and more, until they reached the top floor at last.

Filador led them further into the massive room, past all the contents of the walls and shelves and to the very end. Not waiting for his three companions to catch up to him, he ran up to the shelves of books on the opposite wall, tracing his finger over book after book after book until-

-he-

-found it.

He smiled and selected a massive tome from the shelf in front of him. It was gigantic in size and had to have at least three thousand pages in its entirety. He hefted it quickly and then set it down on a nearby table with care.

The cover was dark brown, and the only words on the cover were bright gold in all capital letters: the title.

“Ten years in the making, and revised twenty times over five decades. The product of over a thousand of the finest historians the world has ever known. A year in the editing, and with an introduction by King Diaro himself.” He turned to Till and smiled again, pointing to the cover. “The History of Kylar,” he proclaimed.

“What’s in it?” Till asked.

“What’s in it? Why, this is the story of our entire continent ever since we began writing anything down at all, and from a good deal earlier as well! The sum total of all the kings, queens, princes, dragons, wars, adventures, and alliances since before your grandfather’s grandfather’s grandfather was a little child! This is the grand story of the ages, and every word is true!” He paused to take a breath, and Bardon interrupted.

“Well let’s see it, then!”

Filador nodded. “Of course!” He reached out and opened the aged cover gently. “Chapter One.”

He showed them the history of the Drii Empire, the exploits of the first king of Kanigon, paintings of the founding of Lindor, an essay on what was known of the inhabitants of Mount Avalanche (“That will have to be updated,”), the stories from the Time of Dragonslaying, and map after map after map of every town, city, forest,

coastline, and river imaginable. It was a wealth of information and, for Saliban, a treasure beyond price.

Filador took pride in naming off story after story from its pages. One legend in particular he had found particularly fascinating, and he showed it to them now. “From the Time of Dragonslaying,” he said. “There are countless stories in here of heroes who slew monstrous dragons, but they all have one thing in common: the Death of the Dragon. According to the book, the Death of a Dragon was a sight to behold. Here – I think this passage describes it. ‘And at last the great beast perished. With a cry like thunder and a roar like an earthquake, it sailed to the ground. The collision made avalanches pale by comparison. And when it fell, the slayer ran quickly, for he knew what the fall meant. For every dragon, in its dying throes, exploded in a flame to outshine the sun and turn midnight to noon, a fire that turned stone to cinders and bone to ash, a heat that could destroy a forest. Some of the greatest fires in history have come from the Death of a Dragon.’” He sighed and closed the book.

Aren looked at Filador, smiling. “How much of it have you read, Filador?” she asked.

His eyes lit up. “My dear lady, you are looking at the only person alive today who has read the entire History of Kylar cover to cover.”

Till’s eyes widened. “Cover to cover?” He took another look at the volume on the table. “How long did that take?”

“The better part of a year, but I did it. And I have no regrets. In all the world, a finer piece of literature is nowhere to be found.” He looked up at the ceiling, as if noticing the library itself for the first time. “This brings back memories,” he said softly.

When they were through poring over the myriad stories of the great book – Filador had read it completely, but neither Till nor Aren had any such ambitions – when they were finished examining its pages, they set it back slowly on the shelf and began examining the other far corners of the Great Library of Saliban. If the History of Kylar was the prize jewel of the Library, there were still many other gems to interest even the casual reader. Everything seemed to be here, and the Master Librarian was there to help anyone find anything they didn't see. The job of Master Librarian was a highly respected title in Saliban, and many candidates trained for years in the hopes of one day achieving it. Filador told them privately that in all his years in Saliban, whenever he had wanted any text, he had never left this building without finding it.

The rest of the day was spent there, and they left with the setting sun and the closing of the library's doors. The inn where they stayed was quickly located once more, and everyone quickly settled down for the night.

Bardon was just about to snuff out the lamp that lit the room when a thought came to him. He looked over at Filador, lying in bed with his eyes closed. The scientist did not seem to be asleep yet. "Filador?" he said softly.

He rolled over and opened his eyes to look up at Bardon. "Yes?"

"Why did you leave Saliban?" It was an idle question, a curiosity that had not occurred to him to ask before.

When he asked it, Filador paused and blinked once as if stunned. Bardon shook his head. "Never mind. It's not important."

"No, it's all right. I've been thinking about it a lot lately anyway, being back here." He sighed. "Her name was Tylene, and she was visiting Saliban to do some

research about the Ivory Sea. I met her in the Great Library a few days after she came. We started talking, and I asked her where she was from. Lindor, she said. I had never been to Lindor and she had never been here, so we had a lot to talk about.” He sighed again. “Her visit only lasted two weeks, but she started finding excuses to come back. I certainly didn’t mind. Tylene was as intelligent as she was beautiful, and she felt the same way about me that I felt about her. I asked her to marry me on the top floor of the Library. She said yes.

“We traveled south to Arnit Town and had our honeymoon there. It was the most wonderful week of my life. And when it was over, we traveled back to Lindor, to start our new life together.

“It was only ten years after the Battle of Kanigon, and the Drii still had a presence in Lindor back then. The black flag was everywhere. Still, though, we were happy. We lived our lives as if the Drii were not there, so far as we could, and we were happy.”

He took a deep, ragged breath. “And then one day, a Mire came out of the Council Chamber to give a speech. We listened, like everyone else. On the way back to the Chamber, the Mire passed us. I bowed, as was expected of us, but Tylene didn’t see it. She was facing the other way. They took it as disrespect.

“A Tikk came up to her, raised up a tentacle, and extended a claw. He stabbed her in the back. She didn’t scream, just fell to the ground. The Mire moved on like nothing had happened. Nobody said anything.”

He spoke with a forced calmness, staring straight ahead. “A week later, I came to a meeting of the Council. The Mire was speaking again, telling the Councilmen how to enforce discipline better in the streets. Right there, in front of everyone, I stabbed it.”

He blinked. “Eighty-six times.”

Filador shook his head. “Right in front of the whole Council. When the new Mire came to replace the old one, they launched an investigation, but they never found out who did it, or where the body was. Nobody said anything.”

He looked up at Bardon. “And I’ve lived in Lindor ever since.”

Bardon’s mouth went dry. He couldn’t think of anything to say. “I’m sorry,” he managed.

“Yes,” responded Filador. “So am I.” He snuffed out the lamp and went to sleep in the darkness.

Chapter 10

Making arrangements to speak before the Council of Saliban was even easier than getting an audience with King Diaro. The Council, Filador informed them, met every week to discuss current events, and anyone who wished to speak had a chance. And the meeting, as luck would have it, was this afternoon.

The initial stages of the Council meeting were incredibly dull, comprised largely of one group of Councilors arguing against another group while a third party played mediator. The debates apparently held significance to those present, and indeed Filador seemed to be watching with some interest, but to Till and especially Aren the entire procedure seemed to be nothing more than a monumental waste of time. When the arguing ended two hours later with no noticeable results, it was only because their time allotted had ended. It was the citizens’ turn to speak.

A woman rose and spoke for ten minutes on the subject of taxes, demanding an explanation for the recent increases. She was given a quick, simplified answer – apparently this was a common concern – and she sat down, unsatisfied. Another woman told the Council that she had been unfairly charged a fine by the Great Library for an overdue book. She claimed the book was not overdue and the Librarian had his figures mixed up. A bored-looking Councilman told her it would be looked into. A man asked for a pardon for his brother, who was apparently a criminal being held in the city prison. The request was denied. On and on, one after another, the citizens of Saliban demanded answers to their problems, and one by one the Council dealt with each situation, usually by shrugging it off. Till didn't blame them; he was a council member in Lindor himself, and knew how monotonous the job could be.

When it was Filador's turn to speak, he stood up and addressed the Council. "I request a private audience," he said.

There was a muttering among the audience at this; such requests were rare because it was assumed that any concern that had to be addressed privately was something of which the public would not approve. It was a legal right that all citizens possessed, however, and it was granted. The rest of the audience filed out of the chamber quietly.

The doors shut, leaving only Till and Filador, the two speakers, and Aren and Bardon as concerned parties. The head Council member eyed Filador uncertainly. "What is your concern?" he asked.

"My concern is with the Drii," he replied calmly, and the Council whispered fiercely within itself now. The Drii were always a matter of interest, whatever the reason.

“You may speak,” he was told.

Filador bowed. “I believe our case may be made most eloquently by my friend here.” He pointed to Till. “I leave the floor to him.”

He sat down, and Till took the stage. “Thank you,” he said, slipping quietly into the Council-speaking mode with which he was so familiar. “I come from Lindor, to the north. As you probably know, Lindor was recently overrun by Tikks. This was a direct result of a rebellious act by the citizens of Lindor. However, I do not believe the invasion was justified.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is not the Drii’s land,” he said. “The Drii have no claims to Lindor. They have no claims to any land in Kylar, or any land at all beyond their own stronghold on the Isle of Terror. They have no right to rule us.”

“They conquered us,” the Councilman observed.

“That,” Till replied quietly, “is a mistake I intend to rectify.”

More quick whispers followed, and the Councilman stared at Till intently. “What do you mean by that?”

“The Drii,” he said, “have become far too powerful. They have conquered not only our land, but our spirits as well. It must end here and now. It must end, and children must look once more to the flag of Kylar as the proper symbol of their heritage, rather than the black rag the Mires fly. It is time to free Kylar.”

“I do not think there is a man, woman or child in Saliban who would disagree with you, in private at least,” he said, “although perhaps in Kanigon it is different. But

the problem is an old one. Freedom is not our concern; prosperity is. What are you asking, exactly?"

"Soldiers," Till told him. This time there was open gasping from the Council. He continued, ignoring the comments. "A force of a few hundred, perhaps a thousand, soldiers to retake Lindor. To spark a revolution."

By now the Council members were in an uproar. The head member banged a gavel against the desk to silence them. He studied Till once more and considered his words carefully. "What you ask," he said slowly, "is impossible. I could not agree more with your intentions, but if soldiers of Saliban are seen fighting the Drii openly, it could well bring the full force of their Empire against us. I have no wish to see the armies of Atara emptied on our city."

Till thought of Filador and grimaced. "Nor do I. But there are ways of protecting you. The Drii, for instance, need not know what town your soldiers come from."

"And how can I ask a thousand men to ride to their deaths for a town many of them have never seen?"

"Well, you can ask for volunteers, of course; I'm sure you would get plenty. But this is not just for us. Saliban would benefit also. All of Kylar would benefit if it were freed from the Drii yoke."

The man shook his head slowly, sadly. "I'm sorry. I want very much to support your cause. But I don't think I can. I can't take responsibility for the lives of everyone in Saliban."

Filador stood up abruptly. "Then what if I did?"

He blinked. "Excuse me?"

“Don’t do it in the name of the Council. Go to the army and ask for a thousand volunteers to fight the Drii, privately. Say a man named Filador asks it of you.” No response came for a moment. “Please. We need this.”

The man thought about it for a few moments longer. At last he sighed. “Leave us,” he said. “We will discuss this and vote on it in private.”

Filador nodded and left. Outside, he spoke to his companions calmly. “I’m not sure if I have convinced them or not,” he said. “I think I have, but it is hard to say. I believe what the man said; he wants to fight the Drii. He only needs a way to prevent them from striking back at Saliban. I think I have provided him with such a way. We shall see.”

Aren opened her mouth as if she were about to say something, but then thought better of it. She leaned back against the wall and waited.

Twenty minutes later, the door opened once more. Filador entered. “Well?” he asked.

“You may have your soldiers,” he said.

Filador bowed. “Thank you. You will not regret the decision.”

“I hope not,” he responded dryly. “When is the attack to take place?”

“Misselon Day, at Silver Rock.”

“They will be there,” he said. “You have our support. Now go.”

They went.

Chapter 11

For all of Filador's fondness of his hometown, he showed no great desire to stay. They left the very next morning, at dawn. It did not seem they were in any danger of starvation, since each city at which they stopped provided new sustenance to refill their packs. They resumed their journey on a bleak note, the clouds turning gray just as they left Saliban's city limits. They had not gone half a mile before it began to rain.

This was the first time precipitation of any kind had fallen since their journey began, and they were getting soaked. Quickly they sought shelter under a nearby oak tree for protection from the weather. This served them well until lightning started arcing across the sky, at which time the risk of being crushed by a falling tree outweighed the discomfort of being wet. They resumed their trek, donning what protection they could muster to stay dry in the rainstorm. All except for Bardon; he strode on stalwartly, undaunted by the rain that was now falling in thick sheets across the sky. Till thought privately that Bardon, weapons expert or not, would have little trouble in any weather.

The rain did not stop for several hours, and when it did they unanimously decided to rest by the side of the now-muddy trail. Extracting loaves of bread and various other food from their soaked packs, they ate a quick lunch while enjoying the rainbow forming over Mount Avalanche, still just barely visible on the horizon.

By another unspoken but nevertheless unanimous decision, the break from walking continued another hour as the party took the opportunity to rest. Traveling across Kylar could take its toll on anyone, and these four were no exception. In the end, the stop to eat lunch took over two hours.

It was not until they picked up their supplies and began moving south again that the attack came.

They did not see the Tikks until they were surrounded. Eight of them, eyes gleaming black and claws bared. Dimly Till realized that if the Tikks had wanted them dead they would be so already; they must have some other goal. But Tikks couldn't speak to tell them what their master wanted, and there wouldn't be a Mire all the way out here, so...

Oh, no.

A man stepped out of the nearby woods and advanced on them slowly. Nothing marked him clearly as a servant of the Drii, but it could not have been clearer from the way he walked, the look in his eye, and the unconscious tendency of his right hand to drift towards the hilt of his weapon.

Just about everyone did what the Drii wanted, they were almost as universally feared, and a few even liked them. But this... It was always sad to see any human become a true, willing servant of the Isle of Terror. Sad, and more than a little scary. For all the terror that a Mire held, it was nothing when compared to the horror of a human mind twisted to the purpose.

Such Drii servants, though, were all too common these days, or so it seemed. The man glanced around for a moment, then settled on Bardon as the apparent leader of the group. He drew his sword and pointed it at Bardon. It was not really necessary to threaten him with it – the surrounding Drii did a very effective job of that on their own – but it served to give him an air of command.

“Which one of you is Till?” he wanted to know.

Bardon drew himself to his full height, leaving the man staring up at him by a considerable distance. The advantage it gave him was purely psychological, but it threw his opponent off guard. “Why do you want to know?” he demanded.

“That is not your concern.” He thrust the blade of his sword to within an inch of Bardon’s throat and held it there a moment. “Tell me. Now.”

Till did not share Bardon’s apparent confidence, but he had no wish to see anyone else hurt because of a question as simple as this. He stepped forward. “I am Till. What do you want?”

The man smiled a clean, evil smile. “Come with me.” He began walking away and motioned for Till to follow. With a quick glance to Bardon and Filador and a lingering gaze at Aren, Till obeyed. The Tikks watched him carefully but made no move to stop him.

When the Drii-servant had gone some way, he turned back to Bardon and smiled again. “Kill them,” he told the Tikks, and turned once more.

Chapter 11

Claws gleaming brightly, the Tikks began circling the trio, closing in for the attack. They slowly advanced in on their prey, their eyes reflecting neither the wild instinct for killing seen in animals nor the cold, calculating air of a swordsman attacking an opponent; rather, they showed something completely and chillingly different, an alienness that stretched to the depths of their souls.

If they had souls.

Bardon had been watching the Tikks warily all this time, and now he decided action could be delayed no longer. A brief glance to his sword was of no avail; an armed man was a match for a single Tikk, and a sword master could perhaps take two at once, but in single combat eight Tikks were as deadly as a thousand. He looked back to Till, walking away slowly. “You fool!” he cried suddenly.

Till turned, startled, thinking the comment had been directed at him. But Bardon wasn’t looking at him. “You idiot!” he shouted. “You moron! You utter lump of useless vegetable matter! What have you done?”

The man with the evil smile turned around, confused, and the Tikks paused in their attack. They did not understand what was going on, but they knew something was afoot and they did not want to get in the way of any plans their masters might have. Even such as they knew that a living enemy could be used and killed later, while a dead enemy was permanently dead. They watched and waited.

“What did you say?” the man demanded.

“I said,” Bardon told him through gritted teeth, “that you are a fool. I could have had them! Don’t you see, you idiot, I could have had them! But no, you come barging in with all the intelligence of a pebble and ruin the entire affair! You fool!”

“What madness is this?”

“Madness it is not. I have been following them all this time, tracking their movements, watching who they talk to, keeping pace with them every step of the way. By the time they got back to Lindor, we could have had them! But no, now we’re going to have to kill them! All because of you!”

Aren and Till were watching the exchange with wide eyes, exchanging occasional incredulous glances. Bardon, a spy? A traitor? Filador's face did not betray his emotions, but he was privately berating himself for accepting the man so easily. Meanwhile, the Drii servant was thoroughly and completely perplexed. "You're... you're on our side? You serve Izm?" he managed.

"You're on our side?" asked Bardon mockingly. "You serve Izm?" He sneered. "YES, you forsaken idiot, you blundering dullard, I work for the Drii too. Don't your commanders tell you anything? Or are all Mires as stupid as you?" He pointed at Till. "And him! Of course he's important, but you don't just go traipsing in here and picking him up like he's a parcel to be delivered! Think, man! If Izm wants him so badly, he must be very important – and probably very dangerous."

The man looked quickly from Till to Bardon to Filador and back to Till, completely confused by now. The Tikks were watching Till exclusively, as if waiting for something to happen. And Bardon, towering in bellowing rage, was drawing his sword and brandishing it wildly. "Go back to whatever slimy hole you crawled out of and report to whatever mindless creature you work for that the situation is under control!" The man hesitated, and Bardon gave an extra twirl with his weapon. "Go, before you become as dead as these two!"

Slowly, uncertainly, and utterly terrified, the man went. He made a quick motion with his hands and the Tikks followed him, all eight of them. Within moments they were gone, leaving only Till, Aren, Filador, and Bardon left standing beside the muddy trail.

