

Worlds Within Words

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“Worlds Within Words”

I affirm that this manuscript is my own work and that all acknowledgements have been properly made.

Signed: 

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this to my grandmother, Moira de Wet, whose constant, unconditional support of my writing spurred me on to greater heights.

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*PROLOGUE**Last Chapter: A World Within Words*

I am watching.

The river sighed alongside the bank while reeds quivered in the delicate autumn wind.

Crickets chirruped softly, quieting as the forest loomed ahead, silent and still.

Lialh knelt, grasping the loose, loamy soil, allowing it fall through his fingers. He studied the ground before him, noting where it was soft and wet, and recently trodden. Rubbing two fingers together, he felt how the moist air flowing off the river would eventually cover the residue of their passing.

He needed to be swift. "Ansuz..." He allowed the spell to filter through his tongue before escaping his lips.

Small, incandescent wisps escaped Lialh's fingers and the tiny droplets of water shifting in the air began to glow. Some fell away, burnt alive, but those which remained floated away on a hidden current, forging a trail through the close shadows and ever-increasing whispers which burdened the forest.

Lialh sprung from path to path, his lips still sounding out the spell, when the lights vanished and darkness encompassed him.

Relaxing his muscles from their sudden tension, he whispered words recalled from his training. "Raidho."

His senses moved outward, expanding through and beyond the trees, whose bark spoke to him of great suffering and terrible shame that they had allowed themselves to be used so.

His senses were dulled to all danger, but the haunted trees screamed for him to flee.

The shadows and darkness were not natural, that much was obvious. If Mahj Geth Master Rigel had taught him anything, it was to believe in his gut, before landing two fists in that very pit, felling him to the ground. Lialh knew then the truth of his wisdom.

Unstrapping Mikael, a sword like no other he'd ever encountered, he held the onyx-encrusted hilt loosely in his right hand. Feeling for the last time with his extended senses, he flung out with his left hand, screaming a single word with blinding intensity. "Kenaz!" A ball of pure white light streamed from his fingers, coalescing in a perfect sphere above his head, stunning with its brilliance. Shouts of dismay alerted him to his enemies, and

without seeing, he lunged with Mikael, shouting out words of demise. "Hagalaz!" Lightning pulsed through his right hand, burning his skin with raw power, accelerating deep into his sword. It was released in an arc of vivid yellow light, enhanced by the sword's own magical properties. The dark creatures were illuminated for a brief, elongated moment before their bodies became one with the earth. Jumping from one to the other, their deaths became as nothing when silence once more descended. Breathing heavily, Lialh knelt, Mikael his only crutch. The ball of light remained, though severely drained, as he summoned the calm. Drawing back his senses, he allowed Mikael to slowly recharge his depleted body.

"Very impressive," laughed a sudden voice, stronger and darker than any of the foul creatures he had moments before dispelled. "The energies within you are powerful indeed. More than I would have thought you capable of. But," and a gauntleted hand appeared out of the depths of shadow which Lialh's light could not penetrate, "you are rendered weak without your precious sword."

With a wave and a sound barely heard, not even Lialh's strong grip could prevent Mikael from being snatched away, leaving him to fall heavily on the ground.

"It would seem," pondered a second, female voice of almost unnatural musical quality, "that the young hero might have benefited from your training in place of those wretched Mahj. His power might very well have surpassed your own, Cannaugh."

"I would have you slain for that remark, Chealdrin," said the male voice with a detached sense of threat, "but I fear you speak the truth. Nevertheless, we will allow the master to _"

"No, Cannaugh! We slay him here, on our terms."

"You overstretch yourself, Chealdrin. But perhaps you are correct. This one has been an irritant for too long now."

Lialh felt numb as his exhausted body was flung into the air. Dark bands of a slick eel-like substance held him aloft. "Eihwaz!" he shouted with as much power as was left in him, and the air surrounding him shimmered, forming a protective shield.

"You think you can fight us?" laughed Chealdrin. "Zanek," she said with disgust. But the shield held, though it took most of Lialh's strength to keep it in place.

"Is that the best you can manage, Chealdrin? He is but a weak pup, waiting for us to show

him the way." Cannaugh's voice lifted. "Zahwei!"

The shield shattered into hundreds of useless pieces.

"The futility of those who fight against us is apparent, Chealdrin. This world's last hope, hanging in the balance, as it were."

"Slay him, Cannaugh. Your boasting will be the end of us."

"As your tongue will be the end of you. Do not think to –"

I... must intervene.

There was a sharp snapping sound as all words ceased from the den of groaning foliage. Lialh attempted to draw some form of power from the echo of raw pain around him, fuelling the ebbing light above his own battered form. He struggled against the slick bonds that still held him, but they refused to budge. He froze as the forest eroded around him and he found himself alone freed from his bindings.

No spell or martial trick would work in this strange between place. Time had no meaning, and he was no longer child nor man.

"I offer you freedom, young hero," said a voice out of the sheer grey void. "You need not bear the fate of this world in its endless cycle. Go back to your village and live out a simpler existence. Take this gift, and allow another your burden."

Could he start again? Be someone new, unimpeded by destiny? Was it possible? But he couldn't, and he knew it, in that small part of him that remained. Its name was Fear, and it was his shame. Fate was his parent, his guide, and he could not live without it.

That knowledge burned its way into the void, and he heard himself crying out from the edge of time. "This must not happen. This must not happen!" He began to whimper.

"This is not how it ends. I am the hero!" His body materialised in that place between, but it began to quiver and ripple and change, becoming foreign. "This is not supposed to happen! I am not supposed to die!" His now alien features echoed his anguish as a familiar object raced towards him from the edge of light. Lialh had made his choice. He couldn't let go.

Mikael, his own blade, screamed in crystal protest. The sword pierced the heart of his floating body, and the trees cried out in despair.

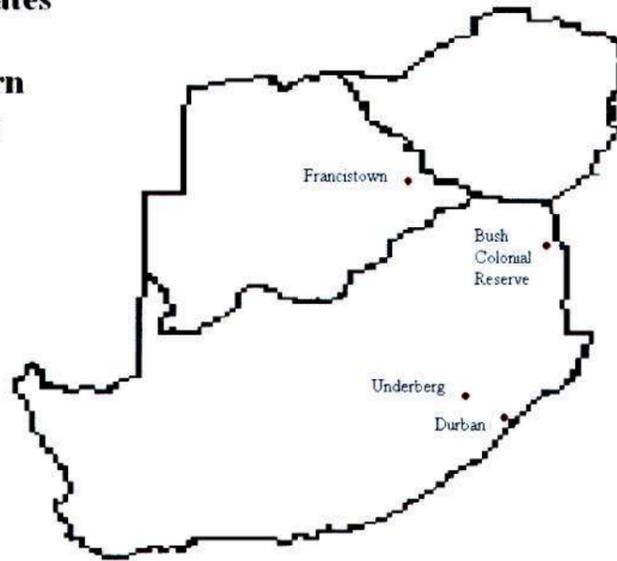
Sitting up, Michael wiped sweat from his brow. Looking around with a mind still half asleep, he mumbled into the night. "We have to find it, Sergi. We have to find the book today."

PART 1

The Future

**United States
of
Southern
Africa**

South Africa
Botswana
Zimbabwe
Lesotho
Swaziland



A voice crackled, emanating from the walls of the bedroom. "Michael, you say that every morning, but what do we have to show for this urgency of yours?"

Michael lay back down in his bed, letting his head fall into the luxurious quilt, a family heirloom miraculously intact thanks to a miniature robotic device created by the friendly people over at Nanotech Corp. It meticulously sewed in the missing seams, fixing any tear and leaving a trace of magnetic field wherever it happened to travel, repelling any dirt foolish enough to find its way back.

His lips quirked as he recalled Sergi's quip about the vacated dirt taking up residence in his brain. He glanced at the nightstand. Sitting on top wasn't a photograph per se, but rather a digital image beamed across a lens. He stared at the image of his parents smiling over him as he tried to take his first steps towards them. He sighed. Neither that memory nor Sergi's remarks could bring any kind of smile to his face that morning. The dream was too fresh.

"You're ignoring me," muttered Sergi.

Michael looked up at the ceiling, noticing for the hundredth time the peeling paint. The house was old, true, and not completely compatible with the crystals, but Sergi had managed to implement the technology well enough. He had once told Michael that, while the house looked normal from the outside, within the walls was a spider web of circuitry connected to every household appliance. And yet, the paint still peeled.

"You know," continued Sergi, ignoring Michael's lazy staring, "I could have you out of that bed long before you could –"

"I'm not ignoring you, Sergi, though you do seem a bit overly dramatic this morning. Sometimes I wonder why I give you so much control in the first place."

"I too ask that question on a regular basis, but then I remember how lazy you are and the world makes sense again."

Michael lips quirked again. "Have you been working on your satire? I'm starting to think I give you too much free time as well."

"Too much free time! Too – do you realize how busy I've been searching for this mythical relic book thing of yours?"

Michael grinned. "I think I'd better check the walls for parasites. It sounds like you might be getting worms. Did you know that your vocabulary tends to diminish when you're angry?" He felt the room temperature rise for a moment. "And was that a blush I felt, or anger?"

"You think you're so funny, but just wait. We'll see who ends up with worms. I hear there's a mutated strain of tape worm coming out of Sino Chechnya. It would be too bad if they found their way into your breakfast."

"What a pity we've placed a trade embargo on them then. I don't think our great USSA would allow even our *oxygen* to mix with the Cheches if they could help it."

"You underestimate my willpower."

"Hey," said Michael, raising his hands, "easy now. I give up. Glory to the Unites States of Southern Africa and all that." He reached down and grabbed the end of his white sheet. He tried to yank it up, but it was too well tucked in. Cursing, he picked up his pillow and waved it above his head. "Peace. Parley?"

"Not up for a fight, eh? I guess I should have expected as much." The bed began to tilt on its hidden axis, a little faster than normal, and Michael tumbled onto the floor.

"Ow! Hey, that wasn't funny." He rubbed his elbow. "But I guess I deserved it," he said, standing. "And now, unless you'd like to join me, I think I'll clean myself up a bit."

"Don't hurt yourself."

"Too late." The bathroom door slid open with a hiss and he stepped into the shower. With a clap of thunder, all of the excess sweat and dirt was vibrated off of his body and out of every pore as though pulled with a magnet. Michael stood still for a moment, allowing his hearing to return. Usually he didn't bother with that particular feature of the shower, but this morning he was in no mood to be soothed.

"You usually enjoy the feel of the hot water coursing over your body."

"Sergi!"

"I'm not watching. It just seems such a waste not to enjoy comfort whenever you can."

Michael sighed, but said nothing.

Dressing in jeans and a flowery shirt – Sergi had been about to say something before Michael silenced him with "Not a word" – he made his way through the house, catching a glimpse now and then of the surrounding countryside.

The house was almost 80 years old, built some time in the 1950's in the southern part of what had once been the Crocodile Bridge portion of the Kruger National Park, now the Bush Colonial Reserve. It was an area which joined at the borders of Mozambique and the USSA's northernmost state, Zimbabwe. The protected animals were gone, however, either moved to smaller, well-protected parks, or extinct. All that remained were the grand houses built by the rich who thought to spend their retirement enjoying the sight of those who were also enjoying their last fleeting days. It still surprised Michael that the city lines had not yet encroached upon this bastion of nature, but he didn't think it would be that long now.

Taking the stairs down to the dining hall, he sat at the long, opaque, plastic-looking table. Like much of the furniture, it was a new addition to his home. It was made from a tough, virtually unbreakable polyester, and as Sergi was wont to tell him over and over again, it clashed with everything.

"Sergi, I know it's a slow day for you, but how about some food?"

"Chef Sergi is always willing to try new things," he replied, adopting an over-the-top French accent. "Today I have created for you a splendid blend of snails and porridge. And," he said, regaining his normal accent, "you can eat it with a spoon. Although, if you like, you can use your hands. I know how you battle."

Michael smiled, a habit he thought he might start to enjoy. "I suppose I haven't been fair with you this morning. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry this seeming obsession of mine has you working so hard. Forgive me?"

The kitchen was entirely automatic in design, and when Michael heard the familiar clattering of pans and sizzling of oil, he knew his friend was feeling somewhat placated. Five minutes later, a breakfast of eggs, tomatoes and bacon moved steadily towards him along a conveyor, the plate stopping to his left. Michael lifted the plate onto the table in front of him, reaching for some cutlery. He plunged his fork into his meal, taking intermittent sips from a glass of orange juice which had been sent behind the food. "Have you found anything on the Network yet, Sergi?" asked Michael, his stomach no longer aching from hunger. "We really do need to find that book."

"Sorry? I missed that between the mouthfuls of bacon fat."

Michael put his fork down, regarding his food. He had never before had such an appetite,

but ever since the dreams had begun, he had woken up feeling constantly drained.

“And no,” continued Sergi, oblivious to Michael’s musings, “the Network is large, and now with all those cyberguards...”

“I know, I know. It’s just that the dreams are getting worse. I see more and more each night, not to mention feeling as though I might just collapse and lack the willpower to get up again. And... and this time I actually saw him die. I haven’t seen him die since ...” He gulped down an egg yolk. “His sword, remember, the one with my name, or sounded like it anyway... well, it was used against him, or me, because just before the dream ended I found myself watching the sword come toward me. I felt it tear....” Michael sat back. He wasn’t hungry anymore. “Show me the news, please.”

The far wall began to part, revealing a screen composed of a crystallized form of quicksilver. A face materialised within, formed from the screen itself.

Michael almost fell off his chair. “Sergi,” he managed to splutter, “you... you’ve got so many faces in the database. Couldn’t you pick one that looked a little less... inebriated?”

“It’s the face of Robert Frost, you cultural dunce,” said Sergi, affronted.

Michael smirked. “Robert Frost after a hard night at the pub, maybe. And what’s with the pipe?”

‘Robert Frost’ chewed his pipe and scowled. “I was trying to look professional,” he said, parting the hair across his eyes. “Besides, it’s too late to change. I’m receiving transmission.” Sergi’s face took on a serious mask. “The news in brief: tensions are rising once more between the USA, the USSA and Sino Chechnya. After almost a decade of trade embargos and veiled military threats, experts fear that both sides might finally stop their chest thumping and pull out the nukes.”

“Sergi, are you sure you’re reading your cues correctly.”

“I thought I might embellish a little. I am channelling a great poet, after all.”

“If you say so.”

“Ahem, to continue. After many years of negotiation, the Vatican and European Union have agreed to create a unified ruling European Council that –”

“I was wondering how long it would take before the Vatican bullied the EU into such a concession,” remarked Michael. “It doesn’t seem like anything can kill religion.”

‘Robert Frost’ smirked. “I think the Vatican stopped regarding themselves as being

religious when the pope declared Rome to be under martial law.”

“True enough, I suppose. What else?”

“On the local front,” continued the news broadcast, “Governor Sindole of South Africa has refused requests to meet with the rebels believed to be hiding out in the Drakensberg Mountains. Despite pressure from nationwide municipalities to hold talks, Sindole has repeatedly stated that he will not negotiate with terrorists. Many feel that his response to the constant sabotage blamed on the rebels, who refer to themselves as the True Africans, is a strange one. For not only does he refuse to meet with their representatives, but makes no attempt to quell their activities in the least. Polls indicate that many South Africans sympathise with the rebels and feel that our American patrons should be removed. Fear of the loss of the crystal technology has kept that sentiment to a minimum, however.”

Michael sighed. “I wouldn’t envy the governor’s job right now.”

“I wouldn’t envy your own position, Michael. And don’t forget, you’re also part of the vanguard of American ‘patrons’.”

“My mother was South African, Sergi. This was her house. Besides, I was born here.”

“And so was I, in a manner of speaking. What does that make me?”

“A technological achievement?”

“Patronising bastard.”

“If you weren’t Robert Frost at this very moment, I might believe you meant that.”

Michael took a sip of his juice. “So what are these rebels up to?”

“A rebellion.”

“Funny.”

“Well, if you insist. There are a number of old articles I could pull up for you. I wouldn’t want to bore you with the details, but they talk about the rebels managing to sabotage two nuclear plants in the Koeberg Chain along the west coast. A few casualties were reported, but the plants’ override systems prevented any major disasters. Governor Sindole has a special team out searching for their ‘base of operations’, but it looks like the rebels keep managing to kill them off. The Governor’s even requested help from mainland USA, but they seem to be stalling for some reason.”

“Aren’t they always? It sickens me what they can get away with these days.”

“It’s not exactly something new, Michael. They –” Sergi stopped abruptly.

Michael raised his eyes. "They what? Why'd you stop?"

"Hold on. I'm receiving a new transmission. Priority news broadcast."

Michael thrummed his fingers on the table.

"Great Gatsby!"

Michael perked up his ears, uncertain whether he should laugh at such a ridiculous turn of phrase or be worried by Sergi's tone. "What!"

"Michael, you'll never believe what some idiotic reporter has done. And he's broadcasting it on all channels. Does he want to get caught?"

"Sergi, I'd say explain yourself, but that would be too obvious."

"Oh, pipe down. I'm patching through now."

The screen flickered for a moment as 'Robert Frost' disappeared. But instead of the reporter, or even the natural silver colouring of the screen, all was black.

"Sergi?"

"Don't ask me. It was fine a moment ago."

The screen flickered with a sudden burst of life, illuminating a man in his early thirties. His skin was a burnt brown while his hair sported an elaborate braid which was all the style among the younger generation of South African Americans. Michael realised that he himself also, technically, fell under that category, but here in South Africa it mostly referred to those of pure African heritage. The man had a small white dot attached to the corner of his mouth which acted as a microphone. He touched it briefly, then smiled widely into the camera. "My apologies, but we lost the lighting for a moment. As I was saying, what I have discovered here, in the heart of rebel territory, is a place far greater than anyone could ever have imagined."

"Sergi, do you think you might want to explain?"

"Michael," began Sergi, his voice emanating once more from the walls, "maybe you didn't hear. This idiot has infiltrated the rebel base. And he's broadcasting it to every station in the country. Do you really think the rebels don't have access to news broadcasts?"

"Oh. Does he want to get himself caught?"

"I'm so glad you could catch on."

But the reporter didn't stop. "At great risk to myself, I, Jackson Matebele, bring to you a

find greater even than the location of the rebel group known as the True Africans. If you will notice by my immediate surroundings, I am standing in an ancient African tomb situated in the centre of a series of catacombs riddling the mountains at Injasuthi.” He indicated a wall carving behind him, and the image took up the entire screen. “Here we have what looks to be a mythological figure fighting off demons of some sort. Whether it’s of Nguni descent or some other, even older tribe, will be for the archaeologists to discover.” The screen returned to Jackson’s face, slightly enlarged for effect. “But these carvings pale in comparison to the artistry evident in this next relic. According to my extensive knowledge of local history, this next piece surpasses the artistic ability of the ancient Nguni.”

The image shifted, and Michael eyes widened. The screen now focused on the statue of a woman carved in such intricate detail that were it not obvious, she would immediately be taken for a heavenly creature. She was adorned in flowing stone garments that accentuated the soft features of her face and, through a trick of light pouring through from some unknown source, the illusion of flowing hair was created. She held a book in her left hand, also made of stone, while her other hand waited, palm up, for some sort of offering.

The screen returned abruptly to Jackson Matebele. “She would appear to be some sort of goddess – a scholarly type, or possibly a scribe, designating knowledge. Nevertheless, this type of symbol has never before been seen in relics of African culture. What secrets does this tomb hold? What can it teach us of our true African roots? Is it possible that there are lost writings among these ruins from a thought to be originally illiterate tribe? Perhaps to have even escaped the plague? Only time will tell. Not only does this hold grand possibilities for the native – hey, what are you doing – leave him alone – run, Msizi, ru –”

The transmission ended abruptly.

‘Robert Frost’s’ face appeared on the screen. “We apologise for the lost transmission. We shall attempt to regain it at a later stage. Meanwhile, onto other news: the US Space Programme has officially announced that an in-depth analysis of Mars has found it completely devoid of any ores or water supplies –”

“Sergi, that’s rather cold of you,” said Michael.

Sergi raised an eyebrow. "I could have told you that was going to happen. I just thought your human sensibilities might be better served if I made a quick transition."

"But he sounds like he's in danger."

"I don't see why you care, Michael. People far more able than us would have seen the news. I'm sure he's being rescued as we speak."

"Yeah well, sometimes people don't do the right thing."

"I suppose that's why you speak to *me* all day?"

"Hey, what's that supp –" Suddenly Michael blinked. "Sergi! Quick, go back to that shot in the tomb, the one showing the images of that battle on the wall."

Sergi ground down on his pipe. Nevertheless, his 'face' disappeared from the screen to reveal the image from the previous broadcast.

"Focus in on that man with the sword. Okay, bring him up a little closer. Do you think you could fill the screen with his face?"

Sergi complied. "Michael, what is it?"

"Look Sergi, at his features."

"What about them?"

"But don't you see? I've described him so many times your memory banks should be bursting with his image."

"You mean ..."

"Yes! It's him!"

"But... that's impossible, Michael. He's only a figment from your dreams."

"Not when they reflect reality."

"Reflect rea... reflect reality? Michael, this is insanity. It's not real."

Michael sighed. "I know how you feel, Sergi, but surely after all you've seen –"

"That's just it, Michael. I haven't *seen* anything."

"Don't be so pedantic. I'm having these dreams for a reason. Just look at the image of the sword, if you would be so kind as to return it to the screen. It's an exact replica of Mikael."

The screen split in half, the one side displaying the tomb hero while the other half portrayed a priest looking up to the heavens, his hands raised above his head. "I've tried, God," shouted the holy man. "What more do you want from me?"

“Sergi, please,” said Michael. “Trust me just this once more. Because I think I’ve finally discovered the location of the book.”

Michael O'Connor swatted at the flies which had perched themselves on his exposed neck on that warm Durban evening. They flew only far enough away to be out of arm's reach, darting back in at odd intervals. Trying to ignore them, he supposed the flies were preferable to the stares he received from those who heard his decidedly Americanised accent, a gift from his father. But he was tired of pleading his own Africanness in an age where even an Afrikaans accent was accepted with no judgement. He knew the time was approaching when he might be stoned in the street. Then again, his white, half-American skin was probably thick enough to deflect barbed words.

The café he was seated at was little more than a tourist attraction. The food was too oily, the waiters unfriendly, and the rolling waves from the ocean brought with them the smell of rot.

Nobody swam in the oceans anymore. He recalled his parents bringing him to one of Cape Town's beaches as a child, but the water had been far too cold for swimming. He remembered how the ocean had frozen the soles of his feet and how they reminded him of cheeks pinched red. Durban's beaches had been off limits for twenty years now, and he had never had a chance to enjoy its warmer waters.

Michael shook his head, wrinkling his nose. Sergi had suggested the adjective 'sour' in reference to the ocean, and he was inclined to agree.

He glanced at the pasta he had ordered, and pushed it away. He would let the flies have it. Those the world now had in abundance, especially along the coast. With the oceans off limit – thanks to acid rain and global warming, or so he was told – governments and corporations now felt no qualms about dumping all sorts of rubbish and toxic waste into the water, and the flies swarmed amongst the stench.

For a moment Michael was reminded of the wonderful experience of eating fish at a Cape Town café. The only fish left edible now were those farmed in fresh water far inland. At the very least, he thought, illegal fishing had now become a thing of the past. It was only unfortunate that it took the extinction of most salt water creatures to realise just how much they were needed for a viable world ecosystem. He peered around more suspiciously, expecting a typhoon to suddenly pick him up and drop him far out to sea.

The thought of his flesh searing off made him swallow hard.

Michael winked at the waitress, more out of boredom than anything else, and received the obligatory cold stare. It washed over him like a refreshing shower, chasing away the stench for a moment. Why they still had open air cafes on the coast was beyond him. He whispered to Sergi, asking his artificial friend for the time. Glancing down at his wrist watch, he was rudely reminded why he had been forced to leave Sergi at home. Pushing one of the small buttons on his watch, he saw that he'd only been waiting for half an hour. But waiting wasn't what truly annoyed him. He was more surprised at the momentary anger he had felt at having to physically check the time. He was getting far too complacent if the slightest movement of his body was too much of an effort. But then again, who could he blame? Progress?

The absence of the familiar presence of his partner in 'truth seeking,' as Sergi referred to it, was more disconcerting than he would have thought. Loneliness had been a part of his life for many years now, especially living out in the middle of nowhere, but he had been prevented from plumbing the depths of true depression thanks to Sergi's constant natterings. Annoying as he could be, he kept Michael sane in a world which had passed the point of insanity somewhere during his adolescence.

There had been reasons for not bringing Sergi, starting with the manner in which Michael had been contacted. Sergi had been hijacked the day before during one of his Net runs, and a recording had been imprinted on his matrix. Sergi had been forced to play back the message as soon as he returned to the house. A meeting time and place had been relayed 'in aid of Michael's efforts to discover the truth'. The holo-image had then leaked a virus into Sergi's chip, which had created a steady build up of acid. Fortunately, he was able to back Sergi up onto a temporary flash drive without too much damage. Unfortunately, the repair process to Sergi's chip could not be completed in time for the meeting. It was an automated process, and he could only hope that Sergi would be up and running by the time Michael got back.

Listening now to the constant buzzing of the flies only heightened the anger and irritation he felt at the attempted destruction of his friend. Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes, grinding his teeth in frustration, before letting out a sudden yawn. He realised that he was trembling slightly, and wondered if it was only his anger. When he opened his

eyes again, he had to steady his chair before it tipped over, such was his surprise. Before him sat who he could only assume was his contact.

“Mr O’Connor, I’m glad that you could meet me. I don’t have much time, so this must be brief.”

“Hey, hold on a minute,” said Michael, regaining himself. “I’ve got a bone to pick with you. You think you can just install a virus onto Ser... my surfing bot... and almost destroy –”

“A necessary precaution, Mr O’Connor. Please, the information I have to offer you is of vital importance. It was necessary to ensure complete secrecy.”

The man spoke with an English accent, but it felt a little too forced. In fact, Michael could swear that when he stressed some syllables, an American accent filtered through. It didn’t mean much, though, especially in South Africa with its blend of different languages. It might have been a natural amalgam, but Michael didn’t think so. Besides, an American accent drew unwanted attention these days; something this man clearly didn’t need.

Michael closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “Fine,” he said finally, crossing his arms and opening his eyes. “I’ll listen, but you’d better make this worth my while.”

His contact, dressed in shifting pants, a grey tie and charcoal blazer, placed a briefcase on the tiny café table. His lean moustache, the only noticeable facial hair, moved with his lips as he spoke. “I’ll assume then, that you know of the plague of 2005?”

Michael sat back in his chair, waiting.

“Please, Mr O’Connor. If you could indulge me. There is a... a process to my thinking.”

Michael’s pursed his lips, but decided he would play the role of the obedient puppy, though only for so long. “All the paper in the world disintegrated. I assume that’s the correct response.”

Michael’s contact sighed, as though he were lecturing a child who refused to accept that he was wrong. “The propagandists of this age have truly learnt from their German masters.” The contact sat back. “I would have thought that you of all people would question such a claim.”

“Why? Why is something that happened 30 years ago so important?”

“Come now, how can you say something like that? The past is everything. Would the US

be the same if it had never had its revolution? Would this country be any different if apartheid had never come into being? Would Europe be ruled by the Vatican if Hitler had won? Is it not obvious that history has shaped all that this world has become?"

Michael frowned. "I understand what you're saying, causality and all. And, well, fine, the world would be a different place if paper still existed, I'm sure, but since I never grew up in that world, and very soon there'll be no one alive who has, what does it matter? If you want to read or write, the world has computers aplenty."

"I suppose I should have expected such a response, but think about it like this. Our world suffered the greatest loss of literature since the burning of the Library of Alexander.

History all but forgotten. It's not a slight or trivial thing, Mr O'Connor, and instead of trying to salvage anything, once again the world was looking in the wrong direction."

He paused, breathless, as he batted away a fly.

Michael couldn't help but smile. At least the flies recognised the garbage coming out of this man's mouth.

"Perhaps the world is better off looking to the future than the past," continued Michael's contact after a moment, "but what happens when the computer is the only device left to record memory? What happens when we humans forget to remember? The world doesn't seem to care, so long as they have their precious technology." He looked at Michael's features for a moment, as if to size him up. "You weren't even alive on that day, were you?"

"The day the world stopped'?"

"Yes. So I see you do still recall some of your history. Some people, philosophers mostly, like to call it 'The day the world lost its memory'. I prefer that title. It cuts to the core of the matter, though not in the way most people think. When they say it, all they can think about is the complete shut down of technology. Like a great Electromagnetic Pulse shattering the world. But I like to think of all of the Homers and Vergils lost for all time. Those works not copied onto the Net in the following couple of days were and are lost forever, kept only in our dying memory."

"Surely digital copies were made before that?"

The contact raised his eyes. "I guess you don't remember all of your history then. No, everything, from bank records to credit ratings to life savings were wiped clean. Once

they got things running again, the world had to start over. Be grateful you weren't alive during that period. Utter chaos, and that's not counting the millions of deaths due to technological failure. But I'm straying from the point, and I don't have that much time."

"Well then get to the point."

"I will, but you need the context if you're to understand what I'm about to tell you next. The world's technology is failing. You know this. It's the very reason why South Africa is no longer a sovereign state."

"And?"

"It can't be easy, being of both American and South African descent. I don't envy your situation."

Michael laughed. "I might as well be nothing around here. I'm less than these flies to my own people."

"I'm sorry, I truly am, but then you know the reason for this. Crystalcorp."

"Crystal technology?"

"The ultimate tool of coercion. The US has it. The world needs it. Otherwise they'll be looking at complete technological failure in a matter of years. South Africa was only one of the first to succumb to the pressure."

"I don't see what choice there was, to be honest."

"American homogeneity. People don't want it, and, it seems, would rather commit acts of terror than accept it. But I'll tell you now, South Africa was smart. All the other countries will come around, when their failing technology becomes more than they can bear. The US will win this war of attrition; it's just a matter of time. At least this country won't have that much dirt to dig away. Sino Chechnya and all the rest will fall, however, their graves already marked."

Michael stared silently at the man for a while. "You're baiting me, aren't you?"

"Are you hooked yet?"

"We'll see."

"We will, won't we?" The contact paused. "How about a change in tact? Let me ask you a few questions, and you see if you can answer them."

"Go ahead."

"Have you at all considered why technology has been degrading ever since that fateful

day? Surely there's a mystery in there somewhere? And what about the Paper Plague? To this day, there is no known cause. Not to mention these American crystals. How, when integrated, does it allow normal technology to function? Has it ever occurred to you to question the suspicious timing of this new technology's release?"

Michael's eyes had widened slightly. True, these were all questions he had no answer for, and God knows he'd love to find out. But these were questions that were surely out of his league. "I don't know the answers. Now, don't think I'm not interested, but I fail to see your point."

This time it was his contact's turn to look puzzled. "But, Mr O'Connor, I thought you'd be a little more than 'just interested'. Surely you can see how these questions might affect you personally?"

"Personally? While I'll admit that this grand conspiracy you're thrusting in my face warrants a little digging, I don't see that I could go up against a government which, in time, will virtually rule the world. Besides, why would I want to?"

Michael's contact shook his head. "I thought, since... Mr O'Connor, what about the melting signs?"

Michael sat forward. "Oh, come now. I think I've had enough." He started to get up, but his contact grabbed his arm, pulling him down.

"Mr O'Connor, I don't think you realise the great risk I took in meeting you." He swiped at another fly.

Michael took a deep breath. "God damn it," he said slowly, "what about signs now?"

"Propaganda. You parents would have remembered, and I hear the effect is being used for practical applications in certain third world countries, but everyone else seems to have conveniently forgotten. You won't find any information about it on the Net, unless you looked really hard. Mr O'Connor, do you ever remember anyone mentioning the fact that signs, billboards, and anything, other than paper, which had writing on them, melted?"

"Now you're starting to annoy me."

"Mr O'Connor, the 'Paper' Plague is a fraud. Because it wasn't just paper which disappeared, it was all language."

"Language disintegrated," repeated Michael, scoffing.

"Written language, in the broadest sense of the term."

“I see. Actually, I don’t see. Besides, there’s a flaw in your theory. If it was the writing which disintegrated, what about clean paper? I believe that also went the way of the whale.”

His contact sighed. “And you have proof of that? Would you even remember?”

“Look,” said Michael, suddenly uncertain. “It’s been fun and this has been a most interesting conversation, but I really should get going. Please don’t contact –”

“I have proof.” He hefted a briefcase onto the table. He slapped at his neck as another fly landed.

“Proof? So what exactly do you want me to do with this proof of yours? Expose this great government conspiracy. I think even that’s slightly beyond me.”

“Of course not, Mr O’Connor. This has never been about that.” He swallowed heavily, and sweat began to pour from his face.”

“What then?”

His contact’s eyes widened and Michael could see pain reflected back at him.

“Are you alright?”

“I... I’m fine. It’s just, it’s you, Mr O’Connor. It’s always been about you, about who you are.” He paused. “Do you ever get the feeling that you’re being watched?”

“I live in the middle of nowhere. Who’s going to watch me?”

“Just so... oh, suddenly ...” His contact tried to take in a breath, and grabbed at his throat. His lips were turning blue, and a white froth ran down his chin.

“Shit!” Michael was transfixed.

His contact reached for him and pulled him closer. “Look in the briefcase,” he managed.

“What couldn’t the plague destroy?” With his last breath, he pulled down on Michael’s shirt, ripping off the top button. “Search for the book that was lost. It holds the key to everything!”

Michael leapt back from the body, and couldn’t help but notice the large purple pustule on the side of the man’s neck. Suddenly the buzzing of the flies weren’t merely an annoyance, and panic started to well up from his stomach. He clenched and unclenched his hands, before grabbing the briefcase.

He ran into the night, ignoring the shouting from behind him.

Michael didn't know much of anything when he opened the briefcase. What he did know was that the information so dearly imparted to him was worth a man's life. He remembered his contact's words: "It's because of who you are." What did he mean by that? Did it really mean anything – *who* he was? Sure, he was a moral sort; didn't care much for religion or stupidity. He believed in the truth, no matter what anyone else thought. But maybe it was more than that.

He was just Michael O'Connor.

The man's words haunted him.

Michael froze, staring at the contents of the briefcase. Sweat dripped down his shirt as he lifted the single item from its leather interior. He had always been of the opinion that artefacts discovered by archaeologists should be left hidden and protected. Man just didn't have the ability to deal with the consequences of their release. He should have listened to his own advice.

He lifted out a smooth piece of paper, turning it over in his hands, searching for any hint of degradation. He knew that such antiquated photographs had once existed, but much like paper, they had all disintegrated. All things to do with the medium were a thing long forgotten. He recalled the digital image of his parents on his nightstand. He had had to have it specially made, choosing that picture from a number of web images his parents had kept.

Staring at the image in his hand, he pushed his musings to the back of his mind. He was holding something which shouldn't exist. Suddenly nothing else was important. His hands started shaking, and he was forced to breathe slowly before he could have a good look at it.

The image was that of an old rock standing alone in a field of low grass. Engraved on the stone was a strange symbol.

Squeezing his eyes together, he slid the photo into his jacket pocket. Dumping the

briefcase, Michael took the next train back home.
If ever he needed Sergi, it was now.

“He tried to kill me.”

“I know, Sergi, but... the way he just –”

“Excuse my lack of sympathy. But I guess a slowly dissolving chip doesn’t have quite as much charm as a human frothing at the mouth.”

“Sergi.... Why does it always have to be about you?” Silence permeated Michael’s house and he knew he had gone too far. “I’m sorry,” he said finally. “It’s just, that could have been my fate.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Michael, I’m sure fate has some grand plan for you, and your all too human body.”

“Well of course it does,” said Michael, sighing. He thought he heard Sergi splutter. “But I hardly think I’d succeed without you at my side. Just look at the mess I made this time.”

“You’re an ass, you know that. But you are right, on both accounts.” There was a slight pause. “Fine, show me what you’ve got.”

Reaching into his pocket, Michael pulled out the photograph and waved it in the air.

“Take a scan of this.” He knew it would only take Sergi a moment, but the silence seemed to make the room smaller.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Sergi carefully.

“Um, yes it is?”

“That’s a photograph, idiot.”

“That’s what I thought.” Michael sighed and sat down. “Sergi, I’ll tell you the truth. I’m scared. My contact died right in front of me. Killed... for this. And now I need you to tell me why we’re both seeing what we’re seeing.”

A panel protruded from the far wall.

“Put it in there. We’ll know soon enough if we’re both hallucinating.”

“Do you think you can date it?” asked Michael as he inserted the photograph. “It might help to know how old it is.” He realised then as he sat down in his high-backed study

chair that he couldn't say the word. To name it made it real. Michael wasn't sure he was quite ready to accept such responsibility.

The photograph appeared before him on his computer screen, and he enlarged it with a touch of his finger.

"Michael, that kind of procedure is at least thirty years old. It was made obsolete when there was no longer anything worth dating."

"I realise that, but we can at least try."

"Fine. I shouldn't be gone for more than a few sec –"

"While you're at it, Sergi, see if you can match that symbol on the stone to anything on the Net."

"Okay, okay. Anything else? A foot rub perhaps?"

Michael shrugged. "Rain check? Besides," he said, patting the arm of his chair. "Shirley knows how to take care of all my needs."

"I'll never understand your propensity for beginning the names all of your gadgets with an S. Hopefully the next one isn't the 'Sadomasochist 3000'."

"Go already."

As Sergi began his search, Michael tried to find any recognisable landmarks on the photograph. Unfortunately, the only thing of note was the stone itself. Michael zoomed in on the symbol. The top of it was shaped in the form a diamond while two lines sprouted outwards from the bottom corner. It reminded him of an oddly shaped man, with only a head and legs.

His parents had often told him of the great paintings in some of the famous art galleries of the past. The most important works of art had been destroyed alongside everything else in less than a week, while the only records of their existence were the handful that had been scanned in the days after the disaster. Looking at the symbol on the stone, the idea of the world reverting to an artistic stone age was now all too real.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he waited for Sergi to return.

It was at least one minute, however, before Michael heard his voice. If Sergi hadn't been an artificial intelligence, Michael might have sworn he was breathing heavily. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"I've just been chased through the Net is what happened! I found your dating procedure

then went in search of the symbol. Only, when I found a match, it was protected by cyberguards on a US government-sanctioned site. I managed to sneak through and download as much information as I could before they noticed. I spent the last minute losing them in the Net. They're sophisticated, those guards, I'll give them that."

"God, Sergi, I'm sorry I put you in danger," said Michael. "At least we know one thing, though. The government does know something." He breathed deeply, trying but failing to comprehend the impact of such a revelation. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Never felt better. Don't worry about me, Michael. It was more like a short jog around the block. Those cyberguards might be good, but I'm better."

Michael sighed in relief. "Good show, buddy. So, come now, what did you find out?"

"Well, firstly, I discovered that the symbol isn't just any old scratching. It is in fact; get this, a runic symbol."

Michael nodded sagely.

"You haven't got a clue what that means, do you?" Sergi asked pointedly.

"No," replied Michael, laughing slightly to ease the tense feeling building in his chest.

"Typical. Well, if what I discovered is at all true, runes were supposedly created thousands of years ago by the Norse peoples of Scandinavia, and twenty four of these runes were made into a single alphabet, which they called the Futhark. There were many later alphabets based upon Futhark, but apparently this was the original. For hundreds of years runes were predominantly used for divination purposes, though they apparently have more 'far-reaching powers', whatever that means. It was tacked on at the end, but the whole thing seemed to have a large question mark imprinted over it."

Michael mulled over the new information. "Okay, if what you say is true, then how does it tie in with the photograph?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps we could find out once it's been dated."

"Good idea."

Sergi was silent.

Michael looked up. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing really. It's just good to see you excited over something again. There were a few months when I thought you'd decided to quit your 'life's mission'. I mean, after your father passed away...."

“Euphemistic as always, eh Sergi? Well, I hardly think terror is the same as excitement, but if it keeps me alive a little longer, I’m not complaining.” He sighed, remembering things best left alone. “You’d better feed me the instructions....”

Most of the equipment needed for Paper Fibre Identification could be created in a virtual workspace. Using the wall screen as a viewing space, Sergi took on the form he thought would be most appropriate, a mad Dr Frankenstein. He wore a white lab coat and looked around with goggling eyes.

Michael watched as the good doctor set out all of the necessary equipment. From what Sergi had mentioned, it seemed vastly complicated. There were a lot of equations involved, which was enough to have Michael stop pestering him. It still took most of the night to complete.

“Well, Igor, it seems we’ve finally succeeded.” Lightning flashed outside the windows of the virtual workroom and Sergi began to laugh maniacally.

Michael couldn’t help but laugh himself, and all of the tension dissipated like the fetid ocean pulling back from the sand. “Enough, Sergi. My insides are about to explode. What did you find out?”

“According to the results...,” began Sergi. “Well, that’s unexpected.”

“What? Don’t keep me in suspense.” Michael was lying on his more comfortable sofa-like chair. His body had moulded into it, and even though it was part of the design, Sergi had never tired of remarking otherwise. This time, however, Sergi had no quip about Michael’s exercise routine, even when he sat up and the chair reverted back to its normal position.

“According to this,” continued his electronic friend. “Michael, it’s impossible! Barring any serious error on my part, which we know is a calculated impossibility, this photograph is... only three days old.”

“But... what! That means... the rune survived the Paper Plague. It didn’t melt.” The last he said almost silently.

“Michael, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Sergi. “What about melting

signs?”

“My contact. He suggested that it was language that was affected by the plague, not paper. But surely this proves that only paper is affected?”

“Michael, are you sure? How do you explain the photograph?”

“Are you sure it’s not affected by the plague? Didn’t most things take about a week before degrading completely?”

“Yes, but even after three days, the signs were evident. Michael, this photograph isn’t affected.”

“Okay...okay.” Michael put a hand to his forehead. “Wait a moment. That’s it. Photographs aren’t made of the same material as paper.”

“That’s... actually, you’re right. But then why are there no other surviving photographs? And consider that not all paper was made using the same materials. Yet it was all affected. Michael, I think your contact may have been onto something. Paper isn’t the common denominator.”

“And language is?”

“Possibly. Think about it. What are hieroglyphics but pictures drawn with the purpose of expressing oneself? You could say the same about photographs, or even paintings, or any artwork for that matter. Are they not an expression of man’s voice?” He said the last with a healthy dose of sarcasm, but Michael didn’t mind. Sergi was definitely onto something.

“Shit. What have I got us into, Sergi?”

“You’re asking me? If I recall, discovering the truth of things was always your forte.”

“When they’re mundane, human secrets, sure.”

“And humans can’t be truthful,” offered Sergi.

“You’re more right than you realise, Sergi. In that sense, you’re better than any human I know, and you shouldn’t forget it. But this seems different. The only clear evidence we have is anything but human.”

“Time to give up, then?”

Michael laughed. “Not on your life, so to speak,” which earned him a slightly toasty gust from the air regulator closest to him.

“Well, good. That’s what I like to hear. The problem is, where do we go from here?”

“Well, think about it. What do both the rock and the photograph have in common?”

“The rune?”

“Right.”

Michael stood and began to pace about the house, going through in his mind what his contact had said. “You know, there was something I forgot to mention, Sergi. When I was speaking to my contact, he mentioned something about the suspicious release of crystal technology. Do you think this has something to do with that?”

“I don’t know, Michael. If you keep giving me dribs and drabs, I won’t know what to think. I don’t see how runes and rocks and photographs have anything to do with crystals.”

Michael thought for a moment. “Sergi, we’ve got plenty of crystals all over the house. Won’t you pop one out quickly?”

“Are you sure? You know it’ll take forever to reintegrate it?”

“I don’t care at this point. Take one out of something unimportant, like the toaster.”

“Okay, but I hope you know what you’re doing.”

There was a slight delay, when a wall socket near Michael opened up, and out protruded the crystal. He picked it up gently, as they tended to be rather volatile if dropped. “The photograph, Sergi, if you please.” He walked over to the panel where he had placed it. Taking it in his other hand, he brought the crystal towards it.

“Michael, exactly what do you expect to happen? I don’t think the photograph’s going to sprout wings.”

Michael stopped moving. “I don’t know. Shush.” Swallowing, he brought them closer together.

“Michael, something’s happening.”

“What? I don’t see anything.”

“It’s the crystal. The power output is increasing.”

“It feels normal.” He brought them together.

The crystal exploded and Michael flew across the room, his back crashing into the sofa.

“Michael! Michael, are you okay?” Sergi’s voice had risen to a new level.

Michael opened his eyes, rubbing his hands across his face. “I’m fine, I think.” He sat up.

“Saved by the sofa.”

“I’ll never make fun of it again. Are you sure you’re alright? That explosion was

incredible.”

“I’m sure. How’s the rest of the house?”

“It... looks fine. It was mostly a concussive burst of energy. Nothing flammable.”

Michael rubbed his shoulders as he walked over to where he had tried his experiment.

There was no sign of the crystal, but lying there on the floor was the photograph. Bending over, he picked it up, holding it out in front of him. His eyes widened. The photograph was completely untouched, except for where the rune had been. Its outline was emblazoned in the empty space. Michael ran his fingers along the outline. “Well, Sergi, I think we have our answer. Unfortunately, it’s just posed a whole lot of troubling questions.” He lowered the photograph, his mind too full of excitement to realise he had almost been killed. “Sergi,” he said, thinking, “you mentioned that there were twenty four runes in the Futhark alphabet. I don’t suppose it would be possible to discover if any other letters have survived on anything other than the Net.”

“Sorry, no. I barely managed to discover their general history. The rest was too heavily encrypted for me to do much before getting caught.”

“Well, what about this rune? Did you find anything more about it specifically, like a name?”

Sergi remained silent, the only answer his pride would allow him.

“Don’t sweat it,” said Michael, trying to sound encouraging.

“I could try and find out again, Michael.”

“No Sergi, I won’t put you in any more danger that way.”

“I would hardly be in any more danger than you put yourself. So, what then?”

“I don’t know.” Michael sighed, when his face suddenly lit up. “Hold on. You said that runes were used for divinatory purposes years ago. Wouldn’t it be logical that if any more runes survived, someone would still have some? Surely the government couldn’t have confiscated them all, no matter how quiet they tried to keep it? Why don’t you see if you can find a collector of antiquities, or maybe a fortune-teller. I know it’s a long shot, but if runes still exist to this day, somebody’s got to know about it. There must be somebody who can tell us what just happened.”

“I’ll return as soon as I can,” said Sergi, and with that he was gone.

South Africa's borders had been rewritten. Botswana had been co-opted into a cleansing of the last traces of corruption within Zimbabwe two years after the 'the day the world stopped'. Armies were marched in, demolishing infrastructure as they went along, cleansing the country of its leaders with repeated public hangings. Repercussions for such acts were a thing of the past. The world had become the worst type of monster, and nobody with any sort of power cared as long as survival was at stake.

South Africa was extended to incorporate both countries. Zimbabwe had to be rebuilt, and while this might have once seemed a logistical nightmare, the word 'security' would be waved about, and naysayers would hold their tongues. South Africa had become a true behemoth, with America now controlling from within; the term 'Superpower of Africa' had become a reality.

"Sergi, one of these days I'm going to start referring to you as the 'Walking Encyclopaedia'. Oh no, ma'am, he doesn't bite, he's merely a talking reservoir of information."

"Don't you mean 'walking'?"

"As soon as you start, let me know."

"Well, unless you want more than the school textbook version, you might start treating me with a little more respect. If you ask me, and I know you won't, history could always do with a little more flair. For example, I might add that President Zuma had been taken over by bodysnatching aliens in a bid to take over the world."

"You left out the part where Mugabe was a shape shifting Andromedan who'd managed to slip his noose and take to flight as an albatross –"

"Only to be shot by an Englishman on safari," laughed Sergi.

"Ticket please, sir."

Michael glanced up at a petite woman. She had opened the door to his compartment so softly, he hadn't even noticed. "Yes, of course. Here we go." Rummaging around in his jeans pocket, he pulled out a flattened piece of stainless steel. It had an engraving of a train upon it, though the image had already begun to disappear at the edges. Michael smiled as he handed it to her. It was an old-fashioned method of proof of payment, but

out in the hinterlands of Botswana, now the northern state in a slowly expanding group of imperialised African countries, online forms of payment still seemed slow to take root. It was a clever way of using the Paper Plague as the train engraving would only last the one trip.

The ticket lady made a tiny incision in the steel with a small laser before handing it back to him. "Enjoy the rest of the trip, sir. We should be arriving in Francistown in one hour."
"Thank you."

Sergi piped up as she left. "I guess melting signs isn't too far-fetched if they're using the phenomenon for train tickets."

"Well, it's the first I've heard of it. Strange that something like this wouldn't have made the news. Somebody must have realised the implications."

"And what if some people did, Michael?"

"Then I guess nobody listened."

They were both silent for a while before Sergi spoke again. "Do you think this diviner will be able to help us, Michael? I mean, it was hard enough tracking her down on the Net. They tend not to advertise."

"You told me finding her was simple."

"I can process information faster than your brain could ever hope to. It still took me some time. Even with every citizen having to register their occupation on the Net, I hardly think 'Hi, I'm familiar with runes' is going to be among them. I had to read between the lines. Traditional healer seemed the best bet."

"Surely she didn't actually call herself by that title?"

"Some people aren't quite as willing to hide the truth behind smoke and mirrors. I guess she's one of the brave ones."

"You couldn't find any other brave ones closer to home?"

"I'm sure I could have, except for the fact that, oh wait, no, she was the only one. I told you earlier, Michael, if there were any others, they're gone now. Things tend to die out, or end up exterminated. Surely you know that better than anyone?"

"I do know that, but this is Africa. Nothing here dies out completely. I'd sooner think it was a conspiracy."

"Don't you ever get tired of conspiracies?"

“Nope. Besides, if there were no conspiracies, we’d have no excuse for the names people call us.”

“You mean that old couple on the other side of Crocodile Bridge? That’s at least five kilometres away.”

“I’ve seen their telescope. I’m telling you, it probably has electron microscope capabilities. Who knows what they’ve seen?”

“Most likely you talking to the wall. You know, Michael, I’ve always warned you about that wall. No-good whore, if you ask me.”

“I wasn’t, and I won’t have you talking about my wall like that. At least she listens ...”

Francistown had at one time been the second biggest city in Botswana; the ‘Capital of the North.’ The gold rush had drawn in many hopefuls, and it had grown to become an important trade route through the hinterlands of Southern Africa.

As Michael walked over to the taxi rank, he was surprised to see a driver behind one of the wheels of the red and yellow vehicle. He would later discover that the wheels were still made of rubber, a material last used on vehicles twenty years ago. These days composite fibreglass was used instead due to its superior traction and the fact that one never had to worry about flats.

Opening the door to one of the taxis, he shielded his eyes from a sudden light reflection in the door window. Blinking, he peered into the dark interior. “Morning. Um, can I use this taxi?”

“Course you can,” replied the driver, a middle-aged black man who continually scratched at his wiry beard.

“Thank you. You speak English?”

“Everyone speak English who counts. Big city this with lots of big white men. Big black men too. All speak English.”

Michael got into the taxi, feeling slightly awkward. He wasn’t quite so used to the personal touch. The taxis in South Africa Prime – as Sergi had called it, once more trying to insert popular culture into the conversation – were completely automated. Once one’s

credits had been uploaded into the dashboard terminal, either via cell phone, touchpad, or, in his case, Sergi, it sped that person to their destination.

Michael had brought a number of silver and copper pieces along with him on this trip, expecting a manual system of payment. He hadn't, however, expected the taxi to be manually driven.

He cleared his throat, uncertain about the procedure. "I need to get to ..." He glanced down at his watch, and Sergi quickly displayed the address. "I need to get to 195 Old Blue Jacket Street."

"You sure? That's not a good part of town."

"Well, yes, I'm sure. Why, what's wrong?"

The taxi driver shook his head. "Used to be main road. Not anymore. You sure you want to go there, then you'll see."

"Okay then, can we go?"

"Sure, sure. Cost you one silver."

Michael handed him the coin.

As the taxi pulled off, the driver leant back in his chair. "Why you want to go to this place?"

"I'm looking for someone living there."

The driver shook his head. "Only bad people live there. Or mad. They say the air makes you crazy where the two rivers come together."

Michael glanced down at Sergi, widening his eyes in question. A small map appeared on his watch. "The Tati and Inchwe Rivers?" asked Michael.

"Yes. You know Francistown?"

"Not much. Enough to get by. What's wrong with the rivers?"

"Mad spirits. Ghosts of the miners, they say."

"The gold mines, you mean? I heard there were some in this area. Isn't that the reason for Francistown's founding?"

The driver laughed, a sharp and quick sound. "Yes."

Michael peered at him quizzically, but said nothing, and the rest of the drive was done in silence. Eventually they sighted one of the rivers, then the other from a short rise in the road.

“The place you want is near the Tati River. Very rough. You want me to wait outside for you?”

Suddenly Michael wasn't so sure of his brilliant plan. He handed the driver another coin.

“Alright. We won't be long.”

They stopped outside of a building adjacent to the river. It looked rundown, with cracked windows and peeling paint, and not very stable. The road itself was eerily empty apart from a few sleeping bodies taking no notice of anyone.

Taking a deep breath, Michael stepped out of the taxi. Facing the road was a loading zone and large garage door, but no entrance for pedestrians. Holding his arm out, he spoke to Sergi. “How about a scan? Any life signs?”

“It's difficult to get a reading. There seems to be some sort of interference. But... there we go. Two heat signatures, by the looks of it. They're both on the ground floor, around the other side. Maybe we'll find a door there.”

Waving his hand at the taxi driver to wait, Michael walked around the edge of the building. He saw the river slightly further on past a wire fence. It didn't look too inviting, even from this distance with the sun shining overhead. He finally came to a heavy wooden door set into the wall. The surrounding brickwork was uneven, confirming Michael's worry about the stability of the building. He knew little about river erosion, but it seemed plausible that the foundation was slowly being eaten away. It made entering even more daunting, but what truly frightened him were the bones and feathers hanging from a metal bar sticking out from the wall above the door. He reached up to touch them, and felt a shiver run through him. He lifted his watch. “What do you make of those?”

It was a moment before Sergi spoke. “It's the strangest thing. It's almost as though they're resisting my efforts to scan them. But then everything goes back to normal. A few goat bones and feathers from various birds. Nothing special.”

Michael breathed deeply. “What's going on inside?” he asked finally.

“Someone's sitting on the floor. The other one seems to be pacing back and forth. Maybe you should just knock.”

Michael lifted his hand, hesitating, and brought it down twice in quick succession.

“The one standing has stopped,” said Sergi. “He's facing the one sitting.” They waited.

“They're not moving. Try again.”

Michael knocked again, still unsure.

“The sitting one’s gesturing at the door, but the other seems reluctant.”

Michael knocked for the third time, now slightly annoyed. This time the one seated seemed to win out, and Michael stepped back.

The door swung open, revealing a large black man. He was dressed in a dark leather jacket and brown long pants. He used a cord of rope for a belt, but his pants still hung low over his bare feet. His face was the most unusual aspect of his appearance, however. Red and white paint was splashed across it in loose swirls and stripes.

Michael couldn’t help but think about what Sergi had said about the Paper Plague attacking language. But if the train ticket was anything to go by, symbols were just as much at risk. Looking at the man’s face before him, Michael wondered how long the paint would last if not physically washed off. The slight scarring in the corner of his face suggested that this man knew exactly how long the paint would last before ‘melting’ away. Michael grimaced at the thought of skin burning off like acid.

The man looked Michael up and down, made some decision, and started to close the door.

“Hey, hold on,” cried Michael, trying to stop the door from closing. A sharp word from inside was the only thing to stay the man from slamming the door in Michael’s face. He stepped forward suddenly, grabbing Michael by his shirt. He pulled him in, but not before Michael noticed him glance at the bones and feathers.

The room was dark. There were some windows on the far side, but they had been blackened with paint. Odds and ends littered the room, giving it a lived in feeling, but there was no bed that Michael could see. Small statues of a long-haired woman were placed at strange intervals; some were on sinking shelves while others hung from string next to bunches of unrecognisable herbs and flowers which gave the room an oddly sickening smell.

Adjusting his eyes to the half light, Michael was pressed rudely to the ground. Expecting his knees to hit cement, he was surprised at the soft yet coarse feeling under him. He knew enough from living in what was once a game reserve to recognise an animal’s hide, but as to what type, he couldn’t tell.

Seated before him was a strikingly young black woman. Her face was painted in long

white stripes which ran down her neck, disappearing behind the plain dress she wore. From her neck down she might have seemed like any normal girl. That thought was completely abolished, however, when Michael noticed the hundreds of coloured beads strewn throughout her hair, and the odd sack hanging down the back. Sergi would later tell him that it was a goat's bladder, but all he could think was that it added to the woman's otherworldly persona.

Michael found himself at a loss for words. He had prepared a number of questions regarding runes and their existence, not to mention the photograph, but they all seemed to disappear from him the moment his knees touched the animal hide. He thought later that it must have been the oddly overpowering herbs, but at the moment, all he could do was stare at the woman before him.

She didn't smile or frown, but seemed to have perfected a look of complete emptiness. Closing her eyes, she reached around the back of her neck, loosening something. Michael thought she was going to show him the goat's bladder, but instead she pulled out a great necklace and placed it on the floor. Michael leant back slightly, his eyes going wide. He was certain she hadn't been wearing it a moment ago. It was as if she had peeled it from her body.

She began to unstring four hand-sized tablets from the necklace, gathering them into a single pile. She pushed them towards him. "Shuffle."

With his mind unable to focus on anything else, he took the tablets. As he did so, the man behind him sat against the far wall, a small metallic instrument in front of him. He began to push his thumbs against it like a piano, and as he continued, the air began to fill with a cacophony which Michael thought might drive him insane. After a minute, however, it began to soothe his mind as he became numb to the beat.

Michael looked down at the tablets. He wasn't quite sure what they were made of, though their off-white colour reminded him of a skeleton he had once seen. There were smaller scratchings around their edges, but he couldn't quite make them out. What he could see in the light were the large symbols emblazoned on two of them. One had the outline of an eye painted on it, and despite the fact that it was almost childlike in its inception, it seemed to draw him into its very centre. Blinking, he looked at the next one. This one had two weapons engraved on it; a spear and an axe. They crisscrossed one another, which

seemed to reinforce the threat from the man behind him. Michael quickly pushed the tablets away.

The other two tablets had the same scratchings around their edges, but no symbols. Instead, the one had a single notch at the bottom while the other had two. The notches seemed to generate a feeling as equally disturbing as the symbols.

Finally heeding her words, Michael began to shuffle them, becoming more and more uncomfortable. A knot had suddenly appeared in the back of his shoulders, and he squeezed his eyes to shut out the pain.

Seeing his reaction, she leant over and took the tablets from his hands. Running her hands over them slowly and deliberately, she threw them into the space on the animal hide before them. "Chilume!" she cried out rather loudly.

This took Michael by surprise and he fell back.

The man behind him stopped his music and stood up quickly, grabbing Michael's shoulders and pushing him forward with a scowl, before returning to his instrument.

Michael came face to face with the tablets. They had all fallen face down but for the one with the weapons. He sat back as she took his face in her hands, searching deep within his eyes. She turned away suddenly, and Michael thought he saw a tear fall. "What? What did you see?" His rational mind, he found, had been left behind at the door.

She turned back to face him. "Pain," she said. "I sorry. Much pain. Blood." She took a deep breath. "Not... normal." She gathered up the tablets and threw them down again. "Zvibili!" She shouted it even louder than the first time, almost out of relief. This time only two were facing up: the weapons and the one-notch tablet. "Travel," she said. She moved her arms in front of her body. "Long travel."

"A journey?" asked Michael.

"Yes, yes," she nodded emphatically. Gathering up the tablets for a third time, she stopped. Peering at him with a querying look, she finally decided to throw them.

"Mpululu." It seemed as though her enthusiasm had finally been drained, for she spoke softly this time. The weapons and the two-notch tablets were face up. "Happy. Sad." The way she said the words mirrored Michael's questioning face. "Not you," she continued. "But is you. Happy sad." Shaking her head, she gathered up the tablets once more.

Michael wondered how many more times she was going to throw them. The fourth time

she did so, something strange happened. Her eyes rolled into her head and she fell on top of the tablets. The man behind Michael moved to help her, but she quickly righted herself, gesturing for him to step back. “Ndirinaka,” she said.

“Arichaenda.”

“Nyangwe, bwe iri chikombesa!”

The man finally stepped back and the woman gathered up the tablets before Michael could see them.

“What did the tablets say?” asked Michael finally.

“Not for you. For me.” She seemed to gather her courage. “Last.” She threw the tablets down. All of them were face down. She stared at them for a long time. Michael noticed that tears had begun to fall down her face in a constant stream, marring her face paint. She swallowed heavily, pointing at the man behind Michael. “Dzinga murume. Zvino!” Michael felt a hand on his shoulder, lifting him to his feet. “Wait.” He felt a sudden rush to his head. “I need some answers. I didn’t come here for this.” But before he could get his bearings, he was pushed through the door and onto the street. He tried to scabble to his feet, but the door closed firmly in his face. He fell back, suddenly exhausted.

“Michael?”

He took a deep breath. “I’m not sure this calls for one of your quips, Sergi.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything, dimwit. I was going to ask if you were feeling alright. Your heart is pounding away.”

“Damn it, I know.” He got to his feet. “I’m sorry. My head still feels like it’s full of smoke. Besides that, I’m fine. Though I think we’ve come to a dead end.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you expect me to do? Beat the door down?”

“No, but we could –“

“Do nothing? That’s the first idea you’ve had that I agree with.” Michael’s eyes glazed over. “Hmm, I think a nice hot bath is in order. Leave the conspiracies to those who might actually make a difference. That person just isn’t me, Sergi.” He turned back towards the taxi.

“Michael! Have you finally lost it?”

“There was never anything to lose, Sergi.”

“Michael, stop, for a moment. I’m getting some odd brain readings from you. You’re steadily losing neurons from your hippocampus.”

“So what? Now you’re some great diagnostic chip. Will wonders never cease? What else can you do? How about jumping off that bridge by the river?”

Michael reached the taxi, and the driver gave him an odd look. “You okay, sir?”

“I’m fine. Dead fine. No problems here. You know what, the bath is too far. How about you just drive me over into the river?”

“Michael, what’s that on your shoulder?” whispered Sergi. “Is that ...” He made a quick decision. “Hey, taxi driver.” The man swirled around, his eyes widening in fright. “Um,” Sergi raced through some of the history of the Shona people. “I speak with the voice of your father. Vadzimu. This man is cursed by a muroyi. You must find the curse. Destroy it!”

The taxi driver fell away from Michael, hesitating.

“He has been cursed. You must destroy it!”

The taxi driver pointed at Michael’s shoulder. “It is there, Father. But I cannot touch.”

“Use a stick!”

The man searched around and came back with a short pole.

Michael turned towards him. “Kill me. Stab me with your weapon.”

“No, hai.” The driver moved back.

“Knock it off, quickly!” shouted Sergi.

The driver leapt to Michael’s left and swiped at his shoulder. Whatever was clinging to it fell to the ground.

Michael stood still for a moment, before his eyes rolled back into his head. He began to fall forward.

The driver flung the pole away, catching him. He placed him on the ground before backing away. “I have done it, Father.” He opened his taxi door, took one look at Michael, then drove away, flinging out the two coins he had been given as payment, shouting something about mad spirits.

Michael groaned, grabbing his head.

Sergi checked his reading, and was relieved to see his serotonin levels rising. “Michael?”

“God, what the hell?”

“You tried to kill yourself?”

“Oh.”

“You seem to be almost back to normal.”

“My head feels like a steel brick.”

“Relax for a bit. But while you’re doing that see if you can knock over that piece of goat skin.”

“What?”

“Goat skin. I think that bodyguard stuck it to your shoulder.”

Michael leant forward, feeling as though he were about to retch, and pulled the small flap of skin towards him with his boot. He bent to pick it up, but Sergi warned him not to touch it. “You want to go back to committing suicide? Don’t be a dunce. See if you can turn it around.”

Michael flipped it with his boot, and couldn’t help but smile. “What do you know; I think it’s a rune.”

“Damn.”

“Damn’s right. By the way, when did you start saying ‘damn’?”

“Never mind that. Michael, they just tried to kill you, with a rune. Wasn’t it just yesterday that another one almost did the same thing?”

Michael fumbled in his jacket, pulling out the photograph with the perfectly seared rune.

“But this,” he said, waving it at his watch, “happened when I brought it in contact with a crystal. This other one almost had me kill myself. I don’t think they’re the same thing.”

“Fine, but those two clearly saw you as a danger. Michael, they must be in on whatever this conspiracy is.”

“And we were just lucky enough to find them? I don’t know.”

“What were you saying yesterday about fate?”

“What then? I should just go back and ask them what they no? Maybe this time tall, dark and brooding won’t resort to... whatever this is.” He kicked the goat skin away.

“I don’t think you’re going to have another chance to ask him, or her.”

Michael stood up, standing still for a moment as vertigo gripped him. “What do you mean?” he asked finally.

“They’re leaving.”

Michael glanced towards the building. "They're coming out?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure. They're moving away from us."

"To where? They're going to swim across the river?"

"Looks that way, only... they're halfway across, and unless they know how to breathe in water, I'd guess they're walking."

Michael started to run back to the other end of the building.

"I wonder how the Pope would take this news?" asked Sergi.

Michael slowed, catching his breath. "What news?"

"The fact that they're walking on water."

"Maybe he'll make them the poster children for his new regime. I don't know, Sergi, why does it matter?" Michael coughed. "Running's hard."

"Serves you right. Hurry up, they're moving faster now. Their heat signatures are starting to fade." Michael ran past the door he had been so ignominiously kicked out of, finally reaching the edge of the river.

"So where are they?" Michael searched the river and the far shore, but all he saw were old mine dumps strewn haphazardly around an even more desolate area of barren earth and stone.

"Not on the water? I thought we were on to something. Regardless, we should still be able to see them. Unless... hold on a moment."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm bringing the satellite into better focus."

Michael stood around, still trying to catch a glimpse of anyone amongst the mine dumps.

"Are you going to be much longer? I can smell the dumps all the way from here."

"Almost there. Just a little more focus... aha. Damn! Michael, you're not going to believe this. They're underground. There's some sort of tunnel running from this building under the river."

"Are you serious? What the hell is going on here?" Michael raced back to the door, but he couldn't budge it. "Sergi, can you do anything with this?"

"That's a thick wedge of steel, Michael. My laser would take at least ten minutes to get through. I don't think we have that much time."

Michael ran back to the river, gazing along its length. "There's a bridge over there to the

right. We'll have to follow from above." He took in a few deep breaths, enjoying the fresh air while he could. "It looks like I'm going for a trek through some mine dumps."

The bridge, like most of the area, was empty of traffic. Crossing over, Michael felt like he had entered the proverbial wasteland. Old and rusted bulldozers littered the scene, while black and white dumps juxtaposed one another like some god-like chessboard. Oddly enough, tufts of grass had managed to struggle to the surface of the gravelly hills, eking out a miserable existence.

Sergi warned Michael that grazing on the grass wouldn't be a very good idea, though the gravel might do wonders for his digestion.

Michael grimaced, an expression he utilised far too often when he lacked the energy to respond. He had once tried rolling his eyes, but the repeated strain had caused him to suffer headaches.

Sergi had managed to situate the satellite directly over the dumps, but there was some sort of interference. He could only catch glimpses of the two escapees' heat signatures before they would disappear.

Michael followed the blips through the dumps, but after half an hour he felt like giving up. "Sergi, my nose is starting to melt off from the smell. I also think my tongue is starting to dissolve."

"I guess there are certain drawbacks to being human."

Michael started gagging. "I think I'm going to be sick, again."

"Hold on. Let me try and boost the signal. I still don't see how the dumps could be causing this much static, though."

"Right now I don't really care."

Sergi was silent for a moment. "Okay, I'm getting something. It looks like there's a natural hill, about a hundred meters east of here. I think I caught a glimpse of something."

Michael trudged off once more. He came to the side of the hill. An opening had been cut from it, but had been boarded up. Judging by its state, it looked like a relatively recent addition.

"There's something odd about this, Michael. From what I've been able to find out about the history of this area, this was once the Monarch Mines. They used to mine gold here,

but it closed down in 2010.”

“Well clearly,” began Michael, grabbing one of the boards, “someone decided to set up shop once more.” He heaved on the beam, but it was nailed in far too tightly. “Now I know why ‘Strength-it-ups’ are so popular. I could have used one about now.”

“God, Michael, you do know what they put in those things, don’t you?”

“I do know, which is why I have a backup system.”

“A rubber muscle suit?”

“No, dumbass. Your laser. Surely it won’t take more than a few seconds to cut through this?”

“Oh, if I must.” Michael held out his wrist as the laser erupted from his watch, cutting through the boards. Pulling the rest away, he stared into the gloomy entrance. He was about to open his mouth when a light suddenly erupted from the watch. “Pre-empted you there, Mikey-boy.”

“It’s about time you learnt to think for yourself. And please, no more ‘Mikey-boy’.”

“But Mikey-girl isn’t as catchy.”

Ignoring his friend, Michael took a few steps forward and broke into a small fit of coughs. “Is it safe in here?” he asked. “The air’s not very fresh.”

Sergi reassured him that it was structurally stable, though only for another ten years or so. Pockets of dust which haphazardly dislodged themselves into Michael’s face threatened to undermine his faith in Sergi, but he carried on nevertheless. He didn’t go very far, however, before he came to a dead end. “Sergi?”

“Don’t ask me? My sensors are battling to penetrate much further than your own eyes. Maybe they sealed off this mine when it was closed down.”

Michael placed his hand on the wall in front of him, running it across the surface. “Is it just me, or is there something wrong here?”

“Well, mine records don’t contain a work order for this. Maybe some local thought it would be safer to block up the tunnel. Don’t want any kids wondering around mines.”

“Maybe. There’s still something wrong with this wall, though. Have you tried scanning it? Is it cement? Apparently they still used that up till 2012.”

“Is that general knowledge or your best guess? Let me check.”

Michael waited a moment. “You know, Sergi, I always respected the speed at which you

found answers, but even I could do better.”

“Shut up, Michael. I’m trying to figure something out. Put your hand against the wall again.”

Michael noticed a number of calculations flying all over his watch face. He thought Sergi even beeped once.

“Incredible! I’ve never seen such a thing,” said Sergi.

Michael raised his eyebrow, trying not to look irritated. “And the grand verdict would be?”

“It’s not real.”

“Just as I thought, Watson,” said Michael, mimicking his favourite online detective.

“Come on, Sergi. You’re telling me this wall is nothing more than a light show?”

“Exactly! Hey, how did you know?”

“I’m a genius. What do you mean ‘exactly’?”

“This wall’s made up of a dense cluster of light molecules; photons.”

“Light? Isn’t light made up of waves?”

“That’s the thing about light. It can be both. Scientists still haven’t managed to figure it out. Nevertheless, this wall is nothing more than a mirage.”

“Really, then why do my fingers tell me different?”

“Because... it’s like the light particles are so tightly fused together, they won’t budge.”

“You just made that up, didn’t you?”

“Michael, this is a serious discovery. Do you realise the implications?”

“Particle physics wasn’t really one of my favourite subjects, Sergi. I’m sure it’s wonderful, but how do we get through it?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe if I bombard it with concentrated light waves, I could make a small hole.”

“Wouldn’t that cause a nuclear explosion?”

“I don’t think so. I could find out quickly enough.”

“Hold on a moment.” Michael shone the watch light, which Sergi had dimmed considerably, into the corner of the wall. “Are those two runes? I can’t quite see from here. Magnify them onto the watch, please, Sergi.” Michael stared at the marks closely, convinced more and more that this was the place he might find some answers. “They look

slightly faded, but it seems more like natural degradation than the Paper Plague. Maybe there are more?" Michael shone light into the other corner, recognising the lone rune immediately. He pulled out his own copy. "It's the one from the photograph, Sergi. I think we're on to something here."

"Not for very long, I'm afraid," said a voice from behind.

Michael started, but it was too late to stop the sickening crunch at the back of his head.

He crumpled forward, the photograph landing in a pool of light.

Sergi was the only one to hear the gasp from the assailant, and his repeated mutterings.

"Othala! He is the one who brings Othala!"

Michael woke in a tiny cot to the sound of heavy shouting. He tried to lift his head, only to fall back down as he felt shooting pain raging from the back of his neck down his spine.

"Keep still, Michael. That was a nasty smack to the head."

"Sergi? Where are we?"

"In some kind of cell; underground, in the mines. Whoever knocked you out did something to those two runes in the left corner. The wall just vanished... well, no, the photons were converted into light waves before dis -"

"I get it," groaned Michael, grabbing at his head.

"Right, anyway, we were taken deeper into the mines before we finally came to this large cavernous chamber. Definitely not in the mining records. I checked. It must have taken years to carve out. I'm surprised there wasn't a cave in."

Michael closed his eyes, trying his hardest to comprehend Sergi's words, but it all came out as an odd droning sound.

"Michael, it was covered in runes."

He sat up, his eyes opening. "What?"

"It's incredible. Anyway, you were taken down a side tunnel to this cell."

"What happened to the photograph?"

"The man who knocked you out took it. But apparently it saved your life. He kept saying

the word 'Othala' over and over, as if it meant something important. I've a suspicion it might be the name of the rune, though what significance it has, I'm not sure. I—"

At that moment, the wooden door to Michael's cell opened, grating against the rough stone floor. Three people, two men and a woman, walked in.

There was a small candle on a table next to Michael which provided some weak light, but one of the men, much older than the others, touched the wall next to the door and the room flooded with artificial light.

The woman Michael immediately recognised as the sangoma. Sergi had managed to dig out that name from the Net based on her description. It translated roughly to 'African medicine woman'. The men he didn't know, though he assumed the younger one was his attacker.

"No free, Inyanga," pleaded the sangoma in her broken English. "Dangerous. I see."

Free? Michael could barely move as it was.

"And yet he holds Othala, Shona," replied the older man, the Inyanga. His voice had receded to the typical gruffness of the elderly. "You found this near him, Matthew?" He held the photograph in his left hand.

"I did, Inyanga," replied Matthew.

Michael was taken by surprise. This Matthew had white skin. For some reason he hadn't expected that. And, unlike the sangoma, Shona, or the Inyanga, he was dressed in clothes similar to Michael's. Modern clothes.

"But it is not true rune!" tried Shona once more.

"It is as true as any other," said the Inyanga, whose English was more fluid. "Merely because it is not inscribed on wood or bone does not make it any less real. The significance of such a thing as this can surely not be lost on you. Now, I will take into consideration what you have seen in your vision, but I must discover how this," and he held up the photograph, "came to be in his possession, and," he sighed, "the ramifications."

"Inyanga," said Matthew, his voice slightly heightened. "He's awake. He could have heard...."

"I fear it is too late to worry about such things now, Acolyte. And now that he is awake, I would speak with him alone."

Matthew gave Michael one last look before nodding and leaving the room. Shona frowned, and was about to protest when she received a stern look from the older man. Dropping her shoulders in defeat, she too left.

Turning to Michael, who had fallen back in his cot and was only now succeeding in his attempts to sit up, the Inyanga moved closer and sat on the edge. "I think you'd best tell me who you are, young man. And how you found us? Things aren't looking good for you at the moment." He attempted to sound comforting, but there was power behind his voice.

Michael refused to be cornered, however. "You expect me to answer you after your boy almost cracked my skull? What are you anyway? The leader of some cult? And what's with the archaic speech? I guess living down here, you thought you'd lose a few contractions in the dark."

"Look here," said the Inyanga, leaning in. "I do n... don't have time for this, and neither do you. You may not know this, but I too have people to answer to. So you either talk to me, or maybe you'd like to stay here a little longer than you planned."

Michael looked at Sergi, who had pasted a small yellow smiley face on the screen of the watch. It winked at him. "Fine, you win." He leant back more comfortably.

"A little too quickly, but very well. Tell me your name, and how you came to know about us?"

"Well, my name is Michael and I only recently came into contact with that photograph you hold in your hand. I needed more information on it, so I sought out some mystical aid from your sangoma, Shona. However," he stressed, "before I could show her the photograph or have any of my questions answered, she did her reading thing –" he waved his hands about and rolled his eyes back "– then had her tall and dark friend toss me out, with a little goatskin charm thrown into the mix. I've never really had the impulse to kill myself, but I can thank a terrified taxi driver for preventing me from drowning myself in the river. So, naturally, I thought, why would someone want to kill me? Maybe I should follow her and find out. So I did. And here we are. Oh, did I mention almost getting killed a second time by your 'acolyte' over there?"

The Inyanga's face had grown grave, and had shone with anger when Michael mentioned suicide. He closed his eyes for a moment, before opening them again. "I'm sorry.

Sometimes my people can act rashly. But we are not murderers, and I will see the guilty party is dealt with. Nevertheless, you explain yourself somewhat sparsely, and it may just be that your curiosity won't pay out very well regardless. Now, about this photograph. Tell me of it." The Inyanga placed it on Michael's lap.

Staring at it for some time, Michael wondered how he should proceed. He looked at the man before him, trying to judge just how old he was. His hair was white and balding, and yet his neatly trimmed beard, also white, accentuated his African features, making him seem more wizened than old. Unlike Matthew, he only wore simple robes. "Hold on," Michael began. "Before I say anything, I'd like to know exactly what I *have* gotten myself into. Just who are you, and why, in this age of modern convenience, are you wearing robes?"

The Inyanga raised both eyebrows and glanced down at his clothing. "I can assure you ..." He stopped, and shook his head quickly. "I think the less you know of us the better, Michael. We've dealt with intruders before and you would not be treated any differently."

"Have it your way, though for some reason my arriving with this rune tells me I'm not like your average trespasser. But, alas, it would seem our time is up. Oh well, we'll just have to schedule something for tomorrow."

The Inyanga looked at him curiously, then stood up and reached for a bowl on a nearby ledge.

Michael hadn't noticed it.

"Have some water."

Michael took it warily and drank slowly, then more steadily. He was only now realising how thirsty the bump on the head had left him.

"It would seem," continued the Inyanga, "that we have reached an impasse."

"Big words, considering your rural existence. If you haven't heard, there's a marvellous land to the south called South Africa. I'm sure you'd be able to find a mine more to your liking."

"Rather flippant for someone in your position, though I would guess as a defence mechanism it's worked for you in the past. And if *you* haven't heard, Botswana is now as much a part of your great country as Zimbabwe is. Unlike others however, we choose to

keep imperialism outside the borders of our culture. I am in the fortunate position to best understand what that means.”

“And just what does it mean? You’ve cut yourself off from the world, and for what? Your own little volkstad.”

“Don’t you dare compare us to those... those ...”

“Those what? Isolationists? Or do you prefer extremists?”

“I will not be insulted!”

Michael sat back. “Feel free to explain.”

The Inyanga took a deep breath. “We have cut ourselves off out of necessity. Yes, to protect ourselves from those who would harm us to keep their secret, but also to preserve a heritage which has been devastated by technology. We cannot co-exist with the imperialism running rampant throughout the world. We would lose that battle.”

“Have you tried?”

“Some of us have, yes. They are gone now.”

“Have you tried getting in touch with them?”

