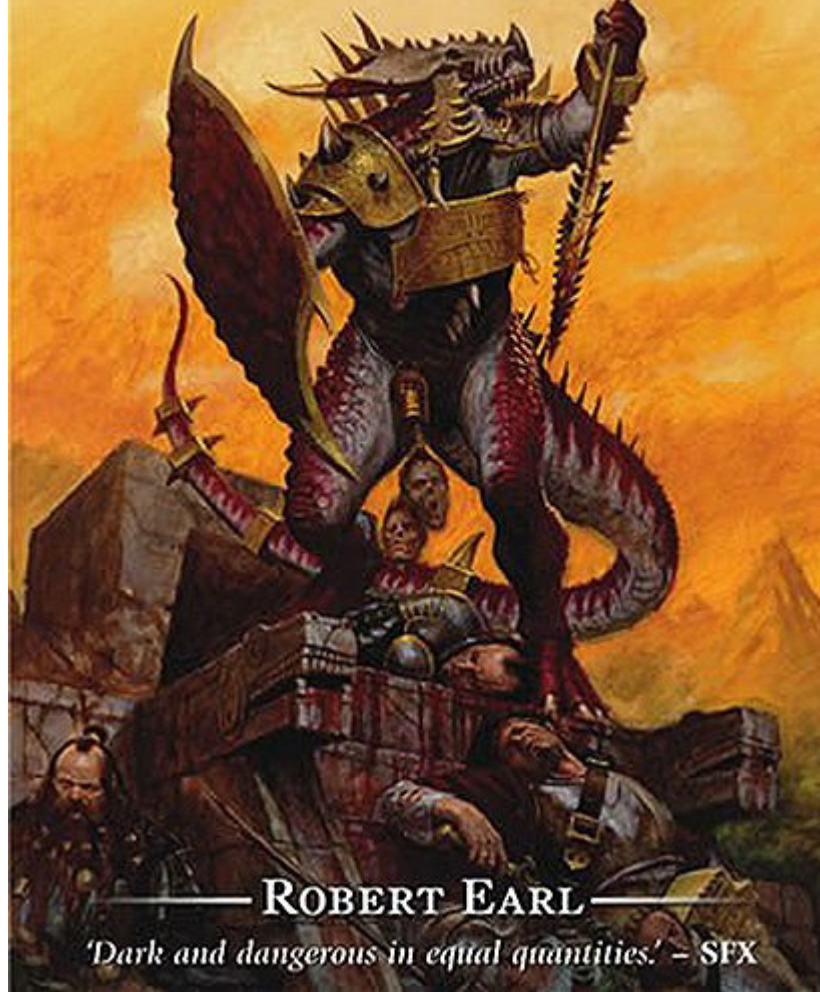


WARHAMMER

THE BURNING SHORE



— ROBERT EARL —

'Dark and dangerous in equal quantities.' – SFX

A WARHAMMER NOVEL

THE BURNING SHORE

Florin & Lorenzo - 01

Robert Earl

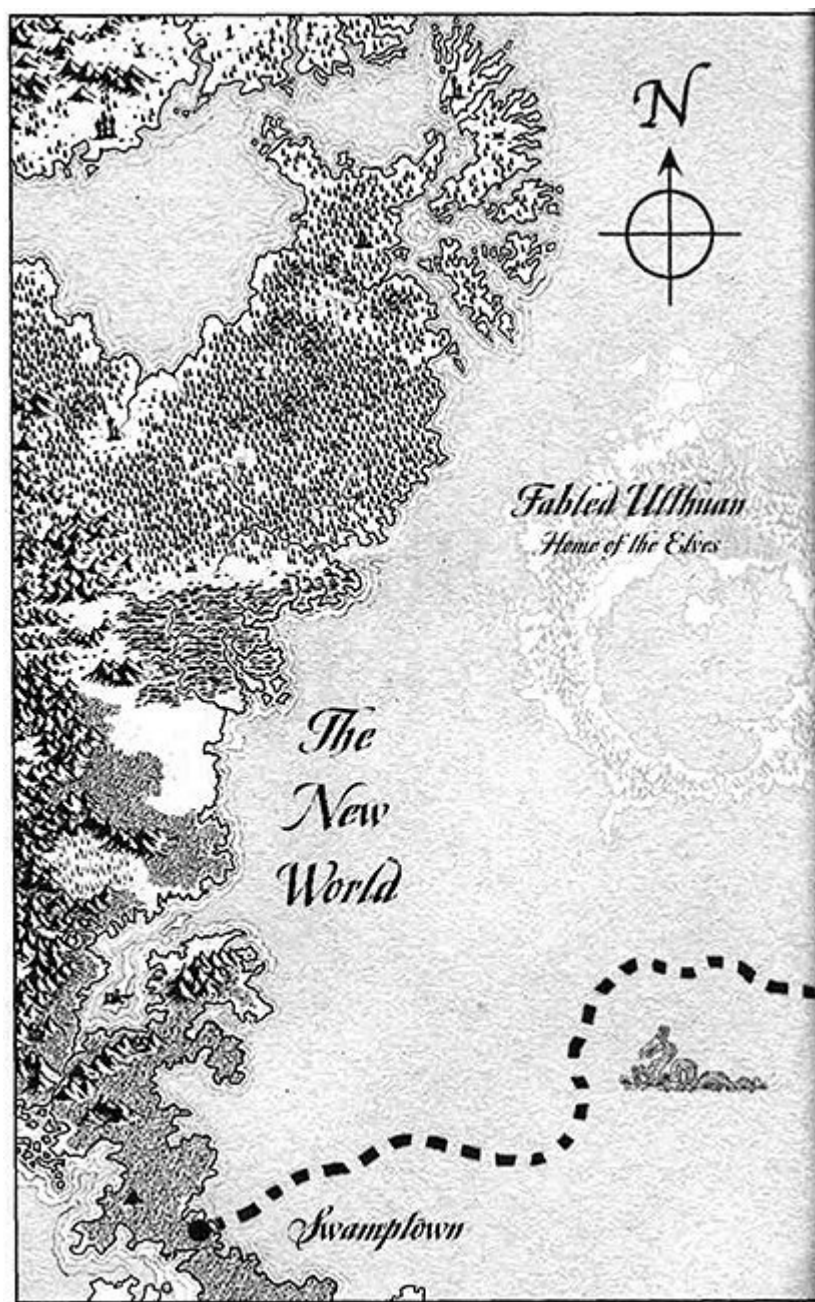
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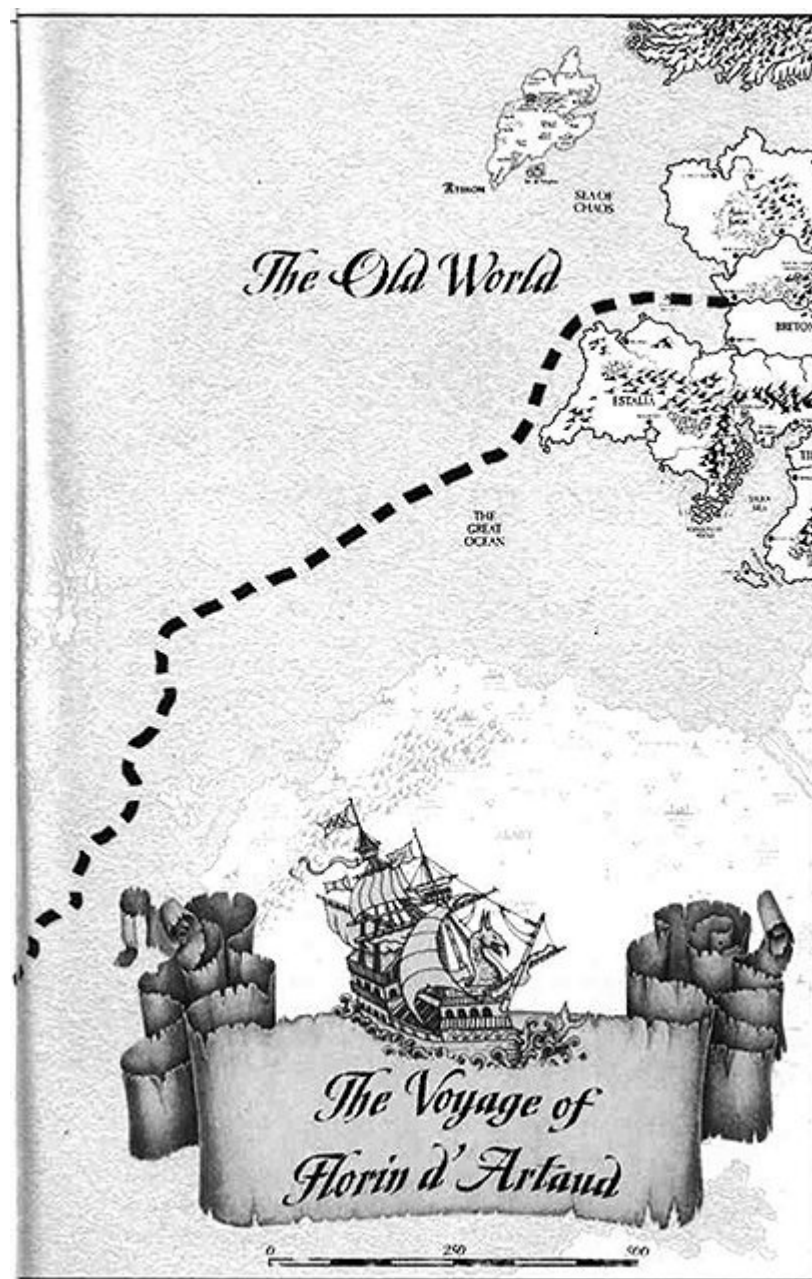


This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl-Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.







CHAPTER ONE

Florin d'Artaud loved cards. He loved the way they purred like contented animals when the dealer shuffled them. He loved the soft, waxy feel of them between his fingertips as he fanned them out, and the way their faces smiled up at him like old friends.

Most of all, he loved the way their patinas of faded ink could light up his whole world, the way that they could send his pulse racing and his blood fizzing through his veins like sparkling wine.

Yes, Florin loved cards. And if the cards didn't always return the favour, what of it? A gentleman accepted his losses and paid them off however he could.

But tonight, for once, he wasn't losing. He was winning, and winning big.

Trying to ignore the sweat that plastered the silk of his tunic to the hard muscles of his back, he studied the dealer's face. It resembled a punching bag, but judging by the glitter in the depths of his eyes, Florin guessed that the man had just as often punched back.

As wrinkled and creased as an old leather glove, the zigzagging scars that crossed the broken angle of his nose were almost comically ugly, and for that Florin was grateful.

As far as he was concerned, it was that hideously ugly face that had brought him so much luck tonight.

"The game remains ogre's fist," the old battler announced portentously, snapping the cards into a neat rectangle and glancing down at his snuffbox. Even in this dingy backroom the burnished steel of its lid shone like a mirror.

"Aces high. A run beats a flush."

Although they'd been huddled in the smoky miasma of the backroom all night, and the dealer had introduced every hand with that same dull mantra, the gamblers nodded again. They leaned closer to the table, their faces damp and flushed and gleaming in the rich yellow light of the room's single lamp, and their eyes grew harder.

There had been half a dozen of them at first, but luck had thinned down their ranks. Now only, three remained. The gold of their beaten opponents stood stacked in front of these survivors—the piles as high and neat as the bars of a cage.

Florin watched the last of his five cards slide to a halt in front of him. He savoured the excitement of every new hand before picking it up. His face remained

blank. Neither a flicker of a smile nor the hint of a frown marred his even features as he studied his cards. His dark eyes remained impassive as he slid them into order. And, although he paused to brush a strand of hair back from the high dome of his forehead, his hands remained steady.

As Florin examined his hand from behind his nonchalant mask, the dealer glanced up at one of the other players: a heavily-built Reiklander with a brightly hennaed mane of hair. As their eyes met, the dealer tugged at his twisted earlobe three times, and tapped the crooked bridge of his nose twice.

“Well, then gentlemen, if you’re ready. The betting starts with you, sir.”

Somehow he managed to make the honorific sound like an insult, but Florin didn’t care. He had other things on his mind.

“Let’s start with three crowns,” he said carefully.

“Three crowns bet,” the dealer intoned as Florin slid the money across the table.

“Too rich for my blood,” the Reiklander dropped his hand. The third player, a wiry little runt of a Tilean, grunted his agreement and folded too.

“The pot’s yours, sir.”

Florin passed his full house back and gathered up the handful of coins without a trace of disappointment.

The Reiklander and the Tilean tried not to smile at their accomplice as he shuffled again. They had made a real killing tonight. Perhaps that was why the dealer’s fingers were as sure as an honest man’s as he dealt another hand over the mirrored lid of his snuffbox.

“The game remains ogre’s fist,” he intoned. “Aces high. A run beats a flush.”

The three players picked up their cards, fanned them out, and considered their options. The Reiklander tugged at the roll of fat that bulged beneath his chin and watched the dealer. When Florin glanced down, the scarred old villain’s left eye winked shut in what might have been a twitch.

“I’ll bet four... no let’s make it six crowns,” the redhead said, counting out his coins and sliding them into the pot.

The Tilean sighed theatrically and looked at his cards as though he was about to burst into tears.

“Six it is,” he agreed and glanced at Florin.

“Six, and raise you six,” the younger man said, knocking the coins off one of the three piles, in front of him.

“See your six, raise you six,” the Reiklander said after a moment’s fake hesitation.

The Tilean, a better actor, scratched unhappily at his goatee and twisted one of his rings. Then he shrugged.

“I’m in.” He pushed twelve more coins into the table.

“Raise you twelve,” Florin said, excitement tugging the corners of his mouth into a reluctant smile.

The redhead saw the expression and glanced quickly at the dealer, whose eye twitched again.

“And another twelve.”

The Tilean looked from his companion to the dealer. Then he squeezed the bridge of his sharp little nose between his fingertips.

“What’s the bet?” he asked nervously.

“Twenty-four crowns to stay in the game,” the dealer told him, as though twenty-four gold crowns were of no more concern than so many beans.

“Very well, twenty-four.” He counted out the bet and pushed it reluctantly into the centre of the table. For a moment his hand hovered over the money, as if he was considering snatching it back.

“Well, I’ll raise you... Oh I don’t know, what do we think?” Florin couldn’t help gloating at the fear that shone on the Tilean’s sweaty face. “Let’s say another twenty-four.”

He counted out half of his remaining coins. Silence, as thick as oil, filled the room; it was broken only by the hiss of an oil lamp and the clink of gold.

The redhead, pale now apart from two high red spots on his cheeks, took a deep breath and counted out twenty-four coins. Then, with a final glance at the dealer, he counted out the last of his money.

“Raise you fifteen,” he snapped and looked once more at his cards.

“I’m out,” the Tilean sighed, as if he didn’t know whether to be miserable or relieved. His chair squeaked backwards as he reached behind him for a bottle of wine. He uncorked it and poured it down his throat as though his stomach was on fire.

“Raise you twenty,” Florin smiled and pushed the last of his coins across the table.

The redhead considered the gleaming pile of gold in front of him. It seemed to have a gravity all of its own, a way of attracting everything in the room to the rich glimmer of its weight. There were coins there from the Empire, the Southlands, even distant Cathay.

And there were enough of them to buy this tavern twice over.

“Will you take an IOU?” he asked without lifting his eyes from the treasure.

Florin barked with explosive laughter, impervious to the flash of sudden hatred that glinted in his opponent’s eyes.

“This is no time to joke, my man. If you don’t have enough to cover the bet, well then...” He waved his hands eloquently.

“All right,” the redhead scowled. “I’m sure you’ll take this.”

Reaching into the grimy depths of his tunic he pulled out a small velvet purse. Carefully, with surprising delicacy for such a big man, he tipped the contents out into the palm of his hand and held them up to the light.

A diamond glittered hard and cold, the silver into which it was set dull by comparison. Florin leaned forward to examine the jewel.

“Why do you only have one?” he asked.

“What?”

“It’s an earring. Where’s the other one?”

“Does that concern you?” the Reiklander asked, his voice ominously low.

“No,” Florin replied. “I’ll accept it.”

With a final look at the dealer the redhead dropped the earring onto the mess of coins that spilled across the centre of the table.

"I'll call you."

Florin swallowed and realised, for the first time, how damp his palms had become.

"Well, what have you got?" his opponent snarled with impatience.

"Kings," Florin smiled, and turned over the first.

The second.

And the third.

The redhead took a deep breath, before running a hand through the thatch of his hair. He grinned at the dealer. Even though every game of the evening had been fixed, even those they'd lost, this last hand had been damned nerve-wracking. All that gold was enough to make anyone nervous.

"Well," he began cheerfully, turning to Florin, "you had me worried there, but..."

Florin turned over a fourth king.

"Four kings," he said, unnecessarily. "Can you beat that?"

For a moment the gamblers sat and looked at the dealer, whose mouth had fallen open.

"Four kings wins," he managed at last.

A smash as the Tilean dropped his wine bottle brought them back to life.

"Well, gentlemen," Florin said, reaching out with both hands to scoop the pot. "It's been a real pleasure."

The redhead sat open-mouthed as his gold disappeared into Florin's purse.

"We'll have a rematch anytime you want," Florin said, eyeing the big man warily. But his attention had turned to the dealer who, for the first time that evening, was beginning to sweat.

He pulled at the tip of his crushed nose as if trying to straighten it, then rubbed his brow. Then he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down unhappily.

"I'll be on my way then," Florin said, to nobody in particular. His eyes flicked from the two other players to their failed accomplice.

"Here's a little something for your trouble," he told the dealer, dropping a handful of coins on the table and backing towards the door.

"Thanks," the man nodded unhappily.

"My pleasure. Good night."

And with that Florin turned and, fighting the urge to run, rattled his way down the stairs and out into the darkness beyond.

The three men sat as if hypnotized. But when the door slammed below, they returned to their senses. Leaping to their feet, they rushed to follow Florin out into the night.

* * *

Although it was as black as pitch in the alleyway, Florin could tell that dawn was not far off. It had something to do with the smell: the first faint stirrings of the ocean

breeze had started to stir through the miasma of sewage and mouldering plaster. It was the smell of Bordeleaux.

Shifting the heavy purse on his belt, Florin hurried out of the darkness of the alleyway and into the street beyond. Here pale starlight mixed with the glow of a dying moon to set the bleached walls and painted shutters of the district aglow.

Testing the weight of the coins once more Florin grinned, his teeth shining in the pale light. He hurried back towards his lodgings. The exhilaration of his victory carried him unheeding through the potholes and clumps of raw sewage that slimed the street. He began to whistle but stopped when caution took over.

After all, he'd won often enough to know that it was a lot more dangerous than losing.

He pressed on until he'd rounded two more corners. Then he stopped, waiting and listening in the deep shadows.

It was quiet now. Only the sounds of the city's troubled sleep rose above its cooling chimneys and gabled roofs. Here and there a dog barked in the night, or a gust of wind smashed a tile or banged a shutter closed. There was an occasional distant cry, although whether of drunkenness or pain it was impossible to tell. Once a high-pitched scream floated across the city before it was suddenly choked off. Laughter followed.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Florin was about to start back home when he heard the sound of his pursuers. Their footsteps were cautious but insistent as they pattered after him, jogging hastily over the broken cobbles of the street.

With his back pressed firmly to the wall Florin craned his head around the corner and peered back down the street.

Although they were no more than silhouettes in the gloom there was no doubt that the pair following him were indeed the card-sharps. The Reiklander was conspicuous thanks to his size; he dwarfed the wiry form of the Tilean who scampered along in his wake.

Time to run, Florin told himself, his pulse accelerating. There was certainly no point waiting for his pursuers to catch up, even though facing them would provide one hell of a challenge.

A sudden flash of steel appeared in one of his pursuers' hands as they drew nearer; it gleamed as coldly as the stars that flickered above.

No point hanging around, Florin decided. It would be a mistake to look for trouble with two armed men. To push a bluff too far. A mistake to listen to the siren song of rushing blood that hissed in his ears.

As the cheated card-sharps rushed towards the corner the Tilean slipped in the filth that slicked the cobbles. He swore, his deep southern accent unmistakable.

"Quiet!" his comrade hissed, turning on him angrily.

Florin's teeth shone again as he smiled in the darkness. By now the thrill of winning a few games of cards had disappeared like morning mist, burnt away by a rush of a terrible new excitement that wasn't much different from fear. It gleamed within the darkness of his eyes, and on the sheen of sweat that dewed his skin.

"Ah, to hell with it," he said out aloud and stepped back around the corner.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he greeted them as warmly as if they had been guests in the family home. “Lost?”

The Tilean was the first to recover from his surprise.

“Yes, we are. We’re lost,” he began unconvincingly. His friend, however, was beyond any pretence. Desperation was apparent in the ragged emotion in his voice, the smell of his sweat, the sharpness of his movements.

It occurred to Florin that he might have made a mistake.

“Give us back our money,” he demanded, closing on Florin. He chopped his cutlass through the air as he approached; the gesture as casual as the swish of a cat’s tail before the pounce.

“I don’t have any of your money,” Florin countered, feigning confusion as he stepped back and prepared to counter the attack that he realised was inevitable. It had been inevitable right from the start.

“Please?” the Tilean pleaded from behind his comrade, his hands spread wide. “Return it and you can go.”

As he said this, the Reiklander leapt forward with a roar, his cutlass blurring into a lethal arc aimed at his victim’s legs.

Every instinct told Florin to leap backwards, or upwards—anywhere but into the attack.

He leapt into the attack.

Florin tore his dagger from its sheath as he rocketed forward. He caught his opponent in the centre of the chest with his shoulder, then twisted the blade to one side and cut upwards.

With a grunt of surprise the Reiklander lurched backwards, trying to reverse the angle of his flailing sword arm. But before he could, the dagger’s edge had sliced through the muscle of his bicep as neatly as a wire through cheese.

The Reiklander howled with pain and jumped away, slashing wildly at his foe as he did so. Reversing the grip on his dagger, Florin pressed forward, his mind full of predatory concentration.

Again the redhead lunged at him and again Florin leapt into the blow, this time slashing at the pale white target of the flesh beneath the Reiklander’s beard.

The steel connected with scarcely a sound.

The big man fell back. His weapon clattered onto the cobbles as both hands fluttered up to staunch the sudden pulsing of warm blood. Florin danced warily to one side, the lethal point of his concentration focused on his enemy. The Reiklander fell to his knees; it was the opening Florin needed.

But before he could finish him off, the Tilean struck.

In the long, long seconds of his fight with the bigger man Florin had completely forgotten about the second. It was a lapse that almost cost him his life. While he and the big Reiklander had been struggling the Tilean had slipped behind him, waiting for an opportunity to strike. And the opportunity was now.

With a grunt of effort, the Tilean’s sword whipped silently forward, tearing through the silk of Florin’s shirt with an angry whine. It sent a line of white-hot pain slicing across the muscles of his back.

Spinning around to face the next blow Florin saw the rapier flickering towards his eyes and ducked a little too slowly. Another thread of agony zipped across his forehead, and a spill of hot blood ran down into his eyes.

Blinking back tears, Florin stumbled away, crouching low, waiting for a chance to duck in behind that sword point.

But the Tilean gave him none. The rapier gave him the advantage, and he intended to use it.

“Should have just paid up,” he said, flitting to one side with the grace and finesse of a dancing instructor. “Now it’s too late.”

With a practiced flick of his wrist the man struck again. The blade was invisible as it sliced through the darkness. Florin spun to one side. The blade hissed past his ear, and he lunged forward.

Once again the Tilean was too quick. Even as Florin tried to close with him he’d skipped backwards, the blade of his rapier swishing playfully through the air.

“Ranald’s teeth,” Florin snarled with frustration. Behind him he could hear the Reiklander groaning with pain as he lumbered slowly back to his feet.

“What’s that you say?” the Tilean asked, nipping forward to send the tip of his blade stinging across Florin’s nose.

“I said you can have the gold,” he snapped, trying to ignore the fresh burst of pain.

“Sorry, my friend,” the Tilean said. “Too late for that. You’d have me arrested as a common thief.”

“Stop messing about,” the Reiklander interrupted, his voice an aggrieved whine. “I’m bleeding. Just kill him.”

The Tilean obediently lunged forward from the shadows. Florin, desperation pushing him into one last frantic gamble, threw himself forward and to the right.

For a split second he thought that he’d made the wrong choice. Then the Tilean’s blade flickered as it stabbed through the air to his left, and Florin was upon him. With a yell he gripped the elbow of his sword arm and plunged the blade of his dagger into the little man’s stomach.

The Tilean’s eyes opened in twin circles of shock as the knife ripped upwards into the soft flesh beneath his ribs. Then his mouth gaped open in an expression of perfect outrage as Florin twisted the blade up into his heart as neatly as if he were coring an apple.

With a horrible sucking sound, he pulled his dagger free and let the Tilean fall.

He died silently. The barest rattle of his last breath was silenced by a thump as his body collapsed bonelessly onto the ground. Florin’s senses were already concentrated on the Reiklander.

But the big man was already running: his heavy boots pounded down the street as he fled. For a second Florin considered giving chase. Then he looked down at the body at his feet.

The blood, black in the moonlight, still pulsed from the wounds in its stomach and throat. It seeped between the cobbles to mix with the filth of the gutter, as inconsequential as a butchered pig’s.

With a deep, shuddering breath Florin knelt down beside the man. He reached under his jaw to feel for a pulse. There wasn't one. Unthinkingly he wiped his dagger clean on the Tilean's shirt. Then he turned the corpse's face away from the grimy stone of the pavement. He brushed a smudge of dirt away from its forehead, and closed its eyes.

Fighting the tight fist of nausea which clenched his stomach, Florin rose to his feet. He squeezed his temples and took a deep breath.

Why didn't I just run, he asked himself?

But he no more knew the answer to that than to why he'd spent his inheritance on cards, or why he'd turned down the sinecure of militia commander. Or why he'd done anything since his parents had died.

He sighed, turned and made his way home.

Behind him the dead man lay in the street, his form as still and pale as a stone knight beneath the light of the gibbous moon.

Florin's apartments were at the top of an old building that sprawled drunkenly across three streets. It had served many purposes over the years: it had been a barracks, a stable and an inn.

Now it was none of those things. The cavernous spaces between its peeling lathe walls and high drafty gables had been carved up into a shabby warren of little chambers that housed everything from bales of cheap calico to the workshops of a dozen stooped and weak-eyed artificers.

Florin unlocked the side door and made his way up three flights of narrow stairs. They squeaked and groaned as if they were about to collapse, but he was too used to them to pay any heed to their protest.

In summer the slate roof above his rooms became hot enough to fry eggs on, but in the winter it froze into a flat sculpture of snow and icicles. Even the rats deserted the gables at that time of the year, although the cockroaches weren't that fussy: they scuttled away now as he unlocked his front door and pushed it open.

And yet, despite the discomfort, Florin had never considered moving back into the luxury of his family's town house. For as long as he could remember that home had felt like a prison, the bars of respectability strictly guarded first by his father and then, after his death, by his brother. Here, at least, he was free.

Hungry, but free.

He bolted the heavy door shut behind him, dropped the dead weight of his purse onto the table, and collapsed into the beaten up sofa that had been drawn up to the window. Putting his feet upon the sill he leant back, stretching as luxuriously as a cat.

As the first pink hint of dawn crept across the slate of Bordeleaux's rooftops and spires and distant ramparts Florin breakfasted on half a loaf of stale bread, which he washed down with a few mouthfuls of sour wine.

Tomorrow, he decided, he would eat properly. For the first time in what seemed like an age he'd be able to afford to. Perhaps he'd buy some fat pork sausages from the Empire, or maybe find a Tilean cookshop where the fish was smothered in one of their delicious cream sauces. He'd even heard that a new halfling restaurant had opened near the docks. That might do.

But for now he was content to sit and gnaw his week-old bread and watch the city wake. The citizens grew as loud and raucous as the flocks of sparrows that flitted above their heads. The cries of the costermongers and beggars rose up from the streets below in a ragged chorus that would last all day.

Meanwhile, to the east, the red ball of the autumnal sun rose up behind the great central column of the Lady's temple. She stood silhouetted in eye-watering sunlight, a vision of beauty in gold and pure white marble.

The spire upon which she perched rose out of the merchants' quarter like a sword hilt out of the stomach of an enemy. It had been raised at the expense of one of Bordeleaux's most celebrated grail knights, the martyr needing something to buy with the hoard of the dragon he'd slain.

Not that "martyr" was the word the merchants used to describe the late St. Gilles. It was rare to find any of their class that showed anything but derision for their aristocratic masters. How many times had Florin's own family equipped their protectors at usurious rates, or sold them warhorses with weak lungs and strained fetlocks?

"Idiots," Florin muttered, without conviction. He'd never been able to muster the hard shell of contempt that the merchant families of Bordeleaux showed towards their supposed betters.

The sun climbed higher as he dozed. It was almost midday before a bang on his door jolted him out of his sleep. He turned just in time to see it crash open and a figure stumble through.

It was the dealer.

He looked no better in daylight than he had in lamplight. In fact, he looked a lot worse. The network of scars that marred his face was as pale as death against the red brick of his complexion, and the broken angle of his nose looked more predatory than comical. It resembled a vulture's beak that arced out over a grin of broken teeth.

"Good morning, boss," he nodded towards Florin, his beady eyes slipping past him to rest on the stained leather of the purse.

"Good morning to you, Lorenzo," Florin greeted him, and relaxed back into his chair. "What took you so long?"

"I didn't want to be followed," Lorenzo replied, closing the door behind him and pulling up a chair. "You'll be shocked to hear this, but a couple of those fellows last night weren't quite gentleman."

"You don't say?" Florin raised his eyebrows and passed the wine across to his old retainer.

"No," Lorenzo took a deep, gurgling pull of wine before continuing. "No. They expected me to help them cheat you."

The two men, servant and master, peasant and gentleman, old and young, turned their eyes to the purse that lay between them.

And suddenly they were wracked with laughter. Tears streamed down their cheeks and their heads were thrown back as they howled at the sun like confused wolves.

"Well, gentlemen or not, they came just in time," Florin said, recovering first. "Mordicio wanted his money two days ago."



CHAPTER TWO

“Ah, my boy, there you are!” Mordicio exclaimed happily as Florin was led into his office.

“Yes. I’m sorry that I’m a couple of days late, but...”

“Nonsense!” Mordicio waved away the apology. He rose arthritically from behind his desk and hobbled over to embrace his guest. Before Florin could react, Mordicio’s liver-spotted hands had descended upon his shoulders and he was clasped to the old man’s bony chest.

An onlooker could have been forgiven for thinking that this was a favourite nephew returned from some long and dangerous voyage, rather than a defaulting debtor. And at another time he might have been right. With Mordicio, loan sharking and family weren’t mutually exclusive.

“Come, sit down, sit down,” the old gangster smiled happily, his eyes as warm as honey beneath the snow-white bushels of his eyebrows. “Would you like a drink?”

“Well, perhaps a little wine,” Florin said politely, and pulled up a chair.

“Brioche, wine for my guest,” the old man, arthritis forgotten, snapped his fingers. Florin heard the shaven-headed thug who’d escorted him into this inner sanctum amble wordlessly off into the carpeted distance.

“Ah, Florin, Florin, Florin. It’s been too long.” Mordicio stumbled around the corner of his desk, paused briefly to rub his stooped back, then folded back into his chair with a sigh.

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry about that, it’s just that...”

“Please, no apologies. Why apologise? You’re here now, shouldn’t that be enough for a poor old man like me?”

Florin bit his lip, and tried not to look at the gilded books and jewelled trinkets that lined the old man’s shelves. He tried to ignore the silver astrolabe and the thick Arabyan carpets. In fact the only thing that looked poor in the whole room was its owner. Mordicio never wasted money on new clothes or jewellery.

Or barbers. The unruly bush of a beard that softened the bony angles of his face might have belonged to a dwarf, if a dwarf could ever have grown so tall and lank. Mordicio’s fingers burrowed into its depths to scratch his chin as he regarded his guest.

“No, my boy, no apologies. I’m just an old man glad to see an old friend’s boy. Of course, if you have my money...”

“Right here,” Florin told him. He unhooked his purse and, without further ado, started to count the coins out onto the scuffed leather surface of the old man’s desk.

“Oh, well, if you have the money on you—” Mordicio watched the coins piling up with the feigned indifference of a leech eyeing a low-cut dress.

“There you go,” said Florin, putting out the last coin. “One hundred crowns.”

“Very good. And don’t worry about the interest.”

“The interest?”

“Yes, for the last two days.”

Florin paused. There’d been no mention of extra interest for being two days late. But then, there’d been no mention of being late, either.

“How much?” Florin asked warily, but Mordicio just smiled.

“To you my friend, nothing. On the house.” His eyes twinkled, as his smile grew as wide as a shark’s. “Gratis.”

“Really?”

“Of course, of course. I always liked you. I liked your father too, gods rest him, even though he never put so much business my way. Ah, here’s our wine.”

The secretary had returned, as quietly as he had gone. He handed Florin a goblet of spiced wine, and his master a clay pot of water.

“Your health!” said Mordicio, drinking deeply.

“Your health!” Florin tested his wine. It was as fine as it smelled, and although it seemed a waste to gulp it down he did anyway. He wanted to get out of here before the subject of interest came up again.

“Thank you, it was excellent,” he said, wiping his mouth and setting the goblet down. “But now I really must be going.”

“Ah, busy, busy, busy, hey?” Mordicio nodded approvingly. “I was the same at your age. But a man must have pleasures as well as business. Like music, for example. Or gambling.”

“Well, yes...” Florin trailed off.

“Or women.” Mordicio’s smile suddenly seemed to be a lot more mocking than avuncular.

“Yes, women. Or should I say girls? Girls like the Comtesse Grisolde Angelou. A hideous name, but a beautiful girl. At least,” he chuckled mirthlessly, “her father thinks so. But then the magistrate isn’t alone in that, is he?”

Florin sat back down.

“What do you want?”

“What do I want, he asks me. As though we were traders haggling in the market and not two old friends!” Mordicio’s voice quivered with outrage, and his hands tugged at his beard as though in grief. “What do I want? Me, who knew you when you were a child. I’m almost insulted.”

“That was never my intention.”

“I know, my boy, I know. But when you get to my age you like to talk to youngsters. To be reminded of what it’s like to be young and in love. Or, if not in

love then..." He punched his thumb through the ring of his fingers in an obscene gesture and laughed.

Florin sighed.

"No, I'm just interested, just interested." The gangster's voice faded off and for a moment he sat and regarded his guest, enjoying his discomfort.

"As for me, I'm too old for that kind of thing. Well, almost. But I do enjoy a little bet from time to time. A little flutter."

"Oh yes?" Florin asked, waiting.

"Yes. Even if it's just on the toss of a coin." With an exaggerated wince of arthritic pain Mordicio reached across the desk and selected a single coin from the pile. He turned it between his fingers and examined both sides.

"An emperor and a griffin. Let's call the emperor heads, shall we? What do you choose?"

"Me? Well, I don't gamble. I, well, I..."

"Very wise, very wise. But there are worse vices, you know. Can you imagine what the magistrate would do if he found out what you have been doing to his daughter?"

"What are we betting on?"

"Your debt. Let's call it double or quits, shall we?"

Florin knew that he should refuse. His brother would have complained for months about having to give him one hundred, but two?

Anyway, Mordicio might be bluffing. And if he wasn't, why would the magistrate believe him? Especially if Grisolde kept her mouth shut.

Florin leant forward, pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, and squeezed.

"I'll call heads. The emperor," he decided, sitting back up.

"Well then, here we go. I'll throw it. Isn't this exciting my boy? Doesn't it set the heart aflutter?"

"Yes," Florin groaned miserably. "It does."

Mordicio spun the coin high into the air with a practiced flick of the thumb. It glittered in the afternoon sunlight before falling back to the desk and bouncing on the aged leather, pirouetting around like a golden ballerina. It slowly wobbled to a drunken halt and finally collapsed onto the desk.

Florin, hardly daring to look, leaned forward. Then, although he fought it, a smirk spread across his face.

"Who won?" the old man asked. "My old eyes aren't what they were."

"Me," Florin said smugly. "Look."

"I'll take your word for it. Ah well, you win some you lose some. So now I owe you a hundred."

The younger man tried not to look too triumphant as he started to shovel the coins back into his purse.

"Well, no hurry. Whenever you can."

"No, no," Mordicio spread his hands. "I'm a man who pays his debts. Unless... Well, how about another spin of the coin? Double or quits?"

“No, I really must be going,” Florin shook off the temptation. With this money he could buy some decent rooms, a decent wardrobe, maybe a necklace for Grisolde... No, not that. Grisolde wasn’t really worth it anymore. Maybe Claudia.

“Well, if you won’t humour an old man...” Mordicio broke his train of thought. “By the way, would you ask Grisolde to tell her father I need to speak to him? I think it’s better he hears the news of her engagement from an old friend of the family, don’t you?”

“What!”

“No, no, don’t thank me. I’ll be happy to oblige.”

Now it was Mordicio who smirked.

Florin, defeated, selected a coin and resisted the urge to punch the old man. Behind him stood Brioch, and behind Brioch a mansion full of locked doors and professional thugs.

So he didn’t punch Mordicio. Instead he said, “Double or quits, you say?”

Mordicio, a genuine smile creasing his face, nodded.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had been so close to tears. Perhaps not since his father’s funeral, four years ago. Even then the Hanged Peasant’s best wine hadn’t tasted so sour, nor had the obscenely painted walls of the back terrace seemed so dull.

“Don’t worry about it, boss,” Lorenzo told him unhappily, pouring him another glass of wine. “Bastien will pay. Doesn’t he always?”

“Used to,” Florin agreed miserably. “But this time? Three hundred crowns. That’s probably more than he’s got in the warehouse.”

“Still, blood is thicker than water.”

“Yes, that’s what I said last time. And the time before that. But every time I say it Bastien looks a little more doubtful. I don’t blame him, either,” Florin admitted unhappily. “Maybe we should just run.”

“Maybe.” Lorenzo poured himself a drink. He glanced morosely around the tavern yard in which they sat. The shadows were lengthening into night now, the last sunlight of the day gleaming on the vines that covered the trellis above their heads. A sparrow perched above them, feasting on the last of the summer’s grapes. Lorenzo enviously threw a cork at it, and wished that he could fly away so easily.

For one traitorous moment he considered doing just that. After all, his master’s debts weren’t his. But the years he’d spent with Florin, and with Florin’s father, were a chain he had no wish to break. He was the d’Artauds’ man; had been since he’d escaped the grinding poverty of his village, would be until his body was carted back there to be buried.

So the question remained, what were they going to do?

“We could run,” he nodded, and sucked his front tooth thoughtfully. “But where to? And with what?”

Florin shrugged and rubbed his eyes. Damn Mordicio. And damn Grisolde, and her damned father.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, peering into the depths of his cup. “Maybe the Empire. Or Tilea.”

Lorenzo snorted.

“Mordicio would find you there within a month.”

“Araby?”

“He’d find you there even sooner. You’d stand out like a pigeon amongst a flock of rooks.”

“Norsca?”

Lorenzo barked out a mirthless laugh and pulled at the grizzled skin above his Adam’s apple.

“You’d be better off letting Mordicio cut your throat here and now, and be done with it.”

“Well, I suppose that I could ask Bastien,” Florin suggested.

Lorenzo had successfully navigated his boss through the shoals of pride to the safe harbour of desperation. He breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that Bastien would pay, regardless of what his stringy old scold of a wife would say. Anything to protect the family’s name.

“Yes, ask Bastien. After all, what are brothers for?”

“Although even if he says yes again—and he might not—do you remember what Rochelle’s family did to him, after he lost that estate last year?”

“Ah, yes. Brother Rochelle. I wonder how monastery life is suiting him.”

Despite himself, Florin sniggered.

“Ah well, to the hells with it. If it comes to that, we’ll go to Norsca and be damned.”

“It won’t come to that,” Lorenzo smiled, glad to see the storm clouds of his master’s mood lifting. “Bastien will pay. Sometimes I think he even likes you!”

“Even though I’m the smart one?”

“The smart one who owes Mordicio five hundred crowns.”

Their laughter was interrupted by the tavern keeper, who came waddling out from the taproom beyond.

“Excuse me,” he said, leaning over the table in a cascade of jowls and wiping his hands nervously on his apron. “There’s...”

“Don’t worry, Jules,” Florin interrupted, raising his hand imperiously. “I know it’s a little overdue, but I’ll pay my tab on the first of the month.”

“It isn’t that,” the barman muttered, a flicker of resentment in his eyes. “There’s someone to see you.”

“Someone? Who?”

“A runner from the docks, sir. And a mercenary.”

“A mercenary?” Florin and Lorenzo spoke with one voice.

“Yes. Says he’s looking for you, sir.”

“Damn.”