Bardon, with sword still in hand, turned to face his companions once more. "Well, that should hold off the Drii attacks for a little while longer, anyway," he said,

sheathing the blade carefully. He noticed all three travelers were gaping at him.

“What?”

Filador stared a moment longer, then shook his head. “That was,” he said, “the most masterful piece of deception I have ever seen.” Till nodded agreement.

Aren looked at Bardon. “Nice,” she told him. “A little too convincing, but nice.”

He bowed to the group in general. “Glad to be of service.”

And with that minor interruption resolved, the journey resumed.

Chapter 12

The actual situation, however, was quite serious indeed, and it raised plenty of dangerous questions about their quest. First of all, the man had singled out Till in particular for capture; the others had been considered of no value, and had been left to die. This indicated that the Drii had some special interest in Till; but what?

Secondly, it proved that Drii forces knew exactly where they were and what they were doing. This was, to say the least, not a good sign. Up until now, they had gone completely untouched by enemy forces. They had taken this to mean that their adversaries were ignorant of their plans; now this inaction indicated planning rather than blindness. It meant they had to stay constantly on alert. Bardon’s ruse would not last long; as soon as their attackers reported back to their superiors, they would find that Bardon was not a spy at all and would send more forces to finish the job.

Their aims, therefore, were threefold: swiftness, stealth, and misdirection. Swiftness to stay ahead of the Drii, stealth to avoid detection by the Drii, and

misdirection to keep the Drii guessing. They did not know if it would work, but they had no choice, and Misselon Day was approaching.

Arnit Town to the south had been their next objective before the Drii attack. It was generally decided that they should continue as planned, although their enemies now knew where they were going. However, to avoid detection as well as possible they now stayed off the main path and traveled exclusively in the nearby woods. It was slightly more difficult than the main road, and still dangerous, but need drove them on. Three days later they came to Arnit Town.

Arnit Town was unique in their journeys thus far in that nobody present had ever been there before. Filador and Bardon both knew a few things about the town but would not say much; they, like Till and Aren, were anxious to see it for themselves. When they arrived at last it was quite a sight to behold.

The town itself was nothing particularly spectacular, being of roughly the same size as their native Lindor. The houses were not much different from the norm, although they tended to favor the color blue in decorations and shingles. There was no wall and no main gate. It had neither the clean, clear-cut appearance of Saliban nor the grand majesty of Kanigon, and might have been just another town out in the wilderness somewhere but for one thing.

The water.

It seemed to be everywhere in Arnit Town. Great stone-laced fountains hurled water into the air in huge, sweeping arcs. Networks of canals flowed along every street and under every bridge. Clear, sparkling pools dotted the sidewalks while waterfalls dived over the tops of buildings to come splashing down into the pristine basins below.

Status was indicated not by gold or silver but by the intricacy of the water system around one's house. Water splashed from the tops of people's houses and bubbled down grooves in the stone to cascade over rocks into crystal-clear ponds in green yards. The entire city seemed to be alive with the motion of water through rivers, in lakes, overhead, underfoot, and in every direction imaginable. It was an incredible experience.

As they walked the streets of the city, though, the travelers encountered the most incredible sight of all: water-weavers. These were people who performed aquatic feats the way jugglers did tricks and musicians played. Armed with a portable array of tubes, siphons, pumps, and spouts, they amused pedestrians by shooting a stream of water into the air and catching it in a crystal goblet, creating bubbles and setting them free to hang in the emptiness, and lighting a candle under the arc of a fountain. The myriad sleights of hand and masterful tricks they performed seemed to be of little interest to many of the city's inhabitants, but to Till and his companions it was a sight to behold. It took them hours just to find an inn, pestered as they were by the water-weavers, but the distractions were more entertaining than annoying.

The inn, a small cottage-style building called The Silver Marlin, featured much less aquatic decoration than most of the surrounding neighborhood. They had hardly settled into their room when a quick knock rattled the door. Till rose to answer it.

It was a woman in her late twenties bearing a piece of parchment in her hand. She wore a deep blue sash across her chest. Executing a quick curtsy, she smoothed her hair and addressed Till in a tone that tried to be commanding. "Her Majesty requests your presence in her court immediately," she said. She handed him the parchment. "I suggest you comply."

Hastily Till scanned the document. It was written in ink, a flowing script that wandered gracefully over the page. At the bottom was a large seal stamped with an intricate picture of a crescent moon.

“What does it say?” asked Filador.

Till read it aloud while the messenger waited impatiently. “To the honorable travelers Till of Lindor, Aren of Lindor, Filador of Saliban, and Bardon of Kanigon: Her Royal Majesty the High Queen of the City of Arnit, the Honorable Lenisa Manira II, henceforth invites, requests and demands the presence of the aforementioned persons in her Royal Court in the City of Arnit, at the moment of delivery of this document by its respected bearer of said document.”

“Which means,” the messenger told them, snatching the paper away from Till once more, “that you are to waste no time in coming to visit Queen Manira as soon as possible or she will be quite upset. I suggest you get ready, unless you plan to arrive like that.”

Till examined his own clothing and glanced at his companions. “What’s wrong with what we have on?”

She muttered something and shook her head. “If that’s the best you have then there’s nothing to be done about it, I suppose. Let’s go. Follow me.”

They went.

The messenger led them wordlessly through the main roads of the town, bypassing numerous water-weavers who no longer even glanced at them as they passed by. The main palace was much smaller than Diaro’s, but it served its purpose: to be the most needlessly grandiose building in the town.

The main entrance, which their guide entered without even a second glance, dazzled the eyes of those four not yet used to Arnit Town's skill with water. Eight separate streams of water shot overhead and crashed down quietly on the other side, four on the left and four on the right. Twenty other water jets interweaved an intricate pattern above the doorway, each missing the others by mere hair's breadths. The sides of the doorway were covered by nearly invisible waterfalls that shimmered down the sides like liquid paper. And in spite of all this, the floor was completely dry. That was the mark of expertise in Arnit Town; to be able to fashion works of art with running water and keep it entirely separate from the viewer physically. To dip one's hand in the actual liquid of any design that made use of running water was considered incredibly rude, or so they had been informed. Till did not care to test the accuracy of that assertion.

Onward they went into the heart of the palace, past a plethora of water fountains and spouts that were as beautiful as they were pointless, which is to say that they were very beautiful indeed. Long before they reached the actual throne room they knew exactly what Queen Manira looked like due to the innumerable statues, paintings, tapestries, and myriad other likenesses of herself the queen had displayed everywhere. Aren frowned. She had not even met this queen yet, and already she didn't like her; she seemed too arrogant, too interested in the status of royalty rather than the responsibilities. King Diaro hadn't been like this.

Filador, for his part, was troubled largely by the invitation itself. He could not understand why they had been invited. Was it about the attack on Lindor, or had they done something wrong? He didn't like not knowing.

If Bardon was nervous about the summons, he did not show it.

Their messenger turned guide let them into the main throne room, curtsied once more, and left. The woman's curtsies seemed much more an official formality than any gesture of respect; certainly she seemed to regard the travelers, and Till particularly, as people who were quite unworthy of her attention. Once she was gone, Till put her out of his mind and concentrated on the throne room ahead.

It was decorated as lavishly and aquatically as the rest of the palace, and on a huge throne in the center sat the queen herself. She stood when she saw them and gave them a welcoming smile while her attendants watched silently. "Welcome, welcome!" she said. "I hope my messenger wasn't too terribly rude to you; she always seems to be in a bad mood." She clapped, and four chairs were quickly brought before the throne. "Please, sit down," she said, and did so herself.

Queen Manira was undeniably beautiful, a woman who seemed to have both the charms of youth and the wisdom of the ancients. Time seemed to be a thing that had little meaning for her; it would have been nearly impossible to guess her true age. Her hair was golden and cascaded over her shoulders with no less grace than any of the waterfalls in her palace. Her deep green eyes watched each of them carefully as if trying to see who they were and of what value they could be. She was tall, and she wore a brilliant blue dress that seemed to shimmer when she walked. Her scepter was golden and set with a sapphire on the end. She seemed utterly comfortable in the luxurious environment that surrounded her.

"You are perhaps wondering why I have brought you," Queen Manira told them. "It is simple. I have heard of your quest and your designs for Lindor. I think the entire

idea is simply marvelous, and I want to offer you assistance. You'll accept, of course."

It was not a question.

Filador stepped forward and bowed awkwardly. "Ah, thank you, Your Majesty," he offered. "What manner of assistance is this?"

"Three thousand of my strongest troops to meet you at Silver Rock on Misselon Day. The Drii," she said, wrinkling her nose, "simply disgust me. They have those nasty tick-things, the black creatures, and then those monstrous gray bugs that slither like snakes... Oh yes, and of course I heard about what happened to your friend, ah, Myrtle did you say his name was?"

"Marrott," Till said humbly.

"Marrott, of course," the queen purred. "Yes, a despicable business, simply awful. Of course, it wouldn't have worked if they'd tried it on me, of course. I have my guards to protect me." She gestured grandly to the servants around her, some of whom were armed with spears.

You fool, thought Bardon. If the Drii wanted you, you would be a pathetic target. Aloud he replied, "Of course, Your Majesty."

"So," the queen continued easily, "I believe that concludes our business here. I trust you find my offer satisfactory? Yes, of course you do. I hope you think well of Arnit in the future. You may leave." She dismissed them, and servants appeared to lead them out of the palace.

Chapter 13

“Well, that was easy,” was the first thing Till said after they had been dismissed. “We didn’t even have to do anything.”

“Too easy,” Bardon replied. “I don’t like it. Success just doesn’t fall in your lap like that.”

“Well, regardless, it would seem we have little choice in the matter,” Filador told him. “And that certainly saved us some time in Arnit Town. I suggest we take advantage of the opportunity and press onward to our next target.”

“Which is...?” inquire Aren.

“Dorn,” Filador informed her. “The last human settlement for us to visit before heading back to Lindor. It’s quite a long way to the east of here, even if we were to travel to it in a straight line.”

“Which implies,” Aren noted wryly, “that we will not be.”

“Correct. The main road is sure to be watched by the spies the Drii have sent to keep an eye on us. Therefore we will take a much lesser-known route to the south. It passes first through a large, open hilly region known as the Hallot and from there into the Silent Forest. After that, it curves back up to intercept Dorn.”

“Lesser-known? And consequently, I take it, lesser-maintained?” observed Bardon. “Probably more dangerous as well.”

“In light of the Drii threat I’d say anywhere that they aren’t is safer than anywhere they are,” Till replied.

Filador nodded. “But we should be careful nonetheless. There are rumors aplenty about the Hallot and the Silent Forest and the creatures they contain. Caution will be prudent.”

“What kind of rumors?” Till wanted to know.

“All kinds. Rumors will do us no good. We must simply meet what we encounter as best we can. Let’s prepare for the journey.”

And so they did, and the next morning they were on the trail once more. The land south of Arnit Town was not the thick green tree-dotted plain they were used to; rather, it was quickly becoming the Hallot of which Filador had warned them. The grass became dry and brown and eventually faded away into dirt entirely. Cracks in the earth became more and more noticeable. Hills rose and fell around them like waves in an arid ocean. Animals of all kinds became more and more scarce.

The physical change had psychological effects as well. No longer could they hide under trees and behind rocks to keep away prying eyes. They felt now as if they were out in the open for the entire Drii Empire to see. It was a disquieting feeling with more than a little truth behind it. Their only comfort was that no Tikks could be hiding nearby either.

It was as frigid at night as it was hot in the daytime. The moon in the clear sky overhead seemed to drain all the heat from the landscape, leaving only the four travelers below to cling to their blankets and wish they could risk lighting a fire. Only the stars seemed comforting there on the outskirts of the Hallot.

It was on the morning of their second day of travel that they noticed the mounds of earth. Aren, the first as always to spot something new, pointed one out to the other group members. They approached it curiously and examined it. It seemed to be exactly as it appeared: a large pile of dirt on the top of a dry hill. The mound was massive in

size; at its peak it reached a height more than double a man's, and it was at least that big across.

“What is it?” Aren wanted to know.

Filador gave the matter a thorough examination, though he lacked some of the gusto present on Mount Avalanche due to the gravity of the situation. After taking careful notes observing the mound from all sides, he pronounced his analysis. “I don't know,” he said. “It's interesting, but as far as I can tell it's just a pile of dirt. Maybe we'll see more of them as we continue on, something we should be doing now anyway.”

Nobody else knew what it was either, so the matter was settled. And Filador was right; the mounds, whatever caused them, became much more numerous as they traveled. Eventually every hill they encountered seemed to have one of them at its peak. The group spoke little now, favoring hasty movement to chatter, but privately the mounds made Till nervous. He didn't know what they were; that didn't bother him, but Filador didn't know either, and that did bother him. Till was torn between a curiosity that made him want to understand the oddities and an anxiety that made him hope he would never know.

Whatever else might be said about the Hallot, it was certainly vast. There seemed to be no end to the miles of rolling hills that filled the dusty landscape. Clouds, trees, birds, and grass all seemed to have melted away to some other world; the Hallot was their world now. Always on guard but never seeing anything more exciting than the occasional dirt-caked pile of earth, they plodded slowly on towards the Silent Forest.

That night they made camp as usual, eating little to conserve their steadily decreasing food supply. Conversation dwindled with the setting sun and soon all four were asleep. It was then that the first inhabitants of the Hallot appeared.

A nearby mound shifted slightly, and a head poked through. It resembled the head of a large bird; short brown feathers covered it and black eyes shone with intelligence behind the long, slightly curved yellow beak. Its neck extended a few feet into the air and it sniffed the air, surveying the situation. Till and his companions were quickly located. Its mission completed, it retreated back into the ground, leaving the mound it had come from only slightly disturbed.

Moments later it returned, coming up completely out of the ground this time. The resemblance to a bird was not limited to its head; great brown feathers covered its entire body except for its feet, which were claws of the same color as its beak. When it moved, it shuffled quickly over the ground, kicking up small clouds of dust around itself. It walked over to the group of sleepers and peered at each in turn, examining their clothing and weapons with curiosity. It made surprisingly little noise, being careful not to wake the sleepers.

Now it shuffled back to the mound from which it had emerged and gave a short hiss. Five more creatures, each appearing identical to the first, came up from the hole that the mound concealed and joined their companion on the surface. More came from other holes all around, and within minutes the four humans were surrounded by about thirty of the large birds. The creatures hissed and snapped among themselves, arguing about what to do. Finally a consensus was reached.

One of the birds shuffled back into a hole. When it returned a moment later it was being followed by a woman. She was in her late seventies, long gray hair trailing in wisps and stands down her back. A brown cloak of the same color as the birds' feathers surrounded her, and she clutched it closely to her body to keep out the wind. She walked slowly towards the other birds clustered around the camp and pushed through them patiently to see what was in the center. When she came to the four travelers, she gasped in surprise and hissed a question to one of the nearby birds. It shot back a response, and she nodded her head. The woman cleared her throat and waited.

The largest of the birds stepped out of the group and faced Till. It looked around for a moment, then threw back its head and let loose a loud squawk. "REEEEEE!!!" it cried.

All four jumped up, startled. Their eyes widened when they saw the creatures watching them from all sides. Bardon was the first to regain his senses. "Who are you?" he asked, addressing the old woman.

She stared at him for some time before answering. "My name?" she croaked. "I hadn't thought about my name in so long I can scarcely remember. I believe my name is... Zoll. Yes, that sounds right. I am Zoll."

Aren stared at the woman. There seemed to be something odd about her she couldn't put her finger on exactly. "And what are your...friends here?"

"They call themselves..." She made a brief snarling sound. "I call them the Hallots, after the name of the area. And young lady, I don't know what your name is, but you are this group's only chance of getting out of here alive."

Chapter 14

The flock of land-bound birds herded them towards one of the mounds nearby. As they approached one of the Hallots cleared away some of the dirt, revealing an inconspicuous but very large hole in the ground. It was quite dark and slanted downward, apparently leading to the Hallots' underground home. Judging by the incredible number of mounds they had seen thus far, that home must be extensive indeed.

The woman who called herself Zoll led them in single-file procession through the pitch-black silent tunnels of the Hallots. The Hallots themselves followed behind them, making sure none of them tried any sudden escapes. Small chance of that; in the total absence of light that pervaded the tunnels, it was all they could do to walk without stumbling, much less find a way out. Vaguely Till wondered how the old woman knew where she was going.

After a time, Till felt something warm against his arm. It was Aren's hand, reaching for his in the dark. He took her hand in his and squeezed it gently, giving her what reassurance he could. Neither said anything, but he felt better having the comforting presence of her touch. Both dearly needed any comfort they could find in the omnipresent blackness.

Aren, in particular, was troubled. What had the woman meant when she said she was the group's only hope of survival here? She was glad that she would have a chance to help, but she did not understand what she could possibly do to save her companions, nor why Zoll had singled her out as the group's savior. She held her husband's hand tightly, peering into the blackness ahead and wondering whether this detour from the main path had really been worth the trouble after all.

At length Zoll whispered for them to stop, and they obeyed silently. Moments later they were blinded by a torch suddenly lit. The torch was followed by several others, continuing until the entire room was visible.

The chamber was large, perhaps fifty feet in diameter, and its ceiling more than half that in height, giving it a dome-shaped appearance. Five corridors led into the room; it was through one of these that the travelers had entered. Now all of the Hallots, satisfied that none of the humans had escaped, turned and departed through the corridors to leave them alone with Zoll.

“Welcome to the home of the Hallots,” she told them grimly.

“Who are you?” asked Filador. “You told us your name, but that’s not much information.”

“No, it’s not,” Zoll admitted. “Very well then. I am the only human ever to survive an encounter with the creatures around us.”

“What happened to you?”