“We have methods of contacting our own which work outside the bounds of technology, but it has been to no avail. They are lost to us.” He held his head in his hands. “I have always thought of our Order as being the heart of our nation. And the struggle of the heart would craft the nature of its entire people. But for some, the mind is easier to accept. It is the way of comfort, not truth. It destroys our dream of a united nation with pride and arrogance.”

Michael lowered his eyes.

The Inyanga looked at the photograph a second time. “As you may or may not be aware, an inyanga is a man of magic amongst our people. I can do many things with this power, but one of my chief responsibilities lies in my role as a healer. But it goes beyond the mere physical. It is my duty to protect them from the idea that their culture, that their very souls, are not as worthy as those who have embraced imperialism. I seek to aid a nation in rediscovering its roots among the ruins of prosperity.”

“But whose roots? Look at Matthew? I would hardly say that he shares the same history or culture that you do.”

“And there, once again, is this failure to understand. It is not a matter of one’s personal

faith, but a matter of survival, regardless of creed or race. History, memory, orality. These are the weapons we now use, so that we do not forget who we are. We do not allow machines to remember for us, for in time they would be the only ones left to remember anything. I for one am not willing to forget who I am, and I think you may come to understand that, which is why I will now tell you the truth of what we are.” Michael blinked. He wasn’t quite certain whether he was surprised at this response. He hadn’t truly believed anything he told the Inyanga, but it had certainly goaded the man into some kind of righteous evangelism. This man definitely had force behind his words, and Michael was inclined to trust him. He knew he was in danger, but strange things had been happening to him. He wasn’t exactly certain, however, if he was inclined to believe all of the impossibilities. Then again, his world was suffering from a Paper Plague, of all things. He thought then that he might play along, for the time being. “I’m sorry if we got off on the wrong foot.”

“I will give you the benefit of the doubt, Michael. Now, if you would hear me out, keep silent.” He took in a deep breath. “This cult, as you so finely put it, we call the Order of Tyr, the reason for which does not concern you. It was created in response to the Paper Plague, and the discovery that runes and the objects they were inscribed upon were not being destroyed, at all.” He paused. “Excuse me, that’s not entirely true.”

“I was thinking much along the same lines, don’t worry.”

The Inyanga gave him a stern look. “What I said about the runes is true. What I meant is that this Order has in fact existed since before the Plague. But our *significance* did not take effect until that point, as I’m sure would understand if you didn’t interrupt. We are made up mostly of fortune tellers, runespeakers, traditional healers and so forth; those who would have known of the indestructibility of the runes. We came together, first as a group wishing to better understand the world of old and in a sense shun the world of technology for fear of its penchant for destruction, not only to the world above us, but to the very existence of all things mystical. However, as the Paper Plague took effect, our goal became that much more apparent, and focused. We hid ourselves as completely as possible and furthered our new cause: to question the Plague, and finally to realise that runes must hold the true power to the mysteries of the world and beyond, for why else would they alone survive? We have been keeping the secret of the runes for thirty years

now, and though some of our tactics have at times been ruthless, I daresay it might cause panic were the greater population to discover the truth.”

“Or maybe you don’t want to share your findings with the rest of the world,” said Michael, not allowing himself to fall under this man’s spell of mystery, despite this overwhelming feeling of awe generated by the Inyanga. “You’re just like any other government agency out there, aren’t you? You want to hoard the power for yourself!” “That is not true! We not only fight to learn the truth, but we fight those who would do exactly as you have suggested.”

“So what? You’re glorified, technology-hating Luddites?”

“No! We do not sabotage nor do we kill unless necessary, and very rarely does it come to that. Nor do we shun technology in such an adverse way. We merely do not partake of it. But we must protect ourselves, and who better to seek out the truth than professionals in the field of the mystical?”

“And once you’ve discovered the truth? What then? Will you share your news freely with the world? Ah, but I can see by your look that you wouldn’t.”

“You know nothing! We will make that decision when the time is right. You need not burden yourself with such worries.”

Michael shook his head in despair. He realised he wasn’t going to win on this front. If he wanted the truth he would have to rely on himself, and Sergi. “Fine. I’m sorry, once again, for my antagonism. It must be the bump on my head. I would like one more question answered, though.”

The Inyanga pursed his lips. “Ask and I shall see.”

“I have recently learnt that it was language, and not paper, that’s been destroyed.”

“Yes, this is something we have been aware of for some time now. It is not so easy to hide the truth in the hinterlands of Africa than it is in your ‘modern’ society. Especially when it is we who have learnt to adapt the Plague while all you do is search for limited alternatives.”

“Yes, well, you’re welcome to your opinion. But what I wanted to ask was whether you’ve discovered why runes are the only form of writing to have survived?”

“Have I not said it already? Within them lies a greater power than we as yet can truly comprehend.”

“You tell that to all your ‘acolytes’?” Michael couldn’t help but smirk. It sounded like it might have come from an online manual of 1940’s nuclear jargon. “Fine, so you don’t know. I understand. But there was something else that was also bothering me. Why the Order of *Tyr*? I know you said I didn’t have to know, but now I do.”

“You think yourself humorous, Michael, but we shall see. *Tyr* is named after one of the three ancient gods of runes. Freyja and Heimdall are the other two.”

“Other t – wait, you mean there are two more of these cul –”

“No! You will receive no more answers from me!” He slammed his hand down on the photograph. “Explain this now. You now know more than enough to warrant your immediate imprisonment, so I wouldn’t test my patience much further.”

Michael sighed. He had no choice. “I received it from a private source, within the government.”

The Inyanga turned his head and spat. “It all makes sense now. You are a government spy! Sent to discover this location... you would have been followed, or ...” At that moment, he spied Michael’s watch. “A beacon –” He grabbed the watch, ripping it off Michael’s arm. “You think you can fool me with your stories?” He raised the watch, ready to smash it on the floor, when Sergi’s voice permeated the room.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t do that. I’m not indestructible.” The Inyanga stood, frozen.

“And besides, oh Great Inyanga, if I truly were a homing beacon, this place would have been swarming with government officials long before this.”

The Inyanga lowered the watch, staring at the small face looking back at him on the screen. “What manner of witchcraft is this?”

“Oh, and I thought you might appreciate a little delicate magic. But wait, let me put it in simple terms. If you hadn’t noticed,” Sergi stopped, and his small face seemed to survey his surroundings, “which you quite obviously hadn’t, the world outside is a lot more technologically evolved.”

“Pah,” spat the Inyanga.

“Look,” said Michael, reaching out his hand for Sergi. “I don’t work for the government, and Sergi here isn’t a homing beacon. He’s my friend.” The Inyanga still stood, waiting.

“The person I got this photograph from put his own life at risk to get it to me, and now he’s dead. All of the information on runes is highly protected by the government, and I

don't think Sergi here would have almost been destroyed himself by government watchdogs were we working for them. Now, please, Inyanga, give me the watch."

The Inyanga closed his eyes, as if to open them would be admitting defeat, then reluctantly handed back the watch. "So you too have been made an enemy of the South African government?" he asked soberly.

"'South Africa' no longer really exists anymore, I'd say. Any real existing government only means one thing these days, and I'm hoping they still don't know about me. But if they do, then I would most certainly be an enemy."

The older man sighed, sitting on the cot once more. He gestured to their surroundings.

"Everyone of the Order lives a... low-tech lifestyle, so to speak. It's our way of hiding."

"It's clear that the government wants to keep this whole rune business secret," said Michael, "but how much do you think they really know?"

"A whole lot more than we would wish. They strive to keep it secret from the public, as do we, but their goals are not ours. They seek to discover power behind the runes, while we only seek an answer as to why the runes are so powerful."

"Fine, I'll accept that for now." Michael lay back, worn out. "So where do we go from here?"

"You will stay here for the time being, that's what you'll accept," said the Inyanga, standing up. "I must speak with Shona, now," he said, putting his hand on the door frame.

"I won't very soon forget our conversation, Michael. Don't you forget that there are quicker ways of killing a man than having him commit suicide."

Michael lay back down, suddenly too tired to argue. He drifted off to sleep, his pounding head receding into quiet slumber, unaware that he was no longer in possession of his precious photograph.

Michael knelt down in front of the door, his ear pressed firmly against it, listening for the telltale signs of breathing. Hearing only the dull scratching of termites, he knew that he had been left unattended. He was surprised that there were no guards, but when he tried to open the door to his cell, he found it firmly secured. The Inyanga had turned off the strange light when he left, but Sergi still couldn't figure out where the power had originated. He had tried a wide range scan but had found no sign of any electrical current in the walls. Beaming his light against the wall had revealed a small inscribed rune, though how it worked was a mystery. Michael had tried touching it but nothing happened. "Sergi," he whispered finally, "see what you can do with this door." Sergi scanned the door.

Looking down at his watch screen in the low candle light, Michael saw that he had pulled blue-prints on the make of the lock. Dark lines revolved on the now blue screen as Sergi probed its weak points. "It's a simple iron lock," he concluded. "Nothing special. I should be able to melt through it in a moment." A tiny pin protruded from the watch, and a red beam began to sear the lock. The smell reminded Michael of his mother's roast, but he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He watched as the metal turned red hot before it began to melt away, dripping down the door onto the stone floor. "Try now," offered Sergi.

Michael gave it a push, but it still refused to budge. Stepping back, he lifted his leg and kicked out as hard as he could. The door flew outwards on its hinges, echoing as it reverberated against the stone wall. Michael grinned awkwardly. "Sorry."

"Michael, next time they should just kill you."

Shrugging, he escaped his cell, turning left down a long corridor of stone covered in moss. It suggested a water source somewhere behind these man-made walls, making Michael wonder how close they were to the converging rivers. Another thing which he couldn't figure out was the heady luminescence which seemed to be embedded within the very air. The further he moved along the passageway, every time he attempted to focus in on the flickering light, it seemed to move away so that while his direct vision saw only darkness, he could see the walls clearly out of the corners of his eyes. "What do your scanners say about this strange light?"

"Other than the fact that it's strange?" said Sergi. "My long range scanners are the only ones picking it up. It's as if it resists close inspection. Fortunately, as light goes, it doesn't have any unnatural properties."

"Which means?"

"Which means that it's light."

"Thanks, but where's it coming from? The walls? The moss?"

"Neither. It's just... in the air."

Michael continued walking, the passage heading off into the darkness. After about five minutes, he reached a fork in the tunnel. "Which way?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Where exactly do you want to go?"

Michael shook his head. "You know, I never really gave it a thought. To escape, or to explore...?"

"Is that a question?"

"It could be... never mind." He weighed up his options. "What's down the left passage?"

"It seems to end abruptly," said Sergi. "But I still think it's worth a try."

"And why would you say that?"

"Hey, I've also got intuition."

"Your feminine circuits finally kicking in?"

"I don't have any feminine circuits."

"So it's a part of your male circuitry?"

"I suppose..."

"And since when were your circuits gender based?"

"I... hey, that's not funny."

Smirking, Michael decided to follow his friend's advice. The moss in the passage lessened as they wound their way along, and he wondered if they were making their way to the surface.

What they found shocked even Sergi. "Didn't the Inyanga say they shunned technology?" he asked. "What do they call this?"

What stood before them was a behemoth of a metal door. It was made of stainless steel or something at least as durable. Its dimensions seemed to defy the width of the tunnel.

Lights flickered around it, seemingly at random. There didn't seem to be any handle or

knob of any kind.

“Strange. What do you think they’re hiding?” asked Michael.

“Maybe this is where they perform their spooooky rituals.”

“There’s no need for such dramatics, Sergi.”

“Spoil sport. Well, whatever it is, it must be important. Because this door could prevent just about anyone from getting through, I’d imagine. What they didn’t count on, however, was me.”

Michael never knew exactly what Sergi did, but seconds later he felt a slight rumbling under his feet. The door grated against the rough stone, suggesting that it had been closed for a very long time. Dust started to rise and he backed away, catching a stray fleck of rock on his cheek. He squeezed his eyes shut in momentary pain.

“You okay, oh buddy oh pal?”

“Fine, just a scratch.” Coughing away some dust, he saw that the door had disappeared completely into the opposite wall.

Stepping slowly, Michael entered a domed room not much larger than his own bedroom. Turning his head, he saw that the walls were completely covered in a mirror-like glass, though it didn’t reflect back his image. There was still that familiar haze in the air. He thought it seemed to permeate more potently within the room.

There was only the one entrance, so whatever secret was being kept locked away was somewhere in this room. But Michael searched, and Sergi scanned, and there was nothing to be found.

“I’m having the same trouble with my scanner,” said Sergi. “Except that whatever’s in this room is somehow disabling even my long range scans.”

“It must be some kind of dampening field.”

“Dampening field? This isn’t science fiction, Michael.”

“Then what? Does your superior intellect have a better answer?”

“However superior I might be, no, it doesn’t.”

“What about this bizarre glass wall?” asked Michael hopelessly. He ran his hand against it, and for a moment he thought he spotted something. He touched the wall again, holding his palm flat. A symbol flared and Michael jumped back as he felt a surge of adrenaline. It disappeared again. Michael wiped his hand across it for a third time. “Sergi, shine a

light here. Do you recognise that?"

"It's not one that I've seen, but I'd wager it was a rune."

Michael removed his hand and saw that the rune remained.

"It hasn't disappeared. Do you think it's the light?"

"I don't think so," said Sergi. "Look, it's starting to fade. Besides, your hand doesn't emit light, dumbass."

"Well, what then?"

"Isn't it obvious? They're responding to heat. Your body heat; the light's heat... only the light wasn't emitting enough to sustain it."

"Even if it works for a moment, it'll still tell us something. See if you can emit a beam throughout the room."

"A beam of heat? Are you insane?"

"I didn't mean burn me to death? Just... a little warmth."

"Alright, but I can't exactly do that when I'm latched onto you, now can I? Put me on the floor."

Michael removed his wristwatch and placed it in the centre of the room. The watch began to hum. The sound reverberated against the walls as the dome was bathed in bright white light.

The sloping walls began to flare, symbols searing themselves all around them.

"God, it's beautiful." Each rune flared a unique colour, reminding Michael of the kaleidoscope he'd once found amongst his father's old toys. The runes were like a multicoloured galaxy and all one needed to travel to the planets was to touch them. He started to breathe heavily in excitement. "How many planets are there?"

"Planets?"

"You know what I mean."

"Twenty three," replied Sergi after a moment.

Michael frowned. "I thought you said there were twenty four altogether."

"There are."

"Then where's the last one?" He walked slowly about, admiring the fiery runes. There seemed to be a pattern to them, but he was lost as to its meaning. Their brilliance began to fade as Sergi turned down the light and he found back himself in the centre. Stooping

to collect his wristwatch, he glanced down. Gleaming there, underneath, rested the last rune. "Sergi, you've been sitting on it the whole time," said Michael. Bending closer, he was further surprised at what he saw. "Look," he said, touching the rune. "It's my rune. The one from the photograph. What did you say Matthew called it? Othala?" It flared, brighter and deadlier than any of the others had, and Michael grabbed his chest. The room began to spin, and every single rune burned so fiercely that he was forced to shut his eyes.

"What's happening...? Michael...!" Sergi flew from his hands.

Michael's clothes were ripped from his body, but didn't notice as he felt his heart tearing in his chest. His body was lifted into the air, and began to slowly rotate. As his pace quickened, his skin blackened, and began to melt away in a blinding white fire.

"The manuscript clearly states that he is the one," argued the Inyanga. "Why do you fight me so, Shona?"

"Because of what I have seen!" she shouted right back. Her voice reverberated about the colossal, domed assembly room.

Torchlight flickered, and here and there a rune could be seen to form on the walls, only to fade back into darkness. The centre of the room held a giant pedestal upon which the Inyanga stood, looking down upon the few that were a part of the Order of Tyr. Many of them were not even part of the original Order, but rather the children of that generation. Indoctrinated from an early age through necessity, this generation had grown up believing in the Order, and the need to keep its secrets. And even though many of them, much like Shona, set up home and shop away from their main base of operations, many did live in the underground complex of old mine shafts.

Shona stood directly below the Inyanga, at the forefront of the faces who too demanded answers to the mystery that was their captive, Michael O'Connor.

The Inyanga sighed. The ease in which Michael had quelled his old and bludgeoned heart was unsettling. For those few moments back in the cell, when he had felt suddenly trapped, as if his own destiny were being pulled in a direction he was too frightened to

follow, he had desperately needed to believe that the fool who had stumbled upon them was in fact one of the enemy. Only now did he realise that it was his own fool's dream. He was old, and didn't know whether he could stand the repercussions were the prophecy to come to fruition in his lifetime. And yet, this was the position he found himself in.

"The signs are all here, Shona. Your attempt on his life was premature."

Shona managed to look abashed. She retreated to her native language, after which she was named. "I have apologised for that, but it was a misunderstanding. Tiphor knew the fear this man had created in me. He only thought to protect me."

"And Tiphor failed. Is that not proof enough that he is the one. You know the words as well as I: 'To hold Othala in his hand upon the discovery of our Lord Tyr.'"

"It hardly marks him, now does it," stated the fortune teller in growing anger.

"True enough. But what of the other signs? What of his companion? 'Alive and yet not,' I believe it was."

"Circumstantial."

"When is anything not?"

"Why do you insist on this pointless discussion, Inyanga? You do not even listen to me when I speak of what I have seen in him; of the path he sets for himself. He will destroy us!"

"Truly?" remarked the Inyanga in as patronising a voice as he could manage. "And yet, how can he be so inconsequential, and still threaten us so?" He gestured to the others.

"Does it not state in the prophecies that 'a choice shall be placed before him, and upon him, in the darkness and in the light.' Hear me now," he said, turning to all those assembled. "It is prophesied that he will have this choice to make. Darkness, as Shona here has seen, is a possibility. Those of you familiar with the writings know this to be true. It does not discount the validity of him being the Vordir."

"You may be right," admitted Shona. "But he does not know of the merkstave. How can he then make his choice? Are we to be his teachers? And what of 'heir to the Creator', Inyanga? What is your understanding of that?"

The Inyanga calmed himself, slowly regarding his audience. "Everything will be revealed in time. We cannot stop fate, for it will reach us, whether we try to prevent it or not. Which is why I denounce the decision to harm Michael in any way, or detain him

indefinitely on fruitless grounds; at least for the time being. I see you would have him dealt with severely, Shona, whether he be chosen or not. But if this person is to have such a dramatic affect on this Order, then a decision will be made in the appropriate time. At present, he has done nothing but stumble onto us, and as yet we have not slain those who do so." Shona lowered her eyes in deference to his decision, and the Inyanga nodded. "This conclave is over. And until more information can be gleaned, I beg everyone to carry on as normal."

Almost immediately, talk began to filter throughout the room. It sounded like thunder and crashing waves as it echoed around the dome. The Inyanga began to step down from his pedestal, when he felt a slight shake in the ground. Catching himself, he looked up, but no one else seemed to have noticed over the din. Shrugging it off, he continued on, when a great shudder swept throughout the room. The noise stopped as everyone quietened. Some people had been thrown to the floor and were muttering curses.

"What's happening?" shouted someone, when the walls suddenly flared to life, runes throughout the dome breaking from their hibernation.

It was dazzling to behold, and most people stared in awe. But the Inyanga knew better. *It's too soon*, was his first thought. He was not ready for this. But whether he meant himself or Michael, he didn't know, for his mind contained only one thought as he made his way as quickly as possible from the room. The Vordir must be saved before he destroyed himself.

Michael screamed, though his mouth and throat had long since been burnt through. His mind collapsed as pain rocketed through his skull, splintering it and the soft flesh underneath. As his body exploded in a deluge of organs ripped apart and bones stamped upon with vicious force, Michael knew pain like nothing he had ever felt before. He died in that moment, along with his body, and wept from falling tear ducts as though he were whole....

For long moments there was only anguish, and when he opened his eyes, he was stunned to see the burnt physical remnants of body staring back at him on the floor.

He didn't understand. Why was he still alive? How was he still able to think, to see? But then the burning returned, coursing through his vision, different images erasing the memory of his destroyed body.

He saw glimpses of a young Inyanga, at a time long passed. He was arguing about something he held in his hands, pointing angrily at it.

The images changed. He heard the ocean crashing nearby as he watched as a giant of a man punched a scrawny boy onto the ground. "Listen to your gut. Even when it's in pain, it'll never lie to you."

The image flickered, and Michael saw the same boy, only older and stronger, with a deep fire in his eyes. He was held aloft, struggling as his body floated in the air, his hands tied behind slick black bonds. "Make a choice!" he demanded suddenly, and Michael started. For some reason it sounded as if this man were speaking directly to him. "If my world is to live, I must perish. You are the only one who can save it!"

"What?" cried Michael in his own mind, for he realised that was all he had left; a consciousness amid pain and death. "I don't understand. What's happening?"

"Make your choice, before it's too late."

"What choice?" Fear welled inside Michael, and though he hadn't spoken aloud those last words, they resounded amid the darkness surrounding them.

The strange man leant forward. "I know now that I am not the Vordir. You must take up the mantel. It is your destiny to destroy fate. But you must choose. Othala or Alahto?"

Michael was confused. "I don't know what you mean. What's the difference?"

"The difference is inside of you. Listen to your gut. What does it tell you?"

Michael's mind was racing, but he calmed himself, and felt the twin pull of the runes.

Othala had brought him to this moment. But it had also shown him great pain. Of Alahto, however, he knew nothing. "There is no choice," said Michael.

"There is always a choice. Now, choose!"

There was no choice.... "I choose Othala."

"Then be reborn."

Michael felt his body quiver as he suddenly found himself held aloft by the same dark bonds.

The same voice entered his mind, only it was different, frightened. "Why have you done

this to me? Why have you killed me?"

Michael shook in fright. "But you asked me to choose."

"Then you have made the wrong choice!"

At that moment Michael looked up and watched as a screaming sword flew at him. He tried to lift his hands and protect himself but he couldn't move. All he could do was gasp in shock as the sword pierced his heart.

Michael's body hit the floor with a dull thud. His skin burned naked and red, but the pain had dissipated.

"Hold up his head," said a voice out of the fog. "Pour some water."

Michael couldn't move. His body felt foreign; not his own.

Another voice, softer yet more stern, cut through into his mind. "He has done it. It is written on his very skin. He has chosen Othala."

Michael groaned as the unfamiliar language filtered through his mind. It made him want to scream out in agony, but he couldn't remember how.

"Enough, Shona! He has endured in these few moments what you will never feel in an entire lifetime. He needs aid, not your displeasure."

Michael felt his body being covered in a soft sheet, before being lifted up into strong arms. It was hours later when he awoke.

"You are a lucky man," said the same female voice. Shona sat on a stool next to the cot he lay upon. "How you managed to enter that chamber is beyond me, but I can no longer deny you as Vordir."

"Vordir?" mumbled Michael. "That's what he said..." His throat felt like ash.

Shona's eyes widened. "You understand me?"

"Understand? I don't ..."

Shona held her hand to her mouth. "There is no denying you, I see. You are prophecy incarnate. To either save us or destroy us." She paused before continuing. "But I have seen the truth, and cannot trust you to do the right thing. You may have the mark of Othala, but the darkness still covers my sight when I look at you. The mark may convince the Inyanga, but not me." She leant over and held a bowl near his lips. "Drink."

Michael sipped gladly. "Thank you, I think." His head hurt, and his heart felt as if it still might tear apart.

Shona shook her head. "You are powerful indeed to be able to speak our language?"

The door creaked open, and the Inyanga entered. "Shona, thank you for watching him. But I would speak with him alone."

She glanced at Michael before turning away. "Do not try and hide things from him, Inyanga. He has gained the understanding." With those words, she left the room.

The Inyanga peered after her. "Is it true?" he asked.

"What?"

"I see that it is."

"Good morning, camper. Late night you've had," said a familiar voice from the Inyanga's hands.

"Sergi?" cried Michael, and broke out into a fit of coughing.

"Michael, you don't look at all well. Been through a trash compactor, have you? Ye Olde Inyanga refuses to tell me."

"But, what do you mean? You were right there with me."

"Don't you remember? Whatever happened in that chamber, happened only to you. I was thrown clear out the room, like discarded trash. Then that gargantuan door closed behind me, and I was left to pine away on the floor until this kindly gentleman found me."

"But what did happen?" asked Michael, breathless. "I don't understand it."

"Which is why I brought you this." The Inyanga produced an old parchment.

Michael managed a surprised look.

"It is written in runes," he explained. "It is a prophecy. I think you had best read it."

"Read it?" asked Michael. "But I don't know how to read runes."

"Are you absolutely sure? You couldn't understand Shona before you woke up either. Now you can."

"Shona? Who's spoken to me in Shona?"

"I am right now."

"Sergi?"

"He's right."

"But, I can only hear English."

The Inyanga handed him the manuscript. "Give it a try."

Staring down at the page, Michael eyes saw only runes. He concentrated harder, felt a familiar pressure in his head, and for a moment thought the fire would return. But calm descended over him suddenly, fighting off the panic, and the words altered before his eyes.

Vordir, shall he be heralded,

*A mark of power upon his soul.
 Know him by Othala,
 Before the secret places of Tyr.
 A companion for the heir to the Creator,
 Alive and yet not,
 Within the World of Words.
 A choice shall be placed before him,
 And upon him,
 In the darkness and the light.
 Destroyer or Guardian,
 Hail the Lord of Runes.*

“I’m this Vordir?”

“That is correct. You are the Lord of Runes.”

Michael looked up sceptically. “You have got to be joking.”

The Inyanga shook his head.

“But I have absolutely no knowledge of rune lore. This can’t be true.”

“But you can learn. And I am here to teach you. Besides, now that you have been marked, the knowledge will find its way to you.”

“I don’t think I like this.”

“There is nothing to like. There is only knowledge and destiny.”

“Spoken like a true Inyanga,” piped in Sergi. “Michael, personally, I think everyone here is crazy and we should all go home. Come, I’ll get the bags, pack the car, and –”

“No, Sergi. I think he’s right. Something changed me in there. It feels as if my brain has been rewired.”

“In a sense it has,” said the Inyanga kindly. “That room we created to be a nexus for rune power. Performing any type of rune magic is difficult at the best of times, but the room makes the most dangerous spells possible.”

Michael sighed. “Spells? I’ve clearly bitten off more than I can chew with this one, hey Sergi?”

“I’ll say.”

“Still... I suppose the only way I’ll understand it all is if I know the rest.” He laid his arms out, hands palm up, and he thought he saw a glimmer of light upon his skin. The Inyanga placed both of his own hands down and trembled slightly as he felt a power remembered from youth.

“I’m willing to learn,” said Michael.

“Where shall we begin?”

“I have questions,” Michael said quickly. “About the prophecy. I understand the part concerning Othala, I think, and ‘before the secret places of Tyr,’ and my companion, Sergi, as being ‘alive and yet not –’

“I resent that implication,” said Sergi in a huff. “By all standard definitions, I am alive.”

“I don’t think this prophecy deals in ‘standard definitions,’ Sergi. And you aren’t truly alive in the conventional sense.”

“Thanks.”

Michael looked away from his friend. “And you tell me that I have been marked,” he continued. “But how? And how do these choices affect me?”

“But surely you know,” said the Inyanga kindly. “You experienced it, within the domed room; within the nexus. Why not tell us what occurred, and then maybe things will become clearer.”

And so Michael related his experience: how he, or rather Sergi, had discovered that the runes reacted to light, or rather, heat; how speaking the word ‘Othala’ had caused a cataclysmic reaction; his body burning white; and how he had chosen Othala over another rune, Alahto, which he didn’t know. He didn’t mention the man in bonds, however, nor the desperate way in which he had been accused of killing the man. Michael didn’t know as yet how to comprehend this.

“I truly am sorry for the pain you experienced, but it would seem you have been cleansed in the rune fire, somehow. And the choice you had to make....”

“What is it?”

“It never occurred to me until now. A choice in both the darkness and the light.” He looked into Michael’s eyes. “Two choices!”

“I’m sorry. You’ve lost me.”

“Never mind, it is not that important. At least, you need not worry about it for the

moment.”

“I’m not so sure I feel the same way,” said Michael. “If it has something to do with this prophecy...?”

“I’m sorry, I hate to butt in here,” said Sergi, annoyed, “but are you two listening to yourselves? You’re speaking so callously of prophecy, Michael, that you seemed to have forgotten who you are.”

“What are you babbling about, Sergi?”

“I’m not the one who’s babbling on, pretending he knows the answer to the universe.”

His voice began to grate like a sled being pulled over granite. “You’ve sat there and not once questioned the legitimacy of everything you’ve seen and heard. That, I’m afraid, is not the Michael I’ve had the privilege of knowing most of his life.”

“Sergi, please... you weren’t there.” Michael’s voice dropped as tears welled at the memory of the burning. “I have to know why I had to go through that; if it has any sort of meaning...”

“Michael,” interjected the Inyanga softly. “Sergi’s right. You’ve just been through an emotional and physical turmoil of which I can only dream, and here I am inflicting myself and my beliefs upon you. I apologise, and should let you rest.”

“No, please, neither of you understand. I don’t need to rest; in fact, I’ve never felt better or more fully aware of my senses. And while I understand your criticisms, Sergi, the fact remains that something integral changed within me in that room. My mind... thinks differently. I can’t comprehend it, but I know that being critical of anything at this moment is not in my best interests. Sergi, I need to know more, and that’s enough for me.”

Sergi said nothing, but he couldn’t help but think that the shade of Michael’s face was like nothing he had ever seen before. He only hoped he hadn’t lost his friend.

“You were saying something about choices, Inyanga?” said Michael.

“Yes, but let’s not concern ourselves with that just yet. That’s something which needs a little self reflection.”

Michael let it be, for now. He knew Sergi was afraid, and that he should be too, but he couldn’t let that worry him at the moment, especially when it felt as though his body were being continually pinched. He would rub his skin and feel a sensation that didn’t

seem real. And yet, he was calm; at peace, and something was preventing him from spiralling into hundreds of broken pieces. It was something... almost alien, and yet familiar. He needed to know more.

"I can't rest until I get what I need," stated Michael. "And right now all I need for is the truth." He nodded at Sergi, then turned to the Inyanga determinedly. "Tell me about Alahto."

"Alahto..." The Inyanga paused, grimacing as his lips formed the words. "I'm sorry," he said. "Speaking such a rune symbol is difficult. Especially when one realises the amount of power it contains."

Michael understood his hesitancy, strangely enough, and was surprised at his own patience. What unnerved at him, and he only realised it now, was that thinking the word gave him an uneasy feeling. He looked up at the Inyanga, confused. "Something's wrong. I can't say the name of the rune any longer."

The Inyanga nodded to himself. "Yes, it would make sense. Othala is reinforcing itself within you, almost like a living force. Alahto is anathema to its very nature."

"You mean it's some type of opposite rune, or force?"

"In a sense. Let me explain this to you properly. There are twenty four runes in the Futhark alphabet; the only true runes. Each of these has a power, or, for lack of a better word, a personality; a nature. It is what has allowed their divining purposes to be understood throughout the ages. You can invoke a rune's power by drawing it, or speaking it, though don't worry about that yet," said the Inyanga quickly, seeing Michael's worried face. "Neither I, nor you at the moment, have that type of power. Nevertheless, I suggest you be a little more wary when reading runes aloud in future."

Michael nodded, listening patiently.

"There are patterns, usually used for divining, which can combine the runes together. Some, like Shona, have incised runes upon their own divining tools, preferring their more traditional beliefs. Regardless, there is only one source of true power, whether they believe it or not. We here have utilised the more traditional patterning to hide these very

mines from prying eyes.”

“I remember those two darker runes on the wall of light,” said Michael. “Sergi, do you still have them in memory?”

“Of course,” said Sergi, still sounding a bit sore. “It takes more than being pitched around like refuse to stop old Sergi.” The two runes appeared in the air, Sergi illuminating them against the far wall.

“I suppose this is as good a time as any to teach you,” said the Inyanga, slightly daunted by Sergi’s abilities. He rummaged in his robe for some time before pulling out a piece of white chalk. He began by drawing three circles on the ground, two above, one below, before breaking each up into segments of eight. “Each of these segments can hold one rune. Singular runes, especially among this Order, don’t generally offer much power. There are some practitioners in the other two Orders who can ...” He stopped. “Never mind that. Patterns of three runes, and multiples thereof, usually work for us; one rune for each circle. The circles are called airts, with each one being named after one of the gods. The spell we used to hide these ruins, for example, was easy enough, and follows like so.” The Inyanga pointed to the first airt. “This is the airt of Freya. Within this we placed the rune Isa, of air. With it we forced the light to our will, creating the illusion of the wall.” He drew a rune in one of the segments of the second airt. “Within the airt of Freyja,” he explained, “we used the rune, Wunjo. I suppose you would think of it as the rune of persuasion. Wunjo would persuade any onlooker that the wall was real and impossible to pass through. Now, Isa and Wunjo were inscribed deeply, enhancing their power. The last one, however, we used sparingly.” He drew it within the final airt, that of the god Heimdall.

Michael recognised Othala. He realised suddenly that he didn’t actually know what it meant.

“Othala is the embodiment of good,” said the Inyanga. “A better word I could not say.”

Michael’s eyes widened and he wondered at the choice he had made.

“It is never inscribed that deeply, and is mostly used as a last resort. Let’s just say that it keeps the bad guys away.” The Inyanga laughed suddenly. “If it were any stronger I am pretty certain none of us would be here. Not all of our closets are bare, so to speak.”

Michael frowned at this statement and wondered whether the Inyanga might mean

something more.

“But shouldn’t that prove to Shona that I’m no threat?” he asked, thinking things through.

“I mean, I kept Othala in my pocket. Doesn’t that show that I’m a good person at heart?”

Michael blinked, amazed that he could even say such a ridiculous thing.

“Ah, but the best kind of people can do the worst sorts of things, Michael. I know that fully well, and you would do best to remember it.”

Michael pursed his lips. “What do you do once you’ve inscribed those runes?” he asked, getting back to the art of rune magic.

“We speak them aloud, allowing them to encompass our very beings. Usually there is one person per airt speaking out the individual runes. It’s the most effective way. The most powerful arts, however, occur when the leaders of each Order intone the rune of their own airt. Very rarely does that happen. Only once in my lifetime have all three leaders been together.”

“Sounds like some powerful hoodoo,” said Sergi.

“Your scepticism is beginning to annoy, Sergi,” said Michael.

“It’s my circuits. I guess I’m just too artificial for this mumbo jumbo.”

“Don’t be so rude, Sergi. Inyanga, there are one or two things that still puzzle me, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead.”

“About the airts; does each rune have its own unique position, or can you place it anywhere?”

“It depends on your purpose. The runes aren’t as cut and dry as I seem to have made them out to be. I’m sure you’ll start to understand when you start practising.”

“My next question then. Just what do you expect me to do now that I’m this Vordir? It doesn’t say much in the prophecy, now does it?”

“Michael, the power of the runes is strong. They have survived the Paper Plague against all odds. They will show you the way. Think for a moment. Surely there has been some clue.”

Had there? His mind raced back to not more than two days ago, when his contact had been killed in front of him. He recalled his last words: “Search for the book which was lost.”

"I'm not certain, Inyanga, but something was said to me a few days back. I was told to search for some lost book? Does that mean anything to you?" Michael may not have felt quite right in his body, but even before his transformation he would have noticed the look of panic flashing across the Inyanga's face.

"Um, I am not certain. A book of runes, possibly? There are many of those which survived the Plague." He was speaking much faster, and his words seemed to slur over one another.

"I don't think so." Michael wasn't inclined to pry into the Inyanga's personal life just that moment, but the man was obviously keeping something from him. "There's nothing you might know, is there?"

"No, absolutely not. I'm sorry, Michael, but this you're going to have to look into yourself."

"I suppose I'll find out then, won't I." He leant back into his cot. "You still haven't told me of...of..." Michael tried to say the rune's name, but found it absolutely impossible.

"Ah yes, Alahto. Alahto is one of the twenty four merkstave, or shadow runes. Each of the Futhark runes can be twisted and subverted, mostly used for greed. Alahto is in every sense the exact opposite of Othala. In other words, it is pure evil."

Michael let out a long breath as he looked out the window of the train as it turned into the last bend leading to the Underberg train station. As the train began to slow, the impact of the events of the past ten days threatened to crush his skull. It was too much for one man to cope with.

Watching as the small town came into view through the falling snow, he glanced down at Sergi. He was sulking and Michael couldn't blame him. This whole crazy journey would have fallen apart were it not for him, and yet Michael was always the centre of attention, the 'fated one' with the great destiny.

Alive and yet not. How could he have been so callous? Michael wondered if it had been eating away at Sergi all this time.

He needed to make it up to Sergi somehow. Maybe he should even try and find him a companion. There was no reason why he couldn't wear two wristwatches. Michael smiled as he thought it over. No girl he ever found would ever be a match for Sergi. He supposed if she had the personality of an Austrian arm wrestler, she might bully him into submission. Then again, and Michael was surprised he hadn't considered this before, what was it about Sergi, exactly, that made him male? He wondered whether it had been a conscious choice.

Having found Sergi's chip in one of his grandfather's old chests when he was still a child, he had asked his father where it had come from. But his father had only shrugged, telling Michael that he could have the piece of junk if he was so inclined. Little did anyone know that Sergi was lying dormant within, waiting for the blundering of a youthful Michael to awaken him.

As he reconsidered Sergi's feelings, he realised that the mere fact that Sergi could feel emotion, not to mention his self-awareness, meant that, under any law, man-made or universal, he was alive. *Alive and yet not* was definitely a cruel way to represent his friend. *Spirit without a body*, maybe, but in every sense alive. The Inyanga was right, he realised. Even a good person could be cruel.

The train came to a smooth stop at the Underberg station, but Michael was slow in exiting. Though the conductor tried to hurry him off, he was lost in other thoughts. He knew the book was out there somewhere, in the mountains. The only problem was

finding it. And then it struck him as he realised somebody knew exactly where to find it: intrepid reporter Jackson Matebele.

Only, he was nowhere to be found. His last transmission didn't bode well; for all Michael knew he could be dead.

The answer came to him as he stood there freezing in the snow, gazing up at the grey sky and daunting mounts, and not for the first time he wondered whether his experience in the nexus chamber hadn't made him smarter. He knew what Sergi's answer to that would be, but at the moment Michael didn't care. He knew exactly how to find the whereabouts of the elusive reporter.

He lifted up his watch and blew cold air on it.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" shouted Sergi.

"Waking you up. We've got work to do."

"Don't you mean you've got work to do?"

Michael grimaced. "I'm sorry, for everything I said. I was so caught up in my own life that I forgot the person who's stood by me since I was a kid."

"Well..."

"Forgive me?"

"I'll think about it. You really think you're on the right track?"

"I do."

"Alright then. But just so you know, I'm not doing any heavy lifting. My muscles aren't quite as developed as yours."

Michael laughed, then realised that he was turning into an icicle. He walked over to the automated taxis, thankful as he climbed into one that he didn't have to deal with a driver.

"Think you can find out where Jackson Matebele was staying? This is the last bit of urban jungle for miles around. He must have made some sort of reservation."

"We'll know soon enough."

Snowflakes barrelled down like hail, melting as they touched Michael's coat. Snow caked Michael's black-brown hair with a damp residue as he hurried from the taxi into the

Underberg Inn, a three-star hotel where Jackson Matebele had been booked.

“Don’t you just love this icy weather?” said Michael, shaking himself off.

“Says the shivering man. Really, Michael, this weather is so provincial.”

“If I wasn’t mistaken, I’d say that sounded rather high and mighty of you, Sergi.”

“I’m a chip. Cold makes my circuits slow up. So no, I don’t the cold.”

Michael was silent for a moment before speaking. “You know, Sergi, that response was based solely on logic. The box said you came with emotions.”

“Sometimes life just doesn’t call for them.”

Michael shrugged. He couldn’t argue with that. He walked over to the front desk and rang the bell.

A man wearing a shining pink and black pinstriped blazer with black suit pants walked over to him, dusting off imaginary dust while lifting his chin a bit too high in the air.

“Bonjour. Hello, Monsieur. *Est-ce que je vous aide offrir?* How may I help you, Sir?”

“Hi, uh, I’m sorry, why are you speaking French?”

“Because, Sir, I am.”

“What?”

“French.”

“Yes, but you’re in South Africa. We only speak English here.”

“Ah, oui.”

“So –”

“You wish to make a reservation?”

“Um...” Michael cleared his throat. “Not quite. I’m looking for a guest I believe is staying here. Or at least was. His name is Jackson Matebele.”

“One moment, Monsieur. Let me check.”

As the concierge busied himself with the computer next to him, Michael took the chance to look around. It wasn’t the best hotel he’d ever seen, but it was clean, the wooden floors were polished, and the carpets weren’t tangled and torn, so it couldn’t be all bad. It even had a pillar or two, though they were clearly not decorative. Michael glanced at the ceiling, wondering just how much pressure was pushing down on those two lone columns.

“Sir, Monsieur Matebele is indeed booked at this hotel. Might I call up and see if he is

willing to see you?”

“Actually, I don’t think he’s here at the moment. I was wondering if I could just wait in his room.”

The clerk smiled. “Why, of course. Please, Sir, it is my great honour to allow you to disrespect the privacy of our guests. In fact, allow me to hand you a set of keys to all of our guests’ rooms.”

Michael stared at him. “I’m sorry. Was that absolutely necessary? A simple ‘no’ would have sufficed.”

The clerk seemed about to respond, checking himself at the last moment. “If you wish to book a room, please inform me now. Otherwise...” He turned to leave.

“Is your hatred of America so great?”

The man swivelled round. “America, sir? Are you not South African?”

“I am in fact South African, though I get a lot of my accent from my father.”

“That is wonderful, Monsieur. But I can no longer tell the difference.”

“Why live in this country if you have such a problem with it?”

“Because the Pope is worse.”

Michael watched him return to the back room. “Wow,” he said to Sergi.

“Wow indeed. This place gives me the creeps.”

“Emotions, finally?”

“I suppose. Then again, if something happened to you, I’d be left for the scrap heap, so you could chalk it up to self-preservation.”

Michael laughed. “And I thought you cared?” As he said this, he moved towards the elevator. “Which floor, Sergi?”

“The computer was good enough to relay his room number. He was staying in room 203. So, I’d guess the second floor.”

Pressing the dark red arrow, Michael waited for the elevator to descend. As the doors chimed and opened, Michael hoped fervently to find some clue to the reporter’s whereabouts.

Michael shivered as he entered the main suite of Jackson Matebele's room. The key card lock had been no problem for Sergi, but feeling guilt for breaking in wasn't the reason for his trembling. The room was absolutely freezing. The reporter had obviously not been there for some time, judging by the temperature. Then again, Michael wouldn't have been surprised if the clerk hadn't shut off the heaters himself as some sort of revenge against the world.

The room itself was decorated much the same as the lobby: shimmering, polished hardwood floors, carpeted walls for those with a need for privacy, and immaculate bed coverings and bathroom. And yet, there was definite evidence that this room had been lived in recently: a handheld razor, for the discerning traveller; and some cheap shampoo products, most probably compliments of the clerk, were placed neatly on the bathroom shelf. Michael imagined a maid had cleaned up the room upon Jackson's departure. There was nothing on top of the dresser, so Michael pulled out each of the drawers, finding a discarded piece of paper on top of the third drawer clothing. On it was a telephone number, and the word: *trustworthy?*

Raising his eyebrows, he asked Sergi to call the number.

After a short while, Michael heard a click. "Yebo? Who is calling?"

Michael was surprised at the rural African accent. He hadn't heard it much since he was a child. Even the Colonial Reserve ranger spoke English fluently and he claimed to have lived most of his life on a farm. Michael and he had had many conversations about the pointlessness of ranger's occupation, considering that most of the bigger animals had been taken to more secure facilities. Michael recalled being intrigued at his response.

"There are places in this country which have not yet felt the creeping tide of technology. The Kruger Park, sorry, Bush Colonial Reserve, lies mostly abandoned today, as you know, but nature hasn't forgotten her land, and I reckon she might make a last desperate attempt at regaining her lost outpost. Which, unfortunately, makes you the enemy. I'm just here to make sure the casualty number isn't very high."

Michael's attention was brought rudely back to the present when he felt a small jolt from Sergi. "Uh, hi, sorry about that. My name is Michael. Who am I speaking to?"

"Mukel? You American? No good, no good." There was a pause, and Michael thought he might have hung up, when his voice came through again. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to know who I'm speaking to, and I'm not American."

"Sandile. But you call me Trevor."

"Fine. Trevor, I was –"

"Sandile."

"What?"

"You call me Sandile. You make Trevor sound too American. Besides, only friends call me Sandile, so you be priv... eh lucky."

Michael sighed. "Whatever you want. I need to know if you helped named Jackson Matebele. He's a reporter. He may have called you." There was an eerie silence.

"Sandile! Is everything alright? You know that name, don't you?"

"No, I'm sorry. I no help you."

"Sandile," Michael tried more gently. "How were you helping Mr Matebele?" Michael thought he heard a sob.

"It is dangerous!" he finally cried. "I told him, but he would no listen. Boy tried to make him listen, but no. He remain pig-headed. It is no my fault they never come back."

"Boy?" asked Michael.

"Boy, yes. Said he was cameraman. But no camera. He only boy!"

"Alright. Never mind that now. How exactly did you know them? Are you a guide of some sort?"

"Guide, yes. Have jeep; go into mountains. Take them, but they no come back. I hear guns, and vamoose."

"Vamoose?"

"Yes. I drive very fast. No one catch me."

"You took them into the mountains?" Michael felt some excitement. "Whereabouts? Do you think you could take me?"

"No."

"At least tell me where you took them. I can get someone else to take me there."

"No one else take you. Too scared. I only one."

Michael let out an exasperated breath, and looked at Sergi thoughtfully. An idea came to him. "Do you want money? I can give you a lot." He had remembered to bring quite a few gold and silver pieces along with him. Even though he was no longer in the

hinterlands of Northern South Africa, one never knew how people would respond. Besides, it helped if people saw the cash in their hands. Credits on a computer just weren't tangible enough.

Sandile seemed to pause. "Reporter only give Sandile half what owed. You pay his, plus double, and Sandile take you. But it dangerous. Rebels take over area."

"I'm not worried about the danger," said Michael, and he hoped the lie sounded convincing. While Sergi had certain weapon-like abilities, Michael was not likely to survive if caught by rebels.

"You no worry, but Sandile worry."

"I'll give you your money, all up front as well."

"Good. Where I find you?"

"The Underberg Inn. Where Mr Matebele stayed."

"When you want leave?"

"As soon as possible."

"I be there in thirty minutes."

"Great. I'll meet you outside the front."

Ice battered Michael's cloak as the dented, ancient army jeep careened along the old dirt road, now pitted with dangerously packed snow. Even Sergi gave a yelp when the jeep was one second in the air and the next slamming hard into the ground. Michael pretended to yell himself, though his mouth was sealed in a grimace. "Are you crazy!" he cried finally.

"You say you want fast. I go fast!" shouted Sandile over the whipping snow.

"There's fast and then there's dangerous. I think you've crossed that thin line."

"Not dangerous yet. Drakensberg dangerous. Rebels hide in mountains. Kill on sight."

"Are you absolutely sure?" asked Michael. "I mean, if they're rebels, wouldn't they rather take hostages?"

"True Africans different. Cold makes brain freeze. They all crazy."

Michael had no logical answer for that and gave up.

It had taken half the day to reach this point, and it was darkening. Not really wanting to travel at night, especially in icy mountains and forests, they were going to stop at some place called Injasuthi. It had once been a small chalet resort for travellers in the region, but the territory had long been abandoned. According to Sandile, it was a now transitional zone between government and rebel held land; a no man's land. Sandile would leave them there to find lodgings; any of the abandoned buildings would supposedly do for shelter.

Finally arriving, they were dropped off at a boom gate. Sandile suggested that they try the old shop. They might find some food not taken by the rebels.

Michael had already cursed himself during the ride for not bringing better provisions.

Sergi hadn't cared, however; he said he would go hungry.

Sandile left in a squeal of rubber and snow, and Michael traipsed his way along an abandoned road, finally crossing a long bridge, entering the main area of Injasuthi. He walked past the empty chalets, all covered in snow. In fact, as far as he could see, snow covered almost everything; it was beautiful and depressing.

He saw the old shop on the left. It was warmer inside, but still cold. The walls were made from coarse wooden logs and reminded Michael of a hunter's lodge. He found more food in the back storage room than he could have hoped. Unfortunately, most of it was rotten. There were a few cans of assorted vegetables, however. He didn't know how long they'd been there, but he was hopeful that the food inside would be edible. Placing one of the cans on a table, he had Sergi use his laser as can-opener. The vegetables were nothing spectacular, not to mention slightly gritty, but for Michael, who'd last eaten that morning, it was more than adequate. As for Sergi, he was quite put out that he was made to do such menial work. He was even angrier when he was turned into a glorified light bulb.

Michael only shrugged and said it wasn't his fault there were no working lights as he took his meal out onto a small balcony and sat in a wooden chair, picking at his food. Gazing out at the dark sky and looming mountains, his thoughts turned to the following day, and how he would find the tomb. He supposed that necessitated finding Jackson Matebele. Michael only hoped that Sergi's heat sensors would do the job. For that to work, however, Sergi would need to find a satellite in the area.

The idea of heat reminded Michael of just how cold he was. Standing, he shivered

unconsciously. The quiet was eerie, and the abandoned chalets reminded of him of one or another of the horror movies he'd watched as a child. Bending down, he collected a healthy amount of snow and piled it on the wooden floor inside. *I am the Vordir*, he reminded himself, and his mind seemed to calm at this recognition, readying him for what he was about to attempt.

According to Sergi, 'Vordir' was Scandinavian for Guardian, or Defender. Why that might refer to him, Michael had no clue, but if it helped him by accepting the title, he saw no harm in it. Besides, a childish part of him thought it sounded exciting.

He spread the snow out evenly and drew a circle, dividing it into eight. He wondered if he should create the other two airts, but decided against it; what he was attempting was simple. At least, he hoped it was. The only problem was which rune to use, and where to place it. "Sergi," he said, glancing down at his watch. "Display the entire Futhark on the floor."

"Whatever you say, Slavedriver. Your mule obeys."

The floor was suddenly awash with a whitish glow, the Futhark arranged neatly in three rows. Sergi also knew the names to all of the runes, thanks to the Inyanga, but didn't display them yet. Besides, Michael didn't think the names would help. He would have to feel this one out.

Looking over them, he allowed his mind to focus on each rune. He didn't know the 'nature' of all of them as yet, and found that concentrating didn't bring this information to the fore. *Maybe I'm not ready?* His only recourse then, was to use the ones he knew. Just as he thought this, he realised what he could try. Isa, the rune of air, was one which might work. He didn't know how, but perhaps he could heat the air in the lodge. He recalled the Inyanga saying that no rune was cut and dry, and that by placing them in a different position within the airt, a different aspect could be utilised. Memorising the shape of the rune Isa, Michael looked over at his own airt. He recalled where the Inyanga had placed it to create the wall of light. He saw no common ground, however, in what he was trying to do and what the Inyanga had achieved. Looking down at the eight segments, he shrugged. He would have to make his own decisions about placement; create his own, individual airt. If the knowledge was already inside his head, he only had to find it. But when he tried, his mind refused to focus. It felt as though his thoughts had

almost found the answer, and then vibrated around it, like placing the same poles of two magnets together.

“Damn it! Sergi, nothing’s working.”

“I hardly thought any of this nonsense would be easy, Michael. Besides, when did the Inyanga ever say you would inherently know everything? It’s more likely the knowledge is outside of your experience.”

“That’s hardly the response I expected from a sceptic like you?”

“What can I say? I thought long and hard about it and realised that I couldn’t change your mind. I’m not saying I’m convinced, but a little trust can’t hurt.”

“Wow. Okay, so how do I carry on?”

“Experimentation. How else are you going to learn?”

Realising his friend was probably true, he drew Isa anyway. He held his hand over the airt and spoke the rune aloud, with as much force and determination as he could. “Isa!” “Presto!” shouted Sergi. “Hey, where are the balloons, the clowns, the ...” He stopped short of making fun of Michael’s attempt, and his face shimmered into a temperature gauge. “That’s... amazing.”

That’s when Michael saw it. The temperature gauge was moving incrementally upwards. Michael thought he saw the rune in the snow glow for a moment, but it was weak. The heat in the room was not much better than earlier, but the cold now seemed more bearable. Michael wondered how long it would last. Perhaps as long as the rune was present? Picking up some of the snow, he carried it into over into one of the nearby chalets and performed the miracle feat a second time. Once the room was warm, he slipped quickly under the tattered covers of a bed and fell asleep. As he slept, his mind relaxed, and the rune’s power faded.

The next morning he found a battered backpack, put some cans inside, and continued up into the mountains.

The snow was shaken violently off the pine tree as the lower bark exploded and crackled, warping the trunk and cooking the sap. Every man in the camp flew to the ground, protecting his body from flying debris. Two men were not yelling in surprise and fear, but stood regarding the results calmly.

“I can get you twenty more of these,” stated the man dressed in the grey suit and dark glasses matter-of-factly. Snow fell on top of his head, but seemed to rush off him as it was repelled. His suit was neither wet nor stained and retained its perfect condition. Nor, it was clear to everyone, did the man seem to be feeling the cold.

The other man, the leader of the True Africans, Londisizwe, hefted the lightweight gun-shaped device, smiled as he ran his fingers across his coarse stubble, and nodded.

“Do you agree to our arrangement?” asked the man in grey.

“What do you want in that place? It is evil.”

“Your superstitions do not interest me. Nor do your questions. Now, do you agree?”

“How many of your men are coming?”

“Enough. I wouldn’t worry. We won’t interfere in your affairs so far as you don’t interfere in ours. None of your men will enter the tomb, though.”

Londisizwe hefted the gun in his hand, and nodded. “I agree. But we have prisoners. They are still there, in the cages.”

“Ah, yes, the reporter and his nephew. I think perhaps I might take them as well.”

“No, that was not part of the deal.”

The man in grey raised an eyebrow, appraising his adversary, wondering how far this rebel leader could be pressed. “We will pay well.”

“We have no need of money. I think the prisoners will serve us better as bargaining tools.”

“Against who? The South African government? Don’t be a fool. Besides, there’s nothing South African left of this country’s leaders. Nobody down here cares about your little rebellion.”

“Be careful how you speak. You are in my home now.”

“Your home?” The grey man laughed. “None of this is truly yours. It’s just a matter of time before you realise the truth.”

Londisizwe shook his head. “You are wrong. While we hold this ground, it is our home, because we alone have chosen not to be puppets. Others choose only survival, but we choose to live because we refuse to be slaves.”

“Rousing words. But don’t forget, you’re always somebody’s puppet.”

“Then is it not better to live life resisting what we do not choose for ourselves?”

“True, from one perspective. But then history has shown that there will always be those who can’t conform to a better life. In that sense I suppose you will always be rebels.”

“Then why sell us guns?”

“Because, for the moment, you serve our purpose.”

Londisizwe turned away, wondering at the grey men’s words as he watched his men about the camp. “We keep the prisoners.”

The grey man shrugged. “It’s of no consequence. You may keep them.”

“Good. Do you want to enter the tomb now?”

“No. But I will be back. And please make certain that everything remains intact. For if any mistakes were to occur, this little Rebel Alliance of yours would cease to exist. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis, and walked off into the trees on the far side of the camp.

For a moment the trees moaned and swayed. Londisizwe noticed a quivering in the air above the camp, and then it was gone. He shook his head, wondering for the hundredth time about the motives of the man in grey.

Michael watched the red dots on his watch move away. He stood up from his crouched position in the snow, and moved further into enemy-held ground.

It had been Sergi’s warning that had saved him from being caught this time, but unlike the other occasions, it hadn’t been the patrolling rebels that set off Sergi’s alarm. It had been a surge of energy unlike anything Sergi had felt before, and it had scared his electronic friend. Sergi wasn’t usually prone to outbursts of emotion – actually he was – but they always tended to be directed at Michael. For some reason, however, that surge of energy had put the fear of death in him.

Michael trudged through the snow, his boots falling through lighter patches, at times causing him to pitch forward, a muffled cry coming from Sergi whenever his arm plunged into the snow.

Sergi had finally managed to connect to a satellite in the area – an odd fact since there was nothing particular interesting in this area for anyone to see – and pinpointed the position of the rebel camp. Michael had steered well clear of it, but at the moment he had no other landmark by which to find the tomb. He thought it might be somewhere inside the mountain itself, if it had been hidden all this time, and so he continued along, moving up along a gentle incline until he saw the small strand of red material standing stark against the tree from which it swayed in the light breeze. Michael fingered it gently. He recognised it immediately as the colour of the scarf Jackson Matebele had worn in his transmission. He looked ahead at the general path he had chosen and wondered if the reporter had come the same way. It made sense that he would have also wanted to avoid the rebels. Then again, Michael had no clue what Jackson's motivations had been. The tomb very well might have been a lucky find. Nevertheless, it would make sense that the reporter had found an alternative route into the tomb if he had managed to enter unnoticed. Only now, thanks to Jackson, the rebels probably knew there was another entrance. As Michael hurried along, he hoped they hadn't discovered it as yet.

The ten or so black bricks stood flush against the side of the mountain. They were mostly covered in snow, and, with a passing glance, they might have been easily missed. It was as if a window looking into the mountain had been boarded up, and when the bricks came easily loose in Michael's hands, Sergi remarked that it was like looking into a dark soul. Michael thought Sergi meant to say 'dark hole', which earned him a set of expletives and something about poetry not being the sole domain of humans.

Sergi had to shine a light inside, it was so dark, and once Michael had climbed inside the small hole, he noticed that there was a small crawl space which inched away beyond Sergi's attempts to see further. Michael replaced the bricks as best he could behind him, and began to crawl. He was surprised a short while later, however, when a gust of air

blew dust in his face. Crawling slowly forward, this time keeping his eyes almost closed, he finally saw some light ahead and realised that there were shafts in the ceiling that must have gone all the way to the surface of the mountain much like the one he was crawling through. His first thoughts were of a ventilation system, and when his hands had finally run out of ground and emerged into space, he knew it was true. Sergi shone his light into the larger passage below, hoping by the silence that there were no guards. At the very least, Michael now knew how Jackson Matebele had entered. Somehow he doubted the reporter had found the opening by accident.

The atmosphere within the tomb was perfect. The hair on the back of Michael's neck started to rise. It was too perfect.

The air was not only breathable, but tasted fresh on his tongue, like a cool glass of water. Fortunately, it wasn't cold. Michael had almost frozen outside, but in here he almost felt like taking off his jacket. But while the warmth was a great comfort and should have reassured him, it did the opposite. It wasn't the effect that produced these feelings, however, but the source, and as Michael closed in on it, his uneasiness grew exponentially.

He followed the long passage until Sergi finally shut off his light. The corridor had begun to develop a light of its own, and while Sergi didn't exactly run on batteries that needed to be conserved, they didn't want to alert anyone to their presence.

"Michael, there are two people ahead of us. It looks like the corridor opens out into a large room; it might even be the one we've been looking for."

Michael hunkered down on his haunches and moved forward. Ever so slowly, he peered around the corner and took everything in.

Sergi had been right. It was the same room Jackson had been broadcasting from. The walls were covered with images of great battles; there was Lialh fighting off demons, while on a further wall seemed to be a rudimentary map. It was shaped in the form of an island, with two distinct markings. Michael couldn't see if there was any writing on the walls, and doubted there would be, if the Paper Plague had anything to do with it. Then

again, if there was writing, it might be written in runes.

He didn't stop to dwell on what might be, however, for his attention was drawn to something else: the statue of the goddess. The effect of flowing hair and moving tresses were still prominent, but it was the object in her hand that truly caught his attention.

It was the book he had been searching for.

Only, from this distance it looked wrong somehow. And, there was something else; a shadow shifting around it... the source of the heat."

"Sergi, do you see the shadow?"

"Michael, what are you on about now?" he whispered back.

"Surrounding the book."

"My sensors don't pick up anything, if that's what you mean. I wouldn't be surprised if you were hallucinating."

"Don't be insulting. I'm telling you, it's there."

"Yeah well, great for you, but maybe you should be concentrating on those two in the cage."

"What?" Michael blinked, and took in the large cage a few meters in front of the statue. The cage bars looked to be made of stone, and, following them up to the ceiling, he noticed a slight depression; a trap. But had the two occupants triggered it? Seeing a few broken remains at the back of the cage, he saw that it wasn't the case.

Hunkered within were the reporter and his nephew. Sergi expanded his search, making sure no one else was in the vicinity. Feeling slightly more confident when Sergi gave the all-clear, Michael stood up and walked towards the cage.

The nephew looked up, and Michael saw that he was only about fifteen or so. His face was shrouded in a shadow of its own. He shivered and backed up against the farther side of the cage, only to realise that he was now closer to the resident skeleton. He cried in fear just as the only other living occupant of the cage, a bedraggled Jackson, looked up, anger welling in his eyes when he saw Michael.

"Damn you! Let us out of here!" Jackson grabbed the stone bars of the cage, and Michael saw that it was in fact a cage door with a rudimentary stone keyhole.

"Shut up," whispered Michael. "You'll call the guards."

Jackson froze as he heard Michael's voice. "American?" he whispered in relief, sitting

back on the floor. "Oh, thank God. "What are you, CIA? I hope you guys took out that rebel scum once and for all."

"No, and I'm not American," said Michael. "Let's just say I'm an independent operator. I came in the same way you did."

"A mercenary? Did the company hire you? Hmm, I never would have thought they cared."

"No, I'm not here for that ridiculous television company."

"Then what? Who are you?"

"Never mind that. Do you want to escape or not?"

"Oh, this is just fantastic. You're probably some nut who thought he could play hero. Well, you're only going to get us all killed!"

"Just shut up, will you. If you want to get out at all, then you better listen to me." He pointed at the stone book. "What do you know about that?"

Jackson blinked. "Who cares? If you really plan on saving us, then open this damned cage."

"I'm afraid I can't do that yet." Michael knew he sounded excessively cruel but he had to remember the reason he had come. "First, the book."

"What are you trying to do? Kill us all? I don't know anything about the damned book."

"He's lying," said Sergi. "His heart rate just rose slightly."

"Who the hell said that?" exclaimed Jackson.

"Never mind. How did you find this tomb? Tell me and I'll let you out."

"You're blackmailing me? Jesus man, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"Tell me, damn you!" Michael listened to himself as he said this, and wondered what was wrong with him. Something was wrong here, and it had something to do with that shadow. He turned away from the two prisoners and walked purposely towards the statue of the goddess. Michael looked into her face and felt his pulse race. She was beautiful beyond words, and almost real.

Sergi, meanwhile, was scanning the book when he suddenly spoke up. "Michael, it seems to be encased in stone. And, there's something else, something familiar here. Remember down in the tunnels back in the Order's conclave; how the light was so strange when I scanned it?"

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s happening again. Only, this time it’s not light I’m picking up on my long range scanners.”

“What is it?”

“Um, well, darkness.”

Michael shivered as Sergi said the words. He felt the exact same thing. He stood before the stone book, ignoring Jackson’s angry cries, and ran his hands along it. It was smooth to the touch, but as he removed his palm, a shape rose up in the centre. It looked similar to ...

“Othala,” he said quietly as his hand crackled. He had no time to consider it before he was thrown some meters back onto the floor. He coughed as he tried to breathe, but the wind had been knocked out of him.

“Man, are you okay?” asked Jackson, surprise infused with anger.

“What was that?” and Michael realised it was the first time he had heard Jackson’s nephew speak. His tone, while still fearful, now held a hint of childish curiosity and excitement.

Michael looked up at them both, and saw that they were gripping the stone bars, staring at him. He looked down at his hand. It smoked slightly, but other than that looked to be unhurt. “Sergi, you alright?”

“I’m fine. It’s a good thing I don’t bruise easily.”

Michael sat up, and pushed himself to his feet. He unstrapped Sergi and handed him to Jackson. “See if you can help them get out. I’m going to try again.”

“Michael, you don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

Michael sighed. “Unfortunately I do. I was wrong. It wasn’t Othala. It was the merkstave.”

“You mean... Alahto?”

“Yes. That’s why the rune looked similar. And that’s what the shadow is. This entire place might be covered in merkstave for all I know.”

“Maybe you should just speak the merkstave? It might release the book.”

“You know that’s impossible, Sergi. But don’t worry, I’ll find a way.” He walked purposefully toward the book as Jackson and his nephew could only stare in stupefaction.

“You both look like mules,” stated Sergi. “Hold me up to the lock, dimwit. Let’s see about getting you free.”

Jackson nodded and held out his hands.

Michael stared down at the book before him, wondering how he could possibly free it from its stone casing. He thought through all of his limited rune lore, but nothing hinted at an answer. He knew that if he could only speak the merkstave it would set the book free, but he couldn’t do that. Which meant... what? Maybe it didn’t have to be exact, he thought out to himself. He recalled one thing the Inyanga had said to him: not all the runes were black and white. Often at times the nature of one rune would overarch into another. Which meant, that if he spoke a rune close enough to the nature of the rune of darkness, he might succeed.

Only, his knowledge of runes was almost nonexistent. He glanced up at the statue of the goddess, trying to recall what knowledge the Inyanga had imparted to him.

‘Runes are bound to the natural order of all living things. They are but aspects of nature....’

The ‘natural order’ resounded in his mind. There was something there....

He watched as the illusion of the statue’s swaying hair caught his imagination and seemed to hold his heart in a vice grip. He couldn’t help but think of the saddest thing that could happen to this angelic creature. He knew immediately, of course, and it seemed to awaken something in his mind. The saddest thing would be the goddess’ death.

Death: the end of the natural order; the journey into shadow. His mind moved swiftly, trying to remember if the Inyanga had ever mentioned the name of the death rune. He hadn’t, but just as Michael began to despair, he saw the word change in his mind’s eye much as the scroll of prophecy had become readable. He felt a familiar pressure in his head, but it was quickly gone, and the death rune stood out in his mind, black against white.

With growing excitement he held his hand palm down over the stone book, but stopped short. Glancing over at her other hand, palm up, he felt some indecision. Removing his hand, he placed it on top of hers, stating clearly: “Mannaz!”

His hand began to quiver as the shadow was drawn to him. Like tendrils of smoke it swarmed from every corner of the room. The images on the wall seemed to come alive,

dancing in darkness as Lialh battled the demons. Michael heard a slight cracking sound and looked up into the goddess' eyes, which blinked at him through a startling green iris. The stone lips cracked as well, and flushed red ones pushed through, speaking only three words: "Death welcomes you."

Glancing back down, Michael saw that the stone covering the book was dissolving when the shadow surrounding it flashed brightly and smothered his mind in black fog.

“Wake up.” Rough hands shook him until his head banged against a hard stone floor. Michael grunted, and his eyes opened in glassy pain, blurry faces looking down at him. “Do you think he’ll be alright?” asked a tremulously young voice. “I mean, he looks like ...”

“Don’t you dare say anything about Michael! He’s a fighter.” Sergi’s voice drifted through his subconscious like a fly on water.

“Selfish bastard is all he is! He just left us in here. He doesn’t give a shit about us.”

“But Uncle! Didn’t you see that statue move? It said something!”

“You’re all insane. And this talking watch is the worst of all. I mean, of all the advances our country has made, they had to waste themselves on rubbish like this.”

“I beg your pardon?” There was a small electric burst and Jackson yelped. “It’s not my fault this lock is made of something impervious to my attempts. So watch your mouth, because the laser in this watch could just as easily work against your flesh.”

Michael took this moment to sit up, attempting to dull the pain in his head. Someone held onto his arm – the nephew, he thought.

“Are you alright, Mister? That man hit you hard.”

“What?” he attempted.

“You got thumped, Michael. Sorry I didn’t warn you, but I was concentrating on getting this cage open. It’s a wonder he never just killed you.”

“Thanks, Sergi,” he coughed.

“We heard a noise,” piped in the nephew. “We turned and saw this man hit you over the head. But I swear as it happened the statue was moving and talking. Did you see it, Mister?”

Michael nodded. “How did I get in here?”

“That rebel bastard threw you in here,” said Jackson finally. “Had some type of strange key. Mumbled something and left. Probably went to fetch their leader; some guy named Londisizwe. And when he gets here, I’m sure we’ll all be dead. So thanks a lot for the great rescue.”

“Damn!” said Michael, ignoring the reporter’s complaints. “You sure you can’t get through, Sergi?”

“Positive.”

Michael sighed. Everything was falling apart. Jackson looked at him hard, and he stared back at him in return. “What?” he said, exasperated.

“So what’s so important about the book?”

Michael looked wistfully back at the statue. He couldn’t see the book from his vantage point, and wondered what it looked like now that the stone covering was gone. “I’m not sure. All I know is that it holds the answers to all my questions.”

“And what are those questions?”

Michael squinted at the man who would so brazenly demand things of him.

“The Paper Plague for one,” realising it was likely the only aspect he might understand.

Jackson blinked. “The P …” he mouthed the rest of the word silently. “But how?”

“For one, it’s the only surviving book I’ve ever heard about, you idiot,” said Sergi.

Jackson nodded as if it made sense.

“How did *you* find out about the book?” But Michael almost knew the answer before he asked.

“A man came to me,” offered Jackson, slightly more willing.

“Charcoal blazer, bad English accent?”

Jackson nodded. “He wanted me to report its whereabouts on live television. That’s how I found the tomb and knew how to enter unseen. Only, when I got here, all I saw was a book-shaped stone. I thought I’d been lead on a bit of a goose chase. So I concentrated on what I thought was the bigger find.” He indicated the entire room. “The tomb itself.” He shook his head. “God, what a story this will b –”

“Unfortunately, Mr Matebele, you won’t get a chance to tell anyone.”

They all looked up at the new speaker in the grey suit. “Who the hell are you?” said Jackson.

“A concerned party. I’m here to, shall we say, negotiate the anonymity of this tomb.”

“What! You can’t hide something like this. Besides, people would have seen my report. They’ll send search parties.”

“Oh, I doubt that very much. Especially considering that the surrounding mountains are filled with dangerous, bloodthirsty rebels. And as for this tomb, well, a news report of a large explosion in the area will be released shortly. That should keep most people away.”

He smirked. "And this is Michael O'Connor, I presume. Yes, how could one mistake that determined air, that assurance of character?"

Michael stared at the man, his eyes trying see through his dark glasses.

The grey man, as they would later call him, walked closer to the cage, followed by another. The second man was clearly one of the rebels, and Michael thought he might even be the leader. He had a relaxed air of authority about him, and the way he kept glancing at the grey man suggested deep suspicion.

"How do you know me?" asked Michael.

"Know you? We've been keeping a watch on you for most of your life. You're a very special man."

"What? Why?"

"Because of *who* you are. Isn't that what your informant had to say?"

Michael's eyes widened as he recalled that Durban evening, and the fly, and the ...

"You thought you could so easily escape our notice by fleeing to Botswana?" He smiled as if recalling something humorous. "You led us straight to those low-tech fools. The fabled Order of Tyr brought down by your own carelessness." His face turned from a smirking cheerfulness into a sneering mask. "Caught in our trap like the pathetic mice they were."

Michael's heart sank below the tomb floor as he thought of all those people. "If you've hurt them..."

"Hurt? They're beyond feeling any sort of pain by now, I would think. Besides, our ways are efficient and don't accumulate much mess. Too much to explain in the long run."

Michael grasped the bars in anger. "You bastard. You evil, fucking bastard!"

"Enough of this!" cried the leader of the rebels. Michael caught a hint of ancestral Zulu in his accent, but just as Jackson sounded like a white-born South African, so this man had clearly not been brought up in a completely rural home. "You have seen the prisoners as you requested. Now we leave."

"Wait," said the grey man, and walked slowly towards the statue. "I'm just going to make certain the prize is still in place. In case this one has done something to it." He stopped, and stared at the hand of the statue, before turning in anger, fury blazed across his face.

"Where is it? Where is the book?"

Michael blinked in confusion. "How should I ..." and then he touched the place in his cloak that had been causing him slight discomfort. He hadn't given it much thought, but as he reached down, he pulled the book out. Stunned, Michael couldn't help it as he ran his hand over the pristine dark brown leather surface. He felt it shimmer with such incredible power that he felt momentarily overwhelmed. Embossed on the cover was a single word: *Caiy'n*.

Shivering at the feelings brought on from reading the title, Michael's attention was caught by the three interlocking wheels beneath the title. He immediately recognised them as the three airts as each one spoked into eight segments. But they were not empty like the one's drawn by the Inyanga. Engraved inside each segment was one of the twenty-four runes of the Futhark.

He placed the book on the floor of the cage, for as he had touched one of the airts, it had turned slightly, and a powerful surge of what could only be rune energy had almost burnt his hand.

The grey man was also surprised, but his smile returned. "I don't know how you freed it, but it's of no consequence. You will give it to me now."

"No," replied Michael, simply.

"No? Are you so foolish to think I would not just kill you for it?"

Michael shook his head, but when he looked up, the grey man was aiming a gun at him.

"Be careful, Michael," whispered Sergi, a quiver in his voice. "Remember that surge of energy I felt earlier? Well, it was created by that weapon."

"Shit!" cried Jackson. "Hey man," he shouted at the rebel leader, "you just going to let him shoot us?"

The rebel leader glared at Jackson for a moment before finally shouting at the grey man to put the gun down.

"You, Londisizwe," the grey man emphasised the name, "stay out of this. It does not concern you."

"I will not be treated in this manner! Your government thinks they rule the world and its entire people, but you are wrong."

"Wrong? You fool, we rule every part of you."

Londisizwe seemed about to reply, when he turned and left.

“Hey, don’t leave,” shouted Jackson. “I’m not a traitor to my own kind. I promise. Come on! Shit. Mikey, this guy’s crazy. Do you think he’ll shoot us?”

Mikey? “Jackson, shut up.” Michael grabbed hold of Sergi. “My friend, I need you to be quick. Do you think you can burn a rune into the rock below us?”

“Michael? You’re not kidding, are you? Okay, I’ll try. Which one?”

Michael knew which one; at least the name, but he didn’t know the shape of the rune. He cast his mind back to the dream as the grey man began to walk closer, waving the gun at the cage. He remembered Lialh being bound in the air, where he had uttered the rune; and... yes, there, as if his new-found abilities allowed him to see further, he saw the filaments of light escape Lialh’s mouth: the rune forming and breaking into the spell’s affect.

Sergi had by this time shone the Futhark onto the floor and Michael pointed. Sergi used the outline to burn a hole in the rock with his laser. Just as the grey man saw what he was doing, Michael smirked and placed his hand over the rune. “Eihwaz!” he said powerfully, and the air surrounding the cage shimmered.

The grey man blinked, shouted in anger, and aimed his gun. His finger seemed to caress the trigger, pressing it ever so softly, emitting a burst of electricity in an arc which sent everyone down in cover. But the shield held. The grey man screamed his frustration, while Jackson only stared and his nephew looked at Michael with wondering eyes.

“Michael, what now?” shouted Sergi. “We’re still trapped in here.”

Michael nodded, looking thoughtfully at the book on the floor while the grey man aimed at the shield a second time.

Within the World of Words....

The words from the prophecy reverberated through him, and he knelt down next to their only hope. He grasped the cover gently and tried to open it, but it refused to budge. There was no visible lock, nor any strap holding it closed.

Jackson’s nephew sidled up to him, and studied the cover. “Do you think those circles are some kind of combination?”

Michael hadn’t considered that before, but as he looked at the three interlocking airts, he was inclined to agree. Only, he was afraid to move them. He recalled the immense power they emitted when he had nudged only one, and knew that any mistake in the

combination could have dire consequences. “What’s your name?” whispered Michael.
“Msizi.”

“I think you’ve got the right idea, Msizi. Except that I don’t know the combination. Although –” Michael sat cross-legged in front of the book just as another burst of electricity glanced off of the shield. He wasn’t worried. He was centring himself, finding calm the way the Inyanga had showed him. He allowed his thoughts to grip the runes in front of him. He fixed the shield in another, stable part of his mind, and then forgot about it. He placed his hand over the combination lock, searching, then moved his palm along the leather covering until his hand began to tingle. Curious, he opened his eyes and moved his hand away, revealing a small rune in the corner of the cover. He passed his hand over it again, causing it to flare, where it was otherwise invisible. He recalled the last time he had seen that particular rune: the first rune Lialh had ever spoken in his dreams. Finally, Michael knew its meaning. It was Ansuz, rune of the past and memory; to show where others had gone before. He closed his eyes, held his palm firmly, and spoke the single rune: “Ansuz,” he said, so softly, so gently, that his mind became a home for all the runes in the Futhark until all was a white fog.

Michael watched clouds flow on the periphery of his vision. It reminded him of mist on a cool morning, the way it always seemed to disappear the closer you got. He tried to ignore the strange effect by keeping his eyes firmly ahead on the lone cabin standing like a rundown sentinel in the wilderness. Everything around him was surrounded by snow; heaviness settled everywhere he looked. He thought for a moment that he had somehow escaped the tomb, but he could see the difference in landscape even through the ice. This snow was different, as though it were dead.

He moved forward a step, and time swept along at an even greater pace like an echo against his back, propelling him with an insubstantial push.

He was inside the cabin now. Someone knelt over a table, their back to Michael. The man, if it was in fact a man and not a lifelike statue, was robed in swathes of whitish-grey. A slight movement, a shifting of weight from one foot to the other, and Michael

was convinced of his initial assessment of gender. As a hand emerged from the coverings, he saw that it was aged, but still stable. For one strange moment Michael felt as if he had known this man before now.

He stepped forward once more, time shifted, and the man was gone. Michael felt himself being dragged across the floor, but by no human force. It was as though gravity had decided to finally revenge itself on the lording human race, sucking him into a ball of himself, ready to crush his soul. Michael was able to move his arms against the force, grabbing the edge of a table while his legs threatened to pull his grip free. He glanced up, looking for some way of escaping this trap, but no one was there to help him.

He was about to let go when a voice whispered inside his head. He saw the leather-bound book on the table. It called to him, warning him of the consequences of what he was about to see. "Your life will be forever changed," it whispered.

"My life has already changed," shouted Michael angrily.

"But not theirs...."

Michael turned from the phantom finger in his mind, following the force which flowed from the tip. He was caught off guard at what he saw, and was just able to hold on. As if from above, he saw himself sitting cross-legged on the ground. His image was blurry through the quivering of the shield surrounding the cage. But it was not himself that drew his attention; it was those surrounding him: the rebel leader, Londisizwe, commanding two of his rebels to aim their own more mundane weapons at the grey man who continually fired raw voltage at the cage; Jackson Matebele glancing furtively at each of them, then turning an angry gaze on Michael's body. He was angry, true, but he also seemed to realise that his life was no longer in his own hands. There was desperation there, and a strong desire to continue living. Jackson's nephew, Msizi, held Michael's hand. Msizi reached over suddenly, having heard a familiar voice, and slipped Sergi back onto Michael's wrist.

Michael finally understood what he was seeing. These people, for good or ill, were his responsibility. Whatever god-like choice he was supposedly making, he knew these people had every right to continue living.

Michael returned to the cabin.

The book was in front of him now. He could clearly see the three interlocking runes and

was surprised. "How did you know what I would choose?"

"My fate is irrevocably linked to yours, Vordir. You are my Guardian."

Everything went white.