Florin pushed back his chair. Lorenzo was already on his feet, eyeing the exit. But it was too late to run. The mercenary had followed the tavern keeper into the courtyard, and had already spotted them.

He struck an impressive figure, even for a professional warrior. Towering more than a head above the other patrons, the blond point of his fashionably waxed beard jutted forward like the ram of a galley. The man pushed carelessly through them. Few

dared to take offence, the mercenary's brash confidence obviously owed little to his damasked armour, or his sheathed sword, or even the solid muscle of his frame.

He drew nearer and Florin noticed the red flashes that the Bretonnian sun had burned onto his pale skin. They marked him as a northerner, a soldier of the Empire. The gathered Bretonnians knew better than to annoy such a barbarian, even if he did look sober. They hurried out of his way as he marched through them, his heavy boots thumping across the slated floor as remorselessly as the beat of a money-lender's heart.

A wolfish grin spread across his face as he reached Florin's table.

"So you are here!" he exclaimed, pulling off one leather gauntlet to punch him painfully on the shoulder.

"Damn me! Lundorf!" Florin's apprehension turned to disbelief, which dissolved into a burst of delighted laughter. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting my old ring leader," Lundorf grinned, baring strong, white teeth. "How have you been?"

"Fine, fine."

"I was sorry to hear about your parents."

"Thanks. But it was a while ago."

For a moment the two old friends stood and studied each other. It had been a long time since they'd been together. They'd been teenagers then, tearaways supposedly under the care of a succession of harried old scholars. But that was more than a decade ago. Now, as they faced each other once again, they found themselves shuffling their feet awkwardly and wondering what to say.

It was Lorenzo who broke the ice. «

"I take it you don't want me to stick him, then?" he asked from the position he'd taken behind Lundorf's back. The two younger men turned to watch him folding his knife back into his sleeve, disappointment creasing the punch bag of his features even more than usual.

"By Sigmar, that monkey's ugly!" Lundorf said, peering at the older man's face with an unhealthy fascination.

"Lorenzo Gaston at your service," Lorenzo responded with a bow. "And tell me madam, do all the ladies of your Empire wear their beards in that fashion?"

"Do all of Bretonnia's peasants speak to their betters in such a manner?"

"No, we never speak to our betters in such a manner."

"Except for you."

"Except for nobody."

Lundorf raised one eyebrow in a gesture of studied disdain.

"I see that Florin's choice of servant hasn't improved over the years."

"Evidently."

The two men glared at each other.

"Well then," Lundorf said eventually. "If you won't act like a peasant I suppose I won't treat you like one."

"Thank you, sir," Lorenzo bowed sarcastically.

Florin tried not to smile.

“I’m glad to see you two have hit it off so well. Lundorf, this is my, um, my manservant Lorenzo. Lorenzo, my oldest friend Karl von Lundorf.”

The two men shook hands and found that, to their surprise, they liked each other.

“Now let’s eat something.”

“And perhaps a drink?” Lundorf suggested. “It’s damned hot in this wretched country!”

“Speaking of which,” Lorenzo added with an obscene wink, “I’ve heard that Madame Gourmelon has some new girls.”

And so the night began. After the wine of the Hanging Peasant they ate from the clay platters of Gunter’s Pork Knuckle Paradise. Only then, suitably fortified, did they wipe the pork grease from their faces and descend towards the docks.

The nearer they got to the savage carnival that was Bordeaux’s nightlife, the narrower the streets became, and the wilder the crowds. Drunken longshoremen rubbed their hessian-clad shoulders against those of the sons of opiate merchants. Soft-bellied burghers haggled with hard-eyed girls, shamelessly fondling their buttocks and breasts as they negotiated the price of half an hour’s fun.

And everywhere, flitting amongst the throng like piranhas, ragged children scurried to steal, or to beg, or to fall upon any they found already fallen.

“This is fantastic!” Lundorf roared above the screams and the laughter, unaware of the pickpocket’s hand Lorenzo had just punched away from his purse. “You Bretonnians really know how to have a good time.”

“We certainly do,” Florin replied with a smile of pride. “Ah, here we are. The Vampire’s Shadow. The finest wines and comeliest wenches in the whole of Bordeaux. And the most courteous doormen. Good evening, Fulger.”

Florin bowed slightly and offered the hulking ogre that leaned against the doorpost a coin-laden handshake.

“Evening, Monsieur d’Artaud,” the ogre replied, pocketing the coin. “Good to see you again.”

Two more silvered handshakes later and the trio were seated in a corner table, relishing the roar of noise and fog of smoke that was the tavern’s lifeblood. A wine skin later and Florin found out what had brought Lundorf from the fog and chill of his homeland.

“It’s a great opportunity,” Lundorf told him, sweeping his hand around in a broad gesture that sent his goblet flying across the taproom. “Lustria! Remember when we used to play that game, Florin? Jungle explorers?”

“Yes. That was the time we set fire to the tanning sheds.”

“Boys will be boys.”

“That’s not what my father said.”

Lundorf roared with laughter.

“Yes, didn’t he make you howl? You never told him about the rest of us being there, though, did you? This man,” Lundorf turned to Lorenzo, “was a hero when we were children. He was always our leader. Remember what we did with Binmeier’s goats?”

“And Dame Grulter’s laundry?”

The two men howled with laughter, while Lorenzo, mystified, looked on.

“The good old days, hey?”

“Yes, the good old days. Shame you weren’t there, Lorenzo old man. You’d have had a hell of a time.”

Lorenzo, whose adolescence had been spent struggling beneath the grinding heel of absolute poverty, nodded indulgently.

“So, what are you going to Lustria for?” he asked, keen to move the topic of conversation to something that he could understand.

“For glory,” Lundorf told him. “And gold.”

“A toast,” Florin cried, raising his goblet. “To glory and gold.”

“Glory and gold,” Lundorf echoed.

“Gold and glory,” Lorenzo chimed, and the three men drank. When they’d drained their cups, and sent the serving girl dodging away for more, Lundorf froze. Then he sat bolt upright, clutching his forehead like a man in the grip of a seizure.

“I’ve just had a fantastic idea,” he cried out, gripping Florin painfully above the elbow. “Why not come with me? We’re short an officer.”

“To Lustria?” Florin asked, trying to slide his hand beneath the dress of the returning serving girl. With hardly a pause she turned and, swinging from the hip, put all of her weight behind her punch. There was a resounding smack that rocked Florin back against the table. He grinned stupidly as his fellow customers, including Lundorf, bellowed with delight.

“Yes, Lustria,” Lundorf shouted above the din.

“But why?”

“For glory and gold!”

“Glory and gold!”

“Cheers.”

They drank some more while Florin, absentmindedly feeling his bruised cheek, considered it.

“But there’s nothing in Lustria. Just swamps and diseases. The occasional shanty town.”

“But that,” Lundorf said, lowering his voice and leaning forward confidentially, “is where you’re wrong. That’s why this expedition’s been put together. We’ve got ships and men. Damn me, we’ve even got a cannon. And why?” He leaned closer, ignoring the spilt ale that soaked into his sleeve. “Because there’s treasure there, just waiting for the taking.”

“How much?” Florin asked, as though he was about to start haggling.

“Boat loads. The jungle’s full of it, apparently, just waiting to be picked up.”

“Waiting to be picked up?” Lorenzo, who’d leaned forward too, scoffed. “I suppose the owners don’t want it anymore? All went off after the grail?”

“No. They all died... A plague or something, or maybe there was a war...Anyway, the thing is...”

“The plague?”

Lundorf grunted dismissively.

“It was a long time ago. Anyway, the thing is...”

A sudden fight broke out on the next table and Lundorf paused as two sailors, one knife and five dice rolled past them. “The thing is, it’s covered by the jungle, so nobody else has found it yet.”

“How will you find it, then?” Lorenzo demanded.

“We’ve got a... well, I can’t say. But anyway, how about it, Florin old man? Let me introduce you to the Colonel tomorrow morning. You’d make a great officer.”

Florin drained his cup and got unsteadily to his feet. He swayed slightly before putting his hand on his heart and saying, “Lundorf, I love you and I’ll go with you anywhere. Anywhere in the world. But not to Lustria. There’s nothing there.”

“But there’s treasure!”

“Glory and gold,” Florin roared, snatching up somebody else’s goblet and drinking deeply.

The ensuing brawl carried them out of the tavern and away into the night. The last thing Florin remembered after they’d found the next tavern was telling Lorenzo to stab the next man who mentioned Lustria.

Lorenzo agreed to do it too, relieved that however drunk, his master wasn’t fool enough to swap the comforts of Bordeleaux for the depths of some miserable swamp.



CHAPTER THREE

Florin's pulse beat a painful rhythm inside his head. His stomach rolled on waves of nausea, each one stronger than the last. Florin pulled a pillow over his head and tried to go back to sleep, when a second jarring crash rang out through the room.

"For Shallya's sake!" he growled, sitting up and looking blearily around. The light hurt his eyes as he squinted across the chamber.

Lorenzo looked briefly up from the bundle of clothing that he was wrestling into his master's carriage trunk and said, "About time. Come on, help me to pack. We're going."

"Going? Going where?" Florin snapped irritably. "I'm not going anywhere. Wake me up after lunch and we'll go see Bastien then. Or maybe," he collapsed back onto his pillows with a groan, "we'll go tomorrow."

"No we won't," Lorenzo said, grim-faced as he stamped the last of his master's jackets flat and banged the lid shut.

"Well then, whenever. And will you stop making that noise? In fact, I order you to be quiet."

"Bastien sailed for Araby last night," Lorenzo told him, and started to beat the dust off Florin's saddlebags, the battered souvenirs of his long pawned horse.

"What?"

"We're going to Lustria."

"What!"

"Unless you want to explain to Mordicio why you can't pay him."

The shock of this news did wonders for Florin's hangover. He crawled out of bed and staggered over to the bucket of water Lorenzo provided for his morning wash. He dunked his head into it, letting the icy water clear his mind.

"You're telling me Bastien's not here anymore?" he asked, blinking in confusion and dripping water over the floorboards. "No. No, he would have told me."

"He probably would if you'd accepted his last dinner invitation. Or the one before that. But you were too busy."

"I was," Florin shrugged and slumped down onto the couch. He vaguely hoped that the sunlight that streamed through the window would stop his shivering as he tried to get to grips with the situation.

Lorenzo looked sceptically at his master. Sometimes he almost seemed to want to get himself into trouble. Still, the old retainer decided, he had only himself to blame. He should have made him visit his brother.

“Araby, you say?”

“Yes, boss, Araby. Now, we’re done. Here’s your trunk, and your saddlebags. And here’s a wheat sack for anything else you want. Do you want to take that bedding?”

“We’re going to Lustria, you say?” Florin asked, comprehension dawning.

“Yes. If we can get to your friend’s ship in time.”

“Damn it.”

As if rebelling at the news, Florin’s stomach rippled queasily and the urge to vomit became overwhelming. He staggered over to the window and leaned out over the street before loudly and copiously throwing up.

From below voices rose in protest.

“Hey, isn’t that the fellow from Mordicio’s house?” Florin asked weakly, wiping his mouth with his sleeve and pointing to the street below.

Lorenzo was beside him in an instant. He watched as the shaven-headed thug, supposedly the money-lender’s secretary, led his squad of cut-throats through the crowd below. Although their uniform consisted of nothing more than their bald pates, the five men might have been brothers: their broad shoulders and sour expressions were almost identical.

“Damn.”

“The roof, I think,” Florin said. He was already feeling better, cured by the need to take charge of the situation. “What’s in here?” he asked, slinging the saddlebags over his shoulder.

“Everything you need.”

“And my cloak?”

“Here,” Lorenzo held it up. “And your sword.”

“Right then, just bar that door on the way out, would you?” Florin asked and, with a deep breath, pulled himself out of the window.

The rotten tiles of the roof crumbled underfoot as he scrambled up to the dizzying heights of the ridge. Bordeleaux was spread out below him in all its glory: from the hard marble gaze of the Lady to the sprawl of workshops and slums that led down to the harbour.

Florin cast a quick glance in that direction, and counted the forest of masts that bobbed above a sea as flat and silver as a coin. Whether one of them was Lundorf’s he had no idea. All he could do now was hope.

After a moment, Lorenzo joined him and they started the long, scrabbling journey across the high desert of sloping roofs and battered chimneystacks. Although it wasn’t the first time they’d taken this route the two men felt their hearts beating briskly at the thought of the drop that lay below. The fingers with which they gripped the handholds and ridges soon became dangerously slick with sweat.

Occasionally one of them would slip as a tile gave way. Both men tried very hard not to listen to the falling stone as it bounced the long, long way down to the street below.

Soon they came to the end of their roof and halted abruptly. The deep moat of a crossroads cut across their path, and a sheer precipice of brickwork fell away to the shadowed street below. In its depths tiny and foreshortened citizens went about their business, oblivious to the two men perched above them.

Florin glanced across the street to the next block. Its walls were studded with balconies that reached out over the divide like fungus rings on the trunk of a tree.

“Right then, where’s the ladder?” he asked, peering around.

“Gone,” Lorenzo sighed and backed away from the edge. “Look, you can see the marks where we left it.”

“Damn it all,” Florin cursed viciously and kicked a lump of lichen. “People will steal anything. Now how are we supposed to get across?”

From behind them the distant crash of splintering wood sent a flock of pigeons wheeling up into the sky.

“We’ll have to stand and fight, then.”

“Bugger that,” Lorenzo said, horrified at the enthusiasm in his master’s voice. “We can jump.”

“Jump! We’d never make it. It must be twenty feet across at least.”

“It’s nowhere near twenty feet,” Lorenzo scoffed. “Watch this.”

Hawking up a lump of phlegm he drew back his head and spat it across the divide.

“It’s as easy as that.”

“Charming,” Florin said. “But hardly proof.”

The not too distant tinkle of breaking glass floated out across the rooftops.

“You’d think nothing of jumping the distance if it was on the ground. Look, it can’t be more than ten feet to that balcony, and it’s a bit lower than us.”

“No,” Florin said, standing up on the balls of his feet and stretching his back.

“No, give me my sword. We’ll stand and fight.”

Lorenzo watched his master roll his shoulders and flex his fingers, like an athlete about to hurl a javelin.

“My sword please,” he asked, his eyes sparkling.

With a shrug Lorenzo turned and walked back along the ridge of the roof, the scabbarded sword in his hand.

“Let me show you,” he said, and, before Florin could react, he’d sprinted to the edge of the roof and hurled himself into space.

For a moment he seemed to hang suspended in the air, arms and legs windmilling like some plump spider hanging on an invisible thread. The blur of movement that wrapped itself around him seemed to come from a world that was intent on rushing past. The brickwork, the lichen, the confused kaleidoscope of the street below and the simple wooden handrail of the balcony all hurtled past Lorenzo’s ungainly form as he plummeted downwards.

Florin watched open-mouthed as his servant flew through the air. Then, before he’d even had time to feel the first stab of alarm, Lorenzo had landed, his feet and palms slapping safely onto the tiled floor of the balcony in scant applause.

“There you go, boss,” he called back with a cheeky grin. “Easy as you like.”

“Yes. I see you took my sword with you. Just throw it back, would you?”

“It’d never reach,” Lorenzo shook his head regretfully. “You’d better just jump.”

Florin hesitated. Behind him the hulking shapes of Mordicio’s henchman had clambered up onto the roof. As the first of them crabbed cautiously forward and caught sight of Florin, he called something to his companions, and drew a short, fat-bladed cutlass.

Florin ground his teeth. If he’d been a merchant he’d already have fled. If he’d been a knight he’d be preparing to meet his pursuers with his belt knife. As it was he just swore, hurled his saddlebags over to Lorenzo, and prepared to jump.

“Come on, boss!” Lorenzo bellowed as though he were at a horse race. “You can do it!”

Florin rolled his neck, took a final look behind him, and jumped.

“Orcs, hey? So, tell me about the campaign,” Colonel van Delft said, leaning back in the cabin’s only chair and twirling the iron-grey tip of his moustache into a dangerous point. The shadow it cast onto the dank wooden wall behind him moved up and down, keeping time with the rocking of the ship and the swinging of the oil lamp.

“I was in charge of the horse,” Florin said, with poker-faced sincerity. “We had a dozen light cavalymen with lances and a mix of pistols and crossbows. We acted as scouts for the main column, and...”

“How do you find pistols?” van Delft interrupted.

Florin scratched his chin as he tried to remember what Lundorf had told him.

“They’re slow, and don’t have a very good range. My uncle said they were worse than a bow or a sword...”

“Sensible man. And he was Count d’Artaud, you say?”

Florin nodded.

“Never heard of him. But stick to the point, lad. What happened in the first engagement?”

“We’d spotted the orc settlement the evening before. It was a crude encampment: just a ring of sharpened stakes driven into the ground around some rotten animal skin tents. The flies were everywhere, and the smell...” Florin wrinkled his nose expressively. Van Delft nodded and leaned forward eagerly.

“Numbers?”

“Maybe a hundred,” Florin replied, trying not to make it sound like a guess. “Anyway, we didn’t attack them there. Instead we waited until morning, when the count prepared an ambush.”

“What kind?” van Delft demanded.

“What kind? I don’t know.”

The Colonel raised his eyebrows.

“I mean, the count just hid most of his men in one end of a ravine, with the rest sat up on the top with boulders and bows.”

“Aaaah,” the Colonel nodded approvingly. “I see. And you were the bait?”

“Exactly. We rode up to the orcs’ hovels the next day, fired a volley at them, and retreated. They all followed in a ragged sort of mob.”

“Really?” van Delft asked, thoughtfully running his hands through the white lion’s mane of his hair.

“Yes, pretty much. So we led them into the ravine, and the count’s waiting men. They held the orcs in the ravine while the men above stoned them.”

Van Delft seemed a little distracted as he gazed at the young man in front of him.

“It was a great victory,” Florin added, and wished that he had something else to say. He almost looked at Lundorf for reassurance, and only the experience he’d gained at so many card tables stopped him from doing so.

He didn’t know why, but he could sense that, here and now, his bluff was as near to being called as it would ever be.

Van Delft leant back and studied him.

“When you say that these orcs came at you in a disorganised mob, were they completely disorganised?”

“Well,” Florin hedged, “they were by our standards.”

“Hmm,” van Delft tapped his fingers onto his chair for a moment before reaching his decision. “All right then, Monsieur d’Artaud, I’m willing to take a risk on you. Sigmar knows the Bretonnians need an officer, and you’ll be hard-pressed to do worse than the last one.”

“Sir?”

“Ask Lundorf. He seems willing enough to fill you in on things. In fact, Lundorf,” the Colonel turned to regard the officer who, despite the bilious rolling of the ship, was standing to rigid attention beside him. “I’m holding you responsible for this young man. Any problem with that?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. And by the way, you’re a junior officer so your share of the loot is ten shares, no more, no less. Understand?”

Florin bit back on the instinct to immediately demand fifteen. Something about the Colonel’s manner suggested that he was not a man used to negotiation. Instead he just nodded his assent.

“Now then, gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me I have things to do.”

“Sir,” Lundorf snapped off a salute, the bang of his heels hitting the deck in perfect time with the raised fist of his salute.

For a second Florin considered trying to copy it, but contented himself with a low bow instead.

“I’m in your debt, my lord,” he said, sweeping his arm around. “And I’m sure that if you ever have reason to...”

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear?” the Colonel growled. “You’re dismissed.”

Van Delft watched the two friends march hurriedly out of the cabin, then leaned back and twirled the tips of his moustaches pensively.

Florin was hardly the man he’d have chosen as a brother officer. His military career seemed both scant and exaggerated; his manners effete even for a southerner. But then, in a long career that had taken him from Imperial cadet to mercenary commander, van Delft had long since learned to make do with the materials at hand. He’d also learned to trust the judgment of officers like Lundorf.

Well, up to a point.

And anyway, after the Bretonnians' last officer a trained chimp would be an improvement.

Smiling at his own wit the Colonel dismissed the matter from his mind, and stalked out of the claustrophobic gloom of his cabin in search of his secretary.

Lundorf led Florin and Lorenzo off the Colonel's flagship and back onto the pier. Now, hours from the flotilla's departure, its old timbers were groaning beneath the weight of the crowds which thronged it.

Carters cursed and swore as they pushed their way forward, huge casks of fresh water balanced precariously upon their vehicles. Merchants dragged or carried sacks of vegetables, or nets of fruit, or skins of wines unfit for any tavern.

Amongst all this desperate, last minute commerce, mercenaries from a dozen races and in a hundred stages of drunkenness swaggered their way back to their ships. They shoved their way arrogantly through the merchants; the whores that remained perched on the arms of some of them cackling as loudly as the seagulls that circled greedily overhead.

"Quite a little army your Colonel's got here," Florin raised his voice as the three of them elbowed their way through the crowd.

"Yes, and all to fit into three ships," Lundorf laughed. "Not that they're bad old tubs really. Of course the Colonel bagged the best one, the *Hippogriff*. It used to be a spice freighter, apparently, so it's relatively dry. I was damned lucky to get my lads on it."

Then there's the *Beaujelois* here, the Tileans' transport," Lundorf continued, gesturing towards the fat bottomed cog that they were shoving their way past. "By Sigmar, you should see the stuff they eat. I've never smelt such a foul combination. You there, get away!"

An old woman, who was hunched over the basket of lemons she was carrying, had thrown herself in their path to thrust some of her wares towards them.

"A penny apiece," she shrieked. "Cheapest in the city."

"Begone, crone," Lundorf pushed past her, but Florin put a hand on his arm.

"Let's buy some," Florin decided. "My father said they ward off the sea weakness."

"Sea weakness?"

"Yes. Something to do with being out of sight of land."

"Well, if you say so. How much for the basket, crone?"

"For you, your lordship, five gold crowns," she bared a mouthful of rotten teeth and shrinking gums in what was supposed to be a winning smile. "And you can take the basket, too."

"Five gold crowns?" Lorenzo asked, aghast, but Lundorf had already paid. The old woman dropped the coin into the front of her ragged bodice and narrowing her eyes suddenly with the caution of a millionaire in a poorhouse, she slipped away into the crowd.

"Here you go," Lundorf said, turning to present the basket to the manservant. "Just look after those, would you?"

Before Lorenzo could argue Lundorf was once more ploughing ahead into the crowd.

“And there’s your boat,” Lundorf told them, five minutes later. The *Destrier*. Don’t worry, she’s not as bad as she looks.”

“No?” Florin said dubiously. He pushed his way past a knot of street children to study the bobbing wooden box that would be his home for the next three months.

The *Destrier* was a cog, a thickly built barrel of a ship designed to withstand the towering seas of the north. The elegant lines of the Tilean vessels that lay at anchor beyond had no parallels in her bulky frame. She wallowed in the sea as gracelessly, and as comfortably, as a pig in its sty.

She was also a lot smaller than most of the other vessels. Against the backdrop of Bordeleaux’s distant heights, even against the backdrop of the other merchantmen, the *Destrier* looked tiny. In fact, apart from its towering central mast, the only thing that was big about the ship was the smell of brine and unwashed bodies that wafted from her open holds.

“I’m not surprised that my predecessor jumped ship,” Florin guessed, but Lundorf shook his head.

“Oh no, it was nothing like that. There was just some, ah, unpleasantness with the witch hunters at the last port. Bad business.”

“I bet it was,” Florin barked with laughter. Then he frowned as he watched the stream of men and goods disappearing into the *Destrier*’s dank interior. It seemed that, even as he watched, more bodies and bundles had disappeared into the ship’s entrails than was possible. It was as though the ship were no more than a trapdoor to some other place.

“Nice looking fellows,” Lorenzo muttered sarcastically as a dozen drunken mercenaries staggered over the boarding planks. Their accents were harsh, and despite the warmth of the Bretonnian sun their flushed faces were wrapped in shapeless fur hoods. One of their number was being dragged unceremoniously behind them, his heels cutting deep ruts through the filth of the pier.

“Their captain,” Lundorf explained, with a shrug. “It’s a shame. Those Kislevites can be real daemons if they’re properly led. You needn’t worry about that, though. You’re only responsible for your fellow countrymen. There’s about a score of them, I think. Anyway, I’ll introduce you to the captain of the ship, and then I must be off to see how my lot are doing.”

Then, for the first time since he’d fled from his chambers, Florin paused. What was he doing here? He’d never been in a battle, never commanded so much as a squad. How had he bluffed his way into command of a hardened mercenary company?

He felt a sudden vertiginous sense of doubt, like a sleepwalker who awakes to find himself about to step over a high precipice, and for a moment he stood balanced on the very brink of turning back.

The roar of the world around him grew silent and, in some deep part of his soul, a dice began to spin. Each of its faces held a vision of a different route. He held his breath as it revolved, revealing different paths to take.

Now Mordicio’s mercy.

Now a passage to Araby.

“Are you all right, old man?” Lundorf asked, slapping him on the back.

And the dice was cast.

“Yes,” Florin said, drawing himself up with a sudden certainty. “Yes, I’m ready. Let’s see my new command.”

“Good man,” Lundorf said approvingly, and led him into the organised chaos of the *Destrier*’s foredeck.



CHAPTER FOUR

The shoals around Bordeleaux were numerous, and sharp toothed. Some of them still held the ships they'd wrecked up above the waterline: rotting trophies to warn the unwary. Others, infinitely more dangerous, lurked unseen below the waterline. Their granite fangs thrust up from the depths like stone gutting knives, accidental predators that were as dangerous as anything else in the vast ocean beyond.

Despite the aid of Bordeleaux's hired pilots, Captain-Owner Gorth hadn't wanted a gaggle of drunken mercenaries getting under his men's feet whilst they coaxed their vessels past these guardians. So, with all the thoughtfulness of a natural despot he'd had them sealed in their cabins, and left them to curse and squabble as the flotilla cautiously nosed its way through the grey chill of the morning mist.

Now, however, with the coastline sinking under the far horizon, the hatches had been thrown open. The mercenaries clambered up from their confinement and blinked in the dazzling sunlight as they staggered and slid across the rolling deck.

Florin stood perched on the height of the stern deck, the ragged score of Bretonnians that comprised his command gathered on the deck below him. The few Kislevites who had so far recovered from the previous day's drinking stood blearily around the gunwales, watching their foreign comrades like hungover bears. Their captain was still nowhere to be seen, and Florin took some scant comfort from this failing in his brother officer.

But for now, he was content to ignore both these northern savages and the sailors that swung overhead like clothed monkeys. For now all he was worried about were his own men.

Whether by accident or design they looked every inch the dogs of war, these Bretonnians. They wore their scars with as much unconscious pride as they did their weapons, and although many of them were as unshaven and dirty as peasants, their boots and their armour gleamed with professional care.

Not for the first time Florin wished that he'd taken the time to pick up some armour. He felt like an actor without a costume, and he wondered how much his fine town clothes had added to the mercenaries' obvious resentment of him. It showed in every scowling face and muttered word, the atmosphere as tense as the ropes which hummed and sang above their heads.

He drew himself up in unconscious defiance of their hostility and spoke.

"I," Florin began, meeting and holding each man's eye in turn, "am Captain Florin d'Artaud. I am your new leader."

The men greeted this news with a uniform expression of distaste. Quelling the urge to glower back at them, he pressed on.

"I don't know you, or what you can do. For all I know you might be cowards, or traitors, or fools."

A growl of resentment rippled through the men, and Lorenzo, who stood behind them, made a desperate chopping gesture at his throat.

"But then, for all you know, so might I be." Florin grinned wide enough to show his molars. To his immense relief some of the men smiled back. "So I think that the sooner we find out about each other, the better."

One of the mercenaries, a tall gangling figure, none of whose clothes seemed to really fit, barked with laughter.

"And how will we do that?" he asked. "Should we sail back to Madam Gourmelon's and ask your mother?"

The tension erupted into a wave of raucous laughter as all eyes turned to see if their new captain would react to the insult.

Florin reacted.

Before even he knew what he was going to do he'd leapt from his perch and onto the deck, his boots thumping onto the *Destrier's*

deck like a great fist. A couple of steps and he was standing close enough to the mercenary to count the broken veins on his nose. Up this close the man's height was apparent, but any regrets Florin might have felt about this confrontation were lost beneath the glow of rage that burned in his chest.

"What did you say?" he hissed, following the mercenary as he took a step back.

The man swallowed, and pulled nervously at his chin, horribly aware of his friends' avid observation and of Florin's rage.

"I asked you what you said," Florin repeated, edging closer. Once more the man stepped back, but now, beneath his comrades' scrutiny, defiance had replaced anxiety in his eyes.

"I say what I like," he boasted, a little uncertainly. "You can't do anything about it."

"Yes," Florin grinned mirthlessly, "I can. Tomorrow, when the sun rises full over the horizon, you and I will fight. We'll fight here, and until death or mercy. Lorenzo!" Florin bellowed for his manservant who appeared from behind the tall mercenary's back. "You'll be my second. Ask this gentleman what weapons he chooses."

"What weapons do you choose?" Lorenzo asked unhappily.

"You can't challenge me to a duel," the mercenary began uncertainly. "Regulations say that..."

A chorus of jeers drowned out the rest of his sentence. He looked around, his eyes darting from one mocking face to the next. Like a rat caught in a trap he realised that this was not how things had been supposed to go.

"Go on, Jacques," one of the friends called out, "you started this. Can't back away now."

The gathered men roared their agreement and Jacques, bowing to the inevitable, shrugged miserably.

“So, what weapons do you choose?” Lorenzo repeated.

The mercenary glanced down at the rapier Florin wore and pursed his lips. For all he knew this milky-skinned young fop, although obviously never battle hardened, had practiced every day of his life with the sword.

No matter, he thought, with rising confidence.

“Very well, then,” he said, “the weapons I choose are gutting knives.”

“That’s hardly usual,” Lorenzo complained, but Jacques wouldn’t be moved.

“Oh, well, if you want to call the whole thing off...”

“Not at all,” Florin interjected smoothly. “Gutting knives it is. Well then, gentlemen. I can’t see any point in wasting any more of each other’s time for the moment. You’re dismissed.”

And with that Florin turned on his heel and stalked up to the forecastle. A forbidden area to all but officers and seamen, it was now deserted. Florin gathered his thoughts as the cold wind mockingly. The occasional flecks of sea foam that splashed into his face feeling as cold as chips of ice. Behind him his men’s voices were raised in heated discussion, and he frowned with concentration as he tried to hear what they were saying.

“Well, boss,” said Lorenzo, coming up behind him, “that could have gone better.”

“I suppose it could.”

“Do you think he knows that you carry a knife in your boot?” Lorenzo asked innocently.

“I doubt it.”

“Well, I don’t suppose he needs to know.”

Florin just grunted, and turned his face to meet a fresh blast of wind.

“He’s a big fellow though.”

“So he’ll make a big example.”

“Let’s hope so,” Lorenzo muttered. “Let’s hope so.”

The two men fell into companionable silence as the *Destrier* pushed onwards, eagerly pursuing the setting sun. Behind them Jacques’ comrades were busy arguing about which knife he would use to remove their new officer, and the sound of whetstones on steel began to whisper throughout the ship.

“But why didn’t you just put him on a charge?” Lundorf asked later that night. “You can’t go duelling every time a soldier mutters.”

“He didn’t mutter,” Florin defended himself. “And anyway, I’ll make an example of him.”

Lundorf, who’d begged a boat to come and see if the rumours that had swept the flotilla were true, grunted cynically. They were sitting in the tiny cupboard of a cabin Florin had been assigned. He shifted uncomfortably on the bail of spare sailcloth on which he sat, and wiggled his foot beneath the single bunk.

“Yes, a fine example. This probably hasn’t occurred to you, but fighting with a sword like a gentleman and brawling with a gutting knife are two different things.

Have you ever seen a gutting knife? Fishmongers use them. They're no more than hooked razors. How can you expect to beat a man with such a peasant's weapon?"

Florin ignored Lorenzo's conspiratorial wink, and said nothing.

"This Jacques has quite a reputation too, or so my sergeant tells me. Apparently they call him Ribbons. Because of what he cuts his opponents into. Gutting knives! Horrible weapons. Give me cannon any day."

"Yes, so much more civilised to blow a man up," Lorenzo muttered with barely a hint of sarcasm.

"Yes," Lundorf nodded distractedly. "Look, tell you what, old man. Why don't you let me have a word with the Colonel? I'm sure we can find some sort of charge to lock your man up on."

"Out of the question," Florin shook his head. "Pull a stunt like that now and what would everybody think? Believe me, it's better to take the risk and do it this way."

"Yes, I thought you'd be keen to do the honourable thing," Lundorf smiled approvingly.

Although that wasn't quite what he'd meant, Florin nodded. Lorenzo just rolled his eyes, a flash of white in the shadows that nobody noticed.

"Well, anyway," Lundorf continued, "If you'll take my advice you'll start keeping your men occupied rather than brawling with them. Of course I know you have military experience with the 'count'." He paused to wink heavily, the unfamiliar gesture twisting his entire face. "But I'm always keen to help a brother officer. So, I'm going to give you Orbrant."

"Orbrant?" Florin frowned. "What's an Orbrant?"

"Not a what," Lundorf roared with laughter, "a who! Orbrant's one of my lads, and one of the best sergeants I've ever seen. And he's all yours, old man. Lorenzo, pop outside the cabin and tell Orbrant that he can come in and have your seat. He's the fellow in the hood who rowed over with me."

Lorenzo looked mutinously at Florin, who shrugged apologetically, before letting himself out of the tiny cabin. A moment later the door opened again and Orbrant stepped inside.

If he was the best sergeant Lundorf had ever seen, he certainly didn't look the part. He was of average size, and average build. His clothes, although well mended, were of a washed-out black broadcloth, and he was wearing no armour.

He also lacked the bristling moustaches or waxed beards of his comrades, and unlike the others Orbrant carried a single weapon:

an ornately carved warhammer. Blunt on one side and spiked on the other, the metal of its construction glowed as silver as a winter moon despite the buttermilk glow of the cabin's lantern.

Apart from this unusual weapon the only other distinguishing things about this undistinguished man were the smoothly shaved dome of his head and the piercing blue of his eyes. The wrinkles that creased the skin around them were the only things that gave his age away and Florin guessed that he was perhaps forty.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" he asked as he stooped to enter the cabin.

"Yes, sergeant. Please, take a seat. This is Captain d'Artaud, the officer I was telling you about."

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Orbrant nodded to Florin, who nodded back.

“Lun... Captain Lundorf tells me that you’re an excellent sergeant.”

“Yes,” Orbrant agreed, the blue depths of his eyes devoid of either modesty or hesitation. “Sigmar has blessed me with a proficiency in war.”

“I wish that I could say the same,” Florin admitted, and immediately wished that he hadn’t. But Orbrant didn’t seem to mind the slip.

“So I understand,” he said softly. “But did your god bless you with the gift of understanding?”

“Yes,” Florin decided after a pause, “I think that she did.”

“Very well, then. I’ll be happy to serve in your company, Captain d’Artaud.”

“Splendid,” said Lundorf. “Well done, Orbrant.”

“You don’t have to thank me, sir. I’ve always been keen to be away from the evil that you carry in your ship.”

“The evil?” Florin asked, surprised. “What do you mean?”

Lundorf sighed.

“It’s nothing. Sergeant Orbrant is just a little old-fashioned.”

Orbrant turned to regard his officer, his face a perfectly respectful blank.

“The Grand Theogonist has decreed that the followers of the colleges are to be spared,” Orbrant shrugged regretfully. “And yet, in all sorcery there is the taint of Chaos.”

The sergeant’s voice had hardened, and his eyes flickered with a cold blue flame of fanaticism.

Perhaps, Florin thought uneasily, he isn’t such an average man after all.

“Welt, sergeant, I don’t have your knowledge of these things,” Lundorf said. “But although I’m sure you’re right, you must admit that these fellows come in damned handy in a battle.”

Orbrant’s hand strayed to the haft of his warhammer as he nodded reluctant agreement.

“Aye, that they do. But faith and well forged steel serve just as well.”

“By the way, Florin,” Lundorf said, “how many men do you find yourself with?”

“A couple of dozen,” Florin told him. Although he was curious to know what exactly Orbrant considered to be the evil that Lundorf’s ship carried he could also see how obviously his old friend was trying to change the subject. “They’re a rough-looking lot, hardly like the troops that used to garrison Marienburg.”

Orbrant nodded with professional interest.

“Don’t let that fool you, captain. Mercenaries never look quite as polished as garrison troops, but they can be just as effective. How are your men armed?”

“Variously,” Florin explained. “They all seem to carry swords, daggers, a couple of pistols.”

“Don’t they have pole arms or guns stored below?”

“Well... I don’t know,” he admitted, fighting against the instinct to bluff.

“We’ll check on their arms tomorrow,” Orbrant decided. “What about NCOs? Do they have any? Or have you appointed any provisionally yet?”

“I don’t know,” Florin admitted uncomfortably.

Orbrant noticed his embarrassment and paused.

“Don’t worry about it, Mrs. d’Artaud. You’ll learn all of this as we turn you into a real captain.”

“What do you mean ‘a real captain’?” Florin asked haughtily.

“You don’t have to be so prickly around the sergeant, you know,” Lundorf contorted his face into another conspiratorial wink. “Just listen to his advice and you’ll do fine.”

“Now then,” Orbrant pressed on, unmoved. “How long have your company been together for?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have they ever fought as a unit before?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Have they ever fought against orcs?”

Florin shrugged.

“Did you ask them?”

“No.”

“Have you ever fought against orcs?”

“N...” Florin stopped himself.

“No,” Orbrant said and exchanged a knowing glance with Lundorf. “Thought not. Might be best if you didn’t mention that to anyone else though.”

He held Florin’s eye for a moment; his own twinkling with what could almost have been good humour.

“Don’t look so miserable, captain,” he said. “I’ve run a dozen companies officered by much bigger idiots than you. At least you don’t have any illusions about your own capability.”

“Thanks,” Florin deadpanned. “But why are you so keen to help me? Do you want a bigger share?”

“No,” The spark of sympathy died in Orbrant’s manner as quickly as it had been born, “I’m helping you to help the expedition. And my reasons for doing that are my own alone.”

“Well, all right. But before you continue, sergeant, I might as well admit now that, apart from the fact that I’m due to fight a duel with one of them in a few hours’ time, I know nothing about my troops.”

“Then tomorrow we can call them in here one at a time to find out everything we need to know,” Orbrant decided. “If that’s acceptable to you, captain?”

“Um, yes. That’s acceptable sergeant.”

“Good. Now if you’ll excuse me I’ll go and find a place to sleep amongst them.”

“You can stay in here if you like,” Florin offered. “Nobody’s using the hammock. And I’m hardly in a position to stand on ceremony with you.”

“No, I’ll stay with the men. So should your manservant, if you don’t mind me saying so, captain. His eyes and ears would be better off in the midst of the lads’ quarters rather than wasted up here.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Very well. Goodnight, sir. Captain Lundorf.”

“Night, Orbrant,” Lundorf waved as the sergeant let himself out, pulling the door open so quickly that Lorenzo, who’d been intently eavesdropping, almost fell into the cabin.

“Just came to fetch my pipe,” he lied comfortably, before hurrying away to leave Florin and his friend alone once more. This time he really did leave them, too. After all, the ship was awash with excited men willing to bet on ill informed hunches about tomorrow’s fight, and as far as Lorenzo was concerned his duty was to make as much money from it as possible.

After he had gone the two men sat in a thoughtful silence.

“Well, old man, looks like you got Orbrant just in time. He’ll soon have your lot licked into shape.”

“Yes, them and me both,” Florin said ruefully. “But what’s all this about having evil on your ship?”

“It’s nothing,” Lundorf waved the question away. “We were lucky enough to pick up a wizard in Marienburg. He’s a decent enough fellow. Keeps himself to himself. And he comes with all sorts of references and guarantees from one of the colleges of magic. Sigmar alone knows why he’s thrown in his lot with us.”

“Which of the colleges is he from?” Florin wondered, and Lundorf just shrugged.

“Celestial, I think. Is that the one to do with comets? I’m not really sure. He doesn’t come out of his cabin much, so I’ve never been able to ask him. Orbrant reckons he’s in there consorting with daemons, but from the contents of the buckets his man brings out I doubt if he has the time.”

“Feels the sea, does he?”

“Oh yes. You can hear him hurling half way across the deck.”

The two friends laughed at the mage’s discomfort as Florin reached beneath his mattress and produced a bottle of brandy. He pulled the cork out with his teeth and took a swig before passing it to Lundorf.

“Cheers,” he said and took a pull of the burning liquid. “Damn, but that’s strong! Better watch it. Don’t want to wake up too groggy tomorrow.”

“No,” Florin agreed unhappily. For a while he’d forgotten all about the duel. He took another drink and cast about for something to take his mind off the approaching confrontation.

“So tell me, Lundorf, why are you here? I always knew you were going to be a soldier, but a mercenary? I thought that Karl Franz would have found employment for you back in the Empire.”