She sighed. “The Hallots have ruled this area for centuries. I wandered into the Hallot long ago, before even the Drii arrived, when I was young. The Hallots found me and took me in. I learned their language and their ways until I was as much a Hallot as any of them. By now, they accept me. It’s not a bad life, I suppose, but I would surely love to see the fountains of my home once more.”

“You’re from Arnit Town?” asked Till, and she nodded.

Aren looked the woman in the eyes. “You said I was the only chance we have of getting out alive. What did you mean by that?”

“When the Hallots took me in,” she explained slowly, “they let me live for two reasons. Number one, I was unarmed, young, innocent, and naive; I did not present a threat. They were curious about me, and they knew I would do as they wished. And number two, I was female.”

“Female? Why was that important?”

“The Hallots are an all-female society. Every bird you have seen here today has been a female. They have no respect for males whatsoever, especially within their own species. The females are the decision-makers, the property-owners, and the rulers; the males are...” She searched for a proper word. “Pets.”

“And that’s where I come in,” Aren murmured.

Zoll nodded. “I suggest you three men give this lady a great deal of respect. Make it appear that she rules you with an iron fist, assuming that’s not true already. If the Hallots believe you have the same values as them, they might consider letting you go. If not...” She shrugged. “Well, they wouldn’t formally execute you, but unwanted travelers tend to be...forgotten.”

Bardon spoke for the first time since entering the tunnels. “Do you really think we have a chance of escaping?” he wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” she said. “All I know is this. If you do, you will be the first, and I have been here for fifty years.” The woman turned and left the room.

They spent the night there, sleeping on the cold ground in the slowly dwindling torchlight that filled the room. It was cold and dark and slightly damp down so far under the earth, and their lives might be forfeit in the morning. They had one consolation only: for this night, at least, they were safe from the Drii.

When Aren awoke she had no way of knowing whether it was morning; it was impossible to tell in the pitch black that surrounded her once more. The torches had apparently burned out, so by her reckoning she must have slept at least several hours. She sat up and hugged her traveling cloak close to her body, clinging to it for warmth in this cool, clammy room. Aren heard Till sleeping beside her and decided to wake him. It was probably time to get up anyway, and besides, she needed someone to talk to.

“Till,” she whispered.

No answer.

She poked him. “Till!”

Still no answer. A harder poke. “*TILL!*”

He sat up in the darkness. “What?”

“I don’t know. I wanted someone to talk to.”

“Me too.” He sighed.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to us.”

“Neither do I. Zoll seemed hopeful, though. She thinks you can save us, Aren.”

“I know. I hope it works. What does she want me to do, anyway?”

“Just act like you’re in charge, I guess. She says the Hallots respect women. So if we respect you they’ll like us and let us go.”

“I wonder if it’s that simple,” mused Aren. “I hate this place. The dirt, the air...and those birds...” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I just hate it.”

“I don’t like it either. But there’s nothing we can do but play along.”

“I know.” She blinked. “I hate this darkness. I can’t even tell if my eyes are open or closed in this place. I wish they’d bring another torch or something.”

Impulsively she reached for him in the blackness, and he put his arm around her and drew her to him tightly. It made her feel a little better, but not much. He wished there were something else he could do or say to comfort her, but he felt no better than she did; no words came to mind. So in place of speaking he simply continued holding her to him, listening the sound of her breathing and enjoying the warmth of her body against his. It wasn't much, but it was the best they could do under the circumstances.

Filador was up about an hour later, followed shortly by Bardon. They had little to say but made conversation nonetheless; discussion focused largely on what they should do next. The answer, as far as anyone could tell, was to wait for something to happen. So wait they did.

In another hour or so several more Hallots came, this time bearing torches once more. It appeared that they did not normally use torches, preferring the natural darkness that came with underground life. The rooms were obviously designed for the use of torches in emergencies, however; this chamber, at least, had a hole in the ceiling that led straight towards the surface as an outlet for smoke. The torches provided light, and once that was taken care of more of the giant birds appeared to bring food and water. The food consisted almost entirely of assorted fruits and vegetables with a little meat that Till didn't recognize; the water came in one large bowl that they were apparently expected to share. It would have been easier and more convenient for both parties if the Hallots had elected to simply bring them their own supplies from the surface, but certainly the human captives were in no position to complain. They ate their breakfast without relish.

It took them about half an hour to finish, having consumed most of the food they had been offered. When they were done, Zoll returned to speak to them some more.

“I trust your stay hasn’t been too terrible thus far,” she croaked.

“None too comfortable, either,” replied Bardon. “How do we get out of here?”

“Their queen wants to meet with you today, to see what business you have with the Hallots. Then she’ll decide what to do with you. The rest of your life basically depends on what the queen decides, and what she decides will depend largely on how you act. So be respectful, be patient, and above all, treat the lady here as your leader. Never speak unless she speaks first, and follow her lead at all times. And you, young lady – what did you say your name was?”

“Aren.”

“Aren. Well, Aren, you need to show some arrogance. Not to the queen or the Hallots – avoid that at all costs – but arrogance to your three friends here, and to any male Hallots you should happen to encounter. Try to treat them as another species rather than another gender; the queen should like that.”

“These male Hallots,” said Filador. “What do they look like? Are they really that stupid?”

“I suppose it would be easiest to show you,” Zoll responded after a moment of consideration. “Come with me.”

She picked a torch from one of the walls and led the travelers out through a nearby corridor and down another long tunnel. In time it led to another poorly lit room slightly smaller than the chamber they had come from. It was absolutely silent. But what was most interesting about the room was its contents.

Now, for the first time, they saw the males of the Hallot species.

The room was filled with cages hanging from the ceiling and mounted on posts on the floor. Each cage housed a single male Hallot. The males were large as birds went, but by Hallot standards they were small; each was only half the size of its female counterpart. They were much more brightly colored than the Hallots they had seen thus far. Gone were the dull brown feathers that covered the others; these creatures were brightly colored all over in varying shades of blue, green, red, and the occasional yellow. Their plumage was spectacular; their tails were half again as long as their bodies, and they had crests on their heads that shone like gems. Some wandered around their tiny cages, some played with toys, some ate seeds or drank water, and most slept. But all of them were in cages and none of them showed any sign of intelligence.

Aren was shocked. “These are the males?” she asked. “They have an entire half of their species locked away like – like animals – in little cages?”

Zoll nodded. “That’s it exactly.”

“Are they intelligent?” Filador asked, reiterating his earlier question.

The woman shrugged. “Who knows? These males certainly aren’t, but that doesn’t say much. How smart would you be if you were given no education whatsoever? They’re simply not thought of on the same level as females. Their only purpose is to keep the species alive. If they weren’t needed for that, I suspect the females would let them all die away entirely.”

“And nobody tries to do anything about this?” inquired Till.

“Oh, there are a few radicals out there that demand that males be given the same treatment as females, but nobody listens to them. The government puts out an occasional

study that shows they are simply less intelligent than females and can't be treated equally; I suspect it's entirely propaganda. And some demand better treatment for them, but those protests are in the vein of saving endangered species; you may feel bad for the animals and want to help them, but you still consider them animals." She shook her head. "No, by and large it's just not an issue. It's how their society works."

She led them back to the room where they had slept. "All right, now listen carefully, all of you. The queen will see you in a few minutes. I am doing my best to help you escape and will continue to do so as long as I am able, simply because I don't want anyone else to be trapped here like I was. That's why I'm going to tell you a few things that are very important for you to know. First of all, when we enter the queen's chamber, only Aren may speak. It is absolutely critical that the rest of you do nothing but follow her and watch her. Aren, take every opportunity to assert your authority among the group. Also, be careful to speak and listen only to the queen. Do not speak to me; I will be your interpreter, translating your words to her and hers back to you, but ignore me completely. Your entire focus must be on the queen. And don't forget that you should only speak when spoken to, and again, only to the queen. Do you have any questions?"

"Are there any ceremonies I should follow? Should I bow or anything like that?"

"No. Just come in and stand where I show you to stand. The rest of you stand behind her. Answer her questions respectfully and truthfully, Aren, and hope for the best. Now, if there are no other questions...? Then we shall proceed to the queen's room. Come."

This time she led them into a different corridor, leaving the torch behind so that they had to follow her into pitch blackness again. The trip was quite lengthy, taking well

over an hour of solid walking with a great many twists and turns. As before, Till found himself amazed that Zoll knew her way around here so well. Fifty years in a place could do that for a person, apparently.

When they arrived at the queen's throne room at last, one of the first things they noticed was that it had a large fire going in its center; this was the first time they had seen any large fires underground here. It kept the room well-lit by Hallot standards; at any rate, they got a good view of the queen.

She sat on a large ornately carved wooden throne. The most surprising thing about her was that she was so unremarkable; there was nothing to distinguish her from any of the other Hallots they had seen here so far. She was not decorated, had no crown, no special plumage. Only the throne and Zoll's warnings set her apart.

As instructed, Aren approached the throne and stood what she judged to be a respectful distance away, looking at the queen. Her three male companions kept well behind Aren and did not lift their eyes from the back of her cloak. Till reflected that he did not envy his wife her responsibility; at least all he had to do was stand there and keep quiet, and that was something he could handle.

The queen stared at Aren for quite a while, examining their faces and their clothes. She glanced at the other members of the group for just a moment, but quickly dismissed them as irrelevant and unimportant. Her black eyes settled on Aren once more. At last she spoke, making a long, deep whistling sound.

“Why did you come here?” Zoll translated.

“I am a traveler on our way to Dorn to the northwest. I have come this way on a detour away from the main road to avoid detection by the Drii. I did not know this was your land,” she said, carefully referring to herself only and avoiding the word ‘we.’

“What business have you with the Drii?”

Uh-oh. These were not the kinds of questions she wanted to be answering. Tell the truth and keep it simple, she reminded herself. “I am wanted by the Drii Empire for opposing them openly. If I am found, I will almost certainly be executed.”

The queen’s eyes narrowed. After a moment she unleashed a series of clicks followed by a quick shriek. “This pleases me,” Zoll said. “We have no great love for the Drii. There have been more and more Tikks passing through here recently, and it is only a matter of time until they decide to interfere on our affairs. What exactly did you do to make the Drii Empire hate you?”

“We freed a very vocal opponent of Izm from prison and unleashed a small revolution on our hometown of Lindor. The Drii decided Lindor was getting too free-minded for its own good and took it over with devastating force. We barely escaped with our lives. Currently we are trying to build up enough force to retake control of Lindor.”

“I see. And how do I know that this story is true?”

While listening to this exchange, Till had been idly rolling a pebble around in his hand. He lost his grip on the stone and it tumbled out of his hand, landing with a small but audible thump on the ground.

Instantly Aren whirled on him, enraged. “SILENCE!” she shouted and struck him across the mouth with the back of her hand. She stared at him a moment longer, feigning anger, and quickly mouthed “I’m sorry,” silently before turning back to face the queen

once more. Till, stunned, wiped the blood from his lip; that had hurt! But as he forced the pain away he saw the logic of what she had done. What better way to prove her superiority than hitting a servant without provoking a response? That was the sort of spontaneous emotion that the Hallots would probably find more convincing than simple words. Still, he would do his best to keep quiet from now on; he had no wish to endure a repeat performance.

“I apologize for the interruption,” she continued brusquely. “As to the truth of my story, I can offer you only this. I have done nothing to anger you intentionally, and I have no other reason to be here except as a path to Dorn. Beyond that, I can do nothing but ask you to trust us.”

“Very well.” The bird on the throne sat in silent thought for well over a minute, staring into the fire with her great dark eyes. Aren began to wonder whether she should say something; the queen had been quiet for quite some time now. But at last she spoke again. “I have reached a decision,” Zoll informed them. “You and your males shall stay with us for another week. In that time we shall watch you closely. If at the end of that time we deem that you are not a threat to us, and are who and what you say you are, you shall be permitted to leave. Otherwise I shall have to make a decision as to how to deal with you. Leave me now.”

They left.

Chapter 15

The trip back to their room – they had come to think of the large chamber where they stayed as theirs, at least for now – was a long and silent one. This was certainly not

the decision they had been expecting. Better than a death sentence or a refusal to release them, certainly, but a whole week in this alien place? It didn't do anything to ease their tensions.

"You did well," Zoll told them when they had returned to their room. "I think she will let you go. Now it is a matter of time. But be careful and be respectful, of Aren and of the Hallots. They may still decide not to release you." And with that she was gone.

Later that night, when Bardon and Filador had gone to sleep once more, Aren stood by the fire with Till. "One more week," she sighed. "What if they don't let us go? What happens to Lindor then? The armies of Saliban and Arnit Town will show up there on Misselon and we won't be there to meet them. We'll just be a couple more heroes that didn't make it."

"Well, then, at least we'll be heroes that didn't make it instead of people that never tried."

"There is that. And what happens to us?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I wouldn't want to live here the rest of my life, but better here than Atara."

"And if they kill us?"

"I don't know," he said again, sighing. "Do you think it was worth it, to come all this way to fight for Lindor?"

"I think so. Don't you?"

"Yes, I do. If we can just get back to Lindor with our lives and our armies intact, it'll all be worth it." He smiled at her. "That's what this is all about, after all."

“I know.” She smiled back at him. “And I’m glad we’re doing it. I just wish there were some easier way.” Aren stared at him a moment longer and frowned, as if noticing the dried blood on his lower lip for the first time. “Sorry about that,” she said, tracing her finger over the spot where she had struck him. “I didn’t mean to hit you that hard. It was just for show.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

“Does it still hurt?”

He shook his head. “Not really.”

“Well,” she whispered, ignoring his response, “maybe I can make it up to you.” She lowered her hand to his shoulder, leaned forward, and brushed her lips gently against his. He returned her kiss emphatically, pressing his mouth tightly against hers in a glorious embrace that lasted for one perfect moment in the torchlight in spite of everything.

Then cold reality sunk in again and she released him. “What was that for?” he asked.

“I told you. For hitting you.”

“For a kiss like that, you can hit me again,” he said. And she smiled, a clear, clean smile with no trace of deception.

With morning came more breakfast, but no Zoll. They ate without company, which was fine with them. Over the course of the meal Filador counseled patience. “There’s nothing we can do but wait and hope,” he told them. “I think we have a good chance of being allowed to leave, so long as we do nothing to offend them. We pose no threat to them that I can see.”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” growled Bardon. “If they don’t let us go, I’m not about to sit around idly while the rest of my life disappears in this hole. One way or another, I’ll be out of here, and you with me if you have any courage.”

“If it comes to that, I will be with you every step of the way. But I sincerely hope it does not. I don’t think we have much chance of escape. We might make it to the surface, but how could we get all the way out of the Hallot without being seen? I believe our only real chance is for the queen to grant us leave.”

“And if she does let us go? What’s next? I’m very curious about this Silent Forest you mentioned.”

“Well, we’ll get a very close view of it ourselves if our journey continues as planned. We’ll have to travel quite a large section of the path directly through it. I don’t know how it got its name exactly, but from what I’ve heard travel through that region is at least as hazardous as the Hallot.”

“Where have you heard all these rumors?” Aren wanted to know.

“You hear a lot about the world when you live in Kanigon,” he replied, and Bardon nodded knowingly. “There are so many stories out there that they can’t all be true, but if half of what I’ve heard is correct, our trip through the Forest will be quite an adventure indeed.”

“What about you, Bardon?” pressed Till.

“As Filador told you,” he said slowly, “there are so many rumors that it’s hard to know what to believe. But there was one story in particular that made quite an impression on me. A man with only one leg told me about his trip through the Forest. He said there were creatures there that could crush your bones as easily as they could

look at you. Wouldn't say what they were; he just kept going on about how awful they were." He shook his head. "I'll never forget his face... the look he had..."

"Well, we'll find out if he was right soon enough," Till put in weakly, and Aren nodded grave agreement.

The next week was as much a learning experience as a time of uncertainty. They began to understand how Zoll knew her way around the tunnels so well and gained an appreciation for the skills necessary for navigation in the dark. They saw firsthand how the Hallot society operated, orders from the central royal figure trickling down to affect the lives of all citizens while the brightly colored subspecies of males watched silently from a distance. They saw what worked and what didn't in terms of Hallot etiquette, and the necessity behind their policy concerning strangers. Even the language barrier was melting away; by the time the week was over, Filador was already speaking phrases of the Hallot bird-speech. Till decided that Zoll was right; there were worse things than living out one's life here. But, he admitted to himself, he would be at Bardon's side in a heartbeat were an escape attempt ever mounted.

When the queen summoned them to appear in her court a week later, it was a simple affair; Zoll arrived in her usual fashion and told them what they had been expecting for the past seven days. It was time.

The queen sat on her throne as she had before, eyeing Aren with an odd curiosity. This time, though, there was no waiting around. Her pronouncement was immediate.

"You may go," she said, and without waiting for a response she dismissed them.

Zoll chuckled as she led them back out. "The queen is like that," she explained.

"A long time to make decisions, but once her mind is made, it is carried out instantly. I

imagine you're all pleased. Your supplies have been carefully preserved in the event that you would be released. This way. The tunnel on your left will go straight out, and it faces to the north; you should be able to find your path again based on that. Any other questions?"

Everyone was too stunned to say anything.

"All right then. I wish you all a fantastic voyage, and I hope you save your town." There was an undeniable twinkle in her eye as she said that last, but she made no further comments on the matter. As they turned down the tunnel to leave she wished them farewell, and then she was gone.

Chapter 16

For all the hidden dangers the Hallot concealed, the terrain itself was fairly easy going. All in all, it took them less than two days to travel from the Hallots' lair to the border of the region. That journey was easier than it had been in some ways; the mound-dotted hills, previously a cause for anxiety, were now a reassurance; they were a constant reminder that the worst threat in the area was now their ally. This was reassuring, but they had plenty of other cause for concern. The week the Hallot queen kept them had eaten up a sizable chunk of what precious time they had left. Filador explained that Dorn was now the only city left on their list, but even so Misselon Day was swiftly approaching and they could not afford to dawdle. He calculated that if all went well they should still be able to reach Silver Rock with more than a week to spare. However, for the four people highest on the Drii Empire's list of enemies, all going well was never a safe assumption.