Michael opened his eyes, smiled at Msizi, and grasped the book. As he turned the three airts, a surge of power flowed through him into the tomb. As the second rune interlocked, the shield collapsed as its energy was ripped away. The rebels and the grey man were looking on in wonder and hate, and even as the voltage gun was aimed, Michael knew its power was similarly gone. Locking the third rune in place, the room became a multicoloured mirror of distorted images. The air above the book swirled before suddenly expanding pulling them all into its splendid heart.

His skin crackled, smoked, and began to split. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, he came apart; tiny shards of what he had once been.

His mind, a complex configuration of code amid steel fibres, was there nonetheless, but it was a fragile thing. And now, it was changing....

The book's pages flapped about madly, gigantic things threatening and encouraging. *Pick me*, they all seemed to say as another page was turned and lost to history. The words of the book, at first stark in their rigid form, began to shiver and swarm inwards upon each other.

It was magic, and his original form could not be tolerated. It was too alien, and yet, he could not be destroyed.

Sergi's essence, if it could be so called, was undeniable; an affirmation of life. He knew this, though its confirmation ignited in him a fire of hope. Would he be made whole?

Would his desires be fulfilled?

Would he finally ascend to his place among men?

As his essence burst forth into tiny cells, he knew that he would finally be born.

Book pages swarmed Michael's vision like mosquitoes buzzing faster and faster they seemed as smooth as sanded wood. He froze in this position as a seam of light formed, unclasping and revealing the book's innermost self.

An island, nothing more than sketched lines upon translucent white, formed and began to eat away at the page. Waves rose up to froth against a rugged coastline as sheer cliffs pushed up through a churning ocean. Colours of all shifting hues jumped about like dancing balls of light, finally coalescing into single tones of brown and white and green as the land itself shifted between mountains, grassy plains, dark forests and misty rivers. Towns, cities, spires and towers emerged from the landscape. Strangely familiar huts surrounding small oases dotted the many savannahs while large lumbering beasts sprang from the earth, fully formed. The ocean erupted once more into existence, a wild and chaotic maelstrom bombarding the southern coastland with ceaseless fury as the island

suddenly froze like some marble statue, waiting....

Londisizwe could not conceive of himself in the strange in-between void he and his men had been thrust into. He was witness to the strange splendour of the island-continent, yet could not believe. For what he was seeing was home; the land he strove for back on the ruined Earth. This new South Africa, so young and vibrant and untamed was ideal in its innocence, yet so utterly different from the country he had known in the present or through the poorly lacking history consigned to the Net. Despite the distance he felt from the unknown, this land called to him, sparking tales of an idyllic age long past.

And yet, he himself was less real than the land before him. He had no feeling, could not move his limbs and could not even see his hands in front of him. He could sense his brethren were close, and with a sense of will grown to steel throughout his days as the leader of the True Africans, he summoned them towards him, catching fragments of emotion and pure terror. Rallying the disincorporate souls, he folded them within his net and flung them, himself following after, into the frozen world.

A voice cried after them, unheard. Unable to prevent the headstrong nature of the rebel leader, it could do nothing but watch as the rebels fell into the world; into space, but out of time.

The island, caught in a moment of time, began to divide along three imagined lines, each one superimposed in bright contrast to the land itself. Two towers groaned up against the sky, dwarfing all in their need to supersede each other as they seemed to conquer the land by their very presence.

The map of the island suddenly condensed within itself, drew to a point with a resounding smack, and sealed itself as the pages of the book came together.

Michael saw it all, and was struck by the strange symmetry of the island. Not only did it intrigue his heightened senses, but he couldn't help but notice that the three lands were divided like the three-patterned airts: two above and one below. But unlike Londisizwe, the similarities between the island and South Africa were not readily apparent to one who had isolated himself so fully from the country he called home.

His vision swam suddenly as a foreign entity cascaded into him, battering him into the closed book. He was aware of no one, and yet felt a force of such anger spread toward him.

Michael?

He recognised that thread of thought, for it sounded like ...*Msizi? Are you there?*

Michael, what's happening? What was that place? Are we going back home?

I... I'm not sure.

Mikey, that you? What the hell's going on? You better have some sort of explanation.

We're ...

The book began to shudder and reopen, revealing the first page, entitled 'Prologue', of a grand story.

What do we do, Michael?

I don't know. I don't know....

The pages began to turn, integrating time into the space previously displayed. As the pages turned, Michael couldn't help but notice vast amounts of writing placed there by some almost god-like hand. He felt himself being pulled forward, towards the grand tale.

The pages turned, and the prologue fell away, opening up the first chapter.

The pages stopped, opening up into some undefined space and time. Michael began to fall faster the closer he came, the words looming out at him. Unfortunately, they spread so quickly that he couldn't read any of them.

Jackson's voice surfaced once more, and Michael was at least thankful that he would not be alone in the strange world. That thought flickered across his vision as panic suddenly gripped him: where was Sergi?

A wind whipped up from below him, and with a deftness which stunned his disincorporate self, he was flung far above the page he was about to descend into.

Msizi's voice surfaced from below, crying out for Michael. But it was too late as both he and Jackson disappeared into the book.

Michael tried turning his head, but found that he couldn't move. He floated up and out of the book while the echoes of a despairing world cried out.

The pages began to turn once more, only in reverse as some other force weaved itself among the words.

Michael O'Connor!

Grey Man! Agent! Whoever you are! What do you think you're doing?

Michael O'Connor thinks he can escape? I think you underestimate me. You might not have any knowledge of this book, but I know more than you would believe.

A second gust of wind sent Michael spinning, only this time a shooting pain swept through his arm. Stunned, he realised that he had taken corporeal form.

"Notice a change, Mr O'Connor?"

They stood meters from each other upon the edge of a number of pages bound together by some terrible will. Michael looked down at his body, surprised to find no hideous mutations or aberrations. His arm bled profusely from a cut high up, but he was otherwise fine. The air itself was familiar to him, being the self same light he had witnessed in the Order of Tyr's tunnels.

Michael took a step forward, but regretted the move as his feet slipped on the smooth edge of the pages. He caught himself, and managed to look ahead, only to face the steady gaze of not only the Grey Man, but his electrical weapon. "What do you know about this place; this 'world of words'?" shouted Michael, heady with vertigo.

"I know many things. The least of which is this book. I must admit though, I never suspected this..." he said as he swept his free arm around him. "Ever since we first discovered the book, its mysteries have always eluded us. But, I learnt. You see, the Order in Nepal were not as unwilling to share as your South African brethren were. And the control of my astral body was only the first..."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Mars has no life, no resources to harvest. Earth's own destruction began a long time ago, and it's only a matter of time before its resources are gone. This new world, however, will be our salvation."

“All you want is Caiy’n’s resources?”

“Is that its name? Well, never mind. I’m sure it will be given an appropriate numerical designation.”

“You’re mad. You don’t know anything about it. What if it doesn’t have everything you need?”

“We don’t. But that’s why *I’m* here, as a, I suppose you could say, surveyor. And now I think it’s time for you to take a fall.”

Michael glanced over the side, but saw only indeterminate words as a page flapped against the grey man’s will. He thought about jumping, but just as he made up his mind to do so, he heard a crackling as the voltage gun was charged.

“No, no, no. We’re not planning on going so soon, are we? I’m afraid your time in this world, and even the next, is up.”

Michael swung his head around as the gun took up his vision. And from that moment, everything slowed to a crawl.

The grey man’s finger touched the trigger like a delicate lover, calling on death to fulfil its destiny. Energy formed within the tip of the weapon, coalescing into a deadly ball of ruined lightning. The tension built to a peak, before exploding outwards in a deluge of blue-white light.

Michael’s eyes widened as the lightning began to break up, separating into individual arcs before those too began to break up, forming smaller and tighter lines. These soon began to twist in on themselves, before falling into a pattern which finally stabilised. Michael sucked in a breath as the pattern entered his subconscious, forming unbidden connections with the knowledge already learnt. The pattern finally snapped into place. With it came the recognition that what he was seeing was the runic symbol for lightning. He didn’t even have to recall where he had seen that particular effect before, as Lialh’s brilliant display within his dream had all but cemented itself within conscious memory. The word ‘Hagalaz’ seeped through his mind to his lips and he knew how he could stop this screeching death.

Using the arced lightning as his drawn rune, Michael spoke aloud with the familiar force which followed all of his runic attempts. “Hagalaz!” He pushed out with his hand to focus the power, but just as the whisper of the runic shape escaped his own mouth to

meet the arc in some attempt to control the flow, something struck Michael as odd. The pattern of the voltage gun's lightning was not exactly the same. It was different, but only subtly so. There were the same number of lines, the same general shape; only, it seemed off somehow; inverted. Shaking it off, Michael concentrated his power as his rune word struck the arc. The lightning reared up in midair, straining against Michael's power as control of the arc was threatened. But Michael was not adept at controlling such a massive creation of energy, and he faltered. The arc surged toward him, and he pushed back as best he could.

Unknown to him, however, a second battle was occurring within the runes themselves. Hagalaz strained to control its inverted self, and just when it could no longer hold out, the arc rune gave way, slipping past Hagalaz, snaking its way back to Michael as he finally gained full control. The lightning pulsed in the air, to the shock of the grey man.

"How? How did you learn to control the runes? You were not with the Order long enough."

Michael ignored him, and with a rage built up now with the memory of the grey man's destruction of the Order of Tyr, he pushed out with mind and arm. The lightning arc obeyed and streamed towards his opponent.

"No!" The grey man screamed in outrage and pulled the trigger once more, sending out a second arc. It struck the first, but this time the effect was not so subtle. The arcs merged into one another, expanding into a ball of chaotic lightning. Michael finally let go of his control, and just as he jumped back to protect himself from the inevitable blast, he felt a sudden cold shiver in his palm. Clutching it to himself, he looked at his hand. Nothing seemed out of place, but he had little time left to think as the explosion knocked him off his feet.

The pages beneath his feet regained control and began to unravel. Michael crawled to the right side, hoping to at least fall into the same page as Jackson and Msizi. But he wasn't quick enough. That page had passed him by. Glancing back towards the grey man, Michael saw that he had already disappeared. Sighing with a weariness which drained him to his soul, he fell. Just as his blurring vision caught the words 'Chapter 3', he heard an excited voice from afar.

"Michael. It's me. I'm human. I'm finally human."

Caity'n was in the bloom of new spring. Fresh grasses, brilliant in the low morning sunshine, combined with the slow-moving hillocks and wavering river, unsteady in its banks and the course set down in an uncertain future. Gliding along the bends was a creature slightly smaller than a dragon fly, though infinitely more intelligent. Its needs, however, transcended simple hunger; so much so that its very existence was swept up in this craving. Its intelligence only allowed the search for its sustenance to become that much more calculated and predatory.

Tiny lumps along the sides of its streamlined body contorted as the slight breeze brought with it a much welcome stowaway: the scent of a living creature. Its two rather inadequate eyes surveyed the valley, burgeoning saplings providing no cover for this prey to hide behind. As it finally set its limited sight on the morning meal, the silhouetted form turned to face the creature. Ignoring the limited potential for its prey to defend itself, it dove in at an angle, moving to dodge an out flung appendage. Seizing the opportunity, it forged ahead toward its ultimate goal; its only need; its life craving: flesh.

The lone figure gazed inquisitively through his telescope as the scene unfolded below him. Sitting in his stone spire, a thing of independence outside of the world's influences, he watched as his faithful abomination carried out its bound duty. Chuckling softly to himself, he could not help marvelling at the voracity of the need to approach his solitary sentinel. Having remained secluded for so many years, he had come to disdain the company of others. His creature, a product of his inordinate Ru power, had seen fit to keep it that way.

Awaiting now the inevitable end of this distraction, the Lord of Ru brought his eye back to the telescope, preparing the grimace which he had always affected at seeing an intruder ripped apart.

Only, the event never occurred as he expected.

The raised hand of the intruder moved in a slow arc, a ripple of air following in its wake. And, as an artist might erase and rework his masterpiece, so did the intruder rework the world. In the instant the ripple wave passed through the creature, it disappeared from the Ru Lord's sight. Sitting back, aghast, and now terrified at the prospect of the intruder's powers, he neglected his other concerns to mark its progress. The shape moved closer towards the tower, but halted at the river which formed the second barrier of his seclusion. But instead of the great magic the Ru Lord believed would be used to levitate over this obstacle, the intruder once more waved an arm in an arc. What the Ru Lord beheld in this moment shocked him to his core, for it should not have been possible. Stepping onto the newly created white bridge, the intruder approached the tower. But not even the bridge held the Ru Lord's interest. He had eyes only for the intruder, as it appeared to have no body. It seemed to be made of pure energy.

"Ru Lord." It was said simply, as if stating a fact not worth disputing.

Awaiting the bodiless energy within the topmost tower room, the Ru Lord was surprised to have been incorrect in his earlier assessment. For the intruder did have distinct features, and a more than desirable shape. She reflected the mothering nature the Ru Lord had never known, yet also the dazzling beauty of a lady willing to go to his bed.

"Who...what are you, to have destroyed my creature so?"

"I do not destroy. I merely correct abominations."

"What?"

"It courses above your head as we speak. That is what your creation has become; has ever been. What was once a flesh eater now follows a path that searches for more... depth."

"You speak in riddles. What do you want with me?"

"This tower is an abomination. It stands outside of time. Everything within is an abomination, including you."

"What are you?"

"An avatar."

"Who do you serve? Did those Ru Queens send you?"

"I serve the infinite and effect the definite."

"So you plan to kill me?"

"You must be eradicated. But, if you leave this tower and remove this blight, your death will become moot."

"And you believe this shape you've taken to be formidable?" he asked, ignoring her threat.

"I am new to this body. But I will learn."

"And if I deny you?"

"Then you must be destroyed."

The Ru Lord spoke a quick word. Bonds of a rope-like substance snaked around her ankles and wrists, pushing her to the ground. "I think you underestimate my power."

The intruder grimaced, but could not move. "You are correct. This place is outside time. It is infinity within infinity. It must not be allowed. It must be destroyed."

"You're in no position, my darling little bird, to be making such boasts. But let's see what we can make of you nevertheless, shall we?"

The intruder could only watch as she was placed in a chair, sitting as a statue would if suddenly animated.

He watched her as she peered through sultry brown eyes at the book in front of her.

Moving quickly to pull his work away, her next words stopped him in his haste.

"This book of prophecy is invalid. The world has changed."

"The world cannot change."

"This prophecy holds no value. The Vordir has changed that."

"Your other silly *Ru Lords* have gone to collect him already, to fight the darkness?" he spoke scathingly. "He's only a boy. He can change nothing."

"You speak the truth, but base it on an inaccuracy. For you see, he is no longer Vordir. Another has come. Were this prophecy outside the bounds of this tower, it would be within my power to affect that change. But that has not come to fruition. Hence, your interference cannot be tolerated. You are... unpredictable."

"You're in no position to be ordering me around. Have you forgotten that you're trapped?"

"Trapped is a state of mind. Besides, I'm never without forethought."

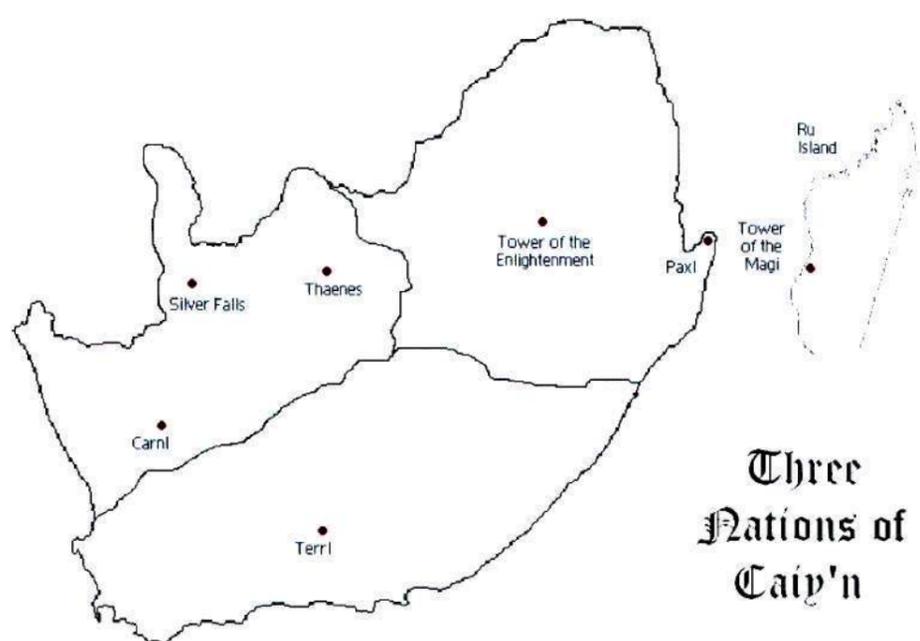
Eyes widening in surprise at such a bold statement, the Ru Lord felt a sudden prick against his neck. Slapping sharply with his right palm, he saw specks of blood as he brought his hand away. "What have you done?"

"Your abomination; it has become my salvation."

"No..." The Ru Lord fell forward, a deep purple welling around the affected area. The intruder managed to free herself as night fell. Limping downstairs from chafed ankles, she fell out into the open, past the Ru wards which set the tower slightly out of time, allowing the once Ru Lord to extend his life considerably. Turning to face the abomination of time, she cocked her head, as if listening. Shaking her head in quiet surprise, she waved her arm in an arc. The tower rippled and disappeared, leaving an object far more suitable for the times ahead.

PART 2

The Past



Chapter 12 *Thaenes*

Sergi opened his eye with aching care, savouring the feel of salty moisture clouding his

vision. It was so completely alien to every other impulse he had ever experienced that the tears coursed out of him. Sunlight glimmered as his eye adjusted to the light, and he blinked repeatedly. The new sensation almost overwhelmed him, sending him into a strange euphoria.

He had never known the movement of a human body, and couldn't be certain that he was doing it right, but for some reason he knew that the life he had once known was no more. He ached to feel, to know the pleasures of simple air on his skin. He managed to tilt his eye downwards, and was surprised to find his body covered by a blanket. But he didn't give it another thought. All that mattered was his new body.

Sergi closed his eye – odd, that he could only open one; he thought humans had two – and relaxed, concentrating on moving his right hand. It was a momentary struggle, but he finally felt his fingers bend to his will, and he grasped the edge of something soft beneath him. It felt smooth, while the top of his fingers brushed against what he could only assume was the coarse blanket. He was elated, but when he tried to open his eye, he found that it wouldn't move. Fear clutched at him and his hand clenched the smooth covering. Panic began to ensue and he urged his eye to open with everything he had. There was a strange stretching feeling, and what felt like a snap, when his left eye opened with incredible force, flooding his vision with a light which seemed so much brighter than before.

“Oh my, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were awake. Let me close that blind for you.”

Sergi froze, or at least he would have had he mobility in his body. He couldn't move, but he was thankful when the sunlight coming through the window was dimmed. Looking around carefully, he realised that he was in some sort of room, and considering the height of the woman coming towards him, he was lying in a bed.

“Goodness, you've gone and hurt yourself. I told you not to try and walk about yet. Your poor eye. How did you bruise yourself so?”

Sergi blinked. What was she talking about? He had only just woken. He didn't recall her at all. He tried to raise the hand he had moved just before, but he couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel anything, only his one damned eye. But he could hear, and for that he was grateful.

“Don't try and move now. You've had a hard knock of it. I'll get you a damp cloth.” She

started to leave, which frightened Sergi more than anything else, and he strained to open his mouth. With a familiar stretch and snap, he cried out for her to stop, only to become blind once more. He wanted to flail with panic, but his paralysis remained.

“Stop, please. I can’t move my body. Please, help me.”

He heard hard boots creak on wood, and a rougher voice could be heard from just outside.

“Tabitha, that boy woken up yet? He’s been sleeping far more than he should be.”

“Shush, Pa, you’re going to scare him. He’s woken up, but sounds terrified. You just wait outside while I tend him.”

“Please,” shouted Sergi. “I can’t see, and my body won’t move. What’s wrong with me?”

“What are you on about, Michael?” said Tabitha. “You’re sitting up in bed, if my eyes don’t deceive me. Only, that bruise of yours... how did it get around your lips?”

Michael woke with a gasp, peering left and right before recalling where he was. He had woken the day before, disoriented and confused as he was forced to place himself in the hands of the woman named Tabitha. The first time she had spoken, a string of runes had erupted from her mouth and he had quivered against some kind of rune spell. Only, when she pulled his arms down, she had given him a comforting look, before telling him her name, and that she was there to help him. He had relaxed at that point, both because of her soothing words as well as the fact that there were no runes in sight. Just before he had fallen asleep once more, his mind tried to make sense of the situation. It was a new land; a new language. He only hoped that the runes he saw were his own way of translating. Waking for the second time, he knew something was wrong. He turned to face Tabitha just as she spoke. He tried to ask her what she meant about a bruise, but he couldn’t open his mouth. It had gone completely numb. Panic drained his face white when he heard words he knew he wasn’t speaking.

“Somebody help me. I can’t move. Why can’t I move?”

He could see Tabitha looking at him in confusion, and maybe with a little sympathy, but he had no time for that. Who was saying those words? They came from his mouth, he had

no doubt of that; they sounded like him, but were definitely not him.

Suddenly, with what felt like wriggling around his mouth, he could feel his tongue and lips once more, and he sighed with relief. His eyes widened, however, when an alien-looking black substance slithered down the skin of his arm towards his right hand. It seemed to settle over his hand completely. His hand was immediately numbed, so much so that it might as well not have been there. His blackened fingers began to move wildly of their own accord, before settling in what could only be called despair.

Michael looked up at Tabitha, but she was slowly backing away.

“Michael, I think you need some time to recover. I’ll just make you something to drink, yes?” She turned and ran from the room, the door to the outside all but slamming behind her as he heard calling shouts.

He slapped his left hand to his face, pulling it down over his mouth and chin. He raised his right arm in front of his face. “What are you?” he whispered almost to himself, but the oil-like substance seemed to jump at his words. It began to move once more, back up his arm and towards his face. Michael slapped his hand over it, and it seemed to shudder, but it finally reached his mouth, causing him to gasp for breath. But, somehow, the oil was controlling his breathing.

“Can anyone hear me?” he heard his own voice say. Michael nodded imperceptibly.

“Michael, is that you? Please tell me it’s you?”

The oil seemed to rise up and shift onto his cheek, and Michael found he could speak once more. “I hear you,” he said fearfully, but steady nonetheless. “Who... what are you?”

“Michael? It’s me, it’s Sergi,” said the oil as it reclaimed his mouth.

Michael sat back, and it was a long time before he blinked.

“Michael, what’s happened to me? I was supposed to be human. What have I become?”

Michael found his voice again, but he was silent. What was going on? He was in a new world, he could accept that much. At first, when he had awoken, he had thought it all a dream, but the tangibility of the situation was all too real. The World within Words. He had almost been willing to rack up the events between worlds as an illusion, but the memory was now too vivid to ignore. And the last thing he recalled was Sergi shouting to him, something about being human.

“Sergi, calm down. We’re in Caiy’n, the world of the book.”

Two men, farmhands by the look of them, strode into the room. They took one look at the oily bruise surrounding Michael’s face and stopped, hesitant. A shout from behind changed their stance, however, and, steeling themselves against whatever horror they were about to encounter, marched forward, oddly, most probably dumbly, determined. Michael pushed himself back, his body not as yet working as he knew it should. They lunged forward, each trying to grab an arm, but the bruise was faster. It slipped around the lips and gave such a demonic shout that the pair of bulky men stopped short. Sergi slithered down Michael’s neck and arm into his right hand, before the newly blackened fist connected with one of the farmhand’s jaws. Stunning the burly man, the farmhand had no time to think before the fist jabbed him in the stomach, doubling him over. Michael, who at this point hadn’t really moved, leant forward, giving Sergi some space within which he could more easily do damage. Michael couldn’t feel the blows being landed, which was surprising considering the considerable power they seemed to possess. He wondered if Sergi felt them, or if he could feel anything at all. Whatever the truth, the farmhand’s body had become an outlet for Sergi’s rage. Michael might have taken the moment to feel pity for his friend, but there was no more time for contemplation. A beam of wood suddenly crashed down onto Sergi and, finally, his strength gave out. Michael’s hand went limp.

Michael watched helplessly as the beam was then aimed at his head, and fell back instinctively. It still clipped him above his right eyebrow, however, spinning him so that he knocked the side of his head against the wall. His mind began to slide away into darkness as the beam was raised for a second time. “Stop!” came Tabitha’s voice, raised in a slight scream. “Father, please, we mustn’t kill

him. We must help him to fight this demon.”

“There’s no helping the demons and their work, Tabitha. The only saving we can do for him is to give him a quick death.”

“We can take him to the priest, Father. I won’t have you killing anyone, especially not after the time it took me to bring him back to health.”

Tabitha’s father sighed. He pointed at Michael. “Grab him, Jaken. We’ll take him to town in the wagon. And if the demon hand moves, cut it off.”

Michael was hoisted up tenderly, Jaken not wanting to touch him at all, but slung over Jaken’s shoulder nevertheless.

“Take care of Willem, Tabitha, if nursing be all important to you. And we’ll see this demon bastard purged.”

Michael was almost completely naked when his body crashed into the dustbowl of a village green, which, with the wooden road sign in the middle, might have been taken for a glorified crossroads. His lips tasted the crumbling paths which crisscrossed the village green, spattering them with his unholy blood.

It was a small village, with a lone inn on the one edge of the green, while what might have been taken for some sort of store took up the other.

A single highway – more of a well-swept dirt road – ran through the village, meeting and exiting at the village green, and as Michael managed a glance towards each horizon, he noticed carts and wagons trundling away in the distance. If he had doubted the purpose of the village before, then he was certain of it now. It was nothing more than a roadside stop on the way to some larger prize.

Aside from the inn and store, there were a number of small houses dotted around the green and up and down the highway, but if the villagers showed any curiosity about Michael, they weren’t showing it. The village, named Thaenes according to Tabitha’s father – though when he spat it out it sounded like ‘ten’ – was a ghost town that morning. Tabitha’s father aimed a kick at him, but Michael managed to roll away. He grimaced as stone chips cut his back and stomach.

Tabitha's father pointed his finger at Michael, telling Jaken to stop him from moving too far away. Strong calloused fingers gripped his shoulders, pulling him up before pushing him down to bloodied knees.

Looming before him, situated on the southern tip of the green, was a building which dwarfed all the others. A lone grey cloud slid in front of the sun and he was finally able to look up at it. The sun emerged once more and Michael was forced to lower his head like a supplicant to keep the searing light from his eyes.

From what he could gather from his brief glance, it was one of the few buildings which hadn't been made from wood or large stone blocks. This one seemed to have been meticulously put together with muddy-red bricks which, together with the growth of lichen and moss, made it seem ancient in comparison. It was built almost like a pyramid, inching ever upwards to a flat point atop which rest a stylized symbol. Michael couldn't really make it out from his position on the ground, even with the sun not directly above, but it sent shivers running through him.

"We should throw him in one of the cages," muttered Jaken. "Like me grandpa used to do with the likes of these demons."

"Quit your muttering, Jaken," replied Tabitha's father. "Those are barbarous ways. The priests have shown us our mistakes." He sighed. "Tabitha was right to do it this way. But it doesn't mean the demon won't pay." He moved towards the large building. Set in the wall was an enormous archway under which was set a plain wooden door. Tabitha's father pushed the door inwards, allowing the light to flesh out the inner hallway. Michael was forced inside and made to walk down the centre of an enormous room which stretched upwards into the pyramid-shaped ceiling. There were oddly stylised mats on the floor. Michael thought he recognised the symbols on some of them, but they were wrong somehow, only not in the same way that merkstaves were.

There was only one person inside. He was kneeling on one of the mats before some sort of statue carved into a symbol similar to the one he had seen outside. It was also curved and stylised, and for the life of him, Michael couldn't understand his sudden repulsion.

The man, or priest as it turned out, faced them as he heard the footsteps, a smile on his thin face as he thought he would be inviting some of his congregation to join in his worship. His smile ended, however, when he saw how Michael was being led to his promised exorcism.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded with a slightly squeaky voice full of command lent by the acoustics of the room. “No man shall be harmed in the face of the Enlightenment. Hold up, sirs, for you insult the house of our Great Spirit.”

Tabitha’s father stepped forward as Jaken halted, uncertain of how to proceed in the face of such determination.

“This is no man, Canon Grenval,” began Tabitha’s father. “This is a demon incarnate that has attacked poor Jaken’s brother. It was only my daughter’s hand which halted this here demon’s destruction, and only as she is convinced he can be purged.”

The priest’s eyes had widened slightly, but he still retained enough control to exert an imperious air. “Curious,” said Canon Grenval thoughtfully. “Bring him before me.”

Michael was lifted up and all but dragged in front of the priest, who ran his eyes up and down Michael’s mostly naked body. All that covered him was a too-large piece of cloth surrounding his genitalia. Michael figured it might have been Tabitha’s father who had leant it to him, and guessed that he wouldn’t want it back.

Grenval’s eyebrows rose at the sight of his limp black hand. He turned to the other two men. “The Mahj have tainted this land, and it is all we good people can do to turn back the tide threatening to overwhelm us. Many think us narrow in our views here in the outskirts of the large towns and cities, but I say we are the last bastion against the ever-increasing incursion of Mahj-induced suffering and disease. For this is what this man here possesses – or rather, possesses him – a demon of Mahj creation. The signs are clear, my sons. The Enlightenment has spoken through me and seen through this one’s mask.” He pointed at Tabitha’s father. “You and your daughter have been neglectful in your duties to the Enlightenment. Do not think that you are exempt from the world on your farm, for as you can now see, the Mahj seek to dominate even the tiniest corner of existence.”

Michael listened with an odd detachment. The words had so enraptured the other two that they had prostrated themselves on the mats, heads lowered in fearful prayer. He was

immediately reminded of the images coming out of the European Union. This man could very well have been the pope.

The priest told them to stand and told them that he would rid Michael of his possession. He thanked them for their devotion to the Enlightenment, warning them not to miss the next service, lest the next demon not be so easily captured. They thanked him and left, eager to hide from the face of holy wrath.

Michael waited while the priest walked around his kneeling body, before moving over to a chest along the far wall, opening it and pulling out a plain brown robe. He walked back over to Michael, handing it to him. "Put it on," he said.

Michael held it gingerly, studying the man before him. He was thin, but not gaunt in the way one might have expected in a holy man. In fact, the man before him was utterly average-looking, and if not for the odd hairstyle – two rows of black hair running from forehead to nape – Michael wouldn't have given him much notice. "Why?" he asked slowly, looking away.

"Because the Enlightenment does not tolerate impropriety."

"No, I mean, what are you doing?"

"In the grand scheme of things? I suppose I'm protecting myself." Michael was immediately aware of the shift in tone. It sounded more relaxed. "There's a war on, if you weren't aware, and our gracious nation has chosen to support the Mahj. The fervour has not yet reached us here in the outskirts, but it's only a matter of time."

Michael coughed. "Um, what about the whole demon thing?"

"Demon?" laughed the priest. "By the look of that hand you've been afflicted with a rotting disease. But those two need not have known that. What that little charade did gain me, however, were a few more fervent followers."

"I see. So you don't think I'm possessed?"

"These people will believe anything so long as you surround it with spectacle."

Michael stood up and placed the robe over his head. "You don't think you're telling me too much? What you're saying could harm your position among these people."

"Blackmail? Even after I've just saved you from a public stoning?"

"That's not ... Look," said Michael. "I'll just go then."

Canon Grenval smiled and motioned with his hand. Two youths in white robes came

forward from where they had been waiting in the shadows behind Michael. "I wouldn't struggle," he said as each youth grabbed Michael from behind, trying to pinion him.

"You must understand that I need to take certain precautions. I would take your tongue except that you'll need it to scream. Your hand, now. I'm afraid that I'll have to remove it. You see, in this instance spectacle isn't enough. They've seen you enter my church. They will need proof that I am still worthy of their devotion."

Michael lashed out, struggling against his would-be captors.

"Hold him fast! We cannot proceed with the amputation here. We need to take him down to one of the cells."

Michael finally stopped, his battered body no match for the strength of youth.

They laughed as he went limp in their arms, when his right hand suddenly jerked. The 'rotting disease' slithered up his arm to his mouth.

"I suggest you let me go, priest," came a dark, guttural voice, echoing easily throughout the room. "Unless you wish me to bathe in the blood of the Enlightened."

Chapter 13 Church of the Enlightenment

Canon Grenval reeled back, his eyes widening in fear. He had never believed it possible,

in all his years, that demons could truly exist. It was nothing but a tale told in the dark places of one's dreams; a place which he had always taken care to cultivate in the minds of his followers. That was where the true power of faith lay. Only, now his own belief system was collapsing, as was his reason and ability to rationalise.

But suddenly it made sense. This was all a Mahj plot. There was no demon here. It was an illusion sent to lull him into fear. He had always known the attack would come, but had expected an all-out assault as opposed to these cloak and dagger tactics. He had underestimated the Mahj, but he had not the time to berate his own failings.

The church had always had one weakness when it came to fighting the Mahj. It had no magic. It had always needed to choose its battles wisely, when the magic could be held in check. The war that was being fought at this very moment was such an example. It was a war between church and Mahj in everything but name, but it was that one point which prevented the use of magic. The war would be fought with men alone, and the nation which won through would see its backer rise to power in the Southern Duchies.

Steeling himself, Grenval glared back at this would-be demon, drawing strength from his evangelical training. "Do not think to fool me with your grand charade. I know not whether you are a Mahj or one of their pawns, but the Enlightenment will not fall so easily." Gathering himself, he pulled a small figurine from his robes. It was a smaller replica of the same symbol displayed throughout the church, and when Grenval held it before Michael, Michael felt like retching. If not for Sergi controlling his mouth, he might very well have. Michael knew the shape now, seen up close. It was not a rune, nor a merkstave, but a twisted version of both. While the merkstave were anathema to him, this symbol seemed far more abhorrent to his senses. Where he might fight against the inverted runes, this symbol seemed to leech his strength. He fell back to his knees, his mind swimming to dizzying heights.

"Ah, so the Mahj do have a weakness. The Embodiment will be most interested to hear of such a thing. Be gone now, demon, and infest my church no longer."

The word he spoke then was itself an abomination of the nature of the runes. It seemed to further twist the figurine's odd power so that Michael felt his throat constrict.

"Thalatho!" screamed the priest.

Pain wracked Michael's head, and he lost himself to the pull of gravity.

“Stand fast, priest!” came a tremor of a voice, strengthened by arrogance.

Grenval jerked up, shaken, his eyes narrowing. “What is the meaning of this? To interrupt an exorcism of the direst nature is punishable –”

“Your exorcism means nothing to me, priest,” said the same voice, not backing down. “I am in need of your facilities. You will of course comply.”

“How dare you seek to order a priest of the Enlightenment? Acolytes, seize this fool.”

The stranger regarded the two approaching him and shook his head sadly.

Michael couldn’t see with his cheek flattened against the edge of one of the prayer mats, but what he felt and heard in the next few moments sent a chill through him. The stranger spoke the rune of air, Isa, but it seemed to erupt from two distinct places. There was a crumpling sound and a muffled gasp, and the priest before him took a step back.

“Ru Lord!” There was definite fear in Grenval’s voice now.

“I have no time for your pathetic little charades, priest.”

“You think to attack me here? Your pet has already failed, as will you. This village will side with me in the war to come, and your kind will fall before the might of the Enlightenment.”

“There is no need to attack you, priest. This nation has opened its eyes. It’s only a matter of time before this backwards village succumbs.”

“No!” Grenval lunged forward, hurling his figurine at the Ru Lord. Thala –”

“Asi...”

Michael shuddered as the merkstave was muttered.

Grenval’s mouth twitched, suddenly skewed at an impossible angle. He grabbed at his throat as he started to gag, dropping the figurine to the floor.

The Ru Lord walked over slowly, kicking it away as he reached Grenval. “Isa.” Grenval was lifted into the air, and Michael saw that he had stopped gagging, the spoken rune negating its opposite. He also noticed something wrong with the Ru Lord’s arm, but his strength gave out before he could have a closer look. “I have neither time nor the patience to teach you how to treat your betters, priest. I require the use of your dungeons. I have two prisoners who you are to keep alive until Ru Guards arrive to retrieve them. Nod that you understand.” Grenval did so, begrudgingly. “I will personally escort them to their cells, and you will see that they are not harmed. I need not remind you of the penalty.”

He glanced over at Michael, regarding him with interest. "What do we have here, priest?"

Grenval growled. "One of your own, I assumed."

"Truly. He performed Ru magic then?"

"No."

"Then he is nothing," and he turned to leave, lowering Grenval as he walked away.

Grenval immediately dived for his figurine, but the Ru Lord was quicker. "Zawit."

Grenval stared, now scared, at the melting remains.

"I suggest you see to your acolytes, priest."

Grenval grimaced, but finally made his way over to check on his men. They groaned at his touch, but only had the wind knocked out of them. Helping them up, he pointed at Michael. "Take him to one of the cells. And open up two others. It seems we'll be having some guests."

Michael swallowed hard as he opened his eyes, cutting short his immediate urge to be sick. His body still hadn't recovered fully from landing in Tabitha's field, but over the last three days he had been getting better. Now he felt like he might never move again. He rolled over onto his back, dusting the grit from his right cheek.

"Look, he's finally moving."

Michael thought he recognised the voice, but it seemed to come from a distance.

"Hey Mikey, when you've finally decided you've had enough shut eye do you think you might be up to doing a little hocus pocus." That voice no one could forget.

"Jackson?"

"I'll let you know when I wake up. But since I'm in a coma, I don't suppose it hurts to say yes."

"Don't be ridiculous, Uncle. Not even your imagination could come up with everything we've seen."

"Don't be smart, Msizi. You're only a figment as well, so you don't get to talk back to me."

"Will you two just shut up!"

“Oh Lord, the crazy parasite’s speaking again. Msizi, if it lunges for me one more time, I want you to protect me.”

“I’m not some figment you can control, Uncle Jackson.”

Michael shut out their voices, watching instead as the black oil around his mouth trailed down his arm into his right hand, which started to clench and unclench repeatedly.

“Sergi?” he whispered. The hand shook slightly before the oil moved back up to Michael’s face, blinding him as it took control of his eyes. Something fell onto lip. He lifted his hand to wipe it away, but he couldn’t help but taste the salty flavour. More tears started falling as the oil expanded over his entire face. Michael gasped for breath, but even that reflex was removed from him as Sergi screamed his anguish. Michael heard the sound, his ears having been left alone, and felt his stomach lurch with pity for his friend. After a few minutes the crying stopped and Michael’s face was released. He saw Jackson and Msizi watching him from the next cell, worry on their faces. He glanced down at the oil that was Sergi and wiped away his own tears. “Sergi, I’m so sorry,” whispered Michael. “I never meant... I mean, when you said you had your own body, I didn’t think ...” He fell silent. Glancing down, he couldn’t see Sergi, but knew where he had gone for the fact that he couldn’t feel his right toe. He looked back at the other two.

“Michael, are you... I mean, clearly not, but, Michael, what’s happening? Where are we?”

Michael watched as Msizi tried to phrase his question as tactfully as possible, and shook his head. He had got them all into this. If not for him, they’d all be safe on Earth; and still stuck in a cell, he had to remember. He smirked as he considered the irony of the situation. “We’re in the book,” he said finally, trying to sit up. “A world within words.” “And you expect us to just believe you, do you?” said Jackson. “I remember all those swirling colours. That’s when I must have gone into a coma. Yes, that’s it. The last ten days have been a strange lucid dream, and... as soon as I get out of this cell, I’ll wake up. Yes, that’s it.” He tried to reach Michael through the bars. “Come on, damn it. Get up, stop your whimpering and free us so we can all get out of here.”

Michael smiled despite himself, though it felt more like a grimace. Jackson’s words had struck a nerve. Everything that had happened to him over the last two weeks or so was absurd. And yet his mind could accept it as true. Whether it had been his rebirth or his

choice in Othala, he might never know, but, looking at Jackson's wide eyes, he knew he would never have to doubt his surroundings. These other two, though, were never meant for this world.

He tried to move again, but his body was slow to react. Whatever that figurine had done to him still seemed to be affecting his strength. "Msizi."

The boy, who had moved slightly away from his uncle, perked up. "Yes, Michael?" He sounded a bit too eager.

"Are we locked up tight?"

"Yes. I've tried everything, but the cell door won't budge. Maybe... maybe you could do some magic?"

"I don't know if I can. I feel so weak. The priest did something to me. I can barely move as it is."

"Can't, um, Sergi do it?"

Michael sighed. "Sergi's changed. I don't think he can."

"He's a god-damned parasite –"

"Hey, Jackson, don't say another word. This is the only warning I'm going to give you. Otherwise I'll figure out how to create fire and we'll see whether or not you wake up from your coma."

"Whoa, take it easy there, Mikey." Jackson moved away from the bars.

Msizi glanced at his uncle before whispering to Michael. "Don't be too hard on him."

"Why not?"

"You don't know what he did."

"Who?"

"The Ru Lord."

It all suddenly came back to Michael: the man who had inadvertently saved him from amputation; the magic he performed, both rune and merkstave; and his two prisoners....

"I... forgot."

Msizi sat down, staring down at his hands. "We landed about ten days ago –"

"Straight into a pig sty." said Jackson from the other end of the cell.

"There was some sort of festival," continued Msizi, "and we just popped out of the air into the mud. I couldn't really breathe with the wind knocked out of me, but at least it

stopped me from sucking in the mud. I finally managed to stand, a little disoriented with all the noise. I saw Uncle Jackson a little way off trying to fight off—”

“I’ll tell my own story, thank you very much.” There was a sudden wistfulness in Jackson’s voice which Michael found slightly disturbing. “I wasn’t quite so bad off as my nephew here. I think I killed their prize pig. Not the most comfortable of landings, I can tell you now. There was the most eerie silence as I stood. Michael, you won’t believe what I saw.”

Michael leaned forward, intrigued.

“There were huts made of straw, and communal fires, and it was all very much like camping in the wilds, except of the fact that everyone was naked.”

“They weren’t all naked, Uncle. The men were covered, mostly, and the women ...”

“Flesh, flesh and more flesh.”

Michael couldn’t help but smile at the image. “Sounds like it wasn’t all that bad.”

“Maybe not for you, considering that they were all white.”

“It’s true,” said Msizi. “Well, except for the one’s covered in mud. It was like stepping back into our own history, but wrong somehow.”

“If that’s how our ancestors behaved then I’m glad it’s all in the past. Because they all suddenly started screaming and wailing and fainting like we were the spirits of the dead. Maybe we were, considering we haven’t seen another black face around.”

“And the fact that we appeared out of thin air.”

“Anyway,” said Jackson, annoyed at the interruption, “some of them fell to the floor like they were praying but one man decided he didn’t like the look of me and grabbed me around the throat. Well I can tell you now, I wasn’t going to stand for it.”

“I rushed to help him,” Msizi interrupted again, “when these strange bands of black rope suddenly covered my body.”

“The Ru Lord,” said Michael, remembering a similar spell in his dream.

Msizi nodded. “The villagers, nomads, whatever they were—”

“White Zulus.”

“White... what? Uncle, I don’t think that’s quite appropriate.”

“Just get on with the story.”

“Anyway, the *villagers* all but fled as he walked towards us. He was wearing this large black cloak and dark gloves, but he quickly pulled them off. I’ve never seen anything like it before. His right arm looked as though it were made of glass. Over the next few days I saw that it was covered in shimmering symbols, just like on the book.”

Michael’s eyes widened at this description. “What happened?”

“I rushed him,” said Jackson. “Stupidest thing I’ve ever done.” He laughed, but it was a hollow sound. “The villager stepped away from me when he appeared. I guess Ru Lords are scarier than someone with dark skin. Anyway, I thought I might take the opportunity to fight back.”

“Yes, but you never got very far, which probably saved your life,” said Msizi, slipping in.

“So you keep telling me.”

“You know what he can do.”

“I do know, nephew, better than you could ever understand.” Jackson sat back suddenly. The shift in mood was palpable, and suddenly all of the boisterousness of the retelling was lost.

“He accused us of being enemy Mahj. At least, he thought Uncle Jackson was. He kept referring to me as his Geth. But that came later. First there was Lialh.”

Michael sat up at last, not even his waning strength enough to stop him from reacting. He felt Sergi shift slightly up his leg. Msizi didn’t notice his reaction as he had resumed staring at his hands, so Michael kept silent.

“We didn’t know his name then, but he was the one who ran into the path of the Ru Lord, tackling Uncle Jackson. I think the Ru Lord was so surprised that he stopped. Lialh grabbed onto his glass arm to pull himself up. I don’t know what happened, but the Ru Lord took a very sudden interest in him. Then he told the villagers to strap us down in one of the wagons like we were an afterthought.”

“Wagons,” muttered Jackson. “Who knew such a form of transport could still be in existence?”

“Apparently they like to ride horses a lot,” said Msizi. “They don’t have cars,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You don’t say,” said Jackson, but his nephew ignored him.

“We were given food and water, but were ignored during the day while he held long conversations with Lialh. And for the last ten days we’ve been travelling east along some dust road.”

“That’s it?”

Msizi nodded while Jackson looked away.

“He thought we were there to kill the boy,” Jackson said slowly. “He asked me a lot of questions. Every night, he would take me apart from the two boys and ask me who I served, where we were from and if our clothes were in some way a sign of our fealty to our dark master.” There was silence for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” said Michael finally. “I was just trying to save us.”

“Michael, if you hadn’t helped, the grey man would have killed us,” said Msizi.

“Don’t try and make him feel better. The grey man only showed up because he was after Michael.”

“Well, what do you think the rebels would have done to us?” argued Msizi.

“Nothing,” said Jackson fiercely. “Nothing they could have done would have compared...”

“He was finally convinced that we weren’t out to kill Lialh, though he still wanted to know how we just popped out of the air. But we were slowing him down, so he decided to lock us up here until proper guards arrived to take us to some tower in the east.” There was more silence. “What about you, Michael?” Msizi finally asked.

Michael told them what had happened, about arriving only three days ago in Tabitha’s field and how she had cared for him. He tried explaining about Sergi, who twitched slightly at his name, but he wasn’t quite sure how.

“I’m sorry for your... whatever he is, but I hope that now you’re awake you can keep him under control. He’s been flinging abuse ever since he saw us again,” said Jackson.

Michael closed his eyes as he slowly breathed out. His mind was a jumble of information that needed to be sorted. “What was his name, this Ru Lord?” he finally asked.

“He never actually told us his name,” said Msizi, “but I heard Lialh mention it once or twice. He was forbidden from speaking to us, you see, though I think he knew we were innocent.”

“His name?”

“Lialh called him Ba-Roc. He wore these midnight blue robes covered in symbols –”

“Runes,” said Michael. “Or I suppose in this world they call them Ru.”

Msizi nodded. “He took care to cover up his arm, so I never saw it again close up. One thing that did stand out were his eyes, though. They were like golden flames.”

“Don’t forget that ridiculous moustache of his. Black against that shock of white hair.”

Michael formed the picture of the Ru Lord Ba-Roc in his mind, but failed to see how he was connected with anything that had happened to him before. He had never appeared in any of his dreams, and yet Lialh had.

“So Mikey, now that you know our little tale, how about finding us a way out of here and back home?”

“I’m not sure I can, Jackson. Do you see any portal we can just jump through?”

“Well at least get us out of these cells.”

Michael closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his thoughts. In his head he formed his plight, his need to escape, hoping some inherent rune knowledge might come to the fore. He felt it there, on the cusp of his mind, before his strength failed and his body slid to the floor. “I’m sorry. I can’t focus. It might be this place. It feels as though it’s leeching all of my power.”

“Well then that’s it, we’re done for.”

Shouting suddenly became audible from somewhere above them. The muffled screams of anger slowly grew louder. A door opened further down near the end of the cell bloc, and a number of figures stepped through.

“The ritual exorcism must be performed!”

“Do not think to sway the will of a Ru Guard.”

“I hear it said that you Ru Guards are nothing but pathetic reminders of what it means to fail.”

“We serve our purpose as we all must.”

“You say it as though it were a sermon practiced over and over, but I wonder if you truly believe.”

“My belief is in my own strength, not in lip service to a god who has failed to teach his followers the importance of duty.”

Canon Grenval and a fully armoured figure stopped in front of their cages. Grenval glared at Michael, but the armoured figure stood there, surveying the captives. The voice that emerged from the armour vibrated slightly. It had a deep tone which sounded almost inhuman. "I will be taking them, priest. If you will open their cages."

"I will not!"

"Very well." An armoured arm shot out, hitting Grenval in the face and breaking his nose. He fell to the floor, crying in pain as blood streamed onto his robes. Michael didn't move from the floor, watching the Ru Guard with interest, but Jackson and Msizi shuffled back.

"Do not be afraid," said the Ru Guard as he removed his helmet. Only, he wasn't a man. Sheet straight brown hair fell over her armour, revealing the goddess from the tomb in the Drakensberg. But her face was neither serene nor godlike, instead boasting a curious frown, almost like remorse, at her actions.

Jackson and Msizi gasped, but Michael could only stare with an odd delight.

The goddess raised her right arm in a sudden arc and the cells melted away before them, leaving no sign of their existence.

Jackson and Msizi froze, not sure whether to run.

She ignored them, however, reaching out an armoured arm to Michael. He took her hand in rapt amazement and felt energy pulse through him, revitalising his body. She pulled him up, but as soon as he let go of her, his legs began to fail.

"It is the armour," she said.

Looking closely he saw that it was inscribed with runes.

"Hold onto me as we leave. You will be fine beyond this place." She finally beckoned to the other two to move ahead of her towards the exit. As they ran ahead, she stooped and swept her hand over Grenval's nose, stopping the bleeding.

Grenval looked up at her in bewilderment. "Who are you?"

"A visitor. I will be leaving now."

"Oh. I hope you enjoyed your stay."

"I did, thank you." She stood up and pulled Michael after her. He tried to comprehend what had just happened, but try as he might, it was a mystery that would have to await explanation. They ran up some stairs into a side corridor which exited into the large

worship room where he had almost been exorcised. He saw Jackson and Msizi waiting for them by the large doors when Sergi started to move.

He expanded, covering Michael's right foot, causing him to trip. Michael's arm slipped from the goddess' hand as Sergi gained control of his entire leg. He was still expanding over the right side of Michael's body, taking over his arm then finally the right side of his face and into his head. Michael felt as if his mind were being shuffled and sorted, and still Sergi delved deeper until he was somewhere beneath Michael's consciousness. Sergi finally stopped, finding what he needed, and resurfaced. Michael felt as though something were draining away from him as Sergi concentrated on control of his hand and foot, pulling him across the room to the altar. Looking down, he saw that his right hand was facing palm up. The oil parted, forming an airt within; white against a dark background. A rune formed in the top-most segment, one unfamiliar to Michael. It flared against his skin as Sergi placed his palm on top of the altar. Lastly, he took control of Michael's mouth, and shouted with venom, "Tiwaz!"

The altar caught alight, the unnatural fire fuelled by Sergi's anger. The stone seemed to feed it as the flames spread up the walls and along the floor, charring the worship mats. The armoured hand grabbed hold of Michael's left side, but Sergi seemed determined to remain, to fuel the fire and cleanse his rage.

"Sergi!" Michael finally managed as his friend released his mouth. "Do you really want to die here? I'll make this better, I swear. It doesn't have to end this way."

There was a moment when Michael thought he might burn to death, but Sergi finally released him, the oil curling up into a pinprick on his hand. Michael started running. Fire licked at his feet as they burst out of the church. Jackson and Msizi were somewhere ahead of them, but he couldn't quite see in the darkness. They finally caught up to the two and ran out of the village as people looked out of their small homes, some staring and some screaming at the sight of the church in flames. Michael's thoughts drifted to Grenval and the other acolytes caught in the flames, but he quickly put that aside. He couldn't help but feel that they deserved their fate.

Chapter 14 Grasswalkers

Msizi was the first to falter. Michael wrenched his hand from the armoured goddess, going back to help his friend. Jackson stopped as well, bent over, his dark skin almost invisible in the night.

They were somewhere south of the village, surrounded by a sparse grove of trees which, nonetheless, only allowed a small sliver of moonlight to pass through.

“We have to keep moving,” said the goddess. “They will send out a search party and kill us where we stand.”

Jackson raised his head at this and looked ready to move again. But Michael shook his head. “I realise the danger, but we’re all far too tired. I say we wait until morning. Surely they won’t find us here?”

The goddess looked around. “You may be right. We have far to travel, but it is best done in the daylight when we are all rested.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” asked Jackson. “I don’t want to be knifed to death while I’m sleeping. How did that fire start anyway?”

“Does it matter?” said Michael.

“I –”

“I can keep watch,” said the goddess, cutting off the chatter. “This armour grants me a small amount of strength. I will use it now, though it will be useless in the morning.”

“Do it then,” said Michael. “It won’t be very comfortable on the ground, but we all need some sleep.”

Michael led Msizi to a more sheltered spot against a tree. He looked at Michael with thanks and closed his eyes.

Jackson dropped down against a trunk close by, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Mikey, one of these days you’re going to have to explain to me what just happened. But first I need a little shuteye. Oh, and give black beauty over there my thanks.”

Michael frowned, said he would, and moved over to where she was seated, gazing back the way they had come. He sat down next to her, feeling oddly rejuvenated now that he was outside the church.

“Michael, I can see that you have many questions,” she began, “but answer me this first.”

He looked at her, swimming in her features, not wishing to mar the silence, yet unwilling to disappoint her by not speaking. "Yes?"

"What do you see when you look at me?"

Michael tried hard to put her image into words. "I don't think I know of any descriptions that would do you justice. Beauty, splendour, brilliance. These words mean nothing in comparison."

"And would you save me as I have saved you?"

"I would," he said without hesitation.

"That is good, but I would have you know that this form is not one I would choose for myself. It was a necessity, to make you understand what you fight for. For this beauty is within everything you see." She grasped some soil and let it fall through her hands. "Do you understand?"

"And Thaenes? Do you represent them as well?"

"Thaenes is a village which has lived in fear for many years. One cannot always judge a book by its cover, and I ask that you do not judge them harshly."

Michael didn't say anything.

"Would you see me as I wish to be?"

Michael nodded, uncertain of what else to say.

She held her palm over her head, bringing it down over her head. The face that was left behind was not of the same beauty it was before. Michael knew the truth of this in the dark, and felt regret at what was lost.

"Do not be disappointed. I was never meant for such perfection."

Michael lay down, staring up at the tree tops and trying to hold down his disappointment. It had felt like a veil had been lifted from his eyes and he could think once more, but he couldn't fight the bitterness which now marred his face. "How can you do that, change yourself?"

"I am not of this world, yet inextricably linked to it through a power far greater than the runes you have come to know."

"Can't you change back?"

"I can, but you would no longer feel loss. It is the driving force necessary for you to succeed, so I dare not accede to your wish."

Michael felt anger boiling up within him, but managed to suppress it, leaving him feeling tired and empty. He said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"I have not been permitted to share all of my knowledge, but I will tell you what I can. You are now within the world of Caiy'n, a place of beauty, but also of loss and hate and all things men despise yet use as tools of power. I apologise for not arriving to meet you, but you did not arrive at the beginning, as I expected."

"There was a slight delay," said Michael. "We were attacked between worlds and fell into the book at different points."

"Most curious. Where is this one who attacked you?"

"He fell as well, but further back. I'm not sure where."

"Then let us hope he is dead and will plague you no longer. Now, what would you like to know?"

Hundreds of questions flittered across Michael's mind, and he picked them at random.

"How is this world possible? How can it exist?"

"Every world has the potential for existence. I know not why or how this one came to be, but its existence has been affirmed and cannot be undone. Perhaps such questions regarding the origins of this world are not meant for me, but the Creator himself."

"Creator? You mean the Enlightenment and all that stuff Grenval was spouting?"

She looked down at him, and he could swear he saw a small smile. "No, not quite."

Michael looked away. "I'm sure I'll find out."

"You may not like the answer."

"Any answer is better than none."

"Spoken like a young idealist."

"I'm not sure that description fits me." He rolled his eyes at the idea.

"And yet you believe so easily, unlike your other companion over there."

"Jackson? I've barely had time to get to know him, but I'd say he believes wholeheartedly in this world, despite the melodrama. Besides, he's a reporter. His life revolves around stories. Now he's part of one."

"Such a firm opinion of one you profess not to know."

"I suppose. It doesn't matter, anyway. Tell me more about this world."

"This world is much the same as any other, I imagine. The only difference is in

perspective. But like all worlds it has many stories and events. You, fortunately, or unfortunately as you might look at it, are tied to the one written in finite detail; the most important story, some might say.”

“The one concerning Lialh.”

“True, yet it also concerns me.”

“How so? I mean, who are you exactly? What are you?”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “I am no goddess. As for names, I have not chosen one for myself. But if you insist, you may call me Avatar.”

“Avatar? Surely you must have something better than that? You don’t have to be so formal. Names are not titles, after all.”

Avatar frowned. “But it is not title. It is what I am.”

“But you don’t understand,” said Michael gently. “A name is not what you are, it’s who you are.”

“These concepts are new to me, Michael. I am not certain who I am.”

“Then until you find out, how about we just call you Dominique.”

“Such an odd name, and not of this world.”

“It was my mother’s name.”

“You think of me as your mother?”

“No, no, don’t think that. There’s just something about you that reminds me of her.”

“Very well. I accept that name and will regard it highly. And now you must rest, Michael. We have a long way to go, and there is something you must see.”

“But you still haven’t told me anything.”

“There is time enough for that in the morning, and your companions deserve to hear what I must say.”

Michael nodded reluctantly, leaving Dominique to her post while he found a comfortable spot. His stomach growled suddenly and he wondered whether they would find food, and soon.

Michael's nose was the first sense to awaken. Something delicious was tantalising him and it was a moment before he realised that his eyes were open. Sun shone through the trees, casting a green glow over everything. He couldn't help but think of complete contentment. But then his stomach groaned and he sat up.

Jackson and Msizi called him over to the makeshift fire over which a number of branches were hung. The branches were dripping fat into the fire and as Michael moved closer, he saw meat suspended from them. Dominique nodded to him as he approached.

"Breakfast," said Msizi with a smile on his face.

"I see saving us from certain death isn't the only thing you're good for," said Michael good-naturedly as he sat down, absorbing the warmth of the fire.

"I thought you might all be hungry," replied Dominique. "Once I was certain we weren't being chased, I managed to flush out a hare."

"How did you –" Michael saw a bow leaning against a far off tree. Frowning, he looked back at Dominique. "Where's your armour?"

She pointed at the bow. "It was starting to get heavy, so I changed it."

"And the clothes you have now?"

"I didn't use all of the armour for the bow. So I made each of us some clothes to wear."

"Aren't they fantastic, Michael?" asked Msizi, fingering his woollen tunic and deerskin boots. "Dominique showed us a small spring where we could bath and change."

"She did, did she? Just how long have I been asleep?"

"For ages," he replied. "We were going to wake you, but Dominique said you needed your rest. That you had to be at full strength."

"Well, I feel like I could run for *ages*. But first I'd love to get out of this robe. Too many bad memories."

Jackson pointed into the trees. "The spring's over there. You can get changed and have a wash."

"Thanks. I'll be right back." He grabbed his share of the clothes and moved off towards the stream. He stripped off the robe and walked into the water, flinching as the cold hit him. Dunking his head quickly, he tried to wash off the dirt of Thaenes. He noticed that a number of bruises had formed, and was careful to avoid touching them. He knew where Sergi was hiding as he could feel him at the back of his neck. Or rather, Michael felt a

numbness that could only be him. "Sergi," he tried, drying himself with the robe and putting on his new clothes. "Sergi, we need to talk. I'm not sure if you can hear me, though I think you can, but you have to know that things will get better. Right now, we just have to make the best of it."

The oil slowly slid around Michael's neck, taking control of his mouth. "You don't know, Michael. You don't know what it's like, to have your dream stripped away like that."

Michael wanted to answer but Sergi refused to let him have his mouth back.

"I killed them all, didn't I?"

Michael nodded.

"They deserved it, the lot of them." He slid to the side, giving Michael access to his mouth.

"What do you want me to tell you, Sergi? That what you did was right, or that it was wrong? You know better than I do. I, for one, know they deserved some sort of punishment, but who's to say that burning to death was justice?"

Sergi twitched. "They hurt you, Michael," he began, sliding back. "And they would have hurt me too. I was protecting us."

"Then leave it at that."

Sergi remained silent and Michael walked back to the fire. Msizi offered him a stick of hare and he ate ferociously, hunger taking over. He had a second piece then sat back, looking over at Dominique. "So what's the plan?"

"We need to catch up to the plot."

"What?" said Jackson.

"Lialh is what I think she means," said Michael.

"Yes. He is the focus."

"What does Lialh have to do with this?" asked Jackson. "He's only a kid."

"He's older than I am, uncle," said Msizi.

"You shouldn't be here either."

"When did you start to care?"

"Hey, nephew, don't take that tone with me. Especially not after all I've been through."

“Enough, you two. Dominique,” said Michael, turning back to her, “Lialh is supposed to be the hero. When I dreamt of him fighting, he was older than these two describe. I don’t see the point of reaching him before he grows up.”

“You must understand, Michael, that your arrival has created a ripple effect. In taking the detour to imprison your friends, Ba-Roc, and hence Lialh, was forced outside of the plot. I fear this had caused him to miss a vital portion of the journey.”

“Hold on,” said Jackson. “I just have to ask. Why would we be doing this again?”

“Michael’s destiny – all of your destinies – are connected. There is no choice.”

“No choice! You say it like you can tell us what to do. Look, you may be the sexiest girl alive, but you don’t have that right.”

“Have I not earned it by saving your life?”

“No, you haven’t.” Jackson sat back, his face drawn in to a sulk.

“Whatever else happens, I’m going,” said Michael, frowning at Jackson’s description of Dominique. “Question is, which way do we need to go?”

“Your friend there can help us with that,” she said.

“Sergi?”

“Not that parasite again.”

“Shut up, uncle. All Sergi’s tried to do is help us. It’s not fair what happened to him.”

“You’re wrong.” The oil had moved up Michael’s torso to his mouth. “I deserve all of it. Last night proved that I can’t be trusted with my own body. I... might do more terrible things, who knows. What I do know is that you’re safer with Michael here to control me.”

“*Hardly,*” thought Michael. “*You seem to be able to take over at will.*”

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“About what? We never said anything,” said Jackson.

“Never mind,” said Sergi.

“*Sergi, you heard that?*”

“*Yes. And Dominique’s right. The transition changed me into this... thing. And I think I know why.*”

"Because you can access my subconscious knowledge," said Michael as the events of last night resurfaced. It was strange the way that memory had suddenly come to the fore, and Michael wondered if it had even been his thought at all.

Sergi moved over, finally allowing Michael space to speak. "Sergi can unlock the runes in my mind. We can use them to find Lialh."

"But how?" asked Jackson. "You just happen to know what to do?"

"Well, unless you call what happened back in the tomb blind luck, then yes."

"More unluck if you ask me."

"Do you know which one to use?" asked Msizi excitedly.

"I think so, and we don't even need Sergi for this. Lialh used it in one of my dreams to follow these dark creatures."

"Dark creatures?" said Jackson. "What's next? An evil overlord bent on our extermination?"

Dominique smiled. "Your foreknowledge is astounding, Jackson. But I would not concern myself with that. You are not the first to cause a ripple, but you were necessary to counteract the last."

"More riddles," said Jackson.

"The answers will come in time. As to your suggestion, Michael, it is a good one, but not the one we seek at the moment. We must catch up with Lialh, yes, but first we must locate the plot which was bypassed. In that I can be of some aid. It will require three airts and three runes."

"Do you know which three?" asked Michael.

"The one of which you spoke is but the first. Sergi, I believe, can find the other two."

Sergi slithered up Michael's face to his head, and started digging. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling, but Michael hoped it wouldn't happen too often. "I think I have them," said Sergi. He moved back to Michael's open palm, forming three small airts. In the top left one, Ansuz appeared, the rune of memory. In the right, Dagaz, a rune linked to the spirit of Caiy'n, and at the bottom, Othala.

"How do I get them to work?" asked Michael. "Do I speak all three?"

"No. Just the one tied to you."

He held out his palm face up, not quite knowing what else to do, and spoke, loud and clear. "Othala!"

Sergi flared a deep blue, and Michael watched as a same-coloured wind lifted from his palm, moving off further south. "Can any of you see that?" he asked.

Jackson and Msizi shook their heads and Dominique just smiled.

"What do you see?" asked Msizi.

"A blue wind. I think we need to follow it."

"And so we shall," said Dominique, standing. She swung her arm over the fire and it disappeared, leaving no sign that they had been there.

"You still need to tell us how you do that," said Michael.

"I can effect necessary change. That is all you need to know."

"Fine. So I guess we start walking."

"For now," she said with an infuriating smile.

The next day found them travelling through a rather dense forest when a thunderstorm broke out. They huddled under a large tree whose tight-knit leaves acted as an efficient canopy against the rain. Michael let go of the blue-wind spell and heard Sergi sigh with some relief. He was surprised that his friend was the one affected by the use of runes. It felt more like a punishment than anything else, which was the last thing he wanted to inflict on Sergi.

"So tell us something about this world, Dominique," said Jackson, breaking Michael out of his reverie. "I mean, if we're going to be saving it and all, you'd think we might need to know what we're saving."

"As cavalier as you might sound, Jackson, I agree with your sentiment. You must learn of this world and why it is worth your combined efforts." Dominique paused, considering.

"I think there is a tale you might enjoy. It takes place far back in time, but still makes its effects known to this day. It is called the Legend of the God-Kings of Caiy'n."

Msizi perked up. "God-Kings? That sounds exciting."

"I thought there was only one god, this Creator of yours," said Michael.

“There is, but you must let me finish. They were not true gods as you would think of them, but so great was their power that they allowed the belief in their divinity to spread. But let me start at the beginning. Caiy’n is surrounded on all sides by oceans. The continent is ruled over by three separate nations: Carnl, Terrl, and Paxl. The God-Kings were their earliest rulers, also counting three in number.”

“What were their names?” asked Msizi.

“Heimdall, Freyja, and Tyr.”

Michael sat up, disbelief written across his face. Guilt flared inside as he recalled the grey man gloating over the destruction of the Order of Tyr.

“Just one more link in the chain,” said Sergi. *“I know how you feel, Michael. Despite myself, I think I’m going to miss that old man.”*

Michael was stone-faced as Dominique continued.

“Each king ruled their respective nations justly and their people loved them in turn. But there came a day when the three God-Kings became dissatisfied. They discussed their unease with one another and decided that what they lacked was guidance. Fearing that the Creator had abandoned them, they sought to beseech his advice on how they should proceed in their rule of Caiy’n. Using their vast rune powers, they shaped the continent itself into a powerful spell. Each nation served as a single airt. Deep lines were carved into the earth and enormous runes were inscribed within each segment. Rivers were rerouted and mountains levelled in their desire to question the Creator. Standing, each within the centre of their airts, they invoked their powers, opening a conduit to the Creator. But all was not thought out in their determination. The power they unleashed was beyond their control and the conduit became a weapon.”

“What happened?” asked Msizi. “Did they destroy the Creator?”

“No, for not even their vaunted powers could do such a thing, but they did manage to shatter his ethereal armour, wounding him greatly. From that wound poured all that the Creator had hoped to spare this world. Corruption, hate, greed and every negative thought which had been locked away was now free to enter Caiy’n, coalescing in a dark force which threatened to bring this world to heel.”

“And did it?”

“That is a story best left for another. As for the God-Kings, the Creator punished them dearly. He took each of their bodies and confined them within three pristine gems. As for the nations themselves, stewards were appointed to watch over the people until the return of the kings. These stewards wear the gems as a sign of their position, passing it down to their successors. It is said that the God-Kings still to this day speak to their stewards through the gems and guide their hand in how to best rule.”

“Fascinating,” said Jackson. “I hope you enjoyed that story, Msizi. I’m sure you won’t hear one finer.”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic, Uncle. I really enjoyed it.”

“Remember this story, Jackson, and the lessons within. For the consequences can be felt to this day.”

“And what would those be?”

“The war that you have inadvertently become a part of is fought between two factions created from the aftermath. The Enlightenment was founded as a spiritual body whose duty it is to resist the dark forces unleashed from the Creator. And the Mahj, whose duty it is to control the use of runes so that they can never again be used in such a destructive manner.”

Jackson fell silent as Dominique held out her hand. “The rain has stopped and we must continue on.”

Michael stood with the rest of them, thinking about her story and wondering if he could also be capable of such destruction.

Just as Sergi said that he couldn’t maintain the blue wind spell for much longer, they stepped out of the forest and gazed out at a sweeping savannah. Low trees and bushes dotted the landscape while grasses shaded brown and yellow swept along the wind with a low rustle.

Msizi was the first to run through the grass, laughing for no reason other than pure enjoyment.

Jackson shook his head at the young man, but couldn't stop smiling. "My grandmother would tell me stories of such places," he said. "I could never pluck up the courage to tell her that I didn't believe her. I'm glad I didn't."

"We do not have far to travel," said Dominique. "Those trees near the horizon grow around an oasis. I think we will be in fine company tonight."

The first thing they caught sight of were the herd boys. They snapped whips in the air whenever one of their cows – Michael thought they were cows but couldn't be sure – strayed too far. Two of the herd boys stayed behind while a third ran towards the oasis, shouting.

Jackson shook his head when he saw them. "I can't believe they're white. Who wrote this book anyway?"

Two men came to greet them, but slowed when they saw Jackson and Msizi. Dominique strode forward, yelling at them to show respect for all guests. Strangely enough, they lowered their heads as though cowed, and moved forward, looking slightly more friendly but still wary.

It turned out that this tribe of nomads, the Grasswalkers, were on their way back to their winter settlements when they were forced to take refuge. Apparently a large army had passed through two days back, relieving them of most of their cattle and supplies, so they were forced to make a detour to this oasis.

The two men were the sons of the tribe's chieftain, who, with the rest of the Grasswalkers, had left for winter settlements the day before while his sons and a few other men and women made certain the surviving animals were well-watered and fed before following.

They were led into the midst of what seemed a bustling community, despite the fact that there were only a handful of people there; mostly women. Young girls were playing in the shallows of the oasis while two of these women – one naked above the waist, making Msizi grin foolishly – were weaving the strong, thick grass of the savannah into a basket.

"You see the combs in their hair?" said Jackson. "My grandmother told me that her mother used to wear them like that as well."

"I'm surprised you managed to look above the neck," said Sergi, taking momentary control of Michael's mouth. "You don't strike me as the sentimental type."

"I'm appreciating history, parasite. Just because you don't have a heritage doesn't mean you have to disparage mine."

Hearing voices, the rest of the nomads jumped to attention. One young man ran to fetch a spear, but the brothers stopped him.

"They are tokoloshe," shouted the young man. "Why do you bring them here? To take more of our life's blood?"

"The sangoma has vouched for them," explained one of the brothers. "They are not evil spirits. I think the sun has burned them."

Sergi couldn't help but snigger at the explanation while Jackson scowled.

Michael, however, heard only one word: sangoma. He turned to Dominique. "I think you'd better explain yourself."

"Michael, you must learn to trust."

"You aren't my mentor, Dominique. Neither are you some old sage spouting wisdom."

"Then what am I?"

"I'm not sure. But, I just know that some things have one explanation."

"That is a rather narrow manner of viewing the world, Michael."

Michael laughed. "Which world? This one, where everything's black and white, or the other one, where everything's a different shade of grey?"

Dominique shook her head and turned towards the brothers. "It is late in the day and we would ask your hospitality for the night."

They nodded, relieved at the simplicity of the request, and set to building up a large fire. The herd boys came in for the night, hoisting some meat which had just been slaughtered. The women, now certain that Jackson and Msizi weren't dark spirits, came to greet them, taking them over to some clay pots holding beer and cow's milk. Msizi didn't know what to do with himself when a girl wearing only a grass skirt gripped his hand, but Jackson just clapped him on the back and told him to enjoy himself.

Michael called over to Jackson before he went off. "I'm surprised that you're so willing to go with them, after what happened at the other village."

"There's something you need to understand about Zulu culture, Michael. The people are, for the most part, hospitable. That's been lost on Earth, and God knows I've helped it along, but whoever wrote this book we're in has managed to unearth a lost heritage; a simpler life. Even if he is colour blind. Besides, what would you have done if someone popped out of the air and killed your prize pig? I think we'll be alright."

Michael nodded and went to sit by the fire, staring into the flames.

Soon the dancing and the drumming began and he couldn't help but feel a primeval upliftment. Dominique had shown him the tangible beauty of the world, but he hadn't been completely convinced, especially after the events in the church. Looking at the joy around him, he saw the spirit of the world, and knew that it was truly something worth saving.

"Sergi," whispered Michael as he sat up. Everyone else was still asleep around him "Do you have enough strength to try the spell once more? I've got this strange feeling that we need to try it now."

"I'm not sure. It feels like I've been hit over the head. With the amount of beer you had I'm surprised you don't feel it."

"I feel fine."

"Why am I always the one feeling the brunt of your excesses?" Sergi slithered down Michael's arm, forming the airts on his palm.

Michael spoke Othala once more, a bit quieter this time. The blue wind appeared, but instead of heading south, it made its way back into the village. Curious, Michael watched as it travelled only a short way. It hovered a little, as if uncertain, before losing itself to gravity. Like a fine blue mist it dropped, covering one of many chickens scratching at the ground in the early dawn.

Michael was surprised and frowned. "It's never done that before."

"I think you did something wrong, Michael," said Sergi.

“I –”

The chicken jerked its head up in an odd imitation of someone listening to something far off. It darted its beak once more and finally moved away from its fellow poultry. Michael followed it a short way down a small hillock to a tree which had been stunted in its growth. It looked more like a caricature of a tree, thought Michael. The base of the trunk was surrounded by small, smooth white stones. He wondered if they were the only thing holding the tree up.

The chicken stepped almost delicately between the stones until it reached the tree. It pecked at it for a moment, stopped, stiffened and promptly fell over.

“It is called the isisivane,” said one of the brothers, coming up behind him. Michael jumped in fright and the brother grabbed his arm to steady him. “Do not be afraid,” he said. “You are Inyanga?”

“Inyanga? No.”

“I saw you perform magic. True, it is unlike anything I have been trained in, but it is there.”

“You’re an Inyanga?”

“I have the talent, yes. My brother will be chief one day and I will be his advisor.”

Michael looked back over at the dead chicken. “What do the stones mean?”

The Inyanga looked over at the tree. “Each stone has been placed there by one of our tribe members to honour the spirit of a great warrior. He died here, in what was once a wasteland. But the grass grew and wildlife is now in abundance, and so we honour him around this lone tree. Come and watch.” They walked over to the stones. The Inyanga moved his left foot over a loose one, dug underneath and hoisted it up into his right hand. Michael had to marvel at such skill.

The Inyanga spat on the stone and threw it on the pile. “This is how we honour a great warrior.” He pointed to the chicken. “But you have offered a blood sacrifice. You must complete the ritual.”

“But... the whole chicken thing. It wasn’t done on purpose.”

“You must not question where your magic leads you. It always knows best.”

Michael nodded, very much aware that the runes had their own plan for him. “What do I do?”

“Touch the tree.”

“That’s all?”

“We are not a complicated people.”

“Alright.” Michael walked over to the tree, stepping over the stones. Leaning over, he placed his palm on the trunk. Nothing happened. He was about to step back when he heard Sergi in his mind.

“Michael! Something’s happening. I’m being pulled....”

Sergi stretched out over Michael’s arm like rubber. He could feel his friend fighting against whatever it was trying to control him. Sergi finally gave in and slid down to Michael’s hand, forming an unbidden airt and rune on his palm.

“*Jera!*” shouted Sergi. “*Say it, Michael, please! Make it stop.*”

“Damn it.” Michael had no choice. “Jera!”

The tree shattered as though it were made of stone, flinging shards all around.

Standing to attention within the spirit shrine, blade facedown, was an ancient, pitted sword.

“Mikael,” said Dominique, coming up behind him. “You have recovered the sword of Mikael.”

Chapter 15 *War*

Jackson hefted the onyx-hilted sword, peering underneath the blade. "Hmph, it doesn't look that special."

"Uncle, how can you say that? I mean, the chicken led Michael right to it."

"Well sorry, but I'm not sure I trust that chicken. Something off about it if you ask me."

"It is dead," said the Inyanga.

Jackson handed the blade back to Michael, shaking his head. "That's not... never mind. So what now? You going to use your Chicken Blade to kill the bad guys? Who would that be, exactly?"

"I'm not exactly an authority here, either," replied Michael. "And please don't call it the Chicken Blade. Where's your sense of romance?"

"Ba-Roc took it when he peeled back my mind."

Michael glanced down, feeling uncomfortable.

Msizi glanced at his uncle but also kept silence.

"Oh alright, I'm sorry. I won't bring up my torture again if it makes you feel any better."

Jackson stomped off back to the oasis.

Msizi made to go after him but Michael help up his hand. "Let him go. I think he just needs some time."

"I am afraid time is a luxury none of us has," said Dominique, who had remained silent up until now. "The plot has raced ahead of us and we must catch up if we are to succeed."

"We have the sword," said Michael. "But how does that help us?"

"Ripples," she replied. "The sword of Mikael was meant for Lialh, and yet you now hold it. You are already changing the world with your very presence. And we must not forget Msizi and Jackson." Msizi's face flushed a deep brown.

"Hold on," said Michael. "You say it's called the sword of Mikael. I had a dream in which Lialh used it, but he just called it Mikael."

"A shortening, perhaps. Mikael was a hero of the nomadic tribes. He fought a great evil hundreds of years ago and died for his efforts."

"I see."

"As to our journey, there is something we will need if we are to succeed. It is some ways

east of here.”

“What is it now?” said Jackson angrily, trudging back to them, a toddler clinging to his knee. “Another Chicken Blade? Maybe one for each of us?” He paused. “Can somebody do something about this?”

The Inyanga bent over picked up the child. “We must appreciate our children, for one day they may no longer be among us.”

“None of us has children,” said Jackson.

Msizi looked at the ground. “I wonder if mom’s worried.”

Jackson gave him a mysterious look. “Don’t worry about her, Msizi. The doctors will take care of her. Even if they let her see my report, I doubt she understood much.”

Msizi nodded.

“All parents feel the loss of a child,” spoke the Inyanga. “Here, now, we feel it most keenly.”

“What do you mean?” asked Michael.

“It is something we have not spoken of, but cattle was not the only precious item taken from us by the marauding army. The soldiers took some of our young men as well; to make them into soldiers fit to defend our home, we were told. But we believe home is family and they have been taken from their families.”

“But, the dances and celebrations last night?” said Michael, surprised.

“We do not show out pain to strangers. We did not wish to burden you. But, now, I see that you understand struggle, and so I have told you of our shame.”

“I just... can’t believe people can do such things.”

“Can’t you, Michael?” asked Jackson. “What do you call the things she’s done to us?”

“What are you talking about?”

Suddenly he grabbed the hilt from Michael, holding it up to the light. “I’m talking about all the trouble Dominique’s gone through to send us on a quest we know nothing about.” He stepped towards her and Dominique moved away. “Now we have to be careful we don’t find a knife stuck in our backs.”

“You’d rather be stuck in a cell?” said Michael.