“The Emperor will have my services in time,” Lundorf nodded, his eyes darkening as he took the bottle. This time the liquor felt smoother as he poured it down his throat. “But I wanted to get away. Father’s a decent man, and the academy was an excellent institution, but... oh, I don’t know. I suppose I wanted to do something on my own. You know how it is.”

“Yes,” Florin agreed, thinking of the stuffy town house and the stuffy warehouses and the stuffy society his elder brother thought himself so lucky to have inherited.

“Yes, I know how it is. Hey Lundorf.”

“Yes?”

“To glory and gold,” he said softly, and drank from the cheap glass of the brandy bottle like a knight from the grail.

“Yes,” Lundorf agreed, taking the bottle from his friend. “Glory and gold.”

Below decks the sound of violence broke out, but the two old friends ignored it. They were contemplating the violence yet to come.

Orbrant led the Bretonnians out onto the deck, the chill pre-dawn breeze tugging at his threadbare clothing. Amongst the shadows that haunted the ship his smooth scalp gleamed as white as bone, and his eyes were dark pits.

But there was a spark of contentment in those cold eyes this morning, and in the way that the sergeant paced slowly across the deck. He looked as happy as a terrier that had just spent a night in a barn full of rats.

Some of the men who followed him, however, looked far from content. Two of them had their arms in slings. One hobbled. Others sported ugly grey bruises or beards matted with darkly dried blood. As they passed Orbrant to find places around the deck some of them looked sullen, others rueful, most resigned.

He emerged now, the last man in the procession. Although his confidence had survived Orbrant’s kindness, Jacques had spent a long and sleepless night. Insomnia had left dark bruises beneath his eyes and had coloured his skin as grey as his collar.

But by now his pulse was already beating, adrenaline lifting his spirits as he greeted the ragged chorus of his mates’ cheers with a swaggering bow, and a wide grin that might almost have been genuine.

The sky to the east reddened with the light of the approaching sun. It wasn’t until the fiery orb had finally emerged from the sea that Florin appeared. He strolled casually onto the deck, Lundorf and Lorenzo following in his wake, and greeted the assembled men.

“Good morning,” he said, the well-practiced confidence of his voice flawlessly smooth despite his dry mouth and damp palms.

The knots of Bretonnians, Kislevites and sailors that had by now surrounded the fighting deck like an amphitheatre of unwashed flesh, returned his greeting impatiently. Rumour and counter-rumour had swept through the ship’s company, each new conjecture fuelling a dozen more. By now so much money was riding on the outcome of this duel that Jacques and Florin weren’t the only ones who had learned to dread the warmth of this new day.

They looked at each other now, the light of the growing sun already painting them both blood-red. Despite their bravado both men saw their own fear reflected in the other’s eyes, and both men respected it.

For a moment they stood almost as comrades in the face of the danger into which they were both headed. The arrogance and the anger which had brought them here had gone now, washed away by a night of phantoms and anxious reflection. All that remained, all that held them on this collision course, was pride.

As the sun cleared the distant horizon and began its long track over a world still full of promise, that hardly seemed enough.

Jacques considered apologising. More used to action and insults than diplomacy he struggled to find the words, some way of taking back the meaningless insult of the day before without losing face with his comrades.

But it was too late. Before he could find such words Lorenzo, his voice booming with all the professionalism of the world's ugliest ringmaster, pushed his way into the centre of the deck to address the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, sparking a torrent of catcalls and raucous laughter, "we are here this morning to settle a matter of honour between two of our gentlemen colleagues."

He waited for the nervous jeering to die down before carrying on.

"The duel is to be fought between Captain Sir Florin d'Artaud, late of Bordeleaux, and Jacques Ribbon who, according to his second, is from 'nowhere in particular'. A fine town, I'm sure."

"I think it's in Kislev," one of the sailors shouted from the safety of the rigging, provoking a dozen bloodcurdling threats from below.

"And now the sun has risen," Lorenzo pressed on, "and the appointed time has come. It remains only for me to remind the more simple-minded among you of the rules. Only the participants may fight, and only with their chosen weapons: gutting knives."

Lorenzo paused to see if the crowd would respond to the jibe, but now, with the promise of blood drawing so near, they were no longer really listening. Instead they were busy jostling for position, leaning hungrily forward like wolves over a fresh kill.

"The duellists will fight until death or surrender," Lorenzo concluded. "Now if you gentlemen will shake hands and return to your starting posts we can begin."

Florin, who had stripped to the waist in defiance of the dawn chill, weighed his knife carefully in his left hand and stepped forward, right hand outstretched. Jacques did the same and they briefly clasped hands. Their cold sweat mingled as their frightened eyes met. Stripped of his friends and his arrogance Florin realised for the first time how young his opponent was.

And how nervous.

"If you gentlemen will stay in your corners until I count down to zero," Lorenzo said, no longer having to raise his voice. The catcalls and cheers had died away. Now there was nothing to rival his voice except for the eerie song of the wind in the rigging.

"Five," he began, and watched Florin rolling his shoulders, muscles clenching and unclenching beneath the rough marble of his goose pimpled skin.

"Four."

Jacques took a long, drawn out breath, and twitched his knife from side to side in nervous anticipation.

"Three."

A Kislevite called out drunkenly, and was quickly silenced by his mates.

"Two."

Lorenzo, his pulse racing, was seized by a sudden and irrational reluctance to continue.

“One,” he whined, and swallowed the lump in his throat.

He glanced to one side to notice that Jacques had become still, his breathing had calmed, his stance had relaxed. A real professional.

Damn, thought Lorenzo, and said, “Zero.”

Nothing happened.

Florin and his opponent both stood and watched one another, seemingly more relaxed than any of the breathless crowd that surrounded them. In the silence the wind blew, and the planking creaked, and the sails snapped and bulged greedily.

And then Jacques attacked.

With a sudden, wild yell he hurled himself forward. His spindly frame pirouetted across the deck with a surprising grace, and the crowd erupted into a roar of excitement as he closed on Florin.

The sickle-shaped blur of his knife whipped through the air towards his opponent’s throat and Florin side stepped, dipping out of the way as the blade flickered over his head.

But as he ducked, Jacques’ fist rocketed out to catch him on the chin. The punch connected with a dull thump that sent Florin flying back against the gunwale, stars floating through his field of vision and the taste of blood sharp on his tongue.

He barely had time to spit before Jacques was on him again, yellowed teeth bared in a snarl as he flicked the razored hook of his knife towards his captain’s eyes.

This time Florin jumped forward, trying to get inside the blow, but Jacques saw the movement in time and leapt to one side. He let Florin rocket past him. Then he reversed his grip on the knife and struck, slashing the gutting knife across the muscles of Florin’s back with a wide, easy swing.

A spray of blood, ruby bright in the morning sunlight, burst through the air. The crowd howled out in a storm of appreciation.

Florin, his face deathly pale, turned to face Jacques. He tried to ignore the deep burning pain and the terrifying flow of blood that pulsed down his spine. Instead he concentrated on his enemy.

He couldn’t believe how agile the mercenary was, how quick. For the first time, he realised that he was facing an opponent who was much, much better than he was.

Deep within his stomach the first hint of panic twisted and stretched, like some slowly awakening beast.

Think, Florin told himself. Think.

Jacques circled around, taking his time now that his enemy was bleeding. He watched him raise the unfamiliar blade of his knife uncertainly and take a step forward. Then another. And then he stumbled, staggering back to his feet.

The crowd howled at the scent of exhaustion, their faces contorted into masks of greed satiated or denied.

Jacques watched his opponent shaking his head like a bull in the ring as he retreated across the deck, leaving a trail of bloody droplets behind him. He realised that he must have opened an artery as, weak from blood loss, Florin dropped his unused razor onto the hard planking of the deck and sank to his knees.

The cacophony of the crowd grew deafening as he cautiously approached his dying officer, grabbed a fist full of his hair and lifted his head. The vulnerable flesh

beneath Florin's chin was pale and untanned, and for a second Jacques found himself hesitating. Then he steeled himself and brought the razor down.

But he was too late.

Before he could administer the coup de grace he felt his ankles gripped and his feet leaving the floor. With a shout of surprise he fell backwards, arms flying out instinctively to break his fall. Florin, yelling through a mouthful of bloodied teeth, leapt to his feet and spun his opponent around so that he hit the deck nose first.

There was the crunch of breaking cartilage, followed by a gout of blood, but before the mercenary had a chance to feel the pain of his broken nose Florin had pulled his ankles as wide apart as the handles of a wheel barrow and kicked him between the legs.

Jacques' scream rose even higher than the roar of the crowd as Florin, eyes wild with desperation, drew back his foot and kicked again. Jacques, his mind blank of everything but for the incredible pain that had exploded in his groin, dropped his razor and reached down to protect himself.

As he did so, Florin flipped him onto his back, lifted his foot, and stamped down. Through the prism of his tears Jacques saw the descending horse shoe of his captain's heel as it snapped down onto his upturned chin.

And then it was all over.

"Stitch that!" Lorenzo, suddenly a much richer man, howled with glee.

"Well done," said Lundorf, relieved if a little uncertain of his friend's technique.

But the last thing that Florin heard before he collapsed was the voice of the crowd, roaring like some great monster as he fell backwards into the warmth of unconsciousness and a pool of his own blood.



CHAPTER FIVE

The wind had been merciful. It had waited until the ship's surgeon had finished sewing up the ruin of Florin's back before it began to play.

It started gently enough: merely rippling patterns into the rolling surface of the water and scattering the light of the setting sun. Then, gradually, it became bolder, rushing across the water in sudden charges that sprayed ruffs of white water up from the top of the swells. The foam shone ice-white as it flecked the air, the chill brightness belied by the warmth of the breeze.

The sea soon joined in with the fun. It rolled its waves higher and sharpened their ridges, so that instead of just little flecks the wind could rip great white sprays from their heads. Trailing these crests back like plumes from a warrior's helmet the wind, caught up in the excitement of the game, blew harder.

The sea wasn't to be outdone. It reared up in response, carving valleys and mountains from its surface in shapes designed to challenge the wind's imagination.

Overhead the sky became jealous. Its scowl became greyer as the game below grew rougher, and the light bled out of the world. Soon it began to growl with anger, bitter at the fun that its brothers were having, but the wind and the sea were too enthralled to notice.

It wasn't until the sky began to spit with frustration, the first crackling flames of its rage flashing down to hiss across the cloud shadowed water, that things began to turn nasty. Suddenly this was no longer a game.

Suddenly this was war.

Yet had an eagle been watching the *Destrier* and her two sisters as they rode through the battle it would have seen little amiss. Bobbing this way and that, the ships seemed happy enough amongst the thrashing of the sea. They moved as effortlessly as motes of dust on a summer's breeze, now racing up to new heights on heaving swells, now plunging suddenly down into the green shadowy depths below. It seemed all the same to the little flotilla, even when their formation was broken and they were scattered across the ocean's boiling surface like matchsticks in a millrace.

But amongst the ships' passengers, the voyage was rapidly collapsing into a nightmare. The mocking whine of the wind was interspersed with the blunt impact of the sea against fragile walls. The terrifying groan of tortured timbers split the air, blending with the cries of men sure their world was about to end.

Only the sailors remained silent. Their faces grim and white beneath a sheen of salt spray they worked swiftly but calmly, bound by a discipline forged from fear and confidence in equal measure. Swinging around their ropes and hanging from winch handles like acrobats they dragged the sails down, fighting the howling wind for possession of the cloth.

Their captain watched them, silent for the most part. His men knew what they were doing. He wouldn't burden them with unnecessary orders.

Only when danger loomed ahead did he step in. Once a loose boom, snapping free of its restraining cord, brought him racing down to the stern, a hastily assembled gang of men at his heels.

Later a coil of rope rolled across the deck, the tangled hemp as dangerous as a snare on the pitching ship. He and the first mate battled their way down to clear it away, and then he worked his way up to the stern to find out why the foresail still remained unfurled.

Above him the clouds ripened into a heavy black mass and then, suddenly, burst apart into a torrent of rain.

An hour later the storm proper began.

Lorenzo sat and shivered. He cursed, low and loud, muttering the profanities with the sort of quiet intensity that other men reserve for prayer. The fact that he was kneeling on the floor, leaning over a bucket as other, more spiritual men, might lean over a reliquary, just added to the illusion.

Every now and again he'd crawl to his feet, being sure to keep at least one handhold clamped onto the interior of the pitching cabin, and would look down on Florin. In the days, or perhaps weeks, since the storm had begun his master had sunk into a deep, burning fever.

"Gods rot the bollocks off that cursed surgeon," Lorenzo repeated for the hundredth time as he rolled Florin onto his side and checked the brown stained mass of his bandages. Reluctantly he peeled them back, revealing the jagged rail of the poorly stitched wound that followed the bumps of his spine.

It was weeping again: a thick yellow liquid seeped out from between the stitches.

According to the surgeon that was a good thing. Perhaps that was why he'd stayed locked in his own quarters since the storm had begun.

"Worthless scum," Lorenzo decided as he lent to feel Florin's brow. The burning flesh beneath his hand was worryingly dry, and Lorenzo knew that it was time to try and get some more water into him.

"What a gods forsaken place," he grumbled as a sudden, gut-wrenching yaw sent his knuckles cracking painfully against the wall and his boot heels squeaking across the planking. He waited until the ship had righted herself before crawling across the tiny room to recover the water skin.

It felt worryingly slack, almost empty. Never the less Lorenzo unhooked it and took it back to Florin.

"Here you go, boss," he said, pinching Florin's stubbled chin and shaking his head back and forth. The only response was a groan of complaint, but that was good enough for Lorenzo.

Carefully, bracing his knees beneath the bunk, he lifted his master's head and put the spout to his lips.

"Drink up," he demanded, lifting the flask higher so that the last swig of their water spilled down, some over Florin's face, some into his mouth.

Lorenzo squeezed the water skin and realised that it was empty.

He cursed again, and looked resentfully at the tightly sealed door of their cabin. The skipper had promised to send water into them twice a day. He'd promised soup too, come to think of it. But for the past few days there'd been no sign of water, or of soup, or anything else.

For all Lorenzo knew he and Florin were the last survivors of a ghost ship. The two of them would rot away in the squalid isolation of this tiny cabin whilst the *Destrier* swept to her doom.

He tore his thoughts away from that disturbing idea and instead indulged himself in a brief fantasy, a dream of impossible comfort that involved nothing more than curling up in his bunk and waiting for the storm to pass.

A horrible squeaking groan from the ship's innards snapped him back to reality. He knew that he no longer had a choice. Without water Florin's fever would devour him, and he'd no more allow that to happen to his friend than his friend would allow it to happen to him.

Struggling out of his jerkin and leaving it in the dryness of the cabin Lorenzo hung the four water skins he'd managed to scrounge across his chest and opened the cabin door.

The storm, it seemed, had been waiting for that very moment. With a deafening roar it pushed past him in an arc of salt spray and howling wind, the force of it scouring the inside of the cabin.

Lorenzo, head bowed down as he struggled out of the cabin onto the lifting deck, swung the door shut behind him. The slam of wood on wood was lost in the cacophony. The spray that lashed across the pitching deck was thicker than rain, and the manservant found himself spitting out bitter mouthfuls of sea water as he seized one of the ropes that lined the *Destrier's* gunwale and pulled himself forward.

He tried not to look over the side into the thrashing abyss that waited below. Beneath the weight of the storm clouds the sea was black and bruised, the mad flecks of foam that scudded across its surface a dull grey. It looked alive, Lorenzo thought, tearing his eyes away. And hungry.

With tears streaming down his face he pulled himself along the gunwale towards the hatch that led to the water casks below. The *Destrier*, meanwhile, lurched drunkenly from one side to the other, now filling Lorenzo's field of vision with the ravenous depths of the sea, now hiding everything but for torn rigging and boiling skies.

Somehow, despite the weakness in Lorenzo's knees and the rolling in his empty stomach, he ignored the twin monsters of sea and sky and pulled himself forward. By now his hands had frozen into petrified claws around the rough hemp of the rope. Blisters grew and popped as he slid his palms down the unforgiving surface.

"Come on then," Lorenzo roared in tiny defiance of the elements. "Come and get me."

The storm snatched at him in response. Dragging himself ever onwards, Lorenzo laughed with a hard edge of hysteria in his voice.

By the time he'd drawn level with the hatch his hands were pink with a burning compound of blood and seawater. Although his destination was only a lunge away he made himself wait as the *Destrier* rolled to the left, bringing her side down close enough to the sea's angry surface for a sudden wave to rear up and slap him a numbing blow across the back.

"Rot your bollocks," he snarled defiantly and waited for the *Destrier* to right herself. The second she did so he unclenched his hands from the rope and dived across the deck.

As soon as he left the support of the gunwale his feet slid from under him and he fell onto his knees. But it was too late to give up now. Crawling across a slick of polished wood and running water, sliding this way and that, he struggled desperately onwards towards the oasis of the hatch.

He almost made it on the first attempt. Almost. But just as his fingertips brushed against the mahogany inlay that surrounded the trapdoor, the *Destrier* reared her head, heroically breaching the crest of a wave and sending Lorenzo slipping helplessly back down the deck.

He scratched at the wood with his nails as he shot back down the sudden slope of the deck, back towards his cabin. With a bang he hit the wall only three feet to the left of where he'd started out.

But before he had time to despair the *Destrier* charged, storming the cavern that had followed the wave, and Lorenzo was sent spinning back towards the hatch.

He hit it with a thump, his hands and teeth gripping the wood as he hugged himself into it, fastening onto the carpentry as tightly as one of the barnacles that slated the *Destrier's* hull.

She reared up again, climbing the next wave, and in the second of relative calm that followed Lorenzo reached over and grabbed at the solid wooden handles that opened the hatch. He turned at them expectantly, already anticipating the sweet respite that awaited him below decks.

The handles remained solid. Stubborn.

Unmoving.

Baring his teeth in desperation, Lorenzo twisted and pulled harder, but nothing gave. The *Destrier's* charge was broken as she dropped into a sudden chasm with a bone-jarring thud, and Lorenzo, half stunned, tried again.

"Gods damn it!" he swore at the sudden rush of water that smacked into him, pulling playfully at his legs.

Then he tried to turn the handles the other way.

Still nothing.

Lorenzo howled with frustration and, refusing to relinquish his precious handholds, banged the hatch with his head.

Suddenly the handles were turning of their own accord. The hatch winked open, and he felt hands pulling him roughly inside. He was dragged down a short ladder as the trapdoor was once more secured into place above him.

At first Lorenzo could think of nothing but the relative silence and calm of this welcome underworld. Even the stench of refuse and bilge-water seemed sweet to him after the terrible, scouring freshness of the world above. And the dozen or so men who stood hunched over him, their faces distorted into gargoyle masks by the flickering light of their lantern, looked like angels.

Then their leader pushed his way through them, bent almost double beneath the low ceiling, and looked down with a terrible satisfaction.

"Well, well. Look who it is," said Jacques, as he knelt down to study his lads' catch. "The captain's monkey."

"That boot didn't do much for your looks," Lorenzo told him, and spat a mouthful of blood and salt water into the bilges at Jacques' feet.

"No matter," the mercenary agreed smugly. "The girls always love a winner."

"So I see," Lorenzo looked around pointedly.

Jacques laughed and slapped his catch on the shoulder.

"You're a real diplomat, little man," he cackled. "But you can get stuffed. I'm not making the same mistake twice. Your fop of a master turned out to be a real killer, gods alone know what a runt like you would turn out to be."

"What I am," Lorenzo shrugged, grabbing at the ladder as the *Destrier* leapt upon another peak, "is in a hurry. The fevers got a hold of Fl... of the captain. Seems the surgeon's better at drinking the spirit than using it on his patients."

"I'm sorry to hear it," Jacques frowned. "He wasn't a bad fellow. For an officer."

"Isn't such a bad fellow," Lorenzo muttered. "But anyway, if you'll just show me where the water's kept I'd better get back to him."

"Surely," Jacques nodded. "You'll have to ask the sergeant first, though. Turns out he isn't just a pretty face either."

"Sergeant? You mean one of the Kislevites?"

"No. Orbrant, of course. Kislevites!" he spat. "Those rotten bastards wouldn't piss on their own grandmothers to put them out. That captain they hide behind won't even let us leave our sick in the upper decks. That's why we're all stuck down here."

"You have a sickness down here too?"

"Fever, dysentery, sea weakness. Just the usual," the mercenary shrugged.

"Maybe when the boss is better he can change that. But look, can we be quick? I don't like to leave him for too long."

"Of course," Jacques agreed and headed off into the darkness.

Lorenzo ducked his head and followed him, splashing through the wash of filthy water that rushed throughout the *Destrier's* lower deck. It was dark here; the men were presumably rationing their lantern oil. It was dripping wet. Mould grew in slick patches on the ceilings and walls of this dingy world, and most of the men who swung like rotten fruit from hammocks that had been strung up between the *Destrier's* ribs were coughing or feverish. One of them was crying out in the soft tones of a child, wailing in his delirium as one of his comrades lent over him, mopping the dampness from his brow.

"Is the upper deck much better than this?" he asked, although he was really speaking only to himself. Jacques, who was holding tightly to a crossbeam as the *Destrier* rolled queasily, answered him.

“It’s drier,” he said. “And that’s the thing when you’ve got a fever. There are less vermin too.”

To demonstrate, he waved the lantern at a bundle of black-furred shapes that were swimming past them. The rats fled before the light, although without much urgency.

Jacques led off again and Lorenzo realised how similar this place was to the visions of hell his village priest had tried to terrify him with as a child. The darkness, the filth, the misery and the vermin.

And if this had been hell, the figure that they now approached would presumably have been the presiding daemon.

Orbrant was kneeling with his back to them, the smoothly shaved cannon ball of his head bent in prayer. He seemed not to notice the foetid bilge-water that surged around his calves and thighs, or the creaking of the ship’s timbers.

He somehow sensed Lorenzo and Jacques approaching however, and rose smoothly to his feet, legs slightly bowed to allow for the rolling of the ship.

“Visitor for you, sarge.”

“Thanks, Jacques. What is it Lorenzo?”

“It’s Captain d’Artaud,” Lorenzo said. “He’s got the fever.”

“Yes,” Orbrant nodded. “I’d heard. Is it bad?”

“Bad enough.”

“He’ll need water.”

“Yes.”

“Well then, let’s get moving. Jacques, bring a couple of lads and a coil of rope to the hatch. Lorenzo, come with me to the casks.”

“Yes, sergeant,” Lorenzo said, realising too late that he’d failed to inject even a trace of mockery into his use of the title.

Florin’s fever broke on the same day as the storm, and just as suddenly. One night he was shaking with the icy chill of his burning blood, teeth chattering as he mumbled to friends long gone and imagined. But the next morning, as effortlessly and naturally as the rising sun, he opened his eyes, yawned, and said, “How about something to eat?”

Lorenzo, who’d been dozing while the storm drew its breath, looked up blearily. Then a wide grin split his grizzled face.

“Yes, how about something to eat?” he said and, eager to be gone before the storm reasserted itself, he stripped off his jerkin and padded over to the cabin door.

“Won’t be long,” he said, picking up the billycan Orbrant had given him to keep the rations dry. Then, bracing himself, he opened the cabin door and snatched for the safety rope that the sergeant had had rigged up.

He’d already twisted a loop of it around his wrist by the time he realised something was wrong. It took him perhaps half a dozen heartbeats to realise what it was.

The storm had gone.

There was no wild assault of wind and spray to greet him, no pitching deck, no grey half-light or flickering octane.

Instead the *Destrier* rode easily across calm blue waters, the tortured remains of her rigging sharply defined against a clear sky. The ship's crew were already aloft, busily repairing the damage, and above them there was nothing but lazy cumulus clouds. Lorenzo sighed with pure animal pleasure as he felt the warm sun against his skin—the first time he'd felt it for perhaps a month.

Around him other men, smiling the same disbelieving smile, sat or strolled around the deck. After the purgatory of the storm they looked as alike as brothers: their skin pale, their clothes mildewed, their faces gaunt but open with the joy of being alive.

Lorenzo unhitched his hand from the safety line and strolled across the deck to the galley, where the cook was ladling out the contents of a great iron pot to all comers. The smoke from the cooking fire, the first in weeks, lifted in a high and unbroken line into the clear sky.

Filling his cook tin Lorenzo hastened back to Florin to tell him the good news, tripping over fallen rigging as he made his way back to the cabin. Once there he kicked open the door with a bang and handed Florin the steaming tin.

"The storm's broken," he said smugly, as though he'd somehow personally arranged the improved weather.

"Storm?" Florin slurped the contents down hungrily. "What storm?"

Lorenzo was still chuckling when Orbrant, as unmoved by the storm's passing as he had been by its fury, knocked on the cabin door to make his first official report.

It was another day before Florin could stand up without dizziness, and three more before he could walk around the deck. The violence of the fever had left him gaunt, his shirt hanging like an empty sail from his bones, but at least his wound had healed into a healthy jagged scar. The pink slash ran down beside his spine, and the surgeon's only advice was to shield the raw flesh from the sun.

He would have done so anyway. There was no doubt now that they had travelled far, far to the south of Bordeleaux. Even beneath the brisk sea breeze the tropical skies burned with a scorching blue light, the midday sun beating down on men grown sluggish with the heat.

Not that that stopped the *Destrier's* crew. Day by day they struggled to repair the damage done by the storm. Ignoring the sweat that poured off them they raced to get their ship back into shape, so that the days were filled with the sound of hammering and sawing, and the cries of foremen as they manhandled timber across the vessel.

The *Destrier's* sister ships, the *Hippogriff* and the *Beaujelois*, seemed in even worse shape. They limped along behind her, their splendid white sails now as bedraggled as a street urchin's rags. The *Beaujelois* had even lost her foremast. The splintered stump made her seem as unbalanced as an elephant with only one tusk. Long boats of materials and craftsmen plied back and forth between the three ships, swapping canvas and expertise under Captain-Owner Gorth's foul-mouthed direction.

The mercenaries, meanwhile, had been confined to quarters, their clumsy limbs stowed out of the crew's way whilst they worked. So, while the sailors toiled above in the healthy sea air, Florin's men remained rotting in the dank fever-pit of the hold. He'd visited them on the second day, where he'd been impressed by their ragged

salute as much as by the squalor in which they lived. Judging by the coughing and the babbling of the delirious, he could tell that the men needed a change of quarters.

Eventually, of course, they'd be allowed up onto the deck to sleep under the warm southern stars or through canvas-shaded days, but only when the skipper had finished repairing the storm damage. And when that would happen, nobody appeared to know.

In fact, it often seemed to Florin that things were getting worse. Even now, as he made his way over to the stern deck, a great, splintered beam was being lowered down onto the main deck, trailing a mess of twisted tackle behind it.

He skirted the mess, Lorenzo close behind him, and greeted the two men he found there.

"Good-day to you, skipper," he said, bounding up the steps and offering his hand. "Just wanted to thank you for getting us all through that storm."

The sailor nodded his thanks, and grasped Florin's hand.

"Don't mention it, cippo," he said, eyes smiling within the weathered creases of his face. "If I'd have lost his ship old man Gorth would have followed me down into the deeps to give me a beating for it."

Florin laughed. Old man Gorth, although safely ensconced on his flagship, was legend amongst passengers and crew both. Rumour had it that he'd built this fleet up from nothing but the fishing skiff his uncle had left him and Florin, although he'd never seen the man, was inclined to believe it.

"According to what I've heard, the old man probably would have. And you, captain," he continued, turning to the other man. "We were never introduced. I'm Captain Florin d'Artaud."

Again he held out his hand and the Kislevite, after regarding it for one suspicious moment, reached out and shook.

"Graznikov," the man muttered, and squeezed as hard as he could. Florin squeezed back. Only when the two men's knuckles start to shine white did Florin force himself to pull his hand away.

The small victory was enough to paint a wide smile across the pink expanse of Graznikov's flabby face. His small blue eyes gleamed as he drew a bottle of clear liquid out from the folds of his cloak.

"You southerners, very soft," he smirked, uncorking the bottle and taking a long pull. After a moment's hesitation he offered the bottle to the skipper, who declined, and then Florin.

"Cheers," he said, raising the glass before taking a swig.

The alcohol burned its way down Florin's throat like molten lead. There was no taste to it, unless you counted the hint of burnt grease. It didn't even have a smell.

"Excellent," Florin deadpanned, passing the bottle back. Although his expression gave nothing away he couldn't stop the red flush that burned his cheeks, nor the tears that blurred his vision.

Graznikov sniggered sadistically and took another swig. Then he passed it back, his greed overcome by the pleasure of seeing another man suffer.

"Drink, drink," he told Florin encouragingly.

“You’re very kind,” Florin agreed and took another gulp of the vile liquid. Surprisingly, this mouthful was as nasty as the first.

“Thank you very much, Captain Graznikov,” he handed the bottle back. “Acshually, I mean actually, I’m glad we met. I wanted to talk to you about the men.”

“Talk later,” Graznikov decided, lifting back the tall fur hat that seemed to serve his company as uniform and scratching his head. “First drink.” His eyes disappeared between rolls of fat as he smiled evilly.

“After you.”

“Chyars, you say, hey?” Graznikov waved the bottle towards Florin before taking another pull. “I take three fingers, you see? Now you take three fingers.”

“Three fingers,” Florin nodded, wrapped four fingers around the bottle, and drank.

“Now talk,” Graznikov said, retrieving the bottle and carefully driving the cork back home.

“It’s about... about the men,” Florin paused. He was waiting for the nausea to pass before continuing. “I’d like to move all the sick onto the upper deck, where your lads are. It’ll be a lot healthier for ’em.”

Graznikov looked at him blankly, and Florin wondered if he’d understood. But before he repeated himself the Kislevite answered.

“Why?” he asked, incomprehension furrowing his brow.

“Why? Well, they’ll recover quicker if they’re dry. Isn’t that right, skipper?”

The sailor, who’d been watching his carpenters getting to work on the boom, nodded absent-mindedly.

“That’s right. That’s how we always treat our lot. The fevered need to be kept dry and warm.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Graznikov waved away the explanation impatiently. “But why I move my men? They are happy. If they are happy, I am happy.”

“Yes, I understand,” Florin agreed. “But all we want to do is to bring up our sick from the hold.”

“Not possible. Old man Gorth, he gave the upper deck to me. The skipper knows this. Not possible I move them.”

“Even for gold?”

“How much?” Graznikov asked, the future once more full of possibilities.

“Twenty gold crowns.”

“No. Not enough. I move my men, I have too much trouble.”

“Well, then, perhaps a wager. After all we’re both gentlemen, not merchants. My twenty crowns against your upper deck.”

Graznikov sucked at his teeth thoughtfully.

“What wager? I no fight you. I see what you do already!” Graznikov smiled approvingly, as if at some fond memory.

“What wager do you choose?” Florin asked, warily.

“I show you. Drobnic!” He turned and bellowed across the deck to his sergeant. “Bring my dragons!”

“Dragons?”

“You see, you see,” The Kislevite said smugly. “Now we have another drink, no? Finish bottle.”

“If it doesn’t finish me first,” Florin replied weakly. Graznikov howled with laughter and punched his arm.

“No! Is good for you!”

By the time Graznikov’s man returned the bottle was empty. The Kislevite, legs as steady as ever, went to the prow of the foredeck and wedged the glass against the rail. Then, content with his handiwork, he paced back to the opposite rail and opened the box his sergeant proffered.

“My dragons,” he smiled as he reached inside and drew both of them out. “Here. Look.”

So saying he thrust one into Florin’s hand and started the delicate operation of loading the other. He was slow and careful about this task, perhaps because of the danger inherent in black powder or perhaps because the gun was so beautiful.

And they were beautiful. The finely wrought barrels, thick bored steel as long as a man’s forearm, ended in muzzles that snarled open in the likeness of a dragon’s mouth. Behind them the length of the metal was inlaid with a silver damasque of intertwined beasts and birds, and the thick club of the gun’s body and grip shone with the dull inner glow of well-polished walnut.

Wielding a ramrod with a flourish Graznikov firmly pushed down a scrap of wadding to hold down the charge in the first, then swapped it with the one Florin was holding and repeated the process.

Florin hefted the bulky weapon and squinted along the length. The two beads, fore and aft, bobbed up and down as he waved the pistol inexpertly from side to side.

“Good, good,” Graznikov muttered, after priming the second. “Now look. Trigger. Punch back. Make hammer punch here. Then, bang! Very easy.”

“I see,” said Florin. He’d once used a similar weapon, although that had been a long time ago.

“Now, come. Stand here. We fire at bottle, yes?”

“But I don’t know how,” Florin shrugged and tried to give the pistol back. Graznikov shook his head.

“No problem. First, practise. Look along barrel,” Florin followed his advice, and peered along the foreshortened steel.

“Make line of sights.” The bottle jumped back and forth across the two beads, until Florin gradually held it still.

“Now punch trigger!”

Florin fired. The pistol leapt in his hands, an explosion of flame and black smoke erupting from the muzzle.

When it had cleared he peered forward, cautiously massaging his wrist.

“Hey, not bad. Look, I chipped the rail just to the left of it.”

“Good, good,” Graznikov beamed. “She pulls, that one. They both do. To the left. Now, again, and point a little right.”

Florin took the next pistol and aimed again, this time waiting until the sights were an inch to the right before firing.

Once more the pistol roared as it spat a blur of lead out in its fiery breath. This time, when the smoke cleared, there was nothing left of the bottle apart from a fine dusting of glass splinters.

“Very good,” the skipper said, dryly. “But if you want to carry on shooting my ship, go and fire at that mess at the pinnacle. It’s all going to have to go anyway.”

“Good, good,” Graznikov nodded, busily reloading the second pistol and handing it back to Florin. “Come, my friend, we’ll find a target, yes? A wager?”

“We’ll see,” Florin muttered, swapping a wary glance with Lorenzo before following the stocky Kislevite up to the rail.

For a while the two men regarded the messy tangle that was all that remained of the *Destrier*’s elegant pinnacle. Where once the sleek wood had thrust forward from her prow, as sharp and eager as a narwhal’s tusk, it was now a splintered stump, the canvas and rope that it had once borne so elegantly aloft now trailed miserably downwards into the sea.

“Why don’t you shoot at that block on the end?” the skipper suggested, coming forward to stand between the two men.

“Yes. Good,” Graznikov nodded.

“It’s a bit small, isn’t it?”

“No hurry,” Graznikov grinned encouragingly.

“What do you think, Lorenzo?” Florin asked doubtfully.

“I think you’re mad,” he said, and spat disgustedly over the side. “What do you know about guns? Might as well just give him our money now and have done with it.”

“Stupid,” Graznikov snarled at him. “Maybe I fire at you instead.”

Florin chewed his lip thoughtfully until Graznikov, overwhelmed with disgust, snatched the pistol from his hand.

“Yes, too weak. Too frightened,” he sneered.

Florin turned on him, face flushed with anger, or drink, or a combination of the two.

“Give me the gun,” he demanded. “Let’s do it. The skipper can be our witness. If I shoot the block off first my men get the upper deck. If you do it, I’ll pay you twenty crowns.”

“Gold crowns,” Graznikov reminded him.

“Gold it is.”

“You’re sure about this?” the skipper, who knew trouble brewing when he saw it, asked them.

“Yes, yes, yes,” the Kislevite agreed impatiently.

“Yes,” Florin nodded.

“I go first,” Graznikov said and, before anybody could protest, he raised his pistol and fired.

It was an excellent shot. If the block hadn’t swung to one side at the same moment that the Kislevite had fired the bullet, it would have hit dead centre. As it was, it just chipped the side and spun it around like a top.

For a moment the men watched spellbound as the rope from which it hung twisted and knotted, frayed edges sticking out wildly. But for now, at least, the block remained in place.

“Not bad,” Florin allowed, heartened by Graznikov’s scowl. Then he turned his attention to the block. It swung and bobbed, a tiny mark against the shifting blues and greens of the sea. It occurred to Florin, not for the first time, that he could stand here blazing away at it all day without even chipping the target.

Well, that was no problem.

With a final check that his weapon was primed and loaded he slipped it into his belt and swung himself over the *Destrier*’s prow.

“What you doing?” Graznikov asked, but Florin ignored him. All of his concentration was focused on the creaking rat’s nest of frayed rope, torn sail and chipped wood that he had begun to creep along. Below him the sea slipped past the *Destrier*’s prow, the spray of cool water refreshing in the heat of this moment.

“You can’t do that!” Graznikov howled as, inch by perilous inch, the Bretonnian crawled towards the target.

The Kislevite was still howling his protests as Florin, swinging beneath the stump of the pinnace, wrapped his legs around the timber and snagged the length of rope upon which the block hung.

Drawing it towards him he carefully retrieved his pistol, put the muzzle to the chipped wood of the target, and closed his eyes.

Then he pulled the trigger.

There was deafening bang and a backwash of sudden heat. Even before he opened his eyes again Florin knew that he’d been successful. Graznikov’s storm of protests was loud enough to be heard even above the ringing in his ears.

“Well done,” the skipper said as Florin pulled himself back on board and handed the pistol back to the waiting Kislevite.

“No!” the Kislevite protested, stamping his foot on the deck. “No well done. Cheated.”

“Are you calling me a cheat?” Florin asked, eyes narrowing in ersatz rage as he gripped the hilt of his belt knife.

“No,” the Kislevite decided hastily. “No.”

“Excellent. Well, then, let’s get things moving, shall we? Skipper, perhaps you’d let Graznikov’s men wait on the deck whilst my lot move into the upper deck?”

“Yes, of course,” the sailor said. “Captain Graznikov, perhaps you’d gather your men?”

“Old man Gorth gave me the upper deck.”

“You took your chance,” the skipper waved the objection away. “You lost. Now go and prepare your men. I don’t won’t to waste any more time.”

Florin, eager to pass on the good news, followed him. Behind him Graznikov turned to hide his rage, his face burning with hatred as he clenched the rail.



CHAPTER SIX

Their feet crashed down, as unified as the heart beat of a single great beast. The halberds of the first rank, the steel teeth of this newly formed monster, shot upwards, the fat blades chopping through the air as the men snapped to attention. The back rank, meanwhile, held their guns vertically in front of them.

The sting in the beast's tail.

Orbrant, holding his warhammer casually, stood to one side of the formation, his eyes bright with watchful pride.

The transformation the old warrior had wrought upon the mercenaries had been miraculous. Even now Florin could hardly believe that these soldiers were the same rabble that had greeted him on that first day aboard.

They were still dressed in a wild and ill assorted collection of clothes, it was true, and while some of them sported elegant beards and moustaches, others were clean-shaven, or stubbled.

But the discipline that Orbrant had instilled in them was all the uniform they needed. Now, as they stood to perfect attention on the gently rolling deck, their arms gleaming in the light of the tropical sun, Florin had to remind himself not to show too much contentment.

After all, this was hardly the time.

Four bodies lay on planks that rested on the gunwales. They had been sewn into sailcloth shrouds before being carried out onto the deck. All that remained of these men's lives were these four neat packages.

For them the escape from the squalor of the ship's hold had come too late. The fever that had found them there had eaten too deeply for a change of berth to make any difference. The disease had followed them hungrily to their new quarters, as mercilessly and eagerly as the rats that infested their food stores.

For the dozenth time that morning Florin felt a pang of regret that he hadn't been able to help them.

It was ridiculous to feel responsible for them, he knew. He'd spent the storm in the grip of the same fever that had killed them. For whatever reason, fortune had seen fit to spare him whilst she had taken his men. That was hardly his responsibility.

Nor was it like him to feel so bad. Guilty, even. The Florin that had come aboard the *Destrier* wouldn't have given the unknown corpses a moment's thought. Life was

hard, after all, and death eager. And if it took someone else instead of you, well then, that was all to the good.

But somehow, during the dark watches of the previous night, he had been tormented with regrets. Lying in the humid confines of his cabin, staring up into the darkness, he had fought in vain against the suspicion that he was responsible.

If only he could have had the men moved before the storm. If only he had spoken to the skipper before they sailed, or to old man Gorth himself. If only...

"At ease," Orbrant's bark, and the thud of halberd butts hitting the deck, broke Florin's morbid chain of thought.

"All present and correct, sir."

"Thank you, sergeant." He cleared his throat. "Men, we are gathered here today to bid farewell to our comrades Gilles Chevron, Enri Batien, Michellei Vallard and Niccolo Jambon. It was your privilege to know them better than I, but I know that they were loyal comrades and true. They will be missed."

The men remained silent and grim-faced.

"It is with sadness that we send their bodies into the deeps. But it will be with joy that they are remembered by those they leave behind, the joy of friendship remembered and loyalty fulfilled. Let that joy speed them on their way as we commend their souls to the great Manaan's keeping."

He paused, listening to the wind sighing in the knotted rigging above him, and wondered if there was anything else to say.