When they reached the Silent Forest at last, it was a welcome change in scenery, despite the loss of security it represented. The border between the Hallot and the Forest was amazingly distinct; within a single mile the land had changed from the harsh, almost desert-like climate behind them into the vibrant viridian wood ahead. It was as if the forest and the hills were at odds, and this was where they marked the boundary.

Regardless, the forest soon became a sort of companion on their journey. The birds and insects that populated its dense flora formed a constant cacophony that was an omnipresent reminder of the forest's inhabitants. Whatever else the Silent Forest might be, it was certainly misnamed. It was not, however, threatening; everything seemed to ring with life, threatening any woodsman to try his hand in there. It was hard to imagine a Tikk hiding behind the trunk of one of these trees. Of course, the Drii could be anywhere, regardless of scenery, Till told himself. And there were other threats than those coming from the Island of Terror. If the man in Bardon's story had been telling the truth... What creatures lurked among these pleasant branches?

That question, at least, was quickly answered.

They had not traveled into the Silent Forest for more than an hour before they received their first taste of its inhabitants. This arrived in the form of a tiny creature not more than twelve inches long. Its body consisted of a rounded tube-like structure to which two wings were attached. The wings were partially transparent and flared outwards on one end of the body, shimmering brilliant green and casting a light green aura around the entire thing. It fluttered into their view in much the same manner as a butterfly and hovered there for a few seconds as if examining them.

Finally it spoke. "Go away," it said.

Bardon approached it with his sword ready. This was rather comical – it was difficult to imagine the massive blade being of any use against this tiny, agile creature – but he gripped it firmly nonetheless. He returned its eyeless gaze without flinching and replied in kind. “Why?” he demanded.

It flitted over to Aren. “Go away,” it repeated.

She held out a hand as it to touch it; it flew out of reach skittishly and hovered near Filador. He responded to its command calmly, feeling far more curious than frightened by this intrusion. It was, after all, little more than a glowing butterfly that spoke; odd, but hardly cause for alarm. “I will ask the same question as my companion,” he told it. “Why should we go away?”

This seemed to agitate it further. It beat its tiny green wings even more rapidly than before and approached Till. “Go away,” it reiterated.

Till smiled, amused. “We’re travelers,” he told it. “This is the safest route from Arnit Town to Dorn for us. We don’t have much of a choice. If you can’t give us a good reason to go away we’re going to continue.”

It considered that. After a moment it formed an answer. “I don’t like you,” it said.

This creature had become an interesting diversion. Till decided to play its game, if only to see where it led and what it wanted. “Why not?”

“You were not invited here. You are not wanted. You are a threat to us.”

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Aren said. “We didn’t even know you were here. If you hadn’t come to us and told us to go away, we never would have met you at all.”

The thing seemed confused by that. After a time it responded. “Come with me.” And it flew off, making it as clear as it could that they were to follow. As it was going in the same direction they had been traveling anyway, following it was simple enough.

“I’ve never seen anything like you before,” Filador told it as they walked. “What are you? And who are you?”

“I’m called Niva. I’m a Lyre. We live in the forest, and we don’t like intruders.”

“So where are you taking us?” Bardon inquired, slowly warming up to this newly impromptu group member.

“To the other Lyre,” she snapped back. “No more questions. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.” Its green glow turned slightly brown.

So the entire group followed behind the tiny Lyre with barely suppressed smiles. In spite of the ever-present danger of Drii detection, Niva’s miniature invasion into their world was a pleasant diversion on the trail. Whatever these Lyre might want with them, they did not think it was dangerous; the main feeling here was curiosity. The Lyre were like nothing Till had ever seen before, and the prospect of meeting more like Niva was undeniably intriguing.

Over time, a faint glow began to emerge in the forest around them. It was not so much a specific color of light but rather a vague blurriness that surrounded the party and twisted perception. The effect was not sinister, bringing instead a gradual sense of relaxation as it eased into their perception. As the hours passed, the effect grew more and more powerful. It lent an ethereal quality to the environment, the glow becoming quite intense but still not at all unpleasant. By the time they reached their guide’s destination, they felt as if they were in a dream.

Their destination, it seemed, was a large open glade in the forest. The glow here was dizzyingly powerful; apparently this clearing was the source of the effect. It was also the home of the Lyre, or so Till judged by what he saw.

More than a hundred Lyre hovered in the center of the glade, flitting about in a dizzying array of light and color. The effect was something like seeing a rainbow liquefied and spilled out, drop by drop, into the air. Some Lyre were green, some red, some blue, yellow, orange, or brown, and many were green like Niva. They sat perched on branches, soaring across the sky, and generally flying through space at incredible speed. Coupled with the glow that permeated the area, it was quite a marvelous sight.

“We have visitors!” Niva announced to the general population.

Chapter 17

Instantly every Lyre in sight stopped what it was doing and turned to stare at the four humans who had entered their realm. The blurriness disappeared with the suddenness and harshness of a shattered window, making them blink with surprise. It was as if the collective attention of the entire forest was focused solely on them, and it was a somewhat disquieting sensation.

A Lyre with bright blue wings separated itself from the group and approached Niva. “Why did you bring these creatures here?” it wanted to know.

“I did not know what else to do with them,” Niva responded humbly. “I have not seen their like before. I do not know what our policy is for such as these.”

“You know very well what our policy is,” the blue Lyre responded sharply. “What do you think the Aura is there for? Certainly not to allow every blundering

bumbling ape in the whole *terknik* forest to come stumbling into our home! The entire point of the Aura is to keep *ishta* things like those four out!”

“I know exactly what the *slavwiking* Aura is there for,” Niva returned, its previous tone of humility becoming quickly replaced by one of hostility. “And I don’t give an *evelbed* about the rules! We haven’t had a chance to speak with anyone from the outside for over a year! Not all the outsiders are hostile, you know.”

“It is not your place to-”

“Look,” Niva said emphatically, “the point is that they are here whether you like it or not. I had never seen them before. What are you going to do with them? The Aura won’t do you any good now, and we certainly aren’t going to use the Music against them.”

“You shouldn’t have brought them here,” the blue Lyre repeated. “*Ghelack* foolishness.” A brief pause. “What do they want?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. Well.” The four humans, previously ignored by the Lyre, were now addressed. “What do you want?”

Bardon stepped forward, assuming for himself the position of leader naturally. Aren noticed this and found it distinctly annoying, especially for one who had only joined their group recently. His hand was on the hilt of his sword as always in situations like this. “We’re on our way to Dorn,” he said. “We want nothing more than to come through here untroubled and reach our destination in peace.”

“And why are you in such a hurry to reach Dorn?” the Lyre inquired, doing its best to appear intimidating at twelve inches long.

Filador took a step forward, subtly replacing out Bardon as the apparent leader of the group. “We have business in Dorn,” he explained enigmatically. “It is not your concern. Let us pass and you will not be troubled by us again.”

“Yes,” it replied dryly. “So says every Mire that passes this way.”

Filador was taken aback. “Mires?” he asked. “What do you know of Mires? Do the Drii pass through here?”

Niva flashed bright red for a brief moment. “The Drii! Those *yrklen estfig querthezixonifinyebaniopat haquaravibn serliking depporii* animals? The *ofgabin* Tikks and their *rabbecix* Mire commanders? Those Drii? Yes,” it continued, “we know what the Drii are. Every year they remind us anew.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every year they send a Tikk,” the blue Lyre explained. “Just one, every year. Every year it comes and seeks us out. And every year it chooses five of us at random. No pattern, no explanation; just five. And every year it kills those five in front of us all. And then it leaves. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“That’s awful!” Aren exclaimed. “Why do they do it?”

“A Mire came through here once; apparently it had gotten lost. We decided to let it find its way here, rather than simply letting the Aura redirect it. We asked it why. Empire policy, he said. A nice reminder that the Drii are still in control. Helps cut down on revolutions, he said. That’s all.”

Bardon shook his head, dismayed. “That doesn’t even make sense from a political perspective. A policy like that sparks more revolutions than it prevents. I thought Izm was smarter than that.”

“Well it’s disgusting regardless,” Aren said firmly. She looked to Till. “I think we should tell them exactly why we’re going to Dorn. We could use their help.”

Till nodded. “I think so too. Filador?”

He considered. “Yes. Their assistance is much needed.”

Aren suppressed a smile. The decision was made without Bardon’s input; this gave her a certain satisfaction she could not entirely explain. Meanwhile the curiosity of the Lyre had been piqued. “What business in Dorn?” it asked again.

“We are on a mission against the Drii,” Filador told them. “We’re from Lindor, a town where the Drii recently took military control. We have reasons similar to your own for hating them; had they caught us, we would be dead. It is now our goal to build up a force powerful enough to destroy our enemies from the Isle of Terror and lead that force back to Lindor to retake what was ours. We travel to Dorn in order to ask their armies for support of our campaign. And that leads to my next question. May we have your support as well?”

Niva swooped down and hovered inches from Filador’s face. “You fight the Drii?” she asked, amazed.

“Yes,” he said evenly.

This caused a great deal of commotion among the Lyre community in general. Their blue ambassador dashed off to join in the discussion and keep things under control. Niva alone stayed with them. “You have given them quite a lot to discuss,” it said. “It will take them some time to come to a conclusion. Wait until then.”

The decision took them all of three minutes.

The blue Lyre flew back. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” it declared. “So we say. The Drii Empire is our common enemy; you are our friend. We will join your cause. When and where will the battle take place?”

“At Silver Rock,” Till told them, “on Misselon Day.” It was quickly explained to them exactly what those terms meant. When all was made clear in a way the Lyre could understand, Niva flew over to speak with its blue companion.

After a brief conference it announced their decision. “We wish to keep you no longer than necessary,” it told them. “Stay the night with us, and then be quickly on your way. And, with your permission,” it eyed Bardon uncertainly, “I will accompany you on your journey until you reach the edge of the forest, to ensure your safety.”

Filador nodded agreement. “That would be ideal,” he said.

The Lyre’s entire attitude towards the travelers shifted once their cause was understood, and they made good companions. All were desperately eager to hear any news from the outside world, and of course they received that in large quantities. They could offer nothing to eat or drink, but what they did offer was far more important: shelter. The exact nature of the Aura was explained to them.

“It is a barrier we set up long ago,” Niva told them. “According to our records, the Aura is the result of the first Music the Lyre ever made. It redirects all travelers into the forest away from this place. We live lives of seclusion, but it is worth the price; hardly anyone even knows of our existence. Of course,” it continued, “the Tikks apparently have no trouble getting past it. We haven’t quite figured that one out yet.”

“You keep referring to the Music,” Till said. “What is it?”

“The Music is –” it began, and paused. “You will see, at Lindor,” it said at last, and then it would say no more.

They slept soundly and were awakened early the next morning; obviously the Lyre did not wish to delay their travels in any way. Niva remained their constant companion throughout the trip, and it – a “she,” actually, they were informed – was good company. Aren in particular never tired of talking to her, constantly fascinated by her near-total lack of knowledge about the outside world and never tiring of revealing the wonders of Kylar to her. The entire group was fascinated by these discussions, and Filador found Niva’s philosophies on government particularly fascinating. Government, according to Niva, was an entirely unnecessary, unwanted, and unhelpful institution; they lived in such few numbers and in such close contact with each other that all decisions were nearly unanimous. Of course, there were so few major decisions actually made that the arrival of the four humans had caused quite a commotion; that decision, however, had been easy because of the universal hatred of the Drii that existed among the Lyre.

The Silent Forest, it seemed, was actually fairly small; according to Niva, their travels under its canopy would be over within two days or less. By the time they made camp to sleep for the second night in the forest, they were told, they were already more than halfway to the other side.

They slept under the branches of a large tree. Till lay staring at the branches above him sleepily as he pondered their situation. They should be out of the forest soon, Niva had said. As much as he found himself liking this place, that notion was appealing. The sooner they got to Dorn the better. And after that-

The tree smiled at him.

He blinked. *What?*

Not a real smile, of course. Real smiles were formed by people's mouths turning up at the corners to make a signal of happiness. Trees didn't have mouths, so they couldn't make real smiles, but even so a smile of any kind on a tree of any kind was bizarre enough that it warranted a second look.

What had happened?

Slowly Till understood. A smile actually had two parts. The first part, the one most people thought about, was the physical change in the mouth. But there was a second part, one that was just as important: the emotional part. With each smile comes an intent, a background feeling of the thoughts that formed to cause a smile to be created physically. It was those feelings he had sensed, as clearly as if he had seen the smile itself.

So the tree had not actually smiled. But if trees could smile, it would be like this. It was, Till realized, almost exactly the same feeling as he had experience on Mount Avalanche with the Klickers: a way of communicating without the trouble of using actual words.

Experimentally he reached out to the tree above him in the way he had spoken to the Klickers. *Hello?*

Again the smile. *Hello*, the tree replied.

Who are you?

I am Tree.

That wasn't very helpful. *I know you're a tree. What's your name?*

Tree.

Best not to force the issue. *Why are you talking to me?*

You look interesting. I want to help you.

Help me how?

You struggle with an enemy. I want to help you in your struggle.

You mean the Drii?

Yes.

Why would you help me?

Your enemies have caused more harm to the world than you have. This may be the only chance I will ever get to assist those fighting them. I want to help you. And I will.

Thank you.

And thank you for giving me this chance. I will be there when you need me.

Goodbye.

Goodbye.

It was not until the connection had been severed that Till thought to wonder of what use a tree would be in a battle, sitting in a forest miles away from the actual fighting. Well, it couldn't hurt. Any ally, however powerful, was better than nothing.

In the morning he informed the others of his conversation with the tree. This was met with only a small amount of skepticism; by now all four of them were used to the unusual. Niva in particular was not surprised.

“Yes, that’s the Tree, all right,” she said. “I suppose I should have warned you, but I really didn’t think it would communicate with you. It’s very rare that the Tree takes any interest in outside affairs.”

“What is the Tree, exactly?” Filador asked.

“All we know is that it’s intelligent and can communicate without sound,” Niva said. “Which you already knew. More than that I couldn’t say, but theories abound among the Lyre. Some say Izm himself put a spell on the tree before he turned bad. Others believe trees always had the ability to talk, and lost their magic over time. Nobody really knows.” Filador nodded, but his expression conveyed what he thought of both of those “theories.”

When breakfast was finished they packed up and left the Tree behind, traveling steadily towards the edge of the forest. As before, Niva played the part of helpful guide and avid conversationalist simultaneously. As such, she was the natural target for Till’s next question:

“Why is it called the Silent Forest? It certainly seems noisy enough.”

Niva considered. “I never thought about it, but I suppose you’re right; it does seem misnamed. Still, I might be able to give you an answer. There’s another legend the Lyre have. Long ago there was no forest here; the Hallot covered the entire region. When the forest was first planted – the records don’t say by whom – the Hallot fought back. Land has a way of getting into habits, and that land didn’t want plants. The plants grew, all right, but the conflict was so strong that no animals settled there for over a century before the Hallot relented, realizing the forest was there to stay. In that time it got called the Silent Forest, and the name stuck.”

Filador smiled. “That’s some legend.”

“Yes, it is.”

The time flew by, and by noon the next day the forest was behind them. Niva bade them farewell with only a touch of sadness. “I’ll see you on Misselon,” she said simply, and then she was gone.

Chapter 18

The grassy plain they now crossed was something of a relief after the enclosed forest, much as they had enjoyed the company of the trees, but it was not much comfort; all were eager to reach Dorn. With Dorn would come the final stop on their journey, and then – Lindor.

The battle. Till shivered to think of it; maybe Bardon found the notion glorious, but he certainly did not. Battles meant different things to different people. To Till, a battle meant that a large number of people would die. The fact that it was for a good cause did little to ease his conscience – or his fear. For himself, or for his wife. He looked over at her, walking along beside him. *She’s so beautiful*, he realized, not for the first time. He wondered, also not for the first time, what good it would do to drive the Drii out of his hometown only to see Aren dead. Would it be worth it? He honestly didn’t know. If only there were some way to keep her away from the worst of the fighting – but no. He knew better than that. Aren would never allow herself to be pushed anywhere away from the heart of the battle. That didn’t mean she wasn’t afraid, just that she wasn’t going to let that stop her.

She noticed him looking at her. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Aren shrugged it aside and continued walking. But Till could not stop thinking about the battle. He knew it was coming, and he knew it would be terrible, but yet there was another feeling that forced its way in alongside the terror. Hope? He had trouble believing it was that. Perhaps merely a sense of purpose he had not felt before. A realization that, at the very worst, his name would go down in the history books as a martyr. And at the best –

Kylar, purged of the Drii forever?

The thought sent a shiver up his spine. But he knew that if Lindor rid itself of the Empire, the other cities would not sit idly by and watch. Whatever happened, this was the start of something big. It had to be.

I wonder what the Klickers are like in battle? Till decided that he didn't ever want to be on the other side of them in a fight, and that was a good feeling, since they were on his side. He hoped. Who knew what secrets the mountain creatures held? And those Lyre...

Aren sighed. "Till," she said, "I can tell when you're worried. You keep looking at me. What's wrong?"

Had it been that obvious? "I just... I'm worried about the battle. That's all."

She didn't know what to say to that. "I am too. But it's what we're here for." She looked ready to say more, but stopped there.

Filador cut in then. "I've been doing some thinking," he said. "And I don't think you need to worry about the battle."

Till blinked. "What?"

“I don’t know what the outcome will be, but whatever happens, I don’t think you will be killed.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Since the beginning of this journey, we have been attacked by the Drii exactly once. Once! And even then, they did not seek to kill you, only us. They were none too difficult to fend off, either. And since then... nothing.”

It made no more sense to Aren than it did to Till. “What are you suggesting?” she asked.