“What good have any of you done for us outside of a cell? I’m tired of it. Here, you take the sword and be the hero.” He thrust it towards Dominique.

“No, I must not –”

Jackson pressed the blade into her raised hands, cutting her deep.

She disappeared, and the sword fell to the ground.

Both Michael and Msizi jumped up to protect her from Jackson’s rage, but stopped short.

Jackson stepped back, surprised, and sat down. “I....”

“What did you do?” cried Msizi.

“I don’t know.”

Michael bent to pick up the sword, waving his hands out in front of him in case she had mysteriously become invisible. But she had gone. Standing, Michael gripped the sword hard until his knuckles turned white. “We need to go,” he said, though it came out faintly.

“Whatever we need to do, wherever we need to be, it’s to the east.”

“But...,” Msizi stammered.

“I don’t know what happened, but we can’t wait and find out.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jackson.

Michael stared at him before looking away. “We’ve all been through a lot. What we don’t need to do is take it out on each other.” He walked back to the oasis and gathered his things. He asked for a strong piece of cord from one of the women, which he used to tie the sword to his back.

Msizi picked up the bow which Dominique had given him and followed.

Jackson watched them go before standing up and doing likewise. They waved to the Grasswalkers and shook hands with the brothers, who offered them food and water for the rest of their journey.

They spent the rest of the day walking. Michael found the going that much easier now that his muscles had become attuned to long stretches of use. He was amazed that Msizi could match their pace, before Msizi told him that he had been a practicing judo student since he was small. He knew a number of different breathing exercises and had built up a good stamina over the years. Jackson himself, while being of medium build, eventually professed to a fondness for running, and even had a few medals to prove it.

That night Michael provided the fire and they ate a sparse meal of hard bread, some cheese and oddly preserved roots in relative silence.

The next day they crossed out of the savannah into a region with a lot more rolling hills and valleys. Nestled in one of these valleys, surrounded by farms and shepherds grazing their flocks on the hillsides, was a small village. It's similarity to Thaenes gave them pause, but Michael was undeterred. They had left the Grasswalkers in such a rush that they hadn't thought to borrow some tents and bedrolls, and Michael was determined to buy something comfortable to sleep in. The problem, and something which hadn't really concerned them until now, was where to get money from.

Jackson and Msizi were familiar with the old method of using coinage from their travelling back on Earth but had no ideas how to come by any besides theft.

They sat on a hill overlooking the village when Sergi finally piped up. He reminded Michael about the wall illusion back in Francistown and how they could do something similar with some flat stones. Dominique had told them how each nation's coinage was embossed with the face of their respective God-King Sergi, but Sergi, in a rather calm and calculated manner, pointed out that gold and silver were sure to be just as valuable in their raw form.

They used two airts this time, Wunjo for illusion and Jera for earth. After a few unsuccessful attempts where they turned the stones into differing degrees of dirt, they finally created something which gave off a dull silvery shine.

The merchant they approached accepted two bits of 'silver' quite greedily in exchange for three bedrolls and two tents. Leaving the village just as quickly, Msizi swore that he could hear the merchant cursing their names on the wind when the illusion failed.

The next two days went by slowly. They ate their food sparingly, but were thankful that they could at least have a good night's rest.

On the third day they began to see rudimentary sign posts. They indicated that they were moving towards the eastern edge of the nation of Carnl.

Michael stopped. A deep rumbling reached his ears but twice now he had thought it might be an oncoming storm. That thought quickly disappeared when he heard shouting in the distance. They were still within a deep valley, so they couldn't make out the very much. Finally cresting the eastern ridge, they stopped, throwing themselves to the

ground.

The scene in the valley before Michael seemed to come straight from his imagination. He had been home-schooled and his mother had been his history teacher. Much from the time of swords and cannons had been lost, but a few bright historians had had the forethought to preserve a few texts. They were few and far between and Michael had been forced to fill in the blanks, but the scene before him seemed to come directly from that lost part of his youth.

Two armies were on the verge of clashing.

“Sergi, I need to get closer,” said Michael with barely a whisper.

“*Hold on.*” There was the familiar shuffling of his mind before Sergi slid down to his hand, creating a single airt and once again an unfamiliar rune. He quickly told Michael the name. “*Put your hand to your face.*”

Michael did so, calling out the rune. “Raidho.” There was a slight pressure behind his eyes but nothing else happened. He stared down at the valley, concentrating on the forces to his right when his vision jumped ahead of him. Surprised, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them again, he studied the army in front of him.

He saw that it was spread out rather thinly. Soldiers glinting with simple metal breastplates waited nervously. Some held swords and others spears, but they all looked completely out of their depth. There was something familiar about the way they held themselves, when he realised the truth. These were the nomad sons taken for shock troops. Gritting his teeth, he lifted his gaze up. Archers were situated higher up the valley while horsemen waited at the top of the ridge, swords drawn and at the ready.

To his left came the source of the rumbling.

This army had no archers. Instead, they had foot soldiers hefting pikes while horsemen surrounded them like a giant horseshoe protecting its hoof. The rumbling was coming from the foot soldiers, who were shouting out taunts in an attempt to crumble the other army’s resolve. Michael concentrated on the nomad foot soldiers’ faces. They were fidgeting and he could see fear in their faces. This was not the type of battle they were used to.

Michael allowed his vision to wander back up to the horsemen on the ridge on the right. One of them was carrying a banner showing a raven emerging from a lone tree, but

Michael didn't recognise it as anything he would know. He moved his vision left and his heart leapt to his throat. Their banner he recognised intimately. It was the sign from the church back in Thaenes.

It was an army of the Enlightenment.

All of a sudden the chanting stopped and Michael felt the hairs on his neck rise. The horsemen on the outer edges of the horseshoe started to move, spreading further out towards the other army; the Mahj army, he thought.

He didn't understand why the Stewards would allow themselves to be used so, but according to Dominique, the nations of Paxl and Carnl were to be the fodder of this war while the southern nation of Terrl remained neutral despite overtures from both sides. Michael himself wasn't inclined to support the Enlightenment, but after witnessing the cruel use of the nomads as shock troops he realised that mindless killing could never be justified. That was, however, until Msizi spoke up.

"Uncle, do you recognise that?" His voice was tempered with both fear and excitement. Michael knew how he felt. The adrenaline was pumping heavily through him.

"Recognise what? That we should be getting out of here," said Jackson.

"No! Look at the army on the left. It's using the bull horn formation."

"Bull horn? Am I supposed to know what you're talking about?"

"Bull horn?" asked Michael. "What is it?"

"It's the same battle formation created by Shaka when he was king of the Zulus. He used it to slaughter his enemies."

Michael swung his vision back to the Mahj army, fear coating his brow. A man on a black horse was attempting to rally them, but the nomad foot soldiers, already out of their depth, were falling back.

He looked left, higher this time, and saw three figures higher up on a ridge, each astride their own horse. One of them was decked out in intricate white armour with black swirls and seemed to be shouting out orders. Next to him sat a man in brilliant white robes with a miniature papal crown on his head. Both robe and crown were slashed with black and gold. But it was the man next to the priest that drew Michael's eye. He was clothed in a dark grey robe with a cowl pulled down over his head. Michael couldn't tell make out any facial features, but there was something very familiar about him.

Michael blinked. Another cowled figure suddenly stood next to the horse. The grey-robed man bent down to speak to him. The other man nodded and disappeared.

Michael rubbed his eyes, not sure if he could believe them, when Jackson's hand on his shoulder brought him back to action, just as the armies were about to clash. The threat of the bull horns seemed to have succeeded in routing the Mahj army before the fighting had even started.

"They're going to be annihilated," said Jackson. Michael knew the words were true, when something suddenly struck him. Canon Grenval had said it first and Dominique had verified it. This was a war of men. No magic, from either side, was to be involved. And yet the use of the cowled man's powers was clearly breaking such an agreement. This battle was a foregone conclusion, and Michael couldn't let that happen. He saw no way to stop the fighting completely, but he knew he had to at least even the odds. The noise of hooves and clanging weapons on armour seemed to make the ridge they were on tremble and Michael almost lost his nerve.

"We have to do something," he said, breathing deeply to calm himself. "We can't let them be slaughtered."

"Us?" said Jackson. "Now you've really gone and lost it."

"Not quite," he replied, unstrapping the sword of Mikael. He had an idea, but doubt threatened to stop him short. Even with the sword's help it might not be enough.

"Except you have more help, and a little more time, than Lialh did."

Sergi's voice reverberated in his mind. He knew what he had to do.

"Quickly," he said to the other two. "Both of you draw three circles in the dirt. Use sticks if you need to. Draw two at the top and one at the bottom."

Jackson and Msizi stared at him for a moment before going to work.

Michael drew his own airts in front of them, dividing them each into eight segments. He bent down, inscribing the rune Hagalaz onto each top segment, then into Jackson's and Msizi's. "I need you two to crouch on top of your bottom airt, with one hand in each of the top two." Michael crouched as well, doing the same. "Sergi, this might be tough, but do you think you can stretch between both my hands?"

"I can do you one better," and he split in two, each half forming an airt in Michael's hands. *"It's a lot easier once you've accepted your fate."*

Michael stood up, refusing to comment, and grasped the sword of Mikael in both hands. "Are you ready?" he asked. "I don't quite know what's going to happen, so be prepared for anything."

He lifted the sword into the air, waiting for the moment when the bull horns began to converge into a single unyielding wall of steel before he cried out with every inch of his power. "Hagalaz!"

Msizi felt his body lurch slightly, but he held on, allowing his body to become a conduit between Michael and the airts beneath his feet and hand.

Jackson felt the same pull, but it was different. He felt the power of the airts beneath him gather in his body, drawing on his strength, enhancing the power of the runes.

Michael felt Msizi's strength enter him, coalescing in his right hand. It was a stable thing, and Michael felt a connection firm between himself and the boy. He almost fell over, however, when he felt the surge from Jackson. He was barely able to contain it, and wondered momentarily at the implications.

He felt like he might explode at any moment when the power drained out of him into the sword.

Lightning erupted into the sky, filling it with a dark cloud which seemed to drain all the colour from the landscape. Pressure built in the air as the Enlightenment's army faltered. There was a single moment of silence as both armies quieted, before death fell from the sky.

The ground erupted, spraying horses and men alike with clods of dirt, splintered bones, seared flesh and shrapnel armour. Screams could be heard above the explosions, but these were soon cut short. The sword of Mikael burned brightly, a beacon across the battlefield, shredding the bull's horn to pieces.

Msizi faltered, and Michael fell forward. He heard the boy cry out and managed to swivel his body around, though he was far too exhausted to help.

A cowed figure crouched behind Msizi, his hand holding the hilt of a dagger which protruded from the boy's calf. He pulled back the hood, revealing a face as dark as Michael's two companions.

There was a shout from next to him, and Michael saw that Jackson hadn't fallen, but had turned to face the attacker, his hands glowing with energy.

“You!” cried Jackson.

The man turned to face him, surprise echoing across features, which Michael now recognised. He was one of the rebels; a True African.

Jackson grabbed the rebel’s arm, searing the flesh. The man screamed and disappeared, leaving behind a cauterized stump. Jackson threw it away in surprise and disgust, and moved to help Msizi.

“No!” shouted Michael. “Your hands!”

Jackson stopped, looking at Msizi and then back at Michael. “Help him then!”

Michael crawled closer, staring at the dagger, unsure if he should pull it out.

“What are you waiting for?” shouted Jackson.

“He might bleed to death if I take it out!” Michael looked at Msizi, who was gritting his teeth in pain. “Don’t move. I’ll try to get help.” He edged over to the lip of the hill, watching the chaos unfold below. The Mahj army was fighting back, overwhelming the now depleted army of the Enlightenment. He glanced left to see the priest and commander turning to flee. Michael’s far vision was gone, but he felt the cowed horseman looking at him.

Suddenly the man was a foot in front of Michael, lifting his cowl to reveal the face of the rebel leader, Londisizwe. He took hold of Michael’s arm, anger flowing from his eyes and they both disappeared.

Jackson stared in horror, their only link to their home world now gone. He glanced down at Msizi, quickly making a decision. He looked at his glowing hand, squeezed his eyes closed, then opened them and grabbed the hilt of the dagger. It turned to ash quicker than he could blink as the wound was quickly covered in hot blood. He ran his index finger over the gash, touching it delicately. As he cauterised it, Msizi screamed and passed out. Jackson sat down, holding his hands out in front of him. By the time horsemen from the Mahj army reached them, the glow had disappeared.

Chapter 16 The Embodiment

Michael sat up. He was able to make out only the faint outline of a bed before his body failed him and he was forced to lie down. He struggled to remember what had happened, but recalled only a prick behind his neck before the world turned upside down. Images of long corridors floated behind his eyes, but he couldn't tell if he had walked down them or not. Most irritating was the voice in his head. It kept trying to speak to him, but Michael couldn't quite hear the words. He was relieved when sleep came.

Michael was shaken roughly. Blinking against the sunlight, he was glad to be able to think once more. Whatever drug had been used on him had worn off. He hoped never to feel its effects again.

A balding man wearing white robes slashed with gold gave him a water bowl. Michael couldn't help but remember the first time a man in a robe had given him water. He wondered if the Inyanga still lived. Drinking greedily, he spat it out quickly.

"There is no poison," said the monk, his voice lilting slightly on the vowels. "But the drug makes you thirsty, so you must drink."

Michael said nothing, his thirst like a gaping hole in his stomach. He brought the bowl to his mouth, finishing the water.

"Good. You are to be received by the Embodiment himself. It is a great honour so you must be properly cleansed. I have drawn you a bath of water and left robes for your adornment." The command in the monk's voice could not be mistaken, though the thought of cleaning his body after so many days of walking was far too tempting for Michael not to obey. The monk turned, striding gracefully across the floor, stopping as he reached the door. "I would suggest that you not attempt to use your Ru abilities. This room and all others have been warded."

"Wait," said Michael. "Where am I?"

"The Tower of the Enlightenment," said the monk, pausing again. "The House of our Creator."

He was led through the tower, a gargantuan building dwarfed only by the Tower of the Mahj on Ru Island, the monk informed Michael with disdain. He noticed, as he walked through the long hallways leading ever upwards, glimmers on the pure white walls. Stopping for a moment to stare at one, he was immediately repulsed. Running his hand over the glimmer, he managed to see it more clearly as it flared. Just as Canon Grenval's figurine, the emblem of the Enlightenment, had been formed by twisting both Othala and its merkstave, this was a twisting of two runic symbols, though Michael couldn't tell which in the brief time it flared. The twisted runes didn't drain his strength, but succeeded in severing his link to Sergi. He was surprised to find a noticeable lack of the Enlightenment emblems which had weakened him, but now and again he would pass a window under which hung a banner. He immediately moved away as his legs began to falter.

It seemed to take almost half the day to reach the rooms at the top of the tower, though Michael knew it had been only an hour or so. He had passed many monks, some in classes, others praying, but all ignored him. He was just starting to wonder if Jackson had found some help for Msizi when they came to a large pair of double doors.

"You will fall to your knees as you approach the Embodiment," said the monk. "You will keep your forehead on the floor until the Embodiment has bidden you otherwise."

"What is this Embodiment?"

"The Embodiment of the Enlightenment. He is the Hand of the Creator. A god amongst men. You have never heard of him?"

"No. I'm... new to this place."

The monk raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"That's quite a mouthful," said Michael finally.

"What is?"

"The Embodiment of the Enlightenment. One thing I've noticed about this place is that people like to give themselves elaborate titles."

"I would keep such thoughts unvoiced. Titles are meant to bestow grandeur. What the public is not fit to behold must at the very least be made aware of their Creator's greatness through voice. Now, come." The monk pushed on the doors, stepping back as they opened. Light seeped through from a window high in the ceiling, catching Michael's

eyes so that he was forced to step back, holding up his hand. The monk pulled him forward with surprising strength into the room until they were halfway to the single throne, pressing Michael down and pushing his face to the floor.

Michael was immediately reminded of Tabitha's father and the same treatment he received in the church that he couldn't help but push back this time. Rearing his head in anger, he was surprised to find that he was too slow. The monk's hand had already left his head and he fell backwards into an awkward position. He heard the doors closing behind him as he tried to right himself, but now something else was pressing on him like an ethereal weight. Sergi's voice barely seeped through now, but somehow Michael knew that if he had access to his rune abilities he would have been completely immobilised. The wards not only prevented him from using runes, but numbed him – mostly – to their effects.

"You may step forward," said a voice from in front of him.

Michael was surprised at the evident youth of the sound. He struggled but was finally able to lift his eyes. Three figures looked down upon him. Each head was cowled, but Michael recognised the two standing on either side of the throne. They were True Africans, though he couldn't tell if one of them was Londisizwe. Seated was a man covered in white robes, yet emanating from him in waves was a dark shadow much like the one protecting the book in the tomb.

"I have been told of the great power you unleashed upon my unsuspecting army," said the seated man; the Embodiment. "I'd rather expected Ba-Roc to be the culprit, but now I see that I was mistaken."

Michael didn't speak, though he wasn't sure he would be able to.

"I was told, an age back, that a powerful Ru Lord had entered this world. Granted, he was new to his powers, but so strong that even the simplest of spells could be used to, say, burn down a church. But he fell forward into this world, and I've been awaiting his presence ever since."

The shadows pulsed against Michael, pressing down so that he had to squeeze his eyes against the pain before they drew back. He fell forward, breathing heavily. "So you know who I am," he managed.

"Michael O'Connor. The great hero. Your accent would have been enough to set you

apart, but I see that's not enough even for the likes of you. By your actions – the destruction of my forces – I see that you wish carve your name upon the fear of every living man and child within Caiy'n. You wish for people to see your great power and quiver from the destruction and chaos. I understand completely.”

Michael reeled from the accusation. “That isn't true.”

“No?” He motioned to the two at his side. “These men are true patriots. They love their country and yet now find themselves homeless. Thanks to you. But here, at my side, they've found sanctuary, and have discovered a righteous cause worth fighting for and holding onto. Do you kill for a cause, Michael, or are the murder of innocent men the means and the end?”

“I...” The Embodiment had seen into Michael's soul. Why did he fight? Who was he trying to save? Himself? Caiy'n? Ever since the meeting with his contact he had allowed events to control his action. His fate had never seemed his own. Even his actions during the battle had been a reaction from getting to know the Grasswalkers. And who had led him down that path but the one who stood to gain the most from his loyalty. Was she holding his leash even now, setting him upon a path of her own choosing? All of these thoughts raced through him as the shadows from the Embodiment darted around his vision. Staring through them, his resolve faltered and he hung his head.

The Embodiment peered at Michael thoughtfully. “I see.” He turned his head. “Leave us,” he said to the rebels. They nodded and disappeared. The Embodiment noticed Michael's reaction. “A little trick they picked up on their journey between worlds.” He laughed. “They are fools,” he said, surprising Michael by this sudden change in tone. “They have power over time and space and cannot even conceive of how to use it for their own benefit. The only reason they follow me is because their need to fight, to struggle against perceived injustice, is all they know. It's how they define themselves.” Michael only nodded, despair clouding his senses.

“We can't have you like this now. It just won't do. Perhaps if I allowed you to look upon my face, it might put things into perspective for.” The Embodiment lifted his cowl slowly, pulling it back from his face.

Michael's eyes widened in surprise as he saw a face which mirrored his own in almost every way. “Who are you?”

“You don’t recognise the face? But then again, vanity was never widely regarded in our family.”

“Family?”

“Oh come now, Michael. Did my son and daughter-in-law not teach you to use full sentences?”

Michael sat down before he fell over. “But, you disappeared.”

“And where do you think I went?”

“But...” Michael couldn’t believe it. This man in front of him... he was too young, for one, and... the Embodiment? It couldn’t be.

“I told my son to name his firstborn Michael, you know. I’m glad he listened to his father in at least one aspect of his life.”

Michael had to say it. It had to be real. “Grandpa Jonas?”

“Ha!” The Embodiment laughed. “I’ve been named many things, called by many titles, but never that. And yet, like all my other roles, I can’t truly call it my own.” The darkness seemed to grow around the Embodiment – Jonas – as he smiled. “I wish this could be a happy reunion, but I’m afraid that once you destroyed my army, you became an enemy of the Enlightenment. And yet, perhaps I can save you from punishment. If you will help me.”

Michael was a jumble of raw emotions as he tried to process this revelation. His grandfather, a man he had heard stories about, the man who had disappeared long before he was born, was here, now. The Embodiment.

“Michael, I can see in you an immense power. I need you to tap into that power. I could order your death if necessary, but it would be a waste of your talent.”

“What do you want?”

“Soon, soon.” He paused, and the shadow dimmed. “I know you can see the darkness that surrounds me. The others are blind to it, but you are not. It’s that what keeps me young and alive. It’s also that which keeps me prisoner.”

“I can see the shadow of the merkstave around you, if that’s what you mean?”

“It’s more than that. Far more. There are some things you need to understand. While other Ru Lords wield the merkstave as they would any rune, I understand the truth behind the power they wield because I am the source of that power; the very soul of the

merkstave.”

Jonas stood. “I have warded this tower out of necessity as there are those who would kill me for the power they believe I wield. But they are fools who fail to understand the intricate nature of my power. However, I fear they have found a way to steal that power, which is why I need you.” He stepped forward and Michael was forced to crawl backwards. “Follow me.”

Michael didn’t move.

“Look, grandson, I don’t have time for this. Yes, your grandfather lives. Yes, he represents everything you supposedly fight against. But you’ve caused a great upset to my plans, so now you’ll do as I say.”

Michael fell forward as though yanked by a chain. He was forced to follow at a distance, the shadow creating a buffer through which Michael couldn’t pass. They made their way into a small room through a door behind the throne. In the centre sat a pedestal on top of which lay a book. Michael’s first thought was that it was the Caiy’n book, but it wasn’t as large and had a black leather covering in place of the brown one he was familiar with. There was also no rune lock protecting it from unwanted entry.

“This room is not warded,” Jonas explained. “My enemies don’t know this, and it is that lack of knowledge which keeps them at bay. If I were to ward this room then I fear the book might be destroyed.”

“What is it?”

“You will know soon enough. I have had Ansuz inscribed on the corner. I want you to see and understand. Then we shall discuss the book.”

Michael stepped closer, looking for a title, but the leather was clean. He saw the small rune in the corner. Sergi’s voice suddenly rushed through to him, warning him against it, but it was too late. Michael was compelled. He spoke the rune.

Michael barely recognised the landscape surrounding the lone oasis. Blasted terrain stretched out all around it like a wasteland out of someone’s nightmare while the sky roiled in pain.

A man knelt down next to him, leaning on the sword with the onyx hilt. He was tired, but his face held a defiant grimace. "I shall destroy you!" he cried at the dark cloud which hovered above him.

"You cannot destroy that which has no mortality, foolish creature."

"I will prevail against all darkness and wipe its source clean from this world!"

"Your words are meaningless. I shall always exist to tempt men into my fold."

"Then where are these men of yours? You lie to hide the knowledge that you do not hold sway over men's hearts."

"I have no need of men to defeat you, for this battle is already won. It is a war of influence we fight, not of direct conflict. I have not manifested in order to throw down some human gauntlet, but to show you that evil cannot be defeated. Your cause is lost."

Mikael slunk down even further, defeat written across his features. He was clothed in the traditional Grasswalker cow hide skirt and tassels, but it was not enough to protect his body, which was caked in dried blood and grit from the constant wind which lifted up the broken sand and struck at the helpless warrior. Michael almost expected him to be wielding a spear, and was rudely reminded that this was not the world he was familiar with.

"I offer you relief, great warrior, for I see that you too have the power to draw men to your side. Join my cause –"

Jonas popped out of midair, falling between the two.

Mikael looked up, wary. When he saw the old man crumpled before him, limbs spread out at awkward angles, he stood. "What games do you now play?"

But the darkness ignored Mikael, instead sending a tendril towards Jonas' dying body. Michael stepped forward and suddenly he was kneeling down, eavesdropping on the promises made to his grandfather.

"I see that you are not of this world. I cannot manifest on this plane as no mortal body can contain me, but you are different. You have... the right blood. The blood of one who has marked this world."

"What do you want?" managed Jonas, his breathing becoming more difficult.

"I want more than what I am now. I want this world. But I require a vessel."

"I... am dying."

“I can save you. You need never feel the pains of mortality ever again.”

Jonas was quick to make his decision. “Then take this body. Before... I’m gone.”

The shadow descended upon Jonas, mending his bones and muscles with pins of dark ink and stitching of shaded lace.

Jonas stood slowly, his eyes frozen in darkness while the years drained from him, revealing the face of the man Michael knew as the Embodiment. Mikael stepped back, raising his sword as Jonas spoke. “I rescind my offer, great warrior, for I shall be my own herald and men will flock to my banner.”

“No!” cried Mikael, raising his sword against Jonas, who brought his hands together, catching the blade as it fell.

Jonas twisted, lifting the weapon from the mortal warrior, and flung the sword a few feet away.

Mikael could only shudder in disbelief as a pale hand slipped beneath his ribs, grasping not his heart but his soul. He fell back, his body a husk, as Jonas placed the soul within an orb of merkstave crafted from his fingers.

Michael, not quite believing his eyes, watched as his grandfather began to twitch.

Jonas cried out, dropping the orb. His head jerked backwards as he fell to his knees, his body writhing out of control. His chest rose and fell as he collapsed in a heap.

Michael leant forward, knowing that he couldn’t be dead, only to realise that he was crying. Jonas finally raised his head, and Michael saw that his eyes were no longer the shade of dark ice.

“What have I done? What have I done?” He said this like a mantra, and Michael finally realised what must have happened. The darkness, the source of evil, couldn’t retain its control. Jonas now had all the power.

His grandfather picked up the orb, and the scene changed.

The grey steel sky flashed a brilliant blue while dew-laden grass erupted from crumbling slate. A fast flowing river cascaded across his vision. The sudden beauty of the scene was marred, however, when he caught sight of the squat tower in the distance. Michael could

make out two figures standing at the foot of the eye-sore. He stepped forward.

The first man was Jonas. It looked as though some time had passed as his face glowed with a new, dark confidence. Above the other man buzzed some abominable form of dragonfly. It seemed to sense Michael and flew at him but passed through his incorporeal body.

“You were cast out of the Mahj Tower?” asked Jonas.

“I was,” said the other man. “My experiments did not sit too well with them.”

“And they draw on merkstave and Ru without a thought to the consequences?”

“They, that is, we all do. It’s not about good or evil, but rather two halves of a whole. At least, that’s the way it’s taught.”

“I see.” Jonas’ eyes glinted slightly with a familiar darkness.

“How —”

“Never mind. I have three tasks for you and this tower will allow you the time in which to perform them. Disobey me and my servant will deal with you harshly.” He indicated slightly to the left. Michael saw a man leaning against a tree in the distance, but couldn’t make out his features. “Your first task will be to chronicle the historical events of a world called Earth.”

“Another world? How can I believe such a thing?”

“I am not asking you to believe me. Only to follow my orders.”

The other man smirked. “From where am I to attain this knowledge?”

Jonas pulled a scroll from his clothing. “This information was originally encoded in a small hard drive, but this world, it would appear, cannot abide technology, so it chose this form instead. You will take from this those parts which I have marked and create a book for me.”

The Ru Lord nodded as he took the scroll, though Michael doubted he knew what a hard drive was.

“Your second task will be to study a prophecy. I need to know if it’s true and if so, how it can be prevented.”

The old prophecy, thought Michael. Dominique had said that it was no longer valid, that Lialh was no longer the hero. But Jonas hadn’t known that....

“Lastly, I need you to care for two objects.” Jonas held out his hand. The shadow

emanating from his palm coalesced into the orb which held Mikael's soul. Removing his hand, the orb hovered in the air. Kneeling, Jonas spread out his arms, revealing a crystal coffin in which Mikael's body lay. "I wronged this man and will see him restored one day. But now is not the time, and I have plans for his soul. Go now into your tower, Ru Lord, and perform your tasks. Time will cease for you, but I will return tomorrow for the completed book." Jonas turned to leave and Michael stepped after him. Jonas disappeared. Michael looked around wildly but saw no one. Worried, he faced the tower and took a step towards it.

The Ru Lord stood to one side as Jonas poured over the open book. "You have done well. And yet..." Jonas cried with rage. "This... shadow prevents me from crossing back into my world." He turned to face a third man, his servant. "Cannaugh, I will need your services. Your clearance will allow you access to the vault. It was stupid of me to think I could go, but I so wished to see Earth once more. You will have to go in my place."

"Cannaugh?" laughed the Ru Lord. "That is no name."

"You are correct," said Jonas. "It is a title, but what do you know of it?"

"Only that it was anathema within the Tower of the Mahj. It means 'Herald of the Dark'. It was the name given to the God-Kings after they allowed evil into this world."

This time Jonas laughed. "Appropriate, on all accounts."

Cannaugh cleared his throat as he walked forward.

"I'll do as you say," he said, addressing Jonas, as long as you live up to your side of the bargain."

Michael almost fell over. It was the grey man.

Jonas stared at Cannaugh, allowing the man enough time to feel uncomfortable. "You know what to do. You must take the Caiy'n book from the government's vault and place it within the tomb. I fear we are dealing with time paradoxes that cannot be taken lightly."

"But if I don't place the book in the tomb, your grandson won't be able to enter this world. He won't be able to disrupt your plans."

"I need him to, Cannaugh. Besides, if you fail me, then all I have promised you will also not come to pass."

Cannaugh sneered.

“And one last thing. I want you to take this orb. It won’t retain its Ru properties on Earth, but whatever it becomes, I need it placed in my son’s attic.” Jonas stared into the orb for a moment before looking at his servant.” The soul of Mikael Sergi still has work to do.”

Michael fell back, his mind so filled with revelations that it might take an entire lifetime for him to come to grips with them all. But he had no time to wonder at his friend’s true identity or what part the grey man had to play in all of this when he felt himself wrapped in his grandfather’s arms. Shadows bore down on him, engulfing his mind in a thick fog. “You have to make a choice, Michael,” said Jonas, whispering in his ear. “Mikael’s soul is bonded to yours, but we both know how much of a burden it is, on you and him. I think it’s time to set him free.”

Michael tried to voice his thoughts, but found that he couldn’t speak.

“Listen to me, Michael. We are of the same blood, fated, perhaps, to have come to this point. Fight at my side against those who would destroy me. But you cannot do so as you are. He prevents you from drawing on my power, for despite his amnesia, he is tied to the light and draws you with him. But it doesn’t have to be this way. Michael, Mikael’s body is here, intact. I have kept it safe. I see now, as should you, that it is only right. It is time for us both to repay our debts to him.”

Michael wanted to scream out in defiance, to shout that none of this was true, that Sergi wasn’t Mikael. But he knew the truth. His friend would have his body back.

“You see, Michael. It’s the only way. The path is a simple one. You need only choose Alahto.”

“I can’t,” Michael finally managed. “I chose Othala. I am bound to goodness, to the light.”

“Light and dark are two halves of the same coin, Michael.”

Michael remembered the Ru Lord of the tower suggesting the same thing, but there had been doubt in his voice.

“He was right, Michael,” said Jonas, reading his thoughts as though they had been written in his own mind. “I only suggested that it might be false to gain power over him, to make

him fear me enough to do what I asked. But I cannot hold sway over those who use the merkstave, nor can I sever them from the darkness within me. Cannaugh now knows the truth of that and seeks to destroy me out of revenge. This is why I have been hiding here in this tower, drawing on what resources I have to combat him.”

“And the army of the Enlightenment? The battle?”

“That is... something else. But my actions are not in question. You must choose, Michael. Do you chain your friend to eternity, serving your whims, or do you set him free? His soul can't abide the merkstave. Already his voice is being silenced. Choose Alahto and allow your friend his freedom.”

“I can't. Othala...”

“An opening has already been made for Alahto. It was made by Zalagah, the merkstave of dark lightning.”

Michael was forced to recall the battle between worlds against the grey man, when the merkstave had travelled back through the spell into his body. But he hadn't ever given it a second thought. “But about Sergi, you said —”

“It was an opening, a pinprick against the shield of Othala. Mikael would not have detected it.”

Michael began to glow as his body gave off the light of Othala. And there, in the palm of his right hand, was the empty space, like a void calling to him, whispering promises of dark power. “I... no, I can't.”

“Michael, you must listen to me. There's something you're not aware of. Dominique destroyed the tower and the Ru Lord within. But she left Mikael's coffin intact. She meant for you to find it, to return him to his body. Do not forsake her wishes. Not after all she has sacrificed.”

The void filled with a vision of her face, of the beauty she had deliberately lost to make him aware of what she was willing to give up to save her world. What was he willing to do? How far would he go? “I'll do it.”

A choice shall be placed before him,

And upon him,

In the darkness and the light.

He brought his palm up to his face. "Alahto." His body began to convulse as the shadow of the merkstave penetrated his palm, expanding quickly to cover the light of Othala. He felt as though a piece of him had been ripped out and knew that Sergi was gone.

Chapter 17 One Year Later

“The dark prince is not one for the sword. Perhaps it would serve us better were he to be trained in the dagger. Roguish tactics might very suit someone of his... calibre.”

Sergi grimaced as he watched Jackson duck and roll to one side. But not even this manoeuvre could keep him from Msizi's staff. As Jackson regained his feet the weapon swung back into his stomach, neatly toppling him over. Sergi was impressed with the way the reporter-turned-mage-warrior ignored the blood pouring from his exposed knee, though he had enjoyed it when Jackson accidentally cut himself trying to avoid Msizi's blows.

“Enough!” shouted Mahj Geth Master Rigel. “I swear, you're one of the most poorly trained Ru Lords I've ever met.”

“Damn it, I didn't ask for this,” said Jackson angrily. “Besides, why do I even need to use a sword when I can just blow people up?”

“Because, you hog-bellied weasel, what happens when an especially powerful opponent decides to shield himself against your Ru attacks? Or distracts you while an enemy runs up behind you with a dagger? Do you truly believe yourself quick enough to counter such a swift attack with your vaunted powers? It's the unforeseen and the mundane which I will teach you to defeat, though I see now that it's an all but impossible task.” He turned to face Msizi. “You'll need to protect this one, young Geth, even from himself.”

“My uncle has my arm and my heart,” cried Msizi, bringing his fist to his chest.

Sergi watched Jackson roll his eyes at his nephew. “You're enjoying this far too much,” muttered the recently appointed Ru Lord.

“Go now and spar with Lialh, Msizi,” said Rigel. “I fear he needs the practice more than your uncle here.”

“Well, thanks,” said Jackson.

“I only say that because he'll probably be one of those sent to the frontlines. Ones such as you will be kept in reserve.”

Jackson threw down his sword. “Suits me fine.” He turned away from the sparring grounds and started to walk back towards the Tower of the Mahj.

Sergi followed him, intrigued, though the emotion was not his own. He stopped, not willing to pursue such a ridiculous fascination. A battle of wills commenced, as it always did, though Sergi knew he might not always win. They were too evenly matched.

“Why do you fight me in this? Is it not simpler to share this body evenly?”

“Let me think about that, Mikael. Uh, no. Besides, you’re a residual consciousness that should have died a long time ago so I don’t think it’s fair.”

“And yet you inform me that co-existing within another is your fate.”

“More like punishment. And you know what? I don’t know what I did to deserve this.”

Two Ru Guards at the tower entrance saluted him and Sergi realised that Mikael had continued walking. Sergi ignored those two as he always did, wondering why they even bothered to remain here. Once Ru Lords or Queens in training, they were a constant reminder of the fate of the ones who failed to reach a certain level of aptitude.

Jackson disappeared down one of the hallways and Mikael hurried to catch up. Sergi didn’t understand his fascination with Jackson, though he thought it might have something to do with a shared heritage. Sergi had tried telling Mikael that, despite the similarities, their cultures were hundreds of years apart, but as usual he wouldn’t listen. Sergi couldn’t help but wonder if Michael had looked at him the same way Sergi looked at Mikael.

Coming to an intersection, he bumped into Dominique.

“Sergi? Or is it Mikael?” She laughed. “I do not suppose it matters since you can both hear me. I have been looking for you. There is to be a meeting. I am gathering everyone together. The time has come.”

Sergi sighed as he felt the excitement rush through Mikael. “They’ll have to wait for me,” he cut in before his counterpart could speak. “I’ve just come from a bit of sparring and –”

“Let me help with that.” She ran her hand down his body and he shivered.

The dried sweat had disappeared but when he looked at himself he saw that he was also dressed in ridiculous finery. “Did you have to make it look so gaudy?”

“You look fine. Now hurry to the northern map room. There’s going to be a council of war.”

Jackson stared through one of the high-arched windows. This high up in the tower, he could see the main continent peering at him in the distance. From this height the ocean was a haze of sunlight and salty wind, but it always made him pause. He wondered if he'd ever see an ocean quite like this again.

He had been here for six months now, but before that he'd spent five months living in grand finery in the palaces of Carnl being lauded as a hero. His dark skin had garnered him the title 'Exotic Prince' amongst the ladies of the court, which, to be fair, he had played to his advantage. It was Msizi's constant needling which had finally convinced him to travel to the island for training. Jackson had known that his nephew had wanted to find Michael and thought that the Mahj might have been able to help. He wondered what Msizi thought now that they knew his fate.

Jackson entered the room to see that most people were seated. He recognised some of them, having spent a lot of time with them after the 'Battle of the Heavenly Saviour'. It was a stupid name and their 'saviour' was now considered the foremost enemy of the land, but he wasn't quite sure most people made that connection.

The large table, shaped in the form of Caiy'n – which he thought made seating arrangements slightly awkward – was cluttered with miniature war figurines. Taking a seat, he looked at their faces. He nodded at Pauline, the Stewardess of Carnl, who was the most rampant supporter of all things Mahj and the one to whom both he and Msizi had been taken after the battle. She winked back, reminding him that the Mahj were not the only things she had been passionate about. Swallowing nervously, he couldn't help but wonder if her ardour wasn't enhanced by the necklace she wore. The gem contained within supposedly held the essence of the God-King Freyja who helped guide her in all her decisions. Steward Errol of Terrl – Jackson couldn't help but laugh when he said the name – sat beside her. Despite his earlier neutrality, he had finally fallen in with the Mahj when it became apparent that the Tower of the Enlightenment had been usurped by darkness. On Pauline's opposite side was the Steward of Paxl's consort, Martha. She had been forced to flee her homeland after her husband was murdered and his army usurped. Though she held no true power, as the Stewards did not rule by hereditary bloodline, she was the highest authority in Paxl until a successor could be chosen.

Jackson glared at Ba-Roc, who was seated next to the Ru Queen Chealdrin, the current Warden of the Tower of the Mahj. The Ru Lord still hadn't apologised to Jackson for the invasive torture, and the smug look on Ba-Roc's face suggested that he would never get his own back. Dominique entered the room and he looked away. Guilt threatened to overwhelm him as he thought about his part in her disappearance. She had appeared on the island only a week earlier and had introduced herself as the Avatar, which everyone seemed to accept without question. When he had finally got up the nerve to talk to, he about the strangeness of the situation, but she had only smiled back at him and said, "Oh, my poor boy, I put a spell on them. I thought it was obvious."

Mikael Sergi entered the room behind Dominique and Jackson scowled. Of all the strange characters he had met, Jackson battled to understand the once time piece, then parasite, now schizophrenic.

"The battle must be brought to the Dark Lord!" cried Mikael as he sat, stunning Jackson from his thoughts. "His blight on the land cannot be tolerated."

Jackson watched as the man's face seemed to shift as his alternate personality opened his mouth.

"I'm so sorry. I'll try to keep him in check," said Sergi, spreading his arms. "Maybe you want to start this meeting already."

Steward Errol nodded, taking the strange man in his stride. "Regardless of the... difficult circumstances surrounding your condition, good sir, your earlier outburst is not an unjust one. We must lead our armies on the Tower and crush this threat once and for all."

"Please, hear me out first," said Dominique. "We have all had a year's hiatus, and the plot is once more upon us. I agree that the time for action has come but there are more pressing concerns. Michael and Cannagh's war will end soon enough. Once that occurs, Jonas' eye will turn to Lialh."

"And yet you argue that the boy is no longer the focus of prophecy," said Ba-Roc.

"The prophecy has changed, it is true, but Jonas is not aware of that fact."

"But surely this Michael would have told him," added Pauline. "If he is his pawn..."

"Not by choice," said Sergi. "If you'll recall, he gave himself over to the merkstave to save me."

"We all use the merkstave," argued Ba-Roc.

“Yes, but have you chosen it? Michael has tied himself to the darkness in Jonas, who has used that link to command him. But I don’t think Michael is so completely far gone that he doesn’t know what’s right and what’s wrong. And if his only control at the moment is the ability to keep information out of Jonas’ hands then I think he would.”

“And murdering the Steward of Paxl is his way of showing us that he’s truly on our side?” continued Ba-Roc. “Make your excuses if you must, but do not attempt to convince us that he is anything but our enemy.”

“It’s not his fault.”

“Regardless,” said Chealdrin, stepping in, “you say that he will come for Lialh once Cannaugh is defeated. You all put much stock in this Michael’s powers. What, then, can we do to stop him?”

“I agree that Michael is a danger,” replied Dominique, “but he should not be our focus.”

“Why not just throw the power of the Mahj against them?” said Ba-Roc, ignoring her.

“We have the necessary numbers to bring the Tower to its knees.”

“Because, Ba-Roc,” said Dominique, refusing to be shouted down, “we need something in that tower. But perhaps you are right. We must keep Jonas’ attentions outwards and it is possible your plan will succeed in providing such a distraction. We will need Lialh, however. He is Jonas’ only concern. If we march on the Tower with Lialh at its head then I think it will be enough. Recall that Jonas sent out a large army of the Enlightenment to hunt him down a year ago. I think he might send out his entire force if he sees an opportunity to destroy that which he fears can defeat him.”

“And the rest of the Mahj?” asked Chealdrin.

“Do with them as you must, Warden,” said Dominique. “Use them to protect Lialh, for the army of the Enlightenment is formidable. As I hear it, victory was only secured the last time due to Michael’s efforts. Perhaps they can perform a similar function.”

“That’s all well and good,” said Jackson, deciding that it was time to intervene “but what do we need in the tower?”

“The Earth Chronicle.”

“The Earth Chronicle? Of course, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you don’t have two brain cells to rub together,” said Sergi.

“Watch that mouth of yours, oh hero of old. You just might find yourself less a personality when I’m through with you.”

Sergi stood, ready to lunge across the table, when Ba-Roc slammed his hands down on the table. “Enough of this prattle! Is this how two ‘heroes’ behave amongst such esteemed nobility?”

Jackson managed to look guilty, but Sergi had removed himself completely so that it was clear to everyone that Mikael had emerged when he addressed Dominique. “Let us hear this plan of yours, good mistress, and how we might best combat this evil.”

“Thank you, Mikael.” Dominique looked around at the expectant faces. “Mikael’s soul was sent through the Earth Chronicle, and was instrumental in Michael, Jackson, and Msizi’s appearance in this world. I say we send our own catalyst to Earth, at a time of our choosing, to stop Jonas before he ever enters this world.”

There was stunned silence.

“I’m sorry?” said Jackson. “I’m no student of time, but won’t that have really disastrous effects. I mean, even if we do manage to stop him, what happens to this world? Will any of these events have occurred?”

Dominique was silent.

“Well?”

“This world will revert to its original form.”

“You can’t be serious? You mean to say that everything we’ve been through will have been for nothing?”

“You will remember the part you have played.”

“You say that as though this crazy scheme of yours will succeed. Except I see a whole lot of problems such as... what will happen to me and my nephew? And what about Michael, and this fruit cake over here, Sergi.”

“I cannot foresee all that will happen, but I know that it is the only way for us to truly succeed; for this world to survive. Which is why, in an effort to protect you and Msizi, I suggest that it is you both who must be the ones to go through.”

Jackson sat back.

Ba-Roc stood, voicing his disapproval, but all at the table knew what had to be done.

“Will it bring back my husband?” asked Martha.

“It will.”

“Then I say we must do this.”

“Agreed,” said the two Stewards.

“Chealdrin? Will the Mahj do their part?” asked Dominique.

“We will. Success to all.”

Jackson grumbled as he shifted his sword in his scabbard.

Msizi hefted his staff, his face determined.

Jackson shook his head, wondering if everyone around him had been smacked on the head. This plan was insane, and yet here he was going through with it.

They were standing in a circular room with a large airt inscribed on the floor. With Sergi’s help, they were going to use it to teleport directly into the unwarded room containing the book. Jackson had raised his concerns about Jonas realising that this might be their plan, but Sergi doubted Jonas knew that he was able to hear everything said to Michael.

Dominique was to go with them. Her argument was that since Lialh was once more the main focus of the plot, anything she came into contact with concerning him might have more disastrous effects. While she was reluctant to speak about the last time that had happened, it had obviously scared her enough not to want to repeat it.

The three of them and Sergi stepped onto the airt.

“Jackson, you’re the Ru Lord. You must speak the rune,” said Dominique.

It was a single ruin, but drew on the power of the Tower to fuel it.

“Alright.” Taking a deep breath, he bent down, placing both palms on the ground.

“Ready?”

“The army should be closing in on the tower,” said Dominique. “We should go now.”

“Hold on. Dagaz!” Jackson teetered on his feet as the world seemed to fall on its side.

The room righted itself.

Sergi was the first to recover. Gathering his bearings quickly, he rushed over to the door, the clashing of far-off weapons echoing through. But he wasn't quick enough to stop the monk from barrelling into him.

Msizi raised his staff while Jackson prepared to launch a fireball, but the monk's hood fell back and they all froze.

Cannaugh, the grey man, laughed as he stood up. "I see that we all had similar ideas. I should have realised, what with the army outside."

"Step back," said Jackson.

"Ah, the reporter. It has been such a long time. And I see you've learned a few new tricks as well." Sergi groaned from the floor. "The hero of old here as well? Funny how things work out, considering that it was I who saw that your soul would reach your precious Mich –"

"Tiwaz!" said Jackson so suddenly that Cannaugh was taken off-guard.

"Eihwaz!" yelled Cannaugh in response, deflecting the fireball into the wall.

Msizi took the moment to rush forward, bringing his staff down through the shield against the side of his head. Cannaugh fell over, the shield disappearing.

"Most excellent work," said Mikael, taking over from the distracted Sergi.

"I don't why he thought he could talk us to death," said Jackson, wiping away his sweat.

"Did he think we would just wait for him to kill us?"

"What should we do with him?" asked Msizi.

"We should take him with us," said Dominique. "He is not of this world. Whatever the consequences of our actions, I believe they will be lessened if he is removed from Caiy'n."

"Fine," said Jackson. "There's that chronicle of yours. Let's finish this."

Dominique didn't move. "It is not for me to –"

"– do anything, I know. Msizi, how about you take a look. I'll keep an eye out."

Msizi was taken slightly aback, but shrugged as he made his way over to the book.

Dominique hovered behind him, ready to guide if necessary.

"Do I just open it? The Caiy'n book had a lock."

Dominique nodded.

Msizi held his breath as he pulled back the cover, revealing a script written in a careful hand over yellowing pages. He turned the pages carefully, looking for any sign of Jonas' name when he finally saw it at the top of the next page. "There it is," he said, touching it with his finger. The book trembled slightly, and the room went dark.

"You and a team of three other scientists have been hand-picked for a unique project," said a voice from the far side of the room. They all swivelled when a new voice spoke from the other direction.

"You will have access to classified technology. We trust it will enhance your efforts and provide you with a swifter outcome."

Msizi removed his hand and the light returned with the sounds of battle now accentuated with explosions. "What happened?" he asked.

"I believe you are accessing the book in some way," replied Dominique. "But it may very well serve our purpose. Try again."

Msizi flipped through the pages, placing his finger down once more. The room turned dark.

"It won't work. We've input all of the data. The power output of the crystals is far beyond what could be normally achieved, and yet, there is something missing."

"It's as I told you," said another voice. "The world you're trying to create has no life. It needs a soul to exist."

"More of that metaphysical prattle. I'm surprised at you, Jonas. For a man with a scientific mind, you truly have the soul of a poet. But I disagree. There must be a solution."

Msizi lifted his finger and placed it down further on.

"You may not have been the greatest writer, dad, but no one can accuse your novels of lacking soul. I can't believe no one wanted to publish this. But I guess a son can't be objective when it comes to such things. At least know that, wherever you are, your work isn't going to waste. I will see this world come alive. Then we will see what type of heart I have."

"A heart of darkness, I fear."

Jackson blinked against the sudden light, revealing Jonas and Michael standing in the centre of the room. Londisizwe and another of his rebels stood to either side of them.

"I see that you were right about Chealdrin's heart at the very least, Michael," continued Jonas. "I had no idea there would be so many Mahj willing to follow me with only the promise of power behind my words." He smiled at his studied his captives. "Oh, bind them, please."

"Asi!" Michael didn't even have to hold out his arms as he drew on his power.

No one could react as black bands slithered over their bodies.

Jonas walked over to the book, staring down at it. "I was always loath to let another touch it, though, oddly enough, it never did have the same effect with me, or a certain Ru Lord you're familiar with, Dominique." He looked at her thoughtfully. "I find it amazing that the spirit of this world could manifest itself." He shook his head. "All I ever wanted was to survive. But I see now that Lialh was not the true threat. And neither were any of you. It's this thing inside of me. It eats away at my mind, telling me to protect myself, to find a way home. And yet it won't let me leave this accursed world!" He slammed the book back down on its pedestal. "But perhaps I never considered all of the alternatives. Bring me the boy." Londisizwe grabbed Msizi and lifted him up. "You seem to have some special affinity with my precious Earth Chronicle. Now, if you would be so kind, open the portal."

"I don't know how."

"Perhaps you need a little incentive."

"Leave him alone!" shouted Jackson. "Michael, help him." But Michael's face was impassive as he ignored the plea.

"Think, Jonas," spoke up Dominique. "You cannot bring the evil of this world into another. Can you not see that you are being used? Released on Earth, I fear nothing could then be restored."

"Restored? Yes, Chealdrin informed me of your plan. To kill me before I enter this world. Do you truly believe that will change the future? What has already occurred cannot be undone. Even now Chealdrin has taken full control the army of Mahj. The fighting you hear. I would daresay it's not my men that are dying. Do you see? You have failed before you've even begun. Now, open the portal!"

Msizi felt the bonds fall from his body. He peered at his uncle, uncertain. Jackson stared back at him, unwilling to look away, but uncertain of the choice his nephew should make.

Msizi finally dropped his eyes and opened the book. He turned the pages, stopping at something caught his eye. A smile appeared on his lips, which he quickly replaced with a frown of concentration. Had he found it? A place where all could be made right? And then the solution to the portal came to him as he recalled what had been done with the Caiy'n book. "There must be a lock, even if we can't see it."

"Well of course there's a lock," said Jonas.

"But I don't know the combination."

"Don't lie to me boy. Cannaugh informed me that it was you who..." Jonas smiled. "I suppose I was a fool for ever trusting him," he said, looking down at his unconscious body.

"Michael knows the combination," said Msizi, thinking quickly.

"Michael?" Jonas faced his grandson. "Is this true? Why didn't you say something?"

"You once sent Cannaugh back to Earth. I believed you knew how." He sounded like an automaton.

"Ah, so I see there are still things you recall. It's true, while I managed to unlock it once before, certain things have changed. From what I've managed to discover, each entry into Caiy'n resets the lock. The combination changes. It changed upon Cannaugh's re-entry into Caiy'n and once more upon yours." Jonas shook his head. "I never thought to question your knowledge, Michael. Or perhaps something has prevented me." A shadow seemed to pass behind his eyes. "Whatever the true reason, you will tell me now."

"There are three runes. Ravaho, Isa, and Dagaz."

"Very well. Use them."

"We'll need three Ru Lords," said Michael. "Each rune must be spoken at the same moment with as much power possible."

"No, no," said Jonas. "There was no need for that in sending Cannaugh through."

"It is far more expedient than inscribing an airt around the book, as you must have done."

Jonas closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Why must everything in this world be so difficult? And yet coming into Caiy'n took almost no effort at all."

"It is as you yourself stated," said Dominique. "This world has a soul. Earth does not. It is the fundamental difference between Caiy'n, a world born out a story, and Earth, a mere

chronicling of events. In order to pass through to your home world, you must give something of your own soul in payment.”

Jonas shook his head. “Are you trying to frighten me, little Avatar? Then I’m afraid you’ve failed. Wake him up,” he said, pointing to Cannaugh. “And Michael, make sure he’s bound until the last moment. Londisizwe, hold a knife to his throat just to be sure.”

The rebel lifted Cannaugh’s head, slapping him hard. Cannaugh cried out, coughing as he tried to sit up, only to find his arms firmly bound behind him. Looking around, he saw Jonas smirking at him. “Damn you. I’ll have your head for this.”

“Calm yourself, Cannaugh. The only reason I haven’t had you slain is because you are needed for one last task. And in this I think you will obey me.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because it may result in your freedom.”

Cannaugh struggled, but it was no use.

“Bring him to the book. And let us not forget our resident reporter-turned-Ru Lord. I hardly think you need incentive considering that this was your plan all along. But just in case, if you don’t do as I say, I will have the boy killed.”

Jackson swore at him, but acceded.

“I’m sure your army has been routed by now and Lialh disposed of. So I suggest you all forget about this world. It has served its purpose, but there is truly nothing left to salvage.”

The three Ru Lords stood around the book. Michael told them the runes they would need to speak. The other two nodded wearily, beaten. They placed their hands over the open pages and spoke clearly, each one drawing on their reserves of energy. The book flared, light escaping into the room. When it receded, the room was empty.

Chapter 18 Paper Plague

The world broke apart.

Two men and two women fell back as the book in front of them exploded, disgorging flailing limbs onto the floor. The Earth Chronicle exacted its price.

Mikael writhed on the ground. Sergi rose up within their shared mind, watching as his other self, inextricably linked to the fate of Caiy'n, was drawn back, gone forever. He stopped shaking, and for the first time he knew what it was like not to have to share one body.

Msizi fell against a wall, knocking his head, falling unconscious.

Jackson landed next to his nephew. He lay there, his body drained of all energy, knowing that he would never regain his runic abilities. That knowledge clawed at him and he burst into tears at his loss.

Londisizwe and his last remaining rebel comrade crashed into each other. He felt time expanding within him, knowing that his ability to bend space and slow time were gone. Realising that he was still gripping his knife, he let go, frowning at the sticky feeling. Swallowing hard, he noticed the blade stayed where it was, lodged in his chest. His comrade cried out but there was nothing he could do as his leader breathed for the last time.

Cannaugh, once called the grey man, felt his power ripped from him as he landed. The first time he had come back had seen a part of his mind snap. This time it had taken from him the only true power he had known, leaving only deadly emotion behind. The need for revenge coursed through him even stronger than before. He had been used once before as a tool, and now again, by the same man. He looked wildly around for Jonas. Seeing him, he moved to lunge at him, only to find that he couldn't move. Anger coursed through him as he turned to face the obstruction. Emotion drained from his face. Blood rushed to his head and darkness clouded his mind. He wondered why he hadn't felt the pain.

Michael finally clawed his way out of the prison in his mind. He recalled his choice in the darkness and, like his soul rising up to reclaim his husk of a body, the memory of his deeds caught up with his conscience. The sickly sweet smell of blood pouring through his

fingers sent him reeling as he heard the Steward of Paxl gurgling from the knife which Michael had slowly pulled across his throat.

Opening his haunted eyes, he recognised the domed room in which he now faced his demons. He shivered as he recalled how his body had been destroyed in the rune fire. He saw his grandfather at the far end of the room. Hatred coursed through him as he was forced to relive every act of terror he had committed in that man's name. He reached back for his sword, ready to end the man, but it was gone. He looked left, not even able to blink when he saw how it had cleaved Cannaugh below the waist.

"Michael!" came a scream from his other side.

"Dominique?"

"Michael, help me. What is happening?"

He crawled over to her, holding up her head. "What's wrong?"

"I... I cannot feel my body."

Michael lifted her hand and saw how it was slowly growing cold and hard.

Suddenly she quieted as a smile came over her face.

Michael watched as she changed, becoming the goddess once more.

"I am sorry for scaring you," she said, gripping his hand. "I cannot exist in this world.

But at least I can pass over with the knowledge that you are safe."

"Dominique? No. No, don't leave. Please. Tell me how I can save you."

"It is... too late. I think, however, that you will know what to do when I am gone. Time works in strange ways. You will see."

"But..."

"Goodbye."

Michael watched as her body hardened into stone. Suddenly it was too much and his tears fell freely.

Jonas sat up, gripping his head. He glanced down at his body, but found himself unharmed. Looking around, he saw each person came to awareness. He watched as events unfolded, but couldn't find an ounce of pity for their personal losses. Instead,

elation washed over him, but he knew it wasn't his own. It had been so long since he had been in the domed room that it took him some time to recognise it. Dumbfounded, he realised then his mistake. He had let the boy choose their destination. Stumbling to his feet, he noticed the four people who hadn't come through the book with them. Three of them, the two women and the one man he recognised at once as the runespeakers he had approached with his father's novel. And the room... it was the one they had created in order to bring the book to life. But they had only partially succeeded, he recalled. The book had sealed itself against them. And there it was, in the centre of the room.

Jonas looked around for the second man, realising the danger they were both in. If they killed him....

He saw his other self then, already an old man, and moved to protect him, when Jonas gave a lurch. He started to convulse as he fell over. The darkness within him seared through his veins and purged itself from his body. A dark sphere of smoke escaped into the room, pulsing near the ceiling. A heavy weight had suddenly been lifted from his soul and his mind was awash with his conscience. Guilt threatened to overwhelm him as he tried to reach his other self. His eyes widened in shock when his reaching arm began to wither, his body aging before his eyes. The five hundred years he had spent in Caiy'n ate away at him, his last thought only that the Jonas before him might suffer a different fate.

Michael could only watch in horror as his grandfather faded into dust. But he had no time to consider the implications as the great dark sphere began to descend towards the Caiy'n book. And it was then that he realised the awful truth. The evil that Mikael had so valiantly fought against knew through Jonas that it had no hope of overcoming fate and prophecy. Now it sought the world in its entirety, to twist and remake it as it saw fit.

Michael couldn't let it happen, not now. He raced over to his sword, pulling it from Cannaugh's body. Turning towards the centre of the room, he accosted the cloud.

"Stop! I won't let you ruin that world like you did my grandfather."

"You would stop me, little creature?" boomed the creature's voice throughout the room.

"I think not."

Anger poured through Michael as he called upon his rune powers. "Hagalaz!" he screamed, the lightning pulsing through his sword into the cloud. But unlike his previously successful attempts, the cloud only seemed to absorb his power and grow larger.

"You face me as though I were another of your human opponents. You cannot conceive of the scope of that which I am, and such will be Caiy'n's doom." The cloud descended even further, condensing into a tight ball, poised over the book.

Michael sank down, defeated, but noticed that the cloud didn't move.

"Michael!" He looked at the far end of the room. Sergi was near the door, pulling something from it. "It's locked out. We still have time." He flung the object towards Michael, who caught it out of the air. It was a crystal. And suddenly he understood. Caiy'n had been created out of both runic and crystal power. If the darkness was immune to his *rune* abilities in this world... He lurched forward, dropping his sword, and plunged the crystal into the sphere. There was a terrific screeching sound as it expanded and contracted, flinging itself around the room.

Sergi grabbed Michael by the arm. "We have to do something. I don't think that quite did the trick."

Michael was taken aback slightly with the physical contact. Not because it was another person but because it was Sergi, with a body of his own. The moment passed, however, as he heard one of the women scream. Michael looked over, recognising a much younger Inyanga holding a woman closely. He knew where they had come back to, but the when of it baffled him. Why were they here, now?

"We need to ask Msizi," said Sergi, and Michael wondered if he had asked his question out loud.

They hurried over to him. Jackson was holding his head, which was bleeding profusely.

"It's quite bad," he said. "I'm putting pressure but it's not helping much."

Michael racked his brain, but it was harder to know which rune to use without Sergi in his head. "Damn it, we need to heal him."

"I would," said Jackson, "but my power's gone."

Michael smiled despite himself. "Who knew you'd be fit to make a Ru Lord?"

"I hardly think this is the time for a reunion," said Sergi. "Just tell Michael the rune."

“Uruz. It was the first thing the Mahj taught me.”

“Okay, lift his head up closer,” said Michael as he placed his hand against the wound.

“Uruz!” Energy pulsed through his hand, melting away the blood and pulling the skin together into a single line.

Msizi’s eyes flickered, then opened fully. “What happened? Is everyone alright?”

“You’re the one we’re worried about,” said Michael. “It’s good to see you.”

Msizi smiled. “You too.”

“Thanks. But we need to hurry. Sergi said you were the one who chose this time and place. We need to know why.”

“I read,” began Msizi, stopping as he took some deep breaths. “Sorry. I read a little ahead. This was when Jonas and the others brought the Caiy’n book to life.”

“Jonas?” asked Michael.

“Yes.”

“But then that means...” Michael looked around and saw the old man a little away from the Inyanga. “That’s him over there,” said Michael, recognising him from when he first appeared during the battle between Mikael and the dark creature.

“Weren’t we supposed to kill him?” said Jackson. “Stop him from entering Caiy’n?”

“That was your plan?” said Michael. He glanced at the dark sphere, slowing now, but still screeching in pain. “I don’t think it’s Jonas we need to worry about. That crystal won’t keep that thing at bay for long. There must have been another reason, Msizi. You could have chosen any time to kill Jonas.”

“There was. Another reason, that is. This was also when they first tried to open the lock. According to what I read, this was when they released the Paper Plague. I thought we could save Earth as well.”

The implications of such a thing sent them all reeling. The entire world as they knew it would be changed.

“But,” began Jackson, “we can’t. We’ll be changing the past, our past. What’ll happen to us, in the future?”

“We’re already changing things by being here,” said Sergi.

“The Paper Plague is different, though. It’s been a defining factor in our history for, for ages,” said Jackson.

"It's destroying the world, Uncle."

Jackson turned away, not willing to let his nephew see his fear.

"I don't see the problem," Msizi tried again. "We can save the human race from destruction."

"We can't," said Michael. "There's a reason we came here, to this time. And it's more than just being Msizi's choice. We can use the Plague to destroy this evil."

"What? No, Michael."

"Think about it. What's the Plague but a concentrated burst of electromagnetic and runic energy? It's powerful enough to have affected the entire world and continue to do so after thirty years. It's our only weapon. It has to work."

"I think you're right," said Sergi. "And if we're going to do anything, it has to be now."

Michael faced Msizi, seeing the boy's hope destroyed. "I'm sorry. But this is how it has to be. We'll still be saving a world. Just not our own."

Msizi finally nodded, reluctantly.

"You said you read on. How did they set off the Plague?"

"It was your grandfather. He was so angry when a portal to Caiy'n didn't appear that he twisted the lock randomly."

"You mean it was chance? Anything could have happened?" Michael looked towards his grandfather. "I suppose there's no other way." He took a deep breath and hurried over to where Jonas stood, confusion written across the man's brow.

"Who... what are you? Are you from the world? Did you come through the portal?"

Michael realised then that Jonas thought he had succeeded. He didn't know about the lock. Michael needed to make him angry. "No, Jonas, it didn't work. Your plan failed. You see that pile of dust? That's you. That's what you become. And you see that dark cloud? That is an evil beyond anything you could have ever conceived. And you brought it here, Jonas. Now it's going to destroy us all."

Jonas' face flittered with all sorts of emotion before a steady anger began to grow. "No! You're lying. I would never do such a thing. All I ever wanted was to save Earth. We need the resources."

"To save Earth? You mean you wanted the fame and glory."

"I..." Doubt flittered across his face.

“Do you see a portal? There isn’t one. But you can still succeed. The book has a lock on it. Open it, if you can.”

Anger flared openly across Jonas’ face, and he pushed Michael away, kneeling before the book. “I’ll show you. I will succeed!” He twisted the lock.

EPILOGUE

Michael gazed at the statue, tears trailing down his cheeks.

Msizi walked forwards and placed the book in her outstretched palm.

Sergi gripped Michael's shoulder. "Ready?"

"Sure." He placed his hand over the book. "Jera." The stone from Dominique's hand enveloped her world, fulfilling her duty. "Now I know why they call this place a tomb." He laughed. "She was the true Vordir."

"She was a brave one," said Jackson. "Only black beauty in a white world."

"You really need to explain that," said Michael. "She had white skin as far as I could see."

Sergi nodded.

"She made us see what we needed to see," said Msizi suddenly.

"I suppose that makes sense," said Sergi.

"When did you become so accepting?" asked Michael, a hint of the old banter returning.

"When I realised that we don't have to repeat history. The tomb may be here, and Dominique, but the shadow surrounding it has gone. We have changed things. And I think we still can."

"We're thirty years behind our time. Do you think we can remake our world?"

"You mean we can still save South Africa?" asked Msizi.

"Sure," said Michael, "why not? As long as we don't run into ourselves."

"You haven't even been born yet," said Sergi.

"I suppose you're right."

"We can all still be heroes," said Jackson as they began to leave. "As long as I don't end up fathering myself. I don't think I'll ever be able to live it down."

The End

Mr. R Williams

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Faculty of Humanities, Development & Social Sciences

A critical reflection on the writing process of “Worlds Within Words”.

I affirm that this essay is my own work and that all acknowledgements have been properly made.

Signed: ... 

Date: ... 04/04/2008

If you ask me how to shine in the science-fiction line as a pro of luster
 bright,
 I say, practice up the lingo of the sciences, by jingo (never mind if not
 quite right).
 You must talk of Space and Galaxies and tesseractic
 fallacies in slick and mystic style,
 Though the fans won't understand it, they will all the same demand it
 with a softly hopeful smile.

And all the fans will say,
 As you walk your spatial way,
 If that young man indulges in flights through all
 the Galaxy,
 Why, what a most imaginative type of man that type
 of man must be.

So success is not a mystery, just brush up on your history,
 and borrow day by day.
 Take an Empire that was Roman and you'll find it is at home in all the
 starry Milky Way.
 With a drive that's hyperspatial, through the parsecs you will race,
 you'll find that plotting is a breeze,
 With a tiny bit of cribbin' from the works of
 Edward Gibbon and that Greek, Thucydides.

And all the fans will say,
 As you walk your thoughtful way,
 If that young man involves himself in authentic history,
 Why, what a very learned kind of high IQ, his high IQ must be.

Then eschew all thoughts of passion of a man-and-woman fashion from
 your hero's thoughtful mind.
 He must spend his time on politics, and thinking up his shady tricks, and
 outside that he's blind.
 It's enough he's had a mother, other females are a bother, though they're
 jeweled and glistery.
 They will just distract his dreaming and his necessary
 scheming with that psychohistory.

And all the fans will say
 As you walk your narrow way,
 If all his yarns restrict themselves to masculinity,
 Why, what a most particularly pure young man that pure young man
 must be.

Isaac Asimov "The Foundation of SF Success"

Introduction

The first question I ask myself before beginning any writing project is why I've decided to write in a particular genre, or in a particular style. When I asked that question before starting 'Worlds Within Words' the answer was simple: to do justice to the fantasy (predominantly) and science fiction genres and create something original with the potential for serious critique. I've always believed that these two genres have suffered under those critics who feel that they exist outside the scope of "serious literature" (Prothero, 1990) and don't offer anything worthwhile besides a few hours of tame escapism. The fact remains, however, that these critics can cite many examples of the worst of the genres, so in many ways this was my way of discovering whether they actually had something worthwhile to offer to the corpus of 'serious' literature.

The most important aspect, and the one which informed the structuring of the novel, was the nature of the marketing schemes surrounding these two genres. If many book stores and libraries believe that their similarities outweigh their differences enough to place them on the same shelves so as to be indistinct from each other, there must be some cause. One school of thought revolves around expectation. Because they are such distinct subgenres, more so than thriller or crime novels, which are more mainstream, they are placed in a generic subgenre section because they 'supposedly' appeal to a very specialised core readership, which in turn would expect these novels to be separate and easier to find. To support this, many publishers use stereotypical cover illustrations to further distinguish these novels as being science fiction and fantasy. And while I'm not so much concerned with the subgenres' distinction with mainstream fiction as I am with the distinction between fantasy and science fiction, the fact that these two genres are emphasised in terms of convention suggests that archetypes and formulae are important to both. In order to best understand these similarities and differences, I decided to write a novel incorporating both genres while attempting to keep them as distinct as possible. In this way I hoped to explore the benefit of purposefully combining the genres in order to discover where this perceived overlap is determined. What this also meant was that I would have to write within convention. However, if I was to stick to the generally conventional formulae set out for science fiction and fantasy, the question of originality

becomes important. It can be argued that many science fiction and fantasy authors attempt originality through convention, but I've found that while their originality tends to extend as far as creating an original fantastic species, my own originality lies in the way I've attempted to undermine convention itself. The following reflexive essay follows this writing journey.

Literary Origins: Fantasy

At the outset of my novel planning, the question of genre was seemingly simple. In order to best incorporate the science fiction and fantasy elements yet keep them distinctive, I would write a 'twin worlds' (my own term) novel (whereby the protagonist travels between present-day Earth and a fantasy world). The following describes the nature of my fantasy world:

I would concentrate on writing specifically within the high/epic fantasy subgenre and in so doing create a new world in which fantastic events would occur, hence the creation of Caiy'n. In formulaic terms, the fantasy plot must necessarily contain: a battle between good and evil; a heroic protagonist who must mature into his role as a leader and commander of armies and possibly learn of a greater heritage; a recognisable medieval setting hence the lack of modern technology; magic of some form; some object of power and a quest to discover this object which will in turn be used to defeat evil. Each of these elements, so nicely set out in the introduction to the *Rivan Codex* (1998:7), a novel by top-selling high fantasy author David Eddings, must in some way be present in order for the novel to be placed within this category. The problem I found, as I suggested in the introduction, was that high fantasy had, as a subgenre, become stale and overused as hundreds of authors churned out this formula ad infinitum. My fervour for these novels had waned dramatically as each new one I discovered was in many ways a carbon copy of some other I had read. In terms of being original with my own novel, I knew that I would have to attempt something very different.

Through the consideration of the myriad of elements contained within fantasy novels, I believed that the genre wasn't necessarily a waste of my time, nor were my answers to be

found outside the bounds of formula. I pursued two ideas in an attempt to bring life back into my own novel. The first was to use the conventions contained within formula with the purpose of emphasizing my knowledge of them, though not to such a degree that it might wander into comedic parody. By highlighting conventional aspects of the genre, I might turn them on their head, so to speak, and discover something original. My second idea was to bring a character from outside of Caiy'n that could recognize the inherent conventionality and so behave as a literary commentator. In other words, I would approach the genre self-reflexively. The question then remained: in what way could this aid me in my drive to be original? The truth is that I wasn't certain. In hindsight, however, I can suggest that it was the approach more so than the outcome that allowed for originality. By using both Sergi and Jackson (two of my characters) as somewhat ironic critics, many different conventions could be considered in a critical light without being done away with. The next important question to answer is whether I managed to implement any of these grand plans. What I can say is that despite Sergi's warnings and Jackson's complaints during the course of the story, neither one of these characters divert the protagonist from his quest. Thus, while convention is being questioned and reconsidered, it does so on the premise that I, as the author, am aware that despite this, it is still being adhered to, for not to do so would defeat the purpose of the novel.

In order for these characters to take note of the conventions of fantasy and make the necessary comments, their own world would, out of necessity, need to act as a contrast. Furthermore, the characters' perspectives would need to be similar to that of my readership, resulting in my choice for the second of the twin worlds, a recognisably modern, yet slightly futuristic, Earth. The twin worlds idea has been used by many authors (Stephen Donaldson, Mark Anthony and Terry Brooks to name a few) so it's not a new concept. What I discovered, especially considering that these twin worlds novels have been dubbed as high fantasy and not a blending of fantasy and, for example, realism is that these authors concentrated the majority of the action within the fantasy world. When I say majority I am referring to the physical length of the novel, but I'm also talking about the emphasis placed on building up the fantasy world as well as the significance it has on the characters involved. Thus, in my drive for originality, I wanted

to move outside the boundaries of the traditional twin worlds model, which I attempted in three ways. Firstly, I made certain that I would not only write within both worlds equally, in terms of length, but would make sure that each world was equally developed and equally significant. Secondly, the Earth setting would be set thirty years in the future. Thirdly, the fantasy world would not be some parallel magical world, but would in fact be a world based on a novel written by the protagonist's great grandfather. This not only emphasizes the literary nature of Caiy'n, but provides some leeway in terms of convention in that the emphasising of formula would no longer seem contrived. Caiy'n would literally exist within the pages of a novel, and the Earth characters would, by entering the fantasy world, enter a novel. And because of the nature of a novel, with its set number of events, locations, characters etc, by placing outsiders within this timeline, they can affect it by their very presence (I conjure up images of Steven Spielberg's *Back to the Future* trilogy where the protagonist goes back in time and, by changing the past, affects the world's future). In doing this, the protagonist and his companions take on the traditional heroic roles in an effort to correct the imbalances their presence has created.

One aspect of fantasy which is continually criticised is its tendency to concentrate on developing plot and setting, in effect sidelining the creation of believable, well-crafted characters, resulting in glorified place-fillers (See *Lord of the Rings* and *Eragon* as examples). While I realise that this is a symptom of working within strict convention, now that I consider my own character creation, I would suggest that it's one of my strengths, despite the fact that in the past I've often been accused of developing rather wooden characters. Because of my relatively unplanned manner of writing, besides setting out basic plot points, I attempted to put myself in the position of my characters and allow their emotions to guide me. A good example of this occurs in chapter 15 where Jackson grabs Michael's sword and places it in Dominique's hands, causing her to disappear. This event was wholly unplanned and a pure reaction to Jackson's anger and frustration. In fact, Dominique's disappearance was also a spur of the moment decision, resulting in consequences which I had to work through in tandem with my characters. Now, I'm sure this approach isn't something completely unheard of, but it is something which I feel that I need to explore. As a writer I do believe that my own personal context

informs the nature of my characters to a certain extent. Michael, for example, embodies many of my own qualities, while Sergi embodies more of my quirkiest ones. However, while instilling my characters with some of my own traits may be a starting point, because both Michael and Sergi experience situations and make decisions outside of my own scope of experience, they evolve in their own unique way. I will admit to having made many of their decisions long beforehand, but the way in which the characters come to make them is taken out of my own hands. I believe the way in which my characters approach situations, regardless whether the literal outcome is a foregone conclusion or not, results in the originality of even the most archetypal of characters.

Literary Origins: Science Fiction

I now turn to the second aspect of the twin worlds idea: my Earth of the future. Science fiction is a broad term which can encompass many different aspects, so the simplest way I could define it was by using Darko Suvin's theory of the novum (Bowers, 2004:30), whereby science fiction must incorporate something new and previously non-existent into the story, such as time travel, new technology, space travel etc. Obviously this definition doesn't necessarily tie itself to science, as fantasy and magic could just as easily fall into this category. Suvin overcomes this by suggesting that the novum must arise from what the author considers to be empirically real, thus severing any ties to fantasy and the supernatural, which find their place within the impossible made real. Suvin compliments this by stating that "those things [the nova] are explicable within or by extension of known science." (Bowers, 2004:30) Part One of my novel fits this theory on the basis that the catalyst event upon which society is now based is technological in nature. Granted, it is eventually discovered that the plague destroys language and not paper, but by that stage the novel has moved enough into the fantastic that it no longer matters. Regardless, a plague which destroyed all language except for runes was an idea which tied into the importance of language and history and would not only reinforce the importance of technology as a last viable device for memory, but emphasizes the importance of the fantasy world of Caiy'n as being the last viable novel on Earth, issuing it with a significance it may not have deserved in terms of its literary quality (It should be known

that runes, which served as the basis for the Paper Plague, were not an arbitrary choice for a magical language. The structured nature of the alphabet appealed in terms of its use as an alternate written language and system of magic based on its history as a tool for divination). Once I made the decision to utilize a world where such a plague might occur, it became clear that the treatment of this world would need to be just as well thought out for fear of being accused of not fully understanding the complexities of the genre I would be using (Images of threatening Trekkies abound). Because science fiction has become such a large part of popular culture, in no small part thanks to the film industry, it has also become susceptible to mass critique and, with the help of the internet, the creation of large fan bases. I spoke of fan expectation in terms of finding a particular genre on a particular shelf in bookstores, but it extends to content and style as well. Because science fiction tends toward a specific core readership (I hesitate to say fanatical), their expectation of what constitutes science fiction and subsequent feedback to publishers, is very important as it can have an impact on those novelists attempting to break into the niche market .

Science fiction, in its broadest terms, can be broken down into two essential models in terms of setting: the 'other worlds' model, and that which concerns Earth specifically. The former can be likened to fantasy where the rules can be created out of improbabilities, as long as it follows the semblance of rational, empirical logic. A good example is the 'warp' technology in *Star Trek*, which is theoretically impossible. However, because the show posits it in pseudo-scientific terms, its plausibility is allowed in the realm of the TV series so long as the science isn't taken to such extremes that any kind of leeway is no longer possible. Those novels set in a recognisable Earth setting, in contrast, tend to be criticised by hardcore science fiction readers and writers alike if they do not remain within the realms of viable, or at the very least logical, future technology based on present scientific discoveries. In a recent article by *Times Online* (2007), science fiction author Brian Aldiss uses the example of Steven Spielberg's *AI* as a film with an intriguing premise which "toppled over into whimsy and fantasy" because of its "lapses in logic."

(http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article2961480.ece) What I have found in my own writing is that a certain amount of referentiality, (Green, 1997:18) in terms of technology, is lauded because it can then more potently reflect the state of current affairs. To clarify this point, if the technology is in any sense jarring or unbelievable in its inception, the social issues dealt with in the novel suffer in the wake of a weak baseline (I cannot say with utmost certainty that this holds true for every science fiction novel or author, but I can definitely say that some measure of authenticity can only enhance the writing and plausibility of the plot). When considering a Paper Plague on Earth, I felt that it might benefit the ultimate purpose of this project to concoct as believable future as was possible based on this unanticipated event as it could only emphasise the formulaic yet fantastic nature of Caiy'n by creating a more believable contrast.

Science fiction, realism, and even fantasy, may seem to be worlds apart in terms of what the two genres consider to be 'real', but are in certain ways alike. Realism, in "it's selection of subject matter privileges the average, the ordinary, the everyday... and its mode of representation favours the creation of a sense of actual experience." (Green, 1997:18) Fantasy and science fiction share similarities with realism in that they use a similar technique called verisimilitude to convince the reader that the worlds they create are 'real'. I attempted to utilise this technique by making a concerted effort to incorporate any strange and new technologies (inherent to science fiction) into the mundane, every day cycle of life without making these creations the main focus. My first chapter shows this in perhaps greater detail than other chapters because I wanted my readers to understand that the future wasn't some idealistic godlike playground for humans. One couldn't for example, create items from molecules with the push of the button, as can be done in *Star Trek*. I had to let my reader know that while there were many new technological achievements such as the self-cleansing duvet, the future is not some grand utopia of spaceships and adventures.