But if there was, he didn't know what.

"Sergeant, the salute."

"Back rank," Orbrant roared.

"Aim."

"Ready."

"Fire!"

A dozen guns boomed as the volley thundered upwards and rolled away into the infinity of the ocean. Taking that as their cue, the men chosen to be pallbearers stepped forward and lifted the planks. There was the hiss of rough cloth on the planking, four distinct splashes, and the corpses were gone.

"Attention," Orbrant barked. "And—wait for it—wait for it—dismissed!"

Florin watched the tight ranks of his company melt once more into a mob, and wondered how many more of them would follow those first four before the expedition was over.

There was no telling how old it was. It kept no count of the passing of years, or of seasons. Its life was lived to one rhythm and one rhythm alone: hunger.

And to follow this rhythm it was perfectly built.

Long and sleek, as dark and sudden as a nightmare, it scythed through the lightless pressure of the depths with a lazy ease. Every line of its great bulk was as sharp as a blade, every facet of its black skin as smooth as a pearl. From the high sickle of its tail to the thousands of tiny razored teeth that lined its maw, it was beautifully, horribly, lethal.

There was no telling where it came from. Others of its kin had been hatched from eggs or birthed from monsters such as themselves. This one, though, seemed too perfect to be natural. It was as though some insane god had crafted it as a living poem of terror, and of violence, and of constant, endless hunger.

The only hint that it was a thing of this world and not of some troubled dream were the traces of scars that marred the perfect blackness of its skin. They came from eons past when it had struggled against vast and alien beasts, horrors that had taken their mastery of the ocean's trenches for granted.

Nightmares of beaks and tentacles they had grasped at it in a foolish ambition that was to spell their doom. Now all that remained of them were the cicatrices of healed wounds that punctuated their killer's hide.

As the leviathan slipped effortlessly through the ocean's deepest chasms, it knew that there was nothing left that would dare to challenge it again. Its dominance of this dark universe was unasailable, its hunger unassuaged.

When the first hint of blood drifted into its nostrils it didn't hesitate. With a slight twist of its body, a fractional curve of its fins, it turned effortlessly away from its path and up towards the flesh that it smelled above.

"They have come on," Commander van Delft said as Orbrant ran the company through their drill. Under his instruction the Bretonnians formed ranks, changed formation then fired a perfectly timed volley into the sea.

"Good work."

"Thank you, sir," Florin's chest swelled with pride.

"I was talking to your sergeant."

"Ah."

Lundorf, ever the professional, tried not to smile. Graznikov made no such effort.

"Looks like he knows what he's doing," van Delft continued, tugging on the white walrus tip of his moustache thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir," Florin nodded. "I hear that he used to be a warrior priest. One of those mad Sigmari..."

He trailed off, three words too late.

"Mad what?" the commander turned on him, eyes as cold and blue as Orbrant's own.

"Nothing, commander," Florin decided. "But I believe he used to serve his god and Emperor as a warrior priest."

"Believe? Don't you know?"

"I asked him, but he didn't want to talk about it."

"I thought you would have pressed him."

Despite himself Florin felt a snap of irritation. Ever since the commander had turned up for an unexpected inspection, he'd done everything he could to keep Florin and Graznikov off balance.

"What the man did before he joined up is his own business."

"Quite right too," the commander nodded approvingly.

The little group lapsed into silence as Orbrant called the men to attention.

“Well done, men,” van Delft told them. “Glad to see that not everyone on this ship has collapsed back into civilians.”

Graznikov wisely ignored the jibe. His own men, all of whom were armed with the heavy, two-handed axes of their ancestors, had never been much for drill. Nor did he think that they needed it. As far as he was concerned the main skill a mercenary needed was to know who, not how, to fight.

If only the tsarina’s sheriffs hadn’t been so enthusiastic back home he’d never have signed them up for anything as hare-brained as this.

“Tell me, Graznikov,” the commander switched his unwelcome attention from the Bretonnian to the Kislevite. “Exactly why haven’t you been drilling your men, again?”

“No room.”

“And yet the Bretonnians seem to find room enough.”

“My men, real warriors. With axes. No room for axes here,” Graznikov, who was at least officer enough to know when retreat would be more dangerous than staying put, folded his arms sullenly.

“Well, if you say so,” van Delft shrugged. “But I think that you could do worse than to learn from Captain d’Artaud here.”

“Like you say, commander.”

Graznikov and Florin’s eyes met briefly.

No affection was lost.

Commander van Delft, who hadn’t become a commander by accident, pretended not to notice the hostility.

“In fact, I’m sure that if you asked him, d’Artaud here might be willing to take over for a while and train up your men.”

“No.”

“Just as you like, captain. We are all gentlemen of fortune, after all. I wouldn’t presume to put one captain in charge of another’s company.”

The possibility hung uncomfortably in the air.

“Well, I’ve seen about as much as I need to,” the commander decided. “You can dismiss the men, sergeant.”

Orbrant turned to Florin, awaiting his confirmation of the order. Florin felt a surge of gratitude for the display of loyalty, although he was careful not to let van Delft see it.

“Carry on, sergeant.

“Dismissed.”

“Yes, very impressive, your sergeant,” van Delft repeated as if to himself. “Graznikov, would you excuse us for a moment? Why not take Lundorf here and show him what sort of exercise drill you’ve implemented.”

“Yes, commander,” the Kislevite saluted and beckoned Lundorf, happy to escape.

Van Delft watched the two men clamber down onto the main deck and cross to the hatch. The two companies lined the gunwales on either side of them. The Bretonnians, following Orbrant’s lead, were busily sharpening their weapons. The Kislevites watched them with an idle interest.

Van Delft studied the two groups thoughtfully.

"I've been thinking about that campaign you mentioned against the orcs. The duke that led it, he was called d'Artaud too, wasn't he? Any relation?"

"Oh, the count you mean. Yes, he was a third cousin. On my mother's side."

"I suppose that he'd have been a knight, being a Bretonnian aristocrat and all."

"Yes, he was," Florin agreed.

"Funny people, knights," the commander mused. "Funny ideas about war. All that chivalry. Give me a clear shot and a cannon any day. We have one of those by the way."

"Yes sir, Lundorf mentioned it."

"Can't see a knight using a youngster as bait while he hid behind a barricade."

"It was an ambush, sir."

"Sure he was a knight?"

"Yes. I mean..."

"And those orcs. Completely disorganised, you said. No leaders."

"They might have had some leaders," Florin shrugged. "It was so long ago."

"How long ago?"

"Three years. Or was it five?"

"I'm a colonel, not an auctioneer," van Delft snapped. He let the silence become uncomfortable before turning to his subordinate.

"Mad or not, your sergeant's a gift from Sigmar, your men seem to respect you and you're not as stupid as you look."

"Thank you, si—"

"But if you ever lie to me again I will throw you off the pay roll. Which would leave you with quite a long walk home, wouldn't you say?"

Florin, his bluff called, nodded meekly and looked out to sea.

"Yes, it would be. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," van Delft waved away the thanks. "And for Sigmar's sake don't go telling anybody else about this little chat. I doubt if they'd be quite so... forgiving."

"No, sir."

"Right then, that's sorted. I hope you won't take offence, but I want to get to the *Beaujelois* before the Tileans start serving up dinner. Gods know how they do it, but their lads seem to be able to make anything taste good."

The four morsels drifted through the cathedral heights of the warm, upper reaches of its domain.

Adjusting to the unfamiliar light, the black orbs of its eyes changed from onyx to ivory. Gradually they adjusted to the blinding brightness of the long forgotten sun, and it bathed in the new sensations of light and darkness.

By the time it reached the first corpse it could make out every ripple of the sodden cloth which bound it, and every silver movement of the tiny fish which nibbled at its bloated flesh.

Although this prey was obviously long dead, still it attacked. The impact of its first bite tore the body in half, and filled the water with a mahogany cloud of blood.

Swallowing the man's torso it turned, an incredibly agile loop for such a huge creature, and returned for the remains.

There was no taste, not really. Just a sudden burst of ecstasy as the torn meat pulsed down into its stomach.

Spurred on, it lunged for the next body, and the next. By the time it had taken the fourth the sensation of fresh meat had set its appetite on fire. Arcing through the bright heights, its own blood pounding with a hideous excitement, it scented the currents for more human flesh.

As the second full moon rolled over the *Destrier* the long, sweltering heat grew heavier. Sometimes, beneath the blue furnace of the tropical skies, it became almost unbearable. Combined with the shrinking rations and the void of the endless ocean, it had conspired to drive more than one man into an insanity of despair, or violence. So far the *Destrier* had been lucky. The maddening heat hadn't ignited the explosive tensions that had covered the deck of the *Hippogriff* with blood, nor had it boiled anyone's brains enough to send them diving into the vastness of the ocean.

Lorenzo had actually seen the victim of the heat; he had watched him throw himself from the *Beaujelois* gunwale only to be hauled sobbing back out of the water by his comrades. At the time the sight had united Bretonnian and Kislevite both in uneasy laughter, but mock the Tileans as they might, most of them had already felt an inkling of his desperation.

There was already a rumour afoot that they'd missed Lustria. The storm, some said, had pushed them so far to the south that they'd rounded the cape and were now heading away into the endless oceans beyond. Others spoke of empty water casks, and the chaos that was to come when the last few drops were gone.

Thoughts such as these had led Lorenzo to today's plan. It wasn't much of a plan, more a way of driving such nightmares from his mind, really. Away of passing one more endless day without straining his eyes on mirages of distant coastlines, or seagulls that turned out to be sunspots.

The thought that anything would actually come of it never even occurred to him. After all, when he'd tried it as a boy he'd had gossamer thin tendon traces, and the finely carved bone hooks that he'd stolen from his uncle. He'd known the waters too, choosing only the deepest pools in the river that ran through his village.

Today, by contrast, all he'd been able to find was a rope, a twist of wire, and the sharpened hook of a long departed crossbowman.

Embarrassed to be seen playing the fool with such a string of rubbish he'd smuggled it on the stern deck before tying it together.

He was glad to see that the old skill of knotting and binding remained in his fingers, and by the time he'd finished he even went so far as to waste his ration of maggot-riddled dried fish on the end of the line.

Then, wrapping the rope around the railing of the stern, he'd thrown the uselessly baited hook over the side and started to think about eating the mouldy handful of ship's biscuit that was all that remained of today's ration.

Somehow, despite the example of the rest of the ship's company, he'd never been able to crunch down the weevils that wriggled within the stale dough. He couldn't

even do it in the dark, when night would have spared him the sight of half eaten things moving about within the crust.

Instead he spent miserable mealtimes crumbling up his daily bread and sorting out the writhing maggots from the crumbs before eating them.

But today he was to be spared that ordeal. For no sooner had he broken off the first piece of the dough than the rope hummed with a sudden tightness.

Lorenzo looked at it disbelievably as it began to drag itself along the rail. Jumping to his feet, heart racing with a sudden, disbelieving excitement, he tugged experimentally at the rope.

Something tugged back.

With a whoop of joy he braced his feet against the side and started to heave against whatever it was that he'd caught.

It was strong, whatever it was. By the time he had recovered just a few feet of the rope his muscles were burning, his skin glistening with a wash of sweat.

"What are you doing?" a voice asked. Lorenzo rolled his eyes back to find Jacques standing above him.

"Catching fish," Lorenzo told him. "Want to lend a hand?"

"Anything for a comrade," Jacques grinned disbelievably and, wrapping the rope around his wrist, added his own gangling strength to Lorenzo's.

Gradually, inch-by-inch, they hauled the dripping rope out of the sea. The tension in the hemp squeezed so much water out that soon the two fishermen found their feet slipping and sliding across the oak.

"Hey! You have caught one!" Jacques cried out, eyes alight with a sudden excitement.

There was a sudden, heart stopping slackness in the rope followed by a loud splash. The two men froze, hearts sore with disappointment, until an excited shout floated down from the bird's nest.

"Go on! You got him!" the sailor yelled. Moving with a rush of renewed excitement the two men hauled in the slack rope and felt, once more, the fish struggling on the end of the line.

Lorenzo thought about how old the rope had been, and how casually he'd tied the knots.

"What's that you're saying?" Jacques asked him, but Lorenzo just grunted with embarrassment.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd prayed.

Again the rope went slack, but this time, instead of a splash, the two men heard, even felt, a thud. A second later the weight on the end of the rope grew so great that it started to rasp through their hands.

"What the hell was that?"

"I think it's clear of the water," Lorenzo, tears of exertion streaming down the beaten leather of his face, groaned with the pain that burned in his arms. His scrawny muscles felt as though they'd snap at any moment, like so much old rope.

Jacques, his own hands starting to bleed where the rope had scratched away the skin of his palms, looked up at the men who had joined them.

“Come on then,” he snapped at them, his voice strained beneath the cords which now stood out on his neck. “Grab the rope. Help us pull the bastard in.”

Two men grabbed the rope, then two more. Now it began to slide up and over the rail, hissing against the wood as it came faster and faster.

Lorenzo let the others take the strain, his biceps singing with the joy of relief. Then he peered over the side of the rail, and his heart almost stopped.

It was huge, almost the size of a man. Its flanks flashed in the sunlight, shifting from silvered blue to metallic green as it fought. But although its body shone with the living colours of the ocean, rippling like living mother of pearl, the long sword of its mouth was as black and sharp as a thorn.

As Lorenzo watched it bite down upon the impossibly thin length of rope upon which it was suspended. The hemp hummed and groaned with the strain, thistles of snapped fibres sticking up at odd angles as the fish lunged desperately from side to side.

Lorenzo found himself beginning to pray again. He didn’t know what else to do as the fish was dragged even higher above the safety of the sea below.

Then he saw the gills flaring. His mind blank of everything but the image offish soup, he lunged over the rail and grabbed the great flare of skin.

The marlin lurched wildly at the agony of his touch, dragging him farther over the rail. Below him there was nothing but the foamed surface of the sea, the wake of the ship rolling hungrily beneath him.

Again the fish swung back out, and Lorenzo felt his hip slide over the gunwale so that, for a moment, man and fish hung there, each as captured as the other.

But by now more men had come to see what the commotion was. Without waiting for orders they threw themselves into the battle, Bretonnian and Kislevites both. From then on the struggle was short and one-sided. Fight as he might, the great fish was dragged upwards, and then heaved over the rail and onto the deck of the ship.

He thrashed around in the suffocation of this terrible new world, the rapier of his beak sending his captors scurrying back. It was Lorenzo, still too alive with adrenaline to feel the sprain in his fingers, who grabbed a hold of his dorsal and ended his pain with a dagger blow.

For a few more seconds the great fish continued to dance and skitter across the deck, his gushing blood painting grotesque arabesques upon the seasoned oak. Lorenzo waited until the final spasm had died away to a mere shiver before nipping forward to cut the hook from the side of its mouth.

“Let’s get this down to the cook,” He left half a dozen of his comrades to haul the fish down to the galley.

“And bring some more dried fish,” he called after them. “Seems that it is fit for animals after all.”

Jacques, his hair slicked with sweat and salt water, laughed with wild abandon.

“You’ll do anything to avoid those damn biscuits,” he roared at his own humour and slapped Lorenzo on the back. Still grinning he left his comrade slumped exhaustedly on the deck and went to peer over the rail.

“There must be more fish down there,” he called back. “Do you think they swim in shoals?”

“The gods alone know.” Lorenzo shrugged and flexed his bruised hand. “The only thing I caught before were trout.”

“Trout!” Jacques scoffed, leaning over the gunwale. “That thing would need a hundred a day to... hey, what’s that?”

“What?”

“That shadow below us.” The mercenary glanced upwards, but the sky remained empty of even a trace of cloud.

“What shadow?” Lorenzo asked, watching the excitement at the other end of the ship as the cook hoisted his catch up on a block and tackle.

“Look here. Beneath the ship. It’s getting bigger. Maybe we’re running over some shallows.”

“Can’t be,” Lorenzo turned his attention to the frayed and bloodied fishing line. The rope, at least would need to be replaced, he decided. It was miracle it had held the first time.

“Then perhaps... Oh no.”

Lorenzo looked up, surprised by his friend’s tone. He saw Jacques try to pull himself back over the rail. He was a second too late.

With a thunderclap the ocean behind the *Destrier* erupted into a dazzling column of water. It blitzed upwards from the surface, a liquid thunderbolt born of the deeps, with such violence that the plume of it rose as high as the *Destrier*’s mast.

It wasn’t this explosion that tore the scream from Lorenzo’s throat though. It was the thing that the sea had vomited up with it.

It tore itself from its sheath of water so quickly that it revealed hardly any detail. It was just a confusion of terrible parts, a nightmare made flesh.

It took Jacques without a pause, snuffing him out in a sudden spray of blood before crashing back into the sea as suddenly as it had come.

Despite the wash of salt water that swamped the *Destrier*’s stern, and the screams of the crew, and even the final image of terrible jaws closing over Jacques’ body, Lorenzo couldn’t believe what he had just seen.

Shock, as soft and lethal as a shroud, wrapped him in its embrace.

“What, by the gods, was that?”

Lorenzo turned, like a man in a dream, as Florin rushed across to him.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Lorenzo said vaguely. Florin grabbed him by the shoulder, stared into his eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes. I’m all right.”

Beneath them there was a bone-jarring thud and the *Destrier* leapt like a wounded stallion.

“Lorenzo,” Florin urged. “Go below and get Orbrant.”

“Yes, boss,” Lorenzo nodded, feeling the white fog of shock drawing back beneath the fire of Florin’s energy. As he stumbled down into the hatch, fighting the

tide of men that were pouring up, he saw his master gathering the company's gunners around him.

"Fat lot of good they'll do," he muttered to himself, and elbowed his way through the confusion of men that now clogged the deck.

Back on the deck the same thought had occurred to Florin. He angrily thrust it to the back of his mind as he marshalled his gunners. "Come on lads, get 'em loaded. Michel. Michel! Go and get Graznikov. We need his pistols."

He waited until Orbrant's head appeared in the hatchway, and then leapt for the rigging that led up to the crow's nest. Racing up it, the rough hemp scraping his hands, he glanced back to see the deck shrink away below him.

Climbing still higher he eventually stopped, looking back down at the foreshortened forms of the scurrying men below and then, almost reluctantly, out to sea.

The *Destrier's* sister ships lay on either side of her, the three vessels forming the points of a tiny triangle in the vastness of the ocean. Florin could just about make out the matchstick men of their crews, and wondered if they had any idea yet of the danger that had come upon them.

Of the danger itself there was no sign. No dorsal broke the even swell of the ocean, no shadow marred the cerulean blue ripples of its surface. The only movement that stirred in its clear upper reaches came from the kaleidoscopic sunbeams that danced hypnotically through the clear water.

"Captain."

The voice came from below. Florin looked down to see the frantically beckoning form of the skipper.

With a last look out across the sea he slid back down the rigging and dropped onto the deck.

"Leave the observation to my look-outs," the skipper told him. "Just get your lads ready to shoot. We'll tell you where."

"Will do," Florin nodded, running his eyes over the dozen gunners that waited for him. Now, at Orbrant's instruction, they stood in two squads. Florin wished that he'd thought to do that himself.

Well, never mind that now.

"Well done, sergeant," he said. "Now, I want you to take Michel and his mates to the stern. The others will come with me. Any questions? Good. Follow me, men."

As if in response to the order another sudden impact boomed through the *Destrier's* hull, sending the men reeling against the gunwales.

They looked at one another, pallid with fright as the *Destrier* settled back into the water. Beneath them the hull groaned dangerously, the sound dampening their brows with cold sweat despite the burning sun.

"Come on, jump to it," Florin told them, jogging towards the fore-deck. There they lined the rail, peering down into the depths that had spawned this monster, or out over the rolling blue desert of its domain.

Behind them the skipper's voice rose, a hard edge of fear cutting through the tortured creak of the ship's hull.

Florin closed his ears to the sound as he peered desperately into the sea for some sign of their enemy. There was nothing to be gained from imagining the splintering of the vessel's keel, the way the water would rush into her, pulling her down into the lightless depths below, no comfort from imagining the bloating of their drowned bodies as they turned in the tide...

Beside him his men, also listening to the whine and snap of the hull, waited for the next blow to come in fearful silence.

And suddenly, at the same moment as the look-out began to yell, Florin saw the monster's return.

It was a shadow, nothing more. A cancerous darkness deep within the womb of the sea. And although it was small it was growing with a terrible speed.

"To the right side, men," he shouted. "But don't fire until I give the order."

Now the beast was the size of a carthorse.

Now a cart.

"See it down there...?"

Now the blossoming shape expanded to blot out the light that danced in the oceans heights.

"Wait for it, wait for it..."

The monster powered upwards. One of the gunners, leaning over the railing to bring his weapon to bear, began to snarl.

Now the maw of the beast seemed to fill the whole of their world.

"Wait for the order," Florin growled.

The water began to boil up, lifted by the lethal velocity of its attack.

The ship rocked gently upon the pressure that was building beneath it.

Still he waited.

And then, like a signal flare in a night sky, the dead orb of one of the thing's eyes rolled into view. It was as cold as winter, as pale as death.

It was what Florin had been waiting for.

"Fire!"

Despite their terror, or perhaps because of it, the volley rang out in one solid thunderclap. This close, the noise of the black powder was deafening; the rolling cloud of smoke and fire blotted out the sun in a bright, stinking cloud.

Before it had a chance to clear, the beast struck.

It punched through the ocean's surface like a spear through skin. The salt water explosion that burst around it rained through the gun smoke in a chill mist, blinding the men as they staggered back in stunned confusion.

Two of them weren't quick enough. The monster caught them both in a single, savage bite. One of them, dragged by the snared flesh of his broken shoulder, screamed like a woman as he was pulled into the ocean.

The other died in the silence of absolute shock.

Florin, wide-eyed with horror, forced himself to look back into the alien depths into which the daemon had retreated.

But there was no trace of either man or beast. There was just the gentle rolling of the uncaring sea and a few dwindling flecks of foam.

It was gone for almost three hours. Time enough for Florin to wonder if the deaths of his three men might have been blood sacrifice enough. Time enough for the skipper to think that they might have outrun it. Time enough for the men to start to relax.

They were all wrong. The liquid fire of human blood was too rich a delicacy for their tormentor to ignore. And when it returned there was neither pause nor hesitation in its attack, just a constant drum roll of impacts against the hull of the *Destrier*.

Her sister ships drew in closer to her, their gunners firing occasional volleys into the sea around her. Yet for all the good they did they would have been as well to have saved their powder. Oblivious to their attack the great beast cavorted beneath the disintegrating hull of its prey.

As the sun vaulted over her masts and began to sink into the west, the *Destrier* sank lower into the water.

There was no attempt to outrun her nemesis now. All hands were below, fighting a war against splintering wood and snapping beams.

Their weapons were hammers and nails, and great vats of steaming black tar. Professionals to the end, they fought hard; even though they knew that this was a battle they were doomed to lose. Already the ship's lower deck was submerged, the timbers of her keel split and torn so that she wallowed as heavily as a corpse in the water.

Florin stood on the foredeck and looked longingly at the ships on either side. He, like the rest of his men, had stripped down to breeches and shirts, ready for their last hope at salvation. When the *Destrier* went down, they would swim.

Running a comb through hair already ruffled by the evening breeze, he barked with a mirthless laugh at the thought.

"What's so funny?" Lorenzo asked, sourly.

"Nothing," his master told him. "Nothing at all."

He gazed across at the *Hippogriff* and wondered how long it would be before he found himself clawing his way towards it. He studied the neat lines of her hull, and the golden reflection of the dying sun on the white canvas of her sails. She looked so solid. So safe.

Then he looked closer. Something, or rather somebody, was being hauled up that tall mast with a block and tackle.

His form swung from the bottom of a rope as inelegantly as a bag of potatoes, arms and legs windmilling around from the discomfort of some sort of harness.

Squinting his eyes, Florin leaned forward. From this distance he couldn't make out much more than the figure's flapping blue robes, or the wild tangle of his fleecy white beard. He looked old, hardly fit for the terrible demands of either sea or war, and the Bretonnian wondered what had brought the old fool out here.

When the struggling form reached the crow's nest the lookout manhandled him into the lattice-work of the basket. Then, as soon as he was secure, the sailor climbed over the side and shimmied down the rigging as quickly as a rat from a burning barn.

"Who is that?" he wondered aloud.

"Must be Orbrant's friend."

"Who?"

"You know..."

The deck jumped beneath their feet. Both men tensed as they listened for the cry to abandon ship. Instead they just heard a chorus of desperate orders, followed by Graznikov's drunken curses and the crack of his pistols.

"Drunken fool," Florin muttered and looked back up to the strange figure that now stood atop the *Hippogriff*.

By now he had wedged himself firmly into the crow's nest, where he stood tall. The wind flung his robes out behind him like a battle flag, and although his eyes were squeezed shut his mouth was moving. Florin guessed that he was shouting against the wind, even though he could hear nothing from here.

"He's cracked up," he muttered, watching in fascination as the distant figure began to gesticulate like a crazed actor. Then, with a final roar, he threw both of his arms down, fingers extended to the sea below the *Destrier*.

"I wonder if he is crazy," Lorenzo mused, looking thoughtfully at the aged man. He remained stock still, fingers held in rigid accusation at the sea beneath their feet.

"I wonder if he'll jump."

"I wonder..." Lorenzo began, and was cut off as Florin seized him by the shoulder.

"Listen."

Lorenzo listened. For a moment he could hear nothing but the lapping of the waves on the hull, the murmur of Orbrant's prayers, the muffled cries and hammering from below decks.

But then, as soft and insistent as the hissing of absolute silence, he heard something else.

He craned his neck to find the source of the sound, gazing up through the lattice-work of canvas and rigging that creaked above them.

The noise grew louder, whistling like steam from a kettle. Lorenzo squinted up, then winced painfully as, against the darkening sky, the source of the sound appeared.

There were at least a dozen of them, probably more. They tumbled downwards from the clarity of the heavens, shapeless blurs of eye-watering brightness.

"Gods above," Florin breathed, watching the fireballs hurtling downwards. The noise of their descent shrilled into a terrible scream as they fell past the sails, the blinding tails that trailed behind them sending crazed shadows dancing across the twilight-lit deck before splashing into the sea.

The storm of burning hail grew stronger, the missiles hissing like scalded cats as they hit the ocean. The squeak of instantly boiling water mingled with the splash of further impacts, and a thick mist rose up to drift across the waves.

"What a show," Florin said, his predicament momentarily forgotten as the last of the meteors flogged the churning sea.

"Yes, lovely," Lorenzo grumbled, watching the burning lights disappear into the darkness below. "It's just a shame that the daemon wasn't anywhere near it. I'm sure it would have been very impressed."

"Maybe if it surfaces again..." Florin began.

But even as he spoke, the leviathan was doing just that. Before the last wisp of steam had cleared the water between the *Destrier* and the *Hippogriff* began to churn,

roiling like the contents of a cauldron. Once more the sea darkened as the beast rushed to the surface.

This time, though, to the pressure of its ascent was added the white-hot .fury of pure agony. It leapt blindly; arching its back like a leaping salmon as it burst writhing from the water.

For one timeless moment it towered above the watching men, a sight that would live forever in the dark places of their dreams. The twelve tons of its form were suspended as effortlessly as a wasp in amber, every angle of its terrible form was revealed.

They saw the massive dagger of its dorsal, flaring as wide as a sail, and the smoothness of its underbelly, as thick as a schooner's hull. They saw its razored jaws flung wide open in an insane grin, and the rolling orbs of its dead eyes.

But what Florin would always remember were the string of meteors that studded its body like diamonds in a tiara. They shone with a blinding intensity in the melting blubber of its form, as hot as hatred, as constant as love.

They were still burning when the great beast crashed back into the ocean. The thunderclap of its departure served the silent monstrosity as a scream, the tidal wave its bulk displaced a parting shot before it fled back to the icy embrace of the depths from which it had come.

So it was that, as dusk turned to darkness, and then to the starlight which lit the twin voids of ocean and heavens, the *Destrier* limped onwards.

The next day, as if gifted to the ship as a victory laurel, the misty line of Lustria's shore rose above the horizon.



CHAPTER SEVEN

“This place is wonderful.” Florin roared, waving his mug as though it were a marshal’s baton and the thatched wall’s tapestries. “It’s fantastic. By Shallya’s belly I’d forgotten how wonderful dry land felt!”

“Reminds me of Bordeleaux,” Lundorf remarked, provoking an explosion of drunken laughter from his friend.

Lorenzo took a sip of the fermented sugarcane that passed for brandy in this hovel of a tavern, then spat it out onto the damp earth of the floor. He was beginning to wish that he’d gone with Orbrant to search for supplies.

Although, had he done so, he had no doubt that Florin would have led his brother officer into some lethal excess or other. And Swamptown, despite the brothels and bars that formed its decadent core, was no place for excess.

They’d found the squalid settlement the previous day, just as the pack of pirate sloops that called the miserable haven home had found them. The verminous ships had closed in around Gorth’s flotilla as it tacked its way towards harbour, but a well-timed parade of the ship’s mercenary cargo had been enough to keep them at bay.

One look at the disciplined ranks of mercenaries, bristling with lethal combinations of steel and firearms, had put paid to the brigands’ dreams of loot. They had slunk off disappointedly, slipping over the horizon in search of easier prey.

Which had been lucky. Moments after the flotilla had tied up to Swamptown’s rickety bamboo pier the mercenary army had ceased to exist. In its place was a stampeding mob, an untameable rabble that had swept away into the grubby embrace of the malarial town and left their ships almost completely unguarded.

Colonel van Delft had wisely waited until the first and most violent of his men’s needs had been met before shepherding them to the billets he hastily arranged. Then, and only then, did he give his officers leave, and the freedom of Swamptown.

Swamptown. In naming the place the inhabitants had shown a surprising honesty. Their crudely built huts and hovels were riddled with termites and slimed with mould; even the newest stank of decay as they rotted slowly back into the ground from which they had sprung. They stank as they decomposed, each of them filled with the rank odour of rotten vegetation and other, more revolting things.

But if the air inside was dank, the air outside was even worse. After the dean sea breezes of the voyage the humidity here was choking, an asthmatic fog that droned with the constant hum of countless biting flies. Lorenzo's battered hide had proved too tough for the insects, so they had feasted upon his companions. After just two hours ashore they'd covered them with an agonising itch of bites and incisions.

Swamptown. Even the streets oozed. Mud and shit sucked hungrily at their feet with every cloying step, insinuating itself into the damp leather of their boots and spilling over the cuffs.

"Wench," Florin cried out, leaning back on the half barrel that served as a chair and banging his own filthy heels onto the table. "More drink for me and my friend!"

The tavern keeper's wife, a scrawny woman whose grey hair Florin had already loudly compared to a rat's nest, swapped a surly look with her husband before filling two more pots.

"You pay now," she told them, banging the vessels down hard enough to slop a draught over the side.

"Of course we'll pay now," Florin crowed. "Although you can trust us. We'll soon be rich!"

"To glory and gold!" Lundorf roared, snatching up his drink.

"Glory and gold!"

The woman wiped her hands contemptuously on her apron and swapped another glance with the tavern keeper. This time he winked.

"Yes," she began, and with an obvious effort twisted her hatchet face into what could have been a smile. "I can see that you two lads are destined for riches indeed. Gold's just waiting in the jungle for anyone with the courage to go and pick it up."

"So we hear," Lundorf nodded sagely. "And, by Sigmar's left ball, we're the men with the courage!"

"You certainly look like it," she said. "Anyway, that'll be a gold crown."

Lorenzo choked on his drink.

"Certainly, my good woman," Lundorf said, reaching for his purse.

"Each." Her eyes barely flickered as she doubled the price.

"That's too much," Lorenzo managed to cough out, but she just turned on him, this time with a genuine smile on her face.

"And that's too late."

Lundorf rolled the coins into the mess of mud and spilt beer that slicked the table, and Lorenzo sighed.

"Another drink, lads?" The woman said, pocketing the coins.

But before any of them could reply, the thatched door of the hovel burst open, the twigs of its construction snapping as a crowd of men stumbled into the room.

"Aaaaaah, look who it is," their leader sneered, lurching threateningly towards Lorenzo. "The bringer of the daemon."

"Graznikov," Florin cried out, his voice lifting with the cheerful ferocity of a hound that's sighted its quarry. "Join us."

Something in his voice cut through the Kislevite's drunken belligerence, stopping him in his tracks. He regarded his rival with a certain wariness and tugged thoughtfully at his beard.

For a moment it seemed that perhaps, despite the drink and the euphoria of shore leave, the wary peace that ship's discipline had enforced might remain between Graznikov and his rival. But as the Kislevite hesitated on the brink of violence Lundorf pushed him over it.

"I see you've brought your men with you, captain," he said. "What will you lose for them this time? Their boots?"

"Or their breeches?" Florin asked.

The Kislevite's flushed face turned pale, the red that had suffused it melting away apart for two spots of rage that burned a warning on his cheeks.

"We come for the wizard, Lorenzo," he announced with quiet menace, and there was a murmur of agreement from the men behind him. They sounded more excited than angry, more like men waiting for a dog-fight to start than a serious lynch mob. Florin felt a flicker of relief, and noticed that, so far, none of them showed any sign of drawing steel.

"What are you talking about, you fool?" he asked, shifting uneasily in his seat as he counted Graznikov's men. A couple of them had followed their leader through the sagging arch of the doorway to stand beside him in a little knot. Many more waited outside.

"You heard the commander's orders," Florin called out, more for their benefit than Graznikov's. "You saw what he did to that lunatic on the *Hippogriff*. Remember how long it took him to choke to death, and how he danced in the breeze. Touch my man here and van Delft will have you dancing that same jig. Don't be an idiot."

Graznikov scowled at the uneasy shuffling the reminder brought, and silently cursed his men for their cowardice.

"Idiot," Graznikov spat. "You idiot. You bring this wizard on board, and he bring the daemon. The sea daemon."

This time the murmur of agreement was muted, perhaps as each man's thoughts turned to the murderer's corpse van Delft had left hanging to rot. It hadn't been pretty. Especially when the maggots had hatched beneath its skin.

"So," Graznikov, changing tack, pressed on, "we won't kill him. We just beat him. A warning for next time."

He pointed an accusing finger at Lorenzo as more Kislevites barged into the room, eager for a better view. They jostled past their comrades who, as yet, seemed in no hurry to move any closer to the wizard.

Florin and Lorenzo looked at each other and then, turning in perfect time, looked back over their shoulders to the window that lay behind them.

"Ha!" Graznikov snapped with ersatz satisfaction. "You don't deny it."

"Deny the ramblings of a lunatic?" Florin snapped back. "Why waste my breath? Lorenzo helped us to fight the beast while you were still cowering below."

"Lies!" roared Graznikov, taking a step closer.

"On three?" Lorenzo muttered into his pot, and Florin nodded imperceptibly. Lorenzo tapped his finger on the table once.

"Oh, I see," Florin jeered at his foe. "So you did help us against the monster?"

A second tap, the sound damp upon the sodden table.

"I no bring it," Graznikov growled, eyes narrowing dangerously, "No. Your Loren..."

But the third tap had already sent the two Bretonnians springing to their feet. The tavern keeper howled in protest as his table flew forwards, a rain of pots smashing onto the floor even as Lorenzo reached the window.

"Come on," Florin shouted at Lundorf, grabbing his shoulder.

"I'm with you," the warrior shouted back, and leapt at Graznikov.

Florin was halfway to the window by the time he realised that Lundorf hadn't quite understood. He turned on his heel in time to see Graznikov's horrified face disappear behind Lundorf's attack, and to see the gang of Kislevites closing in around the two men like the fingers of a fist.

"Damn," he cursed, the obscenity a statement rather than a battle cry. Then he flung himself into the melee.

His first target was one of the Kislevites' sergeants. From the brown pelt of his beard to the heavy gut, which even the voyage hadn't been able to strip away, he looked more bear than man. And although he was rounded with fat, there was no mistaking the muscle that bulged in his thick forearms, or the aggression that burned in his eyes.

Not that it was to do him any good. Before he'd even thrown his first punch Florin's thumb jabbed forward, finding the soft spot beneath the big man's ear. His world disintegrated into an explosion of pain and bright light as he collapsed.

The next man turned in time to snap out a quick punch, the hard knuckles of his fist crunching into the gristle of Florin's nose. But even before the first trickle of blood, the Bretonnian had ducked inside the man's reach, close enough to smell the stink of his sweat as he raised a knee in a vicious jab that doubled him up with a howl of pain.

Ignoring the copper taste of blood and the sting of tears Florin fought on, ducking a punch, taking another on his shoulder. A knee drove into his thigh with a numbing thump that sent him staggering back into grappling hands.

With the wild energy of desperation pumping through his body he jabbed his elbow back, connecting with what might have been either a joint or a skull. But before he could strike again a fist stabbed into his stomach, ripping a terrible cry from his throat.

Through the pain and the nausea he forced himself into the attack. For a moment it seemed that he was alone, surrounded by a mob of Kislevites. But then, stamping on one man's knee and jabbing the eye of another, he suddenly found himself beside Lundorf.

Although his face was streaked with shockingly bright splashes of blood, the Marienburger was fighting like a beast at bay, roaring with what might almost have been joy as he cracked skulls and ribs.

Despite the crush of bodies, Florin felt a terrible grin starting to spread across his face, the rush of adrenaline bunching his cheeks even as an elbow thudded into his face, leaving an immediate bruise.

He was beyond pain now. Even as the mob of Kislevites battered and kicked him from one side to the next he thought only of the next temple to crack, the next knee to pop or finger to snap.

Vaguely, a thought of no more concern to him than the colour of the serving girl's hair came to him: he wondered if he'd die here, beaten to death by men who were supposed to be his comrades.

At least they had almost gained the door by now. At least they could use it as a pinchpoint, a funnel to stop their enemies surrounding them. At least...

Lundorf grunted with surprise and collapsed onto him like a felled tree. The two men lurched to one side, the heel of someone's palm flashing forward to crush Florin's nose as he caught his friend.

The Kislevites, seeing their advantage, surged forward. But a second later they stopped and pulled back, tumbling out of the tavern.

Florin, half crazed with the rush of combat, jeered at them.

"What are you waiting for? Cowards! Women! Come here and I'll break your heads!"

But the only reply came from Lorenzo. "Come on, boss," he said. "Give me a hand with Lundorf."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Organising our escape. Smell it?"

Through the blood and snot of his crushed nose Florin couldn't smell a thing. He could feel it, though, hard on the back of his throat. Taste it once and acrid smoke of burning thatch could never be mistaken for anything else.

A glance upwards revealed tendrils of white smoke weaving down from the thatch, the heat of the fire gathering its strength for the holocaust to come.

"Let's go," he said and, dragging Lundorf between them, he and Lorenzo fled from the fire that secured their retreat.

* * *

The reveille was not a happy affair. It was held in a loading area of Swamptown's harbour, a venue which had cost van Delft dear in bribes. And even though he had mercifully called it for mid-morning, late enough for the men to rest but early enough to avoid the burning heat of the midday sun, the assembled soldiery looked as wretched as so many re-animated corpses.

Two of them, at least, had an excuse. The malarial smog and cheap rotgut of Swamptown had succeeded where the voyage had failed. Their bodies lay neatly bundled in sailcloth now, fat blue flies already clouding the air around them.

Van Delft, resplendent in the neat green and gold broadcloth of his dress uniform, ignored the buzzing of the insects, much as he ignored the stifled groans and the occasional bouts of vomiting which were the only signs of life from his bedraggled army.

A day and a night were all it had taken to reduce them to this sorry state. A day and a night. And that bloody wizard hadn't even bothered to turn up.

The commander, for perhaps the thousandth time in a long and varied career, wished that he'd stayed in the Emperor's army. How much easier it was to command regular soldiers.

But to hell with that, he thought stoically, I regret nothing.

Anyway, at least the dwarfs seemed to have stayed in shape. Incredible, really, given the amount of ale they'd drunk. They stood in three neat ranks, the stubby block of their cannon resting to one side of them. The muddy sunlight glinted on its barrel, and gleamed on their guns, and shone on their axes.

The commander was impressed. Even their beards were well tended, trimmed and squared below eyes that were merry with contempt for their human comrades.

The last of the captains, Graznikov, reeled off what passed for a report. Had van Delft held an Imperial rank, and had Graznikov been his commissioned subordinate, the bleary-eyed Kislevite would have been awaiting his displeasure in the guardroom right now. Not because rumour suggested that he'd set fire to the town; a fire which still smouldered amongst the ruins of a dozen hovels. Not even because he'd incited his men to assault two brother officers.

No. The worst part of Graznikov's outrage had been that he'd assaulted two men with twenty, and lost.

Mercenary or not, van Delft had considered having the man flogged. Or demoted. Or perhaps even quietly removed.

But for now the commander just gave a curt nod of dismissal. He waited for the sorry excuse of an officer to stagger back to his company before strutting forward to address this ragbag of an army.