“Only this: that Till, for one reason or another, is not in any immediate danger from any servant of Izm. Why this is and how long the protection will last, I do not know; but I fear that were it otherwise, we would all have died long ago. And I still do not know how much that protection extends over to the rest of us. We must all be cautious.”

Till shook his head. “It’s nice to know – if you’re right, that is – but I don’t know how much I like it. I’ll feel a lot better once I know why they’re leaving me alone. Surely not for any charitable feelings on their part.”

“Surely not,” Filador echoed softly. “That worries me as well.”

And it doesn’t do anything to protect Aren, either.

Regardless, the days and nights went swiftly. After leaving the Silent Forest, the road to their next target was relatively short; a few days’ travel brought them to the gates of Dorn.

After Kanigon, no other gates anywhere in Kylar could be truly impressive, but from the very start Dorn seemed a city bent on practicality rather than appearance. An

earthy ruggedness permeated the entire town, from the brown-hued buildings to the people themselves, who seemed as if they had been collectively carved out of granite. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry, but simultaneously there was not a hint of laziness anywhere; the effect was rather like a giant clock, with everything progressing slowly but in perfect time with the universe.

In many ways, Till reflected, Dorn was the exact opposite of Arnit Town.

It did not surprise him to learn, therefore, that in place of an elegant, superfluous queen, Dorn was ruled by a steel-eyed king who lived in a palace that wouldn't pass for an inn in Kanigon. The man's name was Gillon, and he ruled with an iron fist – a trait that was, apparently, a prerequisite for the job. The position itself demanded such characteristics; anyone who was not strong enough to command obedience would never make it to be king at all. That was not to say that he was cold-hearted or tyrannical; the subjects of Dorn would no more tolerate a bigot than a weakling. It meant only that he was competent, which was the important thing.

This information they gleaned from a combination of two sources: Bardon's own vast fountain of past experience, and pieces of information gleaned from the city's myriad inhabitants. The latter were far more helpful than the former; Bardon had apparently not spent much time in Dorn. Still, bit by bit they formed a good picture of the social structure of the city by the time they reached an inn with enough room for four weary travelers.

They picked the first inn they found and arranged to stay for a few nights before asking the innkeeper about making arrangements to see King Gillon. The man laughed.

“I thought you were foreigners, by your look,” he said. “That settled it.” He explained. “Nobody makes arrangements to see Gillon. It’s been said that Dorn hasn’t had a king in a thousand years, for kings wear crowns and hold scepters, and we haven’t seen anyone here matching that description for as long as anyone can remember. We don’t follow ceremony here; if you want to talk to him, go to his house and knock on the door.”

They were given directions – Gillon lived less than a mile away – and within a short amount of time they had arrived. The trip exposed them to a bit more of the city itself. If it could be called a city; Dorn, from what they could see, was smaller than Lindor, and their hometown hadn’t exactly been huge. Still, though, there was more than enough to keep their attention occupied as it was. Dorn was Kylar’s largest exporter of metal for its size, and it showed; the entire town seemed to move in time with the ringing of blacksmiths’ hammers on anvils. Peddlers roamed the streets searching for customers to buy various iron trinkets, but these, like the water-weavers of Arnit, were largely ignored.

When they reached Gillon’s residence, in spite of the warnings they had received, they were not sure they had followed the directions properly. The only thing that distinguished the place from any of the myriad other buildings in Dorn was that it was slightly *smaller* than the average house. Till stepped forward and knocked uncertainly.

“Come in,” boomed a deep voice from inside.

They opened the door to find a muscular, dark-haired man in his late fifties sitting barefoot on a red-and-brown rug in the middle of the room. Behind him stood a large bookcase filled with not only books, but various strange-looking artifacts from all over

Kylar, as well. The room was as harshly practical as the rest of the town. Once again Till found himself categorizing Dorn and Arnit Town as total opposites.

Gillon looked the four of them over briefly and turned a steady gaze on Filador. “What do you want?” he asked.

We seem to get asked that a lot these days, Till thought. He heard Filador reply, “A favor, King Gillon; a large one.”

He laughed. “Who doesn’t? What do you want?”

“What have you heard of the activities of the Drii in recent days?”

His eyes narrowed. “The Drii? Are you from Lindor?”

Filador nodded. “So you have heard.”

“I have heard that three men and a woman scour Kylar from top to bottom in search of anyone who will aid their cause, and by now I have a good idea of what you want from me as well.”

Does everyone in Kylar know of this quest? It’s a wonder the Drii haven’t wiped us out already. And then he remembered Filador’s theory. But what could the Island of Terror want with him? He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“It seems you know quite a great deal about us already,” Filador replied. “Very well then. If you already know our question, all we require of you is an answer.”

A brief pause, then a nod. “Fifty men. I think your cause is a just one, and we can afford to lose that many for one battle. When you arrive at Silver Rock on Misselon Day, you will have fifty of our finest backing you.”

Aren opened her mouth to speak, but Filador shot her a warning glance and she remained silent. “Thank you,” he said and gave a short bow before turning to leave.

When they were back outside Aren voiced her unspoken thought. “Fifty men!” she snapped. “What does he think we are, beggars? Fifty men will not make the slightest dent in an army of Tikks!”

“Fifty men is better than nothing,” Bardon advised her, “and ‘beggar’ is probably as good a term as any to describe us right now. He didn’t have to give us anything.”

“No, he didn’t, but I get the feeling he means this as a token force,” Till said. “He contributes to our cause so that if we win, he may say, ‘I was there when you needed me.’ I don’t trust the man.”

“Our need for his soldiers is greater than his need for our trust. Our journey is nearly over, and Misselon approaches. We’ll have to take what we were given and move on; no sense angering the man so that we get nothing at all from him.”

It was true, but it didn’t make Aren feel any better. *Fifty men. Not insignificant, but still! Saliban sent ten times that number!* At least they were done now; no more cities remained on their list to visit. *No*, she reminded herself, remembering the battle to come. *Not done yet. Not by a long shot.*

When they arrived at the inn that served as their temporary home in Dorn, a woman was waiting outside their door. She appeared strong for her age, which Till placed somewhere in the seventies; the intricately carved black staff she leaned on seemed to be more for show than anything else. She looked a great deal like Zoll, actually.

“Hello,” she said. “My name is Sierra.”

Chapter 19

Nobody said anything for a moment, so she took the opportunity to speak. “I received a message with instructions to give it to you. It is sealed, so I do not know what it says.” She reached into her cloak and pulled out a rolled-up piece of paper with a black wax seal on it, looking in Till’s direction. “You are Till?” she asked. He nodded. “I was told to give this to you.” Till took it from her, broke the seal, and read it aloud. It said:

You may throw all your might

At the forces of night

And drive all your foes from your gates

But your path leads to me

Past the Ivory Sea

And the Island of Terror awaits.

He shivered and hastily folded it up slipping it into his pocket. There was little doubt as to the identity of the message’s writer. Once again, Izm had shown a special interest in him. And for all that this did to confirm Filador’s theories, it held no answers for the real question: why. Why would the undisputed ruler of the Drii Empire go out of his way to send notes to a member of a council in a town that meant nothing to anybody?

Filador, ever practical, asked the next question. “Who gave you this message?” he wanted to know.

“Tikks,” she hissed. “In the middle of the night, they came and left it in my house for me to find. And don’t ask me why, either. I don’t know why they chose me. Nobody in the whole bloody town knows why they chose me. I wish somebody did. Then maybe I’d be out of this mess.”

Till blinked. “Mess?”

She sighed. “I don’t know how it is back in Lindor, but over here, people start to mutter when Tikks creep into your house at night and give you messages. Half the town thinks I’m a witch by now. Even my own son believes I’m cursed.”

“Who’s your son?” Aren asked.

“Oh, of course! How silly of me; you’re foreigners, you wouldn’t know. I should have introduced myself properly to begin with. Gillon is my son.”

“You – you were queen?”

She snorted. “For a little over a year, yes. My husband... mysteriously disappeared... a few weeks after our marriage. Mysteriously, but everyone knows the Drii did it. Nobody knows why – as if they need a reason to kill. My son officially became king the day he was born. Of course, I still had power for the next twenty years or so. But once he took over, I was nothing more than a private citizen.” She shrugged. “Which I don’t mind. If only every child in the city didn’t look at me like I just crawled out of one of their nightmares.”

“That’s some story,” commented Filador.

“Indeed,” she replied. “But I’m a bit curious about this myself. What interest does Izm have in you?”

“You know as much as I do,” Till told her. “The Drii don’t seem to want me dead; if they did, I would probably be so already. Instead, the lord of their entire empire is sending me personal notes. I’m beginning to understand how you feel. At least if they were trying to kill me, I would know I was doing something right.”

She studied him carefully. “So you’re the ones trying to retake Lindor? Was my son much help?”

“Help?” Aren interjected. “If you consider sending a mouse to fight a lion help, then I am sure he has been most helpful. He gave us fifty men and sent us away like children.”

Sierra raised an eyebrow. “Harsh words. He didn’t have to give you anything.”

“If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t be so critical of him. A king’s soldiers are his own to do with as he pleases. But if he sends us help, it means he supports our cause. At least, it should. To give such paltry token to those whose cause he supports... It’s as if he simply wants to get rid of us.”

“Diaro got rid of us well enough without granting anything,” Filador observed.

“Diaro is also king of Kanigon,” Sierra said. “Dorn has much to fear from you if you grow powerful. Still...” She paused. “Perhaps I may be of some help. There are positive sides to having a king believe you are cursed. I think he might do as I asked simply to avoid any chance of angering whatever curse hangs over my head. A small chance, but I know my son well.” She headed towards the exit. “You wait here. I will try my best. In a few hours you’ll have your answer.”

Till and Filador exchanged glances as she left. Unexpected support indeed! But any support was better than none, and anything the old woman could manage could not be worse than the handful of soldiers the king had promised.

When Sierra returned, she looked haggard and very tired, but she smiled on seeing them. “Gillon granted you fifty,” she said smugly. “You now have twenty times that number. Make them count.”

Filador returned her smile, reassured but not particularly surprised by her success. “A thousand!” he said. “Thank you. I wish there was something we could do to repay you.”

“You are the only people in this town to oppose my husband’s killers in the past fifty years. That’s enough. Thank you.” And with that she was gone.

They decided to stay the night in Dorn before moving on, but the morning saw them already on the trail again; their last stop was finished and there were only five days left ‘til Misselon.

Chapter 20

For nearly all of Kylar, Misselon Day was the most significant day of the year. If a calendar had no other markings on it anywhere, the spot for Misselon was the one sure to be circled in bright red. A holiday so ancient that its original meaning had been long forgotten, it now served as little more than an excuse to stop working and throw a celebration. Somewhere along the line fire acquired a special importance in the celebration of the holiday; torches and candles lined the streets of cities, bonfires were lit, and every fire-breather in town found his pockets full of coins. Kylar had precious few holidays throughout the year, but Misselon Day more than made up for the lacking.

No empire can conquer its subjects so completely that it takes nothing of their culture into itself, and the Drii Empire was no different. Mires migrated to Kanigon annually for the celebration, and even Tikks, who understood nothing of such matters, were granted time off. Consequently Misselon was a particularly good choice for an attack on Lindor; the entire city would be caught off-guard.

That had been the original logic, but Filador was under no delusions as to the readiness of his enemy. He had no doubt that Misselon Day would find a Lindor long-prepared for anything he might hurl at it. The only question was whether what forces they had gathered would be enough to loosen the stranglehold Izm had on their hometown. The forces Sierra had acquired for them would certainly help, but...

“Idiots,” he murmured.

Bardon, who was walking next to him, heard. “What?”

“Oh, sorry. Just talking to myself.” He shook his head. “Those fools in Dorn. I have little respect for a king who makes his decisions on the grounds of some absurd superstition. Magic is tolerable in the masses, but it’s the place of leaders to keep their heads clear.”

The man eyed him critically. “How can you be so sure that magic doesn’t really exist? You talk of proof, but where’s your proof that magic really is superstition?”

Filador laughed. “The burden of proof falls to you, not me, Bardon.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The burden of proof always falls on whatever is not obviously logical. If I see a flower, I do not have to write an essay on plant structure to prove that it is a flower; it is there for all to see. But if you wish to tell me that what I thought was a flower is in fact an animal in camouflage, it is your responsibility to convince me, not the other way around. If it were not so, society would drown in senseless theories with no basis in fact. Not that we aren’t anyway,” he added dryly. “I cannot simply dream up a three-headed monster from the stars and expect you to believe it unless I show you some proof. By the

same token, you cannot expect me to believe in magic unless you have some proof, and as of now I have seen none.”

“What a dull world you live in,” Bardon observed. “Nothing real but what you can see.”

“There is nothing wrong with imagination,” Filador replied, “so long as it is not the basis for your life.”

Bardon muttered something beneath his breath and strode several paces ahead, leaving Filador behind with a tiny smile of satisfaction on his face.

The journey continued under an open blue sky, over green hills and tree-dotted landscapes filled with the sounds of late spring. The dirt path they followed wound like a wiry snake over the earth, stretching out before them as far as the eye could see. For those on long journeys, the path quickly became The Path, all one giant road that led wherever one wanted to go. But whereas the path had previously led towards new places and untold adventure, it was now their route to Lindor, their home; but it was also their route to battle and untold suffering, and perhaps death for those who brought the attack into motion. Knowledge of certain death could be dealt with; the uncertainty was nearly unbearable. It was the end of their journey, however, and that alone made each step easier.

It was during midmorning of the second day since leaving Dorn that they came upon the cave.

Some distance away from the main path was a large pile of boulders worn smooth by age. In the center was what appeared to be an opening – an entrance, perhaps. Bardon pointed it out first. “I’ve been by here before,” he said. “That cave is supposed

to be the home of a fierce dragon. I've never been inside myself, so I don't know; I was never fond of testing rumors that get me killed if they're true."

"A dragon?" said Till. "I thought all those were killed during the Dragonslaying, a thousand years ago. What's one still doing around today?"

"It can't come out very often, either, or it would be famous," Filador observed. "It probably sleeps a lot. Dragons tend to be sleepy creatures. Not lazy, just sleepy."

"Well, I'm no more eager to test out the rumors than you, Bardon," Aren said. "Let's keep going."

"Wait," said Till. "If there *is* a dragon in there, it could be invaluable in battle. Imagine having one of those on our side!"

"That's true," Filador replied. "I remember reading about them in *The History of Kylar*. It said that in the old days it took a hundred men with bows to bring down just a medium-sized dragon, and even then most of the men wouldn't survive. All dragons breathe fire. And Tikks don't have bows. Even one dragon could be enough to turn the entire battle to our favor."

"And we could also get ourselves collectively killed," Aren noted.

"True, but there's risk in everything," Filador reminded her. "If there is a dragon in there, it is probably a lot more wary of people than they were in the old days. I think we should at least try."

Aren thought for a moment. "All right," she conceded at last, and Till and Bardon agreed. They entered the cave together.

The entrance led into a long and fairly narrow corridor. It was dark, but not the pitch dark they had experienced in the Hallots' tunnels; there seemed to be some kind of

light coming from up ahead that allowed them to see. Indeed, as they progressed further and further along the rocky passage, it got brighter and brighter. Less than a minute later they reached the source of the luminescence. They found themselves in a small, roughly circular chamber under the rock, perhaps ten feet in diameter and twice that in height. And in the center lay the dragon.

It was asleep, a large, bright flame extending from its nostrils and bathing the entire cavern in flickering light. Smoke trailed from the tip of the flame and escaped through a network of cracks in the rock overhead. Even sleeping, though, the creature looked threatening. Its scales were bright green like emeralds, and wings the color of its flame sprouted from its back. These were currently folded up, but it was clear that when extended they would be more than large enough to allow the dragon to fly. Its tail curled around several times before ending in a lethal-looking barb, and rows of teeth gleamed in its jaws.

The most striking feature of the dragon, though, was its size. From head to tail it was not more than two feet long.

Bardon laughed. “*This* is our fearsome dragon? It looks like a baby!”

“A baby with enough fire to light this entire cave,” Filador noted. “Don’t underestimate this thing because it’s small; a dragon of any size is powerful.”

“Well, how are we going to wake it?” Till wanted to know.

“A very good question,” Filador replied. “In all the old stories they never bothered waking them at all; a sleeping dragon quickly became a dead dragon. Our purpose, of course, is different, but we don’t want it to think we mean it harm. This could take some thought.”

“Wake me?” the dragon snorted without opening its eyes. “I’ve been listening to you four create a noise to wake the dead ever since you set foot in this cave, and you wonder how to wake me? State your business and be gone.”

Filador recovered from his shock quickly. “I, ah, we would like to ask a favor of you. We want you to help us fight a battle.”

Its eyes shot open, black gleaming orbs flashing across the four humans and scanning each face carefully. “Why?” The word dripped out of its mouth like acid.

“Ah... because dragons are powerful, and we could use your support. Any support we can get, actually.”

It spread its wings and slid upwards into the air, dominating the room in spite of its small size. Fire shot from its nostrils, bathing it in flame until it was scarcely visible save as a glittering torch hovering in the air. Smoke slid across its wings and crept up towards the ceiling of the room, forming a dark halo over the dragon’s head. The shadows of the intruders leapt back in stark relief as if pointing the way to the exit. Its voice rang across the room like a brilliant golden gong. “What possible reason,” it breathed, “could I have for helping you?”

Filador was not intimidated. He stepped forward and addressed the creature directly. “Only one,” he said. “We, and we alone in all of Kylar, fight against the Drii rather than with them. If you help us, you will have the chance to wreak havoc on the Drii Empire the likes of which the world has never seen. This will probably be your only chance to do so.”

The dragon dived back towards the earth and flew to within a few feet of Filador's face. It stared the man directly in the eyes. "And what makes you think I oppose the Drii?" it hissed.

Filador laughed. "Only this: that if you did not, your name would be feared as the terror weapon of Izm's hand, the tool he uses to keep order among the most rebellious of subjects. That he has not turned you to his use already proves that you do not support his cause. The masses may be neutral, but power such as yours cannot be indifferent; you either serve or fight. And you, I think, are a fighter."