Considering that the first half of my novel takes place within the Earth of the future, I find it's important to know the extent to which I utilized the science fiction setting i.e.

how essential is this genre to the plot above and beyond the uses I defined earlier? There are two ways of looking at setting: as a backdrop and as integral to the plot. According to award winning science fiction author, Orson Scott Card, this type of division goes hand in hand with 'hard' and 'soft' science as it relates to science fiction. (1990:45) Hard science describes fiction where the physical science is attributed with great importance and tends to be described in great detail, while, soft science tends to downplay the importance of the physical science and concentrate more on the social, political or economic issues of the future. (I say future but time need not be relative to human experience. The events could just as easily occur on a different planet sometime in Earth's relative past). I believe that my writing falls into the latter category because while science did affect the way in which my characters could approach their world, it didn't sit at the kernel of my novel. Unlike a novel like *1984*, by George Orwell, where the plot is imminently linked to the technology and the rules which created that world, in my novel the setting forms the backdrop of a far more personal journey. To echo Rubenstein "It seems that an enthusiasm and reverence for the romance and the possibility of science are of greater value than scientific knowledge as such." (1998:7)

Green suggests in *Novel Histories* (1997:248) that utopian future worlds are created as a means of resisting the present. In one sense they seem to offer a positive outcome, though, much like dystopian worlds, this future is conditional on some change being wrought in the present, with positive or negative consequences. Considering the future politics of my own novel, I would suggest that my overall future falls somewhere between the utopian and the dystopian (mostly) in the sense that certain places and people reek of despair and decay (Durban, especially), while others (Order of Tyr and True Africans in their seclusion) offer different alternatives and means of adapting (Once again 'soft' science fiction encompasses this, though perhaps the term "social science fiction" (Schwartz, 1971:1044), a term coined by *Astounding Science Fiction* editor John W. Campbell in 1938, is more appropriate). At the same time, these settings and characters reflect the cyclical nature of history epitomised by struggle, whether passive or aggressive. I believe the importance of the novel lies in the themes and social intricacies that are explored as well as the balance of past and future that's evoked through the

characters living within these places. In fact, I would suggest that it's the characters and their search for stability and identity in a constantly shifting world that marks the heart of this novel. A question remains, however. While the science fiction world and, to a degree, the fantasy world, are approached from a realist framework, from what mode do characters, and the story itself, stem? My answer, as much surprising to me as it was to my supervisor (who made the connection), is colonial Romance.

Literary Mode: Romance

According to *Romance* by Barbara Fuchs, the titular genre began in classical Greece with Homer's *Odyssey* leading up to the fourth century with Heliodorus' *Ethiopica*, featuring romantic courtships strung together amidst kidnappings, exotic wonderings and dangers barely avoided, until the lovers can return to each other, never once having succumbed to another's entices. (2004:33) As Romance spread across Europe, different countries appropriated certain parts, like the French who made it a part of their poetry canon, leaving no doubt as to why their language is considered romantic. Medieval Romance flourished in the English courts with tales such as *King Arthur* and many of Chaucer's works, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*. However, the term Romance itself was never coined until this period as a way of differentiating between the more academic works of the time. The Renaissance period saw a re-emergence of the genre as writers and poets looked back to classical antiquity for inspiration. It has even found a place in the modern world, though realism, which has been around since the 18th century with novels like *Robinson Crusoe* (Watt, 1957), has overshadowed Romance in the past hundred years or so in terms of popularity. (1957:33) While Romance may have differed greatly over the years in terms of form, length and language, there are a number of core elements which form the basis for the genre. Stiebel describes Romance as "grand dreams of wish fulfilment, ... deeds of heroism and its binary opposite, the fear of failure, [and] of dark menace from without." (2001:37) These conventions share much in common with those of fantasy, suggesting that the origins of this mode within my novel lie within the latter. On one hand this makes sense considering that the two genres share a close history, but I would argue that these aspects merely touch on the surface similarities inherent to the two

genres and that there are enough recognisable differences that set them apart. In terms of setting, fantasy worlds are generally new to both the reader and hero, while Romance generally starts out within some recognizable landscape before venturing into unknown regions. As regards the hero aspect, in fantasy, the convention is to use a hero who has yet to mature into his role. He starts off as a farm boy or someone of little importance who eventually discovers his own worth. Through his discovery of the world and magic, the reader learns as well. The Romantic hero, however, is traditionally a great knight or someone of great fame who had already established a reputation for great deeds. (Fuchs, 2004:39) The great evil in Romance is not necessarily a godlike force threatening to destroy the world, as it is in fantasy, but is generally far more localized (Consider Gagool in *King Solomon's Mines* or even Mordred from the tales of King Arthur to name but two). Names, in both fantasy and Romance, also vary. Where fantasy does at times to create mundane, though still fantastic, names in order to create a more believable world, Romance tends to use allegories in order to emphasise certain qualities. (Watt, 1957:18) Two things are made clear from this short comparison. Firstly, it is clear that origins of my use of Romance don't lie in fantasy. Secondly, I utilised every single one of these Romance conventions outside of the fantasy world. I could even argue more closely for the colonial Romance. Besides the fact that South Africa is a colonial country, or that my South Africa of the future is adjusting to colonisation of a different sort, the biggest clue is my protagonist. Wherever he goes he is reviled as being part of the colonising vanguard (Haggard's Alan Quartermain is another example) because of his accent, despite the fact that South Africa is his birth nation. One question still remains, however. How did I stumble into Romance?

The answer, I believe, is a personal one based on my relationship with my home nation. South Africa has a history of being the gateway into Africa with so many Romances involving this country exploring the magic and mystery of 'deepest, darkest Africa'. Because Romance traditionally combines the familiar with the unknown, and because South Africa is a land of dichotomy, it seems, in hindsight, that writing within this particular mode, the colonial Romance as it were, feels perfectly natural. I would conclude that while the action takes place within both conventional science fiction and

fantasy settings, the Romance mode sets the tone for almost every aspect of the novel, including character, setting and plot because I draw my inspiration from personal memories of place and people based on a strong sense of colonial identity. For example, choosing to set the first half of my novel (the science fiction), within South Africa was not my initial intention. The biggest issue with my original, nondescript setting within America was that it both distanced myself as a writer from all of the different aspects that make up a novel (as mentioned above). The decision to set it within South Africa was a good personal decision because I could not only reinforce the realism of my science fiction setting, but it allowed me to layer my characters and settings with deeper, more personal, meaning.

I was better able to understand how the South Africa I had created came into being upon reading Jameson's view on Romance:

Romance as a form thus expresses a transitional moment...
 Its contemporaries must feel their society torn between
 past and future in such a way that the alternatives are
 grasped as hostile and somehow unrelated worlds.
 the archaic nature of the categories of romance (magic,
 good and evil, otherness) suggests that this genre expresses
 a nostalgia for a social order in the process of being
 undermined and destroyed by nascent capitalism,
 yet still for the moment co-existing side by side
 with the latter. (1975:158)

My South Africa of the future touches on each of these elements in some way. The first chapter takes place within Michael's house, a technological wonder-house controlled by artificial intelligence. From the self-cleansing duvet to the sonic shower and auto-breakfast cooker, it is the ultimate capitalist consumer dream. And yet Michael seems to find no satisfaction in the technology, and manages to find its small imperfections. He lives alone in the middle of a now empty game reserve with no one to disturb his tranquillity other than his AI friend, Sergi. In protecting himself from the dangers of the

world, he has also isolated himself from all outside influence and human contact. In this way Michael is torn, living in his own transitional moment, and yet the alternative, illustrated in the next chapter, is a 'wasteland' of fatal consumerism.

Durban, once the great tourist venue of South Africa, has become a true cesspool of stench and hopelessness. When Michael gags on the stench of the putrid ocean, nostalgia for the clean beaches of Cape Town surfaces. Because the fishing industry has been all but decimated, Durban's two main attractions have been destroyed, allowing it to become the seedy underbelly of the country.

Michael's brief visit to Francistown tells of a city striving to overcome adversity the best way it can. Through the use of new methods of currency and an older transport system, Michael realises that people always find a way to survive. But it is underneath the city where the Romance mode truly flourishes, as it is here that both traditional and the modern can survive without the threat of capitalism. The mines mirror Michael's house in its isolation, yet where the latter, by utilising technology of the future, finds itself ironically cut off from progress, the people within the mine cling to the hope of a better future through more nostalgic means, such as traditional medicines, oral history and magic.

Underberg and the Drakensberg mountains reflect a different kind of isolation. The rebels are the new resistance, not against racism, but imperialism and capitalism. They fight for the right to rule themselves and their own nation and use the same methods as Umkhonto we Sizwe during apartheid. For the True Africans, they can find purpose once more in the struggle for freedom. Unfortunately for most of those people who fought against apartheid, all they had was the struggle and could not find a place for themselves in the new South Africa. It must be noted that I did not intend for the rebels to mimic South African freedom fighters of old, but the similarities became obvious once I had written them in. Once again, there is civil war in South Africa, and much like the Middle East, there seems to be no true end to conflict.

I felt that landscape in my novel was just as important as it was to one of the pioneers of Romance, Rider Haggard. Haggard was skilled at using landscape as allegory in order to better describe the true nature of a place and its history in his own colonial Romances. I myself used a number of different visual areas not only because they best illustrate the different struggles occurring within the country, but because these are the places I can most strongly evoke through personal memory. For example, I used Durban because of my own, sometimes chilling memories of the beachfront and the way it made me feel at times. The Kruger National Park and the Drakensberg evoke the beauty and tranquillity of nature serving as a home for those people on the outskirts of society. But more than that it serves to remind the reader that South Africa will always be a frontier where neither side can truly be defeated, but continually struggle to find common ground. Francistown stemmed from my memories of growing up in Newcastle in Northern Kwa-Zulu Natal where I could understand how people strive to live away from the newer technologies of larger cities. In these places on the outskirts I find a strong sense of community and togetherness.

Caiy'n is a world which suffered many changes both to its geography and to its inhabitants. In its original conception, it was to be a completely fictional fantasy world which would be subject to the conventions of the genre. While in many ways this still holds true, the setting was enhanced to the point where it gained an identity through the changes made to the ruling structure of the three nations and through the introduction of a nomadic race of people, the Grasswalkers. The most important change which coincided with the creation of the Grasswalkers was the new map. I used the outline of South Africa in order to situate the reader more as well as forge a link between future South Africa and one which idealises a South Africa of the past, emphasised by the Zulu-like Grasswalkers. Caiy'n, more so than future South Africa, was the world in which the physical journey would take place. Because of the technology of future South Africa, the need for the physical journey was removed, allowing me to jump from location to location without much of the in-between lethargy. But with Caiy'n this was made impossible because the transport system consists of horses, mules, wagons and carriages. Therefore, because a lot of the character development takes place between the action, the

world gained an identity through character interaction. This is not to say that the fixed locations within Caiy'n did nothing to enhance the identity of the land, because it is through these locations and the events that take place there that both informs the reader of the type of world they're being introduced to as well as having a large impact upon the main characters. For example, Michael and Sergi are affected by the events within the small town of Thaenes in Caiy'n, resulting in the development of their darker personalities. It's during the journey stages that these characters come to terms with their own behaviour and can reflect on their interactions with the indigenous inhabitants, allowing them to make important decisions about the nature of their own identity and how it either clashes or amalgamates with the identity of the land.

Character and Identity

The following traces the creation of the main body of characters in the novel:

Michael O'Connor is a character born from feelings of inadequacy. He begins the story as a recluse. Because of the nature and abundance of technology in this world, he wants for nothing. He doesn't have to spend his life earning money to survive, which is where the idealism of Romance first creeps in. He can have grand adventures without a thought for any other necessity. But despite the fact that he is supposedly following his dream of discovering the world's mysteries, much like, once again, Alan Quartermain of old Haggardian Romance might, he spends that time brooding. In this way I have tried to concentrate on his inner conflict. Michael lives in South Africa yet remains separate. Michael can see how South Africa becoming an American state has renewed those conflicts thought to have died with apartheid and decides to remove himself from the equation like many South Africans have done by emigrating. It's only through his own curiosity, a necessary characteristic of any hero, that he is propelled along in the story until he reaches a point, namely the events in the nexus room, where he can't step back. I have often wondered at Michael's motivations and have concluded that he might never have had the courage had he not had Sergi with him, suggesting that friendship and loyalty are two strengths which can overcome any obstacle. I don't mean to seem

sentimental, but these two features, and I'm not saying they're the only ones, are the cornerstone of any typical Romance or fantasy. Michael is the centre of the novel as he is the one in which the reader must invest the most. But because a lot of his growth happens in Part One, he takes on an almost subsidiary role in part two as the other main characters come to terms with their own identities. This is why I felt comfortable in concentrating on characters like Sergi and Jackson who were also important to the narrative in their own way.

Sergi is in many ways the comic relief and berates Michael constantly, using irony and sarcasm in large doses. Beneath this not so carefully applied veneer, however, lies a frightened soul who longs to escape the confines of his artificial life and become something more than someone else's aide. One of the important questions involving Sergi, which is eventually answered, is how he is able to feel emotion. I never state it explicitly, but I attempt to suggest that emotional intelligence technology on such a level is not widely available in my science fiction world. It serves to emphasise Sergi's unique nature as well as creating a mystery as to his origins. Besides being Michael's only link to the outside world, Sergi keeps him motivated. He also prevents the entire novel from becoming one long melodrama. He is, despite his emotional outbursts, the most pragmatic of the characters and continually points out the flaws in Michael's logic. After he suffers his first transformation, however, his entire demeanour changes. I realise the tragedy inherent in not giving him a human body, but it was never my intention to give Sergi what he wanted. Nor was it my intention to make him such a tragic character. In terms of plot, his duty to Michael was not complete. In terms of convention, it took the idea of friendship and closeness to a completely different level. I will admit to getting the idea from Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time*. The difference, however, is that the relationship between the characters in Jordan's novels was antagonistic from the outset while the emotional bond between Michael and Sergi made this symbiotic relationship far more complex. Once Sergi realises that he can't escape his fate, I felt that I would be able to tap into the darker side of his character. The initial reason for this was because Sergi was never just going to be the sidekick. He was in fact going to be the original Dark Lord of Caiy'n, and allowing his darker side to emerge would be a signal to the reader. The

reason I didn't choose that route were manifold, beginning with the fact that Sergi would no longer be a character with depth, but a vessel for stereotypical emotions. Secondly, Sergi was already such a tragic character that to reveal this information might have destroyed his credibility as a believable character. To reveal his true nature as being that of the grand, yet somewhat archaic, hero of old, Mikael, seemed to suit the nature of the story because I believed it might appeal to Sergi's sense of humour. It also served to revive the Sergi of Part One. In the end, however, Sergi developed his own identity apart from Mikael, which I thought was vital because it meant that he was not merely filling a role, but had become his own person.

Jackson and Msizi are two characters who went through the least amount of editing in terms of their personalities, despite the fact that they originally had white skin. The decision to make them black helped in allowing me to show the extent to which even native South Africans had absorbed the American lifestyle. Jackson's speech and mannerisms are all suggestive of a cavalier lifestyle generally unknown within the more traditional African homes. Even though he has a basic general knowledge of his own cultural history, he is clearly the product of a more modern mindset. While I decided not to force the issue of culture versus modernity, I did hint at such a conflict between the leader of the True Africans and Jackson where Londisizwe views Jackson as a traitor to his own country. Jackson's cavalier attitude ultimately protects his at times fragile state of mind from any threat to his own sense of normality resulting in a personality which can at times be grating to an outward observer (An example would be his interactions in the jail cell in Part Two). Because Sergi's personality becomes a lot darker and more introverted, I used Jackson more and more as the comic relief. It made sense that there would be at least one character who might have trouble believing in the fantasy world, so I used him as my literary critic of sorts as he points out inconsistencies which might not be apparent to the others who wanted to believe wholeheartedly in this new world. I do believe that Jackson is the character who was least changed by his experiences, but I do think he came to respect life a lot more as realised the responsibilities he had as guardian to his nephew.

Msizi is a young boy who views everything that happens as a great adventure. Despite many of the hardships he might endure, he is ever the eternal optimist and idealist. Even when events take a turn for the worse and there seems to be no hope, he is the one character who is able to lift the mood and spur on the other characters. In one sense this makes him a sidekick in the truest sense of the word. He is smart, somewhat precocious, but I needed him to be the one character that saw everything as being fresh and new and something to be admired and experienced. In this way he rounded out the group of companions. Both he and Jackson were given Romantic and metaphor-rich names to further enhance their characters. Msizi in Zulu means to be helpful, which is the role he provides throughout the novel. Near the end he becomes a *geth*, a martial helper to the Ru Lords, and reaches the pinnacle of his personality. Jackson's surname, Matebele, evokes thoughts of the strong-willed Matebele tribe in Plaatje's *Mhudi*. In this way Jackson had a name to live up to, resulting in the realisation of his own strength. The ending for both of these characters was difficult to write because they would both lose something important to them. Jackson loses his newly-gained rune powers, which, while being a blow to his ego, makes him realise his own self-worth. The part of Msizi which was disabused was his idealism. Because I've made the assertion that my novel is primarily character-based, it's important to me as a writer that the events have some permanent impact on the way they view life. And even though Msizi is a relatively minor character, his choice based on his idealistic view on life ultimately proves to have been the best choice for the companions' survival.

The first thing to note about Shona and the Inyanga are their names. I used the name Shona because I wanted my readers to know that the type of divination she used as well as the language she spoke are Shona in origin (A Romantic technique which I thought might be effective). She also illustrates how traditional culture can survive in a changing world by adapting without losing any of their cultural specifics. I attempted to show this by blending authentic Shona four-tablet divination with runic symbols. The Inyanga is in many ways her male counterpart, though being in a leadership position has forced to become a little more tolerant of outsiders. I chose to use his title only in order to show how he had taken on that role completely. The Inyanga, being a traditional African

healer, also took on the role of the Romantic tutelary figure, helping Michael understand his powers and take responsibility for them.

Jonas was the last of the major characters to be introduced, yet was the one who had the most impact on events. While he only appears towards the very end, the reader realises that he was the one, or more accurately the darkness within him, pulling the strings from the beginning. I never intended for him to be the stereotypical bad guy, however, though the darkness that takes over his body is meant to represent the typical evil found in fantasy. Jonas was merely attempting to discover a new world and in the process do justice to his father's failed novel. Unfortunately, his pride and fear of death are two weaknesses which allow him to be exploited without his knowledge. Michael's family was always something I left open to interpretation. One can surmise that his parents are dead and that he is an only child from the way he behaves and by the fact that he never once mentions his parents as though they were alive, so for him to suddenly realise that he is not completely alone has a large impact. It's also something which Jonas exploits, though it is done in a subtle manner. The most important aspect of his character is the fact that he is always in control. In his contact with Michael, Jonas bears down on Michael's resolve and finds the chinks in his grandson's armour. In terms of identity, Jonas reflects Michael in more ways than mere physical attributes. He embodies the type of soulless existence Michael might have eventually succumbed to had he continued to live as he was. Michael needed to face that alternative in order to realise just how far he had come and that the choices he made, while seemingly out of his control, were still his to make. The one problem I did have when writing Jonas was his voice. He originates from Earth, but has been on Caiy'n for over 500 hundred years. What I attempted was to have him use archaic words with a few contractions here and there to reflect his varied heritage, and make the reader aware that not even Jonas is immune to the things he tries to control.

The last character I shall mention is one of the very few strong female characters I have in the entire novel. While I can argue for the dominance of the male role in terms of a 'boy's own adventure' Romance, I was aware of the lack of any strong female character. The reason that she is possibly the most idealised character of all is because of who she is

meant to represent. Dominique is the avatar of the spirit of Caiy'n, a gaia-like creature who occasionally guides Michael. The human form she uses is meant to both idealise and represent the world of Caiy'n as it could be if Michael succeeds. The idealisation is thus not arbitrary, for even though this is the form she initially reveals to Michael, he helps her to form her own identity. She does have a mandate, or purpose, however, which can at times cause her to seem cold and single-minded. Her language usage, for example, can seem stilted as though she were trying too hard to be something she wasn't quite comfortable with, though this explains her character rather concisely. In one sense she can never have her own identity, which is only made more difficult by the fact that she can change her appearance at will. Not only that, but she can appear differently to many people simultaneously. But one aspect of her which seems secure is her duty to her world and to show Michael and the others what they would be saving. Her sacrifice at the end is very much a part of that duty, though something of her burgeoning humanity does surface when she panics before turning to stone. In one sense she is a glorified tour guide of Caiy'n trying desperately to convince Michael of the worthiness of her world. But I rather think that this almost single-minded duty is something of a protection for her, allowing her the courage to complete her mission.

One last aspect that I must interrogate is the nature of my female characters. I personally don't find it important that there are only two because I created them as the story required it. I would also argue that while on the whole the story can be likened to a 'boys own adventure' I hardly think that Shona and Dominique are in any way inferior to their male counterparts. In fact I would suggest that their characteristics allow for more personal strength than any of the male characters. Shona, for example, finds strength in her divining arts, often bullying the Inyanga to her way of thinking. Just because she appears in traditional garb does not mean that she adheres to the traditional view of femininity. Dominique, despite the fact that she uses her beauty as a means of persuasion, initially appears to Michael et al in full armour, belying any soft characteristics she might possess. In fact, she ends up being the de facto leader in Caiy'n as well as leading the council of war later on. Their confidence in themselves is what makes them so strong, and while

they might not pick up weapons and go rushing off to war, their strength and leadership qualities outweigh most of their male counterparts.

Conclusion

The process of writing this novel was a labour of both love and hate where, by the tenth read over, I felt as though the victory of writing that last word had been quashed. One often forgets that writing includes rewriting, but there also comes a time when a writer has to be satisfied and move on. That moment, after months of drafts, has arrived and I feel as though I can neither add nor take anything away. My final draft is, for all intents and purposes, better than the original in terms of structure, character development and voice (a constant struggle amid such a myriad of characters and backgrounds), but in many ways it is no longer the story I intended to tell from the beginning. It has become an amalgam of all I have learned, everything I attempted to keep from my original conception, and everything that had to be added in order to balance the story elements convincingly. In terms of my original mandate, I believe my novel follows the basic structure I set out for myself. However, while fantasy and science fiction may have been the starting point for this novel, I feel as if it has taken itself in an unexpected direction. I discovered that a story worth taking seriously begins with strong characters. Formulaic conventions help to guide the plot, but I can see how they can overwhelm any author to the point where the characters don't have something new and different to contribute to literature, resulting in the plethora of tame escapism on the market. My attempt to undermine convention was a lesson in itself. I found that humour, in some parts, was one of the best ways to facilitate this, though at times I thought even that might have been taken to an unnecessary level. Regardless, by commenting, either directly through the characters or through their actions, on the conventions, I found that I was able to delve deeper into my characters' emotional fonts as their own fears and insecurities emerged to confront both worlds. The last important factor that I came to realise is that while science fiction and fantasy may have surface differences, the fact that I was able to bridge them through Romance suggests that book stores and publishers understand where the similarities lie.

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Worlds Within Words

By Ross Williams

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Creative Component submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for degree of Masters of English (Creative Writing in the Faculty of Humanities, Development & Social Sciences.

“Worlds Within Words”

I affirm that this manuscript is my own work and that all acknowledgements have been properly made.

Signed: 

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I would like to dedicate this to my grandmother, Moira de Wet, whose constant, unconditional support of my writing spurred me on to greater heights.

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*PROLOGUE**Last Chapter: A World Within Words*

I am watching.

The river sighed alongside the bank while reeds quivered in the delicate autumn wind.

Crickets chirruped softly, quieting as the forest loomed ahead, silent and still.

Lialh knelt, grasping the loose, loamy soil, allowing it fall through his fingers. He studied the ground before him, noting where it was soft and wet, and recently trodden. Rubbing two fingers together, he felt how the moist air flowing off the river would eventually cover the residue of their passing.

He needed to be swift. "Ansuz..." He allowed the spell to filter through his tongue before escaping his lips.

Small, incandescent wisps escaped Lialh's fingers and the tiny droplets of water shifting in the air began to glow. Some fell away, burnt alive, but those which remained floated away on a hidden current, forging a trail through the close shadows and ever-increasing whispers which burdened the forest.

Lialh sprang from path to path, his lips still sounding out the spell, when the lights vanished and darkness encompassed him.

Relaxing his muscles from their sudden tension, he whispered words recalled from his training. "Raidho."

His senses moved outward, expanding through and beyond the trees, whose bark spoke to him of great suffering and terrible shame that they had allowed themselves to be used so.

His senses were dulled to all danger, but the haunted trees screamed for him to flee.

The shadows and darkness were not natural, that much was obvious. If Mahj Geth Master Rigel had taught him anything, it was to believe in his gut, before landing two fists in that very pit, felling him to the ground. Lialh knew then the truth of his wisdom.

Unstrapping Mikael, a sword like no other he'd ever encountered, he held the onyx-encrusted hilt loosely in his right hand. Feeling for the last time with his extended senses, he flung out with his left hand, screaming a single word with blinding intensity. "Kenaz!" A ball of pure white light streamed from his fingers, coalescing in a perfect sphere above his head, stunning with its brilliance. Shouts of dismay alerted him to his enemies, and

without seeing, he lunged with Mikael, shouting out words of demise. "Hagalaz!" Lightning pulsed through his right hand, burning his skin with raw power, accelerating deep into his sword. It was released in an arc of vivid yellow light, enhanced by the sword's own magical properties. The dark creatures were illuminated for a brief, elongated moment before their bodies became one with the earth. Jumping from one to the other, their deaths became as nothing when silence once more descended. Breathing heavily, Lialh knelt, Mikael his only crutch. The ball of light remained, though severely drained, as he summoned the calm. Drawing back his senses, he allowed Mikael to slowly recharge his depleted body.

"Very impressive," laughed a sudden voice, stronger and darker than any of the foul creatures he had moments before dispelled. "The energies within you are powerful indeed. More than I would have thought you capable of. But," and a gauntleted hand appeared out of the depths of shadow which Lialh's light could not penetrate, "you are rendered weak without your precious sword."

With a wave and a sound barely heard, not even Lialh's strong grip could prevent Mikael from being snatched away, leaving him to fall heavily on the ground.

"It would seem," pondered a second, female voice of almost unnatural musical quality, "that the young hero might have benefited from your training in place of those wretched Mahj. His power might very well have surpassed your own, Cannaugh."

"I would have you slain for that remark, Chealdrin," said the male voice with a detached sense of threat, "but I fear you speak the truth. Nevertheless, we will allow the master to _"

"No, Cannaugh! We slay him here, on our terms."

"You overstretch yourself, Chealdrin. But perhaps you are correct. This one has been an irritant for too long now."

Lialh felt numb as his exhausted body was flung into the air. Dark bands of a slick eel-like substance held him aloft. "Eihwaz!" he shouted with as much power as was left in him, and the air surrounding him shimmered, forming a protective shield.

"You think you can fight us?" laughed Chealdrin. "Zanek," she said with disgust. But the shield held, though it took most of Lialh's strength to keep it in place.

"Is that the best you can manage, Chealdrin? He is but a weak pup, waiting for us to show

him the way.” Cannaugh’s voice lifted. “Zahwei!”

The shield shattered into hundreds of useless pieces.

“The futility of those who fight against us is apparent, Chealdrin. This world’s last hope, hanging in the balance, as it were.”

“Slay him, Cannaugh. Your boasting will be the end of us.”

“As your tongue will be the end of you. Do not think to –”

I... must intervene.

There was a sharp snapping sound as all words ceased from the den of groaning foliage. Lialh attempted to draw some form of power from the echo of raw pain around him, fuelling the ebbing light above his own battered form. He struggled against the slick bonds that still held him, but they refused to budge. He froze as the forest eroded around him and he found himself alone freed from his bindings.

No spell or martial trick would work in this strange between place. Time had no meaning, and he was no longer child nor man.

“I offer you freedom, young hero,” said a voice out of the sheer grey void. “You need not bear the fate of this world in its endless cycle. Go back to your village and live out a simpler existence. Take this gift, and allow another your burden.”

Could he start again? Be someone new, unimpeded by destiny? Was it possible? But he couldn’t, and he knew it, in that small part of him that remained. Its name was Fear, and it was his shame. Fate was his parent, his guide, and he could not live without it.

That knowledge burned its way into the void, and he heard himself crying out from the edge of time. “This must not happen. This must not happen!” He began to whimper.

“This is not how it ends. I am the hero!” His body materialised in that place between, but it began to quiver and ripple and change, becoming foreign. “This is not supposed to happen! I am not supposed to die!” His now alien features echoed his anguish as a familiar object raced towards him from the edge of light. Lialh had made his choice. He couldn’t let go.

Mikael, his own blade, screamed in crystal protest. The sword pierced the heart of his floating body, and the trees cried out in despair.

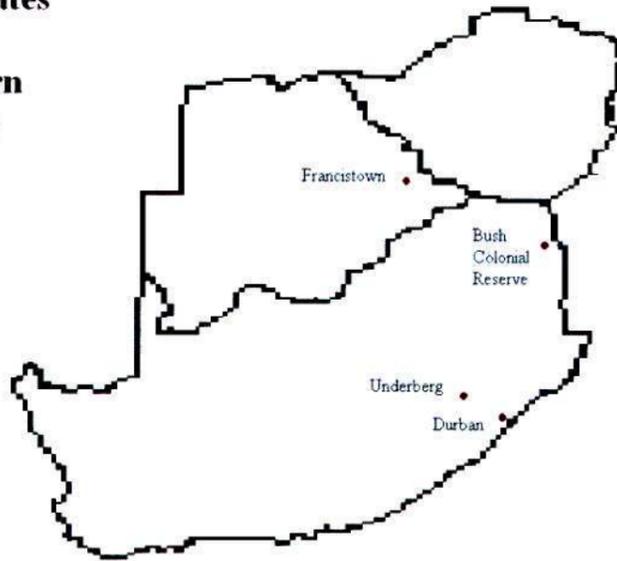
Sitting up, Michael wiped sweat from his brow. Looking around with a mind still half asleep, he mumbled into the night. "We have to find it, Sergi. We have to find the book today."

PART 1

The Future

**United States
of
Southern
Africa**

- South Africa
- Botswana
- Zimbabwe
- Lesotho
- Swaziland



A voice crackled, emanating from the walls of the bedroom. "Michael, you say that every morning, but what do we have to show for this urgency of yours?"

Michael lay back down in his bed, letting his head fall into the luxurious quilt, a family heirloom miraculously intact thanks to a miniature robotic device created by the friendly people over at Nanotech Corp. It meticulously sewed in the missing seams, fixing any tear and leaving a trace of magnetic field wherever it happened to travel, repelling any dirt foolish enough to find its way back.

His lips quirked as he recalled Sergi's quip about the vacated dirt taking up residence in his brain. He glanced at the nightstand. Sitting on top wasn't a photograph per se, but rather a digital image beamed across a lens. He stared at the image of his parents smiling over him as he tried to take his first steps towards them. He sighed. Neither that memory nor Sergi's remarks could bring any kind of smile to his face that morning. The dream was too fresh.

"You're ignoring me," muttered Sergi.

Michael looked up at the ceiling, noticing for the hundredth time the peeling paint. The house was old, true, and not completely compatible with the crystals, but Sergi had managed to implement the technology well enough. He had once told Michael that, while the house looked normal from the outside, within the walls was a spider web of circuitry connected to every household appliance. And yet, the paint still peeled.

"You know," continued Sergi, ignoring Michael's lazy staring, "I could have you out of that bed long before you could –"

"I'm not ignoring you, Sergi, though you do seem a bit overly dramatic this morning. Sometimes I wonder why I give you so much control in the first place."

"I too ask that question on a regular basis, but then I remember how lazy you are and the world makes sense again."

Michael lips quirked again. "Have you been working on your satire? I'm starting to think I give you too much free time as well."

"Too much free time! Too – do you realize how busy I've been searching for this mythical relic book thing of yours?"

Michael grinned. "I think I'd better check the walls for parasites. It sounds like you might be getting worms. Did you know that your vocabulary tends to diminish when you're angry?" He felt the room temperature rise for a moment. "And was that a blush I felt, or anger?"

"You think you're so funny, but just wait. We'll see who ends up with worms. I hear there's a mutated strain of tape worm coming out of Sino Chechnya. It would be too bad if they found their way into your breakfast."

"What a pity we've placed a trade embargo on them then. I don't think our great USSA would allow even our *oxygen* to mix with the Cheches if they could help it."

"You underestimate my willpower."

"Hey," said Michael, raising his hands, "easy now. I give up. Glory to the Unites States of Southern Africa and all that." He reached down and grabbed the end of his white sheet. He tried to yank it up, but it was too well tucked in. Cursing, he picked up his pillow and waved it above his head. "Peace. Parley?"

"Not up for a fight, eh? I guess I should have expected as much." The bed began to tilt on its hidden axis, a little faster than normal, and Michael tumbled onto the floor.

"Ow! Hey, that wasn't funny." He rubbed his elbow. "But I guess I deserved it," he said, standing. "And now, unless you'd like to join me, I think I'll clean myself up a bit."

"Don't hurt yourself."

"Too late." The bathroom door slid open with a hiss and he stepped into the shower. With a clap of thunder, all of the excess sweat and dirt was vibrated off of his body and out of every pore as though pulled with a magnet. Michael stood still for a moment, allowing his hearing to return. Usually he didn't bother with that particular feature of the shower, but this morning he was in no mood to be soothed.

"You usually enjoy the feel of the hot water coursing over your body."

"Sergi!"

"I'm not watching. It just seems such a waste not to enjoy comfort whenever you can."

Michael sighed, but said nothing.

Dressing in jeans and a flowery shirt – Sergi had been about to say something before Michael silenced him with "Not a word" – he made his way through the house, catching a glimpse now and then of the surrounding countryside.

The house was almost 80 years old, built some time in the 1950's in the southern part of what had once been the Crocodile Bridge portion of the Kruger National Park, now the Bush Colonial Reserve. It was an area which joined at the borders of Mozambique and the USSA's northernmost state, Zimbabwe. The protected animals were gone, however, either moved to smaller, well-protected parks, or extinct. All that remained were the grand houses built by the rich who thought to spend their retirement enjoying the sight of those who were also enjoying their last fleeting days. It still surprised Michael that the city lines had not yet encroached upon this bastion of nature, but he didn't think it would be that long now.

Taking the stairs down to the dining hall, he sat at the long, opaque, plastic-looking table. Like much of the furniture, it was a new addition to his home. It was made from a tough, virtually unbreakable polyester, and as Sergi was wont to tell him over and over again, it clashed with everything.

"Sergi, I know it's a slow day for you, but how about some food?"

"Chef Sergi is always willing to try new things," he replied, adopting an over-the-top French accent. "Today I have created for you a splendid blend of snails and porridge. And," he said, regaining his normal accent, "you can eat it with a spoon. Although, if you like, you can use your hands. I know how you battle."

Michael smiled, a habit he thought he might start to enjoy. "I suppose I haven't been fair with you this morning. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry this seeming obsession of mine has you working so hard. Forgive me?"

The kitchen was entirely automatic in design, and when Michael heard the familiar clattering of pans and sizzling of oil, he knew his friend was feeling somewhat placated. Five minutes later, a breakfast of eggs, tomatoes and bacon moved steadily towards him along a conveyor, the plate stopping to his left. Michael lifted the plate onto the table in front of him, reaching for some cutlery. He plunged his fork into his meal, taking intermittent sips from a glass of orange juice which had been sent behind the food. "Have you found anything on the Network yet, Sergi?" asked Michael, his stomach no longer aching from hunger. "We really do need to find that book."

"Sorry? I missed that between the mouthfuls of bacon fat."

Michael put his fork down, regarding his food. He had never before had such an appetite,

but ever since the dreams had begun, he had woken up feeling constantly drained.

“And no,” continued Sergi, oblivious to Michael’s musings, “the Network is large, and now with all those cyberguards...”

“I know, I know. It’s just that the dreams are getting worse. I see more and more each night, not to mention feeling as though I might just collapse and lack the willpower to get up again. And... and this time I actually saw him die. I haven’t seen him die since ...” He gulped down an egg yolk. “His sword, remember, the one with my name, or sounded like it anyway... well, it was used against him, or me, because just before the dream ended I found myself watching the sword come toward me. I felt it tear....” Michael sat back. He wasn’t hungry anymore. “Show me the news, please.”

The far wall began to part, revealing a screen composed of a crystallized form of quicksilver. A face materialised within, formed from the screen itself.

Michael almost fell off his chair. “Sergi,” he managed to splutter, “you... you’ve got so many faces in the database. Couldn’t you pick one that looked a little less... inebriated?”

“It’s the face of Robert Frost, you cultural dunce,” said Sergi, affronted.

Michael smirked. “Robert Frost after a hard night at the pub, maybe. And what’s with the pipe?”

‘Robert Frost’ chewed his pipe and scowled. “I was trying to look professional,” he said, parting the hair across his eyes. “Besides, it’s too late to change. I’m receiving transmission.” Sergi’s face took on a serious mask. “The news in brief: tensions are rising once more between the USA, the USSA and Sino Chechnya. After almost a decade of trade embargos and veiled military threats, experts fear that both sides might finally stop their chest thumping and pull out the nukes.”

“Sergi, are you sure you’re reading your cues correctly.”

“I thought I might embellish a little. I am channelling a great poet, after all.”

“If you say so.”

“Ahem, to continue. After many years of negotiation, the Vatican and European Union have agreed to create a unified ruling European Council that –”

“I was wondering how long it would take before the Vatican bullied the EU into such a concession,” remarked Michael. “It doesn’t seem like anything can kill religion.”

‘Robert Frost’ smirked. “I think the Vatican stopped regarding themselves as being

religious when the pope declared Rome to be under martial law.”

“True enough, I suppose. What else?”

“On the local front,” continued the news broadcast, “Governor Sindole of South Africa has refused requests to meet with the rebels believed to be hiding out in the Drakensberg Mountains. Despite pressure from nationwide municipalities to hold talks, Sindole has repeatedly stated that he will not negotiate with terrorists. Many feel that his response to the constant sabotage blamed on the rebels, who refer to themselves as the True Africans, is a strange one. For not only does he refuse to meet with their representatives, but makes no attempt to quell their activities in the least. Polls indicate that many South Africans sympathise with the rebels and feel that our American patrons should be removed. Fear of the loss of the crystal technology has kept that sentiment to a minimum, however.”

Michael sighed. “I wouldn’t envy the governor’s job right now.”

“I wouldn’t envy your own position, Michael. And don’t forget, you’re also part of the vanguard of American ‘patrons’.”

“My mother was South African, Sergi. This was her house. Besides, I was born here.”

“And so was I, in a manner of speaking. What does that make me?”

“A technological achievement?”

“Patronising bastard.”

“If you weren’t Robert Frost at this very moment, I might believe you meant that.”

Michael took a sip of his juice. “So what are these rebels up to?”

“A rebellion.”

“Funny.”

“Well, if you insist. There are a number of old articles I could pull up for you. I wouldn’t want to bore you with the details, but they talk about the rebels managing to sabotage two nuclear plants in the Koeberg Chain along the west coast. A few casualties were reported, but the plants’ override systems prevented any major disasters. Governor Sindole has a special team out searching for their ‘base of operations’, but it looks like the rebels keep managing to kill them off. The Governor’s even requested help from mainland USA, but they seem to be stalling for some reason.”

“Aren’t they always? It sickens me what they can get away with these days.”

“It’s not exactly something new, Michael. They –” Sergi stopped abruptly.

Michael raised his eyes. "They what? Why'd you stop?"

"Hold on. I'm receiving a new transmission. Priority news broadcast."

Michael thrummed his fingers on the table.

"Great Gatsby!"

Michael perked up his ears, uncertain whether he should laugh at such a ridiculous turn of phrase or be worried by Sergi's tone. "What!"

"Michael, you'll never believe what some idiotic reporter has done. And he's broadcasting it on all channels. Does he want to get caught?"

"Sergi, I'd say explain yourself, but that would be too obvious."

"Oh, pipe down. I'm patching through now."

The screen flickered for a moment as 'Robert Frost' disappeared. But instead of the reporter, or even the natural silver colouring of the screen, all was black.

"Sergi?"

"Don't ask me. It was fine a moment ago."

The screen flickered with a sudden burst of life, illuminating a man in his early thirties. His skin was a burnt brown while his hair sported an elaborate braid which was all the style among the younger generation of South African Americans. Michael realised that he himself also, technically, fell under that category, but here in South Africa it mostly referred to those of pure African heritage. The man had a small white dot attached to the corner of his mouth which acted as a microphone. He touched it briefly, then smiled widely into the camera. "My apologies, but we lost the lighting for a moment. As I was saying, what I have discovered here, in the heart of rebel territory, is a place far greater than anyone could ever have imagined."

"Sergi, do you think you might want to explain?"

"Michael," began Sergi, his voice emanating once more from the walls, "maybe you didn't hear. This idiot has infiltrated the rebel base. And he's broadcasting it to every station in the country. Do you really think the rebels don't have access to news broadcasts?"

"Oh. Does he want to get himself caught?"

"I'm so glad you could catch on."

But the reporter didn't stop. "At great risk to myself, I, Jackson Matebele, bring to you a

find greater even than the location of the rebel group known as the True Africans. If you will notice by my immediate surroundings, I am standing in an ancient African tomb situated in the centre of a series of catacombs riddling the mountains at Injasuthi.” He indicated a wall carving behind him, and the image took up the entire screen. “Here we have what looks to be a mythological figure fighting off demons of some sort. Whether it’s of Nguni descent or some other, even older tribe, will be for the archaeologists to discover.” The screen returned to Jackson’s face, slightly enlarged for effect. “But these carvings pale in comparison to the artistry evident in this next relic. According to my extensive knowledge of local history, this next piece surpasses the artistic ability of the ancient Nguni.”

The image shifted, and Michael eyes widened. The screen now focused on the statue of a woman carved in such intricate detail that were it not obvious, she would immediately be taken for a heavenly creature. She was adorned in flowing stone garments that accentuated the soft features of her face and, through a trick of light pouring through from some unknown source, the illusion of flowing hair was created. She held a book in her left hand, also made of stone, while her other hand waited, palm up, for some sort of offering.

The screen returned abruptly to Jackson Matebele. “She would appear to be some sort of goddess – a scholarly type, or possibly a scribe, designating knowledge. Nevertheless, this type of symbol has never before been seen in relics of African culture. What secrets does this tomb hold? What can it teach us of our true African roots? Is it possible that there are lost writings among these ruins from a thought to be originally illiterate tribe? Perhaps to have even escaped the plague? Only time will tell. Not only does this hold grand possibilities for the native – hey, what are you doing – leave him alone – run, Msizi, ru –”

The transmission ended abruptly.

‘Robert Frost’s’ face appeared on the screen. “We apologise for the lost transmission. We shall attempt to regain it at a later stage. Meanwhile, onto other news: the US Space Programme has officially announced that an in-depth analysis of Mars has found it completely devoid of any ores or water supplies –”

“Sergi, that’s rather cold of you,” said Michael.

Sergi raised an eyebrow. "I could have told you that was going to happen. I just thought your human sensibilities might be better served if I made a quick transition."

"But he sounds like he's in danger."

"I don't see why you care, Michael. People far more able than us would have seen the news. I'm sure he's being rescued as we speak."

"Yeah well, sometimes people don't do the right thing."

"I suppose that's why you speak to *me* all day?"

"Hey, what's that supp –" Suddenly Michael blinked. "Sergi! Quick, go back to that shot in the tomb, the one showing the images of that battle on the wall."

Sergi ground down on his pipe. Nevertheless, his 'face' disappeared from the screen to reveal the image from the previous broadcast.

"Focus in on that man with the sword. Okay, bring him up a little closer. Do you think you could fill the screen with his face?"

Sergi complied. "Michael, what is it?"

"Look Sergi, at his features."

"What about them?"

"But don't you see? I've described him so many times your memory banks should be bursting with his image."

"You mean ..."

"Yes! It's him!"

"But... that's impossible, Michael. He's only a figment from your dreams."

"Not when they reflect reality."

"Reflect rea... reflect reality? Michael, this is insanity. It's not real."

Michael sighed. "I know how you feel, Sergi, but surely after all you've seen –"

"That's just it, Michael. I haven't *seen* anything."

"Don't be so pedantic. I'm having these dreams for a reason. Just look at the image of the sword, if you would be so kind as to return it to the screen. It's an exact replica of Mikael."

The screen split in half, the one side displaying the tomb hero while the other half portrayed a priest looking up to the heavens, his hands raised above his head. "I've tried, God," shouted the holy man. "What more do you want from me?"

“Sergi, please,” said Michael. “Trust me just this once more. Because I think I’ve finally discovered the location of the book.”

Michael O'Connor swatted at the flies which had perched themselves on his exposed neck on that warm Durban evening. They flew only far enough away to be out of arm's reach, darting back in at odd intervals. Trying to ignore them, he supposed the flies were preferable to the stares he received from those who heard his decidedly Americanised accent, a gift from his father. But he was tired of pleading his own Africanness in an age where even an Afrikaans accent was accepted with no judgement. He knew the time was approaching when he might be stoned in the street. Then again, his white, half-American skin was probably thick enough to deflect barbed words.

The café he was seated at was little more than a tourist attraction. The food was too oily, the waiters unfriendly, and the rolling waves from the ocean brought with them the smell of rot.

Nobody swam in the oceans anymore. He recalled his parents bringing him to one of Cape Town's beaches as a child, but the water had been far too cold for swimming. He remembered how the ocean had frozen the soles of his feet and how they reminded him of cheeks pinched red. Durban's beaches had been off limits for twenty years now, and he had never had a chance to enjoy its warmer waters.

Michael shook his head, wrinkling his nose. Sergi had suggested the adjective 'sour' in reference to the ocean, and he was inclined to agree.

He glanced at the pasta he had ordered, and pushed it away. He would let the flies have it. Those the world now had in abundance, especially along the coast. With the oceans off limit – thanks to acid rain and global warming, or so he was told – governments and corporations now felt no qualms about dumping all sorts of rubbish and toxic waste into the water, and the flies swarmed amongst the stench.

For a moment Michael was reminded of the wonderful experience of eating fish at a Cape Town café. The only fish left edible now were those farmed in fresh water far inland. At the very least, he thought, illegal fishing had now become a thing of the past. It was only unfortunate that it took the extinction of most salt water creatures to realise just how much they were needed for a viable world ecosystem. He peered around more suspiciously, expecting a typhoon to suddenly pick him up and drop him far out to sea.

The thought of his flesh searing off made him swallow hard.

Michael winked at the waitress, more out of boredom than anything else, and received the obligatory cold stare. It washed over him like a refreshing shower, chasing away the stench for a moment. Why they still had open air cafes on the coast was beyond him. He whispered to Sergi, asking his artificial friend for the time. Glancing down at his wrist watch, he was rudely reminded why he had been forced to leave Sergi at home. Pushing one of the small buttons on his watch, he saw that he'd only been waiting for half an hour. But waiting wasn't what truly annoyed him. He was more surprised at the momentary anger he had felt at having to physically check the time. He was getting far too complacent if the slightest movement of his body was too much of an effort. But then again, who could he blame? Progress?

The absence of the familiar presence of his partner in 'truth seeking,' as Sergi referred to it, was more disconcerting than he would have thought. Loneliness had been a part of his life for many years now, especially living out in the middle of nowhere, but he had been prevented from plumbing the depths of true depression thanks to Sergi's constant natterings. Annoying as he could be, he kept Michael sane in a world which had passed the point of insanity somewhere during his adolescence.

There had been reasons for not bringing Sergi, starting with the manner in which Michael had been contacted. Sergi had been hijacked the day before during one of his Net runs, and a recording had been imprinted on his matrix. Sergi had been forced to play back the message as soon as he returned to the house. A meeting time and place had been relayed 'in aid of Michael's efforts to discover the truth'. The holo-image had then leaked a virus into Sergi's chip, which had created a steady build up of acid. Fortunately, he was able to back Sergi up onto a temporary flash drive without too much damage. Unfortunately, the repair process to Sergi's chip could not be completed in time for the meeting. It was an automated process, and he could only hope that Sergi would be up and running by the time Michael got back.

Listening now to the constant buzzing of the flies only heightened the anger and irritation he felt at the attempted destruction of his friend. Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes, grinding his teeth in frustration, before letting out a sudden yawn. He realised that he was trembling slightly, and wondered if it was only his anger. When he opened his

eyes again, he had to steady his chair before it tipped over, such was his surprise. Before him sat who he could only assume was his contact.

“Mr O’Connor, I’m glad that you could meet me. I don’t have much time, so this must be brief.”

“Hey, hold on a minute,” said Michael, regaining himself. “I’ve got a bone to pick with you. You think you can just install a virus onto Ser... my surfing bot... and almost destroy –”

“A necessary precaution, Mr O’Connor. Please, the information I have to offer you is of vital importance. It was necessary to ensure complete secrecy.”

The man spoke with an English accent, but it felt a little too forced. In fact, Michael could swear that when he stressed some syllables, an American accent filtered through. It didn’t mean much, though, especially in South Africa with its blend of different languages. It might have been a natural amalgam, but Michael didn’t think so. Besides, an American accent drew unwanted attention these days; something this man clearly didn’t need.

Michael closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “Fine,” he said finally, crossing his arms and opening his eyes. “I’ll listen, but you’d better make this worth my while.”

His contact, dressed in shifting pants, a grey tie and charcoal blazer, placed a briefcase on the tiny café table. His lean moustache, the only noticeable facial hair, moved with his lips as he spoke. “I’ll assume then, that you know of the plague of 2005?”

Michael sat back in his chair, waiting.

“Please, Mr O’Connor. If you could indulge me. There is a... a process to my thinking.”

Michael’s pursed his lips, but decided he would play the role of the obedient puppy, though only for so long. “All the paper in the world disintegrated. I assume that’s the correct response.”

Michael’s contact sighed, as though he were lecturing a child who refused to accept that he was wrong. “The propagandists of this age have truly learnt from their German masters.” The contact sat back. “I would have thought that you of all people would question such a claim.”

“Why? Why is something that happened 30 years ago so important?”

“Come now, how can you say something like that? The past is everything. Would the US

be the same if it had never had its revolution? Would this country be any different if apartheid had never come into being? Would Europe be ruled by the Vatican if Hitler had won? Is it not obvious that history has shaped all that this world has become?"

Michael frowned. "I understand what you're saying, causality and all. And, well, fine, the world would be a different place if paper still existed, I'm sure, but since I never grew up in that world, and very soon there'll be no one alive who has, what does it matter? If you want to read or write, the world has computers aplenty."

"I suppose I should have expected such a response, but think about it like this. Our world suffered the greatest loss of literature since the burning of the Library of Alexander.

History all but forgotten. It's not a slight or trivial thing, Mr O'Connor, and instead of trying to salvage anything, once again the world was looking in the wrong direction."

He paused, breathless, as he batted away a fly.

Michael couldn't help but smile. At least the flies recognised the garbage coming out of this man's mouth.

"Perhaps the world is better off looking to the future than the past," continued Michael's contact after a moment, "but what happens when the computer is the only device left to record memory? What happens when we humans forget to remember? The world doesn't seem to care, so long as they have their precious technology." He looked at Michael's features for a moment, as if to size him up. "You weren't even alive on that day, were you?"

"'The day the world stopped'?"

"Yes. So I see you do still recall some of your history. Some people, philosophers mostly, like to call it 'The day the world lost its memory'. I prefer that title. It cuts to the core of the matter, though not in the way most people think. When they say it, all they can think about is the complete shut down of technology. Like a great Electromagnetic Pulse shattering the world. But I like to think of all of the Homers and Vergils lost for all time. Those works not copied onto the Net in the following couple of days were and are lost forever, kept only in our dying memory."

"Surely digital copies were made before that?"

The contact raised his eyes. "I guess you don't remember all of your history then. No, everything, from bank records to credit ratings to life savings were wiped clean. Once

they got things running again, the world had to start over. Be grateful you weren't alive during that period. Utter chaos, and that's not counting the millions of deaths due to technological failure. But I'm straying from the point, and I don't have that much time."

"Well then get to the point."

"I will, but you need the context if you're to understand what I'm about to tell you next. The world's technology is failing. You know this. It's the very reason why South Africa is no longer a sovereign state."

"And?"

"It can't be easy, being of both American and South African descent. I don't envy your situation."

Michael laughed. "I might as well be nothing around here. I'm less than these flies to my own people."

"I'm sorry, I truly am, but then you know the reason for this. Crystalcorp."

"Crystal technology?"

"The ultimate tool of coercion. The US has it. The world needs it. Otherwise they'll be looking at complete technological failure in a matter of years. South Africa was only one of the first to succumb to the pressure."

"I don't see what choice there was, to be honest."

"American homogeneity. People don't want it, and, it seems, would rather commit acts of terror than accept it. But I'll tell you now, South Africa was smart. All the other countries will come around, when their failing technology becomes more than they can bear. The US will win this war of attrition; it's just a matter of time. At least this country won't have that much dirt to dig away. Sino Chechnya and all the rest will fall, however, their graves already marked."

Michael stared silently at the man for a while. "You're baiting me, aren't you?"

"Are you hooked yet?"

"We'll see."

"We will, won't we?" The contact paused. "How about a change in tact? Let me ask you a few questions, and you see if you can answer them."

"Go ahead."

"Have you at all considered why technology has been degrading ever since that fateful

day? Surely there's a mystery in there somewhere? And what about the Paper Plague? To this day, there is no known cause. Not to mention these American crystals. How, when integrated, does it allow normal technology to function? Has it ever occurred to you to question the suspicious timing of this new technology's release?"

Michael's eyes had widened slightly. True, these were all questions he had no answer for, and God knows he'd love to find out. But these were questions that were surely out of his league. "I don't know the answers. Now, don't think I'm not interested, but I fail to see your point."

This time it was his contact's turn to look puzzled. "But, Mr O'Connor, I thought you'd be a little more than 'just interested'. Surely you can see how these questions might affect you personally?"

"Personally? While I'll admit that this grand conspiracy you're thrusting in my face warrants a little digging, I don't see that I could go up against a government which, in time, will virtually rule the world. Besides, why would I want to?"

Michael's contact shook his head. "I thought, since... Mr O'Connor, what about the melting signs?"

Michael sat forward. "Oh, come now. I think I've had enough." He started to get up, but his contact grabbed his arm, pulling him down.

"Mr O'Connor, I don't think you realise the great risk I took in meeting you." He swiped at another fly.

Michael took a deep breath. "God damn it," he said slowly, "what about signs now?"

"Propaganda. You parents would have remembered, and I hear the effect is being used for practical applications in certain third world countries, but everyone else seems to have conveniently forgotten. You won't find any information about it on the Net, unless you looked really hard. Mr O'Connor, do you ever remember anyone mentioning the fact that signs, billboards, and anything, other than paper, which had writing on them, melted?"

"Now you're starting to annoy me."

"Mr O'Connor, the 'Paper' Plague is a fraud. Because it wasn't just paper which disappeared, it was all language."

"Language disintegrated," repeated Michael, scoffing.

"Written language, in the broadest sense of the term."

"I see. Actually, I don't see. Besides, there's a flaw in your theory. If it was the writing which disintegrated, what about clean paper? I believe that also went the way of the whale."

His contact sighed. "And you have proof of that? Would you even remember?"

"Look," said Michael, suddenly uncertain. "It's been fun and this has been a most interesting conversation, but I really should get going. Please don't contact --"

"I have proof." He hefted a briefcase onto the table. He slapped at his neck as another fly landed.

"Proof? So what exactly do you want me to do with this proof of yours? Expose this great government conspiracy. I think even that's slightly beyond me."

"Of course not, Mr O'Connor. This has never been about that." He swallowed heavily, and sweat began to pour from his face."

"What then?"

His contact's eyes widened and Michael could see pain reflected back at him.

"Are you alright?"

"I... I'm fine. It's just, it's you, Mr O'Connor. It's always been about you, about who you are." He paused. "Do you ever get the feeling that you're being watched?"

"I live in the middle of nowhere. Who's going to watch me?"

"Just so... oh, suddenly ..." His contact tried to take in a breath, and grabbed at his throat. His lips were turning blue, and a white froth ran down his chin.

"Shit!" Michael was transfixed.

His contact reached for him and pulled him closer. "Look in the briefcase," he managed.

"What couldn't the plague destroy?" With his last breath, he pulled down on Michael's shirt, ripping off the top button. "Search for the book that was lost. It holds the key to everything!"

Michael leapt back from the body, and couldn't help but notice the large purple pustule on the side of the man's neck. Suddenly the buzzing of the flies weren't merely an annoyance, and panic started to well up from his stomach. He clenched and unclenched his hands, before grabbing the briefcase.

He ran into the night, ignoring the shouting from behind him.

Chapter 3**The Net Is Good for all Things**

Michael didn't know much of anything when he opened the briefcase. What he did know was that the information so dearly imparted to him was worth a man's life. He remembered his contact's words: "It's because of who you are." What did he mean by that? Did it really mean anything – *who* he was? Sure, he was a moral sort; didn't care much for religion or stupidity. He believed in the truth, no matter what anyone else thought. But maybe it was more than that.

He was just Michael O'Connor.

The man's words haunted him.

Michael froze, staring at the contents of the briefcase. Sweat dripped down his shirt as he lifted the single item from its leather interior. He had always been of the opinion that artefacts discovered by archaeologists should be left hidden and protected. Man just didn't have the ability to deal with the consequences of their release. He should have listened to his own advice.

He lifted out a smooth piece of paper, turning it over in his hands, searching for any hint of degradation. He knew that such antiquated photographs had once existed, but much like paper, they had all disintegrated. All things to do with the medium were a thing long forgotten. He recalled the digital image of his parents on his nightstand. He had had to have it specially made, choosing that picture from a number of web images his parents had kept.

Staring at the image in his hand, he pushed his musings to the back of his mind. He was holding something which shouldn't exist. Suddenly nothing else was important. His hands started shaking, and he was forced to breathe slowly before he could have a good look at it.

The image was that of an old rock standing alone in a field of low grass. Engraved on the stone was a strange symbol.

Squeezing his eyes together, he slid the photo into his jacket pocket. Dumping the

briefcase, Michael took the next train back home.
If ever he needed Sergi, it was now.

“He tried to kill me.”

“I know, Sergi, but... the way he just —”

“Excuse my lack of sympathy. But I guess a slowly dissolving chip doesn’t have quite as much charm as a human frothing at the mouth.”

“Sergi.... Why does it always have to be about you?” Silence permeated Michael’s house and he knew he had gone too far. “I’m sorry,” he said finally. “It’s just, that could have been my fate.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Michael, I’m sure fate has some grand plan for you, and your all too human body.”

“Well of course it does,” said Michael, sighing. He thought he heard Sergi splutter. “But I hardly think I’d succeed without you at my side. Just look at the mess I made this time.”

“You’re an ass, you know that. But you are right, on both accounts.” There was a slight pause. “Fine, show me what you’ve got.”

Reaching into his pocket, Michael pulled out the photograph and waved it in the air.

“Take a scan of this.” He knew it would only take Sergi a moment, but the silence seemed to make the room smaller.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Sergi carefully.

“Um, yes it is?”

“That’s a photograph, idiot.”

“That’s what I thought.” Michael sighed and sat down. “Sergi, I’ll tell you the truth. I’m scared. My contact died right in front of me. Killed... for this. And now I need you to tell me why we’re both seeing what we’re seeing.”

A panel protruded from the far wall.

“Put it in there. We’ll know soon enough if we’re both hallucinating.”

“Do you think you can date it?” asked Michael as he inserted the photograph. “It might help to know how old it is.” He realised then as he sat down in his high-backed study

chair that he couldn't say the word. To name it made it real. Michael wasn't sure he was quite ready to accept such responsibility.

The photograph appeared before him on his computer screen, and he enlarged it with a touch of his finger.

"Michael, that kind of procedure is at least thirty years old. It was made obsolete when there was no longer anything worth dating."

"I realise that, but we can at least try."

"Fine. I shouldn't be gone for more than a few sec –"

"While you're at it, Sergi, see if you can match that symbol on the stone to anything on the Net."

"Okay, okay. Anything else? A foot rub perhaps?"

Michael shrugged. "Rain check? Besides," he said, patting the arm of his chair. "Shirley knows how to take care of all my needs."

"I'll never understand your propensity for beginning the names all of your gadgets with an S. Hopefully the next one isn't the 'Sadomasochist 3000'."

"Go already."

As Sergi began his search, Michael tried to find any recognisable landmarks on the photograph. Unfortunately, the only thing of note was the stone itself. Michael zoomed in on the symbol. The top of it was shaped in the form a diamond while two lines sprouted outwards from the bottom corner. It reminded him of an oddly shaped man, with only a head and legs.

His parents had often told him of the great paintings in some of the famous art galleries of the past. The most important works of art had been destroyed alongside everything else in less than a week, while the only records of their existence were the handful that had been scanned in the days after the disaster. Looking at the symbol on the stone, the idea of the world reverting to an artistic stone age was now all too real.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he waited for Sergi to return.

It was at least one minute, however, before Michael heard his voice. If Sergi hadn't been an artificial intelligence, Michael might have sworn he was breathing heavily. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"I've just been chased through the Net is what happened! I found your dating procedure

then went in search of the symbol. Only, when I found a match, it was protected by cyberguards on a US government-sanctioned site. I managed to sneak through and download as much information as I could before they noticed. I spent the last minute losing them in the Net. They're sophisticated, those guards, I'll give them that."

"God, Sergi, I'm sorry I put you in danger," said Michael. "At least we know one thing, though. The government does know something." He breathed deeply, trying but failing to comprehend the impact of such a revelation. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Never felt better. Don't worry about me, Michael. It was more like a short jog around the block. Those cyberguards might be good, but I'm better."

Michael sighed in relief. "Good show, buddy. So, come now, what did you find out?"

"Well, firstly, I discovered that the symbol isn't just any old scratching. It is in fact; get this, a runic symbol."

Michael nodded sagely.

"You haven't got a clue what that means, do you?" Sergi asked pointedly.

"No," replied Michael, laughing slightly to ease the tense feeling building in his chest.

"Typical. Well, if what I discovered is at all true, runes were supposedly created thousands of years ago by the Norse peoples of Scandinavia, and twenty four of these runes were made into a single alphabet, which they called the Futhark. There were many later alphabets based upon Futhark, but apparently this was the original. For hundreds of years runes were predominantly used for divination purposes, though they apparently have more 'far-reaching powers', whatever that means. It was tacked on at the end, but the whole thing seemed to have a large question mark imprinted over it."

Michael mulled over the new information. "Okay, if what you say is true, then how does it tie in with the photograph?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps we could find out once it's been dated."

"Good idea."

Sergi was silent.

Michael looked up. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing really. It's just good to see you excited over something again. There were a few months when I thought you'd decided to quit your 'life's mission'. I mean, after your father passed away...."

“Euphemistic as always, eh Sergi? Well, I hardly think terror is the same as excitement, but if it keeps me alive a little longer, I’m not complaining.” He sighed, remembering things best left alone. “You’d better feed me the instructions....”

Most of the equipment needed for Paper Fibre Identification could be created in a virtual workspace. Using the wall screen as a viewing space, Sergi took on the form he thought would be most appropriate, a mad Dr Frankenstein. He wore a white lab coat and looked around with goggling eyes.

Michael watched as the good doctor set out all of the necessary equipment. From what Sergi had mentioned, it seemed vastly complicated. There were a lot of equations involved, which was enough to have Michael stop pestering him. It still took most of the night to complete.

“Well, Igor, it seems we’ve finally succeeded.” Lightning flashed outside the windows of the virtual workroom and Sergi began to laugh maniacally.

Michael couldn’t help but laugh himself, and all of the tension dissipated like the fetid ocean pulling back from the sand. “Enough, Sergi. My insides are about to explode. What did you find out?”

“According to the results...,” began Sergi. “Well, that’s unexpected.”

“What? Don’t keep me in suspense.” Michael was lying on his more comfortable sofa-like chair. His body had moulded into it, and even though it was part of the design, Sergi had never tired of remarking otherwise. This time, however, Sergi had no quip about Michael’s exercise routine, even when he sat up and the chair reverted back to its normal position.

“According to this,” continued his electronic friend. “Michael, it’s impossible! Barring any serious error on my part, which we know is a calculated impossibility, this photograph is... only three days old.”

“But... what! That means... the rune survived the Paper Plague. It didn’t melt.” The last he said almost silently.

“Michael, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Sergi. “What about melting

signs?”

“My contact. He suggested that it was language that was affected by the plague, not paper. But surely this proves that only paper is affected?”

“Michael, are you sure? How do you explain the photograph?”

“Are you sure it’s not affected by the plague? Didn’t most things take about a week before degrading completely?”

“Yes, but even after three days, the signs were evident. Michael, this photograph isn’t affected.”

“Okay...okay.” Michael put a hand to his forehead. “Wait a moment. That’s it. Photographs aren’t made of the same material as paper.”

“That’s... actually, you’re right. But then why are there no other surviving photographs? And consider that not all paper was made using the same materials. Yet it was all affected. Michael, I think your contact may have been onto something. Paper isn’t the common denominator.”

“And language is?”

“Possibly. Think about it. What are hieroglyphics but pictures drawn with the purpose of expressing oneself? You could say the same about photographs, or even paintings, or any artwork for that matter. Are they not an expression of man’s voice?” He said the last with a healthy dose of sarcasm, but Michael didn’t mind. Sergi was definitely onto something.

“Shit. What have I got us into, Sergi?”

“You’re asking me? If I recall, discovering the truth of things was always your forte.”

“When they’re mundane, human secrets, sure.”

“And humans can’t be truthful,” offered Sergi.

“You’re more right than you realise, Sergi. In that sense, you’re better than any human I know, and you shouldn’t forget it. But this seems different. The only clear evidence we have is anything but human.”

“Time to give up, then?”

Michael laughed. “Not on your life, so to speak,” which earned him a slightly toasty gust from the air regulator closest to him.

“Well, good. That’s what I like to hear. The problem is, where do we go from here?”

“Well, think about it. What do both the rock and the photograph have in common?”

“The rune?”

“Right.”

Michael stood and began to pace about the house, going through in his mind what his contact had said. “You know, there was something I forgot to mention, Sergi. When I was speaking to my contact, he mentioned something about the suspicious release of crystal technology. Do you think this has something to do with that?”

“I don’t know, Michael. If you keep giving me dribs and drabs, I won’t know what to think. I don’t see how runes and rocks and photographs have anything to do with crystals.”

Michael thought for a moment. “Sergi, we’ve got plenty of crystals all over the house. Won’t you pop one out quickly?”

“Are you sure? You know it’ll take forever to reintegrate it?”

“I don’t care at this point. Take one out of something unimportant, like the toaster.”

“Okay, but I hope you know what you’re doing.”

There was a slight delay, when a wall socket near Michael opened up, and out protruded the crystal. He picked it up gently, as they tended to be rather volatile if dropped. “The photograph, Sergi, if you please.” He walked over to the panel where he had placed it. Taking it in his other hand, he brought the crystal towards it.

“Michael, exactly what do you expect to happen? I don’t think the photograph’s going to sprout wings.”

Michael stopped moving. “I don’t know. Shush.” Swallowing, he brought them closer together.

“Michael, something’s happening.”

“What? I don’t see anything.”

“It’s the crystal. The power output is increasing.”

“It feels normal.” He brought them together.

The crystal exploded and Michael flew across the room, his back crashing into the sofa.

“Michael! Michael, are you okay?” Sergi’s voice had risen to a new level.

Michael opened his eyes, rubbing his hands across his face. “I’m fine, I think.” He sat up.

“Saved by the sofa.”

“I’ll never make fun of it again. Are you sure you’re alright? That explosion was

incredible.”

“I’m sure. How’s the rest of the house?”

“It... looks fine. It was mostly a concussive burst of energy. Nothing flammable.”

Michael rubbed his shoulders as he walked over to where he had tried his experiment.

There was no sign of the crystal, but lying there on the floor was the photograph. Bending over, he picked it up, holding it out in front of him. His eyes widened. The photograph was completely untouched, except for where the rune had been. Its outline was emblazoned in the empty space. Michael ran his fingers along the outline. “Well, Sergi, I think we have our answer. Unfortunately, it’s just posed a whole lot of troubling questions.” He lowered the photograph, his mind too full of excitement to realise he had almost been killed. “Sergi,” he said, thinking, “you mentioned that there were twenty four runes in the Futhark alphabet. I don’t suppose it would be possible to discover if any other letters have survived on anything other than the Net.”

“Sorry, no. I barely managed to discover their general history. The rest was too heavily encrypted for me to do much before getting caught.”

“Well, what about this rune? Did you find anything more about it specifically, like a name?”

Sergi remained silent, the only answer his pride would allow him.

“Don’t sweat it,” said Michael, trying to sound encouraging.

“I could try and find out again, Michael.”

“No Sergi, I won’t put you in any more danger that way.”

“I would hardly be in any more danger than you put yourself. So, what then?”

“I don’t know.” Michael sighed, when his face suddenly lit up. “Hold on. You said that runes were used for divinatory purposes years ago. Wouldn’t it be logical that if any more runes survived, someone would still have some? Surely the government couldn’t have confiscated them all, no matter how quiet they tried to keep it? Why don’t you see if you can find a collector of antiquities, or maybe a fortune-teller. I know it’s a long shot, but if runes still exist to this day, somebody’s got to know about it. There must be somebody who can tell us what just happened.”

“I’ll return as soon as I can,” said Sergi, and with that he was gone.

South Africa's borders had been rewritten. Botswana had been co-opted into a cleansing of the last traces of corruption within Zimbabwe two years after the 'the day the world stopped'. Armies were marched in, demolishing infrastructure as they went along, cleansing the country of its leaders with repeated public hangings. Repercussions for such acts were a thing of the past. The world had become the worst type of monster, and nobody with any sort of power cared as long as survival was at stake.

South Africa was extended to incorporate both countries. Zimbabwe had to be rebuilt, and while this might have once seemed a logistical nightmare, the word 'security' would be waved about, and naysayers would hold their tongues. South Africa had become a true behemoth, with America now controlling from within; the term 'Superpower of Africa' had become a reality.

"Sergi, one of these days I'm going to start referring to you as the 'Walking Encyclopaedia'. Oh no, ma'am, he doesn't bite, he's merely a talking reservoir of information."

"Don't you mean 'walking'?"

"As soon as you start, let me know."

"Well, unless you want more than the school textbook version, you might start treating me with a little more respect. If you ask me, and I know you won't, history could always do with a little more flair. For example, I might add that President Zuma had been taken over by bodysnatching aliens in a bid to take over the world."

"You left out the part where Mugabe was a shape shifting Andromedan who'd managed to slip his noose and take to flight as an albatross –"

"Only to be shot by an Englishman on safari," laughed Sergi.

"Ticket please, sir."

Michael glanced up at a petite woman. She had opened the door to his compartment so softly, he hadn't even noticed. "Yes, of course. Here we go." Rummaging around in his jeans pocket, he pulled out a flattened piece of stainless steel. It had an engraving of a train upon it, though the image had already begun to disappear at the edges. Michael smiled as he handed it to her. It was an old-fashioned method of proof of payment, but

out in the hinterlands of Botswana, now the northern state in a slowly expanding group of imperialised African countries, online forms of payment still seemed slow to take root. It was a clever way of using the Paper Plague as the train engraving would only last the one trip.

The ticket lady made a tiny incision in the steel with a small laser before handing it back to him. "Enjoy the rest of the trip, sir. We should be arriving in Francistown in one hour." "Thank you."

Sergi piped up as she left. "I guess melting signs isn't too far-fetched if they're using the phenomenon for train tickets."

"Well, it's the first I've heard of it. Strange that something like this wouldn't have made the news. Somebody must have realised the implications."

"And what if some people did, Michael?"

"Then I guess nobody listened."

They were both silent for a while before Sergi spoke again. "Do you think this diviner will be able to help us, Michael? I mean, it was hard enough tracking her down on the Net. They tend not to advertise."

"You told me finding her was simple."

"I can process information faster than your brain could ever hope to. It still took me some time. Even with every citizen having to register their occupation on the Net, I hardly think 'Hi, I'm familiar with runes' is going to be among them. I had to read between the lines. Traditional healer seemed the best bet."

"Surely she didn't actually call herself by that title?"

"Some people aren't quite as willing to hide the truth behind smoke and mirrors. I guess she's one of the brave ones."

"You couldn't find any other brave ones closer to home?"

"I'm sure I could have, except for the fact that, oh wait, no, she was the only one. I told you earlier, Michael, if there were any others, they're gone now. Things tend to die out, or end up exterminated. Surely you know that better than anyone?"

"I do know that, but this is Africa. Nothing here dies out completely. I'd sooner think it was a conspiracy."

"Don't you ever get tired of conspiracies?"

“Nope. Besides, if there were no conspiracies, we’d have no excuse for the names people call us.”

“You mean that old couple on the other side of Crocodile Bridge? That’s at least five kilometres away.”

“I’ve seen their telescope. I’m telling you, it probably has electron microscope capabilities. Who knows what they’ve seen?”

“Most likely you talking to the wall. You know, Michael, I’ve always warned you about that wall. No-good whore, if you ask me.”

“I wasn’t, and I won’t have you talking about my wall like that. At least she listens ...”

Francistown had at one time been the second biggest city in Botswana; the ‘Capital of the North.’ The gold rush had drawn in many hopefuls, and it had grown to become an important trade route through the hinterlands of Southern Africa.

As Michael walked over to the taxi rank, he was surprised to see a driver behind one of the wheels of the red and yellow vehicle. He would later discover that the wheels were still made of rubber, a material last used on vehicles twenty years ago. These days composite fibreglass was used instead due to its superior traction and the fact that one never had to worry about flats.

Opening the door to one of the taxis, he shielded his eyes from a sudden light reflection in the door window. Blinking, he peered into the dark interior. “Morning. Um, can I use this taxi?”

“Course you can,” replied the driver, a middle-aged black man who continually scratched at his wiry beard.

“Thank you. You speak English?”

“Everyone speak English who counts. Big city this with lots of big white men. Big black men too. All speak English.”

Michael got into the taxi, feeling slightly awkward. He wasn’t quite so used to the personal touch. The taxis in South Africa Prime – as Sergi had called it, once more trying to insert popular culture into the conversation – were completely automated. Once one’s

credits had been uploaded into the dashboard terminal, either via cell phone, touchpad, or, in his case, Sergi, it sped that person to their destination.

Michael had brought a number of silver and copper pieces along with him on this trip, expecting a manual system of payment. He hadn't, however, expected the taxi to be manually driven.

He cleared his throat, uncertain about the procedure. "I need to get to ..." He glanced down at his watch, and Sergi quickly displayed the address. "I need to get to 195 Old Blue Jacket Street."

"You sure? That's not a good part of town."

"Well, yes, I'm sure. Why, what's wrong?"

The taxi driver shook his head. "Used to be main road. Not anymore. You sure you want to go there, then you'll see."

"Okay then, can we go?"

"Sure, sure. Cost you one silver."

Michael handed him the coin.

As the taxi pulled off, the driver leant back in his chair. "Why you want to go to this place?"

"I'm looking for someone living there."

The driver shook his head. "Only bad people live there. Or mad. They say the air makes you crazy where the two rivers come together."

Michael glanced down at Sergi, widening his eyes in question. A small map appeared on his watch. "The Tati and Inchwe Rivers?" asked Michael.

"Yes. You know Francistown?"

"Not much. Enough to get by. What's wrong with the rivers?"

"Mad spirits. Ghosts of the miners, they say."

"The gold mines, you mean? I heard there were some in this area. Isn't that the reason for Francistown's founding?"

The driver laughed, a sharp and quick sound. "Yes."

Michael peered at him quizzically, but said nothing, and the rest of the drive was done in silence. Eventually they sighted one of the rivers, then the other from a short rise in the road.

“The place you want is near the Tati River. Very rough. You want me to wait outside for you?”

Suddenly Michael wasn't so sure of his brilliant plan. He handed the driver another coin.

“Alright. We won't be long.”

They stopped outside of a building adjacent to the river. It looked rundown, with cracked windows and peeling paint, and not very stable. The road itself was eerily empty apart from a few sleeping bodies taking no notice of anyone.

Taking a deep breath, Michael stepped out of the taxi. Facing the road was a loading zone and large garage door, but no entrance for pedestrians. Holding his arm out, he spoke to Sergi. “How about a scan? Any life signs?”

“It's difficult to get a reading. There seems to be some sort of interference. But... there we go. Two heat signatures, by the looks of it. They're both on the ground floor, around the other side. Maybe we'll find a door there.”

Waving his hand at the taxi driver to wait, Michael walked around the edge of the building. He saw the river slightly further on past a wire fence. It didn't look too inviting, even from this distance with the sun shining overhead. He finally came to a heavy wooden door set into the wall. The surrounding brickwork was uneven, confirming Michael's worry about the stability of the building. He knew little about river erosion, but it seemed plausible that the foundation was slowly being eaten away. It made entering even more daunting, but what truly frightened him were the bones and feathers hanging from a metal bar sticking out from the wall above the door. He reached up to touch them, and felt a shiver run through him. He lifted his watch. “What do you make of those?”

It was a moment before Sergi spoke. “It's the strangest thing. It's almost as though they're resisting my efforts to scan them. But then everything goes back to normal. A few goat bones and feathers from various birds. Nothing special.”

Michael breathed deeply. “What's going on inside?” he asked finally.

“Someone's sitting on the floor. The other one seems to be pacing back and forth. Maybe you should just knock.”

Michael lifted his hand, hesitating, and brought it down twice in quick succession.

“The one standing has stopped,” said Sergi. “He's facing the one sitting.” They waited.

“They're not moving. Try again.”

Michael knocked again, still unsure.

“The sitting one’s gesturing at the door, but the other seems reluctant.”

Michael knocked for the third time, now slightly annoyed. This time the one seated seemed to win out, and Michael stepped back.

The door swung open, revealing a large black man. He was dressed in a dark leather jacket and brown long pants. He used a cord of rope for a belt, but his pants still hung low over his bare feet. His face was the most unusual aspect of his appearance, however. Red and white paint was splashed across it in loose swirls and stripes.

Michael couldn’t help but think about what Sergi had said about the Paper Plague attacking language. But if the train ticket was anything to go by, symbols were just as much at risk. Looking at the man’s face before him, Michael wondered how long the paint would last if not physically washed off. The slight scarring in the corner of his face suggested that this man knew exactly how long the paint would last before ‘melting’ away. Michael grimaced at the thought of skin burning off like acid.

The man looked Michael up and down, made some decision, and started to close the door.

“Hey, hold on,” cried Michael, trying to stop the door from closing. A sharp word from inside was the only thing to stay the man from slamming the door in Michael’s face. He stepped forward suddenly, grabbing Michael by his shirt. He pulled him in, but not before Michael noticed him glance at the bones and feathers.

The room was dark. There were some windows on the far side, but they had been blackened with paint. Odds and ends littered the room, giving it a lived in feeling, but there was no bed that Michael could see. Small statues of a long-haired woman were placed at strange intervals; some were on sinking shelves while others hung from string next to bunches of unrecognisable herbs and flowers which gave the room an oddly sickening smell.

Adjusting his eyes to the half light, Michael was pressed rudely to the ground. Expecting his knees to hit cement, he was surprised at the soft yet coarse feeling under him. He knew enough from living in what was once a game reserve to recognise an animal’s hide, but as to what type, he couldn’t tell.

Seated before him was a strikingly young black woman. Her face was painted in long

white stripes which ran down her neck, disappearing behind the plain dress she wore. From her neck down she might have seemed like any normal girl. That thought was completely abolished, however, when Michael noticed the hundreds of coloured beads strewn throughout her hair, and the odd sack hanging down the back. Sergi would later tell him that it was a goat's bladder, but all he could think was that it added to the woman's otherworldly persona.