They stood before him, a hundred and twenty men, give or take. They came from every corner of the Old World, from the perpetual winter of the far north, to the perpetual summer of the south. But for now, through strange alchemies of greed and desperation, they were all comrades. Brothers.

They might not know it yet, but van Delft did. Once they entered the jungle Kislevite and Tilean, Bretonnian and Marienburger and dwarf, all these labels would become meaningless. They would be soldiers, that was all. Nothing more and nothing less.

And if they don't unite... well, the commander thought, if they don't unite in life then they most certainly will in death.

He allowed himself a smile of grim good humour at the thought before he began to speak.

"Gentlemen," he said, his voice carrying with a practiced ease. "We are gathered here on the verge of a great adventure. In a little more than a week we will set sail once more, following the coast down to a river. And it is at the end of that river that our goal lies.

"And our goal, as you all know, is gold. Perhaps more gold than any of us will need in this lifetime."

"I doubt it," somebody called out to muted laughter.

"I did say 'perhaps'," van Delft shot back, to more, louder laughter.

Only the dwarfs didn't laugh. At the mention of the wealth their faces had darkened with concentration.

Good, thought the commander, seriousness is what mercenary armies usually lack.

“The jungle will be hard work. It is thick. It might contain dangers. I commend you to your officers, who will spend the next five days preparing you for what is to come.”

Here he couldn't help glancing at Captain Castavelli, and the score of Tileans that stood behind him. In marked contrast to the stained and stitched rags that served most of their comrades for uniforms, the Tileans wore luxuriantly coloured and elegantly tailored fabrics. Even the poorest of them had a wide, well tooled leather sash upon which to hang a rapier, and a broad-brimmed slouch hat forested with long white feathers.

Deep in the grim fastness of his Sigmarite heart van Delft was almost looking forward to seeing what the jungle made of their foppery.

“Let me remind you, too, that whilst our paymasters back home have generously provided for your food and passage, your weapons are your own affair. That being the case, from now on there will be daily inspections of all arms. Now, do we have any questions before we consign these, our two fallen comrades, to the ground?”

He paused for a moment, but the only answer came from the hum of the flies.

“Very well then. Captain d'Artaud, you look full of the joys of life this morning. Fall the men out.”

Florin, every muscle feeling bruised and every bone feeling broken, lurched to the front and croaked out the single word “Disssssss—missed.”

The effort was almost too much for him.

The shop wasn't so much a building as a stall that had gradually evolved. Its walls had been made by the two men who had built shops on either side, and the rustling palm thatch of its roof seemed to have grown pretty much by itself.

Still, despite the cramped conditions, it was a relief to be beneath its shade. The disturbing smells of the place were a small price to pay for a moment's respite from the midday heat.

And the smells were disturbing. The peddler obviously ground up the pastes and potions from which he made his living in this very room. Strings of multicoloured herbs and vegetables hung from the ceiling in a thick forest of raw materials, interspersed here and there with the dried carcasses of lizards, or monkey paws, or other, stranger things.

Beyond the dangling tendrils of this confusion sat the great stone bowl of the shopkeeper's pestle and mortar. It squatted against the far wall like some primitive idol, its owner sweating over it like a priest over a sacrifice as he prepared Florin's order.

“I wonder if this stuff will work in the jungle?” Florin asked Orbrant, more to make conversation than because he had any doubt. The two of them had already tried out the lotion the day before, applying it to one arm whilst leaving the other clean. The mosquitoes had bitten a painful recommendation of the herbalist's repellent into their unprotected skin.

Not that that discomfort could compare with the battered flesh and torn muscle that still had Florin hobbling about like an octogenarian. Even now, almost a week after the fight, the bruises still covered his body in the livid blues and greys of a stormy sky.

How satisfying it would have been to have unleashed his men's indignant rage against the Kislevites, he thought. Satisfying but foolish.

In fact, in the days that had followed the fight, Florin had found that his erstwhile foes had started to regard him with a wary respect, bordering on affection. Some of them had even bought him and Lundorf a drink, although they had laughed uproariously when some of it had spilled from his numbed lips.

Even Graznikov had sidled up to shake hands, although his good humour had felt as false as a lead crown compared to the rough honesty of his men.

"I'm sure that it will work for a while, sir," Orbrant said, breaking his chain of thought. "And anyway, my friends here tell me that in the jungle we will be grateful for any little comfort we can find."

"I didn't know you had friends here," Florin raised an eyebrow, the gesture sparking off a twinge of dull pain.

"I met several new brothers at the shrine above the docks. They're good men, although like all of us they've strayed."

"How?"

"That's their business, sir."

Florin turned to regard his sergeant and tried, not for the first time, to fight off the feeling that this grim faced professional should be wearing the captain's cloak instead of himself.

"I have often wondered, Orbrant, why it is that you left the priesthood. I imagine that your order felt the loss."

"No man is indispensable," Orbrant said, and stroked the smooth dome of his head thoughtfully. "As to why I left... well, it makes no difference to either you or the men."

"I know, but I wonder anyway."

Orbrant lapsed back into silence and watched the shopkeeper lean the pestle to one side, wipe his brow, and start to rustle through the hanging larder of his ingredients. After a moment he found the herb that he wanted and, spitting onto his hands with a practiced gesture, he went back to grinding.

"I am on a pilgrimage here," Orbrant said, his voice a murmur beneath the grinding of stone upon stone. "You see that my head remains clean-shaven? That is because I have never renounced my vows. I have only taken myself away from the order for a while."

Florin waited patiently as Orbrant pursed his lips and gazed at the far wall, as though hoping to find the words he sought there.

"I needed to hurl myself into this wilderness like a hawk into the void. I wanted to prove that my faith in Sigmar was as true and as strong as the hawk's faith in the air which bears it up. Do you understand?"

"No," Florin admitted and, to his surprise, Orbrant threw back his head and roared with laughter, his white teeth shining in the gloom. It was the first time he'd

seen the taciturn warrior so much as smile, and his evident surprise kept Orbrant laughing even longer.

"I like you, sir," he confided at length. "You're the most honest rogue I've ever seen."

"Thanks," Florin snorted, trying to take it as a compliment. For a moment they sat in companionable silence, and then Florin said, "You don't have to call me 'sir', by the way."

"It's best that I do. These are irreligious men we have. Lacking the guidance of Sigmar they need plenty of theatre to bear them up, and in that you and I must play our roles well."

"But when we're alone."

"No, think no more of it. I will call you 'sir' and you will call me 'sergeant'. Trust me, it is better this way."

"Well then, sergeant, perhaps you'll tell me why you so needed to plunge into this void."

"Unfortunately," Orbrant said, his features once more composed into the severity of the parade ground, "we don't have the time. Look, this good man has completed our order and we're due back at the companies' lodging. We have to meet that merchant Ali. Do you remember, sir?"

"Yes," Florin agreed, letting the subject drop as he struggled painfully to his feet.

Ali Ibn Zephier leaned patiently against the crumbling mud brick of the Bretonnians' lodging. He remained as still as a lizard in the shade of the old warehouse, completely unmoving apart from the working of his plump cheeks as he chewed on a date.

From time to time his eyes moved in the shadows beneath his broad turban. They flicked from one end of the street to the other, or gazed at the masts of the ships in harbour, or rested on the little knot of his henchmen who stood guard on the handcart that contained their master's merchandise.

The blanket that covered his cargo had grown hot to the touch beneath the burning eye of the Lustrian sun, but Ali remained unconcerned. He'd been in this trade for long enough for fear to give way to caution, and for caution to give way to a careless fatalism.

In this, at least, the sharpness of his wife's tongue had been a help.

When he saw Florin and Orbrant come around the corner he spat out the stone of the date he'd been chewing and walked over to meet them. The baggy sleeves of his shirt hung down from his arms as he threw them wide in greeting.

"My friends," he called, his singsong accent rich with professional charm. "How are you today? You look very well."

A cynical smile pained Florin's battered face.

"Really?"

"Of course, old friends always look good."

"But we've only known you for a week," Orbrant said.

Ali sighed inwardly. These barbarians had no idea of manners.

"Just as you say, my old friend."

“Have you got the powder?” Florin demanded, interrupting the pleasantries.

“Of course. But, so sorry, noble sir, I have to ask for more than the price we mentioned.”

“The price we agreed on, you mean,” Florin said, strolling towards the hand-cart.

“Just as you say,” Ali agreed without missing a beat. “Demand has never been greater.”

“How great?”

“Forty crowns a barrel.”

“Is this a joke?”

“So sorry,” Ali shrugged, starting to lose patience with this barbarian’s lack of manners.

Florin sighed. The coin he’d collected from his gunners should have been enough for four barrels of finest black powder. As it was, they’d barely manage two.

“We shook hands on twenty-four crowns a barrel.”

“Yes, but then things changed. I give you my oath that if you don’t buy them at forty somebody else will.”

“A word with you, sir,” Orbrant said and led Florin out of earshot. “I have coin for the powder. We should take all that we can.”

“You have seventy crowns?”

“Yes.”

For a moment Florin wrestled with the temptation to ask how a priest, a penitent whose only possessions seemed to be a warhammer, a razor and a frayed old robe, had come by such an amount.

“We will take a receipt and I will reclaim the money from the company share at the end of the expedition.”

“Well, yes. All right. Thank you, sergeant.”

Orbrant nodded and waited for Florin to lead the way back to the merchant.

“Very well, Ali. Seeing as we’re friends I’ll give you thirty crowns each for the barrels.”

“Would that I could,” the merchant wrung his hands, pleased that his customer was at least attempting to be polite. “But if my wife found out she would sleep with her legs closed for a month.”

“Yes, women are never reasonable.”

“Even if I sold them to you for thirty-eight a barrel she would call me a fool and a squanderer of our daughters’ dowries.”

“And if I paid more than thirty-two, my men would kill me for a thief as soon as we entered the jungle.”

For a moment the two men stood and frowned, perhaps saddened by the thought that the world was cruel enough to drive them, two old friends, to such an impasse.

It was Ali who spoke first.

“I tell you what I might be able to get away with,” he said, leaning forward conspiratorially. “As well as the powder I have some other things. Weapons of great power.”

“You are truly a man of resource,” Florin nodded, impressed.

“Yes,” Ali nodded modestly and lifted the corner of the blanket, which covered his wares. As well as the fat barrels of powder there were two square boxes huddled within the handcart. The merchant lifted the lid of one to reveal three rows of iron spheres nestling in the deep straw packing.

They were the size of ripe pineapples, but they were black and smooth and almost featureless. The only flaws in their round perfection were the white fuses that grew like pigtails from the top of each of them.

“Look,” said Ali, lifting one up with the air of a conjuror that has just pulled a rabbit from a cynic’s empty hat. “Bombas! All the way from Cathay, where they use them to hunt dragons.”

“Then they’re probably full of damp,” Orbrant muttered.

Florin, who by now was deep in the flow of the poetry of the marketplace, turned on him.

“For shame, sergeant,” he scolded. “Our friend here would never sell poor quality goods. I just wish that we could afford to buy them.”

“Sorry sir,” Orbrant said.

“But you can afford them,” Ali smiled happily. “For you I will make a gift of a whole box. My wife doesn’t know of these treasures, so I will take my loss from the forty you will pay me for the powder.”

“My men will weep when I tell them how poor we have become,” Florin complained, drawing the negotiations to an end.

“They will weep more if they go into the jungle unarmed,” Ali observed, helpfully. “Although not for very long.”

“No doubt. Well then, friend Ali, perhaps you can show me how to use these bombas whilst my sergeant here scrapes together the last of our gold.”

“My pleasure,” Ali beamed delightedly. He should have known that things were never this easy. “But I fear that we can’t light one of these fuses here or we will damage the buildings hereabouts.”

“We’ll use the old well behind the barracks. The water’s too foetid to use.”

“Alas, the water would extinguish the fuse.”

“We’ll drop it into the bucket.”

“But the bucket would be destroyed.”

“No matter,” Florin decided. “Come, my friend, let’s light one of these up.”

So saying he selected one of the bombs and led Ali unhappily away to the well. Of course the bomb might work, he told himself. It wasn’t as if he actually knew that it wouldn’t.

If only his customers would save his wares until the day of battle, he reflected as they approached the well. That way they would avoid so much disappointment.

Long term disappointment, at least.

“Here we go,” Florin said, tossing the weight of the bomb he’d chosen from hand to hand and peering into the well. The bucket was gently rotting away, suspended on its rusted chain perhaps four feet beneath the crumbling wall that surrounded it. An easy enough target to drop the bomb into.

“I wonder, my old friend, do you have a tinder box?”

“Use one of these instead,” Ali said, handing over a small ivory box of sulphur matches. “They’re safer than a shower of sparks.”

“Of course,” Florin nodded and took the box. Resting the bomb on the edge of the well he struck one of the matches and then, shielding the flame from the sultry dampness of the breeze, he bent down to light the fuse.

It burst into life with an impressive hiss. The white twine of its length blackened beneath the bright star of a flame that worked its way steadily downward.

Holding the thing as delicately as if the iron of its body were as fragile as eggshell, Florin leaned over the side of the well and dropped the charge into the bucket.

“Let us stand back a little way,” Ali advised, and the two of them drew back. They waited in breathless anticipation as the distant hiss of the fuse spluttered and died.

They waited a little longer.

Ali felt a trickle of sweat run down his spine and swallowed nervously.

“Perhaps the fuse was loose...” he began to explain when, with absolutely no warning, the bomb exploded.

The power of the explosion was concentrated and reinforced by the confines of the well. Unable to escape in any other direction the fire roared upwards, a volcano of destruction that threw a great gout of shrapnel and shattered brick high into the air.

“It worked,” Ali gasped, but Florin was too impressed to hear the relief in his voice. Even now, after the first impact of the explosion, smoke was still vomiting up out of the well’s charred mouth. With a grin of delight Florin walked cautiously towards it, the cries and rushing feet of his men unheard beneath the ringing in his ears.

“Friend Ali,” Florin shouted over his own deafness. “I can see why your word is so valued.”

The merchant had the presence of mind to snap shut the surprised gape of his jaw as he hastened to Florin’s side.

“Perhaps you would like to buy the rest of the bombs?” he began innocently, the patter of falling debris unnoticed around him.

“No, one box will be enough,” Florin said, patting him on the shoulder.

“But...”

“Come, my sergeant will pay you the balance.”

The merchant cursed himself. If he’d have known that any of those damned things actually worked...

“Maybe I didn’t make myself clear—” he tried again, but Florin merely smiled.

“Yes,” he said. “You did. Ah, here’s Sergeant Orbrant. And a score of my men. Look at how sharp their halberds are, friend Ali.”

“Yes indeed.” The merchant nodded miserably as Orbrant handed him a purse that was five hundred per cent pure profit. He stowed it within his shirt and, cursing his men to get a move on, trailed out of the compound like a broken man.

Even the thought that the rest of the bombas were probably as useless as the first two he’d tried didn’t lend him much cheer. That one explosion should have been enough to double his price.

He was still sulking two days later when, waved off by a desultory rabble of whores, peddlers, beggars and pick pockets, van Delft's expedition were rounded up and herded back into their ships. Although their destination was supposed to be a secret the whole town knew where they were going.

They were going to the southern jungle.

Oblivion.

"What a waste," Ali muttered later that night, his thoughts haunted by images of the expedition's coins and armour mouldering away between cleanly picked bones.

"Yes," his wife surprised him by agreeing. Her own thoughts full of the bronzed young men that were carrying that wealth into the doom of a Lustrian jungle. "What a waste."



CHAPTER EIGHT

Florin wasn't the only one wondering why his company had been transferred to the *Hippogriff*. Lorenzo had assumed that it was to avoid further trouble with the Kislevites. Lundorf, with whose company the Bretonnians had been rotated, suggested that it was a sort of promotion.

Only van Delft really knew, of course. But the commander had remained as tight lipped as always about his reasons, and Florin, who was always happier away from the commander's penetrating blue gaze, hadn't pressed him.

He was beginning to wish that he had sought an answer though. The uncertainty was one of the thoughts that had kept him awake tonight, his hopes and fears for the future combining to drive him out of the claustrophobic confines of his cabin.

Now he stood on the deck, leaning over the warm wood of the guard-rail and peering out over a phosphorescent ocean. The shore lay in a black line along the distant horizon, the tangled mass of the jungle blurred by mist. Despite the late hour the heat remained constant, almost as if the pale light of the fattening moon, Mannslieb was somehow warming the night air.

Florin gazed at its pockmarked face, and then beyond into the stars that lay above it. They glittered unblinkingly in the black void of space, gazing hungrily down like predatory eyes.

The Bretonnian found himself scanning the heavens for the familiar constellations of his home. When he realised that there were none he was seized with a strange certainty that somewhere, beneath the northern skies where they still burned, there was another Florin d'Artaud.

This other Florin d'Artaud might be drinking ale, or playing cards, or rolling around a bed bought with either love or gold. He would be safe from the horrors that awaited in the darkness of the Lustrian shore.

A meteor hissed across the void above and the real Florin used the gods' fire to wish his alter ego luck.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" a voice commented from the shadows, and he started with a thrill of superstitious fear. Then the speaker stepped out into the moonlight, his stooped form dispelling Florin's unease.

"Yes," he said as his pulse slowed back down. "Very beautiful. But very strange. I can't see the Mill, or the Griffin. Or even the Lady's Veil."

“But you can see the Serpent. Look up there, see the bright star to the left of the pinnace?”

Florin followed the wizard’s finger and nodded.

“That’s the eye. Beneath it you can see the two fangs, those trails of smaller stars.”

“So you can,” Florin nodded happily as his imagination joined the dots. “And its body spirals over into the horizon.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m Florin d’Artaud, by the way,” he held out his hand and the wizard took it, his grip cool and dry.

“Yes, van Delft mentioned you. And I’m Bartolomi Kereveld.”

The two men shook hands, and Florin found himself studying the creases and wrinkles that lined the old man’s face. He was searching for a trace of the evil Orbrant had spoken of. All he found were the beginnings of a wry smile.

“Don’t worry,” Kereveld said, his voice gently mocking. “You won’t see any horns.”

Florin snorted, embarrassed that he had been so transparent.

“I never thanked you for driving away that daemon,” he rapidly changed the subject.

“Daemon?”

“Yes, the sea monster.”

“Oh that,” Kereveld’s voice quavered with the effort of appearing modest. “It was nothing. Just a simple meteor storm. Any one of my brethren could have cast a similar version.”

“Yet it seemed to impress the daemon.”

“Pshaw,” the wizard waved away the compliment. “It was no daemon. Just a serpentina megalothon. Quite a natural creature, I assure you. Although it was a prize specimen.”

“Yes,” Florin remarked dryly and cast his gaze back to the shore. It seemed to be waiting for them, brooding with the menace of a beast hidden in ambush. “I bet we’ll find plenty of prize specimens in there, too, of one sort or another.”

“Let’s hope so,” Kereveld nodded humourlessly. “Let’s hope so.”

Florin couldn’t help hoping for quite the opposite. Although in that, as in many things, he was destined to be disappointed.

“Are you sure I can’t persuade you?” van Delft asked, although he was already sure that he knew what the answer would be.

“Dead sure,” Captain-Owner Gorth said, and spat towards the distant mouth of the river. It was massive, a great hungry maw that opened up out of the green mass of the jungle to vomit its muddy waters far, far out to sea. Even with his ships anchored here, half a mile off that treacherous coast, Gorth couldn’t see anything through the silt-laden water.

“I’m damned if I’ll risk my girls in that puddle.”

Van Delft had a sudden, fleeting image of his own two girls. Women, really, but no less sweet to him for that. They’d be sitting in the morning room of their house in

Marienburg now, sewing or gossiping while they waited for him to bring back their dowries.

Quite why he should have to risk life and limb so that he could bribe worthless young men to marry them he didn't quite know. But then, he'd never tried to understand the elegant world which they seemed to so much enjoy.

"All right," he sighed, his attention snapping back to the task in hand. "We agreed that you'd wait for us at sea. No reason why you should change your mind now."

Gorth nodded, satisfied, and thrust his thumbs into the rope belt that disappeared beneath the bulge of his stomach. He'd become rich from knowing when to take chances, and when not to. And risking the hulls of his ships in unknown shallows was definitely an example of when not to.

Still, there was no point being mean-spirited. Apart from anything else he quite liked van Delft. Even though he did stink of aristo, there was no pretension about him, and he had an honest ruthlessness that reminded Gorth of himself.

"Tell you what, though, Colonel..."

"Commander."

"Aye, commander, I'll lend you some of my lads to see your boats to the shore. Wouldn't want to lose any more of you whilst your still in my care, so to speak."

"Very decent of you," van Delft thanked him. "Perhaps you could ask them to help us get them into the water the right way up?"

Gorth sniggered happily. Like every other sailor in the flotilla he'd been enjoying watching the mercenaries struggle and curse with their long boats. One of them had already slipped its ropes and upended itself in the water. It bobbed up and down as it rode the gentle swell out to sea like a great wooden tortoise.

"Manolis!" Gorth bellowed, making his bosun jump. "Don't just sit there. Get those damned boats into the water the right way up."

"Aye, captain." Manolis saluted and began to chivvy his men into action. Some of them took charge of lowering the long boats into the sea, whilst others stripped off and dived into the water. A pair of them swam off to round up the escapee, their long, powerful strokes chopping into the sea like axe strokes. Others, laughing with pleasure at the coolness of the water after the scorching heat of the sun, were treading water and waiting to climb into the descending long boats.

Further down the deck Florin let the sailors take over the task with relief. Lorenzo stood sweating beside him, his palms stinging from a rope that had slipped through his hands.

"Well, boss," he said, rubbing his palms together and looking past the heaving backs of the sailors and into the greenery beyond. "Looks like things are going to get interesting."

"Looks that way," Florin said doubtfully. Now that they were close enough to see the jungle in detail he was beginning to realise how wrong his ideas about it had been.

Even during their stay at Swamptown he'd continued to think of it as more or less a forest. He knew that there would be bigger trees though, and that the heat would be stifling. He also knew that there would be strange plants and animals lurking in this

new world, perhaps reptilian brothers of the bears and wolves that inhabited the forests of Bretonnia.

In short he had expected the jungle to be recognisable.

It wasn't.

There was nothing at all recognisable about the impenetrable green mass that now lay waiting for them upon that alien shore. No mere collection of trees and wildlife this, no shaded domain of bear and boar. Instead its huge form towered above the waves like the bulk of a single monstrous animal. The hollows between its limbs were choked with vines and darkness, the air above it misted with its hot breath.

And, although it seemed poised with the breathless anticipation of a predator in ambush, it was far from silent, this great beast. The whisper of humid winds in the undergrowth, the cries of hunters and the screams of the hunted, the low, constant throb of countless insects; these and a thousand other sounds combined to whisper an entreaty, or perhaps a terrible threat, to the men who would soon be offering themselves to its hungry heart.

"Monsieur d'Artaud," a voice called behind him, and Florin turned to see Kereveld struggling through the ranks of the dwarfs who were waiting on the other end of the deck. The wizard towered above their steel-helmed heads, the great blunt cone of his hat making him seem even more of a giant as he rudely elbowed his way forward. He remained oblivious to their angry stares, as he bumbled along with no more than an occasional, "Excuse me."

Following in his wake came his servant, sweating and wheezing beneath a great haversack and a dangling collection of water bottles and map cases.

"Good day to you, Menheer Kereveld," Florin greeted him. "Let me introduce you to my manservant Lorenzo."

"A pleasure," the wizard waved away his hand and turned back to Florin. "The Colonel tells me that I'm to travel with you down the river. You're quite the warrior, by all accounts."

"Just as you say," Florin decided, his chest swelling at the flattery. "In fact it will be an honour."

A miserable sigh wracked Lorenzo upon hearing that dirty word.

"I do have a few more bits and pieces to take with us, though. I wonder if your man would be so good as to help Theobold here?"

Florin looked at Lorenzo, who nodded and followed the exhausted Theobold back through the milling throng of the crowd.

"Come on then," an impatient voice called from over the side. "Let's be having you. Who's first?"

"That will be us," Kereveld decided, despite Thorgrimm's raised hand, and led the way to the waiting sailor. With barely a pause he hiked up the hem of his robe and clambered awkwardly over the gunwale, the pale sticks of his calves flashing in the sunlight.

"First squad," Florin called out to his men as he followed this spindly charge. "Follow me."

He checked his pack, and vaulted over ship's side, climbing down the cargo net that drooped into the dangerously rocking long boat. Below him the coxswain waited, holding the boat close to the high wooden wall of the ship's side.

"Make your way along to the prow, sir," he said, pointing to the narrow ledge upon which Kereveld was already shifting uncomfortably. "Right then, who's next? Come on, come on."

Florin was content to leave the loading of the boat to the coxswain. Barefoot and clothed in nothing but a red bandanna and a pair of filthy breeches, the sailor was the only man who seemed happy on the dangerously pitching deck. He chivvied the mercenaries into their places, encouraging them with a constant stream of profanities and orders as they stowed their kit and unlimbered the oars.

Lorenzo and Theobold were the last on board, following the great mass of Kereveld's equipment. The men swore nervously as the two servants clambered over them. The boat was now so low in the water that each sudden movement threatened to tip it over.

"What have you got in all those cases?" Florin asked Kereveld as Lorenzo squeezed in by his side.

"Oh, bits and bobs. You know, tools of the trade."

"Right then," the coxswain interrupted them. "When I say 'one' lift your oars and swing the blades back. When I say 'two' cut 'em into the water. And when I say 'three', pull. Got that?"

A chorus of jibes and curses greeted his instruction, but the sailor just smiled.

"Good. Right then, one!"

"Two!"

The oars splashed into the water in a ragged volley.

"Three!"

And the boat lurched forward.

"Not bad for choir boys," the coxswain joked. "Now let's try again shall we? One!"

Slowly, but with increasing speed, the boat began to make its way towards the mouth of the river. By now other boats had left the flotilla, some of them full of men, others low with luggage. The heads and shoulders of the expedition's six mules peered calmly over the gunwale of one, whilst another was slewing this way and that beneath the weight of the dwarfs and their cannon.

Florin's own men were boisterous with nerves, good tinder for the arguments which flared up as one man splashed his fellows with a missed oar stroke, or when another slipped and rocked the boat.

Then the sluggish breeze changed and they caught the first ripe whiff of the jungle. It was enough to silence them. Like cattle that have smelled a wolf they quietened, their eyes wide and alert as they searched the looming coastline.

Before long they had drawn level with the first of the overhanging boughs, its fingers reaching out for them from the banks of the river. Long rosy tendrils trailed down from them into the muddy water, still in the sultry, unmoving air.

A mosquito landed on Florin's knuckle and began to drink.

"I wish we hadn't come," Lorenzo murmured. Florin just grunted as he flicked the mosquito away. Three more took its place.

They drew to a halt, the coxswain slowing the beat of their oars so that they held their position against the current. Gradually the rest of the long boats, all of which had now been launched from the distant trio of the ships, caught up with them.

Florin saw the familiar gleam of Orbrant's shaved head in the last boat, and the white flash of van Delft's moustaches in the one preceding it. The commander was lying back against the stern of his boat, lounging as low and as comfortably as if he were a passenger in a Marienburg gondola.

"Right," the coxswain said firmly as the twelve boats drew into a neat line, bobbing up and down on the muddy river like so many ugly ducklings "Let's get on with it. One!"

"Two!"

"Three!"

"I wonder how we'll know where these ruins are?" Florin pondered as the boat went forward. "Will they be right on the river, do you think?"

"Ruins!" Lorenzo spat as though the word were a profanity. "Who cares if we find them or not? How many ruins do you know that have treasure in them?"

"They were abandoned," Florin told him, doubtfully. "The inhabitants wouldn't have had time to take their treasure."

"Everybody has time to take treasure."

Although the thought had occurred to Florin, he didn't think it wise to admit as much in front of the lads.

"It's a bit late to be worrying about that now," he said, conscious of the effect his friend's complaints might have on the men. It didn't help that there was a lot of truth in what he said. After all, what kind of men would just run off and leave their treasure behind?

One of the mercenaries, a short, barrel-chested northerner called Bertrand, seemed to share his concerns.

"Perhaps there'll be no gold," he told Lorenzo with a shrug. "But if you can't take a joke you shouldn't have joined up."

To Florin's relief a murmur of agreement rippled through the men.

"A joke I can take," Lorenzo lied. "But I wonder how funny it will seem when we return with empty pockets. There's not a man on this world who'd abandon his treasure. His children, perhaps. His wife, certainly. But his purse? Never!"

Kereveld, who had been rummaging carefully through a wide leather satchel, pulled out a small, mildewed book and waved it at Lorenzo, as if to admonish him.

"You're right about that," he told him, carefully opening the book. "But you don't have to worry. The things that built this city weren't men. They were the ancients. Great and terrible beings of unimaginable power. To them gold was just the same as stone, or lead. And when their doom came upon them, they no longer had use for either."

The boat fell silent as the men thought about that. Amidst the narrowing banks of the river and the cacophony of screeches and calls that followed their progress, the wizard's words hadn't been as comforting as he'd wished.

Sensing this Kereveld looked up.

“So, there will be gold for you. Take my word on it.”

Lorenzo, who never trusted anybody’s word on anything, opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut as Florin kicked him.

“What’s that book you’ve got there?”

“An old logbook. The sole survivor of another expedition sold it to a merchant in Swamptown, who sold it to a captain, who was wise enough to sell it to the college,” Kereveld told him. “It was a real find. There’s even a map in it for us to follow. We’re not the first humans to make this trip, you see. That’s how I know there’ll be loot for your men.”

“What happened to the first expedition?”

“The book doesn’t really say. I suppose they were all killed off, one way or another.”

Once more silence descended upon the boat, broken only by the riffling of parchment pages and the thoughtful splash of the oars.

“Well,” Lorenzo decided at length, “that’s a great comfort.” The men’s nervous laughter drifted through the mist that covered the water. It floated up to the distant canopy, and disappeared into the choking undergrowth of the shore. And there, amongst the darkness of matted vines and rotting trees, it reached the ears of the creatures that had been following the boats since the river mouth. They froze at the sound of laughter, these things, their faces void of any emotion as they listened to the alien sound of the invaders. Only after the last of the boats had passed did they twitch back into life, chameleonic skins rippling as they scurried away to carry their strange tidings to their masters.

Hours passed, punctuated only by the splashing of the oars and the cries and shrieks of the jungle’s invisible denizens.

The sun reached its glorious zenith, its burning light stronger here than on any other place in the world. It scorched away the last curtains of mist that had clouded the expedition’s path.

Perhaps the new brightness was why Kereveld sounded so certain, his voice full of confidence as he directed the coxswain out of the main river and into a smaller tributary.

The wizard’s eyes constantly flickered between the mildewed logbook and the serpentine twists of the river. From time to time he’d pull a large, brass-bound compass from his pocket and gaze at it with the concentration of a fortune-teller with a crystal ball.

Whatever he saw there, apart from the swinging pointer, he kept to himself. But it set him muttering distractedly, and gnawing the tips of his moustaches with an uncertainty that Lorenzo didn’t like one little bit.

He struggled with the urge to complain as the banks of the tributary closed in around them, and the claustrophobic heat of the air grew heavier. They were making their way deeper into the jungle’s heart.

The day wore on, and the sun disappeared from the narrow strip of sky above. From behind them a cry rang out from the tail end of their straggling fleet, growing louder as it echoed its way up the line from one coxswain's throat to the next.

"Sir," their own coxswain said, passing the message on to Kereveld. "The commander says we're to stop and prepare to camp for the night."

"Yes, yes," Kereveld muttered, glancing up from a series of scrawled sketches and glancing worriedly at his compass. "Anywhere you like."

The sailor looked at the impenetrable thicket that grew up out of the water on either side. Then he looked at Florin.

"We'll give it another half an hour," he declared. "If it's still like this we'll have to just tie up and sleep in the boats."

But, far from thinning out, the jungle seemed to grow thicker. By the time the boats finally glided to a halt there wasn't even a glimpse of soil, just an endless pincushion of bamboo stalks that grew straight up from the sludge of the river bottom.

Night closed in, and with it, swarms of flies midges and plump, greedy mosquitoes. Florin passed around the pot of the lotion they'd bought in Swamptown, but it did little good. The insects, made devious by hunger, avoided the toxic-tasting skin of their arms and faces and delved up into cuffs, or down into collars, or just waited until the sweat of the hot tropical night washed away the repellent.

They certainly ate better than their prey, who had nothing to munch their way through but hard bread and small beer.

Florin, scratched and shifted, his back already cramped with pain. He knew that he would never be able to sleep tonight. He wondered if he should organise a watch, and was still wondering when the rocking of the boat and the quiet drone of his comrades' voices lulled him into a deep sleep.

The next day they lost their first man.

He was called Moritzio Benetti, and he'd been one of Castavelli's men for a dozen of his twenty-eight years. Florin had been awoken by the cries of his captain in the warm fog of dawn.

"What is it?" he asked Lorenzo, blinking and stretching painfully.

"The Tileans have lost a man," Lorenzo told him, his voice low and unhappy.

"Lost him? How do you mean, lost him? Where could he have gone?"

"That seems to be the question."

The sound of the Tileans' calls drifted through the mist with a new intensity.

"I don't see where he can have gone. There's nothing to stand on, for a start. Unless he swam away..." Florin let the sentence trail off, knowing how ridiculous that suggestion was.

There was a lull in the Tileans' calls for their lost comrade, and for a moment Florin thought that he could hear a man weeping.

Beside him Kereveld grunted into wakefulness, and crammed his hat down onto the tangled mess of his hair.

"Lost a man, hey?" he asked after a moment. "Well, it's only to be expected. Let's get on."

Fourteen pairs of eyes turned on him coldly, but the wizard, unmoved, had already returned to the study of his book.

After an hour's rowing they came to another fork in the river. After some hesitation, Kereveld directed them first to the left before changing his mind and choosing the right.

"Lorenzo," Florin said, his voice level with a careful insouciance he'd perfected over a thousand card tables in happier times. "Let's keep an eye on the route we take. When we return we can try and give old Kereveld here a break."

Lorenzo's face wrinkled up into a smile, and for a moment he seemed on the verge of patting his master on the head as though he was a usually stupid child who has just had a bright idea.

"Good idea, boss. In fact, I've been doing just that since we set off."

"Good man," Florin told him, and settled back to watch a troop of tiny monkeys that were following the boats curiously.

"Must ask Graznikov if they're any relation," he mused, earning a dutiful chuckle from his men.

"That's funny," said Kereveld, to nobody in particular. "I could have sworn we should be going east now."

"What does it matter, as long as we're all happy?" Lorenzo asked him sarcastically.

"Yes, you're right," the wizard sighed as he gazed upwards at the first glint of the sun above the canopy. "Sometimes I feel like the great Heiermat himself."

He must be putting it on, Florin thought.

He must be.

"It's there. I don't believe it? It's really there!"

The boat rocked wildly as Kereveld leapt to his feet, the bony digit of his forefinger outstretched as he pointed excitedly into the jungle.

"What is?" Florin asked, following the wizard's gaze anxiously. The last time the old man had waved his hands in this way the sky had been split asunder with a meteor shower.

This time, though, there was no such spectacular denouement.

This time, there appeared to be nothing.

"Look, can't you see it?" Kereveld turned on him, impatience edging his excitement.

Florin, shielding his eyes against the glare of sunlight on the water, peered forward into the wide lake that had opened up before them. Its surface lay as still as glass apart from the ripples the expedition's oars made, a great horseshoe of brackish water perhaps a quarter of a mile across.

Here and there lilies floated upon its surface, the sunlight so bright on the great leaves that they glowed emerald green. Florin had been busy watching the frogs and dragonflies chasing each other across the archipelagoes they made when the wizard had started yelling and windmilling his arms around.

"I can't see anything," Florin grumbled, his eyes now flitting over the walls of the surrounding jungle. If ever there was such a thing as uniform chaos it was here. Every mile of it was the same green, insect-riven tangle, and yet every foot contained combinations of life that were as unique as any snowflake.

The wizard, his face flushed with the heat and the relief, glared down at the mercenary.

"Look straight ahead. Can't you see that rock? The one that's shaped like an eagle's head? That's what we've been looking for."

Now that it had been pointed out Florin realised that he could see what the wizard had described. Although it was as tall as one of the Lady's cathedral spires the great fang of rock was dwarfed by the great snarl of trees that stood behind it.

The great stone had also been humbled by undergrowth. Although grey patches still showed here and there, countless strains of moss and lichen and climbing vines had coloured it the same thousand shades of green as its surroundings.

At the very top of it a stand of palms waved, like a battle flag planted on the enemy's ramparts.

"You think that looks like an eagle's head?" Florin asked doubtfully, but Kereveld waved the question away with a grunt.

"It looks more like a crested griffon's head, which is what I was looking for."

"Then why didn't you say so?"

"Because you fellows are too ignorant to know what a crested griffon looks like. But anyway, come on coxswain. Head towards the rock."

"Aye, sir," the boatman said, and called out a new tune for the oarsmen to follow. As the boat slowly turned and glided towards their destination Kereveld smiled to himself, then took off his hat to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Thank Sigmar for that," he confided in Florin, who was still trying not to be offended by being called ignorant. "I was sure that we were lost."

"Really?" the Bretonnian replied. "And what would we have done then?"

"The gods alone know," Kereveld said happily, settling back as the other boats in their flotilla arrowed towards the rock. "To be honest I was never really sure that this logbook was genuine until now."

"Didn't you know?"

"No, of course not. One never knows with these old grimoires. And by then, of course, it's usually too late."

Florin looked at Lorenzo who gave him a "told you so" look.

"This was your idea," he reminded him, thinking back to their flight from Mordicio's henchmen.

"Oh, so you knew," Kereveld said, surprise lilting his voice. "I didn't think that van Delft wanted anybody to know. He said you'd all be too superstitious to sign up to an expedition organised by my college."

"Your college," Florin repeated flatly, more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, the college of the heavens. Oh, I admit we've had a few disasters in the past, but still. That's wasn't going to stop me."

"Everyone needs gold, I suppose," Florin said carefully, aware that the hum of conversation had died amongst his listening men as they plied their oars.

“Gold? Oh no, we’re not here for gold,” Kereveld’s interest in the conversation died as suddenly as it began. He was now busily holding the ancient logbook up against the tree-line and squinting first at the picture and then at the tower of rock.

Florin gently took a hold of his shoulder.

“So, if we’re not here for gold, what are we here for?”

“Heiermat’s last theorem,” Kereveld turned to him; his face clouded with confusion. “Do you mean to tell me that you didn’t know?”

God cursed moron, van Delft thought savagely as he strode around the perimeter. All he had had to do was to keep his mouth shut.

He paused as a gang of Kislevites threw some bushels of debris over what had once been a rampart. It had become so overgrown that it was now useless: nothing more than a demarcation point between the camp to be cleared and the towering heights of the jungle beyond.

The men returned to their work and the commander resumed his furious pacing, silently cursing that fool of a wizard as he ploughed around the circuit for a second time.

The only thing that had saved the expedition had been the fact that his damned book had been right. The eagle-headed rock had stood over the remains of a human campsite. Broken amphorae had been found, their wine-stained shards held stubbornly within knots of ground vines. There had been boats, too, their rotten hulls as dank and maggot-ridden as ship’s biscuits. They’d been left with the expedition’s own boats by the shore of the lake, a twilight place where mud and reeds gave way to fallen leaves and sharp-bladed elephant grass.

They had also found a scattering of gold coins. If it hadn’t been for them van Delft doubted that the men would still be here.

The rumours had spread from the wizard’s boat like some terrible plague. It had infected even the best of his men with pointless doubts and imagined fears. The gold had proved some small antidote, the odd hexagonal shapes of the coins and the bizarre patternings less important than their weight and their glitter.

Still, it had been a damn close run thing. Even some of the captains had looked ready to cut and run.

Well, Castavelli had, at least. And if he had gone that pig’s bladder Graznikov wouldn’t have been far behind.

Bloody politics, van Delft thought, and kicked at what looked like a giant cockroach. Why didn’t I stay with the Emperor’s army?

The bug turned on him and sank needle-sharp mandibles into the leather of his boot. He stamped on it, crushing it beneath his heel.

It made him feel better. And anyway, close run thing or not, there had been no mutiny. At least, not yet. The men were busy clearing the small stockade, every one clear in his duty of sentry or axe man or cook. The thick white smoke of their fires was already rising into the air; a dozen acrid pillars that van Delft hoped might serve to keep the mosquitoes at bay.

He wanted them to be as comfortable as possible, for tonight at least. Because it was tonight that would see the expedition succeed or fail. If he lost the hearts of his men now it was all over.

Bloody wizard, he thought again, but this time a little more distractedly. Then he went to order the unpacking of some of the expedition's onions and dried meat for a decent stew.