Flames danced in the dragon's dark eyes. "In that you are correct." The beginnings of a reptilian smile crept toward the edges of its mouth. "I like you, human. For now, at least, I think I will come with you. And I will fight."

It followed them back out of the cave, peppering them with questions. Why were they opposing the most powerful empire in history? When would the battle take place? What were their names? Had they ever seen a live dragon before? All these questions were answered, and more were thrown back in return. Over the course of discussion they learned that the dragon – named Roze – was a female over a thousand years old, which was rather young for her species. She had made her home in the cave before any of them was born and very seldom came out anymore. She was not, however, so secluded that she had no knowledge of the Drii; apparently she disliked them as much as any of the Lyre had. She gave no real reason for this, but apparently it had something to do with what she called the natural order of things. At some level she could sense that the Drii were wrong. Not wrong in the sense of being evil – although she agreed they were that – but wrong as in unnatural, something that should never have existed at all. Her feeling

was nothing more than that, a feeling, so she could not explain more, but it was enough for her to join their cause, and that was enough for them.

Roze proved good company for the remainder of the trip back to Lindor. What might otherwise have been a dry and dismal procession was livened greatly by the dragon's seemingly limitless supply of comments, questions, and declarations of personal belief. Till thought she seemed very un-dragonlike, but when he told her so she only laughed. "None of you has ever seen a living dragon since you were born," she said. "How do you know what is dragon-like and what is not?"

But even Roze's fountain of optimism could not blot out completely the cloud of apprehension over the group. They were going to battle, and they all knew it. All they could do was continue onward and hope. It was only a matter of whether that was enough. Even Till, whom Filador had dubbed untouchable by Drii forces, was uncomfortable. Nobody with any sense trusted the Drii, and the note in his pocket was a constant reminder of his special place in Izm's plans. He shuddered. There were worse things to lose than one's life.

They reached Silver Rock a few hours before sundown on the eve of Misselon Day. It was a boulder of incredible size, gray rather than silver, the largest thing for miles around. They made camp at the base of the gigantic rock, about three miles east of Lindor, and slept in its monstrous shadow. Nobody said much that night, not even the dragon. The same thing was on all of their minds. Tomorrow they would find out whether everything they had accomplished so far was worth it.

PART III: BATTLE

Chapter 21

They awoke at dawn.

The Klickers were the first to arrive. They came less than an hour after sunrise, ten thousand strong and scurrying across the plain like diamond spiders the size of dogs. One Klicker separated himself from the rest to address Filador. *We come as promised*, it projected, then ran off to join the others. All of them retracted the crystalline legs they had formed for the journey and sat together, looking for all the world like a giant pile of precious gems. They had seen the Klickers in action, though, and Till was confident of their allies' abilities in battle. He was amazed at their number; Mount Avalanche must have emptied its slopes to provide this force. And perhaps it had. He had a feeling Klickers did things together once they were committed to something.

The army from Dorn came in midmorning. Sierra had indeed convinced the king; a thousand soldiers marched towards them in perfect formation, gold-tipped brown shields and iron swords gleaming in the morning sun. Their captain came to greet them and bowed before Filador. "The forces of Dorn are yours to command," he said. "It is an honor to serve. I welcome the day that the Drii no longer stain our lands."

Filador nodded. "As do I. Thank you. We will attack tomorrow; be ready."

Noon saw the forces of Arnit Town coming to Silver Rock. Queen Manira had sent three thousand of her finest soldiers to help in battle, as promised. They carried the emblem of Arnit Town, a pale yellow starfish, on their blue shields. The man in charge of this army handed Filador a scroll. He read it aloud. "To the guardians of Lindor. I

entrust you with these, my noble soldiers, in your quest to save your city from the influence of the Drii. I trust you will look favorably upon the City of Arnit in the future. Sincerely, Queen Manira.” Filador rolled the scroll up and handed it back to the man. “Thank you. Ready your troops; we attack tomorrow.”

Arnit’s army was followed less than an hour later by Saliban. Saliban exceeded their wildest expectations; they had expected perhaps a thousand to volunteer, and what they received was an army larger than Arnit’s. And whereas they had expected the troops to be dressed in plain clothing, they were all decorated in the colors and symbols of their hometown. Their captain explained that town pride had won out over the desire for secrecy, and the men, inspired by Lindor’s astounding – if temporary – success, had volunteered in huge numbers and demanded to show all the world exactly who and what they were fighting for. Not the safest course, perhaps, but it was definitely good for morale.

Bardon’s tendency to take control of matters had been something of an annoyance in the past, but now it was an invaluable asset. He took it upon himself to check all the camps individually, going over strategy, speaking with the captains, and checking the preparedness of the men. Filador, for all his logical mind, knew exactly nothing about commanding an army – and that was more than Till or Aren knew. Bardon coordinated the entire attack and quickly became the unofficial but unanimous choice for supreme commander of rebel forces. By nightfall, Till thought their chances of winning the battle had improved dramatically, and even Aren was glad the man was along.

Just as the first star appeared in the night sky, the Lyre arrived.

They came as a swirling, writhing cloud of multicolored light, shimmering in the dusk. Niva flew in front, guiding the swarm, and when she saw Aren she flashed bright green and shot towards her.

“Aren!” she called. “And Till, and Filador, and Bardon! So good to see you all. We’ve come to help, as promised.” She paused. “Who’s this?”

“Her name is Roze,” Aren replied. “She’s a dragon.” Catching Niva’s sudden shift in color, she smiled. “On our side.”

“That’s incredible! I didn’t know there were any dragons left in Kylar these days. If you can’t win with a dragon on your side, I don’t know how you can.” Roze said nothing but emitted a deep red flame of pleasure at the compliment. Meanwhile, Niva asked, “So when does the actual attack begin?”

“Tomorrow, at dawn,” Filador replied. “It should be quite a show. I’m glad you’re on our side, but I must confess I’m not sure what you can do to help.”

Niva flashed brilliant orange. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of that. But – tomorrow morning did you say? No rest for the weary, and no time to waste!” She rushed back to her companions and chattered something to them, whereupon they all rose and flew off towards Lindor. She followed right behind them.

“Wait!” Aren called. “Where are you going?”

“To show you what we can do!” Niva shouted back, and then she was gone.

Excitement mixed with nervousness hung palpably in the air, but darkness was coming – in more ways than one – and everyone needed sleep. Roze curled up next to Filador and drifted off instantly, quickly followed by the four travelers and the armies

they led. The Klickers might have been asleep the entire time for all anyone could tell. Peace descended on Silver Rock as night began.

Around midnight Aren awoke. She sat up and looked around curiously for the source of the disruption; she did not wake up unless there was a reason for it. At first she could hear nothing, but after listening carefully it came to her. It was music, coming out of the night.

Not just music, she realized, but the most beautiful music she had ever heard. It was a sound like the song of the sirens of legend, a chiming of delicate bells and a ringing of voices so intricate, so complex, yet so perfectly simple that for a long time she simply sat and listened. At last she forced the music away and sat up. She turned and saw her husband, Till, asleep next to her. For a long moment she considered waking him so he could hear it as well, but then she reconsidered. Morning would come soon enough, and the music would still be there, she knew. Tracing a finger over his shoulders, Aren pulled her blanket back over herself and let sleep take her once more.

As consciousness left Aren's beautiful eyes, so it came to the deep black eyes of the dragon who slept nearby. She flicked her tail and searched the darkness until she found its source. Such perfect music! But then sleep took her too and she closed her eyes again.

And three miles to the east, in Lindor, an old man named Marrott looked out his window and saw a brilliant yellow light shining in the blackness. The music rang like wildfire in his ears, and he smiled. "They did it," he whispered.

Dawn came swiftly.

Chapter 22

Bardon, who had been awake since well before the sun broke over the mountaintops, awakened everyone who had not risen with the first chills of morning. After a brief breakfast, the entire force began marching its final three miles before facing the Drii Empire directly for the first time in over fifty years. It was a sight to behold; all in all, seven thousand soldiers in formation, banners waving, swords upraised, shields gleaming in the morning sun, and everywhere the call of trumpets. On either side five thousand crystals shone like stars in shadow as they scurried alongside the human army. Bardon strode on ahead like the military leader he was quickly becoming, followed by Filador, Aren and Till, all armed with assorted swords of their own. Flying overhead like a scarlet zephyr was Roze, scouting out the land ahead and screaming defiance to their enemies ahead. And behind it all the melody of the Lyre sang softly, still quiet but growing louder and unquenchable as a rising flood.

When the armies of Kylar reached Lindor, they found their foes in a state of disarray. Drii intelligence had told them when and where to expect the attack, but they had only recently discovered the sheer size of the force they were opposing – and by now it was too late.

The citizens of Lindor were quickly roused to action; few foes are more dangerous than those who are suddenly released from oppression, and the people of Lindor taught the Drii this with a passion. The streets erupted in chaos as civilians became soldiers with the aid of kitchen knives, pitchforks, and old rusty swords that had previously been little more than family heirlooms. Between the wrath of Lindor, the

armies from across Kylar, and the flames of the dragon, all the Drii in the area were either dead or fleeing within mere minutes.

The Klickers did their part, and Till found it fascinating to watch them in action. They transformed into powerful battle machines, their diamond limbs taking shape into claws, scythes, and hooks that tore through Tikks like paper. The Tikks fought back with claws bared, but these were of minimal effectiveness against the Klickers' hard substance. Occasionally two or three Klickers would join together to form a larger creature, and these wreaked havoc on the Tikk forces.

But the Mires controlling the Tikk forces were neither stupid nor unprepared, and the fleeing Drii did not scatter to be killed; rather, they came together in the center of town for a final defense. Every Drii in the city that remained alive congregated in the central square, guarding the Mires who controlled them in the council chambers, and thus began a siege of sorts.

The advantage of surprise previously possessed by the armies of Kylar quickly faded, and the Drii gathered everything they had into a tight formation, attacking anyone who came near. Saliban and Dorn organized several attacks, but all failed with heavy casualties on the human side. The Tikks were outnumbered nearly two to one, but they were in a defensible position and they took advantage of it.

Soon they began hurling bombs over the sides of the building. Evidently the Mires had been preparing for this attack for quite some time and had prepared. The bombs exploded with devastating force among humans and Klickers alike. Till had never seen a Klicker die before. The bombs tore through their bodies like paper, sending

crystal shards flying in all directions. They quickly scattered and everyone else moved back to wait out the attack.

For some time after this a brief lag in the fighting began as no Tikks could leave their makeshift fortress without being killed by swordsmen, and no humans could get close enough to attack without being destroyed by bombs. Roze had done her share at the beginning, ravaging Tikks with fireball after blazing fireball, but she was neither invincible nor tireless, and soon the combined effort of dodging projectiles and breathing fire took its toll on her. She was used to sleeping, not real fighting. She eventually had to take cover with the rest to avoid being hit by one of the stray rocks hurled in her direction.

It was only a matter of time until Drii reinforcements came, however, and both sides knew it. The final assault began at noon.

Humans and Klickers charged the Drii stronghold with reckless abandon, sending in troops faster than Tikks could kill them with bomb or claw. The Klickers quickly organized themselves into the form of a massive battering ram. In this manner they hurled themselves against the main door of the council chamber, splintering the wood into fragments on the first blow. They separated instantly into individuals once more and began flooding the area with Klicker fighters. Swords sang through the air, crystalline claws attacked, and fire flew into the shadow hordes. And through it all the Lyre weaved their music into the battle with ever-rising intensity. What had once been a barely audible trickle of sound swiftly became a rising storm as every shout, every clang of claw on steel, every snapping movement of a Klicker's limb was merged into a note in the

overall melody. The song became a story that the soldiers acted out while the Lyre sang on and on.

But the Tikks fought back with ferocity, and the more Tikks were killed the harder the living ones fought. They swarmed over furniture, claws tearing through the fine curtains and rugs of the council hall, attacking everything in sight with wildly spinning tentacles and the force of their leathery bodies. And for all the superior numbers the Kylar forces had, it quickly became apparent that the Drii were winning. Not one soldier in the entire army had ever fought in an actual battle; Tikks were specifically bred for the purpose. Tikks also gave no thought whatsoever for their own lives. The Mires controlling them thought of the Tikks as tools; they should not be wasted needlessly, but if it won the battle a Tikk's death was no loss. Therefore they threw themselves into combat with a suicidal sense of purpose and a totally alien way of fighting that neither the humans nor the Klickers were used to.

The rebel armies were just on the verge of total retreat when the tide began to turn.

It happened slowly and subtly, and the battle was so chaotic that at first Till didn't notice it at all. But as the minutes passed it became unmistakable. Somehow, something was making the Tikks falter, fall, and die. Here and there they fell untouched by any human weapon or dragonfire, dark eyes flashing in surprise as life left them. But there was no reason for them to die like this. He looked around, confused, as more and more Tikks died. Just the chaos of battle – people shouting, claws flying, shattered glass, splintered wood, and a breeze coming through an open window...

A breeze carrying leaves...

Now why was that odd?

And then he remembered. Back in the Silent Forest. They'd slept underneath a tree. A tree that had spoken to him. A leaf fell on his hand, and he smiled. What had it said?

And thank you for giving me this chance. I will be there when you need me.

Goodbye.

The battle went quickly after that.

Within half an hour all the remaining Tikks had been killed, some by the influence of the Tree but most from the general confusion and terror that took hold of the Drii; the soldiers took care of the rest. The Mires were found and killed as well. It took everyone some time to get over the shock of what had actually happened. Kylar had taken on Atara and won! The Drii were defeated!

A small victory celebration ensued, but only a small one. Nobody wanted to celebrate a great deal just yet. There were two reasons for this. First, the casualties had been immense. Over half the human soldiers had died in the engagement, and well over a thousand Klickers had perished as well. There was no doubt that this had been a sobering experience for many of the soldiers who had walked in with bright spirits and an unquenchable optimism. And secondly, celebration was minimal because everyone knew that the battle was far from over.

Izm could not simply allow an attack like this to succeed for obvious reasons. Such a failure would show the entire world that the Drii Empire did not have the power necessary to control the land it ruled. This would mean a countrywide revolution, something he could not allow to happen. Therefore he had to crush this rebellion here

and now, while it was still unstable, and with such devastating force that it would serve as an example of what happens to traitors rather than an encouragement for freedom.

But that was the future, and for now Till allowed himself some measure of relief over their victory. He, along with his wife and their two companions, had escaped the battle completely unscathed. Whether this was further confirmation of Filador's theory or simply an incredible stroke of luck, Till wasn't sure. But as he held Aren tight against him, right then, it didn't matter. She was alive.

Bardon was grim, but he managed a smile in spite of all. "We did it," he said. "Phase one, at least. Now it gets interesting." And he left to begin preparations to defend the city while sending spies to scout for any Drii attacks. Filador wiped his sword off, but did not sheathe it; his expression said he thought he would need it again soon enough. But nobody knew when the Drii attack would come, or from what direction, or how big it would be.

In the meantime, Aren decided to check on their house. The city was in ruins; fires raged everywhere and bodies – some human, some not – lay in the streets. Till followed his wife through the wreckage, shuddering at the thought of rebuilding their house from scratch...

When he saw it, he couldn't believe his eyes.

The house to the left of theirs had been burned to the ground. The house to their right was a pile of timbers. The street in front of their house was littered with rubble.

And there, in the center of it all, their house stood completely untouched.

Aren just shook her head in awe and went inside. Till followed her in, just as amazed as she, and when they unlocked the door they found the inside as immaculate as

the outside. The windows were unbroken and the ceiling was untouched. The floor was as spotless as if it had been swept and polished yesterday.

And on the table lay a note written in black ink on a sheet of pure white paper.

You may throw all your might

At the forces of night

And drive all your foes from your gates

But your path leads to me

Past the Ivory Sea

And the Island of Terror awaits.

Till growled and crumpled the paper into a ball in his fist, hurling it to the ground.

“Izm did this,” he said, and he left.

Aren picked up the note, smoothed it out, and read it silently to herself. Then she let it drop out of her hands and come to a rest on the floor. She sighed.

It wasn't over yet.

Chapter 23

An hour before dusk a spy returned from his scouting mission. He dismounted and gave his report breathlessly as Bardon listened. When he was done Bardon nodded, and the man ran off on some other urgent errand.

Till approached Bardon uncertainly. “What did he say?” he managed.

He just shook his head. “I don't think we're going to make it,” he said.

“Why? What did he say?”

“The Black Wave is coming,” he said, and he walked away.

Roze flew down to speak to Till. “What’d he say?” she wanted to know.

“He said the Black Wave is coming. Do you know what that is?”

Her eyes went wide. “The Black Wave? That... they haven’t launched one of those since Kanigon...”

“Well? What is it?” he asked, but she had already flown away again, muttering to herself. Till cursed and went back to find Aren.

Half an hour later Bardon returned. “Come with me,” he said. “Both of you. You should see this.” They followed him through the streets of Lindor until they reached a guard tower that had been erected near the main city gates. He led them wordlessly inside and they exchanged silent glances to each other as they climbed the stairs to the top.

Filador and Roze were already there, gazing out towards the horizon, waiting. It was a tall building, and it was possible to see quite a long distance even in the evening light. Till stared for a moment, then said, “What do you want us to see?”

“Just wait,” Bardon breathed, “and keep your eye on the horizon.”

Till and Aren faced east and waited. There wasn’t much to say; the tension in the air was palpable. Till quietly slipped an arm around his wife, and she returned the gesture, but it was small comfort as they watched the darkness come.

And then they saw it.

You draw your forces on your maps, and you make your little strategies, and you think you’re ready. But when the time comes, all you see is a black wave coming over the horizon. That’s it. That was what Diaro had said, and now Till understood.