Michael found himself at a loss for words. He had prepared a number of questions regarding runes and their existence, not to mention the photograph, but they all seemed to disappear from him the moment his knees touched the animal hide. He thought later that it must have been the oddly overpowering herbs, but at the moment, all he could do was stare at the woman before him.

She didn't smile or frown, but seemed to have perfected a look of complete emptiness. Closing her eyes, she reached around the back of her neck, loosening something. Michael thought she was going to show him the goat's bladder, but instead she pulled out a great necklace and placed it on the floor. Michael leant back slightly, his eyes going wide. He was certain she hadn't been wearing it a moment ago. It was as if she had peeled it from her body.

She began to unstring four hand-sized tablets from the necklace, gathering them into a single pile. She pushed them towards him. "Shuffle."

With his mind unable to focus on anything else, he took the tablets. As he did so, the man behind him sat against the far wall, a small metallic instrument in front of him. He began to push his thumbs against it like a piano, and as he continued, the air began to fill with a cacophony which Michael thought might drive him insane. After a minute, however, it began to soothe his mind as he became numb to the beat.

Michael looked down at the tablets. He wasn't quite sure what they were made of, though their off-white colour reminded him of a skeleton he had once seen. There were smaller scratchings around their edges, but he couldn't quite make them out. What he could see in the light were the large symbols emblazoned on two of them. One had the outline of an eye painted on it, and despite the fact that it was almost childlike in its inception, it seemed to draw him into its very centre. Blinking, he looked at the next one. This one had two weapons engraved on it; a spear and an axe. They crisscrossed one another, which

seemed to reinforce the threat from the man behind him. Michael quickly pushed the tablets away.

The other two tablets had the same scratchings around their edges, but no symbols. Instead, the one had a single notch at the bottom while the other had two. The notches seemed to generate a feeling as equally disturbing as the symbols.

Finally heeding her words, Michael began to shuffle them, becoming more and more uncomfortable. A knot had suddenly appeared in the back of his shoulders, and he squeezed his eyes to shut out the pain.

Seeing his reaction, she leant over and took the tablets from his hands. Running her hands over them slowly and deliberately, she threw them into the space on the animal hide before them. "Chilume!" she cried out rather loudly.

This took Michael by surprise and he fell back.

The man behind him stopped his music and stood up quickly, grabbing Michael's shoulders and pushing him forward with a scowl, before returning to his instrument.

Michael came face to face with the tablets. They had all fallen face down but for the one with the weapons. He sat back as she took his face in her hands, searching deep within his eyes. She turned away suddenly, and Michael thought he saw a tear fall. "What? What did you see?" His rational mind, he found, had been left behind at the door.

She turned back to face him. "Pain," she said. "I sorry. Much pain. Blood." She took a deep breath. "Not... normal." She gathered up the tablets and threw them down again. "Zvibili!" She shouted it even louder than the first time, almost out of relief. This time only two were facing up: the weapons and the one-notch tablet. "Travel," she said. She moved her arms in front of her body. "Long travel."

"A journey?" asked Michael.

"Yes, yes," she nodded emphatically. Gathering up the tablets for a third time, she stopped. Peering at him with a querying look, she finally decided to throw them.

"Mpululu." It seemed as though her enthusiasm had finally been drained, for she spoke softly this time. The weapons and the two-notch tablets were face up. "Happy. Sad." The way she said the words mirrored Michael's questioning face. "Not you," she continued. "But is you. Happy sad." Shaking her head, she gathered up the tablets once more.

Michael wondered how many more times she was going to throw them. The fourth time

she did so, something strange happened. Her eyes rolled into her head and she fell on top of the tablets. The man behind Michael moved to help her, but she quickly righted herself, gesturing for him to step back. "Ndirinaka," she said.

"Arichaenda."

"Nyangwe, bwe iri chikombesa!"

The man finally stepped back and the woman gathered up the tablets before Michael could see them.

"What did the tablets say?" asked Michael finally.

"Not for you. For me." She seemed to gather her courage. "Last." She threw the tablets down. All of them were face down. She stared at them for a long time. Michael noticed that tears had begun to fall down her face in a constant stream, marring her face paint. She swallowed heavily, pointing at the man behind Michael. "Dzinga murume. Zvino!" Michael felt a hand on his shoulder, lifting him to his feet. "Wait." He felt a sudden rush to his head. "I need some answers. I didn't come here for this." But before he could get his bearings, he was pushed through the door and onto the street. He tried to scabble to his feet, but the door closed firmly in his face. He fell back, suddenly exhausted.

"Michael?"

He took a deep breath. "I'm not sure this calls for one of your quips, Sergi."

"I wasn't going to say anything, dimwit. I was going to ask if you were feeling alright. Your heart is pounding away."

"Damn it, I know." He got to his feet. "I'm sorry. My head still feels like it's full of smoke. Besides that, I'm fine. Though I think we've come to a dead end."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you expect me to do? Beat the door down?"

"No, but we could —"

"Do nothing? That's the first idea you've had that I agree with." Michael's eyes glazed over. "Hmm, I think a nice hot bath is in order. Leave the conspiracies to those who might actually make a difference. That person just isn't me, Sergi." He turned back towards the taxi.

"Michael! Have you finally lost it?"

"There was never anything to lose, Sergi."

“Michael, stop, for a moment. I’m getting some odd brain readings from you. You’re steadily losing neurons from your hippocampus.”

“So what? Now you’re some great diagnostic chip. Will wonders never cease? What else can you do? How about jumping off that bridge by the river?”

Michael reached the taxi, and the driver gave him an odd look. “You okay, sir?”

“I’m fine. Dead fine. No problems here. You know what, the bath is too far. How about you just drive me over into the river?”

“Michael, what’s that on your shoulder?” whispered Sergi. “Is that ...” He made a quick decision. “Hey, taxi driver.” The man swirled around, his eyes widening in fright. “Um,” Sergi raced through some of the history of the Shona people. “I speak with the voice of your father. Vadzimu. This man is cursed by a muroyi. You must find the curse. Destroy it!”

The taxi driver fell away from Michael, hesitating.

“He has been cursed. You must destroy it!”

The taxi driver pointed at Michael’s shoulder. “It is there, Father. But I cannot touch.”

“Use a stick!”

The man searched around and came back with a short pole.

Michael turned towards him. “Kill me. Stab me with your weapon.”

“No, hai.” The driver moved back.

“Knock it off, quickly!” shouted Sergi.

The driver leapt to Michael’s left and swiped at his shoulder. Whatever was clinging to it fell to the ground.

Michael stood still for a moment, before his eyes rolled back into his head. He began to fall forward.

The driver flung the pole away, catching him. He placed him on the ground before backing away. “I have done it, Father.” He opened his taxi door, took one look at Michael, then drove away, flinging out the two coins he had been given as payment, shouting something about mad spirits.

Michael groaned, grabbing his head.

Sergi checked his reading, and was relieved to see his serotonin levels rising. “Michael?”

“God, what the hell?”

“You tried to kill yourself?”

“Oh.”

“You seem to be almost back to normal.”

“My head feels like a steel brick.”

“Relax for a bit. But while you’re doing that see if you can knock over that piece of goat skin.”

“What?”

“Goat skin. I think that bodyguard stuck it to your shoulder.”

Michael leant forward, feeling as though he were about to retch, and pulled the small flap of skin towards him with his boot. He bent to pick it up, but Sergi warned him not to touch it. “You want to go back to committing suicide? Don’t be a dunce. See if you can turn it around.”

Michael flipped it with his boot, and couldn’t help but smile. “What do you know; I think it’s a rune.”

“Damn.”

“Damn’s right. By the way, when did you start saying ‘damn’?”

“Never mind that. Michael, they just tried to kill you, with a rune. Wasn’t it just yesterday that another one almost did the same thing?”

Michael fumbled in his jacket, pulling out the photograph with the perfectly seared rune.

“But this,” he said, waving it at his watch, “happened when I brought it in contact with a crystal. This other one almost had me kill myself. I don’t think they’re the same thing.”

“Fine, but those two clearly saw you as a danger. Michael, they must be in on whatever this conspiracy is.”

“And we were just lucky enough to find them? I don’t know.”

“What were you saying yesterday about fate?”

“What then? I should just go back and ask them what they no? Maybe this time tall, dark and brooding won’t resort to... whatever this is.” He kicked the goat skin away.

“I don’t think you’re going to have another chance to ask him, or her.”

Michael stood up, standing still for a moment as vertigo gripped him. “What do you mean?” he asked finally.

“They’re leaving.”

Michael glanced towards the building. "They're coming out?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure. They're moving away from us."

"To where? They're going to swim across the river?"

"Looks that way, only... they're halfway across, and unless they know how to breathe in water, I'd guess they're walking."

Michael started to run back to the other end of the building.

"I wonder how the Pope would take this news?" asked Sergi.

Michael slowed, catching his breath. "What news?"

"The fact that they're walking on water."

"Maybe he'll make them the poster children for his new regime. I don't know, Sergi, why does it matter?" Michael coughed. "Running's hard."

"Serves you right. Hurry up, they're moving faster now. Their heat signatures are starting to fade." Michael ran past the door he had been so ignominiously kicked out of, finally reaching the edge of the river.

"So where are they?" Michael searched the river and the far shore, but all he saw were old mine dumps strewn haphazardly around an even more desolate area of barren earth and stone.

"Not on the water? I thought we were on to something. Regardless, we should still be able to see them. Unless... hold on a moment."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm bringing the satellite into better focus."

Michael stood around, still trying to catch a glimpse of anyone amongst the mine dumps.

"Are you going to be much longer? I can smell the dumps all the way from here."

"Almost there. Just a little more focus... aha. Damn! Michael, you're not going to believe this. They're underground. There's some sort of tunnel running from this building under the river."

"Are you serious? What the hell is going on here?" Michael raced back to the door, but he couldn't budge it. "Sergi, can you do anything with this?"

"That's a thick wedge of steel, Michael. My laser would take at least ten minutes to get through. I don't think we have that much time."

Michael ran back to the river, gazing along its length. "There's a bridge over there to the

right. We'll have to follow from above." He took in a few deep breaths, enjoying the fresh air while he could. "It looks like I'm going for a trek through some mine dumps."

The bridge, like most of the area, was empty of traffic. Crossing over, Michael felt like he had entered the proverbial wasteland. Old and rusted bulldozers littered the scene, while black and white dumps juxtaposed one another like some god-like chessboard. Oddly enough, tufts of grass had managed to struggle to the surface of the gravelly hills, eking out a miserable existence.

Sergi warned Michael that grazing on the grass wouldn't be a very good idea, though the gravel might do wonders for his digestion.

Michael grimaced, an expression he utilised far too often when he lacked the energy to respond. He had once tried rolling his eyes, but the repeated strain had caused him to suffer headaches.

Sergi had managed to situate the satellite directly over the dumps, but there was some sort of interference. He could only catch glimpses of the two escapees' heat signatures before they would disappear.

Michael followed the blips through the dumps, but after half an hour he felt like giving up. "Sergi, my nose is starting to melt off from the smell. I also think my tongue is starting to dissolve."

"I guess there are certain drawbacks to being human."

Michael started gagging. "I think I'm going to be sick, again."

"Hold on. Let me try and boost the signal. I still don't see how the dumps could be causing this much static, though."

"Right now I don't really care."

Sergi was silent for a moment. "Okay, I'm getting something. It looks like there's a natural hill, about a hundred meters east of here. I think I caught a glimpse of something."

Michael trudged off once more. He came to the side of the hill. An opening had been cut from it, but had been boarded up. Judging by its state, it looked like a relatively recent addition.

"There's something odd about this, Michael. From what I've been able to find out about the history of this area, this was once the Monarch Mines. They used to mine gold here,

but it closed down in 2010.”

“Well clearly,” began Michael, grabbing one of the boards, “someone decided to set up shop once more.” He heaved on the beam, but it was nailed in far too tightly. “Now I know why ‘Strength-it-ups’ are so popular. I could have used one about now.”

“God, Michael, you do know what they put in those things, don’t you?”

“I do know, which is why I have a backup system.”

“A rubber muscle suit?”

“No, dumbass. Your laser. Surely it won’t take more than a few seconds to cut through this?”

“Oh, if I must.” Michael held out his wrist as the laser erupted from his watch, cutting through the boards. Pulling the rest away, he stared into the gloomy entrance. He was about to open his mouth when a light suddenly erupted from the watch. “Pre-empted you there, Mikey-boy.”

“It’s about time you learnt to think for yourself. And please, no more ‘Mikey-boy’.”

“But Mikey-girl isn’t as catchy.”

Ignoring his friend, Michael took a few steps forward and broke into a small fit of coughs. “Is it safe in here?” he asked. “The air’s not very fresh.”

Sergi reassured him that it was structurally stable, though only for another ten years or so. Pockets of dust which haphazardly dislodged themselves into Michael’s face threatened to undermine his faith in Sergi, but he carried on nevertheless. He didn’t go very far, however, before he came to a dead end. “Sergi?”

“Don’t ask me? My sensors are battling to penetrate much further than your own eyes. Maybe they sealed off this mine when it was closed down.”

Michael placed his hand on the wall in front of him, running it across the surface. “Is it just me, or is there something wrong here?”

“Well, mine records don’t contain a work order for this. Maybe some local thought it would be safer to block up the tunnel. Don’t want any kids wondering around mines.”

“Maybe. There’s still something wrong with this wall, though. Have you tried scanning it? Is it cement? Apparently they still used that up till 2012.”

“Is that general knowledge or your best guess? Let me check.”

Michael waited a moment. “You know, Sergi, I always respected the speed at which you

found answers, but even I could do better.”

“Shut up, Michael. I’m trying to figure something out. Put your hand against the wall again.”

Michael noticed a number of calculations flying all over his watch face. He thought Sergi even beeped once.

“Incredible! I’ve never seen such a thing,” said Sergi.

Michael raised his eyebrow, trying not to look irritated. “And the grand verdict would be?”

“It’s not real.”

“Just as I thought, Watson,” said Michael, mimicking his favourite online detective.

“Come on, Sergi. You’re telling me this wall is nothing more than a light show?”

“Exactly! Hey, how did you know?”

“I’m a genius. What do you mean ‘exactly’?”

“This wall’s made up of a dense cluster of light molecules; photons.”

“Light? Isn’t light made up of waves?”

“That’s the thing about light. It can be both. Scientists still haven’t managed to figure it out. Nevertheless, this wall is nothing more than a mirage.”

“Really, then why do my fingers tell me different?”

“Because... it’s like the light particles are so tightly fused together, they won’t budge.”

“You just made that up, didn’t you?”

“Michael, this is a serious discovery. Do you realise the implications?”

“Particle physics wasn’t really one of my favourite subjects, Sergi. I’m sure it’s wonderful, but how do we get through it?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe if I bombard it with concentrated light waves, I could make a small hole.”

“Wouldn’t that cause a nuclear explosion?”

“I don’t think so. I could find out quickly enough.”

“Hold on a moment.” Michael shone the watch light, which Sergi had dimmed considerably, into the corner of the wall. “Are those two runes? I can’t quite see from here. Magnify them onto the watch, please, Sergi.” Michael stared at the marks closely, convinced more and more that this was the place he might find some answers. “They look

slightly faded, but it seems more like natural degradation than the Paper Plague. Maybe there are more?" Michael shone light into the other corner, recognising the lone rune immediately. He pulled out his own copy. "It's the one from the photograph, Sergi. I think we're on to something here."

"Not for very long, I'm afraid," said a voice from behind.

Michael started, but it was too late to stop the sickening crunch at the back of his head.

He crumpled forward, the photograph landing in a pool of light.

Sergi was the only one to hear the gasp from the assailant, and his repeated mutterings.

"Othala! He is the one who brings Othala!"

Michael woke in a tiny cot to the sound of heavy shouting. He tried to lift his head, only to fall back down as he felt shooting pain raging from the back of his neck down his spine.

"Keep still, Michael. That was a nasty smack to the head."

"Sergi? Where are we?"

"In some kind of cell; underground, in the mines. Whoever knocked you out did something to those two runes in the left corner. The wall just vanished... well, no, the photons were converted into light waves before dis -"

"I get it," groaned Michael, grabbing at his head.

"Right, anyway, we were taken deeper into the mines before we finally came to this large cavernous chamber. Definitely not in the mining records. I checked. It must have taken years to carve out. I'm surprised there wasn't a cave in."

Michael closed his eyes, trying his hardest to comprehend Sergi's words, but it all came out as an odd droning sound.

"Michael, it was covered in runes."

He sat up, his eyes opening. "What?"

"It's incredible. Anyway, you were taken down a side tunnel to this cell."

"What happened to the photograph?"

"The man who knocked you out took it. But apparently it saved your life. He kept saying

the word 'Othala' over and over, as if it meant something important. I've a suspicion it might be the name of the rune, though what significance it has, I'm not sure. I—"

At that moment, the wooden door to Michael's cell opened, grating against the rough stone floor. Three people, two men and a woman, walked in.

There was a small candle on a table next to Michael which provided some weak light, but one of the men, much older than the others, touched the wall next to the door and the room flooded with artificial light.

The woman Michael immediately recognised as the sangoma. Sergi had managed to dig out that name from the Net based on her description. It translated roughly to 'African medicine woman'. The men he didn't know, though he assumed the younger one was his attacker.

"No free, Inyanga," pleaded the sangoma in her broken English. "Dangerous. I see."

Free? Michael could barely move as it was.

"And yet he holds Othala, Shona," replied the older man, the Inyanga. His voice had receded to the typical gruffness of the elderly. "You found this near him, Matthew?" He held the photograph in his left hand.

"I did, Inyanga," replied Matthew.

Michael was taken by surprise. This Matthew had white skin. For some reason he hadn't expected that. And, unlike the sangoma, Shona, or the Inyanga, he was dressed in clothes similar to Michael's. Modern clothes.

"But it is not true rune!" tried Shona once more.

"It is as true as any other," said the Inyanga, whose English was more fluid. "Merely because it is not inscribed on wood or bone does not make it any less real. The significance of such a thing as this can surely not be lost on you. Now, I will take into consideration what you have seen in your vision, but I must discover how this," and he held up the photograph, "came to be in his possession, and," he sighed, "the ramifications."

"Inyanga," said Matthew, his voice slightly heightened. "He's awake. He could have heard...."

"I fear it is too late to worry about such things now, Acolyte. And now that he is awake, I would speak with him alone."

Matthew gave Michael one last look before nodding and leaving the room. Shona frowned, and was about to protest when she received a stern look from the older man. Dropping her shoulders in defeat, she too left.

Turning to Michael, who had fallen back in his cot and was only now succeeding in his attempts to sit up, the Inyanga moved closer and sat on the edge. "I think you'd best tell me who you are, young man. And how you found us? Things aren't looking good for you at the moment." He attempted to sound comforting, but there was power behind his voice.

Michael refused to be cornered, however. "You expect me to answer you after your boy almost cracked my skull? What are you anyway? The leader of some cult? And what's with the archaic speech? I guess living down here, you thought you'd lose a few contractions in the dark."

"Look here," said the Inyanga, leaning in. "I do n... don't have time for this, and neither do you. You may not know this, but I too have people to answer to. So you either talk to me, or maybe you'd like to stay here a little longer than you planned."

Michael looked at Sergi, who had pasted a small yellow smiley face on the screen of the watch. It winked at him. "Fine, you win." He leant back more comfortably.

"A little too quickly, but very well. Tell me your name, and how you came to know about us?"

"Well, my name is Michael and I only recently came into contact with that photograph you hold in your hand. I needed more information on it, so I sought out some mystical aid from your sangoma, Shona. However," he stressed, "before I could show her the photograph or have any of my questions answered, she did her reading thing –" he waved his hands about and rolled his eyes back "– then had her tall and dark friend toss me out, with a little goatskin charm thrown into the mix. I've never really had the impulse to kill myself, but I can thank a terrified taxi driver for preventing me from drowning myself in the river. So, naturally, I thought, why would someone want to kill me? Maybe I should follow her and find out. So I did. And here we are. Oh, did I mention almost getting killed a second time by your 'acolyte' over there?"

The Inyanga's face had grown grave, and had shone with anger when Michael mentioned suicide. He closed his eyes for a moment, before opening them again. "I'm sorry.

Sometimes my people can act rashly. But we are not murderers, and I will see the guilty party is dealt with. Nevertheless, you explain yourself somewhat sparsely, and it may just be that your curiosity won't pay out very well regardless. Now, about this photograph. Tell me of it." The Inyanga placed it on Michael's lap.

Staring at it for some time, Michael wondered how he should proceed. He looked at the man before him, trying to judge just how old he was. His hair was white and balding, and yet his neatly trimmed beard, also white, accentuated his African features, making him seem more wizened than old. Unlike Matthew, he only wore simple robes. "Hold on," Michael began. "Before I say anything, I'd like to know exactly what I *have* gotten myself into. Just who are you, and why, in this age of modern convenience, are you wearing robes?"

The Inyanga raised both eyebrows and glanced down at his clothing. "I can assure you ..." He stopped, and shook his head quickly. "I think the less you know of us the better, Michael. We've dealt with intruders before and you would not be treated any differently."

"Have it your way, though for some reason my arriving with this rune tells me I'm not like your average trespasser. But, alas, it would seem our time is up. Oh well, we'll just have to schedule something for tomorrow."

The Inyanga looked at him curiously, then stood up and reached for a bowl on a nearby ledge.

Michael hadn't noticed it.

"Have some water."

Michael took it warily and drank slowly, then more steadily. He was only now realising how thirsty the bump on the head had left him.

"It would seem," continued the Inyanga, "that we have reached an impasse."

"Big words, considering your rural existence. If you haven't heard, there's a marvellous land to the south called South Africa. I'm sure you'd be able to find a mine more to your liking."

"Rather flippant for someone in your position, though I would guess as a defence mechanism it's worked for you in the past. And if *you* haven't heard, Botswana is now as much a part of your great country as Zimbabwe is. Unlike others however, we choose to

keep imperialism outside the borders of our culture. I am in the fortunate position to best understand what that means.”

“And just what does it mean? You’ve cut yourself off from the world, and for what? Your own little volkstad.”

“Don’t you dare compare us to those... those ...”

“Those what? Isolationists? Or do you prefer extremists?”

“I will not be insulted!”

Michael sat back. “Feel free to explain.”

The Inyanga took a deep breath. “We have cut ourselves off out of necessity. Yes, to protect ourselves from those who would harm us to keep their secret, but also to preserve a heritage which has been devastated by technology. We cannot co-exist with the imperialism running rampant throughout the world. We would lose that battle.”

“Have you tried?”

“Some of us have, yes. They are gone now.”

“Have you tried getting in touch with them?”

“We have methods of contacting our own which work outside the bounds of technology, but it has been to no avail. They are lost to us.” He held his head in his hands. “I have always thought of our Order as being the heart of our nation. And the struggle of the heart would craft the nature of its entire people. But for some, the mind is easier to accept. It is the way of comfort, not truth. It destroys our dream of a united nation with pride and arrogance.”

Michael lowered his eyes.

The Inyanga looked at the photograph a second time. “As you may or may not be aware, an inyanga is a man of magic amongst our people. I can do many things with this power, but one of my chief responsibilities lies in my role as a healer. But it goes beyond the mere physical. It is my duty to protect them from the idea that their culture, that their very souls, are not as worthy as those who have embraced imperialism. I seek to aid a nation in rediscovering its roots among the ruins of prosperity.”

“But whose roots? Look at Matthew? I would hardly say that he shares the same history or culture that you do.”

“And there, once again, is this failure to understand. It is not a matter of one’s personal

faith, but a matter of survival, regardless of creed or race. History, memory, orality. These are the weapons we now use, so that we do not forget who we are. We do not allow machines to remember for us, for in time they would be the only ones left to remember anything. I for one am not willing to forget who I am, and I think you may come to understand that, which is why I will now tell you the truth of what we are.” Michael blinked. He wasn’t quite certain whether he was surprised at this response. He hadn’t truly believed anything he told the Inyanga, but it had certainly goaded the man into some kind of righteous evangelism. This man definitely had force behind his words, and Michael was inclined to trust him. He knew he was in danger, but strange things had been happening to him. He wasn’t exactly certain, however, if he was inclined to believe all of the impossibilities. Then again, his world was suffering from a Paper Plague, of all things. He thought then that he might play along, for the time being. “I’m sorry if we got off on the wrong foot.”

“I will give you the benefit of the doubt, Michael. Now, if you would hear me out, keep silent.” He took in a deep breath. “This cult, as you so finely put it, we call the Order of Tyr, the reason for which does not concern you. It was created in response to the Paper Plague, and the discovery that runes and the objects they were inscribed upon were not being destroyed, at all.” He paused. “Excuse me, that’s not entirely true.”

“I was thinking much along the same lines, don’t worry.”

The Inyanga gave him a stern look. “What I said about the runes is true. What I meant is that this Order has in fact existed since before the Plague. But our *significance* did not take effect until that point, as I’m sure would understand if you didn’t interrupt. We are made up mostly of fortune tellers, runespeakers, traditional healers and so forth; those who would have known of the indestructibility of the runes. We came together, first as a group wishing to better understand the world of old and in a sense shun the world of technology for fear of its penchant for destruction, not only to the world above us, but to the very existence of all things mystical. However, as the Paper Plague took effect, our goal became that much more apparent, and focused. We hid ourselves as completely as possible and furthered our new cause: to question the Plague, and finally to realise that runes must hold the true power to the mysteries of the world and beyond, for why else would they alone survive? We have been keeping the secret of the runes for thirty years

now, and though some of our tactics have at times been ruthless, I daresay it might cause panic were the greater population to discover the truth.”

“Or maybe you don’t want to share your findings with the rest of the world,” said Michael, not allowing himself to fall under this man’s spell of mystery, despite this overwhelming feeling of awe generated by the Inyanga. “You’re just like any other government agency out there, aren’t you? You want to hoard the power for yourself!” “That is not true! We not only fight to learn the truth, but we fight those who would do exactly as you have suggested.”

“So what? You’re glorified, technology-hating Luddites?”

“No! We do not sabotage nor do we kill unless necessary, and very rarely does it come to that. Nor do we shun technology in such an adverse way. We merely do not partake of it. But we must protect ourselves, and who better to seek out the truth than professionals in the field of the mystical?”

“And once you’ve discovered the truth? What then? Will you share your news freely with the world? Ah, but I can see by your look that you wouldn’t.”

“You know nothing! We will make that decision when the time is right. You need not burden yourself with such worries.”

Michael shook his head in despair. He realised he wasn’t going to win on this front. If he wanted the truth he would have to rely on himself, and Sergi. “Fine. I’m sorry, once again, for my antagonism. It must be the bump on my head. I would like one more question answered, though.”

The Inyanga pursed his lips. “Ask and I shall see.”

“I have recently learnt that it was language, and not paper, that’s been destroyed.”

“Yes, this is something we have been aware of for some time now. It is not so easy to hide the truth in the hinterlands of Africa than it is in your ‘modern’ society. Especially when it is we who have learnt to adapt the Plague while all you do is search for limited alternatives.”

“Yes, well, you’re welcome to your opinion. But what I wanted to ask was whether you’ve discovered why runes are the only form of writing to have survived?”

“Have I not said it already? Within them lies a greater power than we as yet can truly comprehend.”

“You tell that to all your ‘acolytes’?” Michael couldn’t help but smirk. It sounded like it might have come from an online manual of 1940’s nuclear jargon. “Fine, so you don’t know. I understand. But there was something else that was also bothering me. Why the Order of *Tyr*? I know you said I didn’t have to know, but now I do.”

“You think yourself humorous, Michael, but we shall see. Tyr is named after one of the three ancient gods of runes. Freyja and Heimdall are the other two.”

“Other t – wait, you mean there are two more of these cul –”

“No! You will receive no more answers from me!” He slammed his hand down on the photograph. “Explain this now. You now know more than enough to warrant your immediate imprisonment, so I wouldn’t test my patience much further.”

Michael sighed. He had no choice. “I received it from a private source, within the government.”

The Inyanga turned his head and spat. “It all makes sense now. You are a government spy! Sent to discover this location... you would have been followed, or ...” At that moment, he spied Michael’s watch. “A beacon –” He grabbed the watch, ripping it off Michael’s arm. “You think you can fool me with your stories?” He raised the watch, ready to smash it on the floor, when Sergi’s voice permeated the room.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t do that. I’m not indestructible.” The Inyanga stood, frozen.

“And besides, oh Great Inyanga, if I truly were a homing beacon, this place would have been swarming with government officials long before this.”

The Inyanga lowered the watch, staring at the small face looking back at him on the screen. “What manner of witchcraft is this?”

“Oh, and I thought you might appreciate a little delicate magic. But wait, let me put it in simple terms. If you hadn’t noticed,” Sergi stopped, and his small face seemed to survey his surroundings, “which you quite obviously hadn’t, the world outside is a lot more technologically evolved.”

“Pah,” spat the Inyanga.

“Look,” said Michael, reaching out his hand for Sergi. “I don’t work for the government, and Sergi here isn’t a homing beacon. He’s my friend.” The Inyanga still stood, waiting.

“The person I got this photograph from put his own life at risk to get it to me, and now he’s dead. All of the information on runes is highly protected by the government, and I

don't think Sergi here would have almost been destroyed himself by government watchdogs were we working for them. Now, please, Inyanga, give me the watch."

The Inyanga closed his eyes, as if to open them would be admitting defeat, then reluctantly handed back the watch. "So you too have been made an enemy of the South African government?" he asked soberly.

"'South Africa' no longer really exists anymore, I'd say. Any real existing government only means one thing these days, and I'm hoping they still don't know about me. But if they do, then I would most certainly be an enemy."

The older man sighed, sitting on the cot once more. He gestured to their surroundings.

"Everyone of the Order lives a... low-tech lifestyle, so to speak. It's our way of hiding."

"It's clear that the government wants to keep this whole rune business secret," said Michael, "but how much do you think they really know?"

"A whole lot more than we would wish. They strive to keep it secret from the public, as do we, but their goals are not ours. They seek to discover power behind the runes, while we only seek an answer as to why the runes are so powerful."

"Fine, I'll accept that for now." Michael lay back, worn out. "So where do we go from here?"

"You will stay here for the time being, that's what you'll accept," said the Inyanga, standing up. "I must speak with Shona, now," he said, putting his hand on the door frame.

"I won't very soon forget our conversation, Michael. Don't you forget that there are quicker ways of killing a man than having him commit suicide."

Michael lay back down, suddenly too tired to argue. He drifted off to sleep, his pounding head receding into quiet slumber, unaware that he was no longer in possession of his precious photograph.

Michael knelt down in front of the door, his ear pressed firmly against it, listening for the telltale signs of breathing. Hearing only the dull scratching of termites, he knew that he had been left unattended. He was surprised that there were no guards, but when he tried to open the door to his cell, he found it firmly secured. The Inyanga had turned off the strange light when he left, but Sergi still couldn't figure out where the power had originated. He had tried a wide range scan but had found no sign of any electrical current in the walls. Beaming his light against the wall had revealed a small inscribed rune, though how it worked was a mystery. Michael had tried touching it but nothing happened. "Sergi," he whispered finally, "see what you can do with this door." Sergi scanned the door.

Looking down at his watch screen in the low candle light, Michael saw that he had pulled blue-prints on the make of the lock. Dark lines revolved on the now blue screen as Sergi probed its weak points. "It's a simple iron lock," he concluded. "Nothing special. I should be able to melt through it in a moment." A tiny pin protruded from the watch, and a red beam began to sear the lock. The smell reminded Michael of his mother's roast, but he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He watched as the metal turned red hot before it began to melt away, dripping down the door onto the stone floor. "Try now," offered Sergi.

Michael gave it a push, but it still refused to budge. Stepping back, he lifted his leg and kicked out as hard as he could. The door flew outwards on its hinges, echoing as it reverberated against the stone wall. Michael grinned awkwardly. "Sorry."

"Michael, next time they should just kill you."

Shrugging, he escaped his cell, turning left down a long corridor of stone covered in moss. It suggested a water source somewhere behind these man-made walls, making Michael wonder how close they were to the converging rivers. Another thing which he couldn't figure out was the heady luminescence which seemed to be embedded within the very air. The further he moved along the passageway, every time he attempted to focus in on the flickering light, it seemed to move away so that while his direct vision saw only darkness, he could see the walls clearly out of the corners of his eyes. "What do your scanners say about this strange light?"

"Other than the fact that it's strange?" said Sergi. "My long range scanners are the only ones picking it up. It's as if it resists close inspection. Fortunately, as light goes, it doesn't have any unnatural properties."

"Which means?"

"Which means that it's light."

"Thanks, but where's it coming from? The walls? The moss?"

"Neither. It's just... in the air."

Michael continued walking, the passage heading off into the darkness. After about five minutes, he reached a fork in the tunnel. "Which way?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Where exactly do you want to go?"

Michael shook his head. "You know, I never really gave it a thought. To escape, or to explore...?"

"Is that a question?"

"It could be... never mind." He weighed up his options. "What's down the left passage?"

"It seems to end abruptly," said Sergi. "But I still think it's worth a try."

"And why would you say that?"

"Hey, I've also got intuition."

"Your feminine circuits finally kicking in?"

"I don't have any feminine circuits."

"So it's a part of your male circuitry?"

"I suppose..."

"And since when were your circuits gender based?"

"I... hey, that's not funny."

Smirking, Michael decided to follow his friend's advice. The moss in the passage lessened as they wound their way along, and he wondered if they were making their way to the surface.

What they found shocked even Sergi. "Didn't the Inyanga say they shunned technology?" he asked. "What do they call this?"

What stood before them was a behemoth of a metal door. It was made of stainless steel or something at least as durable. Its dimensions seemed to defy the width of the tunnel.

Lights flickered around it, seemingly at random. There didn't seem to be any handle or

knob of any kind.

“Strange. What do you think they’re hiding?” asked Michael.

“Maybe this is where they perform their spooooky rituals.”

“There’s no need for such dramatics, Sergi.”

“Spoil sport. Well, whatever it is, it must be important. Because this door could prevent just about anyone from getting through, I’d imagine. What they didn’t count on, however, was me.”

Michael never knew exactly what Sergi did, but seconds later he felt a slight rumbling under his feet. The door grated against the rough stone, suggesting that it had been closed for a very long time. Dust started to rise and he backed away, catching a stray fleck of rock on his cheek. He squeezed his eyes shut in momentary pain.

“You okay, oh buddy oh pal?”

“Fine, just a scratch.” Coughing away some dust, he saw that the door had disappeared completely into the opposite wall.

Stepping slowly, Michael entered a domed room not much larger than his own bedroom. Turning his head, he saw that the walls were completely covered in a mirror-like glass, though it didn’t reflect back his image. There was still that familiar haze in the air. He thought it seemed to permeate more potently within the room.

There was only the one entrance, so whatever secret was being kept locked away was somewhere in this room. But Michael searched, and Sergi scanned, and there was nothing to be found.

“I’m having the same trouble with my scanner,” said Sergi. “Except that whatever’s in this room is somehow disabling even my long range scans.”

“It must be some kind of dampening field.”

“Dampening field’? This isn’t science fiction, Michael.”

“Then what? Does your superior intellect have a better answer?”

“However superior I might be, no, it doesn’t.”

“What about this bizarre glass wall?” asked Michael hopelessly. He ran his hand against it, and for a moment he thought he spotted something. He touched the wall again, holding his palm flat. A symbol flared and Michael jumped back as he felt a surge of adrenaline. It disappeared again. Michael wiped his hand across it for a third time. “Sergi, shine a

light here. Do you recognise that?"

"It's not one that I've seen, but I'd wager it was a rune."

Michael removed his hand and saw that the rune remained.

"It hasn't disappeared. Do you think it's the light?"

"I don't think so," said Sergi. "Look, it's starting to fade. Besides, your hand doesn't emit light, dumbass."

"Well, what then?"

"Isn't it obvious? They're responding to heat. Your body heat; the light's heat... only the light wasn't emitting enough to sustain it."

"Even if it works for a moment, it'll still tell us something. See if you can emit a beam throughout the room."

"A beam of heat? Are you insane?"

"I didn't mean burn me to death? Just... a little warmth."

"Alright, but I can't exactly do that when I'm latched onto you, now can I? Put me on the floor."

Michael removed his wristwatch and placed it in the centre of the room. The watch began to hum. The sound reverberated against the walls as the dome was bathed in bright white light.

The sloping walls began to flare, symbols searing themselves all around them.

"God, it's beautiful." Each rune flared a unique colour, reminding Michael of the kaleidoscope he'd once found amongst his father's old toys. The runes were like a multicoloured galaxy and all one needed to travel to the planets was to touch them. He started to breathe heavily in excitement. "How many planets are there?"

"Planets?"

"You know what I mean."

"Twenty three," replied Sergi after a moment.

Michael frowned. "I thought you said there were twenty four altogether."

"There are."

"Then where's the last one?" He walked slowly about, admiring the fiery runes. There seemed to be a pattern to them, but he was lost as to its meaning. Their brilliance began to fade as Sergi turned down the light and he found back himself in the centre. Stooping

to collect his wristwatch, he glanced down. Gleaming there, underneath, rested the last rune. "Sergi, you've been sitting on it the whole time," said Michael. Bending closer, he was further surprised at what he saw. "Look," he said, touching the rune. "It's my rune. The one from the photograph. What did you say Matthew called it? Othala?" It flared, brighter and deadlier than any of the others had, and Michael grabbed his chest. The room began to spin, and every single rune burned so fiercely that he was forced to shut his eyes.

"What's happening...? Michael...!" Sergi flew from his hands.

Michael's clothes were ripped from his body, but didn't notice as he felt his heart tearing in his chest. His body was lifted into the air, and began to slowly rotate. As his pace quickened, his skin blackened, and began to melt away in a blinding white fire.

"The manuscript clearly states that he is the one," argued the Inyanga. "Why do you fight me so, Shona?"

"Because of what I have seen!" she shouted right back. Her voice reverberated about the colossal, domed assembly room.

Torchlight flickered, and here and there a rune could be seen to form on the walls, only to fade back into darkness. The centre of the room held a giant pedestal upon which the Inyanga stood, looking down upon the few that were a part of the Order of Tyr. Many of them were not even part of the original Order, but rather the children of that generation. Indoctrinated from an early age through necessity, this generation had grown up believing in the Order, and the need to keep its secrets. And even though many of them, much like Shona, set up home and shop away from their main base of operations, many did live in the underground complex of old mine shafts.

Shona stood directly below the Inyanga, at the forefront of the faces who too demanded answers to the mystery that was their captive, Michael O'Connor.

The Inyanga sighed. The ease in which Michael had quelled his old and bludgeoned heart was unsettling. For those few moments back in the cell, when he had felt suddenly trapped, as if his own destiny were being pulled in a direction he was too frightened to

follow, he had desperately needed to believe that the fool who had stumbled upon them was in fact one of the enemy. Only now did he realise that it was his own fool's dream. He was old, and didn't know whether he could stand the repercussions were the prophecy to come to fruition in his lifetime. And yet, this was the position he found himself in.

"The signs are all here, Shona. Your attempt on his life was premature."

Shona managed to look abashed. She retreated to her native language, after which she was named. "I have apologised for that, but it was a misunderstanding. Tiphor knew the fear this man had created in me. He only thought to protect me."

"And Tiphor failed. Is that not proof enough that he is the one. You know the words as well as I: 'To hold Othala in his hand upon the discovery of our Lord Tyr.'"

"It hardly marks him, now does it," stated the fortune teller in growing anger.

"True enough. But what of the other signs? What of his companion? 'Alive and yet not,' I believe it was."

"Circumstantial."

"When is anything not?"

"Why do you insist on this pointless discussion, Inyanga? You do not even listen to me when I speak of what I have seen in him; of the path he sets for himself. He will destroy us!"

"Truly?" remarked the Inyanga in as patronising a voice as he could manage. "And yet, how can he be so inconsequential, and still threaten us so?" He gestured to the others.

"Does it not state in the prophecies that 'a choice shall be placed before him, and upon him, in the darkness and in the light.' Hear me now," he said, turning to all those assembled. "It is prophesied that he will have this choice to make. Darkness, as Shona here has seen, is a possibility. Those of you familiar with the writings know this to be true. It does not discount the validity of him being the Vordir."

"You may be right," admitted Shona. "But he does not know of the merkstave. How can he then make his choice? Are we to be his teachers? And what of 'heir to the Creator', Inyanga? What is your understanding of that?"

The Inyanga calmed himself, slowly regarding his audience. "Everything will be revealed in time. We cannot stop fate, for it will reach us, whether we try to prevent it or not.

Which is why I denounce the decision to harm Michael in any way, or detain him

indefinitely on fruitless grounds; at least for the time being. I see you would have him dealt with severely, Shona, whether he be chosen or not. But if this person is to have such a dramatic affect on this Order, then a decision will be made in the appropriate time. At present, he has done nothing but stumble onto us, and as yet we have not slain those who do so." Shona lowered her eyes in deference to his decision, and the Inyanga nodded. "This conclave is over. And until more information can be gleaned, I beg everyone to carry on as normal."

Almost immediately, talk began to filter throughout the room. It sounded like thunder and crashing waves as it echoed around the dome. The Inyanga began to step down from his pedestal, when he felt a slight shake in the ground. Catching himself, he looked up, but no one else seemed to have noticed over the din. Shrugging it off, he continued on, when a great shudder swept throughout the room. The noise stopped as everyone quietened. Some people had been thrown to the floor and were muttering curses.

"What's happening?" shouted someone, when the walls suddenly flared to life, runes throughout the dome breaking from their hibernation.

It was dazzling to behold, and most people stared in awe. But the Inyanga knew better. *It's too soon*, was his first thought. He was not ready for this. But whether he meant himself or Michael, he didn't know, for his mind contained only one thought as he made his way as quickly as possible from the room. The Vordir must be saved before he destroyed himself.

Michael screamed, though his mouth and throat had long since been burnt through. His mind collapsed as pain rocketed through his skull, splintering it and the soft flesh underneath. As his body exploded in a deluge of organs ripped apart and bones stamped upon with vicious force, Michael knew pain like nothing he had ever felt before. He died in that moment, along with his body, and wept from falling tear ducts as though he were whole....

For long moments there was only anguish, and when he opened his eyes, he was stunned to see the burnt physical remnants of body staring back at him on the floor.

He didn't understand. Why was he still alive? How was he still able to think, to see? But then the burning returned, coursing through his vision, different images erasing the memory of his destroyed body.

He saw glimpses of a young Inyanga, at a time long passed. He was arguing about something he held in his hands, pointing angrily at it.

The images changed. He heard the ocean crashing nearby as he watched as a giant of a man punched a scrawny boy onto the ground. "Listen to your gut. Even when it's in pain, it'll never lie to you."

The image flickered, and Michael saw the same boy, only older and stronger, with a deep fire in his eyes. He was held aloft, struggling as his body floated in the air, his hands tied behind slick black bonds. "Make a choice!" he demanded suddenly, and Michael started. For some reason it sounded as if this man were speaking directly to him. "If my world is to live, I must perish. You are the only one who can save it!"

"What?" cried Michael in his own mind, for he realised that was all he had left; a consciousness amid pain and death. "I don't understand. What's happening?"

"Make your choice, before it's too late."

"What choice?" Fear welled inside Michael, and though he hadn't spoken aloud those last words, they resounded amid the darkness surrounding them.

The strange man leant forward. "I know now that I am not the Vordir. You must take up the mantel. It is your destiny to destroy fate. But you must choose. Othala or Alahto?"

Michael was confused. "I don't know what you mean. What's the difference?"

"The difference is inside of you. Listen to your gut. What does it tell you?"

Michael's mind was racing, but he calmed himself, and felt the twin pull of the runes.

Othala had brought him to this moment. But it had also shown him great pain. Of Alahto, however, he knew nothing. "There is no choice," said Michael.

"There is always a choice. Now, choose!"

There was no choice.... "I choose Othala."

"Then be reborn."

Michael felt his body quiver as he suddenly found himself held aloft by the same dark bonds.

The same voice entered his mind, only it was different, frightened. "Why have you done

this to me? Why have you killed me?"

Michael shook in fright. "But you asked me to choose."

"Then you have made the wrong choice!"

At that moment Michael looked up and watched as a screaming sword flew at him. He tried to lift his hands and protect himself but he couldn't move. All he could do was gasp in shock as the sword pierced his heart.

Michael's body hit the floor with a dull thud. His skin burned naked and red, but the pain had dissipated.

"Hold up his head," said a voice out of the fog. "Pour some water."

Michael couldn't move. His body felt foreign; not his own.

Another voice, softer yet more stern, cut through into his mind. "He has done it. It is written on his very skin. He has chosen Othala."

Michael groaned as the unfamiliar language filtered through his mind. It made him want to scream out in agony, but he couldn't remember how.

"Enough, Shona! He has endured in these few moments what you will never feel in an entire lifetime. He needs aid, not your displeasure."

Michael felt his body being covered in a soft sheet, before being lifted up into strong arms. It was hours later when he awoke.

"You are a lucky man," said the same female voice. Shona sat on a stool next to the cot he lay upon. "How you managed to enter that chamber is beyond me, but I can no longer deny you as Vordir."

"Vordir?" mumbled Michael. "That's what he said..." His throat felt like ash.

Shona's eyes widened. "You understand me?"

"Understand? I don't ..."

Shona held her hand to her mouth. "There is no denying you, I see. You are prophecy incarnate. To either save us or destroy us." She paused before continuing. "But I have seen the truth, and cannot trust you to do the right thing. You may have the mark of Othala, but the darkness still covers my sight when I look at you. The mark may convince the Inyanga, but not me." She leant over and held a bowl near his lips. "Drink."

Michael sipped gladly. "Thank you, I think." His head hurt, and his heart felt as if it still might tear apart.

Shona shook her head. "You are powerful indeed to be able to speak our language?"

The door creaked open, and the Inyanga entered. "Shona, thank you for watching him. But I would speak with him alone."

She glanced at Michael before turning away. "Do not try and hide things from him, Inyanga. He has gained the understanding." With those words, she left the room.

The Inyanga peered after her. "Is it true?" he asked.

"What?"

"I see that it is."

"Good morning, camper. Late night you've had," said a familiar voice from the Inyanga's hands.

"Sergi?" cried Michael, and broke out into a fit of coughing.

"Michael, you don't look at all well. Been through a trash compactor, have you? Ye Olde Inyanga refuses to tell me."

"But, what do you mean? You were right there with me."

"Don't you remember? Whatever happened in that chamber, happened only to you. I was thrown clear out the room, like discarded trash. Then that gargantuan door closed behind me, and I was left to pine away on the floor until this kindly gentleman found me."

"But what did happen?" asked Michael, breathless. "I don't understand it."

"Which is why I brought you this." The Inyanga produced an old parchment.

Michael managed a surprised look.

"It is written in runes," he explained. "It is a prophecy. I think you had best read it."

"Read it?" asked Michael. "But I don't know how to read runes."

"Are you absolutely sure? You couldn't understand Shona before you woke up either. Now you can."

"Shona? Who's spoken to me in Shona?"

"I am right now."

"Sergi?"

"He's right."

"But, I can only hear English."

The Inyanga handed him the manuscript. "Give it a try."

Staring down at the page, Michael eyes saw only runes. He concentrated harder, felt a familiar pressure in his head, and for a moment thought the fire would return. But calm descended over him suddenly, fighting off the panic, and the words altered before his eyes.

Vordir, shall he be heralded,

*A mark of power upon his soul.
 Know him by Othala,
 Before the secret places of Tyr.
 A companion for the heir to the Creator,
 Alive and yet not,
 Within the World of Words.
 A choice shall be placed before him,
 And upon him,
 In the darkness and the light.
 Destroyer or Guardian,
 Hail the Lord of Runes.*

“I’m this Vordir?”

“That is correct. You are the Lord of Runes.”

Michael looked up sceptically. “You have got to be joking.”

The Inyanga shook his head.

“But I have absolutely no knowledge of rune lore. This can’t be true.”

“But you can learn. And I am here to teach you. Besides, now that you have been marked, the knowledge will find its way to you.”

“I don’t think I like this.”

“There is nothing to like. There is only knowledge and destiny.”

“Spoken like a true Inyanga,” piped in Sergi. “Michael, personally, I think everyone here is crazy and we should all go home. Come, I’ll get the bags, pack the car, and –”

“No, Sergi. I think he’s right. Something changed me in there. It feels as if my brain has been rewired.”

“In a sense it has,” said the Inyanga kindly. “That room we created to be a nexus for rune power. Performing any type of rune magic is difficult at the best of times, but the room makes the most dangerous spells possible.”

Michael sighed. “Spells? I’ve clearly bitten off more than I can chew with this one, hey Sergi?”

“I’ll say.”

“Still... I suppose the only way I’ll understand it all is if I know the rest.” He laid his arms out, hands palm up, and he thought he saw a glimmer of light upon his skin. The Inyanga placed both of his own hands down and trembled slightly as he felt a power remembered from youth.

“I’m willing to learn,” said Michael.

“Where shall we begin?”

“I have questions,” Michael said quickly. “About the prophecy. I understand the part concerning Othala, I think, and ‘before the secret places of Tyr,’ and my companion, Sergi, as being ‘alive and yet not –’

“I resent that implication,” said Sergi in a huff. “By all standard definitions, I am alive.”

“I don’t think this prophecy deals in ‘standard definitions,’ Sergi. And you aren’t truly alive in the conventional sense.”

“Thanks.”

Michael looked away from his friend. “And you tell me that I have been marked,” he continued. “But how? And how do these choices affect me?”

“But surely you know,” said the Inyanga kindly. “You experienced it, within the domed room; within the nexus. Why not tell us what occurred, and then maybe things will become clearer.”

And so Michael related his experience: how he, or rather Sergi, had discovered that the runes reacted to light, or rather, heat; how speaking the word ‘Othala’ had caused a cataclysmic reaction; his body burning white; and how he had chosen Othala over another rune, Alahto, which he didn’t know. He didn’t mention the man in bonds, however, nor the desperate way in which he had been accused of killing the man. Michael didn’t know as yet how to comprehend this.

“I truly am sorry for the pain you experienced, but it would seem you have been cleansed in the rune fire, somehow. And the choice you had to make....”

“What is it?”

“It never occurred to me until now. A choice in both the darkness and the light.” He looked into Michael’s eyes. “Two choices!”

“I’m sorry. You’ve lost me.”

“Never mind, it is not that important. At least, you need not worry about it for the

moment.”

“I’m not so sure I feel the same way,” said Michael. “If it has something to do with this prophecy...?”

“I’m sorry, I hate to butt in here,” said Sergi, annoyed, “but are you two listening to yourselves? You’re speaking so callously of prophecy, Michael, that you seemed to have forgotten who you are.”

“What are you babbling about, Sergi?”

“I’m not the one who’s babbling on, pretending he knows the answer to the universe.”

His voice began to grate like a sled being pulled over granite. “You’ve sat there and not once questioned the legitimacy of everything you’ve seen and heard. That, I’m afraid, is not the Michael I’ve had the privilege of knowing most of his life.”

“Sergi, please... you weren’t there.” Michael’s voice dropped as tears welled at the memory of the burning. “I have to know why I had to go through that; if it has any sort of meaning...”

“Michael,” interjected the Inyanga softly. “Sergi’s right. You’ve just been through an emotional and physical turmoil of which I can only dream, and here I am inflicting myself and my beliefs upon you. I apologise, and should let you rest.”

“No, please, neither of you understand. I don’t need to rest; in fact, I’ve never felt better or more fully aware of my senses. And while I understand your criticisms, Sergi, the fact remains that something integral changed within me in that room. My mind... thinks differently. I can’t comprehend it, but I know that being critical of anything at this moment is not in my best interests. Sergi, I need to know more, and that’s enough for me.”

Sergi said nothing, but he couldn’t help but think that the shade of Michael’s face was like nothing he had ever seen before. He only hoped he hadn’t lost his friend.

“You were saying something about choices, Inyanga?” said Michael.

“Yes, but let’s not concern ourselves with that just yet. That’s something which needs a little self reflection.”

Michael let it be, for now. He knew Sergi was afraid, and that he should be too, but he couldn’t let that worry him at the moment, especially when it felt as though his body were being continually pinched. He would rub his skin and feel a sensation that didn’t

seem real. And yet, he was calm; at peace, and something was preventing him from spiralling into hundreds of broken pieces. It was something... almost alien, and yet familiar. He needed to know more.

"I can't rest until I get what I need," stated Michael. "And right now all I need for is the truth." He nodded at Sergi, then turned to the Inyanga determinedly. "Tell me about Alahto."

"Alahto..." The Inyanga paused, grimacing as his lips formed the words. "I'm sorry," he said. "Speaking such a rune symbol is difficult. Especially when one realises the amount of power it contains."

Michael understood his hesitancy, strangely enough, and was surprised at his own patience. What unnerved at him, and he only realised it now, was that thinking the word gave him an uneasy feeling. He looked up at the Inyanga, confused. "Something's wrong. I can't say the name of the rune any longer."

The Inyanga nodded to himself. "Yes, it would make sense. Othala is reinforcing itself within you, almost like a living force. Alahto is anathema to its very nature."

"You mean it's some type of opposite rune, or force?"

"In a sense. Let me explain this to you properly. There are twenty four runes in the Futhark alphabet; the only true runes. Each of these has a power, or, for lack of a better word, a personality; a nature. It is what has allowed their divining purposes to be understood throughout the ages. You can invoke a rune's power by drawing it, or speaking it, though don't worry about that yet," said the Inyanga quickly, seeing Michael's worried face. "Neither I, nor you at the moment, have that type of power. Nevertheless, I suggest you be a little more wary when reading runes aloud in future."

Michael nodded, listening patiently.

"There are patterns, usually used for divining, which can combine the runes together. Some, like Shona, have incised runes upon their own divining tools, preferring their more traditional beliefs. Regardless, there is only one source of true power, whether they believe it or not. We here have utilised the more traditional patterning to hide these very

mines from prying eyes.”

“I remember those two darker runes on the wall of light,” said Michael. “Sergi, do you still have them in memory?”

“Of course,” said Sergi, still sounding a bit sore. “It takes more than being pitched around like refuse to stop old Sergi.” The two runes appeared in the air, Sergi illuminating them against the far wall.

“I suppose this is as good a time as any to teach you,” said the Inyanga, slightly daunted by Sergi’s abilities. He rummaged in his robe for some time before pulling out a piece of white chalk. He began by drawing three circles on the ground, two above, one below, before breaking each up into segments of eight. “Each of these segments can hold one rune. Singular runes, especially among this Order, don’t generally offer much power. There are some practitioners in the other two Orders who can ...” He stopped. “Never mind that. Patterns of three runes, and multiples thereof, usually work for us; one rune for each circle. The circles are called airts, with each one being named after one of the gods. The spell we used to hide these ruins, for example, was easy enough, and follows like so.” The Inyanga pointed to the first airt. “This is the airt of Freya. Within this we placed the rune Isa, of air. With it we forced the light to our will, creating the illusion of the wall.” He drew a rune in one of the segments of the second airt. “Within the airt of Freyja,” he explained, “we used the rune, Wunjo. I suppose you would think of it as the rune of persuasion. Wunjo would persuade any onlooker that the wall was real and impossible to pass through. Now, Isa and Wunjo were inscribed deeply, enhancing their power. The last one, however, we used sparingly.” He drew it within the final airt, that of the god Heimdall.

Michael recognised Othala. He realised suddenly that he didn’t actually know what it meant.

“Othala is the embodiment of good,” said the Inyanga. “A better word I could not say.”

Michael’s eyes widened and he wondered at the choice he had made.

“It is never inscribed that deeply, and is mostly used as a last resort. Let’s just say that it keeps the bad guys away.” The Inyanga laughed suddenly. “If it were any stronger I am pretty certain none of us would be here. Not all of our closets are bare, so to speak.”

Michael frowned at this statement and wondered whether the Inyanga might mean

something more.

“But shouldn’t that prove to Shona that I’m no threat?” he asked, thinking things through.

“I mean, I kept Othala in my pocket. Doesn’t that show that I’m a good person at heart?”

Michael blinked, amazed that he could even say such a ridiculous thing.

“Ah, but the best kind of people can do the worst sorts of things, Michael. I know that fully well, and you would do best to remember it.”

Michael pursed his lips. “What do you do once you’ve inscribed those runes?” he asked, getting back to the art of rune magic.

“We speak them aloud, allowing them to encompass our very beings. Usually there is one person per airt speaking out the individual runes. It’s the most effective way. The most powerful arts, however, occur when the leaders of each Order intone the rune of their own airt. Very rarely does that happen. Only once in my lifetime have all three leaders been together.”

“Sounds like some powerful hoodoo,” said Sergi.

“Your scepticism is beginning to annoy, Sergi,” said Michael.

“It’s my circuits. I guess I’m just too artificial for this mumbo jumbo.”

“Don’t be so rude, Sergi. Inyanga, there are one or two things that still puzzle me, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead.”

“About the airts; does each rune have its own unique position, or can you place it anywhere?”

“It depends on your purpose. The runes aren’t as cut and dry as I seem to have made them out to be. I’m sure you’ll start to understand when you start practising.”

“My next question then. Just what do you expect me to do now that I’m this Vordir? It doesn’t say much in the prophecy, now does it?”

“Michael, the power of the runes is strong. They have survived the Paper Plague against all odds. They will show you the way. Think for a moment. Surely there has been some clue.”

Had there? His mind raced back to not more than two days ago, when his contact had been killed in front of him. He recalled his last words: “Search for the book which was lost.”

“I’m not certain, Inyanga, but something was said to me a few days back. I was told to search for some lost book? Does that mean anything to you?” Michael may not have felt quite right in his body, but even before his transformation he would have noticed the look of panic flashing across the Inyanga’s face.

“Um, I am not certain. A book of runes, possibly? There are many of those which survived the Plague.” He was speaking much faster, and his words seemed to slur over one another.

“I don’t think so.” Michael wasn’t inclined to pry into the Inyanga’s personal life just that moment, but the man was obviously keeping something from him. “There’s nothing you might know, is there?”

“No, absolutely not. I’m sorry, Michael, but this you’re going to have to look into yourself.”

“I suppose I’ll find out then, won’t I.” He leant back into his cot. “You still haven’t told me of...of ...” Michael tried to say the rune’s name, but found it absolutely impossible.

“Ah yes, Alahto. Alahto is one of the twenty four merkstave, or shadow runes. Each of the Futhark runes can be twisted and subverted, mostly used for greed. Alahto is in every sense the exact opposite of Othala. In other words, it is pure evil.”

Michael let out a long breath as he looked out the window of the train as it turned into the last bend leading to the Underberg train station. As the train began to slow, the impact of the events of the past ten days threatened to crush his skull. It was too much for one man to cope with.

Watching as the small town came into view through the falling snow, he glanced down at Sergi. He was sulking and Michael couldn't blame him. This whole crazy journey would have fallen apart were it not for him, and yet Michael was always the centre of attention, the 'fated one' with the great destiny.

Alive and yet not. How could he have been so callous? Michael wondered if it had been eating away at Sergi all this time.

He needed to make it up to Sergi somehow. Maybe he should even try and find him a companion. There was no reason why he couldn't wear two wristwatches. Michael smiled as he thought it over. No girl he ever found would ever be a match for Sergi. He supposed if she had the personality of an Austrian arm wrestler, she might bully him into submission. Then again, and Michael was surprised he hadn't considered this before, what was it about Sergi, exactly, that made him male? He wondered whether it had been a conscious choice.

Having found Sergi's chip in one of his grandfather's old chests when he was still a child, he had asked his father where it had come from. But his father had only shrugged, telling Michael that he could have the piece of junk if he was so inclined. Little did anyone know that Sergi was lying dormant within, waiting for the blundering of a youthful Michael to awaken him.

As he reconsidered Sergi's feelings, he realised that the mere fact that Sergi could feel emotion, not to mention his self-awareness, meant that, under any law, man-made or universal, he was alive. *Alive and yet not* was definitely a cruel way to represent his friend. *Spirit without a body*, maybe, but in every sense alive. The Inyanga was right, he realised. Even a good person could be cruel.

The train came to a smooth stop at the Underberg station, but Michael was slow in exiting. Though the conductor tried to hurry him off, he was lost in other thoughts. He knew the book was out there somewhere, in the mountains. The only problem was

finding it. And then it struck him as he realised somebody knew exactly where to find it: intrepid reporter Jackson Matebele.

Only, he was nowhere to be found. His last transmission didn't bode well; for all Michael knew he could be dead.

The answer came to him as he stood there freezing in the snow, gazing up at the grey sky and daunting mounts, and not for the first time he wondered whether his experience in the nexus chamber hadn't made him smarter. He knew what Sergi's answer to that would be, but at the moment Michael didn't care. He knew exactly how to find the whereabouts of the elusive reporter.

He lifted up his watch and blew cold air on it.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" shouted Sergi.

"Waking you up. We've got work to do."

"Don't you mean you've got work to do?"

Michael grimaced. "I'm sorry, for everything I said. I was so caught up in my own life that I forgot the person who's stood by me since I was a kid."

"Well..."

"Forgive me?"

"I'll think about it. You really think you're on the right track?"

"I do."

"Alright then. But just so you know, I'm not doing any heavy lifting. My muscles aren't quite as developed as yours."

Michael laughed, then realised that he was turning into an icicle. He walked over to the automated taxis, thankful as he climbed into one that he didn't have to deal with a driver.

"Think you can find out where Jackson Matebele was staying? This is the last bit of urban jungle for miles around. He must have made some sort of reservation."

"We'll know soon enough."

Snowflakes barrelled down like hail, melting as they touched Michael's coat. Snow caked Michael's black-brown hair with a damp residue as he hurried from the taxi into the

Underberg Inn, a three-star hotel where Jackson Matebele had been booked.

“Don’t you just love this icy weather?” said Michael, shaking himself off.

“Says the shivering man. Really, Michael, this weather is so provincial.”

“If I wasn’t mistaken, I’d say that sounded rather high and mighty of you, Sergi.”

“I’m a chip. Cold makes my circuits slow up. So no, I don’t the cold.”

Michael was silent for a moment before speaking. “You know, Sergi, that response was based solely on logic. The box said you came with emotions.”

“Sometimes life just doesn’t call for them.”

Michael shrugged. He couldn’t argue with that. He walked over to the front desk and rang the bell.

A man wearing a shining pink and black pinstriped blazer with black suit pants walked over to him, dusting off imaginary dust while lifting his chin a bit too high in the air.

“Bonjour. Hello, Monsieur. *Est-ce que je vous aide offrir?* How may I help you, Sir?”

“Hi, uh, I’m sorry, why are you speaking French?”

“Because, Sir, I am.”

“What?”

“French.”

“Yes, but you’re in South Africa. We only speak English here.”

“Ah, oui.”

“So –”

“You wish to make a reservation?”

“Um...” Michael cleared his throat. “Not quite. I’m looking for a guest I believe is staying here. Or at least was. His name is Jackson Matebele.”

“One moment, Monsieur. Let me check.”

As the concierge busied himself with the computer next to him, Michael took the chance to look around. It wasn’t the best hotel he’d ever seen, but it was clean, the wooden floors were polished, and the carpets weren’t tangled and torn, so it couldn’t be all bad. It even had a pillar or two, though they were clearly not decorative. Michael glanced at the ceiling, wondering just how much pressure was pushing down on those two lone columns.

“Sir, Monsieur Matebele is indeed booked at this hotel. Might I call up and see if he is

willing to see you?"

"Actually, I don't think he's here at the moment. I was wondering if I could just wait in his room."

The clerk smiled. "Why, of course. Please, Sir, it is my great honour to allow you to disrespect the privacy of our guests. In fact, allow me to hand you a set of keys to all of our guests' rooms."

Michael stared at him. "I'm sorry. Was that absolutely necessary? A simple 'no' would have sufficed."

The clerk seemed about to respond, checking himself at the last moment. "If you wish to book a room, please inform me now. Otherwise..." He turned to leave.

"Is your hatred of America so great?"

The man swivelled round. "America, sir? Are you not South African?"

"I am in fact South African, though I get a lot of my accent from my father."

"That is wonderful, Monsieur. But I can no longer tell the difference."

"Why live in this country if you have such a problem with it?"

"Because the Pope is worse."

Michael watched him return to the back room. "Wow," he said to Sergi.

"Wow indeed. This place gives me the creeps."

"Emotions, finally?"

"I suppose. Then again, if something happened to you, I'd be left for the scrap heap, so you could chalk it up to self-preservation."

Michael laughed. "And I thought you cared?" As he said this, he moved towards the elevator. "Which floor, Sergi?"

"The computer was good enough to relay his room number. He was staying in room 203. So, I'd guess the second floor."

Pressing the dark red arrow, Michael waited for the elevator to descend. As the doors chimed and opened, Michael hoped fervently to find some clue to the reporter's whereabouts.

Michael shivered as he entered the main suite of Jackson Matebele's room. The key card lock had been no problem for Sergi, but feeling guilt for breaking in wasn't the reason for his trembling. The room was absolutely freezing. The reporter had obviously not been there for some time, judging by the temperature. Then again, Michael wouldn't have been surprised if the clerk hadn't shut off the heaters himself as some sort of revenge against the world.

The room itself was decorated much the same as the lobby: shimmering, polished hardwood floors, carpeted walls for those with a need for privacy, and immaculate bed coverings and bathroom. And yet, there was definite evidence that this room had been lived in recently: a handheld razor, for the discerning traveller; and some cheap shampoo products, most probably compliments of the clerk, were placed neatly on the bathroom shelf. Michael imagined a maid had cleaned up the room upon Jackson's departure. There was nothing on top of the dresser, so Michael pulled out each of the drawers, finding a discarded piece of paper on top of the third drawer clothing. On it was a telephone number, and the word: *trustworthy?*

Raising his eyebrows, he asked Sergi to call the number.

After a short while, Michael heard a click. "Yebo? Who is calling?"

Michael was surprised at the rural African accent. He hadn't heard it much since he was a child. Even the Colonial Reserve ranger spoke English fluently and he claimed to have lived most of his life on a farm. Michael and he had had many conversations about the pointlessness of ranger's occupation, considering that most of the bigger animals had been taken to more secure facilities. Michael recalled being intrigued at his response. "There are places in this country which have not yet felt the creeping tide of technology. The Kruger Park, sorry, Bush Colonial Reserve, lies mostly abandoned today, as you know, but nature hasn't forgotten her land, and I reckon she might make a last desperate attempt at regaining her lost outpost. Which, unfortunately, makes you the enemy. I'm just here to make sure the casualty number isn't very high."

Michael's attention was brought rudely back to the present when he felt a small jolt from Sergi. "Uh, hi, sorry about that. My name is Michael. Who am I speaking to?"

"Mukel? You American? No good, no good." There was a pause, and Michael thought he might have hung up, when his voice came through again. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to know who I'm speaking to, and I'm not American."

"Sandile. But you call me Trevor."

"Fine. Trevor, I was –"

"Sandile."

"What?"

"You call me Sandile. You make Trevor sound too American. Besides, only friends call me Sandile, so you be priv... eh lucky."

Michael sighed. "Whatever you want. I need to know if you helped named Jackson Matebele. He's a reporter. He may have called you." There was an eerie silence.

"Sandile! Is everything alright? You know that name, don't you?"

"No, I'm sorry. I no help you."

"Sandile," Michael tried more gently. "How were you helping Mr Matebele?" Michael thought he heard a sob.

"It is dangerous!" he finally cried. "I told him, but he would no listen. Boy tried to make him listen, but no. He remain pig-headed. It is no my fault they never come back."

"Boy?" asked Michael.

"Boy, yes. Said he was cameraman. But no camera. He only boy!"

"Alright. Never mind that now. How exactly did you know them? Are you a guide of some sort?"

"Guide, yes. Have jeep; go into mountains. Take them, but they no come back. I hear guns, and vamoose."

"Vamoose?"

"Yes. I drive very fast. No one catch me."

"You took them into the mountains?" Michael felt some excitement. "Whereabouts? Do you think you could take me?"

"No."

"At least tell me where you took them. I can get someone else to take me there."

"No one else take you. Too scared. I only one."

Michael let out an exasperated breath, and looked at Sergi thoughtfully. An idea came to him. "Do you want money? I can give you a lot." He had remembered to bring quite a few gold and silver pieces along with him. Even though he was no longer in the

hinterlands of Northern South Africa, one never knew how people would respond. Besides, it helped if people saw the cash in their hands. Credits on a computer just weren't tangible enough.

Sandile seemed to pause. "Reporter only give Sandile half what owed. You pay his, plus double, and Sandile take you. But it dangerous. Rebels take over area."

"I'm not worried about the danger," said Michael, and he hoped the lie sounded convincing. While Sergi had certain weapon-like abilities, Michael was not likely to survive if caught by rebels.

"You no worry, but Sandile worry."

"I'll give you your money, all up front as well."

"Good. Where I find you?"

"The Underberg Inn. Where Mr Matebele stayed."

"When you want leave?"

"As soon as possible."

"I be there in thirty minutes."

"Great. I'll meet you outside the front."

Ice battered Michael's cloak as the dented, ancient army jeep careened along the old dirt road, now pitted with dangerously packed snow. Even Sergi gave a yelp when the jeep was one second in the air and the next slamming hard into the ground. Michael pretended to yell himself, though his mouth was sealed in a grimace. "Are you crazy!" he cried finally.

"You say you want fast. I go fast!" shouted Sandile over the whipping snow.

"There's fast and then there's dangerous. I think you've crossed that thin line."

"Not dangerous yet. Drakensberg dangerous. Rebels hide in mountains. Kill on sight."

"Are you absolutely sure?" asked Michael. "I mean, if they're rebels, wouldn't they rather take hostages?"

"True Africans different. Cold makes brain freeze. They all crazy."

Michael had no logical answer for that and gave up.

It had taken half the day to reach this point, and it was darkening. Not really wanting to travel at night, especially in icy mountains and forests, they were going to stop at some place called Injasuthi. It had once been a small chalet resort for travellers in the region, but the territory had long been abandoned. According to Sandile, it was a now transitional zone between government and rebel held land; a no man's land. Sandile would leave them there to find lodgings; any of the abandoned buildings would supposedly do for shelter.

Finally arriving, they were dropped off at a boom gate. Sandile suggested that they try the old shop. They might find some food not taken by the rebels.

Michael had already cursed himself during the ride for not bringing better provisions.

Sergi hadn't cared, however; he said he would go hungry.

Sandile left in a squeal of rubber and snow, and Michael traipsed his way along an abandoned road, finally crossing a long bridge, entering the main area of Injasuthi. He walked past the empty chalets, all covered in snow. In fact, as far as he could see, snow covered almost everything; it was beautiful and depressing.

He saw the old shop on the left. It was warmer inside, but still cold. The walls were made from coarse wooden logs and reminded Michael of a hunter's lodge. He found more food in the back storage room than he could have hoped. Unfortunately, most of it was rotten. There were a few cans of assorted vegetables, however. He didn't know how long they'd been there, but he was hopeful that the food inside would be edible. Placing one of the cans on a table, he had Sergi use his laser as can-opener. The vegetables were nothing spectacular, not to mention slighter gritty, but for Michael, who'd last eaten that morning, it was more than adequate. As for Sergi, he was quite put out that he was made to do such menial work. He was even angrier when he was turned into a glorified light bulb.

Michael only shrugged and said it wasn't his fault there were no working lights as he took his meal out onto a small balcony and sat in a wooden chair, picking at his food. Gazing out at the dark sky and looming mountains, his thoughts turned to the following day, and how he would find the tomb. He supposed that necessitated finding Jackson Matebele. Michael only hoped that Sergi's heat sensors would do the job. For that to work, however, Sergi would need to find a satellite in the area.

The idea of heat reminded Michael of just how cold he was. Standing, he shivered

unconsciously. The quiet was eerie, and the abandoned chalets reminded of him of one or another of the horror movies he'd watched as a child. Bending down, he collected a healthy amount of snow and piled it on the wooden floor inside. *I am the Vordir*, he reminded himself, and his mind seemed to calm at this recognition, readying him for what he was about to attempt.

According to Sergi, 'Vordir' was Scandinavian for Guardian, or Defender. Why that might refer to him, Michael had no clue, but if it helped him by accepting the title, he saw no harm in it. Besides, a childish part of him thought it sounded exciting.

He spread the snow out evenly and drew a circle, dividing it into eight. He wondered if he should create the other two airts, but decided against it; what he was attempting was simple. At least, he hoped it was. The only problem was which rune to use, and where to place it. "Sergi," he said, glancing down at his watch. "Display the entire Futhark on the floor."

"Whatever you say, Slavedriver. Your mule obeys."

The floor was suddenly awash with a whitish glow, the Futhark arranged neatly in three rows. Sergi also knew the names to all of the runes, thanks to the Inyanga, but didn't display them yet. Besides, Michael didn't think the names would help. He would have to feel this one out.

Looking over them, he allowed his mind to focus on each rune. He didn't know the 'nature' of all of them as yet, and found that concentrating didn't bring this information to the fore. *Maybe I'm not ready?* His only recourse then, was to use the ones he knew. Just as he thought this, he realised what he could try. Isa, the rune of air, was one which might work. He didn't know how, but perhaps he could heat the air in the lodge. He recalled the Inyanga saying that no rune was cut and dry, and that by placing them in a different position within the airt, a different aspect could be utilised. Memorising the shape of the rune Isa, Michael looked over at his own airt. He recalled where the Inyanga had placed it to create the wall of light. He saw no common ground, however, in what he was trying to do and what the Inyanga had achieved. Looking down at the eight segments, he shrugged. He would have to make his own decisions about placement; create his own, individual airt. If the knowledge was already inside his head, he only had to find it. But when he tried, his mind refused to focus. It felt as though his thoughts had

almost found the answer, and then vibrated around it, like placing the same poles of two magnets together.

“Damn it! Sergi, nothing’s working.”

“I hardly thought any of this nonsense would be easy, Michael. Besides, when did the Inyanga ever say you would inherently know everything? It’s more likely the knowledge is outside of your experience.”

“That’s hardly the response I expected from a sceptic like you?”

“What can I say? I thought long and hard about it and realised that I couldn’t change your mind. I’m not saying I’m convinced, but a little trust can’t hurt.”

“Wow. Okay, so how do I carry on?”

“Experimentation. How else are you going to learn?”

Realising his friend was probably true, he drew Isa anyway. He held his hand over the airt and spoke the rune aloud, with as much force and determination as he could. “Isa!” “Presto!” shouted Sergi. “Hey, where are the balloons, the clowns, the ...” He stopped short of making fun of Michael’s attempt, and his face shimmered into a temperature gauge. “That’s... amazing.”

That’s when Michael saw it. The temperature gauge was moving incrementally upwards. Michael thought he saw the rune in the snow glow for a moment, but it was weak. The heat in the room was not much better than earlier, but the cold now seemed more bearable. Michael wondered how long it would last. Perhaps as long as the rune was present? Picking up some of the snow, he carried it into over into one of the nearby chalets and performed the miracle feat a second time. Once the room was warm, he slipped quickly under the tattered covers of a bed and fell asleep. As he slept, his mind relaxed, and the rune’s power faded.

The next morning he found a battered backpack, put some cans inside, and continued up into the mountains.

The snow was shaken violently off the pine tree as the lower bark exploded and crackled, warping the trunk and cooking the sap. Every man in the camp flew to the ground, protecting his body from flying debris. Two men were not yelling in surprise and fear, but stood regarding the results calmly.

"I can get you twenty more of these," stated the man dressed in the grey suit and dark glasses matter-of-factly. Snow fell on top of his head, but seemed to rush off him as it was repelled. His suit was neither wet nor stained and retained its perfect condition. Nor, it was clear to everyone, did the man seem to be feeling the cold.

The other man, the leader of the True Africans, Londisizwe, hefted the lightweight gun-shaped device, smiled as he ran his fingers across his coarse stubble, and nodded.

"Do you agree to our arrangement?" asked the man in grey.

"What do you want in that place? It is evil."

"Your superstitions do not interest me. Nor do your questions. Now, do you agree?"

"How many of your men are coming?"

"Enough. I wouldn't worry. We won't interfere in your affairs so far as you don't interfere in ours. None of your men will enter the tomb, though."

Londisizwe hefted the gun in his hand, and nodded. "I agree. But we have prisoners. They are still there, in the cages."

"Ah, yes, the reporter and his nephew. I think perhaps I might take them as well."

"No, that was not part of the deal."

The man in grey raised an eyebrow, appraising his adversary, wondering how far this rebel leader could be pressed. "We will pay well."

"We have no need of money. I think the prisoners will serve us better as bargaining tools."

"Against who? The South African government? Don't be a fool. Besides, there's nothing South African left of this country's leaders. Nobody down here cares about your little rebellion."

"Be careful how you speak. You are in my home now."

"Your home?" The grey man laughed. "None of this is truly yours. It's just a matter of time before you realise the truth."

Londisizwe shook his head. "You are wrong. While we hold this ground, it is our home, because we alone have chosen not to be puppets. Others choose only survival, but we choose to live because we refuse to be slaves."

"Rousing words. But don't forget, you're always somebody's puppet."

"Then is it not better to live life resisting what we do not choose for ourselves?"

"True, from one perspective. But then history has shown that there will always be those who can't conform to a better life. In that sense I suppose you will always be rebels."

"Then why sell us guns?"

"Because, for the moment, you serve our purpose."

Londisizwe turned away, wondering at the grey men's words as he watched his men about the camp. "We keep the prisoners."

The grey man shrugged. "It's of no consequence. You may keep them."

"Good. Do you want to enter the tomb now?"

"No. But I will be back. And please make certain that everything remains intact. For if any mistakes were to occur, this little Rebel Alliance of yours would cease to exist. Just like that." He snapped his fingers for emphasis, and walked off into the trees on the far side of the camp.

For a moment the trees moaned and swayed. Londisizwe noticed a quivering in the air above the camp, and then it was gone. He shook his head, wondering for the hundredth time about the motives of the man in grey.

Michael watched the red dots on his watch move away. He stood up from his crouched position in the snow, and moved further into enemy-held ground.

It had been Sergi's warning that had saved him from being caught this time, but unlike the other occasions, it hadn't been the patrolling rebels that set off Sergi's alarm. It had been a surge of energy unlike anything Sergi had felt before, and it had scared his electronic friend. Sergi wasn't usually prone to outbursts of emotion – actually he was – but they always tended to be directed at Michael. For some reason, however, that surge of energy had put the fear of death in him.

Michael trudged through the snow, his boots falling through lighter patches, at times causing him to pitch forward, a muffled cry coming from Sergi whenever his arm plunged into the snow.

Sergi had finally managed to connect to a satellite in the area – an odd fact since there was nothing particularly interesting in this area for anyone to see – and pinpointed the position of the rebel camp. Michael had steered well clear of it, but at the moment he had no other landmark by which to find the tomb. He thought it might be somewhere inside the mountain itself, if it had been hidden all this time, and so he continued along, moving up along a gentle incline until he saw the small strand of red material standing stark against the tree from which it swayed in the light breeze. Michael fingered it gently. He recognised it immediately as the colour of the scarf Jackson Matebele had worn in his transmission. He looked ahead at the general path he had chosen and wondered if the reporter had come the same way. It made sense that he would have also wanted to avoid the rebels. Then again, Michael had no clue what Jackson's motivations had been. The tomb very well might have been a lucky find. Nevertheless, it would make sense that the reporter had found an alternative route into the tomb if he had managed to enter unnoticed. Only now, thanks to Jackson, the rebels probably knew there was another entrance. As Michael hurried along, he hoped they hadn't discovered it as yet.