Behind him the men sweated as they worked, and talked as they sweated. And within their talk rumours grew and took on a life of their own so that, by the time the perimeter had been hacked clear and the food cooked, nobody was quite sure why they were here in the first place.

By the time they'd eaten even their officers were beginning to wonder why. Van Delft, strolling around the smouldering campfires with a glowing cigar in his mouth, could feel their doubt as he rounded them up like errant sheep and led them back to his own campfire.

Kereveld was already sitting there, the flat pillar of his hat nodding up and down as he dozed away the day's unaccustomed hardship. A contented smile had twisted the tips of his moustache upwards, and whenever the wizard's eyes flickered open he glanced around the camp as fondly as if he were everybody's favourite uncle, and this was a treat he'd arranged for them.

Van Delft had to admire his nerve.

"Right then," he began, when they were all seated and plied with whatever alcohol they'd take. "What's with all these stories?"

The five men stared either into the flames, or at the flickering shadows that sidled ceaselessly through the jungle beyond. Thorgrimm, the dwarfs' leader, looked into the hissing bowl of his pipe.

"Captain d'Artaud," van Delft selected a volunteer, his voice still soft with nothing more than mild interest. "I believe that some of the wilder stories came from your boat."

"Oh, I don't know," Florin murmured modestly, as if he were disparaging a compliment. "We just happened to hear our friend here telling us that his college had funded this jaunt, not the merchantmen we'd thought. And that we weren't here for gold."

He looked carefully into the fire as van Delft studied him.

"Actually," he said. "We have been funded by a merchant, who is also a member of Kereveld's college. And as to not being about gold... well, why are you here?"

Florin thought about telling the truth, but only for a split second.

"To seek my fortune."

Van Delft nodded approvingly.

"And you, Captain Lundorf. How about you?"

"The same," Lundorf said with a shrug.

"Captain Castavelli?"

"Si, for fortune. 'Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi', as the ancients used to say, and who are we to argue with some wisdom? Although fortune, she is like all women, she is..."

“Yes, yes, thank you,” van Delft hurried on. “And you, Captain Graznikov. Why are you here?”

“Gold,” said the Kislevite simply, and the dwarf beside him nodded agreement.

Van Delft asked him anyway.

“And Captain Thorgrimm. What brought you here?”

“Treasure,” the dwarf said, his eyes flickering at the word like a latch at a lifted skirt. “Gold, silver. Maybe even gromril. But even if it’s only copper we’ll take our share.”

He looked at van Delft defiantly, much to the commander’s irritation. That glare was tantamount to an accusation of dishonesty. As if he’d steal copper!

Ach, to the hells with wounded pride, van Delft thought. We are mercenaries, after all.

“Well, then gentlemen, I think we’ve established why were all here. For gold. Our esteemed colleague Kereveld here has other interests, it’s true, but they won’t stop us from getting rich.”

The wizard started at the mention of his name before folding his hands over his paunch and drifting off once more.

Van Delft ignored him as he examined the black and orange fire light playing across his officer’s faces. His expression reminding Florin of a gambler studying his cards.

“Are we all agreed on that?”

The assembled men chorused their agreement doubtfully.

“Now, is there anything else that needs saying?”

In the ensuing silence Kereveld began to snore.

“Well, there is one thing,” Florin volunteered reluctantly.

“Yes?”

“If our friend here is paying the piper won’t he be calling the tune?”

“No. I’ll do any calling that needs to be done.”

“But he is your, I mean our, boss. Isn’t he?”

“A paymaster is different from a boss,” Castavelli interrupted, his pride obviously hurt. “We are gentlemen after all. If we don’t to agree with our sponsors we will resign our commissions.”

There was another chorus of agreement, which brought a proud grin to the Tilean’s swarthy features.

“Is correct,” Graznikov added. “Only an idiot would think men like us servants of men like him.”

He waved his bottle at Kereveld, who was beginning to drool into his beard, and glared at Florin.

Florin glared back.

“Yes, well, I hope that answers your question, captain,” van Delft told him.

“Now perhaps you would all be so kind as to go and mention this little chat to your men? They might sleep better knowing we’re in this swamp for a good reason. That we are not here to provide Kereveld here with sacrifices or whatever nonsense is going around. I mean honestly, look at him.”

They all turned to look at the wizard, who was twitching in his sleep like a lap dog dreaming of scraps.

“How much trouble could a silly old fool like that be to men like us? We’re warriors. Dogs of war. We wouldn’t be here if we weren’t the best.”

The men’s eyes gleamed in the firelight.

“Remind your men of that.”

“Sir,” Lundorf said, the response echoing in the throats of his fellows.

Van Delft smiled and nodded in dismissal. Taking the hint his officers scrambled to their feet, ready to take their newfound confidence back to their fellows like torchbearers with light.

“Captain d’Artaud,” van Delft called as he followed Lundorf into the night. “Just go and get a hold of Orbrant and come back here, will you?”

“Of course, sir,” Florin nodded unhappily, his heart sinking.

“And don’t look so worried. I won’t eat you.”

Florin worried anyway, not that it did him any good.

“It’s a great honour,” Florin told himself as he trudged along. In front of him two of the men, their sweat-sodden shirts buttoned to the collar against the swarms of flies, wielded machetes against the thick weave of undergrowth that blocked their path. One of them, a man seemingly as tough as he was short, had been working at the undergrowth all day.

His name was Bertrand, Florin remembered. Maybe he should have a word with Orbrant later on. His mates looked up to this little man, and he seemed to have a giant’s energy packed into his short frame. Anyway, a promotion might be good for morale.

Behind him the rest of his men waited. Those with guns held them primed and ready, the acrid whiff of their fuses lost beneath the stench of the jungle’s humid breath.

Those without guns stood around them. Their eyes were wide and restless, and they looked horribly aware that their job was that of picket fence to anything that might come bursting out of these towering vegetation.

Orbrant’s squad, who were waiting as a rearguard behind them, remained out of sight.

This is a great honour, Florin told himself again, and found that he was actually starting to believe it.

After all, Lundorf had looked jealous enough when van Delft had sent his company down this overgrown track, one of two that led from the abandoned compound. The dwarfs, leaving their cannon behind, had taken the other.

Yes, it had been a great honour. Even Graznikov had seemed a little put out, torn before fear and greed of what might lay at the end it. Of course Lorenzo would say...

Well, to hell with what Lorenzo would say. He’d left him with Orbrant just so that he wouldn’t have to hear it.

“Boss,” Bertrand called out, pausing in his work and squeezing the moisture from his flushed brow.

“What is it?” Florin stepped forward and looked over the man’s shoulder.

“Don’t know.”

He shrugged uncertainly and stepped back out of his captain’s way.

Taking the man’s machete, Florin hacked off a couple of vines and pushed past him into a passageway that had opened up into the awaiting gloom. After a few feet he turned and handed the machete back before carrying on, thorns and creepers snatching at him as he pushed through them.

Bertrand weighed it in his hand for a moment, the thick bushels of his eyebrows furrowed in thought. Then he sighed, looked back up, and followed his captain into the undergrowth.

“I don’t understand,” Florin muttered as the tight squeeze of what he had taken to be a pig run opened up into a vast expanse of claustrophobic darkness.

Suddenly, despite the crushing mass of plant life that grew all around, Florin had the dizzy sensation that he had somehow stumbled underground.

He hadn’t, of course, yet the perception that he’d entered some subterranean realm persisted. It was like being in a long, narrow cavern, more of a tunnel really, that ran ruler straight as far as the eye could see.

The trees that spanned its towering walls reached upwards like temple pillars, arching over to lock fingers high overhead. Their great boughs were clothed with vines and leaves and creepers, the countless shades of green sweeping up in combinations of light and darkness that were complex enough to shame any tapestry.

It was also as silent as a cathedral within this vast hall. After the cacophony of life that filled the jungle it was incredibly quiet, only the occasional muted cry disturbing the deathly silence.

“What is it?” Bertrand whispered, forgetting that his captain had asked him that same question only a minute before.

But Florin had an answer.

“Maybe it was a road,” he said, walking carefully out into the middle of the jungle formed cavern. There, jutting up above the detritus that covered the floor was a stone lip beyond which lay a deep, paved furrow.

Stretching in both directions it was a dozen feet across, a hollow stone spine for this organic cavity. Here and there pools of brown water glimmered sluggishly in its depths, and its walls were slimed with clinging green algae.

It stank as spectacularly, no doubt because of the rotten animal corpses that were strewn like grizzly confetti along the trough’s floor.

“That’s no road,” Bertrand disagreed, wrinkling his nose. “It’s a canal.”

“A canal. Yes, I think you’re right. But who would build a canal in a place like this? And why hasn’t the jungle covered it?”

The two men exchanged a quick glance, then looked warily around.

They already knew the answer: Kereveld’s monsters.

“It looks abandoned anyway,” said Florin. Part of him, a big part, wanted to get out of this eerily quiet place. There was something disturbing about the heavy, oppressive silence that rolled through it; and there was something unsettling about the fact that, in the midst of a world bursting with life, there was nothing here but death.

There was something even more unsettling about the uneasy, itchy sense that they were being watched, examined like bugs by hostile eyes. But that was ridiculous. After all, the canal was abandoned. It was empty, and looked as though it had been for quite some time.

“Hey boss, notice something weird?”

Florin snorted.

“Anything in particular?”

“There’s no flies here.”

Florin listened and looked and found that the other man was right. There were no flies here. No mosquito whine, or black fly buzz, or constant pins and needles of their bites.

He knew that, if anything, this should make him more cautious, yet as he stood there absent-mindedly scratching, he found that it helped him to make up his mind.

“I don’t know what we’re waiting for,” he announced. “Let’s get the men in here and push on, shall we?”

“Yes, sir,” Bertrand said, and pushed back up through the narrow pinch point to gather the rest of the company.

“Now then,” Florin asked himself as they filed gaping into the tunnel. “Which way, which way?”

There was no way of knowing whether the first expedition had gone east or west. Their path to this point had been easy to follow: it was lined with felled trees and quick-growing elephant grass. There had even been the occasional crumbling brown machete blade abandoned by the side of it.

Here, though, they hadn’t left a single sign.

“Which way, boss?” Bertrand asked and Florin, with the same easy bravado with which he had used to cast dice, said, “To the west, Bertrand, always to the west.”

So it was that after hours of marching through the threatening depths of this jungle underworld, they found the landslide that marked the end of the tunnel. Better still was the discovery of ancient barrels cached there, like clues in some tropical drag hunt. The contents were long gone of course; it wasn’t even possible to tell if the mouldy sludge inside the barrels had been water or wine.

Florin was pleased to hear the respect in his men’s voices as they waited for the rear guard to catch up. It occurred to him that they weren’t used to officers who relied on pure guesswork for their decisions.

Or perhaps they just weren’t used to officers who guessed right.

Not that it really mattered. Even Orbrant looked impressed as he led his squad out of the shadows.

The two men gazed outwards at the ragged explosion of blue sky above them. To eyes adjusted to the gloom of the canal path it was painfully bright, despite the fact that the sun was already sinking.

“Straight ahead?” Orbrant asked.

“I’ll lead off,” Florin nodded. “But we’d better not go too far. That canal’s enough to show that this is the right track, and I want to make it back by nightfall. Before nightfall, in fact.”

“Right you are, sir.”

The men struggled out of the neat avenue of the canal and back to the chaos of the jungle beyond. Soon they had sunk back into their own personal hells of sweat and thirst, and of mosquitoes that seemed even thirstier than them.

So it was that, heads bowed with exhaustion, they blundered towards the jungle's guardians like cattle to the slaughterhouse.



CHAPTER NINE

The stream cut across their path, a thin garrotte of gurgling water. Florin smiled when he saw it glimmering through the last few strands of elephant grass. It was the perfect point to stop, turn, and go back with news of the day's exploration. He had a feeling that Kereveld would be very pleased with their news. And if Kereveld was pleased, van Delft would be pleased, which was good enough for him.

"Looks like a river, boss," Bertrand said, lowering his machete and peering ahead.

"Yes. Time to go back, I think."

"Mind if we wash some of the sweat off first?"

Florin hesitated, and glanced upwards. The overarching canopy hid the sun, but he could tell by the length of the shadows that shifted all around them that it was well past noon.

"Very well," he decided, in spite of this. "But make it quick. In fact, let's clear a bit of an area just here by the bank, shall we? Let everyone have a go."

"Right you are, boss," said Bertrand, and he and his partner set to it with a will. While they worked, Florin motioned the rest of the column to a halt and stepped forward to wait by the stream.

The water was almost clear. Not that he'd be fool enough to drink from it: the gods alone knew what diseases lurked amongst the swirling chaff of algal clumps and rotting vegetation.

Easing himself down he sat on his haunches and watched the dim jungle light play across the rippling surface. As he studied the patterns he felt his mind become still; the concerns of his predicament disappeared like an unclenched fist.

He listened to the chop of machetes on elephant grass, to the whine and hum of insects, to the breathing of the trees and the howling of distant apes. He felt sweat trickling down his skin, flies settling hungrily on the furrows it cut through the repellent. He breathed in, and out. In and out, in and...

Something twanged across his senses, shattering this sense of peace as swiftly as the bite of a trip wire.

Rising smoothly to his feet Florin instinctively looked down the running path of the stream.

And the daemons looked back.

It was difficult to see how many of them there were. Their scales were a perfect match for the surrounding vegetation, and for each other. They held their bodies frozen and stiff, the unmoving silhouettes blurring into the chaotic patchwork of the undergrowth behind them.

Florin realised that it was this stillness that had alerted him. Everything else in these green depths was alive with movement: from the dangling vines to the running water to the drifting mosquitoes. These things alone had mastered the discipline of immobility.

He took a step towards them, mouth dropping open in amazement. At first he had guessed that there were three or four. Now he saw that they numbered a dozen, two dozen.

Maybe three.

Where the body of the stream twisted away from him it was choked with even more of them, their batrachian forms as numerous and unmoving as boulders. Some of them were bowed down beneath great packs of leaves and wicker, their burdens as massive on their thin backs as a snail's shell.

Others carried weapons. The blades of their spears twinkled like black ice despite the melting heat of their realm.

Florin knew that he should give the order to fall back. That was the plan he and Orbrant had agreed upon. Yet somehow, despite the evidence of his own eyes, he couldn't quite bring himself to believe that these things were real.

How could they be? How could real beings have skin that flickered and changed to match the shifting palette of colours around them? And how could the almost human bodies wrapped beneath that impossible skin be topped with the flat, crested heads of reptiles?

And the intelligence that gleamed from beneath the cold, nictating membranes of their eyes.

That at least must be a hallucination.

Oblivious to the throaty gurgle of the stream and the muttered curses and falling machetes of his men, Florin and the creatures stood and watched one another. They might have stood there until the moon had chased the sun from the hidden skies above if Bertrand hadn't suddenly cried out.

"Hey boss! Watch out!"

The terror in the man's voice snapped Florin back to his senses, and a sudden explosion of adrenaline unfroze both his legs and his vocal chords.

He didn't wait to see if the daemons were moving too.

"You two, get behind the gunners!" he was yelling as he splashed back out of the water. "Company. Company! Face front!"

The men, who had been lounging in a clearing a little way back from the cut of the stream, scrambled hurriedly to their feet.

"Face front!" Florin yelled again as he crashed back through the jungle to meet them. "Face front, damn you!"

Surprise gave way to their alarm as their captain came racing back along the path, and for a moment confusion reigned as they milled back and forth.

But only for a moment: Orb rant had drilled them well.

By the time Florin had dispatched a runner to the rearguard the men had formed two ragged lines. They were untidy, and cramped by the encroaching jungle, but still recognisable as the formation they had practised so many times before during the long imprisonment of the sea voyage.

“Well done,” Florin encouraged them, his heart racing with excitement as he paced up and down in front of them. “Everyone’s match lit?”

Some of the gunners chorused their assent. Others were already busy blowing on their fuses, sweating until the tips glowed like fireflies against their glistening cheeks. Florin reached into his satchel and pulled out one of the bombs; its fuse unnaturally white against the black iron casing.

As he did so the halberdiers who lined the path in front of them shouted a warning as the first of the creatures appeared.

They came in a tide, pushing at each other as the narrowness of the path funnelled them into a single great mass of golden eyes and flaring crests and short, stabbing spears.

“Right then,” Florin snarled defiantly. “Front rank, kneel. Gunners, take aim!”

Half a dozen guns were levelled, their bearers staring wide-eyed along the barrels at the approaching horde.

Florin struck a match and lit the fuse on the bomb. It hissed gleefully as it withered away, the flame racing eagerly to the charge inside.

For a split second he wondered at the absolute silence of their enemy. It was as frighteningly unnatural as anything about them.

But he had scant time to consider it. They were almost upon him.

“Fire!”

A great thunderclap of fire and smoke rang out through the jungle, drowning out the sound of bullets slapping into cold reptilian flesh.

“Gunners, fall back,” Florin bellowed, his voice small and tiny through the ringing in their ears. “Front rank, fall back!”

No drill this: the men turned and sprinted away, leaving Florin to place the bomb on the path behind them. He looked up in time to snatch a quick glance at the ruined bodies of their foes, the creatures gasping in silent agony as their fellows bounded over them. Then he ran.

Behind him the fuse of the bomb withered into ash, fell silent, and was gone.

The first of the creatures paused to examine it, nose wrinkling as it pawed at the iron casing with delicate fingers. It darted out its tongue, the pink flesh striking the object with a serpent speed. It leapt back at the taste and spat before turning to join the rush of its fellows in their pursuit.

It had covered less than a dozen feet before the explosion tore through its body and flung it like living shrapnel into the ranks beyond.

For a moment the creatures stopped, stunned by the violence of fire and steel which had erupted in their midst. They stood frozen for a couple of heartbeats, counting the toll the bomb had taken. The ruined bodies of their dead or maimed fellows lay all around, charred and twitching; the slaughter was enough to have sent most troops running for their lives.

Not the troops of this race, though. Blinking away their confusion as easily as tears, the lizardmen continued their pursuit.

* * *

“They’re right behind us,” Florin gasped as he followed the last of his men through Orbrant’s neatly drawn up ranks.

“Sir,” the sergeant said, the deep timbre of his voice level with confidence. “There’s a clearing a hundred yards back. You can wait for us there.”

“Yes. Good idea,” his captain wheezed, his hands on his knees.

“Axe you all right, boss?” Florin looked around to find Lorenzo peering from between the last two gunners of Orbrant’s line. He was tossing a grenade from one hand to the other, an insolent smile on his battered face.

“Not bad,” Florin told him, and wiped the sweat from his face.

“Wondered how you’d do without me to keep an eye on you,” his servant said, spinning the bomb on one misshaped finger as though it were a ball.

A flurry of alarmed voices rose behind them as the first of their pursuers scuttled into view. A gunshot rang out, the echoes lost beneath Orbrant’s disapproving snarl.

“Well I can’t stand around here all day,” Florin said and punched Lorenzo on the shoulder. “Things to do.”

And with that he was off, chasing his squad ahead of him. He passed the first of them, a halberdier whose face was a grimace of pain beneath the agony of this heat.

“We’ll wait for you ahead,” he told the man as he rushed past, suddenly realising that, unless he got to the clearing first, this stampede would likely rush right past it.

Lungs bellowing in and out with the hot jungle air he sprinted past another knot of halberdiers, the men struggling beneath the weight of their weapons, and then some of the gunners.

Ignoring the burning in his chest Florin pushed on, eyes rolling with relief when he stumbled into the clearing Orbrant had mentioned.

“Wait...” he gasped as the front-runners joined him. “Here.”

Gradually, gasping like landed fish in the choking humidity, the rest of his squad straggled in. As they did so Florin bullied them into line, oblivious to the contagion of vomiting that had seized his exhausted men.

“Don’t worry about that,” he told one wheezing gunner who’d managed to puke on his boots. “Just so long as it’s your lunch and not your weapons you lose, I don’t mind.”

The man grinned at him sheepishly, and Florin slapped him on the back.

“Right then, who needs to relight a fuse?”

Gradually their exhaustion eased, giving them time to suffer from cramped muscles instead of burning lungs.

Florin strode up and down in front of his men, stopping now and then to strain his ears against the busy hum of the jungle for some sound from Orbrant.

“We’d hear their guns, at least,” he said after they’d been waiting for perhaps half an hour.

“Unless they were surrounded,” one of the men volunteered helpfully. “Saw that in Heldeborg once. Remember lads, when Constanza’s lot were cut down in that bit of forest?”

“Horrible it was,” someone else said with gruesome relish. “They didn’t stand a chance. There was no quarter given, was there? Just chop, and your head on a stake.”

“Constanza shouldn’t have burned those prisoners. Stuff like that never pays.”

“Can’t see these devils giving any quarter either way,” Bertrand said grimly.

“Although they might quarter us.”

The whole company cursed the joker, who cursed them back.

“If you can’t take a joke...”

“You shouldn’t have joined up,” his mates jeered back, cheerfully.

“Sod this,” Florin resolved. “I’m going to see what’s going on. Bertrand, you’re in charge. Stay here for half an hour then get back to van Delft.”

“I’ll come with you if you like, boss.”

“No, it only needs one of us.”

“As you say. And you want us to go after half an hour?”

“That’s right,” Florin said, although he didn’t want them to go after half an hour. He didn’t want them to go at all. What he wanted was for them to stay put, maintaining their fortress wall of pikes and guns for as long as he was still out there.

But what he wanted, and what they’d do, were two different things.

“Won’t be long,” he told them, and jogged back up the path they’d cleared.

He met Lorenzo just around the first bend.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, worry creasing the scars on his face into new forms.

“Nothing,” Florin told him, laughing with relief. “Just wondered what you were up to.”

“Nothing,” Lorenzo shrugged. “The devils took one look at Orbrant’s miserable face and fled.”

Orbrant’s miserable face appeared behind him, right on cue. He was leading four stretcher-bearers, the body they bore lying on a sheet carried between two branches.

“Sir,” the sergeant said, catching sight of Florin. “Everything all right?”

“Yes. But I see you have a casualty.”

“Not one of ours, I’m pleased to say.” Orbrant, sounded no more pleased than usual. He lifted a corner of the sheet to reveal a shiny, ichor-stained snout.

“Well done,” Florin said approvingly. “We can take the head as a trophy.”

“I was thinking that we should show the others what we’re up against,” Orbrant frowned.

“Wonder what it tastes like.”

The two men turned to Lorenzo.

“What? Never eaten frog before?”

“Let’s go,” Florin said.

Night, and a dozen coldly observant eyes, followed them back down the path they had hewn.

“Ugly looking fellow, isn’t he?” van Delft asked, prodding the stiffening corpse with the point of his dagger.

Kereveld disagreed.

“No, he’s perfect. Look at the gills. He’s amphibious, I’m sure of it. And the skin. It was multichromatic, you say?”

Florin, who wasn’t really sure what that meant, nodded anyway.

Graznikov grunted, unimpressed.

“Why you run? Is only small.”

Before the Bretonnian could reply Kereveld barked with dismissive laughter.

“Only small you say. But I’ll wager these things hunt in great swarms. At least, that’s what the book says.”

So saying he leaned forward and pulled up one of the creature’s eyelids. The lifeless orb beneath flickered glassily in the firelight, gleaming like the gold that haunted their dreams.

The mage let it slide back shut and started rifling through the pages of his book. He squinted as he read, tilting the scrawled sketches and captions he was examining this way and that in order to catch the flickering firelight. Eventually he grunted and snapped the covers shut.

“I wish that I had this thing’s night-vision. This really isn’t my field though,” the mage said with a sigh. “I wonder if we could have this specimen pickled?”

“No,” van Delft replied. “We couldn’t. But you seem to know what it is anyway.”

“Oh yes,” said Kereveld distractedly, gazing into the thing’s eye and then turning his neck to gaze up at the starlit sliver of sky above them.

“Well, what is it?”

“Well, our predecessors seemed to call it a skink, although I have my doubts about their etymology. It’s one of the lesser forms. A slave caste, perhaps.” >

“Can they build canals?” Florin asked doubtfully.

For the first time since he had set eyes on the specimen Kereveld turned his full attention back to his colleagues. The old wizard’s eyes lit up like deep brown fireworks.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, they could have, if they were shown what to do. Canals and cities both.”

“I thought you said that the cities were built by an extinct race?”

Kereveld shrugged uneasily.

“Well, that’s one of the things we’ll find out.”

Van Delft looked at the wizard suspiciously, and then grunted.

“Right then, I think we know where we’re going. We’ll wake at dawn, eat, and push on up this path of d’Artaud’s. Whatever these things are it seems that they don’t like the sight of their own blood.”

“Unlike us,” Lorenzo muttered from the shadows. Van Delft pretended not to hear him.

“Any questions?”

“What will our marching order be?”

“Bretonnians first, dwarfs last. If that’s all right with you, Captain Thorgrimm? I want a solid rearguard.”

Which was to say, he wanted a rearguard that wasn't going to run at the first sign of trouble, Florin thought. To judge from the look of contented pride on the dwarf leader's face, he guessed the same.

"That is all right with me," Thorgrimm said. "But we'll need a couple of the mules for the gun."

"Hungry already?" Lorenzo called out, but this time he wasn't ignored. Thorgrimm leapt to his feet, half drawing the axe from his belt, and glowered into the suddenly silent gloom that hid the Bretonnian.

"Did somebody speak?" he asked, his voice deceptively smooth. Florin crossed his fingers and silently willed Lorenzo to bite his tongue.

For once the manservant did just that.

"Only two mules?" van Delft asked, as if there had been no interruption.

"Aye, for the barrel of the cannon. The rest we'll carry."

"We'll help with that if you like," Florin offered, eager to make amends for his servant's tongue. "We can take the shot or something."

"Thank you," the dwarf said, meeting his eyes and bowing slightly. "But we can manage."

"Are you sure? It's damn heavy going out there."

"I said we can manage."

"Good," van Delft clapped his hands together. "Well, then gentlemen, I'll see you in the morning."

He waited until his officers were safely back in front of their own fires before squatting down beside Kereveld. He had some questions of his own.

Not least about what the wizard had meant by "lesser forms".

Dawn stole over the inert forms of the sleeping men. Occasionally one of them shifted restlessly beneath his blanket, or cried out against some nightmare. But for the most part they lay as still as corpses upon the damp grass mounds of their beds, the only signs of life being the snores that rose up to compete with the cries of the things that prowled around their flimsy stockade.

Even the sentries were half asleep. Their eyes blinked as the flat grey shades of dawn replaced the flickering orange firelight of the night watch. They were leaning on halberds or axes, studying the undergrowth suspiciously.

Van Delft, who, as always, had risen just before dawn, paced around them. Occasionally he'd stop to exchange a quiet word with one or check the weapon of another. He was glad to see the way they stiffened their backs as he approached, holding their weapons a little straighter.

They were good lads, these, he decided. Good enough, anyway. As he'd hoped the oppressive gloom of the jungle had succeeded in pushing them closer together, curing them of the plague of bickering the sea voyage had created.

"Morning, Captain d'Artaud, Sergeant Orbrant," the commander said as Florin came yawning towards him. Dragging a comb through the tangled knots of his hair, the flimsy shirt he wore already damp with sweat and humidity, the Bretonnian hardly looked the part of the officer.

Never mind, van Delft told himself. Nothing you can do about that now.

“Morning sir.” Florin straightened and pulled off a clumsy salute.

“Sir,” Orbrant snapped to perfect attention.

“At ease, sergeant, at ease. I see you took your trophy last night. Good idea. Those things are always worth the weight.”

“Sir?” Orbrant raised his eyebrows and looked at Florin, who was trying to bite back a yawn.

“The, ah, the... how do you call it? Ah yes, the skink. I see the body’s gone. I expect you’ll be boiling the meat off the skull.”

Florin and his sergeant exchanged a glance.

“I’m sorry, sir, but we left the skink in your charge. Not that we wanted it back, of course,” he added hastily as his commander scowled.

“Then who took it?”

The question hung in the air between them, heavier than the warm steam of the morning mist.

“Perhaps it was Lorenzo,” Orbrant suggested, disapprovingly.

“No reason why he shouldn’t have, I suppose,” Florin made the excuse without a blink. “But then, there was no reason why he should, either.”

The three men began to stroll, almost casually, towards the dying embers of the fire where the skink had been left. There was still a print in the soft mud where its body had lain, and a sprinkling of the ichors that had served it as blood. Beyond that the ground was a confusion of boot prints and tracks. Almost all of them were recognisably human.

Each took a different point of the compass, Florin, Orbrant and van Delft turned to peer into the immensity of the jungle. Faceless and brooding it peered back at them.

Despite the heat Florin shivered.

“Tell you what,” van Delft decided carefully. “Let’s just assume that somebody took it upon themselves to bury the damned thing, shall we?”

“Yes,” Florin nodded. “That’s obviously what’s happened.”

“Very well, sir,” Orbrant nodded, his face blank. “And perhaps we can double the sentries from now on?”

“Makes sense,” van Delft nodded, glancing down at a pair of shallow prints that led to the fire. Claw marks sprouted from the edges, clear to anybody who wanted to see them.

With barely a second’s hesitation he strolled across them, grinding them beneath his heels as he watched his two subordinates.

“Right then,” he said when no trace of the prints remained. “Let’s get everybody up. No time to lose.”

That day the going was a lot easier. The path they’d cut served well enough and, apart from the odd snarl of fibrous tendrils, and the ground that had disintegrated into a black, evil smelling slime, the going was easy.

They reached the great highway of the ruined canal before noon, scrambling through the gateway they had hewn into the undergrowth the previous day into the vast, overarching tunnel through which it cut. The expedition threaded through: the

hundred and twenty or so members moving in cautious single file as it snaked into the eerie calm of the place.

Most of them fell silent, weighed down by the dismal feel of the place. Not Kereveld, though. His excited shouts could be heard from Florin's position at the front of the column to Thorgrimm's at the rear. Although they didn't know it, man and dwarf scowled at exactly the same moment.

They pressed on. With barely a pause they emerged back into the overgrown chaos which ended the canal, and found themselves drawing up to the river.

It wasn't until they'd reached the spot where they'd fired their first volley that Florin called a halt.

"Right then, men. Lorenzo and I are going to have a quick look at the river."

"What!"

"I'm sure there'll be nothing there. Those, those things..."

"Skinks," said Bertrand helpfully.

"Yes, they'll be long gone by now. I just want to make sure. Sergeant, take over, would you?"

"Sir."

"Come on, Lorenzo."

Florin turned on his heel and marched forward, his heart hammering beneath his ribs. He knew there'd be nothing waiting for him down by the stream. He knew it. No matter how bizarre the creatures had been the formation of their caravan was familiar.

They'd be long gone by now.

Yes, long...

"What's that you're saying, boss?" Lorenzo asked.

Florin, who realised that he'd been talking out loud, smiled sheepishly. "Just cracking up," he said quietly as the two of them slowed their pace.

Lorenzo snorted. "Think we're long past that."

"Sometimes," his master said, his voice low but haughty. "I think you need to remember your place."

"But saving your skin takes me to so many places."

"I just can't seem to find any good servants anymore," Florin whispered, and tiptoed around the corner before Lorenzo could reply.

Everything remained the same. The occasional silver flash of the rippling stream in the dingy confines of the little clearing. The hacked stalks of the plants they'd been busy cutting back, the damaged boughs, yellow as shattered bone. Everything was just as it had been.

Except, thank the Lady, for the skinks. Of them there was no sign.

Florin let out a relieved sigh.

"Right then, let's bring our lot up, and send word back to the commander that we're here. You never know, he might rotate us."

Lorenzo leered obscenely.

"You know what I mean," Florin snorted.

But van Delft, when he finally came barging up the path, seemed in no mood for favours. The cloud of mosquitoes that followed him did little to improve his temper.

“Why have we stopped?”

“This is where we came across the skinks yesterday, sir,” Florin told him.

“Yes, well they seem to be gone now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We can’t afford delays, d’Artaud. The men are tired, I know, but I want to press on until it’s time to make camp. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Kereveld reckons there’s higher ground ahead. Apart from anything else I want to get away from these damn flies.”

So saying he slapped himself across the jaw, smearing a mosquito across his flushed skin.

“Right you are, sir. Sergeant, round up half a dozen volunteers for machete duty, would you?”

“Sir,” Orbrant snapped off a salute.

“And if you’ll excuse us, commander, we’ll see if we can find where this track crosses the stream.”

“Yes, yes, good man,” van Delft said distractedly and rubbed his itching hands together. “Carry on.”

He was still scratching as the Bretonnians splashed across the stream and began hunting through the thickets on the other side for some trace of the previous expedition’s path.

Bloody mosquitoes, van Delft thought. Damned things even seem to bite through a man’s moustache.

Above him eyes as cold as stone gazed down. They watched the leader of these strange pallid apes tearing at himself, and wondered why. .

But although they wondered, they didn’t care. Their job was merely to watch, and to report. Even as the first of the intruders stumbled across the remains of a primitive path beyond, one of them slipped away with the news, moving through the treetops as stealthily as the sultry breeze.

“Kereveld! What are you doing here?”

“Don’t mind me,” the wizard wheezed, leaning against the bole of a tree and gasping for breath. His robes hung about his spindly form in a dank mass, slicked with sweat and dirt, and his hands and face were covered in a polka-dot rash of insect bites and poor circulation.

“Come to help us with the machetes?” Lorenzo asked sarcastically.

“Well done,” Orbrant said, clapping a hand on Lorenzo’s bony shoulders.

“I didn’t say...”

“Go and take over from Louis over there,” the sergeant ignored him and pointed to the front of the column. “Louis! Give your machete to Lorenzo here.”

Florin watched him trudge off to replace the smiling Louis, then turned back to Kereveld.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing, really,” he managed to say before a fit of coughing seized him.

“Orbrant, give him some water, would you?”

The sergeant hesitated before unslinging his canteen and handing it over with a scowl of disapproval. The old man took it with trembling hands, drank deeply, and then wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

"Thanks," he said, handing the canteen back. Orbrant took it suspiciously, and pointedly wiped the rim with the hem of his tunic.

Kereveld was oblivious to the slight. Even though he was now turning a deep puce beneath his mosquito bites he was already struggling to stand up straight again. Behind him, struggling on the mud slicked slope they'd been climbing for the past two hours, a mule brayed. The sound was followed by a string of curses from Kereveld's servant.

"You probably think I'm foolish, joining you all in your monkey work," the wizard said between laboured breaths. "But we're almost there, I'm sure of it. This slope must be the one mentioned in the book. It probably hasn't occurred to you, but we've come a long way up."

Florin winked at Orbrant, but the sergeant was too busy glaring at Kereveld to notice. Seeing the expression on the bald man's face Florin felt his amusement melting away, to be replaced by a calculation of whether or not he'd be able to stop the warrior if he chose to attack the old buffoon.

"Yes," Kereveld repeated. "We're high up here. This must be the plateau Pizzaro spoke of."

"Who?"

"Oh, nobody, nobody." Kereveld waved away the question. "Well, I feel better now. Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell your men to get a move on? The day's wasting."

Florin had a sudden, mischievous impulse to tell Kereveld to go and tell them himself, but before he could, Lorenzo cried out from the front, his voice tinged with surprise.

"Wait here," Florin told Orbrant and raced up the slope to where the lead party had hacked a path through the jungle. Two great trees stood on either side of them like the pillars of a gateway; the distant boughs of their heads huddled together in a conspiratorial arc high, high above.

Lorenzo cried out again, this time his voice cracking with excitement. The other troopers had ceased their assault on the jungle, and huddled around him.

Florin pushed his way through them and followed their gaze.

"Shallya's blood," he whispered, eyes widening as he saw what had stopped them.

"Shallya's blood."

They stood together, an unmoving little tableau, until Kereveld stumbled into them.

When he saw it he fell to his knees, lifted his hands to the heavens, and whooped, a thin and eerie cry of joy.

Before them, rising up out of the sea of mist in the valley below, stood the city.



CHAPTER TEN

Alone of all the captains, Florin had had little faith in Kereveld's tales of cities and gold. He hadn't needed it. Mordicio's vindictiveness, and the knowledge of the terrible fruit it was likely to bear, had been enough to drive him across the ocean and into the cloying embrace of this dank wilderness.

Not for Florin were the whispered promises and mounting greed that had brought the others here. Not for him the dreams of wealth beyond measure lying scattered amongst the bones of a dead race.

But now, standing on the spine of the ridge that overlooked the plateau beyond, he felt a sudden flare of avarice in his chest.

There could be no doubt that the wizard's tales had been at least partly true. The buildings that struggled up through the jungle's choking fingers were as real as anything else in this world. As real and as inhuman.

Even from this distance it was obvious that no human hand had taken a part in their shaping. It wasn't just the size, although the hulking lumps of smooth granite structures were massive. Nor was it the design, although surely no sane human architect would craft buildings as grim as these. Even the massive central building, which Florin guessed must be a temple, was little more than a pile of neatly stacked cubes. Devoid of windows, clean of any decoration, it slumped broodingly amongst its smaller cousins, blind and featureless.

No. What marked this city out as something beyond the power of men was the sterility of its polished surfaces. Not a single vine dared to blur its sharp edges, nor a single tree stump, or tuft of grass.

Whatever had built these gargantuan structures had lent them immunity to the wilderness, the same protection which still hung over the ruined canal.

"That's it, that's it!" Kereveld howled, holding the book out in front of him with trembling hands. His eyes flitted from the stark silhouette of the central building to a smudged ink drawing on the central pages, and he giggled horribly.

Florin, who'd been gaping at the incredible structures beyond, realised it and closed his mouth with a snap.

"Looks like we're here then," he said. "What do we do now?"

"Carry on," Kereveld told him, his voice breaking with a high-pitched laugh that sounded a little too hysterical for Florin's liking.

“No, we’ll inform the commander first.”

“Why waste time?” the old man snapped with impatience “It’s there, right there! Let’s go.”

“Lorenzo, go ask Orbrant to send a runner back to van Delft. Tell him what we’ve found.”

“Right you are, boss.”

“Tell him we’re pushing on down towards the city.”

Kereveld’s eyes creased, and for a moment he looked as smug as a child whose tantrum has worked. Florin felt a flash of anger at the sight of it, but hid it well. If anybody needed to be cultivated now it was the wizard.

Who knew what other pieces of useful information an enterprising man might wheedle out of those mildewed pages of his book?

“Well then, Menheer Kereveld. Look’s like we all owe you a vote of thanks.”

“Yes,” the wizard said. “Do you think we can make the temple by nightfall?”

Florin took the hint.

“I think so. Bertrand, pop back and tell Sergeant Orbrant we’re heading on, will you? Here, I’ll take that. I must ask you to step back, Menheer Kereveld. Perhaps you can wait back in the main body with your servant.”

But Kereveld was oblivious to anything but the temple. He was gazing at it with the wide-eyed rapture of true love, the rest of the world forgotten.

“Suit yourself, then,” Florin muttered, and swung the machete through a tangle of vines to his left.

As the expedition worked its way down into the plateau, the trees once more closed in above their heads. Soon their world had shrunk back down to the few feet that lay on either side of them. The surrounding vegetation grew ever thicker as they pushed on, the tangled thickets swarming with biting insects and hungry lizards that reminded Florin of the skinks they’d run from.

One by one the men fell back exhausted, passing their machetes to those of their fellows who waited behind. Gradually the ground levelled off, the sliding mud of the slope giving way to a morass of rotting detritus. It reached up to the men’s ankles, and sometimes even higher, to dump mouldy leaves and squirming things into their boots.

The shadows lengthened, and in spite of himself Florin began to wonder if they were on the right path. He was even thinking about returning to the ridge to camp for the night when the men up front cut through a great hanging wall of vines and revealed the clearing beyond.

“This is more like it,” Florin grinned and led the way forward.

“Yes, wonderful,” Lorenzo said, although there was something half-hearted about his sarcasm. After the cloying heat and suffocating mass of the jungle the clearing did feel wonderful.

The only undergrowth here was the elephant grass, fibrous and sharp-bladed but easy enough to walk through. It rolled away into the distance, a great shifting sea of green above which the dark silhouettes of the ruins seemed to float. The light of the setting shone on the crumbling stone of their western faces, but painted the other sides as black as the colossal shadows which lurked behind them.

Florin drifted to a halt, the better to feel the sun on his face and the warm breath of the wind in his hair. Then, aware of the crush behind him, he sheathed his machete and swished his way into the knee-high grass.

The first of the buildings lay before them, the giant gravestones of a dead civilization. But despite their glowering presence the Bretonnians laughed and chattered as they emerged from the dank shadows of the jungle and into the light of the sun.

“Looks like Kereveld’s found a friend,” Lorenzo said as the wizard pushed past them and trotted, robes flapping, towards the nearest of the buildings. His book, as always, was clamped tightly beneath one arm.

“We’d better keep an eye on him,” Florin said thoughtfully. “You stay here. Tell Orb rant to stake out the best site to make camp.”