As the sun set and shadows deepened, the land became black. But far off in the distance, towards the horizon, they saw it. A tendril of blackness, a wave of black on black, mingled in shadow but perfectly clear. It spread. It came from all directions, and it spread. The shadow approached from every side, growing in intensity and size as it approached. And slowly, very slowly, it became clear that the Black Wave was not a wave at all, or a shadow, or anything so insubstantial. It was an army of Tikks, coming in numbers the likes of which had not been even imagined since the battle of Kanigon.

Aren's hand found Till's in the starlight, but neither could take their eyes off the still-growing wave of Tikks that swarmed across the earth towards Lindor. From behind, Bardon said, "I don't know what Izm wants with you, Till, but I think you're important to him. Stay up here and don't try to fight. The same for you," he said, nodding toward Aren and Filador. Till nodded numbly. Whatever happened, they would have an excellent view.

When the wave came within half a mile of Lindor, Roze took action. She shot like an arrow from her perch on the guard tower and flew towards the oncoming swarm. Soon she was above them, sending fire from her mouth at Tikks in all directions. She was an awesome sight, her ruby wings mingling with flame as heat surrounded her body and scorched the army below. And the fire that flew from her mouth danced to the music of the Lyre, crackling and smoking to the tune of the melody. The music had grown now, as it was still growing, so that it was powerful and delicately sweet at the same time. But it was not enough. For every time Roze exhaled, a hundred Tikks died; but for every time she inhaled to prepare for another blast, two hundred more rushed to take their place. It was simply not enough.

Now the Klickers began their counterattack. They rushed the Drii as a single crystalline swarm, a wave of shimmering white meeting a wave of black. The Klickers joined into groups of three, and each group merged into a single larger mass; each mass transformed into a huge scorpion-shaped beast. Some Klickers had been lost in the attack, but the vast majority remained; there were well over three thousand scorpions in the army.

The scorpions ravaged the Tikks, clawing through them like paper and slashing at them with stingers that flashed in the night. The Tikks they attacked did not so much as bother to fight back. This was not a battle of strategy as the earlier one had been; there were no bombs hurled here, no defending of key points. This was the Black Wave. It was a swarm.

And it was working. The Klicker-scorpions were doing even more damage to the Tikk army than Roze, but it simply wasn't enough. The combined efforts of Mount Avalanche and dragonfire were like hurling stones into a hurricane, and the hurricane was fast approaching.

Suddenly Aren gasped, and her fingers tightened on Till's shoulder. She looked at him, and he nodded with wide eyes. He had felt it too. He had a feeling everyone for miles around had felt it. A sudden, overwhelming sensation of anger. It was not directed at them, but they could feel its power nonetheless. After a moment of shock, Till recognized exactly what the feeling was. It was the same form of communication the Klickers used – but on a much, much grander scale. This was not thought channeled carefully into telepathic messages; this was sheer, raw unpurified rage blasted at the Drii.

If Till could feel the wrath of the Klickers with such force as a mere bystander, he could only begin to imagine what it must be like for the Tikks themselves. Indeed, it seemed to have quite a powerful effect on them. The entire Black Wave suddenly slowed, then stopped in its tracks altogether. Confusion reigned among the shadow horde.

But the signal, for all its strength, was merely the precursor to the Klickers' real attack. If they were awesome in their strength, so they were terrible in their rage. The entire swarm of scorpions came together and merged into a single brilliant shining mass that outshone the stars and cut into the night. It was every single Klicker left alive in Kylar, the collective mass of the entire species, combined into one area and one being for a strike against the Wave that Izm would not soon forget. The mass arranged itself into the shape of a person that towered above the Tikks like a man among ants. In his left hand the giant held a hammer of crystal that he used to smash the creatures at his feet. In his right, he held a gleaming sword that caught the moonlight, refracting it like a prism into thousands of multicolored rainbow streaks that shot out randomly; and where the lights hit the Wave, Tikks perished.

The giant went on a rampage across the black plains. Tikks were crushed beneath his feet, Tikks were swept aside by his hammer, and Tikks withered in the light of his sword. And wherever the Klicker-giant went, a trail of destruction followed in his path. At last the Black Wave began to falter.

And yet, for all the power of the creatures of Mount Avalanche, it was simply not enough. For everything the giant could do, it could not stop the creatures from reaching Lindor. And when they came at last, the true battle began.

The human armies had been far reduced in number, yet even at their present size they represented a force of over three thousand well-trained and competent soldiers. This was not a thing to be taken lightly, even in such numbers as the Drii possessed. And so Till and Aren had an excellent view of the struggle below, watching in wonder and horror as sword met tentacle and claw met shield time and time again. It was fascinating, in a bizarre, detached way, but Till knew that ultimately none of the men below had a real chance. They were outnumbered ten to one as it was, and the Tikks had only begun pouring into the city. It saddened him to think of it.

Suddenly a burst of movement caught his eye. By the time he had turned, it was already over. A Tikk that had climbed up the walls of the tower. It was still now, impaled on Bardon's sword. But not before it had lashed a claw across his chest. Bardon's mouth widened into a small O for just a moment, then returned to a stern grimace as he lost consciousness.

Filador was on him instantly, tending his wound, but blood was seeping from the gash at an alarming rate and judging by Filador's expression his fate was uncertain indeed. Till shook his head silently, pulling Aren closer to him. She didn't say anything but merely stood staring at his body lying on the stone floor, and at the red pool that was forming near his body. Tears were forming in her eyes, and Till had to fight hard to keep his own tears from flowing. He looked at the dead Tikk that lay beside Bardon's body. *So stupid. Just a mindless thing that came up here to kill. No reason. It's me they're after!* He blinked. *Me?*

Suddenly Roze appeared next to them. She folded her wings up and lay down, panting. "I've never given that much fire that fast in my life," she panted. "They just

keep coming. I've got to... got to rest... just a second..." And then she noticed Bardon's body for the first time. "Bardon? Is he – is he all right?"

Filador shook his head. "Not dead, if that's what you mean, but I wouldn't say all right. I don't know how he'll be. I know a few things about medicine, and I'll do my best to keep him alive, but there's not a lot I can do. We'll just have to see."

The little green dragon eyed the dead Drii. "That... *thing*... did this to him?"

Filador nodded. "Yes."

She simply stared for a moment, studying the creature in muted shock. Then the shock turned to horror, the horror to disgust, and the disgust to anger. Her eyes flashed fiery red and she flew off with a shriek in the direction she had come. "Roze! Wait!" Aren shouted, but that was behind her now and her mind was set on only one thing.

She shot past the outer edges of Lindor and across the plains, into the very heart of the swarm. Once she was there, all her tiredness slipped away. Her hopes, her fears, her dreams and desires, and any sensations of pleasure or pain melted into a tiny spot somewhere in the back of her mind, somewhere unimportant where it wouldn't bother her. All else was fire. It roared from her jaws, it blasted out of her nostrils, it leaped in her eyes and it danced across her claws. Her wings raged with flame and her tail twirled in it. And with the roar of a hurricane and the power of an earthquake, she lashed the fire across the land. It seared through the Wave like a torch in the darkness, forcing silent screams from the mindless masses of blackness around her. And still she raged on. The firestorm grew and spread with a life of its own. Tikks all around her recoiled in horror, claws and tentacles flailing wildly in her direction as crimson doom already laughed in their black eyes.

But even as the inferno blazed she knew what she had done, and what it meant. And even that was meaningless, now. She had known, and she knew, and all that was left now was fire.

Suddenly a great sound like the booming of a huge drum rang across Lindor, and Till looked up just as a blinding flash lit the sky. He stared for a moment, then shook his head in sudden understanding. *NO!*

For at that moment the words from Filador's book came back to him.

And at last the great beast perished. With a cry like thunder and a roar like an earthquake, it sailed to the ground. The collision made avalanches pale by comparison. And when it fell, the slayer ran quickly, for he knew what the fall meant. For every dragon, in its dying throes, exploded in a flame to outshine the sun and turn midnight to noon, a fire that turned stone to cinders and bone to ash, a heat that could destroy a forest.

The words echoed in his mind furiously as the light faded. First Bardon, and now this. *No...*

The sobs came freely now, his knees buckling as the full effect of the war came home at last. *I could have done nothing. If I had just stayed at home, this would never have happened, and all those people wouldn't have died. Why did I do this? Why?*

And the answer came. *I had to.*

It was true, but it didn't help.

Chapter 24

Through all of this, the Music of the Lyre grew and grew. Now it was loud and powerful indeed, its notes rising in complexity and perfection with every passing second until it drowned out even the sounds of the battle below. It seemed to be leading up to something, some final moment, but whether that moment was victory or doom Till could not tell. It was so beautiful that it was hard to concentrate on the battle below, and so hopeful that despair could not yet take hold of him completely. But what good was hope, he wondered, if death came before victory? And what chance of victory could they possibly have against this swarm? He didn't know, but the Music kept these thoughts alive as the armies of Lindor fought with all their might against the terror of their foes.

And then suddenly, his answer came. He heard the sound of countless shrieks, long and high, from behind him. Till turned and looked to the south – and there he saw something that was as unexpected as it was welcome. The Hallots had come!

He shouted excitedly, pointing at them, and Filador looked. He smiled. “The Hallots,” he said. “Perhaps there is hope after all.” Aren said nothing.

It was, indeed, a glorious sight. There were more than five thousand of them, brown wings flapping gracefully in the night air. In the past Till had only seen them on the ground, and when walking they appeared rather clumsy. But the Hallots were birds after all, and now it showed. Their cries rang out over the city and mingled with the song of the Lyre, forming a brilliant interweaving tapestry of sound.

But the Hallots had not come to make music. Till did not understand how or why, but they had come to fight. Perhaps Zoll had talked them into it; the birds did not speak human language, so he would probably never know. But whatever the reason, they now

attacked with a vengeance. They swooped down from the skies by the thousands, diving and piercing the leathery bodies of the black swarm with their beaks. Thousands more Tikks fell. The Black Wave still raged on, but it was getting gradually smaller and smaller as the number of dead Tikks began to outnumber the living ones. But was it enough?

“Till!” Aren shouted. “Look! There are male Hallots too!”

Till looked. And there, in the distance, he saw what she meant. Not all the great birds were female! About half were man-sized and brown, but the other half, he noticed now, was smaller and brightly colored. They did their share, certainly, digging into the opposing armies with enthusiasm. Apparently the pets were warriors, too. That would certainly make for a nasty surprise for anyone who opposed the Hallots – as the Drii seemed to be doing now.

The battle droned on and on as Till watched. It seemed odd to him that the human armies had lasted as long as they had; judging by the numbers on both sides, they should have lost long ago. But something seemed to be holding the Drii back. Slowly he realized what it was: the Music! Every note the Lyre played seemed to make it that much harder for them to attack; with every second the volume and complexity of pattern rose, it got slightly easier for the armies of Kylar to swing their swords. And as dawn approached, that turned the balance more and more in Kylar’s favor and less and less in Atara’s favor. The results were subtle but enormously powerful. What should have been a near-instantaneous victory for Izm had turned into a real battle, and the battle was one that the Drii were now losing.

Dawn broke.

And with the first break of sunlight over the horizon, the beautiful, powerful, intricately complex and skillfully crafted music of the Lyre was suddenly gone. It had grown so gradually, so gracefully, that it had hardly seemed to be there at all; but now, in its absence, the silence hung over Lindor like a curtain. The battle ceased; even the Tikks did not dare disturb this silence. A few soldiers made half-hearted attempts at combat, but the stillness quickly quieted these. Everyone watched and waited with breathless anticipation.

One full minute of total, absolute silence reigned, and then a single, awesome resonating chord with a power beyond belief rang out across the land. In later years it was said that all of Kylar and the Island of Terror besides had heard that note and felt its impact. It contained in its strength and perfection all the intricacies of the entire Music of the Lyre up until that point with an added quality all its own. And when it ended, fading away like the shadows of morning, not a single Tikk or Mire was left alive anywhere in or around the city of Lindor.

A great cheer rose up across the city. The bodies of the Tikks melted away into the earth, leaving only wispy traces of fog as signs of their existence, and these quickly faded also. The Klicker giant disassembled into its component crystalline creatures once more, and these left for Mount Avalanche without even a word of farewell. Soldiers threw off their helmets and waved swords in the morning sun. Children who had huddled in terror under beds now came out and laughed in the streets. And everywhere, to every city, to every home across the land, the word was spread. The battle was over, and Kylar had won.

Aren's eyes lit up and she laughed, hair streaming carelessly across her face as she hugged Till in joy. Till returned the embrace emphatically and then pulled away for a moment. He studied her face – so bright, so alive – and he realized right then exactly what he had laid on the line as he fought for the freedom of Kylar. And he kissed her there, on top of the guard tower, clasping his hands around her waist and pulling her soft lips against his. They stood locked in that kiss for a miniature eternity before she gently pulled away and took a deep breath, smiling.

The battle was over.

PART IV: ATARA

Chapter 25

In the days and weeks that followed, Bardon recovered slowly but steadily from the injury he had taken in battle. In under a month he was as strong as ever. Filador, Aren and Till had emerged from the encounter unscathed. A private funeral was held for Roze, but it was ceremony only; her body was never recovered.

Peace returned quickly to Lindor. The soldiers who had defended the city with their lives now returned as heroes to their respective cities. Nationalism swiftly reached a countrywide boiling point as it became clearer and clearer that Izm had no way to enforce his will against his subjects any longer. Saliban was the first to revolt, followed by Arnit Town, then Dorn, and at last Kanigon. After their defeat at Lindor the Drii knew they had no real chance any longer, but nevertheless they made one final effort at Kanigon. It was their strongest possession in Kylar and the place where they had the greatest force of both Tikks and Mires. But with nothing to back them up and the entire city against them,

it took less than a week to rid the entire city of Drii influence. Bardon himself made the journey to Kanigon when he heard of their uprising, and as general of Kylar's forces at Lindor, he was accepted as leader there as well. He personally led the men of Kanigon against their oppressors, driving them to victory with little difficulty.

With the Drii problem resolved, a council was held in Kanigon to decide what to do next. The leaders of all the cities attended, and over the course of several more days it was decided that a strike against Atara was in order. They did not want to give Izm any time to rebuild his strength; the strike must be made now, and with such power that the Drii would be nothing more than a distant memory for ages to come.

And through all of this, Till and Aren lived very normal lives, resuming their jobs as best they could and never so much as straying from Lindor. The brief but fiery revolution that followed the Battle of Lindor was but faraway news for them. They had done their duty and started the ball rolling; now it was up to Bardon and everyone else to finish the job.

It was with some amusement, therefore, that they greeted the flood of praise and admiration directed towards them. They had done very little fighting in the battle itself, and no fighting at all in any of the battles that followed, but they had become heroes to a world freed from an oppression older than most of its residents. And their newfound status was not undeserved. Certainly they had done their part in arranging everything. Filador, too, found himself in the spotlight of worldwide attention, which he accepted with his usual grace. Bardon, of course, was too busy actually making things work to be concerned with what people thought of his abilities, but he could not fail to notice that he

had become quite popular as well. It was all part of a rising flood of revolutionary spirit that was quickly orienting itself against Izm.

There was, however, a problem.

The council in Kanigon had made its decision, and the plan of attack was almost complete, when the problem occurred. It came in the dead of midnight into the heart of Lindor. And it came in the form of a pair of Tikks and a Mire that slipped past the guards, melted into the shadows and made their way into Till's house.

“Huumaaaaan.”

Till awoke suddenly to find a cold, razor-sharp claw pressed against his throat. He swallowed, and his eyes darted to his right, where a second Tikk held a claw against his wife, holding her silent. Her eyes searched his frantically, searched for some sign of understanding. But he did not understand this any more than she did. His gaze returned to the Mire floating in the air nearby. “What do you want?”

“Do not sssspeak any more, huuman, or the woman diesssss. It isss you we are afffter, not herrrrrrr. We can afford her deathhhhhh.”

He nodded as well as he could.

“You are waaaaanted. Come with meeeee.” The Tikk at his throat retracted its claw and withdrew, allowing him to move. Aren was still trapped; Till did not dare speak. He followed the Mire out of the room in silence, casting a single glance back at his wife before leaving.

“Get on my back, huuman.”

He obeyed, climbing awkwardly onto the creature's back and hanging on as well as he could. It began flying up, up, up, higher and higher until Lindor was tiny

underneath. Till had never been fond of heights and now he was terrified, clinging tightly to the creature's back and trying not to look down. One slip would mean death for him. He had only one consolation; he knew it was in the Mire's best interests to keep him alive. Izm wanted him for some reason, and his current steed would not want to risk its master's wrath by letting him fall.

After nearly half an hour had passed, the Mire broke the silence. "You may speak, huuuman," it hissed.

"Where are we going?"

It cackled a laugh, the only time he had ever heard a Mire laugh. "Ataraaaaa, human. The Isssssland of Terror. We are going to Ataraaaaaa."

"What does Izm want with me?"

"I am not sssssure. I have a theeeeeeory, but I am not sssssure."

"What's your theory?"

"I will leave all the explaining to Izzzzzm."

Till sighed and fell silent. After a time the Mire spoke up again. "I have ssssseeeen Izm before, huuuman. I have ssssseeeen his face. Whatever he wantsss with you, he will have it."

"What does he look like?" asked Till, but there was no response.

The Mire continued on through the cold sky.

At length the creature began descending. Till did not ask why; he did not think he could get much information out of it that it would not volunteer anyway. It came down and landed in the shadow of a large tree. Till was glad to get off of its back, and he lay

down on the soft grass, stretching his legs. The Mire sent a poisonous glance in his direction, its gray eyes gleaming. “Sleep now, huuman. Tomorrow you meet Izzzm.”

Chapter 26

If Till had any dreams that night, he did not remember them when he awoke. They had no breakfast. He climbed onto the Mire’s back again and the journey resumed.

The thing apparently flew much faster than Till had realized, because before noon they had reached the coast. Till had never seen the Ivory Sea before, but now it spread out before them for miles. It shone like a sapphire to the horizon, hardly what one would expect from a body of water that formed the gateway to evil. A thought occurred to him, and he voiced it to the Mire.