The ten or so black bricks stood flush against the side of the mountain. They were mostly covered in snow, and, with a passing glance, they might have been easily missed. It was as if a window looking into the mountain had been boarded up, and when the bricks came easily loose in Michael's hands, Sergi remarked that it was like looking into a dark soul. Michael thought Sergi meant to say 'dark hole', which earned him a set of expletives and something about poetry not being the sole domain of humans.

Sergi had to shine a light inside, it was so dark, and once Michael had climbed inside the small hole, he noticed that there was a small crawl space which inched away beyond Sergi's attempts to see further. Michael replaced the bricks as best he could behind him, and began to crawl. He was surprised a short while later, however, when a gust of air

blew dust in his face. Crawling slowly forward, this time keeping his eyes almost closed, he finally saw some light ahead and realised that there were shafts in the ceiling that must have gone all the way to the surface of the mountain much like the one he was crawling through. His first thoughts were of a ventilation system, and when his hands had finally run out of ground and emerged into space, he knew it was true. Sergi shone his light into the larger passage below, hoping by the silence that there were no guards. At the very least, Michael now knew how Jackson Matebele had entered. Somehow he doubted the reporter had found the opening by accident.

The atmosphere within the tomb was perfect. The hair on the back of Michael's neck started to rise. It was too perfect.

The air was not only breathable, but tasted fresh on his tongue, like a cool glass of water. Fortunately, it wasn't cold. Michael had almost frozen outside, but in here he almost felt like taking off his jacket. But while the warmth was a great comfort and should have reassured him, it did the opposite. It wasn't the effect that produced these feelings, however, but the source, and as Michael closed in on it, his uneasiness grew exponentially.

He followed the long passage until Sergi finally shut off his light. The corridor had begun to develop a light of its own, and while Sergi didn't exactly run on batteries that needed to be conserved, they didn't want to alert anyone to their presence.

"Michael, there are two people ahead of us. It looks like the corridor opens out into a large room; it might even be the one we've been looking for."

Michael hunkered down on his haunches and moved forward. Ever so slowly, he peered around the corner and took everything in.

Sergi had been right. It was the same room Jackson had been broadcasting from. The walls were covered with images of great battles; there was Lialh fighting off demons, while on a further wall seemed to be a rudimentary map. It was shaped in the form of an island, with two distinct markings. Michael couldn't see if there was any writing on the walls, and doubted there would be, if the Paper Plague had anything to do with it. Then

again, if there was writing, it might be written in runes.

He didn't stop to dwell on what might be, however, for his attention was drawn to something else: the statue of the goddess. The effect of flowing hair and moving tresses were still prominent, but it was the object in her hand that truly caught his attention.

It was the book he had been searching for.

Only, from this distance it looked wrong somehow. And, there was something else; a shadow shifting around it... the source of the heat."

"Sergi, do you see the shadow?"

"Michael, what are you on about now?" he whispered back.

"Surrounding the book."

"My sensors don't pick up anything, if that's what you mean. I wouldn't be surprised if you were hallucinating."

"Don't be insulting. I'm telling you, it's there."

"Yeah well, great for you, but maybe you should be concentrating on those two in the cage."

"What?" Michael blinked, and took in the large cage a few meters in front of the statue.

The cage bars looked to be made of stone, and, following them up to the ceiling, he noticed a slight depression; a trap. But had the two occupants triggered it? Seeing a few broken remains at the back of the cage, he saw that it wasn't the case.

Hunkered within were the reporter and his nephew. Sergi expanded his search, making sure no one else was in the vicinity. Feeling slightly more confident when Sergi gave the all-clear, Michael stood up and walked towards the cage.

The nephew looked up, and Michael saw that he was only about fifteen or so. His face was shrouded in a shadow of its own. He shivered and backed up against the farther side of the cage, only to realise that he was now closer to the resident skeleton. He cried in fear just as the only other living occupant of the cage, a bedraggled Jackson, looked up, anger welling in his eyes when he saw Michael.

"Damn you! Let us out of here!" Jackson grabbed the stone bars of the cage, and Michael saw that it was in fact a cage door with a rudimentary stone keyhole.

"Shut up," whispered Michael. "You'll call the guards."

Jackson froze as he heard Michael's voice. "American?" he whispered in relief, sitting

back on the floor. "Oh, thank God. "What are you, CIA? I hope you guys took out that rebel scum once and for all."

"No, and I'm not American," said Michael. "Let's just say I'm an independent operator. I came in the same way you did."

"A mercenary? Did the company hire you? Hmm, I never would have thought they cared."

"No, I'm not here for that ridiculous television company."

"Then what? Who are you?"

"Never mind that. Do you want to escape or not?"

"Oh, this is just fantastic. You're probably some nut who thought he could play hero. Well, you're only going to get us all killed!"

"Just shut up, will you. If you want to get out at all, then you better listen to me." He pointed at the stone book. "What do you know about that?"

Jackson blinked. "Who cares? If you really plan on saving us, then open this damned cage."

"I'm afraid I can't do that yet." Michael knew he sounded excessively cruel but he had to remember the reason he had come. "First, the book."

"What are you trying to do? Kill us all? I don't know anything about the damned book."

"He's lying," said Sergi. "His heart rate just rose slightly."

"Who the hell said that?" exclaimed Jackson.

"Never mind. How did you find this tomb? Tell me and I'll let you out."

"You're blackmailing me? Jesus man, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"Tell me, damn you!" Michael listened to himself as he said this, and wondered what was wrong with him. Something was wrong here, and it had something to do with that shadow. He turned away from the two prisoners and walked purposely towards the statue of the goddess. Michael looked into her face and felt his pulse race. She was beautiful beyond words, and almost real.

Sergi, meanwhile, was scanning the book when he suddenly spoke up. "Michael, it seems to be encased in stone. And, there's something else, something familiar here. Remember down in the tunnels back in the Order's conclave; how the light was so strange when I scanned it?"

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s happening again. Only, this time it’s not light I’m picking up on my long range scanners.”

“What is it?”

“Um, well, darkness.”

Michael shivered as Sergi said the words. He felt the exact same thing. He stood before the stone book, ignoring Jackson’s angry cries, and ran his hands along it. It was smooth to the touch, but as he removed his palm, a shape rose up in the centre. It looked similar to ...

“Othala,” he said quietly as his hand crackled. He had no time to consider it before he was thrown some meters back onto the floor. He coughed as he tried to breathe, but the wind had been knocked out of him.

“Man, are you okay?” asked Jackson, surprise infused with anger.

“What was that?” and Michael realised it was the first time he had heard Jackson’s nephew speak. His tone, while still fearful, now held a hint of childish curiosity and excitement.

Michael looked up at them both, and saw that they were gripping the stone bars, staring at him. He looked down at his hand. It smoked slightly, but other than that looked to be unhurt. “Sergi, you alright?”

“I’m fine. It’s a good thing I don’t bruise easily.”

Michael sat up, and pushed himself to his feet. He unstrapped Sergi and handed him to Jackson. “See if you can help them get out. I’m going to try again.”

“Michael, you don’t know what you’re dealing with.”

Michael sighed. “Unfortunately I do. I was wrong. It wasn’t Othala. It was the merkstave.”

“You mean... Alahto?”

“Yes. That’s why the rune looked similar. And that’s what the shadow is. This entire place might be covered in merkstave for all I know.”

“Maybe you should just speak the merkstave? It might release the book.”

“You know that’s impossible, Sergi. But don’t worry, I’ll find a way.” He walked purposefully toward the book as Jackson and his nephew could only stare in stupefaction.

“You both look like mules,” stated Sergi. “Hold me up to the lock, dimwit. Let’s see about getting you free.”

Jackson nodded and held out his hands.

Michael stared down at the book before him, wondering how he could possibly free it from its stone casing. He thought through all of his limited rune lore, but nothing hinted at an answer. He knew that if he could only speak the merkstave it would set the book free, but he couldn’t do that. Which meant... what? Maybe it didn’t have to be exact, he thought out to himself. He recalled one thing the Inyanga had said to him: not all the runes were black and white. Often at times the nature of one rune would overarch into another. Which meant, that if he spoke a rune close enough to the nature of the rune of darkness, he might succeed.

Only, his knowledge of runes was almost nonexistent. He glanced up at the statue of the goddess, trying to recall what knowledge the Inyanga had imparted to him.

‘Runes are bound to the natural order of all living things. They are but aspects of nature....’

The ‘natural order’ resounded in his mind. There was something there....

He watched as the illusion of the statue’s swaying hair caught his imagination and seemed to hold his heart in a vice grip. He couldn’t help but think of the saddest thing that could happen to this angelic creature. He knew immediately, of course, and it seemed to awaken something in his mind. The saddest thing would be the goddess’ death.

Death: the end of the natural order; the journey into shadow. His mind moved swiftly, trying to remember if the Inyanga had ever mentioned the name of the death rune. He hadn’t, but just as Michael began to despair, he saw the word change in his mind’s eye much as the scroll of prophecy had become readable. He felt a familiar pressure in his head, but it was quickly gone, and the death rune stood out in his mind, black against white.

With growing excitement he held his hand palm down over the stone book, but stopped short. Glancing over at her other hand, palm up, he felt some indecision. Removing his hand, he placed it on top of hers, stating clearly: “Mannaz!”

His hand began to quiver as the shadow was drawn to him. Like tendrils of smoke it swarmed from every corner of the room. The images on the wall seemed to come alive,

dancing in darkness as Lialh battled the demons. Michael heard a slight cracking sound and looked up into the goddess' eyes, which blinked at him through a startling green iris. The stone lips cracked as well, and flushed red ones pushed through, speaking only three words: "Death welcomes you."

Glancing back down, Michael saw that the stone covering the book was dissolving when the shadow surrounding it flashed brightly and smothered his mind in black fog.

“Wake up.” Rough hands shook him until his head banged against a hard stone floor. Michael grunted, and his eyes opened in glassy pain, blurry faces looking down at him. “Do you think he’ll be alright?” asked a tremulously young voice. “I mean, he looks like ...”

“Don’t you dare say anything about Michael! He’s a fighter.” Sergi’s voice drifted through his subconscious like a fly on water.

“Selfish bastard is all he is! He just left us in here. He doesn’t give a shit about us.”

“But Uncle! Didn’t you see that statue move? It said something!”

“You’re all insane. And this talking watch is the worst of all. I mean, of all the advances our country has made, they had to waste themselves on rubbish like this.”

“I beg your pardon?” There was a small electric burst and Jackson yelled. “It’s not my fault this lock is made of something impervious to my attempts. So watch your mouth, because the laser in this watch could just as easily work against your flesh.”

Michael took this moment to sit up, attempting to dull the pain in his head. Someone held onto his arm – the nephew, he thought.

“Are you alright, Mister? That man hit you hard.”

“What?” he attempted.

“You got thumped, Michael. Sorry I didn’t warn you, but I was concentrating on getting this cage open. It’s a wonder he never just killed you.”

“Thanks, Sergi,” he coughed.

“We heard a noise,” piped in the nephew. “We turned and saw this man hit you over the head. But I swear as it happened the statue was moving and talking. Did you see it, Mister?”

Michael nodded. “How did I get in here?”

“That rebel bastard threw you in here,” said Jackson finally. “Had some type of strange key. Mumbled something and left. Probably went to fetch their leader; some guy named Londisizwe. And when he gets here, I’m sure we’ll all be dead. So thanks a lot for the great rescue.”

“Damn!” said Michael, ignoring the reporter’s complaints. “You sure you can’t get through, Sergi?”

“Positive.”

Michael sighed. Everything was falling apart. Jackson looked at him hard, and he stared back at him in return. “What?” he said, exasperated.

“So what’s so important about the book?”

Michael looked wistfully back at the statue. He couldn’t see the book from his vantage point, and wondered what it looked like now that the stone covering was gone. “I’m not sure. All I know is that it holds the answers to all my questions.”

“And what are those questions?”

Michael squinted at the man who would so brazenly demand things of him.

“The Paper Plague for one,” realising it was likely the only aspect he might understand.

Jackson blinked. “The P ...” he mouthed the rest of the word silently. “But how?”

“For one, it’s the only surviving book I’ve ever heard about, you idiot,” said Sergi.

Jackson nodded as if it made sense.

“How did *you* find out about the book?” But Michael almost knew the answer before he asked.

“A man came to me,” offered Jackson, slightly more willing.

“Charcoal blazer, bad English accent?”

Jackson nodded. “He wanted me to report its whereabouts on live television. That’s how I found the tomb and knew how to enter unseen. Only, when I got here, all I saw was a book-shaped stone. I thought I’d been lead on a bit of a goose chase. So I concentrated on what I thought was the bigger find.” He indicated the entire room. “The tomb itself.” He shook his head. “God, what a story this will be –”

“Unfortunately, Mr Matebele, you won’t get a chance to tell anyone.”

They all looked up at the new speaker in the grey suit. “Who the hell are you?” said Jackson.

“A concerned party. I’m here to, shall we say, negotiate the anonymity of this tomb.”

“What! You can’t hide something like this. Besides, people would have seen my report. They’ll send search parties.”

“Oh, I doubt that very much. Especially considering that the surrounding mountains are filled with dangerous, bloodthirsty rebels. And as for this tomb, well, a news report of a large explosion in the area will be released shortly. That should keep most people away.”

He smirked. "And this is Michael O'Connor, I presume. Yes, how could one mistake that determined air, that assurance of character?"

Michael stared at the man, his eyes trying see through his dark glasses.

The grey man, as they would later call him, walked closer to the cage, followed by another. The second man was clearly one of the rebels, and Michael thought he might even be the leader. He had a relaxed air of authority about him, and the way he kept glancing at the grey man suggested deep suspicion.

"How do you know me?" asked Michael.

"Know you? We've been keeping a watch on you for most of your life. You're a very special man."

"What? Why?"

"Because of *who* you are. Isn't that what your informant had to say?"

Michael's eyes widened as he recalled that Durban evening, and the fly, and the ...

"You thought you could so easily escape our notice by fleeing to Botswana?" He smiled as if recalling something humorous. "You led us straight to those low-tech fools. The fabled Order of Tyr brought down by your own carelessness." His face turned from a smirking cheerfulness into a sneering mask. "Caught in our trap like the pathetic mice they were."

Michael's heart sank below the tomb floor as he thought of all those people. "If you've hurt them..."

"Hurt? They're beyond feeling any sort of pain by now, I would think. Besides, our ways are efficient and don't accumulate much mess. Too much to explain in the long run."

Michael grasped the bars in anger. "You bastard. You evil, fucking bastard!"

"Enough of this!" cried the leader of the rebels. Michael caught a hint of ancestral Zulu in his accent, but just as Jackson sounded like a white-born South African, so this man had clearly not been brought up in a completely rural home. "You have seen the prisoners as you requested. Now we leave."

"Wait," said the grey man, and walked slowly towards the statue. "I'm just going to make certain the prize is still in place. In case this one has done something to it." He stopped, and stared at the hand of the statue, before turning in anger, fury blazed across his face.

"Where is it? Where is the book?"

Michael blinked in confusion. "How should I ..." and then he touched the place in his cloak that had been causing him slight discomfort. He hadn't given it much thought, but as he reached down, he pulled the book out. Stunned, Michael couldn't help it as he ran his hand over the pristine dark brown leather surface. He felt it shimmer with such incredible power that he felt momentarily overwhelmed. Embossed on the cover was a single word: *Caiy'n*.

Shivering at the feelings brought on from reading the title, Michael's attention was caught by the three interlocking wheels beneath the title. He immediately recognised them as the three airts as each one spoked into eight segments. But they were not empty like the one's drawn by the Inyanga. Engraved inside each segment was one of the twenty-four runes of the Futhark.

He placed the book on the floor of the cage, for as he had touched one of the airts, it had turned slightly, and a powerful surge of what could only be rune energy had almost burnt his hand.

The grey man was also surprised, but his smile returned. "I don't know how you freed it, but it's of no consequence. You will give it to me now."

"No," replied Michael, simply.

"No? Are you so foolish to think I would not just kill you for it?"

Michael shook his head, but when he looked up, the grey man was aiming a gun at him.

"Be careful, Michael," whispered Sergi, a quiver in his voice. "Remember that surge of energy I felt earlier? Well, it was created by that weapon."

"Shit!" cried Jackson. "Hey man," he shouted at the rebel leader, "you just going to let him shoot us?"

The rebel leader glared at Jackson for a moment before finally shouting at the grey man to put the gun down.

"You, Londisizwe," the grey man emphasised the name, "stay out of this. It does not concern you."

"I will not be treated in this manner! Your government thinks they rule the world and its entire people, but you are wrong."

"Wrong? You fool, we rule every part of you."

Londisizwe seemed about to reply, when he turned and left.

“Hey, don’t leave,” shouted Jackson. “I’m not a traitor to my own kind. I promise. Come on! Shit. Mikey, this guy’s crazy. Do you think he’ll shoot us?”

Mikey? “Jackson, shut up.” Michael grabbed hold of Sergi. “My friend, I need you to be quick. Do you think you can burn a rune into the rock below us?”

“Michael? You’re not kidding, are you? Okay, I’ll try. Which one?”

Michael knew which one; at least the name, but he didn’t know the shape of the rune. He cast his mind back to the dream as the grey man began to walk closer, waving the gun at the cage. He remembered Lialh being bound in the air, where he had uttered the rune; and... yes, there, as if his new-found abilities allowed him to see further, he saw the filaments of light escape Lialh’s mouth: the rune forming and breaking into the spell’s affect.

Sergi had by this time shone the Futhark onto the floor and Michael pointed. Sergi used the outline to burn a hole in the rock with his laser. Just as the grey man saw what he was doing, Michael smirked and placed his hand over the rune. “Eihwaz!” he said powerfully, and the air surrounding the cage shimmered.

The grey man blinked, shouted in anger, and aimed his gun. His finger seemed to caress the trigger, pressing it ever so softly, emitting a burst of electricity in an arc which sent everyone down in cover. But the shield held. The grey man screamed his frustration, while Jackson only stared and his nephew looked at Michael with wondering eyes.

“Michael, what now?” shouted Sergi. “We’re still trapped in here.”

Michael nodded, looking thoughtfully at the book on the floor while the grey man aimed at the shield a second time.

Within the World of Words....

The words from the prophecy reverberated through him, and he knelt down next to their only hope. He grasped the cover gently and tried to open it, but it refused to budge. There was no visible lock, nor any strap holding it closed.

Jackson’s nephew sidled up to him, and studied the cover. “Do you think those circles are some kind of combination?”

Michael hadn’t considered that before, but as he looked at the three interlocking airts, he was inclined to agree. Only, he was afraid to move them. He recalled the immense power they emitted when he had nudged only one, and knew that any mistake in the

combination could have dire consequences. “What’s your name?” whispered Michael.
“Msizi.”

“I think you’ve got the right idea, Msizi. Except that I don’t know the combination. Although –” Michael sat cross-legged in front of the book just as another burst of electricity glanced off of the shield. He wasn’t worried. He was centring himself, finding calm the way the Inyanga had showed him. He allowed his thoughts to grip the runes in front of him. He fixed the shield in another, stable part of his mind, and then forgot about it. He placed his hand over the combination lock, searching, then moved his palm along the leather covering until his hand began to tingle. Curious, he opened his eyes and moved his hand away, revealing a small rune in the corner of the cover. He passed his hand over it again, causing it to flare, where it was otherwise invisible. He recalled the last time he had seen that particular rune: the first rune Lialh had ever spoken in his dreams. Finally, Michael knew its meaning. It was Ansuz, rune of the past and memory; to show where others had gone before. He closed his eyes, held his palm firmly, and spoke the single rune: “Ansuz,” he said, so softly, so gently, that his mind became a home for all the runes in the Futhark until all was a white fog.

Michael watched clouds flow on the periphery of his vision. It reminded him of mist on a cool morning, the way it always seemed to disappear the closer you got. He tried to ignore the strange effect by keeping his eyes firmly ahead on the lone cabin standing like a rundown sentinel in the wilderness. Everything around him was surrounded by snow; heaviness settled everywhere he looked. He thought for a moment that he had somehow escaped the tomb, but he could see the difference in landscape even through the ice. This snow was different, as though it were dead.

He moved forward a step, and time swept along at an even greater pace like an echo against his back, propelling him with an insubstantial push.

He was inside the cabin now. Someone knelt over a table, their back to Michael. The man, if it was in fact a man and not a lifelike statue, was robed in swathes of whitish-grey. A slight movement, a shifting of weight from one foot to the other, and Michael

was convinced of his initial assessment of gender. As a hand emerged from the coverings, he saw that it was aged, but still stable. For one strange moment Michael felt as if he had known this man before now.

He stepped forward once more, time shifted, and the man was gone. Michael felt himself being dragged across the floor, but by no human force. It was as though gravity had decided to finally revenge itself on the lording human race, sucking him into a ball of himself, ready to crush his soul. Michael was able to move his arms against the force, grabbing the edge of a table while his legs threatened to pull his grip free. He glanced up, looking for some way of escaping this trap, but no one was there to help him.

He was about to let go when a voice whispered inside his head. He saw the leather-bound book on the table. It called to him, warning him of the consequences of what he was about to see. "Your life will be forever changed," it whispered.

"My life has already changed," shouted Michael angrily.

"But not theirs...."

Michael turned from the phantom finger in his mind, following the force which flowed from the tip. He was caught off guard at what he saw, and was just able to hold on. As if from above, he saw himself sitting cross-legged on the ground. His image was blurry through the quivering of the shield surrounding the cage. But it was not himself that drew his attention; it was those surrounding him: the rebel leader, Londisizwe, commanding two of his rebels to aim their own more mundane weapons at the grey man who continually fired raw voltage at the cage; Jackson Matebele glancing furtively at each of them, then turning an angry gaze on Michael's body. He was angry, true, but he also seemed to realise that his life was no longer in his own hands. There was desperation there, and a strong desire to continue living. Jackson's nephew, Msizi, held Michael's hand. Msizi reached over suddenly, having heard a familiar voice, and slipped Sergi back onto Michael's wrist.

Michael finally understood what he was seeing. These people, for good or ill, were his responsibility. Whatever god-like choice he was supposedly making, he knew these people had every right to continue living.

Michael returned to the cabin.

The book was in front of him now. He could clearly see the three interlocking runes and

was surprised. "How did you know what I would choose?"

"My fate is irrevocably linked to yours, Vordir. You are my Guardian."

Everything went white.

Michael opened his eyes, smiled at Msizi, and grasped the book. As he turned the three airts, a surge of power flowed through him into the tomb. As the second rune interlocked, the shield collapsed as its energy was ripped away. The rebels and the grey man were looking on in wonder and hate, and even as the voltage gun was aimed, Michael knew its power was similarly gone. Locking the third rune in place, the room became a multicoloured mirror of distorted images. The air above the book swirled before suddenly expanding pulling them all into its splendid heart.

His skin crackled, smoked, and began to split. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, he came apart; tiny shards of what he had once been.

His mind, a complex configuration of code amid steel fibres, was there nonetheless, but it was a fragile thing. And now, it was changing....

The book's pages flapped about madly, gigantic things threatening and encouraging. *Pick me*, they all seemed to say as another page was turned and lost to history. The words of the book, at first stark in their rigid form, began to shiver and swarm inwards upon each other.

It was magic, and his original form could not be tolerated. It was too alien, and yet, he could not be destroyed.

Sergi's essence, if it could be so called, was undeniable; an affirmation of life. He knew this, though its confirmation ignited in him a fire of hope. Would he be made whole?

Would his desires be fulfilled?

Would he finally ascend to his place among men?

As his essence burst forth into tiny cells, he knew that he would finally be born.

Book pages swarmed Michael's vision like mosquitoes buzzing faster and faster they seemed as smooth as sanded wood. He froze in this position as a seam of light formed, unclasping and revealing the book's innermost self.

An island, nothing more than sketched lines upon translucent white, firmed and began to eat away at the page. Waves rose up to froth against a rugged coastline as sheer cliffs pushed up through a churning ocean. Colours of all shifting hues jumped about like dancing balls of light, finally coalescing into single tones of brown and white and green as the land itself shifted between mountains, grassy plains, dark forests and misty rivers. Towns, cities, spires and towers emerged from the landscape. Strangely familiar huts surrounding small oases dotted the many savannahs while large lumbering beasts sprang from the earth, fully formed. The ocean erupted once more into existence, a wild and chaotic maelstrom bombarding the southern coastland with ceaseless fury as the island

suddenly froze like some marble statue, waiting....

Londisizwe could not conceive of himself in the strange in-between void he and his men had been thrust into. He was witness to the strange splendour of the island-continent, yet could not believe. For what he was seeing was home; the land he strove for back on the ruined Earth. This new South Africa, so young and vibrant and untamed was ideal in its innocence, yet so utterly different from the country he had known in the present or through the poorly lacking history consigned to the Net. Despite the distance he felt from the unknown, this land called to him, sparking tales of an idyllic age long past.

And yet, he himself was less real than the land before him. He had no feeling, could not move his limbs and could not even see his hands in front of him. He could sense his brethren were close, and with a sense of will grown to steel throughout his days as the leader of the True Africans, he summoned them towards him, catching fragments of emotion and pure terror. Rallying the disincorporate souls, he folded them within his net and flung them, himself following after, into the frozen world.

A voice cried after them, unheard. Unable to prevent the headstrong nature of the rebel leader, it could do nothing but watch as the rebels fell into the world; into space, but out of time.

The island, caught in a moment of time, began to divide along three imagined lines, each one superimposed in bright contrast to the land itself. Two towers groaned up against the sky, dwarfing all in their need to supersede each other as they seemed to conquer the land by their very presence.

The map of the island suddenly condensed within itself, drew to a point with a resounding smack, and sealed itself as the pages of the book came together.

Michael saw it all, and was struck by the strange symmetry of the island. Not only did it intrigue his heightened senses, but he couldn't help but notice that the three lands were divided like the three-patterned airts: two above and one below. But unlike Londisizwe, the similarities between the island and South Africa were not readily apparent to one who had isolated himself so fully from the country he called home.

His vision swam suddenly as a foreign entity cascaded into him, battering him into the closed book. He was aware of no one, and yet felt a force of such anger spread toward him.

Michael?

He recognised that thread of thought, for it sounded like ...*Msizi? Are you there?*

Michael, what's happening? What was that place? Are we going back home?

I... I'm not sure.

Mikey, that you? What the hell's going on? You better have some sort of explanation.

We're ...

The book began to shudder and reopen, revealing the first page, entitled 'Prologue', of a grand story.

What do we do, Michael?

I don't know. I don't know....

The pages began to turn, integrating time into the space previously displayed. As the pages turned, Michael couldn't help but notice vast amounts of writing placed there by some almost god-like hand. He felt himself being pulled forward, towards the grand tale.

The pages turned, and the prologue fell away, opening up the first chapter.

The pages stopped, opening up into some undefined space and time. Michael began to fall faster the closer he came, the words looming out at him. Unfortunately, they spread so quickly that he couldn't read any of them.

Jackson's voice surfaced once more, and Michael was at least thankful that he would not be alone in the strange world. That thought flickered across his vision as panic suddenly gripped him: where was Sergi?

A wind whipped up from below him, and with a deftness which stunned his disincorporate self, he was flung far above the page he was about to descend into.

Msizi's voice surfaced from below, crying out for Michael. But it was too late as both he and Jackson disappeared into the book.

Michael tried turning his head, but found that he couldn't move. He floated up and out of the book while the echoes of a despairing world cried out.

The pages began to turn once more, only in reverse as some other force weaved itself among the words.

Michael O'Connor!

Grey Man! Agent! Whoever you are! What do you think you're doing?

Michael O'Connor thinks he can escape? I think you underestimate me. You might not have any knowledge of this book, but I know more than you would believe.

A second gust of wind sent Michael spinning, only this time a shooting pain swept through his arm. Stunned, he realised that he had taken corporeal form.

"Notice a change, Mr O'Connor?"

They stood meters from each other upon the edge of a number of pages bound together by some terrible will. Michael looked down at his body, surprised to find no hideous mutations or aberrations. His arm bled profusely from a cut high up, but he was otherwise fine. The air itself was familiar to him, being the self same light he had witnessed in the Order of Tyr's tunnels.

Michael took a step forward, but regretted the move as his feet slipped on the smooth edge of the pages. He caught himself, and managed to look ahead, only to face the steady gaze of not only the Grey Man, but his electrical weapon. "What do you know about this place; this 'world of words'?" shouted Michael, heady with vertigo.

"I know many things. The least of which is this book. I must admit though, I never suspected this..." he said as he swept his free arm around him. "Ever since we first discovered the book, its mysteries have always eluded us. But, I learnt. You see, the Order in Nepal were not as unwilling to share as your South African brethren were. And the control of my astral body was only the first..."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Mars has no life, no resources to harvest. Earth's own destruction began a long time ago, and it's only a matter of time before its resources are gone. This new world, however, will be our salvation."

“All you want is Caiy’n’s resources?”

“Is that its name? Well, never mind. I’m sure it will be given an appropriate numerical designation.”

“You’re mad. You don’t know anything about it. What if it doesn’t have everything you need?”

“We don’t. But that’s why *I’m* here, as a, I suppose you could say, surveyor. And now I think it’s time for you to take a fall.”

Michael glanced over the side, but saw only indeterminate words as a page flapped against the grey man’s will. He thought about jumping, but just as he made up his mind to do so, he heard a crackling as the voltage gun was charged.

“No, no, no. We’re not planning on going so soon, are we? I’m afraid your time in this world, and even the next, is up.”

Michael swung his head around as the gun took up his vision. And from that moment, everything slowed to a crawl.

The grey man’s finger touched the trigger like a delicate lover, calling on death to fulfil its destiny. Energy formed within the tip of the weapon, coalescing into a deadly ball of ruined lightning. The tension built to a peak, before exploding outwards in a deluge of blue-white light.

Michael’s eyes widened as the lightning began to break up, separating into individual arcs before those too began to break up, forming smaller and tighter lines. These soon began to twist in on themselves, before falling into a pattern which finally stabilised. Michael sucked in a breath as the pattern entered his subconscious, forming unbidden connections with the knowledge already learnt. The pattern finally snapped into place. With it came the recognition that what he was seeing was the runic symbol for lightning. He didn’t even have to recall where he had seen that particular effect before, as Lialh’s brilliant display within his dream had all but cemented itself within conscious memory. The word ‘Hagalaz’ seeped through his mind to his lips and he knew how he could stop this screeching death.

Using the arced lightning as his drawn rune, Michael spoke aloud with the familiar force which followed all of his runic attempts. “Hagalaz!” He pushed out with his hand to focus the power, but just as the whisper of the runic shape escaped his own mouth to

meet the arc in some attempt to control the flow, something struck Michael as odd. The pattern of the voltage gun's lightning was not exactly the same. It was different, but only subtly so. There were the same number of lines, the same general shape; only, it seemed off somehow; inverted. Shaking it off, Michael concentrated his power as his rune word struck the arc. The lightning reared up in midair, straining against Michael's power as control of the arc was threatened. But Michael was not adept at controlling such a massive creation of energy, and he faltered. The arc surged toward him, and he pushed back as best he could.

Unknown to him, however, a second battle was occurring within the runes themselves. Hagalaz strained to control its inverted self, and just when it could no longer hold out, the arc rune gave way, slipping past Hagalaz, snaking its way back to Michael as he finally gained full control. The lightning pulsed in the air, to the shock of the grey man.

"How? How did you learn to control the runes? You were not with the Order long enough."

Michael ignored him, and with a rage built up now with the memory of the grey man's destruction of the Order of Tyr, he pushed out with mind and arm. The lightning arc obeyed and streamed towards his opponent.

"No!" The grey man screamed in outrage and pulled the trigger once more, sending out a second arc. It struck the first, but this time the effect was not so subtle. The arcs merged into one another, expanding into a ball of chaotic lightning. Michael finally let go of his control, and just as he jumped back to protect himself from the inevitable blast, he felt a sudden cold shiver in his palm. Clutching it to himself, he looked at his hand. Nothing seemed out of place, but he had little time left to think as the explosion knocked him off his feet.

The pages beneath his feet regained control and began to unravel. Michael crawled to the right side, hoping to at least fall into the same page as Jackson and Msizi. But he wasn't quick enough. That page had passed him by. Glancing back towards the grey man, Michael saw that he had already disappeared. Sighing with a weariness which drained him to his soul, he fell. Just as his blurring vision caught the words 'Chapter 3', he heard an excited voice from afar.

"Michael. It's me. I'm human. I'm finally human."

Caity'n was in the bloom of new spring. Fresh grasses, brilliant in the low morning sunshine, combined with the slow-moving hillocks and wavering river, unsteady in its banks and the course set down in an uncertain future. Gliding along the bends was a creature slightly smaller than a dragon fly, though infinitely more intelligent. Its needs, however, transcended simple hunger; so much so that its very existence was swept up in this craving. Its intelligence only allowed the search for its sustenance to become that much more calculated and predatory.

Tiny lumps along the sides of its streamlined body contorted as the slight breeze brought with it a much welcome stowaway: the scent of a living creature. Its two rather inadequate eyes surveyed the valley, burgeoning saplings providing no cover for this prey to hide behind. As it finally set its limited sight on the morning meal, the silhouetted form turned to face the creature. Ignoring the limited potential for its prey to defend itself, it dove in at an angle, moving to dodge an out flung appendage. Seizing the opportunity, it forged ahead toward its ultimate goal; its only need; its life craving: flesh.

The lone figure gazed inquisitively through his telescope as the scene unfolded below him. Sitting in his stone spire, a thing of independence outside of the world's influences, he watched as his faithful abomination carried out its bound duty. Chuckling softly to himself, he could not help marvelling at the voracity of the need to approach his solitary sentinel. Having remained secluded for so many years, he had come to disdain the company of others. His creature, a product of his inordinate Ru power, had seen fit to keep it that way.

Awaiting now the inevitable end of this distraction, the Lord of Ru brought his eye back to the telescope, preparing the grimace which he had always affected at seeing an intruder ripped apart.

Only, the event never occurred as he expected.

The raised hand of the intruder moved in a slow arc, a ripple of air following in its wake. And, as an artist might erase and rework his masterpiece, so did the intruder rework the world. In the instant the ripple wave passed through the creature, it disappeared from the Ru Lord's sight. Sitting back, aghast, and now terrified at the prospect of the intruder's powers, he neglected his other concerns to mark its progress. The shape moved closer towards the tower, but halted at the river which formed the second barrier of his seclusion. But instead of the great magic the Ru Lord believed would be used to levitate over this obstacle, the intruder once more waved an arm in an arc. What the Ru Lord beheld in this moment shocked him to his core, for it should not have been possible. Stepping onto the newly created white bridge, the intruder approached the tower. But not even the bridge held the Ru Lord's interest. He had eyes only for the intruder, as it appeared to have no body. It seemed to be made of pure energy.

"Ru Lord." It was said simply, as if stating a fact not worth disputing.

Awaiting the bodiless energy within the topmost tower room, the Ru Lord was surprised to have been incorrect in his earlier assessment. For the intruder did have distinct features, and a more than desirable shape. She reflected the mothering nature the Ru Lord had never known, yet also the dazzling beauty of a lady willing to go to his bed.

"Who...what are you, to have destroyed my creature so?"

"I do not destroy. I merely correct abominations."

"What?"

"It courses above your head as we speak. That is what your creation has become; has ever been. What was once a flesh eater now follows a path that searches for more... depth."

"You speak in riddles. What do you want with me?"

"This tower is an abomination. It stands outside of time. Everything within is an abomination, including you."

"What are you?"

"An avatar."

"Who do you serve? Did those Ru Queens send you?"

"I serve the infinite and effect the definite."

"So you plan to kill me?"

"You must be eradicated. But, if you leave this tower and remove this blight, your death will become moot."

"And you believe this shape you've taken to be formidable?" he asked, ignoring her threat.

"I am new to this body. But I will learn."

"And if I deny you?"

"Then you must be destroyed."

The Ru Lord spoke a quick word. Bonds of a rope-like substance snaked around her ankles and wrists, pushing her to the ground. "I think you underestimate my power."

The intruder grimaced, but could not move. "You are correct. This place is outside time. It is infinity within infinity. It must not be allowed. It must be destroyed."

"You're in no position, my darling little bird, to be making such boasts. But let's see what we can make of you nevertheless, shall we?"

The intruder could only watch as she was placed in a chair, sitting as a statue would if suddenly animated.

He watched her as she peered through sultry brown eyes at the book in front of her.

Moving quickly to pull his work away, her next words stopped him in his haste.

"This book of prophecy is invalid. The world has changed."

"The world cannot change."

"This prophecy holds no value. The Vordir has changed that."

"Your other silly *Ru Lords* have gone to collect him already, to fight the darkness?" he spoke scathingly. "He's only a boy. He can change nothing."

"You speak the truth, but base it on an inaccuracy. For you see, he is no longer Vordir. Another has come. Were this prophecy outside the bounds of this tower, it would be within my power to affect that change. But that has not come to fruition. Hence, your interference cannot be tolerated. You are... unpredictable."

"You're in no position to be ordering me around. Have you forgotten that you're trapped?"

"Trapped is a state of mind. Besides, I'm never without forethought."

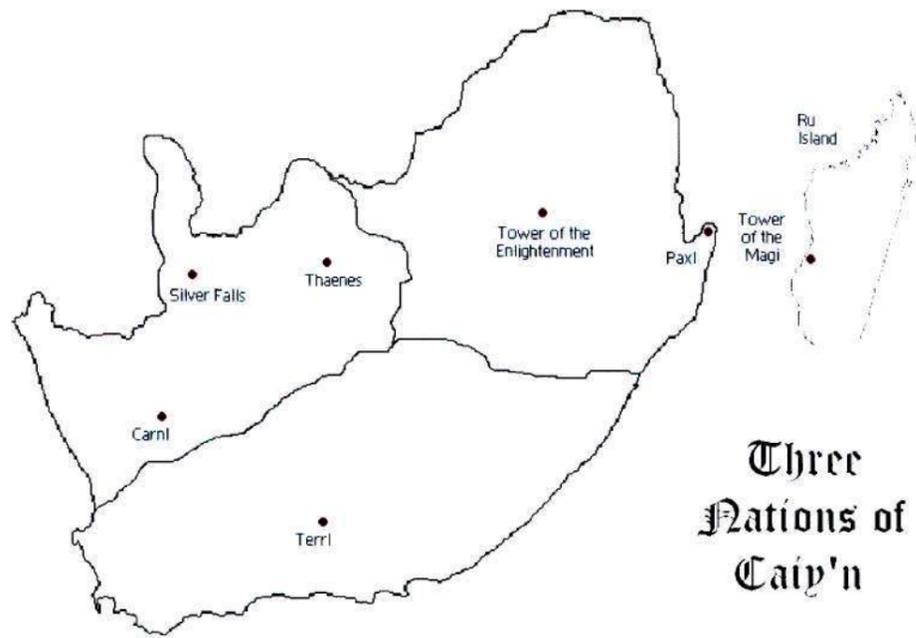
Eyes widening in surprise at such a bold statement, the Ru Lord felt a sudden prick against his neck. Slapping sharply with his right palm, he saw specks of blood as he brought his hand away. "What have you done?"

"Your abomination; it has become my salvation."

"No...." The Ru Lord fell forward, a deep purple welling around the affected area. The intruder managed to free herself as night fell. Limping downstairs from chafed ankles, she fell out into the open, past the Ru wards which set the tower slightly out of time, allowing the once Ru Lord to extend his life considerably. Turning to face the abomination of time, she cocked her head, as if listening. Shaking her head in quiet surprise, she waved her arm in an arc. The tower rippled and disappeared, leaving an object far more suitable for the times ahead.

PART 2

The Past



Chapter 12 *Thaenes*

Sergi opened his eye with aching care, savouring the feel of salty moisture clouding his

vision. It was so completely alien to every other impulse he had ever experienced that the tears coursed out of him. Sunlight glimmered as his eye adjusted to the light, and he blinked repeatedly. The new sensation almost overwhelmed him, sending him into a strange euphoria.

He had never known the movement of a human body, and couldn't be certain that he was doing it right, but for some reason he knew that the life he had once known was no more. He ached to feel, to know the pleasures of simple air on his skin. He managed to tilt his eye downwards, and was surprised to find his body covered by a blanket. But he didn't give it another thought. All that mattered was his new body.

Sergi closed his eye – odd, that he could only open one; he thought humans had two – and relaxed, concentrating on moving his right hand. It was a momentary struggle, but he finally felt his fingers bend to his will, and he grasped the edge of something soft beneath him. It felt smooth, while the top of his fingers brushed against what he could only assume was the coarse blanket. He was elated, but when he tried to open his eye, he found that it wouldn't move. Fear clutched at him and his hand clenched the smooth covering. Panic began to ensue and he urged his eye to open with everything he had. There was a strange stretching feeling, and what felt like a snap, when his left eye opened with incredible force, flooding his vision with a light which seemed so much brighter than before.

“Oh my, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were awake. Let me close that blind for you.”

Sergi froze, or at least he would have had he mobility in his body. He couldn't move, but he was thankful when the sunlight coming through the window was dimmed. Looking around carefully, he realised that he was in some sort of room, and considering the height of the woman coming towards him, he was lying in a bed.

“Goodness, you've gone and hurt yourself. I told you not to try and walk about yet. Your poor eye. How did you bruise yourself so?”

Sergi blinked. What was she talking about? He had only just woken. He didn't recall her at all. He tried to raise the hand he had moved just before, but he couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel anything, only his one damned eye. But he could hear, and for that he was grateful.

“Don't try and move now. You've had a hard knock of it. I'll get you a damp cloth.” She

started to leave, which frightened Sergi more than anything else, and he strained to open his mouth. With a familiar stretch and snap, he cried out for her to stop, only to become blind once more. He wanted to flail with panic, but his paralysis remained.

“Stop, please. I can’t move my body. Please, help me.”

He heard hard boots creak on wood, and a rougher voice could be heard from just outside.

“Tabitha, that boy woken up yet? He’s been sleeping far more than he should be.”

“Shush, Pa, you’re going to scare him. He’s woken up, but sounds terrified. You just wait outside while I tend him.”

“Please,” shouted Sergi. “I can’t see, and my body won’t move. What’s wrong with me?”

“What are you on about, Michael?” said Tabitha. “You’re sitting up in bed, if my eyes don’t deceive me. Only, that bruise of yours... how did it get around your lips?”

Michael woke with a gasp, peering left and right before recalling where he was. He had woken the day before, disoriented and confused as he was forced to place himself in the hands of the woman named Tabitha. The first time she had spoken, a string of runes had erupted from her mouth and he had quivered against some kind of rune spell. Only, when she pulled his arms down, she had given him a comforting look, before telling him her name, and that she was there to help him. He had relaxed at that point, both because of her soothing words as well as the fact that there were no runes in sight. Just before he had fallen asleep once more, his mind tried to make sense of the situation. It was a new land; a new language. He only hoped that the runes he saw were his own way of translating. Waking for the second time, he knew something was wrong. He turned to face Tabitha just as she spoke. He tried to ask her what she meant about a bruise, but he couldn’t open his mouth. It had gone completely numb. Panic drained his face white when he heard words he knew he wasn’t speaking.

“Somebody help me. I can’t move. Why can’t I move?”

He could see Tabitha looking at him in confusion, and maybe with a little sympathy, but he had no time for that. Who was saying those words? They came from his mouth, he had

no doubt of that; they sounded like him, but were definitely not him.

Suddenly, with what felt like wriggling around his mouth, he could feel his tongue and lips once more, and he sighed with relief. His eyes widened, however, when an alien-looking black substance slithered down the skin of his arm towards his right hand. It seemed to settle over his hand completely. His hand was immediately numbed, so much so that it might as well not have been there. His blackened fingers began to move wildly of their own accord, before settling in what could only be called despair.

Michael looked up at Tabitha, but she was slowly backing away.

“Michael, I think you need some time to recover. I’ll just make you something to drink, yes?” She turned and ran from the room, the door to the outside all but slamming behind her as he heard calling shouts.

He slapped his left hand to his face, pulling it down over his mouth and chin. He raised his right arm in front of his face. “What are you?” he whispered almost to himself, but the oil-like substance seemed to jump at his words. It began to move once more, back up his arm and towards his face. Michael slapped his hand over it, and it seemed to shudder, but it finally reached his mouth, causing him to gasp for breath. But, somehow, the oil was controlling his breathing.

“Can anyone hear me?” he heard his own voice say. Michael nodded imperceptibly.

“Michael, is that you? Please tell me it’s you?”

The oil seemed to rise up and shift onto his cheek, and Michael found he could speak once more. “I hear you,” he said fearfully, but steady nonetheless. “Who... what are you?”

“Michael? It’s me, it’s Sergi,” said the oil as it reclaimed his mouth.

Michael sat back, and it was a long time before he blinked.

“Michael, what’s happened to me? I was supposed to be human. What have I become?”

Michael found his voice again, but he was silent. What was going on? He was in a new world, he could accept that much. At first, when he had awoken, he had thought it all a dream, but the tangibility of the situation was all too real. The World within Words. He had almost been willing to rack up the events between worlds as an illusion, but the memory was now too vivid to ignore. And the last thing he recalled was Sergi shouting to him, something about being human.

“Sergi, calm down. We’re in Caiy’n, the world of the book.”

Two men, farmhands by the look of them, strode into the room. They took one look at the oily bruise surrounding Michael’s face and stopped, hesitant. A shout from behind changed their stance, however, and, steeling themselves against whatever horror they were about to encounter, marched forward, oddly, most probably dumbly, determined. Michael pushed himself back, his body not as yet working as he knew it should. They lunged forward, each trying to grab an arm, but the bruise was faster. It slipped around the lips and gave such a demonic shout that the pair of bulky men stopped short. Sergi slithered down Michael’s neck and arm into his right hand, before the newly blackened fist connected with one of the farmhand’s jaws. Stunning the burly man, the farmhand had no time to think before the fist jabbed him in the stomach, doubling him over. Michael, who at this point hadn’t really moved, leant forward, giving Sergi some space within which he could more easily do damage. Michael couldn’t feel the blows being landed, which was surprising considering the considerable power they seemed to possess. He wondered if Sergi felt them, or if he could feel anything at all. Whatever the truth, the farmhand’s body had become an outlet for Sergi’s rage. Michael might have taken the moment to feel pity for his friend, but there was no more time for contemplation. A beam of wood suddenly crashed down onto Sergi and, finally, his strength gave out. Michael’s hand went limp.

Michael watched helplessly as the beam was then aimed at his head, and fell back instinctively. It still clipped him above his right eyebrow, however, spinning him so that he knocked the side of his head against the wall. His mind began to slide away into darkness as the beam was raised for a second time. “Stop!” came Tabitha’s voice, raised in a slight scream. “Father, please, we mustn’t kill

him. We must help him to fight this demon.”

“There’s no helping the demons and their work, Tabitha. The only saving we can do for him is to give him a quick death.”

“We can take him to the priest, Father. I won’t have you killing anyone, especially not after the time it took me to bring him back to health.”

Tabitha’s father sighed. He pointed at Michael. “Grab him, Jaken. We’ll take him to town in the wagon. And if the demon hand moves, cut it off.”

Michael was hoisted up tenderly, Jaken not wanting to touch him at all, but slung over Jaken’s shoulder nevertheless.

“Take care of Willem, Tabitha, if nursing be all important to you. And we’ll see this demon bastard purged.”

Michael was almost completely naked when his body crashed into the dustbowl of a village green, which, with the wooden road sign in the middle, might have been taken for a glorified crossroads. His lips tasted the crumbling paths which crisscrossed the village green, spattering them with his unholy blood.

It was a small village, with a lone inn on the one edge of the green, while what might have been taken for some sort of store took up the other.

A single highway – more of a well-swept dirt road – ran through the village, meeting and exiting at the village green, and as Michael managed a glance towards each horizon, he noticed carts and wagons trundling away in the distance. If he had doubted the purpose of the village before, then he was certain of it now. It was nothing more than a roadside stop on the way to some larger prize.

Aside from the inn and store, there were a number of small houses dotted around the green and up and down the highway, but if the villagers showed any curiosity about Michael, they weren’t showing it. The village, named Thaenes according to Tabitha’s father – though when he spat it out it sounded like ‘ten’ – was a ghost town that morning. Tabitha’s father aimed a kick at him, but Michael managed to roll away. He grimaced as stone chips cut his back and stomach.

Tabitha's father pointed his finger at Michael, telling Jaken to stop him from moving too far away. Strong calloused fingers gripped his shoulders, pulling him up before pushing him down to bloodied knees.

Looming before him, situated on the southern tip of the green, was a building which dwarfed all the others. A lone grey cloud slid in front of the sun and he was finally able to look up at it. The sun emerged once more and Michael was forced to lower his head like a supplicant to keep the searing light from his eyes.

From what he could gather from his brief glance, it was one of the few buildings which hadn't been made from wood or large stone blocks. This one seemed to have been meticulously put together with muddy-red bricks which, together with the growth of lichen and moss, made it seem ancient in comparison. It was built almost like a pyramid, inching ever upwards to a flat point atop which rest a stylized symbol. Michael couldn't really make it out from his position on the ground, even with the sun not directly above, but it sent shivers running through him.

"We should throw him in one of the cages," muttered Jaken. "Like me grandpa used to do with the likes of these demons."

"Quit your muttering, Jaken," replied Tabitha's father. "Those are barbarous ways. The priests have shown us our mistakes." He sighed. "Tabitha was right to do it this way. But it doesn't mean the demon won't pay." He moved towards the large building. Set in the wall was an enormous archway under which was set a plain wooden door. Tabitha's father pushed the door inwards, allowing the light to flesh out the inner hallway. Michael was forced inside and made to walk down the centre of an enormous room which stretched upwards into the pyramid-shaped ceiling. There were oddly stylised mats on the floor. Michael thought he recognised the symbols on some of them, but they were wrong somehow, only not in the same way that merkstaves were.

There was only one person inside. He was kneeling on one of the mats before some sort of statue carved into a symbol similar to the one he had seen outside. It was also curved and stylised, and for the life of him, Michael couldn't understand his sudden repulsion.

The man, or priest as it turned out, faced them as he heard the footsteps, a smile on his thin face as he thought he would be inviting some of his congregation to join in his worship. His smile ended, however, when he saw how Michael was being led to his promised exorcism.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded with a slightly squeaky voice full of command lent by the acoustics of the room. “No man shall be harmed in the face of the Enlightenment. Hold up, sirs, for you insult the house of our Great Spirit.”

Tabitha’s father stepped forward as Jaken halted, uncertain of how to proceed in the face of such determination.

“This is no man, Canon Grenval,” began Tabitha’s father. “This is a demon incarnate that has attacked poor Jaken’s brother. It was only my daughter’s hand which halted this here demon’s destruction, and only as she is convinced he can be purged.”

The priest’s eyes had widened slightly, but he still retained enough control to exert an imperious air. “Curious,” said Canon Grenval thoughtfully. “Bring him before me.”

Michael was lifted up and all but dragged in front of the priest, who ran his eyes up and down Michael’s mostly naked body. All that covered him was a too-large piece of cloth surrounding his genitalia. Michael figured it might have been Tabitha’s father who had leant it to him, and guessed that he wouldn’t want it back.

Grenval’s eyebrows rose at the sight of his limp black hand. He turned to the other two men. “The Mahj have tainted this land, and it is all we good people can do to turn back the tide threatening to overwhelm us. Many think us narrow in our views here in the outskirts of the large towns and cities, but I say we are the last bastion against the ever-increasing incursion of Mahj-induced suffering and disease. For this is what this man here possesses – or rather, possesses him – a demon of Mahj creation. The signs are clear, my sons. The Enlightenment has spoken through me and seen through this one’s mask.” He pointed at Tabitha’s father. “You and your daughter have been neglectful in your duties to the Enlightenment. Do not think that you are exempt from the world on your farm, for as you can now see, the Mahj seek to dominate even the tiniest corner of existence.”

Michael listened with an odd detachment. The words had so enraptured the other two that they had prostrated themselves on the mats, heads lowered in fearful prayer. He was

immediately reminded of the images coming out of the European Union. This man could very well have been the pope.

The priest told them to stand and told them that he would rid Michael of his possession. He thanked them for their devotion to the Enlightenment, warning them not to miss the next service, lest the next demon not be so easily captured. They thanked him and left, eager to hide from the face of holy wrath.

Michael waited while the priest walked around his kneeling body, before moving over to a chest along the far wall, opening it and pulling out a plain brown robe. He walked back over to Michael, handing it to him. "Put it on," he said.

Michael held it gingerly, studying the man before him. He was thin, but not gaunt in the way one might have expected in a holy man. In fact, the man before him was utterly average-looking, and if not for the odd hairstyle – two rows of black hair running from forehead to nape – Michael wouldn't have given him much notice. "Why?" he asked slowly, looking away.

"Because the Enlightenment does not tolerate impropriety."

"No, I mean, what are you doing?"

"In the grand scheme of things? I suppose I'm protecting myself." Michael was immediately aware of the shift in tone. It sounded more relaxed. "There's a war on, if you weren't aware, and our gracious nation has chosen to support the Mahj. The fervour has not yet reached us here in the outskirts, but it's only a matter of time."

Michael coughed. "Um, what about the whole demon thing?"

"Demon?" laughed the priest. "By the look of that hand you've been afflicted with a rotting disease. But those two need not have known that. What that little charade did gain me, however, were a few more fervent followers."

"I see. So you don't think I'm possessed?"

"These people will believe anything so long as you surround it with spectacle."

Michael stood up and placed the robe over his head. "You don't think you're telling me too much? What you're saying could harm your position among these people."

"Blackmail? Even after I've just saved you from a public stoning?"

"That's not ... Look," said Michael. "I'll just go then."

Canon Grenval smiled and motioned with his hand. Two youths in white robes came

forward from where they had been waiting in the shadows behind Michael. "I wouldn't struggle," he said as each youth grabbed Michael from behind, trying to pinion him.

"You must understand that I need to take certain precautions. I would take your tongue except that you'll need it to scream. Your hand, now. I'm afraid that I'll have to remove it. You see, in this instance spectacle isn't enough. They've seen you enter my church. They will need proof that I am still worthy of their devotion."

Michael lashed out, struggling against his would-be captors.

"Hold him fast! We cannot proceed with the amputation here. We need to take him down to one of the cells."

Michael finally stopped, his battered body no match for the strength of youth.

They laughed as he went limp in their arms, when his right hand suddenly jerked. The 'rotting disease' slithered up his arm to his mouth.

"I suggest you let me go, priest," came a dark, guttural voice, echoing easily throughout the room. "Unless you wish me to bathe in the blood of the Enlightened."

Chapter 13 Church of the Enlightenment

Canon Grenval reeled back, his eyes widening in fear. He had never believed it possible,

in all his years, that demons could truly exist. It was nothing but a tale told in the dark places of one's dreams; a place which he had always taken care to cultivate in the minds of his followers. That was where the true power of faith lay. Only, now his own belief system was collapsing, as was his reason and ability to rationalise.

But suddenly it made sense. This was all a Mahj plot. There was no demon here. It was an illusion sent to lull him into fear. He had always known the attack would come, but had expected an all-out assault as opposed to these cloak and dagger tactics. He had underestimated the Mahj, but he had not the time to berate his own failings.

The church had always had one weakness when it came to fighting the Mahj. It had no magic. It had always needed to choose its battles wisely, when the magic could be held in check. The war that was being fought at this very moment was such an example. It was a war between church and Mahj in everything but name, but it was that one point which prevented the use of magic. The war would be fought with men alone, and the nation which won through would see its backer rise to power in the Southern Duchies.

Steeling himself, Grenval glared back at this would-be demon, drawing strength from his evangelical training. "Do not think to fool me with your grand charade. I know not whether you are a Mahj or one of their pawns, but the Enlightenment will not fall so easily." Gathering himself, he pulled a small figurine from his robes. It was a smaller replica of the same symbol displayed throughout the church, and when Grenval held it before Michael, Michael felt like retching. If not for Sergi controlling his mouth, he might very well have. Michael knew the shape now, seen up close. It was not a rune, nor a merkstave, but a twisted version of both. While the merkstave were anathema to him, this symbol seemed far more abhorrent to his senses. Where he might fight against the inverted runes, this symbol seemed to leech his strength. He fell back to his knees, his mind swimming to dizzying heights.

"Ah, so the Mahj do have a weakness. The Embodiment will be most interested to hear of such a thing. Be gone now, demon, and infest my church no longer."

The word he spoke then was itself an abomination of the nature of the runes. It seemed to further twist the figurine's odd power so that Michael felt his throat constrict.

"Thalatho!" screamed the priest.

Pain wracked Michael's head, and he lost himself to the pull of gravity.

“Stand fast, priest!” came a tremor of a voice, strengthened by arrogance.

Grenval jerked up, shaken, his eyes narrowing. “What is the meaning of this? To interrupt an exorcism of the direst nature is punishable –”

“Your exorcism means nothing to me, priest,” said the same voice, not backing down. “I am in need of your facilities. You will of course comply.”

“How dare you seek to order a priest of the Enlightenment? Acolytes, seize this fool.”

The stranger regarded the two approaching him and shook his head sadly.

Michael couldn’t see with his cheek flattened against the edge of one of the prayer mats, but what he felt and heard in the next few moments sent a chill through him. The stranger spoke the rune of air, Isa, but it seemed to erupt from two distinct places. There was a crumpling sound and a muffled gasp, and the priest before him took a step back.

“Ru Lord!” There was definite fear in Grenval’s voice now.

“I have no time for your pathetic little charades, priest.”

“You think to attack me here? Your pet has already failed, as will you. This village will side with me in the war to come, and your kind will fall before the might of the Enlightenment.”

“There is no need to attack you, priest. This nation has opened its eyes. It’s only a matter of time before this backwards village succumbs.”

“No!” Grenval lunged forward, hurling his figurine at the Ru Lord. Thala –”

“Asi...”

Michael shuddered as the merkstave was muttered.

Grenval’s mouth twitched, suddenly skewed at an impossible angle. He grabbed at his throat as he started to gag, dropping the figurine to the floor.

The Ru Lord walked over slowly, kicking it away as he reached Grenval. “Isa.” Grenval was lifted into the air, and Michael saw that he had stopped gagging, the spoken rune negating its opposite. He also noticed something wrong with the Ru Lord’s arm, but his strength gave out before he could have a closer look. “I have neither time nor the patience to teach you how to treat your betters, priest. I require the use of your dungeons. I have two prisoners who you are to keep alive until Ru Guards arrive to retrieve them. Nod that you understand.” Grenval did so, begrudgingly. “I will personally escort them to their cells, and you will see that they are not harmed. I need not remind you of the penalty.”

He glanced over at Michael, regarding him with interest. "What do we have here, priest?"

Grenval growled. "One of your own, I assumed."

"Truly. He performed Ru magic then?"

"No."

"Then he is nothing," and he turned to leave, lowering Grenval as he walked away.

Grenval immediately dived for his figurine, but the Ru Lord was quicker. "Zawit."

Grenval stared, now scared, at the melting remains.

"I suggest you see to your acolytes, priest."

Grenval grimaced, but finally made his way over to check on his men. They groaned at his touch, but only had the wind knocked out of them. Helping them up, he pointed at Michael. "Take him to one of the cells. And open up two others. It seems we'll be having some guests."

Michael swallowed hard as he opened his eyes, cutting short his immediate urge to be sick. His body still hadn't recovered fully from landing in Tabitha's field, but over the last three days he had been getting better. Now he felt like he might never move again. He rolled over onto his back, dusting the grit from his right cheek.

"Look, he's finally moving."

Michael thought he recognised the voice, but it seemed to come from a distance.

"Hey Mikey, when you've finally decided you've had enough shut eye do you think you might be up to doing a little hocus pocus." That voice no one could forget.

"Jackson?"

"I'll let you know when I wake up. But since I'm in a coma, I don't suppose it hurts to say yes."

"Don't be ridiculous, Uncle. Not even your imagination could come up with everything we've seen."

"Don't be smart, Msizi. You're only a figment as well, so you don't get to talk back to me."

"Will you two just shut up!"

“Oh Lord, the crazy parasite’s speaking again. Msizi, if it lunges for me one more time, I want you to protect me.”

“I’m not some figment you can control, Uncle Jackson.”

Michael shut out their voices, watching instead as the black oil around his mouth trailed down his arm into his right hand, which started to clench and unclench repeatedly.

“Sergi?” he whispered. The hand shook slightly before the oil moved back up to Michael’s face, blinding him as it took control of his eyes. Something fell onto lip. He lifted his hand to wipe it away, but he couldn’t help but taste the salty flavour. More tears started falling as the oil expanded over his entire face. Michael gasped for breath, but even that reflex was removed from him as Sergi screamed his anguish. Michael heard the sound, his ears having been left alone, and felt his stomach lurch with pity for his friend. After a few minutes the crying stopped and Michael’s face was released. He saw Jackson and Msizi watching him from the next cell, worry on their faces. He glanced down at the oil that was Sergi and wiped away his own tears. “Sergi, I’m so sorry,” whispered Michael. “I never meant... I mean, when you said you had your own body, I didn’t think...” He fell silent. Glancing down, he couldn’t see Sergi, but knew where he had gone for the fact that he couldn’t feel his right toe. He looked back at the other two.

“Michael, are you... I mean, clearly not, but, Michael, what’s happening? Where are we?”

Michael watched as Msizi tried to phrase his question as tactfully as possible, and shook his head. He had got them all into this. If not for him, they’d all be safe on Earth; and still stuck in a cell, he had to remember. He smirked as he considered the irony of the situation. “We’re in the book,” he said finally, trying to sit up. “A world within words.” “And you expect us to just believe you, do you?” said Jackson. “I remember all those swirling colours. That’s when I must have gone into a coma. Yes, that’s it. The last ten days have been a strange lucid dream, and... as soon as I get out of this cell, I’ll wake up. Yes, that’s it.” He tried to reach Michael through the bars. “Come on, damn it. Get up, stop your whimpering and free us so we can all get out of here.”

Michael smiled despite himself, though it felt more like a grimace. Jackson’s words had struck a nerve. Everything that had happened to him over the last two weeks or so was absurd. And yet his mind could accept it as true. Whether it had been his rebirth or his

choice in Othala, he might never know, but, looking at Jackson's wide eyes, he knew he would never have to doubt his surroundings. These other two, though, were never meant for this world.

He tried to move again, but his body was slow to react. Whatever that figurine had done to him still seemed to be affecting his strength. "Msizi."

The boy, who had moved slightly away from his uncle, perked up. "Yes, Michael?" He sounded a bit too eager.

"Are we locked up tight?"

"Yes. I've tried everything, but the cell door won't budge. Maybe... maybe you could do some magic?"

"I don't know if I can. I feel so weak. The priest did something to me. I can barely move as it is."

"Can't, um, Sergi do it?"

Michael sighed. "Sergi's changed. I don't think he can."

"He's a god-damned parasite –"

"Hey, Jackson, don't say another word. This is the only warning I'm going to give you. Otherwise I'll figure out how to create fire and we'll see whether or not you wake up from your coma."

"Whoa, take it easy there, Mikey." Jackson moved away from the bars.

Msizi glanced at his uncle before whispering to Michael. "Don't be too hard on him."

"Why not?"

"You don't know what he did."

"Who?"

"The Ru Lord."

It all suddenly came back to Michael: the man who had inadvertently saved him from amputation; the magic he performed, both rune and merkstave; and his two prisoners....

"I... forgot."

Msizi sat down, staring down at his hands. "We landed about ten days ago –"

"Straight into a pig sty." said Jackson from the other end of the cell.

"There was some sort of festival," continued Msizi, "and we just popped out of the air into the mud. I couldn't really breathe with the wind knocked out of me, but at least it

stopped me from sucking in the mud. I finally managed to stand, a little disoriented with all the noise. I saw Uncle Jackson a little way off trying to fight off—”

“I’ll tell my own story, thank you very much.” There was a sudden wistfulness in Jackson’s voice which Michael found slightly disturbing. “I wasn’t quite so bad off as my nephew here. I think I killed their prize pig. Not the most comfortable of landings, I can tell you now. There was the most eerie silence as I stood. Michael, you won’t believe what I saw.”

Michael leaned forward, intrigued.

“There were huts made of straw, and communal fires, and it was all very much like camping in the wilds, except of the fact that everyone was naked.”

“They weren’t all naked, Uncle. The men were covered, mostly, and the women ...”

“Flesh, flesh and more flesh.”

Michael couldn’t help but smile at the image. “Sounds like it wasn’t all that bad.”

“Maybe not for you, considering that they were all white.”

“It’s true,” said Msizi. “Well, except for the one’s covered in mud. It was like stepping back into our own history, but wrong somehow.”

“If that’s how our ancestors behaved then I’m glad it’s all in the past. Because they all suddenly started screaming and wailing and fainting like we were the spirits of the dead. Maybe we were, considering we haven’t seen another black face around.”

“And the fact that we appeared out of thin air.”

“Anyway,” said Jackson, annoyed at the interruption, “some of them fell to the floor like they were praying but one man decided he didn’t like the look of me and grabbed me around the throat. Well I can tell you now, I wasn’t going to stand for it.”

“I rushed to help him,” Msizi interrupted again, “when these strange bands of black rope suddenly covered my body.”

“The Ru Lord,” said Michael, remembering a similar spell in his dream.

Msizi nodded. “The villagers, nomads, whatever they were—”

“White Zulus.”

“White... what? Uncle, I don’t think that’s quite appropriate.”

“Just get on with the story.”

“Anyway, the *villagers* all but fled as he walked towards us. He was wearing this large black cloak and dark gloves, but he quickly pulled them off. I’ve never seen anything like it before. His right arm looked as though it were made of glass. Over the next few days I saw that it was covered in shimmering symbols, just like on the book.”

Michael’s eyes widened at this description. “What happened?”

“I rushed him,” said Jackson. “Stupidest thing I’ve ever done.” He laughed, but it was a hollow sound. “The villager stepped away from me when he appeared. I guess Ru Lords are scarier than someone with dark skin. Anyway, I thought I might take the opportunity to fight back.”

“Yes, but you never got very far, which probably saved your life,” said Msizi, slipping in.

“So you keep telling me.”

“You know what he can do.”

“I do know, nephew, better than you could ever understand.” Jackson sat back suddenly. The shift in mood was palpable, and suddenly all of the boisterousness of the retelling was lost.

“He accused us of being enemy Mahj. At least, he thought Uncle Jackson was. He kept referring to me as his Geth. But that came later. First there was Lialh.”

Michael sat up at last, not even his waning strength enough to stop him from reacting. He felt Sergi shift slightly up his leg. Msizi didn’t notice his reaction as he had resumed staring at his hands, so Michael kept silent.

“We didn’t know his name then, but he was the one who ran into the path of the Ru Lord, tackling Uncle Jackson. I think the Ru Lord was so surprised that he stopped. Lialh grabbed onto his glass arm to pull himself up. I don’t know what happened, but the Ru Lord took a very sudden interest in him. Then he told the villagers to strap us down in one of the wagons like we were an afterthought.”

“Wagons,” muttered Jackson. “Who knew such a form of transport could still be in existence?”

“Apparently they like to ride horses a lot,” said Msizi. “They don’t have cars,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You don’t say,” said Jackson, but his nephew ignored him.

“We were given food and water, but were ignored during the day while he held long conversations with Lialh. And for the last ten days we’ve been travelling east along some dust road.”

“That’s it?”

Msizi nodded while Jackson looked away.

“He thought we were there to kill the boy,” Jackson said slowly. “He asked me a lot of questions. Every night, he would take me apart from the two boys and ask me who I served, where we were from and if our clothes were in some way a sign of our fealty to our dark master.” There was silence for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” said Michael finally. “I was just trying to save us.”

“Michael, if you hadn’t helped, the grey man would have killed us,” said Msizi.

“Don’t try and make him feel better. The grey man only showed up because he was after Michael.”

“Well, what do you think the rebels would have done to us?” argued Msizi.

“Nothing,” said Jackson fiercely. “Nothing they could have done would have compared....”

“He was finally convinced that we weren’t out to kill Lialh, though he still wanted to know how we just popped out of the air. But we were slowing him down, so he decided to lock us up here until proper guards arrived to take us to some tower in the east.” There was more silence. “What about you, Michael?” Msizi finally asked.

Michael told them what had happened, about arriving only three days ago in Tabitha’s field and how she had cared for him. He tried explaining about Sergi, who twitched slightly at his name, but he wasn’t quite sure how.

“I’m sorry for your... whatever he is, but I hope that now you’re awake you can keep him under control. He’s been flinging abuse ever since he saw us again,” said Jackson.

Michael closed his eyes as he slowly breathed out. His mind was a jumble of information that needed to be sorted. “What was his name, this Ru Lord?” he finally asked.

“He never actually told us his name,” said Msizi, “but I heard Lialh mention it once or twice. He was forbidden from speaking to us, you see, though I think he knew we were innocent.”

“His name?”

“Lialh called him Ba-Roc. He wore these midnight blue robes covered in symbols –”

“Runes,” said Michael. “Or I suppose in this world they call them Ru.”

Msizi nodded. “He took care to cover up his arm, so I never saw it again close up. One thing that did stand out were his eyes, though. They were like golden flames.”

“Don’t forget that ridiculous moustache of his. Black against that shock of white hair.”

Michael formed the picture of the Ru Lord Ba-Roc in his mind, but failed to see how he was connected with anything that had happened to him before. He had never appeared in any of his dreams, and yet Lialh had.

“So Mikey, now that you know our little tale, how about finding us a way out of here and back home?”

“I’m not sure I can, Jackson. Do you see any portal we can just jump through?”

“Well at least get us out of these cells.”

Michael closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his thoughts. In his head he formed his plight, his need to escape, hoping some inherent rune knowledge might come to the fore. He felt it there, on the cusp of his mind, before his strength failed and his body slid to the floor. “I’m sorry. I can’t focus. It might be this place. It feels as though it’s leeching all of my power.”

“Well then that’s it, we’re done for.”

Shouting suddenly became audible from somewhere above them. The muffled screams of anger slowly grew louder. A door opened further down near the end of the cell bloc, and a number of figures stepped through.

“The ritual exorcism must be performed!”

“Do not think to sway the will of a Ru Guard.”

“I hear it said that you Ru Guards are nothing but pathetic reminders of what it means to fail.”

“We serve our purpose as we all must.”

“You say it as though it were a sermon practiced over and over, but I wonder if you truly believe.”

“My belief is in my own strength, not in lip service to a god who has failed to teach his followers the importance of duty.”

Canon Grenval and a fully armoured figure stopped in front of their cages. Grenval glared at Michael, but the armoured figure stood there, surveying the captives. The voice that emerged from the armour vibrated slightly. It had a deep tone which sounded almost inhuman. "I will be taking them, priest. If you will open their cages."

"I will not!"

"Very well." An armoured arm shot out, hitting Grenval in the face and breaking his nose. He fell to the floor, crying in pain as blood streamed onto his robes. Michael didn't move from the floor, watching the Ru Guard with interest, but Jackson and Msizi shuffled back.

"Do not be afraid," said the Ru Guard as he removed his helmet. Only, he wasn't a man. Sheet straight brown hair fell over her armour, revealing the goddess from the tomb in the Drakensberg. But her face was neither serene nor godlike, instead boasting a curious frown, almost like remorse, at her actions.

Jackson and Msizi gasped, but Michael could only stare with an odd delight.

The goddess raised her right arm in a sudden arc and the cells melted away before them, leaving no sign of their existence.

Jackson and Msizi froze, not sure whether to run.

She ignored them, however, reaching out an armoured arm to Michael. He took her hand in rapt amazement and felt energy pulse through him, revitalising his body. She pulled him up, but as soon as he let go of her, his legs began to fail.

"It is the armour," she said.

Looking closely he saw that it was inscribed with runes.

"Hold onto me as we leave. You will be fine beyond this place." She finally beckoned to the other two to move ahead of her towards the exit. As they ran ahead, she stooped and swept her hand over Grenval's nose, stopping the bleeding.

Grenval looked up at her in bewilderment. "Who are you?"

"A visitor. I will be leaving now."

"Oh. I hope you enjoyed your stay."

"I did, thank you." She stood up and pulled Michael after her. He tried to comprehend what had just happened, but try as he might, it was a mystery that would have to await explanation. They ran up some stairs into a side corridor which exited into the large

worship room where he had almost been exorcised. He saw Jackson and Msizi waiting for them by the large doors when Sergi started to move.

He expanded, covering Michael's right foot, causing him to trip. Michael's arm slipped from the goddess' hand as Sergi gained control of his entire leg. He was still expanding over the right side of Michael's body, taking over his arm then finally the right side of his face and into his head. Michael felt as if his mind were being shuffled and sorted, and still Sergi delved deeper until he was somewhere beneath Michael's consciousness. Sergi finally stopped, finding what he needed, and resurfaced. Michael felt as though something were draining away from him as Sergi concentrated on control of his hand and foot, pulling him across the room to the altar. Looking down, he saw that his right hand was facing palm up. The oil parted, forming an airt within; white against a dark background. A rune formed in the top-most segment, one unfamiliar to Michael. It flared against his skin as Sergi placed his palm on top of the altar. Lastly, he took control of Michael's mouth, and shouted with venom, "Tiwaz!"

The altar caught alight, the unnatural fire fuelled by Sergi's anger. The stone seemed to feed it as the flames spread up the walls and along the floor, charring the worship mats. The armoured hand grabbed hold of Michael's left side, but Sergi seemed determined to remain, to fuel the fire and cleanse his rage.

"Sergi!" Michael finally managed as his friend released his mouth. "Do you really want to die here? I'll make this better, I swear. It doesn't have to end this way."

There was a moment when Michael thought he might burn to death, but Sergi finally released him, the oil curling up into a pinprick on his hand. Michael started running. Fire licked at his feet as they burst out of the church. Jackson and Msizi were somewhere ahead of them, but he couldn't quite see in the darkness. They finally caught up to the two and ran out of the village as people looked out of their small homes, some staring and some screaming at the sight of the church in flames. Michael's thoughts drifted to Grenval and the other acolytes caught in the flames, but he quickly put that aside. He couldn't help but feel that they deserved their fate.

Chapter 14 *Grasswalkers*

Msizi was the first to falter. Michael wrenched his hand from the armoured goddess, going back to help his friend. Jackson stopped as well, bent over, his dark skin almost invisible in the night.

They were somewhere south of the village, surrounded by a sparse grove of trees which, nonetheless, only allowed a small sliver of moonlight to pass through.

“We have to keep moving,” said the goddess. “They will send out a search party and kill us where we stand.”

Jackson raised his head at this and looked ready to move again. But Michael shook his head. “I realise the danger, but we’re all far too tired. I say we wait until morning. Surely they won’t find us here?”

The goddess looked around. “You may be right. We have far to travel, but it is best done in the daylight when we are all rested.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” asked Jackson. “I don’t want to be knifed to death while I’m sleeping. How did that fire start anyway?”

“Does it matter?” said Michael.

“I –”

“I can keep watch,” said the goddess, cutting off the chatter. “This armour grants me a small amount of strength. I will use it now, though it will be useless in the morning.”

“Do it then,” said Michael. “It won’t be very comfortable on the ground, but we all need some sleep.”

Michael led Msizi to a more sheltered spot against a tree. He looked at Michael with thanks and closed his eyes.

Jackson dropped down against a trunk close by, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Mikey, one of these days you’re going to have to explain to me what just happened. But first I need a little shuteye. Oh, and give black beauty over there my thanks.”

Michael frowned, said he would, and moved over to where she was seated, gazing back the way they had come. He sat down next to her, feeling oddly rejuvenated now that he was outside the church.

“Michael, I can see that you have many questions,” she began, “but answer me this first.”

He looked at her, swimming in her features, not wishing to mar the silence, yet unwilling to disappoint her by not speaking. "Yes?"

"What do you see when you look at me?"

Michael tried hard to put her image into words. "I don't think I know of any descriptions that would do you justice. Beauty, splendour, brilliance. These words mean nothing in comparison."

"And would you save me as I have saved you?"

"I would," he said without hesitation.

"That is good, but I would have you know that this form is not one I would choose for myself. It was a necessity, to make you understand what you fight for. For this beauty is within everything you see." She grasped some soil and let it fall through her hands. "Do you understand?"

"And Thaenes? Do you represent them as well?"

"Thaenes is a village which has lived in fear for many years. One cannot always judge a book by its cover, and I ask that you do not judge them harshly."

Michael didn't say anything.

"Would you see me as I wish to be?"

Michael nodded, uncertain of what else to say.

She held her palm over her head, bringing it down over her head. The face that was left behind was not of the same beauty it was before. Michael knew the truth of this in the dark, and felt regret at what was lost.

"Do not be disappointed. I was never meant for such perfection."

Michael lay down, staring up at the tree tops and trying to hold down his disappointment. It had felt like a veil had been lifted from his eyes and he could think once more, but he couldn't fight the bitterness which now marred his face. "How can you do that, change yourself?"

"I am not of this world, yet inextricably linked to it through a power far greater than the runes you have come to know."

"Can't you change back?"

"I can, but you would no longer feel loss. It is the driving force necessary for you to succeed, so I dare not accede to your wish."

Michael felt anger boiling up within him, but managed to suppress it, leaving him feeling tired and empty. He said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"I have not been permitted to share all of my knowledge, but I will tell you what I can. You are now within the world of Caiy'n, a place of beauty, but also of loss and hate and all things men despise yet use as tools of power. I apologise for not arriving to meet you, but you did not arrive at the beginning, as I expected."

"There was a slight delay," said Michael. "We were attacked between worlds and fell into the book at different points."

"Most curious. Where is this one who attacked you?"

"He fell as well, but further back. I'm not sure where."

"Then let us hope he is dead and will plague you no longer. Now, what would you like to know?"

Hundreds of questions flittered across Michael's mind, and he picked them at random.

"How is this world possible? How can it exist?"

"Every world has the potential for existence. I know not why or how this one came to be, but its existence has been affirmed and cannot be undone. Perhaps such questions regarding the origins of this world are not meant for me, but the Creator himself."

"Creator? You mean the Enlightenment and all that stuff Grenval was spouting?"

She looked down at him, and he could swear he saw a small smile. "No, not quite."

Michael looked away. "I'm sure I'll find out."

"You may not like the answer."

"Any answer is better than none."

"Spoken like a young idealist."

"I'm not sure that description fits me." He rolled his eyes at the idea.

"And yet you believe so easily, unlike your other companion over there."

"Jackson? I've barely had time to get to know him, but I'd say he believes wholeheartedly in this world, despite the melodrama. Besides, he's a reporter. His life revolves around stories. Now he's part of one."

"Such a firm opinion of one you profess not to know."

"I suppose. It doesn't matter, anyway. Tell me more about this world."

"This world is much the same as any other, I imagine. The only difference is in

perspective. But like all worlds it has many stories and events. You, fortunately, or unfortunately as you might look at it, are tied to the one written in finite detail; the most important story, some might say.”

“The one concerning Lialh.”

“True, yet it also concerns me.”