“Take a couple of the lads with you, boss. The Lady alone knows what could be lurking around here.”

“No.” Florin his eyes locked firmly on the book, shook his head. “I’ll be all right.”

“So,” Lorenzo said, the firelight twinkling in his eyes. “What about this gold?”

“Thought you said you didn’t believe in it,” Florin chided him, and passed one of the biscuits they’d been baking to Lundorf.

The Marienburger took it with a nod of thanks.

“Well I believe in it, anyway,” he decided, tossing the morsel from hand to hand as it cooled. “Kereveld’s book was right about everything else, why not the gold? Just think: there could be a fortune sitting not a hundred yards from us. No wonder the commander posted guards on these buildings. Imagine the trouble if someone found the loot and made off with it tonight!”

A thoughtful silence descended on the little group. Florin looked across the campsite, where a score of similar conversations were no doubt taking place over a score of similar campfires.

“I already know what I’m going to do with mine,” Lundorf said confidently, and bit off a piece of his biscuit. “Stables. I’m going to build a stables, just outside of Marienburg.”

“Not very adventurous,” Florin chided him, and found himself counting the campfires. Up until now the men had been content to huddle around the comforting blaze of the expedition’s cooking pits.

Tonight, though, they all seemed to have developed a taste for privacy.

“Oh, I won’t run it,” Lundorf said. “There’s a girl back home that I know. Vienela. She can do it.”

“Vienela, hey? Got a good business head, has she?”

“Yes.”

“And a pretty face to go with it?”

Lorenzo sniggered in the darkness, and Lundorf’s even features hardened into a fierce scowl.

“Not that that has anything to do with it, but yes.”

Florin was amazed to note that his brother officer was blushing. But before he could tease him any further Lorenzo brought the conversation back to business.

“So,” Lorenzo asked. “What about Kereveld’s book?”

“He showed it to you?” Lundorf wondered, obviously keen to change the subject.

“No, he didn’t. The old goat’s not such a fool after all. Said he’d tell us everything we needed to know.”

“Maybe he will.”

“Or maybe he’ll tell van Delft first.”

“That’s all right, then,” Lundorf said, and helped himself to a goblet of boiled water. “As long as the commander gets hold of the gold we’ll all get our fair share.”

Florin met Lorenzo’s disbelieving eyes over the flickering orange tongues of the fire.

“Yes,” he said. “Just as you say, Lundorf. But if we find the gold first we can be sure that it’s appropriately accounted for.”

“I see what you mean. I don’t see why Kereveld wouldn’t want to help us recover this damned treasure, though. It’s why we’re here.”

“Although not why he’s here.”

“And why’s that?”

“The gods alone know.”

There was a muffled clink to one side of their fire and a huddle of figures, Kislevites by their silhouettes, slunk past and out into the night. Two of them had swapped their axes for spades, and Florin cursed himself for forgetting to buy his own men such tools.

“Wonder where they’re going,” Lorenzo muttered suspiciously, straining his eyes to follow them into the darkness.

“So do they,” Florin muttered, gesturing to the pair of Tileans who slipped stealthily along in their wake. A moment later both parties had disappeared into the unbroken night outside of the encampment.

Lundorf finished the last of his biscuit and washed it down with the water.

“What I wouldn’t give for a decent cask of brandy,” he sighed, swishing the flat water around his mouth. “Boiled water just never tastes right.”

“Luckily,” Lorenzo smoothly cut in, “I remembered to bring some tea-leaves. They kept well, too. Always the way with the best quality green.”

“Wish I’d thought of that,” Lundorf shook his head.

“Would you like some of these?”

“Well yes, thank you,” the Marienburger nodded, taken aback by this old scoundrel’s generosity.

“What are friends for?” Lorenzo said, and opened his satchel to pull out half a dozen sealed tins, each as big as a fist. Cracking open the lid of one he peered inside, took a sniff, and then, satisfied, closed it up and tossed it to Lundorf.

“I say,” Lundorf smiled, taking a sniff himself. “This is excellent stuff. Thank you!”

“Don’t mention it,” Lorenzo grinned wide enough to show all six of his teeth. “And because you’re a friend I’ll only ask for a dozen crowns.”

“Oh, I see. I thought... well, never mind. The thing is, though, I’m a bit short at the moment. Swamptown, you know.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lorenzo soothed. “Just give me what you can and pay the rest later.”

“Oh. All right then.”

Florin watched Lundorf fumble for his purse and felt a sudden twitch of nostalgia. The first time he’d met Lorenzo it had cost him dear, too. His father had wanted it that way; he had used Lorenzo as a tame fire in which his son could burn their fingers.

His father. A good man, killed by the broken heart of his wife’s death.

Florin thought about him as he studied the vast cemeterial shapes that towered beyond this little circle of light. They blocked out great swathes of the starlit sky, the spaces within their sharp silhouettes so completely black that they might have been gateways into some dark, empty void.

With a sudden prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck he wondered if it would be so long until he met his parents again.

Somehow, sitting in the midst of this terrible wilderness and surrounded by the monolithic shells of a long dead race, he didn’t think so.

He shivered and spat into the fire as if to exorcise the idea.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “I’m going to try and get hold of Kereveld’s book. Then we’re going to get the treasure. And then we’re going to get the hell out of here.”

“Finally,” Lorenzo said, looking up from the handful of coins Lundorf had given him. “Some sense.”

But, unknown to Florin, tomorrow had other plans for him.

* * *

It was a council of war; van Delft had no doubt about that. Nor did he have any doubt about who the enemy was.

It was chaos.

Not the horrible twisting madness from the far north, thank Sigmar. But, left unchecked this kind of chaos could be just as lethal.

Already two men had gone missing. They had slipped away in the middle of the night, taking nothing but a pick and hessian sack, as far as their comrades could make out.

The pick had been found by the sentries, lying in the grass at the edge of the jungle. Of the men who had carried it there had been no sign.

There had also been a couple of fights, one of them over a bundle of spades and the other over some ridiculous rumour. Although captains Castavelli and Lundorf had intervened before they’d escalated into full-blown riots, there’d still been broken noses and cracked ribs. One man was still suffering from concussion.

Everyone, everywhere, seemed to have been transformed overnight, as if by some insidious magic, from soldiers to prospectors. Even now the sound of picks striking stone, punctuated with cries of sudden excitement, and equally sudden disappointment, rang out into the listening mass of the jungle. To his definite

knowledge only Lundorf and d'Artaud, or more accurately, Orbrant, had called muster this morning. That damned Kislevite Graznikov hadn't even billeted his men together.

All this and they'd only been here for less than twenty-four hours.

Well, no more. He'd be damned if he'd see his command disintegrate into a rabble.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," he began, meeting the eyes of each of his captains in turn. Sergeant Orbrant stood at a respectful distance to one side of them, and Kereveld was pacing impatiently around behind them like a cat on a hot tin roof.

Damned wizards, van Delft thought.

"Today we are going to start pulling things back together. I know we're all eager for the riches that brought us here, but if we carry on like this there won't be a man of us left to carry them home."

The captains nodded agreement.

"Luckily for us, we have good terrain to work with. It's already cleared of jungle, for one thing. And for another, as you can see, the central pyramid commands the entire area. Then there are these smaller structures, one at each corner."

He paused to wave a machete at the great lump of masonry that cased the shadow in which they were standing. Although dwarfed by the towering heights of the central pyramid it was still a massive structure. The stones of its construction, some of them bigger than a carthorse, fitted together as neatly as the pieces of a jigsaw.

Some of its masonry was missing. The neatly chiselled cornerstones, for example, had long since been knocked off the structure by age or tectonics. They lay amongst the swaying elephant grass now, those great blocks, as impotent and menacing as fallen idols.

But apart from the damage every surface was blank and monolithic, the countless tons of its construction as completely unflinching and as absolutely soulless as a lizard's gaze.

Only a single, black doorway marred the perfection of its skin. The four guards van Delft had posted there, two Kislevites and two Marienburgers, peered into the gloomy interior mistrustfully.

"We'll use these smaller buildings as the corners of our stockade," the commander continued. "Each of the human companies will be responsible for securing one of them, and for building, and manning, an intervening section."

"And my men?" Thorgrimm asked. *a*

"Your men will be kept in the pyramid. They will also be charged with any mining tasks that may be required. That will include directing my men here in the construction of the stockade. If you think you could do that...?"

The dwarf's eyes flashed at the challenge.

"We can certainly do that."

"Good," van Delft said. "Nothing too fancy. Perhaps just a line of picket stakes?"

"Better to mount them on a bank behind a ditch," Thorgrimm told him, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "It won't take too long, and it'll strengthen the whole front. And instead of fixing pickets in individually we'll make caltrops out of 'em. Six pointers I reckon."

“How long will that take?”

“Today, and most of tomorrow.”

“All right. Would you assign one of your foremen to each of the captains here?”

“Of course.”

“We can have a race,” van Delft suggested, as if on the spur of the moment. “Let’s say that the last company to finish has to dig the latrines, shall we? That way we could have the temple sealed by tomorrow night.”

“Are we sure that the temple’s empty?” Florin asked, looking at the towering mass warily. It appeared to be completely intact: not a single section of fallen masonry, or chipped stone, marred its cubic perfection.

“Yes,” van Delft told him. “But I’m glad you’re interested. Bartolomi here wants to go and have a poke around inside it. Take a couple of men and keep an eye on him, would you?”

“Let’s go,” Kereveld interrupted the commander’s last word.

Florin stared at him, and struggled not to scowl.

“Yes, sir. Although perhaps Captain Thorgrimm here would like to accompany us. If we’re going to go poking around underground...”

“Yes?” the dwarf asked.

“I mean, I would value your engineering expertise.”

“All right,” agreed Thorgrimm, eyeing the temple with professional interest. “You’ll probably need it.”

“Well, I’m glad that’s settled then,” van Delft said, with barely a hint of sarcasm. “Captain Thorgrimm here will lend each of you a quarter of his men, and they will direct your efforts. Let’s say... Castavelli you take the northernmost outbuilding and construct your stockade to the eastern most, Lundorf you’ll take that one and dig south. The Bretonnians will take over there and go west, and Graznikov will close the gap from there. Is that acceptable to everyone? Excellent.”

“Come,” said Kereveld, actually tugging at Florin’s sleeve. “Let’s make a start.”

The Bretonnian looked at van Delft, who nodded, then turned to Thorgrimm.

“When you’re ready, captain, we’ll be at the entrance to the central pyramid.”

“I’ll be an hour,” Thorgrimm estimated.

“An hour!” the wizard snapped impatiently.

“Yes. An hour.”

Fifty minutes later the wizard, the dwarf and a handful of Bretonnians met outside the entrance to the temple. The doorway was a perfect square, a neatly shaped hole amongst neatly shaped blocks.

Thorgrimm was running the gnarled skin of his hands over the sharp edges of the pillars at the side of the entranceway and gazing up at the lintel that hung twelve feet above him with a warm smile.

“Very nice,” he muttered approvingly. “The lines are almost perfect.”

Kereveld looked up from his book and frowned.

“Is this the only entrance?”

“The only one that we can find,” Florin said. “Why?”

“There’s something in the book here about a revolving door. It looks like a flap or something.”

“Let’s see,” Florin leaned closer to the wizard, who reluctantly showed him the page. The only thing that he recognised was a smudged ink drawing of something that looked like a pile of child’s blocks. That, he supposed, was the pyramid. Apart from that the page was covered with a scrawl of undecipherable handwriting and bizarre sketches, none of which appeared to be any more useful than the doodlings of a lunatic.

Not for the first time Florin found himself amazed that the book had actually led them this far.

“Is it all like that?” he asked, trying to hide the disappointment in his voice.

“Some of it,” Kereveld said, looking up suspiciously before shutting the book with a jealous snap. “Oh well. Never mind. Let’s see what we can find, shall we?”

Lorenzo lit the first of a bundle of torches and passed them around. The tar-soaked cloth of their heads spat and fizzled into life, the flames flickering weakly in the tropical sunlight.

Kereveld seized his torch and, without hesitating, strode into the gaping maw of the temple. The others hurried after him, huddling together in the darkness and the cold.

And it was cold. Even a few metres into the passageway the humid breath of the jungle was gone, to be replaced by a chill breeze that whined miserably from the depths beyond. It iced the walls with condensation, the glistening moisture dripping down the faded carvings that adorned them.

Not that this had dissuaded the spiders that seemed to rule this dank domain. Their slimy webs were draped across the passageway, the grey fibres beaded with dew and the drained carcasses of huge insects. Moths with wings as big as a bats, dragonflies with mandibles as sharp as pliers, other, stranger things; the chitinous shells of their bodies rattled as the men brushed tentatively past their hanging graveyard and into the depths beyond.

“Hey. Hey, wait!” Thorgrimm cried, looking up from his study of the stonework as the last of Florin’s men disappeared into the darkness beyond.

“Wait for what?” Florin paused and called back, his voice echoing within the wide confines of the passageway. He didn’t like the sound of it. Perhaps it was his imagination, or perhaps some weird acoustic, but the echo made his voice sound somehow alien.

But before his own flinty tones had died away they were drowned out by a long, terrible screech, and a cry from Kereveld that was cut off as soon as it had begun.

“Kereveld!” the Bretonnian cried out, gazing wide-eyed into the gloom into which the wizard had rushed. “Kereveld!”

There was no reply apart for the echo of his own voice, twisted into a cruel mimicry by the endless depths beyond.

“Sigmar rot the bollocks off you, you old fool,” he muttered and then, since there was nothing else to do, he followed the wizard’s footsteps into the darkness.

From behind, Thorgrimm’s voice floated through the darkness, the words lost beneath the distorting effect of the temple’s stonework.

“He wants us to wait, boss,” Lorenzo said, nervously.

“Yes. But look, what’s that ahead? Is it his body?”

Squinting through the flickering shadows the torches sent fluttering around the walls, much as the spiders' prey must have fluttered in their traps, Florin stepped forward.

"Shouldn't we wait for the dwarf?"

"You wait here. Damn. That is a body up ahead."

There was no mistaking it now. Alone of all the shadows the form slumped in front of Florin lay still. The dark mass of its cloak twisted around it like a ready-made shroud, the hood thrown up to cover its head.

Florin switched his torch from his right to his left hand and unsheathed his sword, the sharp rasp of metal on leather seemed almost painfully loud to his straining senses. Then, nose wrinkling at a musty smell which grew more cloying by the second, he took another step forward and licked his lips nervously.

The body was dead; there was no doubt about that. No living man could lie in such an awkward angle. Beneath the merciful covering of his cape Kereveld's bony form had been twisted into hideous new geometries, as though it had been chewed up and spat out.

Of the book, which until then had never left the wizard's grasp, there was no sign.

"He must be lying on top of it," Florin told himself, his voice flat with disbelief.

Caution forgotten he trotted forward, grasped the corpse by the shoulder and pulled it over.

The cloak fell back and death leered up at him.

Although its smile was manically wide there was no humour in the black hollows of its eyes, no emotion on the polished bone of its face. The scraps of hair that remained stuck to its head looked as false as if they'd been glued on by a grizzly practical joker.

Perhaps the same hellish comedian that had hidden nests of tiny spiders in the thing's eye sockets.

With a sudden, spinal crack, the jaw fell away from the rest of the skull and struck Florin on the forearm.

He cried out in shock and pushed the skeleton away. As he shifted his weight there was a deafening grinding squeal: the same sound that had marked Kereveld's demise, and the earth fell away beneath his feet.

Florin caught one last glimpse of Lorenzo's horrified face as the passageway folded over him. A last taste of the world of the living before he, like the corpse below him, was swallowed up by the temple's hungry stone jaws.

For a long time there was peace. As soft as an endless, black, velvet sheet Florin felt himself sliding down its unbroken skin, his troubles slipping away in the blankness of it all. Then the peace disappeared and in its place only darkness remained. And from the darkness came pain.

It was difficult to tell how badly hurt he was. There was a numbness that stretched down one side of his body, although in the blinding darkness of this place that could be from anything from pins and needles to a snapped spine.

Florin, his head splitting with the pain of fading concussion, drew his finger across the sticky dampness that dripped from his hairline, then tasted it.

The coppery taste of blood was sharp on his tongue.

“At least I haven’t lost my sense of taste,” he told the darkness, and tried to ignore the shakiness of his voice. “And it seems that I’ll still be able to lift a flagon of wine.”

There was no echo here, only a heavy silence.

“So I’ll be all right.”

Gradually, every movement sending bright white sparks of pain spinning through his head, he sat up. There was a muffled rattle, like dice in a leather cup, as the shattered remains of the skeleton shifted around him.

“Sorry,” he told it, then tried to get to his feet.

It was surprisingly difficult, and not just because of the numbness which still paralysed his left side. There seemed to be no floor here, just a wide semi circle of sloping wall. Florin leaned against it, and felt himself sliding down a surface that was as smooth as glass.

The bones beneath his feet shifted, and he slipped back down to a sitting position.

In the darkness, silence blossomed.

“Lorenzo!” Florin cried, his voice loud enough to start his headache pounding back into life.

“Thorgrimm!”

“Kereveld!”

Nothing.

Florin sighed, and wrinkled his nose at the sour smell of decay. He supposed it came from the corpse. Then he felt for his matches. They weren’t there.

Then, so faint that he almost thought he might be imagining it, a noise. A tiny, constant patter, as chitinous and relentless as an insect’s rush.

Florin thought about the things he had seen scuttling within the darkness of the skull’s eye socket and swallowed nervously. Edging away from the sound he began to absent-mindedly scratch the goose bumps that had risen on his skin.

The noise grew louder. It seemed to be coming from the left side of the hole, although from where exactly it was impossible to tell. The whole wall was alive with tapping now, and Florin cautiously reached out to touch it.

“Hullo?” he called out, brushing his fingertips against the cold stone. There was no way this much noise could be coming from any kind of insect.

Please Shallya, there was no way that these noises could be coming from any kind of insect.

Was there?

Clenching his jaw Florin drew his fingers back from the trembling stone and hefted his sword.

“Hullo?”

There was no reply, although the beat of whatever was approaching grew a little faster.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped.

“Hu...”

Florin never finished the word. With the deep groan of shifting masonry the wall in front of him shifted and began to rise.

Scrabbling back over the shifting bones of the temple's previous victim he bumped the back of his head on the far wall.

But before he could even feel the pain the huge block which had formed the wall of the cell lifted up and out to hover in the tunnel above. From the thin gap it left a rush of noise, and a wash of orange torchlight, flooded into the chamber.

After so long spent in the darkness it seemed as bright as the noonday sun, and Florin blinked back tears as he gazed up at the two watery silhouettes that appeared against it.

"I told you to wait," one said gruffly, and threw down a rope.

"I hope you realise how much you've embarrassed yourself in front of Master Thorgrimm here," said the other, its tones rich with carefully constructed disgust.

Relief, sweeter than champagne, flooded through him, and for a moment his injuries were forgotten.

"What's wrong?" Thorgrimm asked him, brows furrowed uncertainly. "Why are you making that noise?"

But Florin was laughing too hard to answer.

The tunnel into which Florin emerged was a different place to the one he had so blindly run down a few hours ago.

For one thing the bone-hard simplicity of its walls had gone, buried beneath a forest of rough-hewn timbers. They were green beneath the axe strokes which had just shaped them, and the sickly smell of fresh sap vied with the musty odour of the temple's depths.

For another the wide passageway was lined on both sides with dwarfs and men. Their backs strained as they hauled on ropes, sweat pouring down them beneath the heat of the torches. Beyond them the ropes disappeared into a complicated nest of block and tackles, and from these down into iron hooks which Thorgrimm had fastened to the shifting stonework beneath.

Florin watched as Thorgrimm carried on with his rescue operation, his voice booming over the grunts of his workers and the squeak of pressurised wood. Despite his size the dwarf looked like some ancient fire god as he swaggered through the torchlight, bellowing the orders that were reshaping this sunken realm.

Men and dwarfs both worked with a will as, beneath Thorgrimm's commands, they swung the block that had formed the side of Florin's cell forward.

"Where's Kereveld?" Florin asked Lorenzo, who was busily cleaning the gash on his skull with some burning spirit.

"Watch," Lorenzo told him without looking up from his task.

Florin watched. The block that Thorgrimm had swung forward was now being lowered, eased down onto the stone beyond that had formed the ceiling of his cell.

Almost immediately, there was the slow, remorseless grind of stone upon stone. The lump of masonry sank as the slab of stone that had roofed Florin's cell moved beneath its weight, falling away as smoothly as the paddle of a mill wheel. As it did so the wall of the passageway rotated down to cover the hole it left, the stone slabs revolving in a single movement.

This second revolving slab had moved no more than a couple of feet when a wild, bony figure flung itself out from behind it to fall with a loud slap onto the paving beyond.

“Kereveld!” Florin called out as the wizard got shakily back to his feet and blinked around in the torchlight.

“Get out of the way there,” Thorgrimm roared, and manhandled the wizard away from the huge stone spoke of the turning wheel that had trapped him.

It was the second time he’d saved the old man’s life. Kereveld had just got clear when the rope, strained beyond endurance, snapped. It flew whipping vengefully back towards the men who were pulling it and the stone, now completely unsupported, plunged as quickly as a guillotine blade through the trap door.

A bone jarring thud, an ear splitting boom, and the rotating wheel of trap doors was closed forever. The gap which had allowed the wheel to spin had been plugged by the falling stone as neatly as a corked bottle.

“Well, that seems to have solved that problem,” van Delft’s voice drifted through the falling dust and echoing concussion of the impact. “I wonder, Captain d’Artaud, if you’d be good enough to follow Captain Thorgrimm’s advice whilst underground. He does seem to know what he’s doing, doesn’t he?”

“Glad to, sir.”

“Good. I’ll leave you in his capable hands, then. Sergeant Frelde. Get all of these men back to work on the barricades, will you? Captain d’Artaud shouldn’t be needing them anymore.”

“Sir,” a Marienburger snapped off a salute and smirked at Florin before barking a stream of orders to the men.

Van Delft returned the salute then, without another word, turned on his heel and stalked back out of the temple.

“Sarcastic bastard,” Lorenzo grumbled when he was out of earshot.

Florin just shrugged sheepishly as his rescuers started to file past him. Occasionally one of them would catch his eye and he would mutter his thanks. Others offered a half mocking salute which he returned, despite the twinge of pain the gesture sent through his bruised chest.

Since the numbness had worn off his torso felt as delicate as a rack of tenderised beef ribs, although he wasn’t about to mention that to the commander, or to anyone else.

Injuries or not, if anybody was going to escort Kereveld and his precious book, it was going to be him.

He even managed an excruciating little bow as the wizard wandered up to him, bony wrists proceeding from his torn sleeves.

“Are you all right?” Florin asked solicitously, but the old man staggered past without a word. At first he seemed to be in shock; his eyes had a distant, glazed sheen, and his lips moved in a constant, soundless mutter.

But then he turned back to Florin and smiled, the expression incongruously innocent on the begrimed wrinkles of his face.

“Of course, I’ve got it now!” he said, as if they’d been in the midst of conversation. “That water wheel thing that was in the book, it was that very trap.

Damned clever it was too, don't you think? I suppose that originally there would have been water below the level of the floor here, enough to have drowned us like rats."

"So the book was right then?" said Florin, raising one eyebrow. It made his scalp hurt.

"Yes, yes. Isn't it fantastic? I knew that those signs wouldn't be for nothing, and they certainly weren't. Why, if this was the rainy season we'd probably already be dead. I knew the book wouldn't let us down."

"Yes," Florin deadpanned. "And what will we find next? Perhaps we should study the book before we go on."

"No, no use," Kereveld said. "There's nothing there but some geometrical patterns. Quite disappointing, really."

"You don't say?" Lorenzo muttered. Kereveld looked at him as if seeing him for the first time.

"What are you hanging about back there for?" Thorgrimm's voice echoed down the hall.

"Just coming," Florin yelled back, and then turned to Kereveld. "After you, sir. Please."

Kereveld smiled and rubbed his hands as he strolled back down the passageway. Florin, trying not to limp, picked up a torch and followed in the wake of the wizard's flickering shadow, his men behind him.

They advanced cautiously over the fallen stone and into the darkness beyond. Thorgrimm strode ahead of them, stopping every now and then to brush his fingers across the stonework of the passage, or to sniff the air.

The ceiling began to lower as they advanced, so gradually that it almost seemed to be doing it by stealth. The walls closed in. The darkness, which retreated reluctantly before the light of their sputtering torches, closed back in around them.

Thorgrimm came to a sudden stop, cocking his head to one side as though listening to some distant sound and lifted his torch a little higher. The flame reached a lump of bitumen and sizzled, flaring up in a sudden burst of fire which illuminated the passage ahead of them.

Or rather, the dead-end.

"That shouldn't be there," Kereveld cried out, his voice quavering with outrage. He started forward past Thorgrimm, but the dwarf just lifted his arm and shoved the wizard back.

"Wait," he said and sniffed the air hungrily. Then he licked one finger and held it up into the air.

"Ha!" he said at last, and strode forward until he was no more than ten feet from the dead end.

There he stopped again and craned his neck to stare upwards.

"What is it?" Florin asked, stepping past Kereveld to look upwards.

"Chimney," Thorgrimm told him.

"And what's that?"

Thorgrimm looked down.

"Some sort of pressure plate. Don't touch it."

“Yes,” Florin agreed carefully. “But what’s it made of?”

Lorenzo and the two men they’d brought with them jostled forwards, and for a moment all six explorers gazed down at the metal plate. It gleamed in the poor light of their torches.

Yet even in this gloomy light there was no mistaking the rich, liquid warmth of the stuff from which the plate had been made. A complicated checkerboard of shapes had been punched into the smooth metal of its surface, strange cubic ideograms of lizards and feathers and skulls.

But it wasn’t these strange hieroglyphs that silenced the men.

“It’s gold,” Lorenzo whispered, rubbing the sweat from his palms before reaching out to touch it.

“Don’t,” said Thorgrimm, his voice choked with emotion. Florin glanced down at him and saw a fresh sheen of sweat glistening on his brow.

He wants it all for himself, Florin thought with a flash of sudden anger. The greedy little wretch.

Thorgrimm, who was thinking exactly the same thing, took a step backwards from the little knot of men, each of who now looked like a thief.

“We’ll have to build a scaffolding over it,” he decided, wiping his hand across his face and making an effort to pull himself together. It was always the way with this much gold, he thought with a wry smile. Even the most loyal of his kinfolk could be ensnared by it, driven beyond honour by the beauty of the wonderful, terrible metal. And as for humans...

His smile was replaced by a scowl.

“Look,” Lorenzo said with a sudden excitement. “Someone’s already shaved a piece off!”

“Where?”

“On the corner there.”

“Yes, I see it,” said one of his companions, pushing forward.

“I saw it first,” Lorenzo snarled and, before anyone could stop him, he’d leapt onto the plate and snatched the shard up.

This time there was no warning groan of moving stone, or crunch of snapping bones.

This time there was just a rush of air as the plate, with Lorenzo still on it, hurtled upwards and out of sight.

It happened as effortlessly as if gravity had simply reversed itself. Lorenzo had hurtled upwards so quickly that, but for the sound of screaming that floated down from the emptiness above, he might never have existed.

Florin, the gold forgotten, leapt forward onto the spot where the plate had rested and squinted anxiously up into the darkness.

“Lorenzo!” he called, his voice echoing against the sheer stone sides of the chimney.

A distant cry rang out as if in answer, and Florin raised his torch up into the void above. Something up there seemed to be moving. Or growing.

Then there was another cry, but this time it was his own as he hurled himself back and out of the way of the returning plate. It plummeted back down from the

heights above, a wash of foetid air preceding it, before slowing down to a gradual halt and settling gently back down onto the floor of the passageway.

“Save you building a scaffold, won’t it Master Thorgrimm?” Lorenzo said shakily, and jumped off the plate like a cat off an oven.

“How did you get it to do that?” Kereveld asked jealously.

“If you step on these markings,” Lorenzo said, pointing to a spiral of what appeared to be tree frogs, “it goes down.”

“And to make it go up?”

“Those bundles of snakes.”

“Here,” said Florin, slapping Lorenzo on the back and handing him a flask of cold tea.

“And where does it go?” Kereveld pressed him.

Lorenzo swallowed a mouthful of tea, his eyes glinting as he studied the wizard’s eager face. He wiped his mouth, belched, and returned Florin’s canteen before answering.

“Come on up,” he said, eager to move on before anybody remembered the shaving of gold that now rested inside his breeches, “and I’ll show you.”

It was difficult to tell how large the chamber was. Its ceiling and far walls were hidden by the darkness, invisible to the explorers who now stood in the little island of light their torches cast.

Around them, sprawled together as intimately as the participants in some grotesque orgy, lay the skeletons.

They weren’t all intact. Nor were they all human. Some of them had the short, blunt look of orcs. Others were smaller, their skulls elongated into snouts from which razor-sharp teeth still sprouted. Another, still held together by its chainmail, had bones as fine and delicate as porcelain. Whatever it was, it made Florin think of the tales he had heard of the elven folk that haunted Loren.

But although the skeletons differed in form and race, in one way they were all alike.

Every one of them, without exception, had been incinerated, the bones burned into powdery chalk. The motes of dust that floated through the acrid stench of this chamber were the same, dull white, colour. And that dust, the last stubborn remains of things long dead in some terrible holocaust, was everywhere. It hung thickly in the stink of the room, the shifting shroud of it that covered the dead like some frail attempt at modesty at the explorer’s presence.

Thorgrimm was unhappy.

“There is a trap here,” he told them, sniffing the air suspiciously. “And no gold. Maybe we should go.”

“No!” Kereveld snapped. “This is the place. I recognise all the skeletons from the book.”

“Do you?” Lorenzo asked, his voice slicing through the carnal atmosphere like a razor.

“Yes. There should be a lever here, or some other mechanism.”

“Which does what?” Thorgrimm demanded. Kereveld could only shrug.

"I don't know, exactly. But it should open some sort of... some sort of window."

One of the Bretonnians prodded a skeleton with the toe of his boot. It collapsed, crumbling into a choking cloud that hung in the still air of the chamber.

"Let's see if we can find this lever, then," Florin decided, tearing his eyes away from the phantom of dust.

"It should be on the east side," Kereveld told them helplessly.

"Very well," Thorgrimm decided after a moment's hesitation. "If you insist on this folly, van Delft has bound me to help you. But if you'll take my advice you'll turn back while you have the chance."

The dwarf looked up, but Kereveld just shrugged.

"This way."

Clumping through the bones of their predecessors the five men followed the dwarf into the endless night of the temple. The entrance the plate had lifted them to was swallowed up by the darkness behind them, leaving them in a world of crumbling death and cold sweat.

But gradually, out of the gloom, the far wall appeared. In front of it there lay the heavy body of what appeared to be a stone sarcophagus. A great heap of bones were piled around the promontory like tinder for a funeral pyre. Thorgrimm pushed some of them to one side to make his way through.

"That's not in the book," Kereveld muttered, rifling through the pages as he followed the dwarf. Now that the flames of their torches had been brought to bear on the neatly cut stone Florin could see that it was no coffin. There was no sign of any lid, or of a name, or of any carving. Apart from the scorch marks that had blackened its corners, the slab was completely featureless.

Except, that was, for the spheres that rested on its surface.

There were eight of them. Eight cheerful little baubles that looked completely out of place in the darkness of this place. Beneath polar caps of dust their surfaces swirled with the bright, primary colours of children's toys or winter decorations.

Above them, gaping open as hungrily ten holes awaited. Eight were empty, as black as empty stomachs, but in the first two, lying as neatly as eggs in a nest, were two more of the spheres.

"Looks like we found your lever," Thorgrimm said, and took off his helmet to scratch his head. "The question is will we have any more luck pulling it than these others?"

He swept his helm around in a broad gesture that took in the ruined forms that lay around, then crammed it back onto his head.

"Let's see," Kereveld muttered, peering myopically at the arrangement. He reached over to the second of the filled cavities and removed a shrivelled brown twig, the end of which had been neatly sheared off.

"Looks like something did grow in here," Florin said, taking it from him. "A vine, maybe..."

"That's not wood," Thorgrimm told him. "It's a finger."

Florin flung the thing away and wiped his hand on his robes.

The dwarf smiled.

“If we’re going to try to open this particular lock we’d better have a better idea of what goes where then.”

Florin, meanwhile, had picked up one of the spheres and was holding it up to his torch. Despite the orange glow of the flame the colours were clear enough, a great swirl of blue, broken across much of its surface by green blobs, swirled between white caps. Here and there tiny capillary lines of blue cut across the green like the veins on a drunk’s nose.

“How much does it weigh?” Thorgrimm asked, hefting another one of the spheres. This one was a deep red dotted with countless, interlocking circles. “I’ve seen something like this before. You need to build up the weight of the leverage in the right order. Those others must have got the first one right, then failed with the second.”

Florin replaced the blue green sphere and picked up another. This one was ash grey; its only features thin orange lines that crawled across its surface.

“I know what they are,” he said cautiously, swapping it for another.

“What?” Thorgrimm asked.

“At least, I think I know what they are.”

“What?”

“Ask Kereveld.”

All eyes turned to the wizard. After a moment he looked up from the book.

“Yes?”

“What’s this?” Florin asked him, and held up the first globe.

“Ahhhhhhh,” the wizard said, the sound as smooth as the end of pain. Eyes gleaming in the darkness he reached out for the sphere with trembling hands, and grasped it eagerly.

“Wonderful,” he breathed, turning it around to gloat over every detail. “Wonderful. This alone will show the old women at the college that the cost was worth it.”

“What is it?” Thorgrimm snapped, his voice harsh enough to cut through Kereveld’s rapture.

“It’s the world,” the wizard said, his voice cracking into a jagged little giggle. “That one you’re holding is Lokratia. See the meteor scars in its crust? And here, look. Deiamol. The burning world.”

Elbowing his way forward, Kereveld rested his book on the stone slab and picked up another sphere. This one was deathly pale apart from three bruised grey smudges, and a smattering of tiny black pinpricks.

“And this,” he said, his voice rising in excitement as he studied it, “must be Obscuria. That moron Brakelda said that it didn’t exist. He never did understand calculus.”

Again he giggled, and Thorgrimm looked accusingly at Florin, who shrugged.

He wanted to say, he may be human but don’t hold me responsible. What he actually said was, “What about the first of the planets, there in the wall?”

“Charyb,” the wizard said. “And that next one is Verda. It shouldn’t be there. It’s the fifth planet. Like so. Deiamol should be in its place. Then Tigris. Then our world.”

Here the wizard hesitated, and weighed the globe in his hand reluctantly.

“Better not wait too long,” Thorgrimm cautioned warily.

Kereveld sighed and placed the bauble in its niche. Then, his fingers sorting through the other five like a dealer at a craps table, he rolled each of the others into place.

“There,” he said, glancing around expectantly. “That’s it.”

Nothing happened.

“At least we seem to have avoided the trap.”

“I don’t understand,” Kereveld muttered in sudden outrage. “There should be a...”

But he got no further. With a barely audible rumble of hidden levers, the sound as powerful as tectonics and as remorseless as death, the ceiling burst asunder with a flash of blinding light.

* * *

Had the fire come it would have devoured figures frozen in every pose, from cowering terror to straight-backed defiance. It would have melted eyes that were squeezed shut in fearful expectation, or wide open in curiosity. It would have melted fat, and frizzled hair, and set sinews ablaze.

But the fire didn’t come. Instead, a thousand stars blossomed into flaming life harmlessly in the darkness above.

Yellow or white or old, dying red they hung in the black void of space, the patterns their tiny bodies made against the vast darkness beyond as complex as a handful of thrown grain. Some burned bright enough to bring tears to the onlookers’ eyes. Others, mere specks in the lightless void of space, could only be seen from the corner of the eye. And behind them all, as smooth and creamy as a trail of snowdrops across an onyx floor, lay the bulk of their galaxy, its edges frayed by the thousands of defecting stars.

“Look,” Kereveld breathed, grasping Florin by the shoulder and pointing one shaking finger upwards. The Bretonnian saw a solid green sphere, no bigger than his thumbnail.

It was Verda, of that he had no doubt. A perfect twin to the impostor that they had handled minutes ago. This Verda, though, was real. Its distant continents were lit not by candlelight but by the sun; its billions of tons were held in place not by sweaty mortal hands but by... by what?

What force was strong enough to hold a world in its orbit?

Florin winced as Kereveld’s fingers pinched harder.

“This is it,” the old man hissed, and turned his manic gaze on Florin before looking back up to ogle the naked universe above. “This is why we’re here.”

“It can’t be real,” Florin said, although he knew that it was. “It must be an illusion.”

“No illusion,” Kereveld said. “Reality. The stars as the Old Ones saw them.”

“But how can we see them? It’s daytime. The sky outside is blue, not this black.”

“Yes,” the wizard replied simply. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

His hand fell limply from Florin's shoulder, and the first glistening tear ran down the old man's face and into his beard.

"Sotek's Eye," he whispered reverently in blasphemous prayer. "With your help I will change our world."

Florin felt a shiver run through him at the words, a twitch of superstitious fear.

Don't be a fool, he told himself. It's not as though this place does anything.

Above him, twinkling against the icy void of space, the galaxy burned.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lorenzo waited until Florin had escorted Kereveld back to the temple before slipping away. He had kept the merchandise hidden beneath the folds of his shirt and the shape of it had soon etched a hot, red patch of insulation into his skin.

Now, sitting on his haunches with his back resting against the smooth stone of the corner building, he shifted the goods within his shirt and watched his customers approach.

They walked with the exaggerated swagger of the world's only honest men, pausing occasionally to glance around them furtively. They looked as though they were about to burst into an innocent whistle.

In fact, as they drew nearer, one of them did start to hum. Florin sniggered and stood up, rising out of the tall-bladed elephant grass like a grotesque apparition.

"Over here, lads," he hissed. The two men stopped in sudden alarm. Then, deciding that this wasn't a trap, they ploughed through the grass towards him. The first of them swept off a white-feathered hat and nodded his head politely.

"What a surprise, to meet you here," he said, his voice lifting with the musical lilt of a Tilean accent.

"Likewise," Lorenzo replied.

For a moment the three men stood and sweated beneath the gaze of the hot sun, studying each other.

"Is a very nice weather we're having," the Tilean said and, despite all evidence to the contrary, Lorenzo nodded his agreement.

"Beautiful."

Again the three men lapsed into silence. A dragonfly hummed past, its metallic sheen sparkling beneath the scorching sunlight. The Tileans watched it suspiciously. When it had disappeared around the corner the first of them lent forward, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"You have the map?" he hissed.

Lorenzo nodded and looked cautiously from side to side before retrieving the roll of paper from beneath his shirt. He began to unfurl it, and then paused.

"Look, you might not want it. It's only one page from Bartolomi's book, not really a map. To be quite honest, I can't make anything of it."

“Don’t keep us waiting.” The Tilean waved away the protest impatiently. “Let us see.”

Lorenzo sighed.

“All right, all right. But if you don’t want it, I have some tea to sell, too.”

And with that he unrolled the piece of paper and held it out for the two Tileans to examine. As the men hunched over the paper, Lorenzo saw the contents reflected in their faces. In a matter of seconds their aquiline features changed from eager to disappointed, from disappointed to exhilarated and then, with an obvious effort, from exhilarated to unimpressed.

“Yes,” the Tilean said. “I see is a very smudged. Very unclear.”

“Sorry,” Lorenzo sighed, and started to roll the map back up. “But I did warn you. Anyway, about that tea...”

The Tilean gripped his wrist and smiled with maniacal insouciance.

“We will take the map anyway. For a souvenir.”

“Well, if you’re sure you want to...” Lorenzo trailed off. “It costs twelve crowns.”

The Tileans seemed genuinely shocked but Lorenzo remained unmoved.

“Take it or leave it,” he shrugged.

They took it, and just in time. Less than half an hour later a trio of Kislevites came slinking along through grass grown dull beneath a suddenly overcast sky.

But that deal was never complete. Before they’d even started to discuss a price a terrible roar from the jungle beyond had sent all three men bolting away like hares from a gun.

* * *

Van Delft stood on the highest stone tier of the temple and gazed across the world below. From this altitude, with the warm breeze brushing the white mane of his hair back from the flushed skin of his brow, and also keeping the flies at bay, the jungle seemed almost beautiful.

The morning sunlight gleamed on the canopy of the surrounding trees. The brilliant greens and golds were a stark contrast to the dark hollows below. Straight ahead the ground swelled up towards the lip of the plateau—the overgrown earth rising up before the temple as smoothly as a wave before the prow of a ship.