“Why is it called the Ivory Sea? It looks blue,” he said.

The monster cackled again but did not answer. Instead it dove towards the water at an angle that made Till’s heart leap into his throat. At the last possible second it came back up again. Just in time – a gigantic animal split the surface of the water with a roar like a thunderclap, sending spray flying and showcasing row after row of sharp, gleaming teeth. When they were well clear of the creature and Till’s heart had stopped pounding, the Mire laughed again. “Ivory enough in that sea to make a man rich beyond his wildest dreams,” it said. “If he can survive long enough to get it.”

The journey resumed without further encounters with the horrors of the deep, and only hours later it came into view. The Island of Terror – home of the Drii.

The island seemed to have been custom-built to fit Atara. The city was a horrendously nonhuman mixture of pale whites, sickly grays, and black. Tikks scurried

through streets below like ants in a hive while Mires floated above them. And in the center of it all, a massive spire rose up through the surrounding clutter, a monolith so black it seemed to have been carved from shadow itself.

“Izm livessss there,” the Mire informed him. He didn’t seem proud of the fact.

“Is something wrong?” Till asked. Any information he could get about Izm would be helpful here. But he got no response.

He was taken to the base of the gigantic tower and allowed to dismount. The main entrance was a pair of doors, each over thirty feet tall and just as black as the tower itself. As they approached the doors opened of their own accord, and Till found himself inside the great building. He and the Mire were the only ones there. “Usually this place teems with my kind,” the Mire said, “but today is special. You are expected. Come.”

Till followed the creature up the stairs. They seemed to go on forever, step after step, up and up until it seemed the rest of his life would be spent climbing to the top. Till walked with a kind of dignified resolution; he did not know what Izm intended of him, but he did not expect to survive the encounter. He had accomplished his goal, and Lindor was free. He was ready to face his death, if that was what lay at the top of the stairs.

At last they came to a door. It was not a large door like the one in front. This door was not meant to impress; anyone who got this close to the ruler of the Drii Empire had other things on his mind.

The door opened.

Till followed the Mire into a room. As the door closed behind him he knew instinctively that this room was the very top room of the tower; somehow it had to be.

The room was entirely dark, except for the very center, which was lit by a pale light from overhead. It was by this light that Till could see Izm.

He was an old man, his thin hair white and his skin stretched over his skeleton. He was dressed in pure black. There was a crown of steel on his head, and he sat on a black throne carved of solid rock. His blue-eyed gaze, the only thing colder than his crown, were fixed on Till, but his commanding voice addressed the Mire first.

“Is this the one I asked you to bring?”

“Yes.”

“Is his wife still alive?”

“Yes.”

“Does anyone besides his wife know about this?”

“No.”

“Good. Your job is done. Your usefulness has ended. Die.” There was no anger or malice in the voice; it was simply a command. He gestured slightly at the creature, and it perished without so much as a sound. Its body lay on the floor between them. Two Tikks rushed in, grabbed the body, and took it out of the room, closing the door behind them. Izm did not so much as glance at them. He was staring at Till.

Neither spoke for over a minute, Izm because he was studying Till and Till because he was terrified of the man before him. At last Izm broke the silence.

“So you’re the one that destroyed my armies.”

He swallowed. “Yes.”

“You’re the first person that’s ever done that.”

“Only the second to try.”

“It still took courage.”

“Bardon did most of it.”

“Bardon would have done nothing without you. You did quite well against me, Till.”

“Thank you.” He didn’t know what else to say.

Izm was silent a little longer before speaking again. “Did Sierra give you my message?”

“Yes.”

“How is she?”

“What do you care?”

The old man did not reply. Till returned his stare for as long as he could, but he began to get impatient. He had been dragged out of his bed in the middle of his night, taken by force away from his home, and brought to see the leader of the land he had spent all his energies fighting. Whatever the reason, he wanted to hear it. At last his annoyance overcame his fear. “What do you want with me, Izm?”

A cold smile passed his lips. “I was wondering how long it would take you to ask me that.”

Again, silence. “Well?”

“How much do you know about the history of Kylar, Till?”

“About the same as anyone, I suppose. Why?”

“The Drii have been around quite a long time. Did you know that? They lived in this city, their creation, long before any humans came along and named it the Island of Terror. They are very old indeed.”

“Then why did they wait so long?”

Izm’s eyebrows lifted. “Eh? So long for what?” He smiled again, and his voice dropped to a barely audible level. “*To attack?*” he whispered.

“Yes, to attack. They only came a little over fifty years ago. If they’ve been around so long, why did they wait until when they did to come after us?”

“For the same reason you took so long to revolt – and not for lack of effort,” he replied. “They tried, Till. For a thousand years, they tried. But they found it impossible. The humans – Kylar – we stopped them at every turn. There was nothing they could do.” He sighed and pointed to where the Mire had been. “Do you know how intelligent the average Tikk is?”

“Not very smart, from what I’ve gathered.”

“No, they’re not. In fact, they have no intelligence whatsoever. Everything they do – absolutely everything – is a direct command from a Mire. Quite literally, they live to serve.”

“Thousands of mindless soldiers ready to die at your command. Must be helpful in battles,” Till said dryly.

“It is, but not so much as you might think. They obey every order they’re given, certainly. But it’s also a huge disadvantage. You have to move them collectively. None of them can think for themselves in the slightest. Compare that to an entire army of humans, each one by himself more intelligent than the entire opposing army put together. The Drii had numbers on their side, but the humans were smarter. The humans won.”

“But the Tikks are controlled by the Mires.”

“Yes. And how smart do you think a Mire is?” He laughed. “By the time a child of Kylar has reached his fifteenth birthday, he has acquired more wisdom than a Mire ever will. They are not stupid, but they were not nearly smart enough. The humans had better generals. The Drii never had a chance.”

“So what happened?”

“The Mires had just enough intelligence to know that they didn’t have enough intelligence to win. They knew there was nothing they could do on their own. There was only one thing they could do. And they did it.” He leaned forward on his throne. “I was born in the city of Dorn. Every night, a Mire would come to me. They taught me. They taught me how to fight, how to steal, how to lie, how to do everything I needed to survive and get away with it. They were training me, Till. They needed a leader and I was it.”

He closed his eyes, the memories returning. “They began giving me missions. Small things at first, information they wanted, some object they needed stolen. As I got better at it, my missions became more and more complex, until at last the Drii controlled nearly the entire city through me. They were ready to take the last step to control things. And so I was given a mission.

“At that time, the heir to the throne was a beautiful, golden-haired young lady about my age. I believe you’ve met her.”

“Sierra.”

Izm nodded. “Sierra. I was instructed to court her. They knew if I could marry her, I would become king and eventually become the key to their plans. So I obeyed, and I succeeded. She fell in love with me, and I—” He looked intently at Till. “I played my part too well. I fell in love with her as well. I dared not tell the Mires, but they found out

anyway. And they could not allow it. Any emotional attachment would spoil me as a general, or so they believed. On the night before my wedding day, they took me from my home and brought me here. Here, in Atara, they did their best to rid me of all attachments to my homeland. They needed a leader and I was ready at last. The first order I gave was to kill Sierra's new husband. I didn't really have a choice, you see."

"If you are looking for sympathy, look elsewhere."

"That's not why you're here." He sighed. "I attacked Kylar less than a year later. They never had a chance. Diaro was the only one that resisted, and Kanigon fell swiftly. Almost overnight I held the entire country in my fist. The humans obeyed the Tikks, the Tikks obeyed the Mires, and the Mires obeyed me. I had everything.

"They hate me, you know," he said. "The Mires. I'm the living embodiment of their inadequacy. That was their great sacrifice; they won the war, yes. But they lost the right to govern themselves. In that way, they have always lost. They were conquered long before the Battle of Lindor, Till.

"But it was their sacrifice to make, and they made it freely. Now they live with the consequences." He tapped the steel crown atop his head. "This belongs to me now. However...

"The funny thing about humans, Till, is that we are mortal. We grow old. We die." He gestured towards the door. "They know it; I know it. And so now I have only one last responsibility before I die, and it is almost complete."

Now he stood up, pulling his black robes tight around his pale frame and staring deeply at Till with icy eyes. He took a step forward, then another, and another. He

fingering his crown, letting his fingers wander over it, until at last he lifted it off his head with trembling fingers.

“I need,” he whispered, “a replacement.”

Till’s eyes widened. He had known Izm was interested in him, but this...! This was beyond anything he had conceived! He could not think, could only speak. “No!”

“Oh, yes,” Izm said. “This crown is yours. This throne is yours. This tower is yours. And all the Tikks you will need to spread a second Black Wave across the land of Kylar are right here in Atara. The Drii belong to you now.”

Numbly Till shook his head. “I will not help you,” he said.

And here Izm’s voice dropped once more to a whisper, a pale sound that was almost sad but firm as iron at the same time. “You have no choice,” he replied. He put the crown on Till’s head.

Till screamed.

Chapter 27

Awaken.

He heard the voice clearly, though he did not know where it had come from. He opened his eyes and found himself in the middle of a large field of short, dry grass. The sky overhead was deep blue and completely cloudless, and while it was clear that daytime still reigned, the sun was nowhere to be seen. At that moment, his entire universe was composed completely of the grass below the horizon and the sky above.

As he examined his universe, the realization slowly came to him that it was, indeed, his; he knew every part of it, every blade of grass, every molecule of air with

such intense clarity that he finally came to understand that the world around him *was* him. It was his mind turned real; it was a visual representation of his life and his thoughts. The actual images meant nothing. They were important only insofar as they represented what was happening. In an odd way, it was very comforting; for the first time in his life, he was completely at home.

Good. You are awake.

Till stood up and looked around uncertainly. “Who are you?” he asked.

Let it begin.

Suddenly he gasped in horror and shock. He felt, at that moment, the most completely foreign presence he had ever known. It was only a tiny touch, but it was enough; the touch was totally inhuman, so completely alien that he could find no common ground with it whatsoever. He rejected it utterly, and the strength of his rejection made it recoil in surprise for a moment.

But only a moment. It came back with renewed strength now, krakenlike, its greasy presence reaching into his mind and probing, searching, slowly but relentlessly pressing into his consciousness. His horror quickly turned to panic as he looked overhead and saw that the day was being devoured by an inky, starless blackness that bore little resemblance to true night. It was him, he knew, his will being slowly devoured by the Drii in preparation for placing the steel crown atop his head.

He did his best to fight it, but it was like trying to fight a raging current in a river. It was like trying to stand in the way of a hurricane.

It was, he realized, like trying to fight the Black Wave.

With that thought came hope, and he began to pit his will against the force like never before. The blackness had not yet crossed even half the sky yet, and he knew as long as he could hold on to any portion of his will he had a chance.

He waged a mental war on the presence, making it pay for every inch it took on the battlefield. And step by agonizing step, he drove it back. It was like a tug-of-war for his sanity, and bit by bit he was winning. Had he been fighting only for his own life, he would surely have lost long ago. But he was fighting for a great deal more, and that knowledge kept him going. At last the darkness was almost gone from the sky, and with a final effort he drove the evil from his world. He was free! At long last, the battle was truly over! He had won! He was free!

He was free...

...

What now?

At the time, he had been consumed with the struggle. But now the presence was gone, and his mind was safe. He hadn't given much thought as to what to do next. How could he return from this nightmare vision into reality?

He thought for a moment, and his mind relaxed as he pondered.

Oh.

The moment he let his guard down, he felt the presence once more. It was weakened, now, having been defeated, but he realized that it was not enough to simply survive the thing's attack. He had to destroy it.

And that meant going into *its* world.

All right, he thought, I'll do it.

And thus resolved, he willed an opening to the creature's mind – the will of the Crown. It appeared, in his world, as a fissure in the ground, a tear in the earth that spewed out smoke and stench and fire. The heat of it blasted his face. He turned away for a moment, took a deep breath, and dove in.

The flames and smoke swirled around him like a whirlwind, preventing him from seeing anything for a moment. When it cleared, he found himself on the top of a black stone tower under a black sky. He found a sword in his hand, a long, clean blade that gleamed silver and shone golden at the hilt. Till had never been a particularly good swordsman, and under normal circumstances this might have put him at a disadvantage; here, though, the sword was merely a representation of his own tenacity of willpower. He knew how to use it.

He watched in detached and horrified fascination as the darkness in all direction coalesced, arranging itself into a beast of terrifying shape and unimaginable strength. In form it resembled the shadow of a large dragon – Roze, perhaps, were she fifty times her normal size. The thought of Roze made him angry, and he directed his anger towards the creature before him. Its great wings beat against the darkness, and it circled him warily in the air. He kept his sword pointing it at all times, never letting his gaze leave it. This was it, he realized. Win or lose. Win, and the Drii would be nothing but a memory. Lose, and he would meet worse than death along with thousands of others. Nothing else in between. Here and now.

The dragon lunged at him, black jaws gaping. He leapt aside easily, swinging his sword around to attack its throat. The blade struck the shadow and passed through it without resistance. The dragon whirled and snapped its teeth at Till, but missed inches

from his face. Till ducked and jumped back. It roared with laughter. “Stab me if you can, dragonslayer,” it hissed.

Till growled and lowered his sword. “All right,” he said. “I can’t stab you, then. You’re the Steel Crown of Atara, and I can’t fight you. What now?”

The dragon looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what do I do now? I can’t kill you.”

It roared and flew up into the skies. “You don’t seem very concerned, human, for one who is about to face his immediate demise!”

Till sheathed his sword.

“What are you doing?” the creature demanded. “You’re not going to fight?! Hahaha! This will be my easiest victory ever! You will be even simpler to convert than Izm was!”

Till waited.

The dragon roared again.

Till waited.

It swooped down low and met him face to face. Its eyes burned bright red and its teeth snapped together anxiously. “Any last words, human?” it demanded.

“Only these,” said Till. “A crown is only for those who wear it.” He smiled grimly. “Go ahead.”

The dragon roared in sheer rage now, but it was too late. Till understood. He had understood from the moment he sliced through it with his sword. The creature was insubstantial; it had no real power. It relied on fear, intimidation, and shock. But the Steel Crown of Atara could not convert anyone who did not truly wish to surrender to it.

And that, Till realized, was why Izm became king.

The dragon screamed, and shrieked, and howled and beat its wings and clawed the air and snapped without power at Till's head, but it accomplished no more than a zephyr would have. Within seconds it burst into royal flame, then turned into thick black smoke, and at last faded into nothingness.

And when Till opened his eyes – for real, this time – and saw the shattered steel crown on the floor and the old, old man lying dead beside it, he knew that now, at last, it was over.

PART V: AFTERMATH

Chapter 28

When the first warships arrived from Kylar a week later, Till was ready. He personally greeted Bardon as the man came ashore, spreading the news to the amazed crew that there was no more war, no more battles to fight. For the Mires had become so linked to their leader and the crown he wore that when he was gone, most of them went mad and attacked each other. What few Mires survived had thrown themselves into the sea, and the Tikks, bereft of masters, followed. Atara lay in ruins and the tower of Izm had fallen. There was nothing to do but return home.

They sailed back over the Ivory Sea. The monsters that dwelt there stayed well clear of the giant ships, for the men had harpoons, and the creatures learned swiftly. Very soon they were back to the mainland of Kylar, and Till had much to learn.

Bardon, who had been traveling and making preparations for the assault, knew a great deal of recent news in Kylar that Till was eager to hear. The biggest news, of

course, was that Bardon himself was to become king of Kanigon. Diaro IV had been killed in the revolution, and he had no close relatives; by almost unanimous consent Bardon had been chosen for the job. He had accepted the title with grace, and now he proudly showed Till his golden crown. Till merely nodded and smiled politely; he was happy, of course, but he had had more than enough of crowns right then. Nevertheless he listened as Bardon told him of the grand coronation ceremony, and how even the Klickers and Hallots had arrived to see it. It was, everyone said, the dawn of a new age.

Till's return to Lindor sparked an immense celebration. If he had been a hero before, his story of the encounter with Izm on the Island of Terror increased this a hundredfold. But more than any of the people celebrating, his return was welcomed by Filador and Aren. Filador was both pleased to see Till alive and fascinated by his story; this insight into Izm's motives answered some of the man's leftover questions concerning the Drii. As for Aren, her reaction was as joyful as it was relieved. Partly for Till, and partly for Kylar. The world, it seemed, was returning to normal.

The economy was booming like never before. Everyone had become so used to the Drii taxes and tariffs that when they disappeared, it was like landing on a gold mine. The local city governments, of course, did their best to make up for the Drii's sudden lacking, but it was not enough to prevent a sudden upsurge in prosperity.

Aside from that, the rest of the world was not affected in any serious way. The simple fact was that the Drii had not been all that harmful to Kylar in general. The life of the average citizen in Dorn, Saliban or Lindor was not drastically affected by the name of the person in power.

And yet, he realized, freedom must have been important, or they would not have fought for it – or died for it.

The rebuilding of Kanigon and Lindor – Lindor in particular – was proceeding smoothly. A great deal of damage had been done by the Tikks during their attacks, but in the span of a single year an incredible amount had been rebuilt. Of course, not everything was rebuilt; a few things, such as the black flags that had flown there previously, were ripped from their staffs. This was done with great pleasure, especially by those such as Marrott, who had been campaigning for this sort of thing all along.

And yet, for all the festivities and rebuilding, all the excitement and progress, the memories of the past never quite disappeared. For though in later years words such as “Tikk” and “Izm” no longer frightened even children, the shadow of the Drii merely faded, never died. And it is said that for a hundred years after the fall of Izm’s tower, nobody traveled to the Island of Terror to settle, to research, or even to visit. It was a monument to death, and whenever something unfortunate happened, people looked in that direction and muttered.

But this, as with so many other superstitions, was insubstantial. Atara held no power any longer. It was a city of ruin. And the dark tower of Izm, like the steel crown inside, was broken.

THE END