“How so? I mean, who are you exactly? What are you?”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “I am no goddess. As for names, I have not chosen one for myself. But if you insist, you may call me Avatar.”

“Avatar? Surely you must have something better than that? You don’t have to be so formal. Names are not titles, after all.”

Avatar frowned. “But it is not title. It is what I am.”

“But you don’t understand,” said Michael gently. “A name is not what you are, it’s who you are.”

“These concepts are new to me, Michael. I am not certain who I am.”

“Then until you find out, how about we just call you Dominique.”

“Such an odd name, and not of this world.”

“It was my mother’s name.”

“You think of me as your mother?”

“No, no, don’t think that. There’s just something about you that reminds me of her.”

“Very well. I accept that name and will regard it highly. And now you must rest, Michael. We have a long way to go, and there is something you must see.”

“But you still haven’t told me anything.”

“There is time enough for that in the morning, and your companions deserve to hear what I must say.”

Michael nodded reluctantly, leaving Dominique to her post while he found a comfortable spot. His stomach growled suddenly and he wondered whether they would find food, and soon.

Michael's nose was the first sense to awaken. Something delicious was tantalising him and it was a moment before he realised that his eyes were open. Sun shone through the trees, casting a green glow over everything. He couldn't help but think of complete contentment. But then his stomach groaned and he sat up.

Jackson and Msizi called him over to the makeshift fire over which a number of branches were hung. The branches were dripping fat into the fire and as Michael moved closer, he saw meat suspended from them. Dominique nodded to him as he approached.

"Breakfast," said Msizi with a smile on his face.

"I see saving us from certain death isn't the only thing you're good for," said Michael good-naturedly as he sat down, absorbing the warmth of the fire.

"I thought you might all be hungry," replied Dominique. "Once I was certain we weren't being chased, I managed to flush out a hare."

"How did you –" Michael saw a bow leaning against a far off tree. Frowning, he looked back at Dominique. "Where's your armour?"

She pointed at the bow. "It was starting to get heavy, so I changed it."

"And the clothes you have now?"

"I didn't use all of the armour for the bow. So I made each of us some clothes to wear."

"Aren't they fantastic, Michael?" asked Msizi, fingering his woollen tunic and deerskin boots. "Dominique showed us a small spring where we could bath and change."

"She did, did she? Just how long have I been asleep?"

"For ages," he replied. "We were going to wake you, but Dominique said you needed your rest. That you had to be at full strength."

"Well, I feel like I could run for *ages*. But first I'd love to get out of this robe. Too many bad memories."

Jackson pointed into the trees. "The spring's over there. You can get changed and have a wash."

"Thanks. I'll be right back." He grabbed his share of the clothes and moved off towards the stream. He stripped off the robe and walked into the water, flinching as the cold hit him. Dunking his head quickly, he tried to wash off the dirt of Thaenes. He noticed that a number of bruises had formed, and was careful to avoid touching them. He knew where Sergi was hiding as he could feel him at the back of his neck. Or rather, Michael felt a

numbness that could only be him. "Sergi," he tried, drying himself with the robe and putting on his new clothes. "Sergi, we need to talk. I'm not sure if you can hear me, though I think you can, but you have to know that things will get better. Right now, we just have to make the best of it."

The oil slowly slid around Michael's neck, taking control of his mouth. "You don't know, Michael. You don't know what it's like, to have your dream stripped away like that."

Michael wanted to answer but Sergi refused to let him have his mouth back.

"I killed them all, didn't I?"

Michael nodded.

"They deserved it, the lot of them." He slid to the side, giving Michael access to his mouth.

"What do you want me to tell you, Sergi? That what you did was right, or that it was wrong? You know better than I do. I, for one, know they deserved some sort of punishment, but who's to say that burning to death was justice?"

Sergi twitched. "They hurt you, Michael," he began, sliding back. "And they would have hurt me too. I was protecting us."

"Then leave it at that."

Sergi remained silent and Michael walked back to the fire. Msizi offered him a stick of hare and he ate ferociously, hunger taking over. He had a second piece then sat back, looking over at Dominique. "So what's the plan?"

"We need to catch up to the plot."

"What?" said Jackson.

"Lialh is what I think she means," said Michael.

"Yes. He is the focus."

"What does Lialh have to do with this?" asked Jackson. "He's only a kid."

"He's older than I am, uncle," said Msizi.

"You shouldn't be here either."

"When did you start to care?"

"Hey, nephew, don't take that tone with me. Especially not after all I've been through."

“Enough, you two. Dominique,” said Michael, turning back to her, “Lialh is supposed to be the hero. When I dreamt of him fighting, he was older than these two describe. I don’t see the point of reaching him before he grows up.”

“You must understand, Michael, that your arrival has created a ripple effect. In taking the detour to imprison your friends, Ba-Roc, and hence Lialh, was forced outside of the plot. I fear this had caused him to miss a vital portion of the journey.”

“Hold on,” said Jackson. “I just have to ask. Why would we be doing this again?”

“Michael’s destiny – all of your destinies – are connected. There is no choice.”

“No choice! You say it like you can tell us what to do. Look, you may be the sexiest girl alive, but you don’t have that right.”

“Have I not earned it by saving your life?”

“No, you haven’t.” Jackson sat back, his face drawn in to a sulk.

“Whatever else happens, I’m going,” said Michael, frowning at Jackson’s description of Dominique. “Question is, which way do we need to go?”

“Your friend there can help us with that,” she said.

“Sergi?”

“Not that parasite again.”

“Shut up, uncle. All Sergi’s tried to do is help us. It’s not fair what happened to him.”

“You’re wrong.” The oil had moved up Michael’s torso to his mouth. “I deserve all of it. Last night proved that I can’t be trusted with my own body. I... might do more terrible things, who knows. What I do know is that you’re safer with Michael here to control me.”

“*Hardly*,” thought Michael. “*You seem to be able to take over at will.*”

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“About what? We never said anything,” said Jackson.

“Never mind,” said Sergi.

“*Sergi, you heard that?*”

“*Yes. And Dominique’s right. The transition changed me into this... thing. And I think I know why.*”

"Because you can access my subconscious knowledge," said Michael as the events of last night resurfaced. It was strange the way that memory had suddenly come to the fore, and Michael wondered if it had even been his thought at all.

Sergi moved over, finally allowing Michael space to speak. "Sergi can unlock the runes in my mind. We can use them to find Lialh."

"But how?" asked Jackson. "You just happen to know what to do?"

"Well, unless you call what happened back in the tomb blind luck, then yes."

"More unluck if you ask me."

"Do you know which one to use?" asked Msizi excitedly.

"I think so, and we don't even need Sergi for this. Lialh used it in one of my dreams to follow these dark creatures."

"Dark creatures?" said Jackson. "What's next? An evil overlord bent on our extermination?"

Dominique smiled. "Your foreknowledge is astounding, Jackson. But I would not concern myself with that. You are not the first to cause a ripple, but you were necessary to counteract the last."

"More riddles," said Jackson.

"The answers will come in time. As to your suggestion, Michael, it is a good one, but not the one we seek at the moment. We must catch up with Lialh, yes, but first we must locate the plot which was bypassed. In that I can be of some aid. It will require three airts and three runes."

"Do you know which three?" asked Michael.

"The one of which you spoke is but the first. Sergi, I believe, can find the other two."

Sergi slithered up Michael's face to his head, and started digging. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling, but Michael hoped it wouldn't happen too often. "I think I have them," said Sergi. He moved back to Michael's open palm, forming three small airts. In the top left one, Ansuz appeared, the rune of memory. In the right, Dagaz, a rune linked to the spirit of Caiy'n, and at the bottom, Othala.

"How do I get them to work?" asked Michael. "Do I speak all three?"

"No. Just the one tied to you."

He held out his palm face up, not quite knowing what else to do, and spoke, loud and clear. "Othala!"

Sergi flared a deep blue, and Michael watched as a same-coloured wind lifted from his palm, moving off further south. "Can any of you see that?" he asked.

Jackson and Msizi shook their heads and Dominique just smiled.

"What do you see?" asked Msizi.

"A blue wind. I think we need to follow it."

"And so we shall," said Dominique, standing. She swung her arm over the fire and it disappeared, leaving no sign that they had been there.

"You still need to tell us how you do that," said Michael.

"I can effect necessary change. That is all you need to know."

"Fine. So I guess we start walking."

"For now," she said with an infuriating smile.

The next day found them travelling through a rather dense forest when a thunderstorm broke out. They huddled under a large tree whose tight-knit leaves acted as an efficient canopy against the rain. Michael let go of the blue-wind spell and heard Sergi sigh with some relief. He was surprised that his friend was the one affected by the use of runes. It felt more like a punishment than anything else, which was the last thing he wanted to inflict on Sergi.

"So tell us something about this world, Dominique," said Jackson, breaking Michael out of his reverie. "I mean, if we're going to be saving it and all, you'd think we might need to know what we're saving."

"As cavalier as you might sound, Jackson, I agree with your sentiment. You must learn of this world and why it is worth your combined efforts." Dominique paused, considering.

"I think there is a tale you might enjoy. It takes place far back in time, but still makes its effects known to this day. It is called the Legend of the God-Kings of Caiy'n."

Msizi perked up. "God-Kings? That sounds exciting."

"I thought there was only one god, this Creator of yours," said Michael.

“There is, but you must let me finish. They were not true gods as you would think of them, but so great was their power that they allowed the belief in their divinity to spread. But let me start at the beginning. Caiy’n is surrounded on all sides by oceans. The continent is ruled over by three separate nations: Carnl, Terrl, and Paxl. The God-Kings were their earliest rulers, also counting three in number.”

“What were their names?” asked Msizi.

“Heimdall, Freyja, and Tyr.”

Michael sat up, disbelief written across his face. Guilt flared inside as he recalled the grey man gloating over the destruction of the Order of Tyr.

“Just one more link in the chain,” said Sergi. *“I know how you feel, Michael. Despite myself, I think I’m going to miss that old man.”*

Michael was stone-faced as Dominique continued.

“Each king ruled their respective nations justly and their people loved them in turn. But there came a day when the three God-Kings became dissatisfied. They discussed their unease with one another and decided that what they lacked was guidance. Fearing that the Creator had abandoned them, they sought to beseech his advice on how they should proceed in their rule of Caiy’n. Using their vast rune powers, they shaped the continent itself into a powerful spell. Each nation served as a single airt. Deep lines were carved into the earth and enormous runes were inscribed within each segment. Rivers were rerouted and mountains levelled in their desire to question the Creator. Standing, each within the centre of their airts, they invoked their powers, opening a conduit to the Creator. But all was not thought out in their determination. The power they unleashed was beyond their control and the conduit became a weapon.”

“What happened?” asked Msizi. “Did they destroy the Creator?”

“No, for not even their vaunted powers could do such a thing, but they did manage to shatter his ethereal armour, wounding him greatly. From that wound poured all that the Creator had hoped to spare this world. Corruption, hate, greed and every negative thought which had been locked away was now free to enter Caiy’n, coalescing in a dark force which threatened to bring this world to heel.”

“And did it?”

“That is a story best left for another. As for the God-Kings, the Creator punished them dearly. He took each of their bodies and confined them within three pristine gems. As for the nations themselves, stewards were appointed to watch over the people until the return of the kings. These stewards wear the gems as a sign of their position, passing it down to their successors. It is said that the God-Kings still to this day speak to their stewards through the gems and guide their hand in how to best rule.”

“Fascinating,” said Jackson. “I hope you enjoyed that story, Msizi. I’m sure you won’t hear one finer.”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic, Uncle. I really enjoyed it.”

“Remember this story, Jackson, and the lessons within. For the consequences can be felt to this day.”

“And what would those be?”

“The war that you have inadvertently become a part of is fought between two factions created from the aftermath. The Enlightenment was founded as a spiritual body whose duty it is to resist the dark forces unleashed from the Creator. And the Mahj, whose duty it is to control the use of runes so that they can never again be used in such a destructive manner.”

Jackson fell silent as Dominique held out her hand. “The rain has stopped and we must continue on.”

Michael stood with the rest of them, thinking about her story and wondering if he could also be capable of such destruction.

Just as Sergi said that he couldn’t maintain the blue wind spell for much longer, they stepped out of the forest and gazed out at a sweeping savannah. Low trees and bushes dotted the landscape while grasses shaded brown and yellow swept along the wind with a low rustle.

Msizi was the first to run through the grass, laughing for no reason other than pure enjoyment.

Jackson shook his head at the young man, but couldn't stop smiling. "My grandmother would tell me stories of such places," he said. "I could never pluck up the courage to tell her that I didn't believe her. I'm glad I didn't."

"We do not have far to travel," said Dominique. "Those trees near the horizon grow around an oasis. I think we will be in fine company tonight."

The first thing they caught sight of were the herd boys. They snapped whips in the air whenever one of their cows – Michael thought they were cows but couldn't be sure – strayed too far. Two of the herd boys stayed behind while a third ran towards the oasis, shouting.

Jackson shook his head when he saw them. "I can't believe they're white. Who wrote this book anyway?"

Two men came to greet them, but slowed when they saw Jackson and Msizi. Dominique strode forward, yelling at them to show respect for all guests. Strangely enough, they lowered their heads as though cowed, and moved forward, looking slightly more friendly but still wary.

It turned out that this tribe of nomads, the Grasswalkers, were on their way back to their winter settlements when they were forced to take refuge. Apparently a large army had passed through two days back, relieving them of most of their cattle and supplies, so they were forced to make a detour to this oasis.

The two men were the sons of the tribe's chieftain, who, with the rest of the Grasswalkers, had left for winter settlements the day before while his sons and a few other men and women made certain the surviving animals were well-watered and fed before following.

They were led into the midst of what seemed a bustling community, despite the fact that there were only a handful of people there; mostly women. Young girls were playing in the shallows of the oasis while two of these women – one naked above the waist, making Msizi grin foolishly – were weaving the strong, thick grass of the savannah into a basket.

"You see the combs in their hair?" said Jackson. "My grandmother told me that her mother used to wear them like that as well."

"I'm surprised you managed to look above the neck," said Sergi, taking momentary control of Michael's mouth. "You don't strike me as the sentimental type."

"I'm appreciating history, parasite. Just because you don't have a heritage doesn't mean you have to disparage mine."

Hearing voices, the rest of the nomads jumped to attention. One young man ran to fetch a spear, but the brothers stopped him.

"They are tokoloshe," shouted the young man. "Why do you bring them here? To take more of our life's blood?"

"The sangoma has vouched for them," explained one of the brothers. "They are not evil spirits. I think the sun has burned them."

Sergi couldn't help but snigger at the explanation while Jackson scowled.

Michael, however, heard only one word: sangoma. He turned to Dominique. "I think you'd better explain yourself."

"Michael, you must learn to trust."

"You aren't my mentor, Dominique. Neither are you some old sage spouting wisdom."

"Then what am I?"

"I'm not sure. But, I just know that some things have one explanation."

"That is a rather narrow manner of viewing the world, Michael."

Michael laughed. "Which world? This one, where everything's black and white, or the other one, where everything's a different shade of grey?"

Dominique shook her head and turned towards the brothers. "It is late in the day and we would ask your hospitality for the night."

They nodded, relieved at the simplicity of the request, and set to building up a large fire. The herd boys came in for the night, hoisting some meat which had just been slaughtered. The women, now certain that Jackson and Msizi weren't dark spirits, came to greet them, taking them over to some clay pots holding beer and cow's milk. Msizi didn't know what to do with himself when a girl wearing only a grass skirt gripped his hand, but Jackson just clapped him on the back and told him to enjoy himself.

Michael called over to Jackson before he went off. "I'm surprised that you're so willing to go with them, after what happened at the other village."

"There's something you need to understand about Zulu culture, Michael. The people are, for the most part, hospitable. That's been lost on Earth, and God knows I've helped it along, but whoever wrote this book we're in has managed to unearth a lost heritage; a simpler life. Even if he is colour blind. Besides, what would you have done if someone popped out of the air and killed your prize pig? I think we'll be alright."

Michael nodded and went to sit by the fire, staring into the flames.

Soon the dancing and the drumming began and he couldn't help but feel a primeval upliftment. Dominique had shown him the tangible beauty of the world, but he hadn't been completely convinced, especially after the events in the church. Looking at the joy around him, he saw the spirit of the world, and knew that it was truly something worth saving.

"Sergi," whispered Michael as he sat up. Everyone else was still asleep around him "Do you have enough strength to try the spell once more? I've got this strange feeling that we need to try it now."

"I'm not sure. It feels like I've been hit over the head. With the amount of beer you had I'm surprised you don't feel it."

"I feel fine."

"Why am I always the one feeling the brunt of your excesses?" Sergi slithered down Michael's arm, forming the airts on his palm.

Michael spoke Othala once more, a bit quieter this time. The blue wind appeared, but instead of heading south, it made its way back into the village. Curious, Michael watched as it travelled only a short way. It hovered a little, as if uncertain, before losing itself to gravity. Like a fine blue mist it dropped, covering one of many chickens scratching at the ground in the early dawn.

Michael was surprised and frowned. "It's never done that before."

"I think you did something wrong, Michael," said Sergi.

“I –”

The chicken jerked its head up in an odd imitation of someone listening to something far off. It darted its beak once more and finally moved away from its fellow poultry. Michael followed it a short way down a small hillock to a tree which had been stunted in its growth. It looked more like a caricature of a tree, thought Michael. The base of the trunk was surrounded by small, smooth white stones. He wondered if they were the only thing holding the tree up.

The chicken stepped almost delicately between the stones until it reached the tree. It pecked at it for a moment, stopped, stiffened and promptly fell over.

“It is called the isisivane,” said one of the brothers, coming up behind him. Michael jumped in fright and the brother grabbed his arm to steady him. “Do not be afraid,” he said. “You are Inyanga?”

“Inyanga? No.”

“I saw you perform magic. True, it is unlike anything I have been trained in, but it is there.”

“You’re an Inyanga?”

“I have the talent, yes. My brother will be chief one day and I will be his advisor.”

Michael looked back over at the dead chicken. “What do the stones mean?”

The Inyanga looked over at the tree. “Each stone has been placed there by one of our tribe members to honour the spirit of a great warrior. He died here, in what was once a wasteland. But the grass grew and wildlife is now in abundance, and so we honour him around this lone tree. Come and watch.” They walked over to the stones. The Inyanga moved his left foot over a loose one, dug underneath and hoisted it up into his right hand. Michael had to marvel at such skill.

The Inyanga spat on the stone and threw it on the pile. “This is how we honour a great warrior.” He pointed to the chicken. “But you have offered a blood sacrifice. You must complete the ritual.”

“But... the whole chicken thing. It wasn’t done on purpose.”

“You must not question where your magic leads you. It always knows best.”

Michael nodded, very much aware that the runes had their own plan for him. “What do I do?”

“Touch the tree.”

“That’s all?”

“We are not a complicated people.”

“Alright.” Michael walked over to the tree, stepping over the stones. Leaning over, he placed his palm on the trunk. Nothing happened. He was about to step back when he heard Sergi in his mind.

“Michael! Something’s happening. I’m being pulled....”

Sergi stretched out over Michael’s arm like rubber. He could feel his friend fighting against whatever it was trying to control him. Sergi finally gave in and slid down to Michael’s hand, forming an unbidden airt and rune on his palm.

“*Jera!*” shouted Sergi. *“Say it, Michael, please! Make it stop.”*

“Damn it.” Michael had no choice. “Jera!”

The tree shattered as though it were made of stone, flinging shards all around.

Standing to attention within the spirit shrine, blade facedown, was an ancient, pitted sword.

“Mikael,” said Dominique, coming up behind him. “You have recovered the sword of Mikael.”

Chapter 15 *War*

Jackson hefted the onyx-hilted sword, peering underneath the blade. "Hmph, it doesn't look that special."

"Uncle, how can you say that? I mean, the chicken led Michael right to it."

"Well sorry, but I'm not sure I trust that chicken. Something off about it if you ask me."

"It is dead," said the Inyanga.

Jackson handed the blade back to Michael, shaking his head. "That's not... never mind. So what now? You going to use your Chicken Blade to kill the bad guys? Who would that be, exactly?"

"I'm not exactly an authority here, either," replied Michael. "And please don't call it the Chicken Blade. Where's your sense of romance?"

"Ba-Roc took it when he peeled back my mind."

Michael glanced down, feeling uncomfortable.

Msizi glanced at his uncle but also kept silence.

"Oh alright, I'm sorry. I won't bring up my torture again if it makes you feel any better."

Jackson stomped off back to the oasis.

Msizi made to go after him but Michael help up his hand. "Let him go. I think he just needs some time."

"I am afraid time is a luxury none of us has," said Dominique, who had remained silent up until now. "The plot has raced ahead of us and we must catch up if we are to succeed."

"We have the sword," said Michael. "But how does that help us?"

"Ripples," she replied. "The sword of Mikael was meant for Lialh, and yet you now hold it. You are already changing the world with your very presence. And we must not forget Msizi and Jackson." Msizi's face flushed a deep brown.

"Hold on," said Michael. "You say it's called the sword of Mikael. I had a dream in which Lialh used it, but he just called it Mikael."

"A shortening, perhaps. Mikael was a hero of the nomadic tribes. He fought a great evil hundreds of years ago and died for his efforts."

"I see."

"As to our journey, there is something we will need if we are to succeed. It is some ways

east of here.”

“What is it now?” said Jackson angrily, trudging back to them, a toddler clinging to his knee. “Another Chicken Blade? Maybe one for each of us?” He paused. “Can somebody do something about this?”

The Inyanga bent over picked up the child. “We must appreciate our children, for one day they may no longer be among us.”

“None of us has children,” said Jackson.

Msizi looked at the ground. “I wonder if mom’s worried.”

Jackson gave him a mysterious look. “Don’t worry about her, Msizi. The doctors will take care of her. Even if they let her see my report, I doubt she understood much.”

Msizi nodded.

“All parents feel the loss of a child,” spoke the Inyanga. “Here, now, we feel it most keenly.”

“What do you mean?” asked Michael.

“It is something we have not spoken of, but cattle was not the only precious item taken from us by the marauding army. The soldiers took some of our young men as well; to make them into soldiers fit to defend our home, we were told. But we believe home is family and they have been taken from their families.”

“But, the dances and celebrations last night?” said Michael, surprised.

“We do not show out pain to strangers. We did not wish to burden you. But, now, I see that you understand struggle, and so I have told you of our shame.”

“I just... can’t believe people can do such things.”

“Can’t you, Michael?” asked Jackson. “What do you call the things she’s done to us?”

“What are you talking about?”

Suddenly he grabbed the hilt from Michael, holding it up to the light. “I’m talking about all the trouble Dominique’s gone through to send us on a quest we know nothing about.”

He stepped towards her and Dominique moved away. “Now we have to be careful we don’t find a knife stuck in our backs.”

“You’d rather be stuck in a cell?” said Michael.

“What good have any of you done for us outside of a cell? I’m tired of it. Here, you take the sword and be the hero.” He thrust it towards Dominique.

“No, I must not –”

Jackson pressed the blade into her raised hands, cutting her deep.

She disappeared, and the sword fell to the ground.

Both Michael and Msizi jumped up to protect her from Jackson’s rage, but stopped short.

Jackson stepped back, surprised, and sat down. “I...”

“What did you do?” cried Msizi.

“I don’t know.”

Michael bent to pick up the sword, waving his hands out in front of him in case she had mysteriously become invisible. But she had gone. Standing, Michael gripped the sword hard until his knuckles turned white. “We need to go,” he said, though it came out faintly.

“Whatever we need to do, wherever we need to be, it’s to the east.”

“But...,” Msizi stammered.

“I don’t know what happened, but we can’t wait and find out.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jackson.

Michael stared at him before looking away. “We’ve all been through a lot. What we don’t need to do is take it out on each other.” He walked back to the oasis and gathered his things. He asked for a strong piece of cord from one of the women, which he used to tie the sword to his back.

Msizi picked up the bow which Dominique had given him and followed.

Jackson watched them go before standing up and doing likewise. They waved to the Grasswalkers and shook hands with the brothers, who offered them food and water for the rest of their journey.

They spent the rest of the day walking. Michael found the going that much easier now that his muscles had become attuned to long stretches of use. He was amazed that Msizi could match their pace, before Msizi told him that he had been a practicing judo student since he was small. He knew a number of different breathing exercises and had built up a good stamina over the years. Jackson himself, while being of medium build, eventually professed to a fondness for running, and even had a few medals to prove it.

That night Michael provided the fire and they ate a sparse meal of hard bread, some cheese and oddly preserved roots in relative silence.

The next day they crossed out of the savannah into a region with a lot more rolling hills and valleys. Nestled in one of these valleys, surrounded by farms and shepherds grazing their flocks on the hillsides, was a small village. It's similarity to Thaenes gave them pause, but Michael was undeterred. They had left the Grasswalkers in such a rush that they hadn't thought to borrow some tents and bedrolls, and Michael was determined to buy something comfortable to sleep in. The problem, and something which hadn't really concerned them until now, was where to get money from.

Jackson and Msizi were familiar with the old method of using coinage from their travelling back on Earth but had no ideas how to come by any besides theft.

They sat on a hill overlooking the village when Sergi finally piped up. He reminded Michael about the wall illusion back in Francistown and how they could do something similar with some flat stones. Dominique had told them how each nation's coinage was embossed with the face of their respective God-King Sergi, but Sergi, in a rather calm and calculated manner, pointed out that gold and silver were sure to be just as valuable in their raw form.

They used two airts this time, Wunjo for illusion and Jera for earth. After a few unsuccessful attempts where they turned the stones into differing degrees of dirt, they finally created something which gave off a dull silvery shine.

The merchant they approached accepted two bits of 'silver' quite greedily in exchange for three bedrolls and two tents. Leaving the village just as quickly, Msizi swore that he could hear the merchant cursing their names on the wind when the illusion failed.

The next two days went by slowly. They ate their food sparingly, but were thankful that they could at least have a good night's rest.

On the third day they began to see rudimentary sign posts. They indicated that they were moving towards the eastern edge of the nation of Carnl.

Michael stopped. A deep rumbling reached his ears but twice now he had thought it might be an oncoming storm. That thought quickly disappeared when he heard shouting in the distance. They were still within a deep valley, so they couldn't make out the very much. Finally cresting the eastern ridge, they stopped, throwing themselves to the

ground.

The scene in the valley before Michael seemed to come straight from his imagination. He had been home-schooled and his mother had been his history teacher. Much from the time of swords and cannons had been lost, but a few bright historians had had the forethought to preserve a few texts. They were few and far between and Michael had been forced to fill in the blanks, but the scene before him seemed to come directly from that lost part of his youth.

Two armies were on the verge of clashing.

“Sergi, I need to get closer,” said Michael with barely a whisper.

“*Hold on.*” There was the familiar shuffling of his mind before Sergi slid down to his hand, creating a single airt and once again an unfamiliar rune. He quickly told Michael the name. “*Put your hand to your face.*”

Michael did so, calling out the rune. “Raidho.” There was a slight pressure behind his eyes but nothing else happened. He stared down at the valley, concentrating on the forces to his right when his vision jumped ahead of him. Surprised, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them again, he studied the army in front of him.

He saw that it was spread out rather thinly. Soldiers glinting with simple metal breastplates waited nervously. Some held swords and others spears, but they all looked completely out of their depth. There was something familiar about the way they held themselves, when he realised the truth. These were the nomad sons taken for shock troops. Gritting his teeth, he lifted his gaze up. Archers were situated higher up the valley while horsemen waited at the top of the ridge, swords drawn and at the ready.

To his left came the source of the rumbling.

This army had no archers. Instead, they had foot soldiers hefting pikes while horsemen surrounded them like a giant horseshoe protecting its hoof. The rumbling was coming from the foot soldiers, who were shouting out taunts in an attempt to crumble the other army’s resolve. Michael concentrated on the nomad foot soldiers’ faces. They were fidgeting and he could see fear in their faces. This was not the type of battle they were used to.

Michael allowed his vision to wander back up to the horsemen on the ridge on the right.

One of them was carrying a banner showing a raven emerging from a lone tree, but

Michael didn't recognise it as anything he would know. He moved his vision left and his heart leapt to his throat. Their banner he recognised intimately. It was the sign from the church back in Thaenes.

It was an army of the Enlightenment.

All of a sudden the chanting stopped and Michael felt the hairs on his neck rise. The horsemen on the outer edges of the horseshoe started to move, spreading further out towards the other army; the Mahj army, he thought.

He didn't understand why the Stewards would allow themselves to be used so, but according to Dominique, the nations of Paxl and Carnl were to be the fodder of this war while the southern nation of Terrl remained neutral despite overtures from both sides. Michael himself wasn't inclined to support the Enlightenment, but after witnessing the cruel use of the nomads as shock troops he realised that mindless killing could never be justified. That was, however, until Msizi spoke up.

"Uncle, do you recognise that?" His voice was tempered with both fear and excitement. Michael knew how he felt. The adrenaline was pumping heavily through him.

"Recognise what? That we should be getting out of here," said Jackson.

"No! Look at the army on the left. It's using the bull horn formation."

"Bull horn? Am I supposed to know what you're talking about?"

"Bull horn?" asked Michael. "What is it?"

"It's the same battle formation created by Shaka when he was king of the Zulus. He used it to slaughter his enemies."

Michael swung his vision back to the Mahj army, fear coating his brow. A man on a black horse was attempting to rally them, but the nomad foot soldiers, already out of their depth, were falling back.

He looked left, higher this time, and saw three figures higher up on a ridge, each astride their own horse. One of them was decked out in intricate white armour with black swirls and seemed to be shouting out orders. Next to him sat a man in brilliant white robes with a miniature papal crown on his head. Both robe and crown were slashed with black and gold. But it was the man next to the priest that drew Michael's eye. He was clothed in a dark grey robe with a cowl pulled down over his head. Michael couldn't tell make out any facial features, but there was something very familiar about him.

Michael blinked. Another cowled figure suddenly stood next to the horse. The grey-robed man bent down to speak to him. The other man nodded and disappeared.

Michael rubbed his eyes, not sure if he could believe them, when Jackson's hand on his shoulder brought him back to action, just as the armies were about to clash. The threat of the bull horns seemed to have succeeded in routing the Mahj army before the fighting had even started.

"They're going to be annihilated," said Jackson. Michael knew the words were true, when something suddenly struck him. Canon Grenval had said it first and Dominique had verified it. This was a war of men. No magic, from either side, was to be involved. And yet the use of the cowled man's powers was clearly breaking such an agreement. This battle was a foregone conclusion, and Michael couldn't let that happen. He saw no way to stop the fighting completely, but he knew he had to at least even the odds. The noise of hooves and clanging weapons on armour seemed to make the ridge they were on tremble and Michael almost lost his nerve.

"We have to do something," he said, breathing deeply to calm himself. "We can't let them be slaughtered."

"Us?" said Jackson. "Now you've really gone and lost it."

"Not quite," he replied, unstrapping the sword of Mikael. He had an idea, but doubt threatened to stop him short. Even with the sword's help it might not be enough.

"Except you have more help, and a little more time, than Lialh did."

Sergi's voice reverberated in his mind. He knew what he had to do.

"Quickly," he said to the other two. "Both of you draw three circles in the dirt. Use sticks if you need to. Draw two at the top and one at the bottom."

Jackson and Msizi stared at him for a moment before going to work.

Michael drew his own airts in front of them, dividing them each into eight segments. He bent down, inscribing the rune Hagalaz onto each top segment, then into Jackson's and Msizi's. "I need you two to crouch on top of your bottom airt, with one hand in each of the top two." Michael crouched as well, doing the same. "Sergi, this might be tough, but do you think you can stretch between both my hands?"

"I can do you one better," and he split in two, each half forming an airt in Michael's hands. *"It's a lot easier once you've accepted your fate."*

Michael stood up, refusing to comment, and grasped the sword of Mikael in both hands. "Are you ready?" he asked. "I don't quite know what's going to happen, so be prepared for anything."

He lifted the sword into the air, waiting for the moment when the bull horns began to converge into a single unyielding wall of steel before he cried out with every inch of his power. "Hagalaz!"

Msizi felt his body lurch slightly, but he held on, allowing his body to become a conduit between Michael and the airts beneath his feet and hand.

Jackson felt the same pull, but it was different. He felt the power of the airts beneath him gather in his body, drawing on his strength, enhancing the power of the runes.

Michael felt Msizi's strength enter him, coalescing in his right hand. It was a stable thing, and Michael felt a connection firm between himself and the boy. He almost fell over, however, when he felt the surge from Jackson. He was barely able to contain it, and wondered momentarily at the implications.

He felt like he might explode at any moment when the power drained out of him into the sword.

Lightning erupted into the sky, filling it with a dark cloud which seemed to drain all the colour from the landscape. Pressure built in the air as the Enlightenment's army faltered. There was a single moment of silence as both armies quieted, before death fell from the sky.

The ground erupted, spraying horses and men alike with clods of dirt, splintered bones, seared flesh and shrapnel armour. Screams could be heard above the explosions, but these were soon cut short. The sword of Mikael burned brightly, a beacon across the battlefield, shredding the bull's horn to pieces.

Msizi faltered, and Michael fell forward. He heard the boy cry out and managed to swivel his body around, though he was far too exhausted to help.

A cowed figure crouched behind Msizi, his hand holding the hilt of a dagger which protruded from the boy's calf. He pulled back the hood, revealing a face as dark as Michael's two companions.

There was a shout from next to him, and Michael saw that Jackson hadn't fallen, but had turned to face the attacker, his hands glowing with energy.

“You!” cried Jackson.

The man turned to face him, surprise echoing across features, which Michael now recognised. He was one of the rebels; a True African.

Jackson grabbed the rebel’s arm, searing the flesh. The man screamed and disappeared, leaving behind a cauterized stump. Jackson threw it away in surprise and disgust, and moved to help Msizi.

“No!” shouted Michael. “Your hands!”

Jackson stopped, looking at Msizi and then back at Michael. “Help him then!”

Michael crawled closer, staring at the dagger, unsure if he should pull it out.

“What are you waiting for?” shouted Jackson.

“He might bleed to death if I take it out!” Michael looked at Msizi, who was gritting his teeth in pain. “Don’t move. I’ll try to get help.” He edged over to the lip of the hill, watching the chaos unfold below. The Mahj army was fighting back, overwhelming the now depleted army of the Enlightenment. He glanced left to see the priest and commander turning to flee. Michael’s far vision was gone, but he felt the cowed horseman looking at him.

Suddenly the man was a foot in front of Michael, lifting his cowl to reveal the face of the rebel leader, Londisizwe. He took hold of Michael’s arm, anger flowing from his eyes and they both disappeared.

Jackson stared in horror, their only link to their home world now gone. He glanced down at Msizi, quickly making a decision. He looked at his glowing hand, squeezed his eyes closed, then opened them and grabbed the hilt of the dagger. It turned to ash quicker than he could blink as the wound was quickly covered in hot blood. He ran his index finger over the gash, touching it delicately. As he cauterised it, Msizi screamed and passed out. Jackson sat down, holding his hands out in front of him. By the time horsemen from the Mahj army reached them, the glow had disappeared.

Chapter 16 The Embodiment

Michael sat up. He was able to make out only the faint outline of a bed before his body failed him and he was forced to lie down. He struggled to remember what had happened, but recalled only a prick behind his neck before the world turned upside down. Images of long corridors floated behind his eyes, but he couldn't tell if he had walked down them or not. Most irritating was the voice in his head. It kept trying to speak to him, but Michael couldn't quite hear the words. He was relieved when sleep came.

Michael was shaken roughly. Blinking against the sunlight, he was glad to be able to think once more. Whatever drug had been used on him had worn off. He hoped never to feel its effects again.

A balding man wearing white robes slashed with gold gave him a water bowl. Michael couldn't help but remember the first time a man in a robe had given him water. He wondered if the Inyanga still lived. Drinking greedily, he spat it out quickly.

"There is no poison," said the monk, his voice lilting slightly on the vowels. "But the drug makes you thirsty, so you must drink."

Michael said nothing, his thirst like a gaping hole in his stomach. He brought the bowl to his mouth, finishing the water.

"Good. You are to be received by the Embodiment himself. It is a great honour so you must be properly cleansed. I have drawn you a bath of water and left robes for your adornment." The command in the monk's voice could not be mistaken, though the thought of cleaning his body after so many days of walking was far too tempting for Michael not to obey. The monk turned, striding gracefully across the floor, stopping as he reached the door. "I would suggest that you not attempt to use your Ru abilities. This room and all others have been warded."

"Wait," said Michael. "Where am I?"

"The Tower of the Enlightenment," said the monk, pausing again. "The House of our Creator."

He was led through the tower, a gargantuan building dwarfed only by the Tower of the Mahj on Ru Island, the monk informed Michael with disdain. He noticed, as he walked through the long hallways leading ever upwards, glimmers on the pure white walls. Stopping for a moment to stare at one, he was immediately repulsed. Running his hand over the glimmer, he managed to see it more clearly as it flared. Just as Canon Grenval's figurine, the emblem of the Enlightenment, had been formed by twisting both Othala and its merkstave, this was a twisting of two runic symbols, though Michael couldn't tell which in the brief time it flared. The twisted runes didn't drain his strength, but succeeded in severing his link to Sergi. He was surprised to find a noticeable lack of the Enlightenment emblems which had weakened him, but now and again he would pass a window under which hung a banner. He immediately moved away as his legs began to falter.

It seemed to take almost half the day to reach the rooms at the top of the tower, though Michael knew it had been only an hour or so. He had passed many monks, some in classes, others praying, but all ignored him. He was just starting to wonder if Jackson had found some help for Msizi when they came to a large pair of double doors.

"You will fall to your knees as you approach the Embodiment," said the monk. "You will keep your forehead on the floor until the Embodiment has bidden you otherwise."

"What is this Embodiment?"

"The Embodiment of the Enlightenment. He is the Hand of the Creator. A god amongst men. You have never heard of him?"

"No. I'm... new to this place."

The monk raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"That's quite a mouthful," said Michael finally.

"What is?"

"The Embodiment of the Enlightenment. One thing I've noticed about this place is that people like to give themselves elaborate titles."

"I would keep such thoughts unvoiced. Titles are meant to bestow grandeur. What the public is not fit to behold must at the very least be made aware of their Creator's greatness through voice. Now, come." The monk pushed on the doors, stepping back as they opened. Light seeped through from a window high in the ceiling, catching Michael's

eyes so that he was forced to step back, holding up his hand. The monk pulled him forward with surprising strength into the room until they were halfway to the single throne, pressing Michael down and pushing his face to the floor.

Michael was immediately reminded of Tabitha's father and the same treatment he received in the church that he couldn't help but push back this time. Rearing his head in anger, he was surprised to find that he was too slow. The monk's hand had already left his head and he fell backwards into an awkward position. He heard the doors closing behind him as he tried to right himself, but now something else was pressing on him like an ethereal weight. Sergi's voice barely seeped through now, but somehow Michael knew that if he had access to his rune abilities he would have been completely immobilised. The wards not only prevented him from using runes, but numbed him – mostly – to their effects.

"You may step forward," said a voice from in front of him.

Michael was surprised at the evident youth of the sound. He struggled but was finally able to lift his eyes. Three figures looked down upon him. Each head was cowled, but Michael recognised the two standing on either side of the throne. They were True Africans, though he couldn't tell if one of them was Londisizwe. Seated was a man covered in white robes, yet emanating from him in waves was a dark shadow much like the one protecting the book in the tomb.

"I have been told of the great power you unleashed upon my unsuspecting army," said the seated man; the Embodiment. "I'd rather expected Ba-Roc to be the culprit, but now I see that I was mistaken."

Michael didn't speak, though he wasn't sure he would be able to.

"I was told, an age back, that a powerful Ru Lord had entered this world. Granted, he was new to his powers, but so strong that even the simplest of spells could be used to, say, burn down a church. But he fell forward into this world, and I've been awaiting his presence ever since."

The shadows pulsed against Michael, pressing down so that he had to squeeze his eyes against the pain before they drew back. He fell forward, breathing heavily. "So you know who I am," he managed.

"Michael O'Connor. The great hero. Your accent would have been enough to set you

apart, but I see that's not enough even for the likes of you. By your actions – the destruction of my forces – I see that you wish carve your name upon the fear of every living man and child within Caiy'n. You wish for people to see your great power and quiver from the destruction and chaos. I understand completely.”

Michael reeled from the accusation. “That isn't true.”

“No?” He motioned to the two at his side. “These men are true patriots. They love their country and yet now find themselves homeless. Thanks to you. But here, at my side, they've found sanctuary, and have discovered a righteous cause worth fighting for and holding onto. Do you kill for a cause, Michael, or are the murder of innocent men the means and the end?”

“I...” The Embodiment had seen into Michael's soul. Why did he fight? Who was he trying to save? Himself? Caiy'n? Ever since the meeting with his contact he had allowed events to control his action. His fate had never seemed his own. Even his actions during the battle had been a reaction from getting to know the Grasswalkers. And who had led him down that path but the one who stood to gain the most from his loyalty. Was she holding his leash even now, setting him upon a path of her own choosing? All of these thoughts raced through him as the shadows from the Embodiment darted around his vision. Staring through them, his resolve faltered and he hung his head.

The Embodiment peered at Michael thoughtfully. “I see.” He turned his head. “Leave us,” he said to the rebels. They nodded and disappeared. The Embodiment noticed Michael's reaction. “A little trick they picked up on their journey between worlds.” He laughed. “They are fools,” he said, surprising Michael by this sudden change in tone. “They have power over time and space and cannot even conceive of how to use it for their own benefit. The only reason they follow me is because their need to fight, to struggle against perceived injustice, is all they know. It's how they define themselves.” Michael only nodded, despair clouding his senses.

“We can't have you like this now. It just won't do. Perhaps if I allowed you to look upon my face, it might put things into perspective for.” The Embodiment lifted his cowl slowly, pulling it back from his face.

Michael's eyes widened in surprise as he saw a face which mirrored his own in almost every way. “Who are you?”

“You don’t recognise the face? But then again, vanity was never widely regarded in our family.”

“Family?”

“Oh come now, Michael. Did my son and daughter-in-law not teach you to use full sentences?”

Michael sat down before he fell over. “But, you disappeared.”

“And where do you think I went?”

“But...” Michael couldn’t believe it. This man in front of him... he was too young, for one, and... the Embodiment? It couldn’t be.

“I told my son to name his firstborn Michael, you know. I’m glad he listened to his father in at least one aspect of his life.”

Michael had to say it. It had to be real. “Grandpa Jonas?”

“Ha!” The Embodiment laughed. “I’ve been named many things, called by many titles, but never that. And yet, like all my other roles, I can’t truly call it my own.” The darkness seemed to grow around the Embodiment – Jonas – as he smiled. “I wish this could be a happy reunion, but I’m afraid that once you destroyed my army, you became an enemy of the Enlightenment. And yet, perhaps I can save you from punishment. If you will help me.”

Michael was a jumble of raw emotions as he tried to process this revelation. His grandfather, a man he had heard stories about, the man who had disappeared long before he was born, was here, now. The Embodiment.

“Michael, I can see in you an immense power. I need you to tap into that power. I could order your death if necessary, but it would be a waste of your talent.”

“What do you want?”

“Soon, soon.” He paused, and the shadow dimmed. “I know you can see the darkness that surrounds me. The others are blind to it, but you are not. It’s that what keeps me young and alive. It’s also that which keeps me prisoner.”

“I can see the shadow of the merkstave around you, if that’s what you mean?”

“It’s more than that. Far more. There are some things you need to understand. While other Ru Lords wield the merkstave as they would any rune, I understand the truth behind the power they wield because I am the source of that power; the very soul of the

merkstave.”

Jonas stood. “I have warded this tower out of necessity as there are those who would kill me for the power they believe I wield. But they are fools who fail to understand the intricate nature of my power. However, I fear they have found a way to steal that power, which is why I need you.” He stepped forward and Michael was forced to crawl backwards. “Follow me.”

Michael didn’t move.

“Look, grandson, I don’t have time for this. Yes, your grandfather lives. Yes, he represents everything you supposedly fight against. But you’ve caused a great upset to my plans, so now you’ll do as I say.”

Michael fell forward as though yanked by a chain. He was forced to follow at a distance, the shadow creating a buffer through which Michael couldn’t pass. They made their way into a small room through a door behind the throne. In the centre sat a pedestal on top of which lay a book. Michael’s first thought was that it was the Caiy’n book, but it wasn’t as large and had a black leather covering in place of the brown one he was familiar with. There was also no rune lock protecting it from unwanted entry.

“This room is not warded,” Jonas explained. “My enemies don’t know this, and it is that lack of knowledge which keeps them at bay. If I were to ward this room then I fear the book might be destroyed.”

“What is it?”

“You will know soon enough. I have had Ansuz inscribed on the corner. I want you to see and understand. Then we shall discuss the book.”

Michael stepped closer, looking for a title, but the leather was clean. He saw the small rune in the corner. Sergi’s voice suddenly rushed through to him, warning him against it, but it was too late. Michael was compelled. He spoke the rune.

Michael barely recognised the landscape surrounding the lone oasis. Blasted terrain stretched out all around it like a wasteland out of someone’s nightmare while the sky roiled in pain.

A man knelt down next to him, leaning on the sword with the onyx hilt. He was tired, but his face held a defiant grimace. "I shall destroy you!" he cried at the dark cloud which hovered above him.

"You cannot destroy that which has no mortality, foolish creature."

"I will prevail against all darkness and wipe its source clean from this world!"

"Your words are meaningless. I shall always exist to tempt men into my fold."

"Then where are these men of yours? You lie to hide the knowledge that you do not hold sway over men's hearts."

"I have no need of men to defeat you, for this battle is already won. It is a war of influence we fight, not of direct conflict. I have not manifested in order to throw down some human gauntlet, but to show you that evil cannot be defeated. Your cause is lost."

Mikael slunk down even further, defeat written across his features. He was clothed in the traditional Grasswalker cow hide skirt and tassels, but it was not enough to protect his body, which was caked in dried blood and grit from the constant wind which lifted up the broken sand and struck at the helpless warrior. Michael almost expected him to be wielding a spear, and was rudely reminded that this was not the world he was familiar with.

"I offer you relief, great warrior, for I see that you too have the power to draw men to your side. Join my cause –"

Jonas popped out of midair, falling between the two.

Mikael looked up, wary. When he saw the old man crumpled before him, limbs spread out at awkward angles, he stood. "What games do you now play?"

But the darkness ignored Mikael, instead sending a tendril towards Jonas' dying body. Michael stepped forward and suddenly he was kneeling down, eavesdropping on the promises made to his grandfather.

"I see that you are not of this world. I cannot manifest on this plane as no mortal body can contain me, but you are different. You have... the right blood. The blood of one who has marked this world."

"What do you want?" managed Jonas, his breathing becoming more difficult.

"I want more than what I am now. I want this world. But I require a vessel."

"I... am dying."

“I can save you. You need never feel the pains of mortality ever again.”

Jonas was quick to make his decision. “Then take this body. Before... I’m gone.”

The shadow descended upon Jonas, mending his bones and muscles with pins of dark ink and stitching of shaded lace.

Jonas stood slowly, his eyes frozen in darkness while the years drained from him, revealing the face of the man Michael knew as the Embodiment. Mikael stepped back, raising his sword as Jonas spoke. “I rescind my offer, great warrior, for I shall be my own herald and men will flock to my banner.”

“No!” cried Mikael, raising his sword against Jonas, who brought his hands together, catching the blade as it fell.

Jonas twisted, lifting the weapon from the mortal warrior, and flung the sword a few feet away.

Mikael could only shudder in disbelief as a pale hand slipped beneath his ribs, grasping not his heart but his soul. He fell back, his body a husk, as Jonas placed the soul within an orb of merkstave crafted from his fingers.

Michael, not quite believing his eyes, watched as his grandfather began to twitch.

Jonas cried out, dropping the orb. His head jerked backwards as he fell to his knees, his body writhing out of control. His chest rose and fell as he collapsed in a heap.

Michael leant forward, knowing that he couldn’t be dead, only to realise that he was crying. Jonas finally raised his head, and Michael saw that his eyes were no longer the shade of dark ice.

“What have I done? What have I done?” He said this like a mantra, and Michael finally realised what must have happened. The darkness, the source of evil, couldn’t retain its control. Jonas now had all the power.

His grandfather picked up the orb, and the scene changed.

The grey steel sky flashed a brilliant blue while dew-laden grass erupted from crumbling slate. A fast flowing river cascaded across his vision. The sudden beauty of the scene was marred, however, when he caught sight of the squat tower in the distance. Michael could

make out two figures standing at the foot of the eye-sore. He stepped forward.

The first man was Jonas. It looked as though some time had passed as his face glowed with a new, dark confidence. Above the other man buzzed some abominable form of dragonfly. It seemed to sense Michael and flew at him but passed through his incorporeal body.

“You were cast out of the Mahj Tower?” asked Jonas.

“I was,” said the other man. “My experiments did not sit too well with them.”

“And they draw on merkstave and Ru without a thought to the consequences?”

“They, that is, we all do. It’s not about good or evil, but rather two halves of a whole. At least, that’s the way it’s taught.”

“I see.” Jonas’ eyes glinted slightly with a familiar darkness.

“How —”

“Never mind. I have three tasks for you and this tower will allow you the time in which to perform them. Disobey me and my servant will deal with you harshly.” He indicated slightly to the left. Michael saw a man leaning against a tree in the distance, but couldn’t make out his features. “Your first task will be to chronicle the historical events of a world called Earth.”

“Another world? How can I believe such a thing?”

“I am not asking you to believe me. Only to follow my orders.”

The other man smirked. “From where am I to attain this knowledge?”

Jonas pulled a scroll from his clothing. “This information was originally encoded in a small hard drive, but this world, it would appear, cannot abide technology, so it chose this form instead. You will take from this those parts which I have marked and create a book for me.”

The Ru Lord nodded as he took the scroll, though Michael doubted he knew what a hard drive was.

“Your second task will be to study a prophecy. I need to know if it’s true and if so, how it can be prevented.”

The old prophecy, thought Michael. Dominique had said that it was no longer valid, that Lialh was no longer the hero. But Jonas hadn’t known that....

“Lastly, I need you to care for two objects.” Jonas held out his hand. The shadow

emanating from his palm coalesced into the orb which held Mikael's soul. Removing his hand, the orb hovered in the air. Kneeling, Jonas spread out his arms, revealing a crystal coffin in which Mikael's body lay. "I wronged this man and will see him restored one day. But now is not the time, and I have plans for his soul. Go now into your tower, Ru Lord, and perform your tasks. Time will cease for you, but I will return tomorrow for the completed book." Jonas turned to leave and Michael stepped after him. Jonas disappeared. Michael looked around wildly but saw no one. Worried, he faced the tower and took a step towards it.

The Ru Lord stood to one side as Jonas poured over the open book. "You have done well. And yet..." Jonas cried with rage. "This... shadow prevents me from crossing back into my world." He turned to face a third man, his servant. "Cannaugh, I will need your services. Your clearance will allow you access to the vault. It was stupid of me to think I could go, but I so wished to see Earth once more. You will have to go in my place."

"Cannaugh?" laughed the Ru Lord. "That is no name."

"You are correct," said Jonas. "It is a title, but what do you know of it?"

"Only that it was anathema within the Tower of the Mahj. It means 'Herald of the Dark'. It was the name given to the God-Kings after they allowed evil into this world."

This time Jonas laughed. "Appropriate, on all accounts."

Cannaugh cleared his throat as he walked forward.

"I'll do as you say," he said, addressing Jonas, as long as you live up to your side of the bargain."

Michael almost fell over. It was the grey man.

Jonas stared at Cannaugh, allowing the man enough time to feel uncomfortable. "You know what to do. You must take the Caiy'n book from the government's vault and place it within the tomb. I fear we are dealing with time paradoxes that cannot be taken lightly."

"But if I don't place the book in the tomb, your grandson won't be able to enter this world. He won't be able to disrupt your plans."

"I need him to, Cannaugh. Besides, if you fail me, then all I have promised you will also not come to pass."

Cannaugh sneered.

“And one last thing. I want you to take this orb. It won’t retain its Ru properties on Earth, but whatever it becomes, I need it placed in my son’s attic.” Jonas stared into the orb for a moment before looking at his servant.” The soul of Mikael Sergi still has work to do.”

Michael fell back, his mind so filled with revelations that it might take an entire lifetime for him to come to grips with them all. But he had no time to wonder at his friend’s true identity or what part the grey man had to play in all of this when he felt himself wrapped in his grandfather’s arms. Shadows bore down on him, engulfing his mind in a thick fog. “You have to make a choice, Michael,” said Jonas, whispering in his ear. “Mikael’s soul is bonded to yours, but we both know how much of a burden it is, on you and him. I think it’s time to set him free.”

Michael tried to voice his thoughts, but found that he couldn’t speak.

“Listen to me, Michael. We are of the same blood, fated, perhaps, to have come to this point. Fight at my side against those who would destroy me. But you cannot do so as you are. He prevents you from drawing on my power, for despite his amnesia, he is tied to the light and draws you with him. But it doesn’t have to be this way. Michael, Mikael’s body is here, intact. I have kept it safe. I see now, as should you, that it is only right. It is time for us both to repay our debts to him.”

Michael wanted to scream out in defiance, to shout that none of this was true, that Sergi wasn’t Mikael. But he knew the truth. His friend would have his body back.

“You see, Michael. It’s the only way. The path is a simple one. You need only choose Alahto.”

“I can’t,” Michael finally managed. “I chose Othala. I am bound to goodness, to the light.”

“Light and dark are two halves of the same coin, Michael.”

Michael remembered the Ru Lord of the tower suggesting the same thing, but there had been doubt in his voice.

“He was right, Michael,” said Jonas, reading his thoughts as though they had been written in his own mind. “I only suggested that it might be false to gain power over him, to make

him fear me enough to do what I asked. But I cannot hold sway over those who use the merkstave, nor can I sever them from the darkness within me. Cannaugh now knows the truth of that and seeks to destroy me out of revenge. This is why I have been hiding here in this tower, drawing on what resources I have to combat him.”

“And the army of the Enlightenment? The battle?”

“That is... something else. But my actions are not in question. You must choose, Michael. Do you chain your friend to eternity, serving your whims, or do you set him free? His soul can't abide the merkstave. Already his voice is being silenced. Choose Alahto and allow your friend his freedom.”

“I can't. Othala...”

“An opening has already been made for Alahto. It was made by Zalagah, the merkstave of dark lightning.”

Michael was forced to recall the battle between worlds against the grey man, when the merkstave had travelled back through the spell into his body. But he hadn't ever given it a second thought. “But about Sergi, you said –”

“It was an opening, a pinprick against the shield of Othala. Mikael would not have detected it.”

Michael began to glow as his body gave off the light of Othala. And there, in the palm of his right hand, was the empty space, like a void calling to him, whispering promises of dark power. “I... no, I can't.”

“Michael, you must listen to me. There's something you're not aware of. Dominique destroyed the tower and the Ru Lord within. But she left Mikael's coffin intact. She meant for you to find it, to return him to his body. Do not forsake her wishes. Not after all she has sacrificed.”

The void filled with a vision of her face, of the beauty she had deliberately lost to make him aware of what she was willing to give up to save her world. What was he willing to do? How far would he go? “I'll do it.”

A choice shall be placed before him,

And upon him,

In the darkness and the light.

He brought his palm up to his face. "Alahto." His body began to convulse as the shadow of the merkstave penetrated his palm, expanding quickly to cover the light of Othala. He felt as though a piece of him had been ripped out and knew that Sergi was gone.

Chapter 17 **One Year Later**

“The dark prince is not one for the sword. Perhaps it would serve us better were he to be trained in the dagger. Roguish tactics might very suit someone of his... calibre.”

Sergi grimaced as he watched Jackson duck and roll to one side. But not even this manoeuvre could keep him from Msizi's staff. As Jackson regained his feet the weapon swung back into his stomach, neatly toppling him over. Sergi was impressed with the way the reporter-turned-mage-warrior ignored the blood pouring from his exposed knee, though he had enjoyed it when Jackson accidentally cut himself trying to avoid Msizi's blows.

“Enough!” shouted Mahj Geth Master Rigel. “I swear, you're one of the most poorly trained Ru Lords I've ever met.”

“Damn it, I didn't ask for this,” said Jackson angrily. “Besides, why do I even need to use a sword when I can just blow people up?”

“Because, you hog-bellied weasel, what happens when an especially powerful opponent decides to shield himself against your Ru attacks? Or distracts you while an enemy runs up behind you with a dagger? Do you truly believe yourself quick enough to counter such a swift attack with your vaunted powers? It's the unforeseen and the mundane which I will teach you to defeat, though I see now that it's an all but impossible task.” He turned to face Msizi. “You'll need to protect this one, young Geth, even from himself.”

“My uncle has my arm and my heart,” cried Msizi, bringing his fist to his chest.

Sergi watched Jackson roll his eyes at his nephew. “You're enjoying this far too much,” muttered the recently appointed Ru Lord.

“Go now and spar with Lialh, Msizi,” said Rigel. “I fear he needs the practice more than your uncle here.”

“Well, thanks,” said Jackson.

“I only say that because he'll probably be one of those sent to the frontlines. Ones such as you will be kept in reserve.”

Jackson threw down his sword. “Suits me fine.” He turned away from the sparring grounds and started to walk back towards the Tower of the Mahj.

Sergi followed him, intrigued, though the emotion was not his own. He stopped, not willing to pursue such a ridiculous fascination. A battle of wills commenced, as it always did, though Sergi knew he might not always win. They were too evenly matched.

“Why do you fight me in this? Is it not simpler to share this body evenly?”

“Let me think about that, Mikael. Uh, no. Besides, you’re a residual consciousness that should have died a long time ago so I don’t think it’s fair.”

“And yet you *inform* me that co-existing within another is your fate.”

“More like punishment. And you know what? I don’t know what I did to deserve this.”

Two Ru Guards at the tower entrance saluted him and Sergi realised that Mikael had continued walking. Sergi ignored those two as he always did, wondering why they even bothered to remain here. Once Ru Lords or Queens in training, they were a constant reminder of the fate of the ones who failed to reach a certain level of aptitude.

Jackson disappeared down one of the hallways and Mikael hurried to catch up. Sergi didn’t understand his fascination with Jackson, though he thought it might have something to do with a shared heritage. Sergi had tried telling Mikael that, despite the similarities, their cultures were hundreds of years apart, but as usual he wouldn’t listen. Sergi couldn’t help but wonder if Michael had looked at him the same way Sergi looked at Mikael.

Coming to an intersection, he bumped into Dominique.

“Sergi? Or is it Mikael?” She laughed. “I do not suppose it matters since you can both hear me. I have been looking for you. There is to be a meeting. I am gathering everyone together. The time has come.”

Sergi sighed as he felt the excitement rush through Mikael. “They’ll have to wait for me,” he cut in before his counterpart could speak. “I’ve just come from a bit of sparring and –”

“Let me help with that.” She ran her hand down his body and he shivered.

The dried sweat had disappeared but when he looked at himself he saw that he was also dressed in ridiculous finery. “Did you have to make it look so gaudy?”

“You look fine. Now hurry to the northern map room. There’s going to be a council of war.”

Jackson stared through one of the high-arched windows. This high up in the tower, he could see the main continent peering at him in the distance. From this height the ocean was a haze of sunlight and salty wind, but it always made him pause. He wondered if he'd ever see an ocean quite like this again.

He had been here for six months now, but before that he'd spent five months living in grand finery in the palaces of Carnl being lauded as a hero. His dark skin had garnered him the title 'Exotic Prince' amongst the ladies of the court, which, to be fair, he had played to his advantage. It was Msizi's constant needling which had finally convinced him to travel to the island for training. Jackson had known that his nephew had wanted to find Michael and thought that the Mahj might have been able to help. He wondered what Msizi thought now that they knew his fate.

Jackson entered the room to see that most people were seated. He recognised some of them, having spent a lot of time with them after the 'Battle of the Heavenly Saviour'. It was a stupid name and their 'saviour' was now considered the foremost enemy of the land, but he wasn't quite sure most people made that connection.

The large table, shaped in the form of Caiy'n – which he thought made seating arrangements slightly awkward – was cluttered with miniature war figurines. Taking a seat, he looked at their faces. He nodded at Pauline, the Stewardess of Carnl, who was the most rampant supporter of all things Mahj and the one to whom both he and Msizi had been taken after the battle. She winked back, reminding him that the Mahj were not the only things she had been passionate about. Swallowing nervously, he couldn't help but wonder if her ardour wasn't enhanced by the necklace she wore. The gem contained within supposedly held the essence of the God-King Freyja who helped guide her in all her decisions. Steward Errol of Terrl – Jackson couldn't help but laugh when he said the name – sat beside her. Despite his earlier neutrality, he had finally fallen in with the Mahj when it became apparent that the Tower of the Enlightenment had been usurped by darkness. On Pauline's opposite side was the Steward of Paxl's consort, Martha. She had been forced to flee her homeland after her husband was murdered and his army usurped. Though she held no true power, as the Stewards did not rule by hereditary bloodline, she was the highest authority in Paxl until a successor could be chosen.

Jackson glared at Ba-Roc, who was seated next to the Ru Queen Chealdrin, the current Warden of the Tower of the Mahj. The Ru Lord still hadn't apologised to Jackson for the invasive torture, and the smug look on Ba-Roc's face suggested that he would never get his own back. Dominique entered the room and he looked away. Guilt threatened to overwhelm him as he thought about his part in her disappearance. She had appeared on the island only a week earlier and had introduced herself as the Avatar, which everyone seemed to accept without question. When he had finally got up the nerve to talk to, he about the strangeness of the situation, but she had only smiled back at him and said, "Oh, my poor boy, I put a spell on them. I thought it was obvious."

Mikael Sergi entered the room behind Dominique and Jackson scowled. Of all the strange characters he had met, Jackson battled to understand the once time piece, then parasite, now schizophrenic.

"The battle must be brought to the Dark Lord!" cried Mikael as he sat, stunning Jackson from his thoughts. "His blight on the land cannot be tolerated."

Jackson watched as the man's face seemed to shift as his alternate personality opened his mouth.

"I'm so sorry. I'll try to keep him in check," said Sergi, spreading his arms. "Maybe you want to start this meeting already."

Steward Errol nodded, taking the strange man in his stride. "Regardless of the... difficult circumstances surrounding your condition, good sir, your earlier outburst is not an unjust one. We must lead our armies on the Tower and crush this threat once and for all."

"Please, hear me out first," said Dominique. "We have all had a year's hiatus, and the plot is once more upon us. I agree that the time for action has come but there are more pressing concerns. Michael and Cannagh's war will end soon enough. Once that occurs, Jonas' eye will turn to Lialh."

"And yet you argue that the boy is no longer the focus of prophecy," said Ba-Roc.

"The prophecy has changed, it is true, but Jonas is not aware of that fact."

"But surely this Michael would have told him," added Pauline. "If he is his pawn..."

"Not by choice," said Sergi. "If you'll recall, he gave himself over to the merkstave to save me."

"We all use the merkstave," argued Ba-Roc.

“Yes, but have you chosen it? Michael has tied himself to the darkness in Jonas, who has used that link to command him. But I don’t think Michael is so completely far gone that he doesn’t know what’s right and what’s wrong. And if his only control at the moment is the ability to keep information out of Jonas’ hands then I think he would.”

“And murdering the Steward of Paxl is his way of showing us that he’s truly on our side?” continued Ba-Roc. “Make your excuses if you must, but do not attempt to convince us that he is anything but our enemy.”

“It’s not his fault.”

“Regardless,” said Chealdrin, stepping in, “you say that he will come for Lialh once Cannaugh is defeated. You all put much stock in this Michael’s powers. What, then, can we do to stop him?”

“I agree that Michael is a danger,” replied Dominique, “but he should not be our focus.”

“Why not just throw the power of the Mahj against them?” said Ba-Roc, ignoring her.

“We have the necessary numbers to bring the Tower to its knees.”

“Because, Ba-Roc,” said Dominique, refusing to be shouted down, “we need something in that tower. But perhaps you are right. We must keep Jonas’ attentions outwards and it is possible your plan will succeed in providing such a distraction. We will need Lialh, however. He is Jonas’ only concern. If we march on the Tower with Lialh at its head then I think it will be enough. Recall that Jonas sent out a large army of the Enlightenment to hunt him down a year ago. I think he might send out his entire force if he sees an opportunity to destroy that which he fears can defeat him.”

“And the rest of the Mahj?” asked Chealdrin.

“Do with them as you must, Warden,” said Dominique. “Use them to protect Lialh, for the army of the Enlightenment is formidable. As I hear it, victory was only secured the last time due to Michael’s efforts. Perhaps they can perform a similar function.”

“That’s all well and good,” said Jackson, deciding that it was time to intervene “but what do we need in the tower?”

“The Earth Chronicle.”

“The Earth Chronicle? Of course, why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you don’t have two brain cells to rub together,” said Sergi.

“Watch that mouth of yours, oh hero of old. You just might find yourself less a personality when I’m through with you.”

Sergi stood, ready to lunge across the table, when Ba-Roc slammed his hands down on the table. “Enough of this prattle! Is this how two ‘heroes’ behave amongst such esteemed nobility?”

Jackson managed to look guilty, but Sergi had removed himself completely so that it was clear to everyone that Mikael had emerged when he addressed Dominique. “Let us hear this plan of yours, good mistress, and how we might best combat this evil.”

“Thank you, Mikael.” Dominique looked around at the expectant faces. “Mikael’s soul was sent through the *Earth Chronicle*, and was instrumental in Michael, Jackson, and Msizi’s appearance in this world. I say we send our own catalyst to Earth, at a time of our choosing, to stop Jonas before he ever enters this world.”

There was stunned silence.

“I’m sorry?” said Jackson. “I’m no student of time, but won’t that have really disastrous effects. I mean, even if we do manage to stop him, what happens to this world? Will any of these events have occurred?”

Dominique was silent.

“Well?”

“This world will revert to its original form.”

“You can’t be serious? You mean to say that everything we’ve been through will have been for nothing?”

“You will remember the part you have played.”

“You say that as though this crazy scheme of yours will succeed. Except I see a whole lot of problems such as... what will happen to me and my nephew? And what about Michael, and this fruit cake over here, Sergi.”

“I cannot foresee all that will happen, but I know that it is the only way for us to truly succeed; for this world to survive. Which is why, in an effort to protect you and Msizi, I suggest that it is you both who must be the ones to go through.”

Jackson sat back.

Ba-Roc stood, voicing his disapproval, but all at the table knew what had to be done.

“Will it bring back my husband?” asked Martha.

“It will.”

“Then I say we must do this.”

“Agreed,” said the two Stewards.

“Chealdrin? Will the Mahj do their part?” asked Dominique.

“We will. Success to all.”

Jackson grumbled as he shifted his sword in his scabbard.

Msizi hefted his staff, his face determined.

Jackson shook his head, wondering if everyone around him had been smacked on the head. This plan was insane, and yet here he was going through with it.

They were standing in a circular room with a large airt inscribed on the floor. With Sergi’s help, they were going to use it to teleport directly into the unwarded room containing the book. Jackson had raised his concerns about Jonas realising that this might be their plan, but Sergi doubted Jonas knew that he was able to hear everything said to Michael.

Dominique was to go with them. Her argument was that since Lialh was once more the main focus of the plot, anything she came into contact with concerning him might have more disastrous effects. While she was reluctant to speak about the last time that had had happened, it had obviously scared her enough not to want to repeat it.

The three of them and Sergi stepped onto the airt.

“Jackson, you’re the Ru Lord. You must speak the rune,” said Dominique.

It was a single ruin, but drew on the power of the Tower to fuel it.

“Alright.” Taking a deep breath, he bent down, placing both palms on the ground.

“Ready?”

“The army should be closing in on the tower,” said Dominique. “We should go now.”

“Hold on. Dagaz!” Jackson teetered on his feet as the world seemed to fall on its side.

The room righted itself.

Sergi was the first to recover. Gathering his bearings quickly, he rushed over to the door, the clashing of far-off weapons echoing through. But he wasn't quick enough to stop the monk from barreling into him.

Msizi raised his staff while Jackson prepared to launch a fireball, but the monk's hood fell back and they all froze.

Cannaugh, the grey man, laughed as he stood up. "I see that we all had similar ideas. I should have realised, what with the army outside."

"Step back," said Jackson.

"Ah, the reporter. It has been such a long time. And I see you've learned a few new tricks as well." Sergi groaned from the floor. "The hero of old here as well? Funny how things work out, considering that it was I who saw that your soul would reach your precious Mich –"

"Tiwaz!" said Jackson so suddenly that Cannaugh was taken off-guard.

"Eihwaz!" yelled Cannaugh in response, deflecting the fireball into the wall.

Msizi took the moment to rush forward, bringing his staff down through the shield against the side of his head. Cannaugh fell over, the shield disappearing.

"Most excellent work," said Mikael, taking over from the distracted Sergi.

"I don't why he thought he could talk us to death," said Jackson, wiping away his sweat.

"Did he think we would just wait for him to kill us?"

"What should we do with him?" asked Msizi.

"We should take him with us," said Dominique. "He is not of this world. Whatever the consequences of our actions, I believe they will be lessened if he is removed from Caiy'n."

"Fine," said Jackson. "There's that chronicle of yours. Let's finish this."

Dominique didn't move. "It is not for me to –"

"– do anything, I know. Msizi, how about you take a look. I'll keep an eye out."

Msizi was taken slightly aback, but shrugged as he made his way over to the book.

Dominique hovered behind him, ready to guide if necessary.

"Do I just open it? The Caiy'n book had a lock."

Dominique nodded.

Msizi held his breath as he pulled back the cover, revealing a script written in a careful hand over yellowing pages. He turned the pages carefully, looking for any sign of Jonas' name when he finally saw it at the top of the next page. "There it is," he said, touching it with his finger. The book trembled slightly, and the room went dark.

"You and a team of three other scientists have been hand-picked for a unique project," said a voice from the far side of the room. They all swivelled when a new voice spoke from the other direction.

"You will have access to classified technology. We trust it will enhance your efforts and provide you with a swifter outcome."

Msizi removed his hand and the light returned with the sounds of battle now accentuated with explosions. "What happened?" he asked.

"I believe you are accessing the book in some way," replied Dominique. "But it may very well serve our purpose. Try again."

Msizi flipped through the pages, placing his finger down once more. The room turned dark.

"It won't work. We've input all of the data. The power output of the crystals is far beyond what could be normally achieved, and yet, there is something missing."

"It's as I told you," said another voice. "The world you're trying to create has no life. It needs a soul to exist."

"More of that metaphysical prattle. I'm surprised at you, Jonas. For a man with a scientific mind, you truly have the soul of a poet. But I disagree. There must be a solution."

Msizi lifted his finger and placed it down further on.

"You may not have been the greatest writer, dad, but no one can accuse your novels of lacking soul. I can't believe no one wanted to publish this. But I guess a son can't be objective when it comes to such things. At least know that, wherever you are, your work isn't going to waste. I will see this world come alive. Then we will see what type of heart I have."

"A heart of darkness, I fear."

Jackson blinked against the sudden light, revealing Jonas and Michael standing in the centre of the room. Londisizwe and another of his rebels stood to either side of them.

"I see that you were right about Chealdrin's heart at the very least, Michael," continued Jonas. "I had no idea there would be so many Mahj willing to follow me with only the promise of power behind my words." He smiled at his studied his captives. "Oh, bind them, please."

"Asi!" Michael didn't even have to hold out his arms as he drew on his power.

No one could react as black bands slithered over their bodies.

Jonas walked over to the book, staring down at it. "I was always loath to let another touch it, though, oddly enough, it never did have the same effect with me, or a certain Ru Lord you're familiar with, Dominique." He looked at her thoughtfully. "I find it amazing that the spirit of this world could manifest itself." He shook his head. "All I ever wanted was to survive. But I see now that Lialh was not the true threat. And neither were any of you. It's this thing inside of me. It eats away at my mind, telling me to protect myself, to find a way home. And yet it won't let me leave this accursed world!" He slammed the book back down on its pedestal. "But perhaps I never considered all of the alternatives. Bring me the boy." Londisizwe grabbed Msizi and lifted him up. "You seem to have some special affinity with my precious Earth Chronicle. Now, if you would be so kind, open the portal."

"I don't know how."

"Perhaps you need a little incentive."

"Leave him alone!" shouted Jackson. "Michael, help him." But Michael's face was impassive as he ignored the plea.

"Think, Jonas," spoke up Dominique. "You cannot bring the evil of this world into another. Can you not see that you are being used? Released on Earth, I fear nothing could then be restored."

"Restored? Yes, Chealdrin informed me of your plan. To kill me before I enter this world. Do you truly believe that will change the future? What has already occurred cannot be undone. Even now Chealdrin has taken full control the army of Mahj. The fighting you hear. I would daresay it's not my men that are dying. Do you see? You have failed before you've even begun. Now, open the portal!"

Msizi felt the bonds fall from his body. He peered at his uncle, uncertain. Jackson stared back at him, unwilling to look away, but uncertain of the choice his nephew should make.

Msizi finally dropped his eyes and opened the book. He turned the pages, stopping at something caught his eye. A smile appeared on his lips, which he quickly replaced with a frown of concentration. Had he found it? A place where all could be made right? And then the solution to the portal came to him as he recalled what had been done with the Caiy'n book. "There must be a lock, even if we can't see it."

"Well of course there's a lock," said Jonas.

"But I don't know the combination."

"Don't lie to me boy. Cannaugh informed me that it was you who..." Jonas smiled. "I suppose I was a fool for ever trusting him," he said, looking down at his unconscious body.

"Michael knows the combination," said Msizi, thinking quickly.

"Michael?" Jonas faced his grandson. "Is this true? Why didn't you say something?"

"You once sent Cannaugh back to Earth. I believed you knew how." He sounded like an automaton.

"Ah, so I see there are still things you recall. It's true, while I managed to unlock it once before, certain things have changed. From what I've managed to discover, each entry into Caiy'n resets the lock. The combination changes. It changed upon Cannaugh's re-entry into Caiy'n and once more upon yours." Jonas shook his head. "I never thought to question your knowledge, Michael. Or perhaps something has prevented me." A shadow seemed to pass behind his eyes. "Whatever the true reason, you will tell me now."

"There are three runes. Ravaho, Isa, and Dagaz."

"Very well. Use them."

"We'll need three Ru Lords," said Michael. "Each rune must be spoken at the same moment with as much power possible."

"No, no," said Jonas. "There was no need for that in sending Cannaugh through."

"It is far more expedient than inscribing an airt around the book, as you must have done."

Jonas closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Why must everything in this world be so difficult? And yet coming into Caiy'n took almost no effort at all."

"It is as you yourself stated," said Dominique. "This world has a soul. Earth does not. It is the fundamental difference between Caiy'n, a world born out a story, and Earth, a mere

chronicling of events. In order to pass through to your home world, you must give something of your own soul in payment.”

Jonas shook his head. “Are you trying to frighten me, little Avatar? Then I’m afraid you’ve failed. Wake him up,” he said, pointing to Cannaugh. “And Michael, make sure he’s bound until the last moment. Londisizwe, hold a knife to his throat just to be sure.” The rebel lifted Cannaugh’s head, slapping him hard. Cannaugh cried out, coughing as he tried to sit up, only to find his arms firmly bound behind him. Looking around, he saw Jonas smirking at him. “Damn you. I’ll have your head for this.”

“Calm yourself, Cannaugh. The only reason I haven’t had you slain is because you are needed for one last task. And in this I think you will obey me.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because it may result in your freedom.”

Cannaugh struggled, but it was no use.

“Bring him to the book. And let us not forget our resident reporter-turned-Ru Lord. I hardly think you need incentive considering that this was your plan all along. But just in case, if you don’t do as I say, I will have the boy killed.”

Jackson swore at him, but acceded.

“I’m sure your army has been routed by now and Lialh disposed of. So I suggest you all forget about this world. It has served its purpose, but there is truly nothing left to salvage.”

The three Ru Lords stood around the book. Michael told them the runes they would need to speak. The other two nodded wearily, beaten. They placed their hands over the open pages and spoke clearly, each one drawing on their reserves of energy. The book flared, light escaping into the room. When it receded, the room was empty.

Chapter 18 Paper Plague

The world broke apart.

Two men and two women fell back as the book in front of them exploded, disgorging flailing limbs onto the floor. The Earth Chronicle exacted its price.

Mikael writhed on the ground. Sergi rose up within their shared mind, watching as his other self, inextricably linked to the fate of Caiy'n, was drawn back, gone forever. He stopped shaking, and for the first time he knew what it was like not to have to share one body.

Msizi fell against a wall, knocking his head, falling unconscious.

Jackson landed next to his nephew. He lay there, his body drained of all energy, knowing that he would never regain his runic abilities. That knowledge clawed at him and he burst into tears at his loss.

Londisizwe and his last remaining rebel comrade crashed into each other. He felt time expanding within him, knowing that his ability to bend space and slow time were gone. Realising that he was still gripping his knife, he let go, frowning at the sticky feeling. Swallowing hard, he noticed the blade stayed where it was, lodged in his chest. His comrade cried out but there was nothing he could do as his leader breathed for the last time.

Cannaugh, once called the grey man, felt his power ripped from him as he landed. The first time he had come back had seen a part of his mind snap. This time it had taken from him the only true power he had known, leaving only deadly emotion behind. The need for revenge coursed through him even stronger than before. He had been used once before as a tool, and now again, by the same man. He looked wildly around for Jonas. Seeing him, he moved to lunge at him, only to find that he couldn't move. Anger coursed through him as he turned to face the obstruction. Emotion drained from his face. Blood rushed to his head and darkness clouded his mind. He wondered why he hadn't felt the pain.

Michael finally clawed his way out of the prison in his mind. He recalled his choice in the darkness and, like his soul rising up to reclaim his husk of a body, the memory of his deeds caught up with his conscience. The sickly sweet smell of blood pouring through his

fingers sent him reeling as he heard the Steward of Paxl gurgling from the knife which Michael had slowly pulled across his throat.

Opening his haunted eyes, he recognised the domed room in which he now faced his demons. He shivered as he recalled how his body had been destroyed in the rune fire. He saw his grandfather at the far end of the room. Hatred coursed through him as he was forced to relive every act of terror he had committed in that man's name. He reached back for his sword, ready to end the man, but it was gone. He looked left, not even able to blink when he saw how it had cleaved Cannaugh below the waist.

"Michael!" came a scream from his other side.

"Dominique?"

"Michael, help me. What is happening?"

He crawled over to her, holding up her head. "What's wrong?"

"I... I cannot feel my body."

Michael lifted her hand and saw how it was slowly growing cold and hard.

Suddenly she quieted as a smile came over her face.

Michael watched as she changed, becoming the goddess once more.

"I am sorry for scaring you," she said, gripping his hand. "I cannot exist in this world.

But at least I can pass over with the knowledge that you are safe."

"Dominique? No. No, don't leave. Please. Tell me how I can save you."

"It is... too late. I think, however, that you will know what to do when I am gone. Time works in strange ways. You will see."

"But..."

"Goodbye."

Michael watched as her body hardened into stone. Suddenly it was too much and his tears fell freely.

Jonas sat up, gripping his head. He glanced down at his body, but found himself unharmed. Looking around, he saw each person came to awareness. He watched as events unfolded, but couldn't find an ounce of pity for their personal losses. Instead,