Here and there the canopy was cratered with regular patterns of stunted growth. It occurred to van Delft that beneath these areas lay the ruins of other buildings, buildings which had not enjoyed the protection lavished upon this temple complex—buildings whose remains might contain anything. It also occurred to him that he’d be a fool to tell that to the men below. He’d just about been able to bully them into building a stockade and maintaining some daily semblance of drill, but he knew better than to press them further than that. At least the current wave of gold fever served to keep them within earshot of the buglers he’d posted on these very heights.

Gold fever. It was like an illness with some of them.

Men who had risked everything to escape from their father's fields could now be seen burrowing into the heavy soil below, tearing at the earth without even peasants' tools.

Others, contrary to orders, spent their time sneaking around the corridors and passageways that riddled the outer buildings. So far they had discovered nothing except falling slabs or concealed pits.

"Fools," the commander muttered, thinking of the three bodies that the dwarfs had already recovered from within those buildings. The first two had been merely broken, but the third had been, well, had been...

Had been *smeared*, van Delft decided, thinking of the man's jellied remains.

He winced at the memory and turned his attention back to the tell-tale dips in the thick carpet of greenery before him.

No. There was no way he was going to tell the men that the city they sought was out there, hidden beneath a grappling chaos of undergrowth and Sigmar alone knew what else.

The commander grunted as he reached the decision. Then he frowned. On the far horizon, the blue of the sky was disappearing beneath a vast mountain of cloud. The edge of the dismal mass was as straight as a razor, and it was drawing nearer with the speed of a galloping horse.

He ground his teeth and wracked his brains, trying to remember if he'd ever seen a sky quite like this before. He didn't like it, that was for sure. After a life time spent beneath the choppy weather of the Old World, this hard-edged blanket of cloud didn't seem natural.

The brooding was ended with a sudden, sharp explosion from below. It had come from beyond one of the outbuildings and, as the commander squinted in that direction, a thin wisp of black smoke started to rise upwards.

The noise died away, swallowed by the jungle. In its place a chorus of ragged cries floated up. Van Delft, his face grim, started to clamber back down the ladder of lashed vines that led up to his high eyrie, his thoughts already turning to what he might find below.

During their first foray into the cremetorial stench of the upper chamber Florin had felt many things. Fear especially. But now all he felt was boredom. The crumbling skeletons that surrounded him no longer filled him with anything other than a sort of distant pity. Even amongst the flickering shadows of the torchlight they were now no more menacing than stacks of broken furniture.

True, their lidless gaze sometimes seemed filled with resentment of the warm flesh that still clothed his bones. Or perhaps it was resentment of the fact that Kereveld had succeeded in opening the all-seeing eye of this chamber where they had failed. But what of it? They had long since ceased to have any power in this world, otherwise they would surely have risen up in protest when the wizard blundered through them.

Skulls continued to roll as the wizard barged carelessly past, muttering to himself as he squinted up at the blazing constellations above or down at the paper upon which he scribbled his notes.

Florin watched the old man's actions disinterestedly and arched his back against the cold stone of the wall. Only van Delft's order kept him there, stuck protecting the wizard.

What a waste of time.

He yawned, despite the fact that it wasn't even noon yet, and rolled his shoulders. Maybe he should get in some sword practice. Lundorf had showed him a new trick yesterday, a way of trapping an opponent's thumb beneath the guard...

He pressed his hands against the wall to push himself off, then stopped suddenly. His expression frozen, he slowly began to slide his fingers through the pale ash which covered the stone behind him. It was dry and greasy, and he could feel rolls of it filling the spaces beneath his nails. Suddenly it didn't seem to matter that this soot was scorched bone. All that mattered were the finely carved lines that lay beneath it.

Waiting until Kereveld had wandered to the other side of the chamber, Florin turned and scrubbed the dirt off the wall with the palms of his hands. Beneath it, the edges of the grooves as sharp now as on the day they'd been cut, a mass of carved symbols were revealed.

With a quick glance over his shoulder Florin scrabbled for a torch and knelt down in front of the script the better to read it.

At first he was disappointed. This was no writing he'd seen before. In fact, he wasn't even sure if it was writing at all. There were no letters here, not even the odd little pictograms that occasionally turned up on wares from Cathay. Instead, the ancient masons had marked the walls of their temple with a continuous collage of pictures and images, each fitting as neatly into the next as a brick into a wall.

Florin leaned closer, blinking back tears from the smoke of the torch, and rubbed away more of the soot.

At least he could recognize some of the images. Despite the way that they'd been warped and twisted to fit into neat squares and rectangles Florin could make out snakes and spiders, and some sort of feathered lizard. These carvings and dozens more were crammed together in a higgledy-piggledy mass through which not a single line ran.

His brow furrowed with concentration, Florin smeared more dust away, searching for any clue as to where the fabled treasure might lay hidden. Sweat trickled down his face and he absent-mindedly wiped it away, leaving a grey smear on his forehead.

"What's that you've found?" a voice asked from behind him, making Florin jump and swear. He hadn't heard Kereveld approach.

"It's a... hey, what's that?"

The noise of the explosion echoed dully through the passageways of the temple, rumbling on long after the first impact had died. Mercenary and wizard exchanged a long, anxious glance. Then they shrugged.

"Well, Menheer Kereveld," Florin said as the last of the echoes faded. "I wonder if you'd be so good as to tell me what these mean?"

The two men hunched forward in the darkness, the outside world forgotten as they pored eagerly over words that might proclaim their fortunes.

The dozen round-bladed axes gleamed as brightly as the eyes of the dwarfs who held them. They stood in a stolid line, their backs to the darkness of the jungle beyond. Between the line and the trees, neck deep in the smoking crater their blast had created, their fellows toiled. Sweat glistened on their stocky arms and barrel chests, slicking the dirt that clung to them.

It had taken almost half a barrel of the precious black powder to blow out the two trees that had grown out of this hole, but it had been worth it. Their root systems had clutched around the dwarfs' find like a miser's fingers, pressing it down into the earth. Yet with the help of a single, carefully placed charge, that miser's grasp had been transformed into an open palm.

The dwarfs worked quickly as they picked it clean. Ignoring the mosquitoes that feasted upon their pounding blood, they laboured with a sense of disciplined effort that kept them silent even as the gaggle of humans gathered resentfully in front of their pickets.

Despite the solid blanket of cloud that blocked the sun, occasional specks of light flashed amongst the steaming detritus of the crater. Sometimes the glint came from shards of splintered onyx, from jagged pieces of glazed pottery, or from carbonised bones. When that was the case these objects were hurled contemptuously into the jungle.

But sometimes the specks of light reflected the bright, maddening yellow of gold. When that happened the nearest dwarf would pounce upon the twist of metal like an owl upon a rat, his gaze becoming fevered as the object flared briefly into life beneath the darkening sky. Then, perhaps with a shudder of self control, he would pass the treasure to Thorgrimm, who would stow it in his satchel.

It seemed that the heavier the satchel grew the bigger the surrounding mob of humans became. Occasionally, a brief struggle would break out as men fought over detritus that had been thrown clear by the blast. But for the most part the spectators just shifted uneasily and watched their fellow mercenaries, waiting with the same restless patience of wolves waiting for their prey to weaken.

Graznikov, careful to remain a good twelve paces away from the nearest of the dwarf axemen, had elected himself their spokesman.

"Hey, leedle man," he called towards the dwarfs. "Stand clear. We want look for gold too."

The nearest dwarf glared back at him, his only reply the shifting of his axe from one hand to another.

Graznikov took another step back.

"You stealing from your *Tovaritches*," he protested loudly, his voice miserable with cheated honesty. "Better you share."

Some of the men behind him yelled out their agreement and made an abortive push forward. Thorgrimm looked up from the crater where his dwarfs were working and put his hands defiantly on his hips.

"Bugger off!" he told the Kislevite. "This is our find."

A growl of protest rose up from the men and Graznikov, to his increasing alarm, felt himself being shoved forward towards the dwarf axes.

“You no find gold beneath,” he shouted, tearing his eyes away from the cold steel. “Not yet. That, we want find.”

More of the men behind him added their voices to the cries of encouragement, and pushed against Graznikov’s meaty shoulders with renewed vigour. This time he was ready for them, though, and dug his heels into the soft earth even as another flash of gold from the pit beyond filled them with a new energy.

“No,” Thorgrimm told him. “This is our find. We will give van Delft half, as it says in our contract. The rest, we will keep. As it says in our contract. And in yours.”

“Let us dig too,” Graznikov challenged him, growing braver as some of the men jostled passed him. “You no own ground.”

One of the mob, a beefy Marienburger, could stand it no longer. He barged forward and tried to shove past one of the dwarfs who, twisting away from his hand, reversed his axe and struck the man’s knee with the haft.

There was a crack of steel against bone and a pained howl as the Marienburger collapsed into the mud. From behind him his mates yelled in protest and surged forward. One of them drew a sword, and the others followed his example so that soon the air was sharp with cold steel.

The dwarfs had seen too much gold for steel to melt their hearts, no matter how much or how sharp. They raised their axes to the ready position and shifted to prepare for a charge, the centre of the line drawing back to entice the enemy forward.

Graznikov swallowed nervously and wriggled backwards as a brief heartbeat of silence seized the warriors. Chiming into that heartbeat with perfect timing floated a distant voice, a single word. It was a beautiful word, a magical word. It was the only word powerful enough to stop the violence towards which they were falling.

“Gold!” Orbrant called, his voice quivering with the effort “Gooooold!”

He peered around the corner behind which Lorenzo had been doing business to see if the call was having any effect. It was: the tight huddle of mercenaries that had surrounded the dwarfs opened up, the men’s faces turning to the cry as flowers turn to the sun.

Orbrant took another deep breath, filling his lungs before repeating the cry.

“Gooold! It’s Gooooold!”

The first of the men turned their backs on the scrum that surrounded the crater. Casually, as if they were going nowhere in particular, they started walking towards his position. Orbrant watched them impassively, waiting until one of them began to trot, before repeating the call.

More men drifted away from the dwarfs’ claim.

Orbrant stepped around the corner in time to meet the forerunners.

“Go back.” He told them, holding his hands up as if to ward them off. “There’s nothing here. I was mistaken.”

Their enthusiasm fuelled by denial, the first couple of men rushed past him. Orbrant watched them blunder around the corner of the building, their fellows following them on their wild goose chase. Then he strode through the trampled elephant grass to the remaining knot of men and dwarfs, ignoring those who scampered past him after their fellows as he did so.

As he drew up to the skirmish line he realized how close it had been. The air between them was almost shimmering with hostility.

“Captain Graznikov,” Orbrant singled out the Kislevite, who’d remained to hover like a vulture behind the imminent bloodshed. “Go and make your report to Commander van Delft.”

“Don’t dare to tell me what to do,” Graznikov sneered. “I am the... the captain.”

But beneath the solid impact of Orbrant’s granite stare Graznikov felt his confidence melting away. After all, if a mere sergeant dared to address him like this he must have a reason—must have. Perhaps he’d heard some rumour; that dog Drobnik could never keep his mouth shut.

“Yes, you are a captain.” Orbrant drew closer to him, his eyes as hard as sapphires. “Now go and make your report to Commander van Delft.”

Graznikov licked his lips and took a step backwards. At the best of times he’d always found this slight man with his peasant’s dress and his aristocrat’s weapon a little unnerving. Now, as he so casually risked a flogging by talking to an officer in this way, he seemed positively frightening. What did he know?

With an obvious effort the Kislevite returned Orbrant’s gaze. He held it for almost a minute before, sweat trickling down his brow, he turned on his heel and swaggered away with assumed nonchalance.

When the captain had gone, Orbrant turned to the Marienburgers, who had been watching the show with every sign of enjoyment. Even the man whom the dwarf had felled seemed to have forgotten his grievance for the moment. He and his opponent stood side by side, united in their appreciation of Graznikov’s humbling.

“What happened to your leg?” Orbrant asked him as he staggered forward.

Marienburger and dwarf swapped a glance.

“Bashed it, sergeant,” the mercenary said.

“Hmm.” Orbrant, who’d seen the look, nodded approvingly. “Get one of your mates to help you back to the Bretonnian quarter and we’ll give you some liniment for it. The rest of you can stay here and breathe down Captain Thorgrimm’s neck, if you want, although you’re wasting your time. Dwarfs love gold, but they love honour more. They won’t cheat you. Isn’t that right?”

“Aye,” said the dwarf who’d cracked the Marienburger’s knee. Then he winked at his victim. “More often than not, anyway.”

Orbrant joined in with the uncertain laughter and wiped the first fleck of rain off the smooth dome of his head. Glancing up, he saw the last distant blue slash of sky vanish beneath a rolling expanse of black clouds, dwarfing even the pyramid they pressed down on, fat and heavy-bellied with moisture.

Another spattering of drops pattered against the leaves and a first rumble of thunder growled out in distant menace—a drum roll for the commander who came stalking across the fields towards them.

“What’s going on here, sergeant?” he asked, eyes flicking from the line of men with their unsheathed swords to the line of dwarfs with their unbelted axes.

“Nothing at all, sir,” Orbrant told him with a crisp salute. “Just a spot of digging.”

“Really? You’d better carry on then.” And with that the heavens opened.

“So,” said Lundorf, with hearty good cheer. “We seem to have come to the right place after all.”

The expedition’s share of the gold, which Thorgrimm had carefully weighed in front of the entire expedition, sat in an empty powder chest before van Delft’s feet. There were perhaps three or four hundred crowns worth all told, and there were no two pieces the same, from tangled clumps of golden wire to snapped off lengths of thin piping.

“It’s strange,” Florin said, lifting one twist of metal up beneath the suspicious eyes of his brother officers. “But it almost seems like old scrap.”

“It is,” said Kereveld, who’d already dismissed the find as irrelevant, as he looked up from his pipe.

“No, I mean rubbish. Like in the middens back in my city.”

“Yes, that’s what it is,” snapped the wizard, who’d burnt his fingers.

“How can it be? Look, it’s all gold.”

Kereveld inhaled a lungful of smoke and nodded.

“You forget,” he chided the Bretonnian, a sudden rush of nicotine soothing his irritation. “The beings that built this place had no particular love for gold. They had so much that they used it as we do lead.”

In the gloom of the corridor the men shifted uneasily and peered out into the rush of rain that fell like a veil over the premature dusk. It had driven them and the rest of the expedition into the dubious safety of the outer buildings where they huddled, as restless and steaming as beasts sheltering in a cave.

Only the sentries remained outside. When they were relieved they sloshed into the shelter of the dingy stone walls, their sodden clothing leaving trails of water behind them.

Van Delft had considered calling them all back in. It wasn’t as though they’d be able to see anything against the blinding grey of the driving rain. But he knew the value of routine and he’d decided to stick to it, even though it would mean doing his rounds through the torrential downpour.

How my daughters would scold me if they found out, he thought with a smile that lifted the tips of his moustache.

The drumming of the rain also kept the other officers locked up inside their own little worlds. Graznikov thought of Orbrant, and of revenge. Lundorf thought of Vienela, the daughter of Baron Grulter, and what he wished he’d said to her. Florin thought of cards, for the first time since he’d fled Bordeaux, and toyed with the idea of setting up a game.

It was Kereveld who broke the mood. “How long do you think that this rain will last?” he asked van Delft, who just shrugged.

“Sigmar knows.”

“But it won’t be longer than four days?”

“I doubt it. But for all we know it might last for four months. Why?”

The wizard, who’d been chewing the end of his pipe, just muttered and looked away.

“What is it?” Florin pressed him, but the wizard just waved the question away, one pale hand fluttering like a moth in the dismal light.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try us.”

“Well, all right. It’s really not that complicated, I suppose. It’s all down to my discovery of the planet that used to be known as Obscuria. We’d always guessed that it was somewhere out there, because of the doppler effect it has on the magical field. But until I discovered it we’d never been able to accurately calculate its ellipse. I’ve decided to rename it Bartolomia Primus, by the way.”

The wizard paused, as if waiting for the applause that only he could hear to die away. Florin and Castavelli, who was sitting across from him, nodded blankly. Lundorf opened his mouth to ask a question, then thought better of it and closed it again. Thorgrimm began to snore.

“Anyway, now that I know the ellipse and can extrapolate the cyclical speed of its orbital rate from the observations I’ve made in the star chamber, I’ve made a wonderful discovery.”

He waited expectantly for a moment, then Florin obliged him: “What discovery?” he asked.

“I have discovered, at least, I think I have discovered, how to cast Heiermat’s Last Theorem.”

He leant forward, eyes shining with an almost religious fervour.

“Do you realise what that means?”

“No,” said Lundorf, to the wizard’s evident surprise.

“It means that I’ll be famous. Of all Heiermat’s twelve theorems, it’s only the last that we’ve never been able to follow. If I can cast it I will have made one of the greatest breakthroughs of any human mage.”

He beamed at the assembled men who smiled politely back.

“Well done,” Florin told him, and Kereveld smiled modestly.

“Thank you, thank you,” he muttered. “Although of course my real genius was in finding this place. I think that old fool Tiphianus only voted to give me the money for the expedition because he thought I would fail. Ha! Well, now I’ll show him. If only the rain clears in time, I’ll cast such a spell that the whole college will be forced to recognize my genius.”

Seized by a sudden fit of combative energy, Kereveld sprang to his feet and stalked over to the tunnel entrance. His silhouette was black against the pearly sheet of the downpour.

“How long do you think the rain will last?” he asked.

This time it was Florin who answered. “It doesn’t really matter, does it? A week or a day? When it clears you can get to work.”

“No, no, no.” The wizard shook his head impatiently. “The planets have to be in correct alignment. In particular, Morrslieb has to eclipse Obs... Bartolomia Primus.”

“Why?”

“How do I know?” Kereveld snapped. “It just does.”

“Morrslieb,” Castavelli muttered dubiously, taking off his cap to fidget with the feathers that crowned it. Their bright colours had vanished beneath a layer of grime and the quills were almost threadbare. “I don’t like Morrslieb. It’s a bad omen.”

“Paah.” Kereveld dismissed him, and turned back to watch the rain.

“The lunatics are always particularly energetic when it’s full,” Lundorf added. “I took Vienela to see them once, and... well...”

“Lunatics!” Kereveld scoffed. “What do they know? Morrslieb is no more dangerous than warpstone, if you know how to use it.”

Florin glanced around, satisfying himself that Orbrant hadn’t been in earshot of that particular comment, then got up and joined Kereveld by the entrance.

“Let’s go back to the star chamber while we wait,” he said airily. “We can have another look at the, um, stonework.”

“Why?”

“To pass the time,” Florin told him, already thinking about the inscriptions and what they might tell him. “To pass the time.”

* * *

That night there was no let up in the downpour. The rain danced upon the stone of the temple and beat into the clearing beyond. It filled the ditches the men had dug, the mud swimming into a dirty brown as the water rose up to slurp at the ankles of the stakes above, and a white mist rose from the jungle, as thick and blinding as the smoke from burning straw.

The next day it grew heavier.

Kereveld spent this time gazing up at the great open universe that lay sprawled before the all-seeing eye of the star chamber, scribbling away as he watched distant worlds spin through their orbits. If anything on those alien spheres had looked back it would have seen nothing of the temple, even if it had had the eyes or the art to pick out such detail. All it would have seen would have been the cyclone—the vast spiral of its body roaming across the lush green face of this continent with the silent grace of some grazing animal.

Had Kereveld known the size of the weather system, or its lethargy, he would have despaired. For two days it barely moved. Then, with three days left, it twisted to the north, only to be beaten back by some unseen, rival force.

Time ground past, as effortlessly and remorselessly as the stars which turned above. Morrslieb drew near, and, when there were no more than two days until its rise, Kereveld began to think about casting Heiermat’s Last Theorem despite the storm that raged outside. Deep in his heart, though, he knew it would be too dangerous to unleash such energy into the blindness of driving rain—who knew what might happen? It would be madness to cast the incantation without being able to see how it progressed.

Twenty-four hours later, the night before the heavens’ appointed hour, he changed his mind: danger or not, he had to know. That night he neither slept nor ate. Instead he paced up and down the chamber like some wild animal trapped in a cage, pausing only to stare up into the clouds above. Then Morrslieb rose over the distant horizon. Although hidden by the streaming cloud from the men outside, within the star chamber it could be seen with a perfect clarity.

It appeared like a bloody tumour, a cancer malign enough to blot out whole galaxies as it rolled across the universe. Its surface seemed horribly near beneath the

magnification of the ancient lens, the vast expanse of the visible hemisphere as inflamed and pockmarked as a plague victim's face.

Not even the wizard could bring himself to look at it for long. Every time he did so he began to get the feeling that the moon was looking back at him. The suspicion filled him with the same sort of horrible unease that, on the other side of the world, was already sending the lunatics of Marienburg thrashing against their chains.

Florin hardly noticed how thin the wizard's nerves were wearing. The old fool had never seemed really sane from the beginning anyway. Besides which he had problems of his own. Every time he thought he had cracked the code of the ancients' writing, a cross check would bring his theories crashing back down.

As yet nobody else knew about his find, and he wanted to decipher it before they did. The gods had gifted it to him, and he fully intended to wring whatever advantage he could from the information before anybody else could. If that meant matching Kereveld's sleepless vigil, so be it.

So it was that, on the morning that the bloated corpse of Morrslieb rolled into conjunction with the rest of the solar system, Florin and Kereveld were both as exhausted as each other. It took them both a moment to realise what the billowing golden mist they stumbled out into meant.

"It's a miracle," the wizard decided as, beneath the scorching heat of the tropical sun, the mist began to clear. The sky above was perfect.

"Help me with my notes, would you?" he asked Florin. Ignoring Lundorf's greeting, he started to clamber up the rough hewn ladder that led to the upper tier of the temple.



CHAPTER TWELVE

“Perhaps we should let van Delft know that you’re about to start?” Florin suggested as Kereveld sorted through the satchel of scrolls. The two of them had made their way to the highest tier of the main pyramid and Kereveld was still wheezing with the effort. His mottled hands shook as he wiped moisture off the stone before laying out his instruments, muttering to himself as he did so.

“I said,” Florin repeated to his preoccupied charge, “let’s tell van Delft we’re about to start. Look, he’s just down there.”

The mercenary pointed to the sodden remains of their camp below, where the commander’s foreshortened but distinctive figure was striding about. He roamed from one quarter to the next, a spark of vital force that set the mercenaries repairing their shelters and rebuilding the storm damaged ramparts.

“No, no, no. No time,” Kereveld muttered. He frowned distractedly, then selected one of the parchments and, leaning against the dripping granite block behind him, smoothed it out on his knee.

“This is it,” he said to himself. His eyes flitted down a script that was laid out like the verse of some ancient ballad, then across to the minutely calibrated sundial that he’d set on the stone beside him.

He looked at Florin. To the Bretonnian’s surprise there was, for the first time since they’d met, the unmistakable pallor of fear on the wizard’s face.

“What if it doesn’t work?” the old man asked him, as though the thought had only just occurred to him. “What if this has all been for nothing?”

“It will work,” Florin told him, as confidently as if he had any idea what he was talking about. He patted one of Kereveld’s bony shoulders reassuringly. “Remember during the voyage? You cast that spell against the daemon from the mast of a rolling ship. Here it will be easy.”

“No, that wasn’t the same. With this one...” Kereveld trailed off with the embarrassment of a man who’s found himself talking to his pet. Then he shuddered, shaking off his doubts like a dog shaking off water, and got purposefully to his feet.

“I’d advise you to stand back.”

So saying he slipped his robes off and flexed his fingers. The shadow of the sundial’s needle slipped around the face, darkening one of the sigils that marked it. With a last glance at the scroll, Kereveld began to chant.

Waist deep in muddy water, Orbrant was bent forward with his hands on his thighs. He was gasping noisily for breath as the men above pulled away the huge, timber-hewn caltrop he'd just wrestled back up out of the ditch.

It had been hard work. The three interlaced beams, each as long as a man was tall, weighed almost as much as him. Strong as his god had made him, this weight, combined with the drag of the mud that sucked so hungrily at the bundled stakes, had left the sergeant's muscles burning with exhaustion.

"Sure you don't want a hand down there, sergeant?" Lorenzo asked from behind the work party above.

"No. Just make sure that these are lashed together more strongly. If a bit of rain was able to make such a mess of our defences, so would an... an enemy..."

The sergeant trailed off, the reddened angles of his face hardening as his eyes became cold. Lorenzo swallowed nervously beneath this sudden anger. Then, with a rush of relief, he realized that the warrior's disapproval was aimed not at him but at something behind him.

Sidling out of Orbrant's line of sight, Lorenzo turned and followed it up towards the top of the pyramid. There, blurred by the pale mist that rose up from the warming stone, were two figures. One of them might or might not have been Florin. But there was no doubt about the identity of the second man.

Even from this distance Kereveld was unmistakable. The mass of his hair billowed above his skinny form like the flame of a match and, as his mouth opened and closed, his arms chopped through the air in complex motions. Lorenzo thought back to the last time he'd seen the wizard working himself into such a fit, and frowned.

"What devilry is this?" Orbrant growled, squinting up at the wizard. His hands were now flashing back and forth in a blur, fingers twisted into strange, painful looking contortions.

"Maybe he's speaking Tilean," Lorenzo joked, but nobody was listening. Their work forgotten they stared upwards at the wizard, still and watchful.

Only Orbrant seemed unaffected by the sudden unease which had gripped the work party. Dripping water and mud he clambered out of the ditch and over the bank, elbowing his way past caltrops and men until he stood between them and the wizard. There he sank to his knees, pressed his palms together and began to chant, lips moving as if in answer to Kereveld's unheard incantation.

"Sigmar be my guide," he intoned, his eyelids drooping. "Sigmar be my meat and my drink, and my light in the darkness."

Lorenzo glanced down at the back of Orbrant's gleaming skull. But then one of his comrades cried out and their attention snapped back to Kereveld.

His efforts, it appeared, were working.

To Lorenzo's relief there was no repeat of the burning hail with which the wizard had driven off the daemon. This time the searing material of his magic was confined to motes that, from this distance, seemed no bigger than fireflies. They winked into existence around the mage's head, popping like corn in a pan as they did so.

“Sigmar be my hammer, and the strength with which I wield it.” Orbrant’s voice droned on, as impassive as his men were restless.

Gradually, at first so slowly that it was hardly noticeable, and then with increasing speed, Kereveld’s creations began to grow. As they expanded, their eye watering brightness began to dim and the solidifying shapes displayed blotchy patterns that reminded Lorenzo of something.

“Sigmar be my shade in the heat of the day and my fire in the cold of the night.”

The colourful spheres of Kereveld’s incantation continued to expand, the arabesques which covered their surfaces swirling around like oil on water. Gone were the bright seeds from which they had sprung. They were now clearly recognisable as cousins of the orbs they had found within the temple. The largest was striped with fiery slashes of reds and oranges, already the size of a man. Suddenly for no obvious reason, it began to roll slowly outwards, away from the temple and towards the jungle beyond.

Lorenzo scratched his chin thoughtfully and glanced towards the entrance of the ruins. The dank interior had never looked so inviting, the grim blocks of stone never so well made.

“Sigmar be the truth in my words, and the purity of my heart.” Orbrant’s prayer continued, his words as smooth as the orbs which now rolled towards him.

By now the entire expedition was gaping upwards at the impossible solar system that Kereveld had summoned. It drifted slowly across the clear tropical sky, the perfectly realized contours of its alien surfaces swimming into focus beneath the spectators’ eyes.

Magical or not, they were real, these miniature worlds, as solid as cannon balls in the sunlight. As they silently strayed out over the mercenaries’ encampment, shadows flickered into existence beneath them, at first as insubstantial as mist but darkening all the while.

“Sigmar be my first hope, and my last,” Orbrant said, unperturbed as his men scattered before the approaching shadow of Charyb. It slid over him and onto the steaming grass beyond, as plump and as slow as a Marienburg coal barge.

“Sigmar be with me in joy and despair, and show me the illusion of both.”

For a moment sunlight shone once more on the Sigmarite’s dome. Deiamol rolled over him. Slightly smaller than its sister planet, the surface of this one was softened by a sheath of swirling cloud.

“Sigmar be with me.”

More of Kereveld’s monstrous incantations sailed harmlessly over the praying man, who paid them as little heed as he would high clouds on a calm day.

“Be with me,” Orbrant repeated, his voice sinking to a whisper as the very world upon which he stood rolled overhead.

The sixth planet, a boiling mass of gas, threw no shadow as it passed. Instead the bound flame of its surface flickered eerily on the kneeling man’s gaunt features. Then Obscuria, its surface glittering with the first ice Lustria had ever seen, passed overhead, and red light became blue.

A moment later, with neither sign nor fanfare, the procession of Kereveld's worlds halted. They hung amongst the last wisps of morning mist, as ripe as fruit above the jungle.

The denizens of that tangled mass fell as silent as the men who had brought this sorcery here and, for a while, the only sound to be heard was the constant drone of insects and the whispered repetitions of Orbrant's catechism.

"I did it!" A voice, cracked with excitement, drifted down from on high. "Heiermat's Last Theorem! I am a genius!"

Lorenzo watched the genius, delirious with joy, run his hands through his sweat-soaked hair and punch the air with triumph.

"I showed them. The fools!" The wizard's voice shattered into a peel of wild laughter, and he started to hop up and down in a grotesque jig.

And that was when the planets fell.

It was as though gravity, realising how badly it had been cheated, had decided to snatch them out of the air with a fit of sudden anger. It pulled them down towards its bosom with such speed that the mercenaries barely had time to cry out before the spheres plunged into the earth, vast round bullets aimed at the heart of a giant.

Without even slowing, Verda crashed down through the distant canopy. There was a great crash of splintering timber, followed by a bone-jarring thud and a gout of steaming soil was thrown high into the air. It rained back down as another planet stabbed into the trembling earth, and another.

Lorenzo clasped his hands to his ears, a desperate attempt to silence the deafening cacophony of the tortured jungle and the screeching animals within. It didn't do him much good. The noise of the holocaust was too loud to be shut out, and he could still feel the impacts in his joints; his old bones quaked in sympathy with the trembling ground beneath his feet.

Even after the last of the planets had punched through the earth's skin these seismic shifts continued. They set Lorenzo's teeth rattling together as hard as the colossal stones of the temple complex and, when the pristine form of Verda rose up and out of the ground behind the temple, Lorenzo knew why.

The disappearance of the conjured worlds hadn't marked the end of the wizard's spell. It had marked its beginning. The worlds he had summoned hadn't gone, they were merely orbiting, mangling their way through the surface of the world.

Seized with a sudden panic, Lorenzo turned to run, but he was too late. No sooner had he reached the mud of the ditch when a slide of falling masonry, ponderous blocks bouncing down from the heights like pebbles, collapsed on top of him.

The last thing he saw before the world closed in was Orbrant. The invocation of his god completed, he had risen from his knees, soiled robes billowing about him like a storm cloud, and turned to face Kereveld's sorcery.

Lorenzo had time to marvel at the placid smile that lit the warrior's face before, with a jarring impact, twelve tons of granite sealed him into the ditch.

There was none of the ice he'd been promised. But there was blindness. It took the form of a cloying grey mist through which the indistinct shapes of other dead men

moved. Their voices were harsh, the confusion of accents wracked with a rage and with grief.

Lorenzo wondered how long it would be before the violence of their words was translated into actions. He tried not to think about it. He could recognize one of them as the first man he'd killed, a bandit on the road to Bordeleaux. Another might have been the wife he'd left.

Funny, he hadn't heard that she was dead.

With a shudder he dragged his thoughts away from the sound of the circling daemons and concentrated on the feeling that was returning to his fingers and toes. At least hell wasn't as cold as the old preachers had made out.

Maybe he hadn't led such a bad life after all. Maybe—

With a sudden flash, the blindness cleared and a hungry face lunged towards him.

"Why are you screaming?" Florin asked. "Your purse wasn't damaged."

Lorenzo sat up, dried mud crackling off his face as his features twisted in confusion.

"What happened?" he asked, blinking in the dusk. The voices he'd heard were still as loud as crows over a corpse, and still as angry. Scrabbling up to a sitting position, Lorenzo looked past Florin towards the howling mob.

"What's wrong with them?"

"Seems that Menheer Kereveld's fireworks weren't as appreciated as they might have been," Florin told him, wringing out the cloth he'd draped across his servant's brow.

"What?"

"Kereveld's spell. It killed seven people. Their friends aren't too happy about it."

"Oh," Lorenzo rubbed his eyes and took the flask of water Florin handed to him. "Aren't you supposed to be protecting him?"

Florin barked with laughter.

"Your bang on the head seems to have knocked something loose. As far as I'm concerned the silly old fool's on his own. He'd have been strung up already, by the way, if it hadn't been for van Delft and Orbrant. They've got him safely in the temple while the row dies down."

"If it dies down," Lorenzo muttered, and took a drink. Somebody seemed to be talking to the mob but, whatever the voice was saying, it clearly wasn't popular. One of the crowd replied, and his words were met with a roar of savage approval.

"Where's Lundorf?" asked Lorenzo.

"With his wounded. One of those damn things came up right beneath their bivouacs. What a mess. I've never seen him so angry."

Florin took the flask back from Lorenzo and popped the cork back into it.

"He helped me drag you out of the mud, by the way. You're damned lucky to have made it to that ditch in time. Good thinking."

"Yes." Lorenzo, who'd been desperately trying to claw his way out of the ditch when the sky had fallen in, took the compliment anyway. "I never was just a pretty face."

Florin grunted, his smile betrayed by the concern that furrowed his brow.

"Are you sure you're all right? Apart from losing your good looks?"

“Yes, I think so,” Lorenzo nodded cautiously and drew his knees up to his chest. “I’m better off than Kereveld, anyway. Ranald’s balls, imagine if he hadn’t stopped the damned spell when he did.”

“He didn’t,” Florin said. “Orbrant did.”

“Orbrant?”

“I didn’t believe it either, but it’s true. Some sort of Sigmarite charm.”

Lorenzo snorted.

“Now that is a contradiction in terms.”

The two men laughed as they turned to watch the lynch mob that surged around the temple’s entrance. It parted for a moment to reveal van Delft and, standing beside him, Orbrant. He stood silhouetted against the tunnel beyond, his warhammer held before him, an immovable object against the tide of angry men.

Florin sighed.

“If you’re sure you’re all right, I suppose I’d better go and give our sergeant a hand,” he decided, getting back to his feet.

“I’d leave Orbrant to it,” Lorenzo said, and spat out a mouthful of dirt and blood. “He can handle himself, I’ll warrant.”

“No,” Florin shook his head reluctantly. “He’s certainly saved our hides often enough. I owe it to him.”

“You’re starting to sound like your empty headed mate,” Lorenzo said with disgust.

“Lundorf’s not empty headed.”

“Then how did you know who I was talking about?”

Florin opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again. Lorenzo lay back down with a smug expression on his face.

“Well,” his master rallied at last. “It’s a good job he was empty headed enough to pull you out of the mud.”

“Right you are, boss,” Lorenzo said airily, and Florin decided to quit while he was ahead. Loosening his sword in its sheath he made his way over to the hubbub, stepping out of the way of a Marienburger that came pelting around the corner. Florin hung back as the man flung himself at the crowd, willing him to clear a path through the tightly packed bodies.

“Message for the Colonel,” the Marienburger cried out imperiously, using his elbows to clear a path through his comrades’ mutinous ranks. They cursed at him as he ploughed his way through them, and more than one elbow struck back. The messenger had been well chosen, though. He ignored the blows just as stubbornly as he ignored the complaints, and fought his way through the bruising scrum as if his life depended on it.

Florin, following in his wake, was thankful for it.

“Message for the Colonel.”

“What is it?” van Delft, welcoming the distraction, called out to him.

“We’ve found it, sir. Captain Lundorf says to come quick.”

“Found what?”

“The loot, sir. The abandoned treasure.”

“Rubbish,” a voice cried from the back of the crowd. “We’re not falling for that one again!”

But already, in a hundred hearts, feelings of vengeance were melting away beneath thoughts of wealth. Dozens of muttered conversations faded beneath the movement of scores of feet which turned, before Florin’s very eyes, to a stampede. All of a sudden he found himself surrounded by a tide of rushing men.

“Hey, wait,” the messenger cried, seeing what was happening. “It’s ours. We found it!”

Florin found himself standing alone in front of the Colonel.

“Come back!” the messenger wailed, following the hurrying crowd. “That was a message for the Colonel, not you.”

Van Delft watched him disappear back around the corner, then strolled over towards Florin.

“I thought you were keeping an eye on Kereveld for me.”

“Well, sir...”

“Captain d’Artaud assigned that duty to me, sir,” Orbrant cut in smoothly, his features hidden by the shadows of the approaching night.

The two officers looked at him, identical expressions of disbelief on their faces.

“Sergeant Orbrant,” van Delft said after a long, uncomfortable silence. “You’re an extraordinary man.”

“Thank you, sir.”

A chorus of joyful yells burst out from the darkness on the temple’s far side, followed by a chorus of wild curses and angry threats.

Van Delft sighed.

Damn mercenaries. They’d be the death of him.

“Two statuettes, ugly. Six pounds in total,” Lundorf said, taking them off the scales and passing them to Thorgrimm. The dwarf studied them briefly, nodded his head in agreement, and placed them into the empty powder chest.

Behind them Castavelli’s pen scratched across the parchment, recording the find for posterity.

“One breastplate, round. Three pounds two ounces in total,” Lundorf intoned as the scales balanced.

“Nice workmanship,” Thorgrimm decided, turning the piece of armour over to study the pattern that had been chased underneath. Dozens of pairs of eyes, each as suspicious as the next, watched him hold their treasure up to the light.

Castavelli looked up.

“Nice workmanship.” He chewed the end of his quill thoughtfully. “Should I write that?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Lundorf said, picking the next object from the pile beside him.

“One...” He paused and scratched the back of his head. “One *objet d’art*, lots of frogs. Seven pounds four ounces in total.”

“Aye,” Thorgrimm agreed, examining the carved forms that swarmed around the thing. Strange human/lizard hybrids swarmed together in tight, interlocking patterns

that seemed to squirm beneath Morrslieb's sickly light. The fell moon sat above them now, its wan light reflected in the eyes of the mercenaries. It made them gleam like the eyes of wolves.

Thorgrimm cautiously placed the piece of gold into the box.

"Knife, useless. Twelve ounces."

And the count went on. The stained, sulphurous interior of the powder chest disappeared beneath the hoard, a glittering dream made real by an accident of Kereveld's sorcery. It had been the holocaust wrought by his magics that had uncovered the treasure trove, mixing the gold with mud, blood, corpses and shattered remains.

It was as well for the wizard that it had. Rich men, after all, had more reason to fear the noose.

"Armband, snapped. Ten ounces exactly."

The gathering watched the armband clink into place. They watched Castavelli mark it down. There should have been joy on their faces, and on some there was. But on most there was merely a sober calculation, the deaths of their comrades still weighing heavily on them.

A bloody price indeed for the uncovering of this treasure trove.

Of course, there had been six other planets. Planets whose boreholes had driven through nothing but wilderness, the debris of their passing still lay unseen and uncleaned amongst shattered trees and steaming mud. Even now, with the company's cache being weighed out, there were absences in its ranks. These were the men who had realised the possibility that, a few hundred yards away, great fortunes lay strewn across the jungle floor.

A pair of Bretonnians.

A handful of Kislevites.

A single Marienburger, the sole survivor of his section.

And as for Tileans... well, who knew how many of them had slipped away? Castavelli had things other than his men to count.

As Morrslieb slunk across the black velvet of the tropical sky more men dripped away from the expedition like blood from a wound. Inspired by greed and, although they didn't know it, by Morrslieb herself, they snuck away between tree trunks as red as picked bones and into the darkness beyond.

By the time morning came not, a single one of them had returned.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Success, a long dead commander had told a youthful van Delft, can be just as dangerous to a mercenary army as failure. Maybe even more so. With failure comes the forced discipline of desperation. With success comes... comes... Damn. What had the word been?

Ah yes: dissolution.

Still perched on top of one of the fallen blocks, van Delft watched Lundorf dismiss the parade assembled before him. There were perhaps a hundred mercenaries left to slope away, four-fifths of the total that had started out from Bordeleaux. And what a bedraggled four-fifths they were.

The uniforms, even those of the Tileans, were now little better than peasant rags. The leather of their cross belts and boots had taken on a dark greenish sheen that no amount of scrubbing was able to remove. Even the score of dwarfs, standing to one side in a neat little block, were starting to look ragged and mildewed.

It could have been worse, van Delft thought, but then again, it could have been better. It wasn't as though they'd even been into battle; the seven bodies that lay freshly buried in the field beyond had nothing to do with any enemy. Perhaps that was why a dozen more of their comrades had deserted.

If they *had* deserted.

The commander tugged at the tips of his moustache and thought back to the other disappearances they'd suffered. The more he thought about them, and he thought about them a lot more than he'd let on, the less likely it seemed that they were the result of men running away. After all, where would they run away to?

No. Twelve gone in one night was not something he could turn a blind eye to. Like it or not, he'd have to risk a patrol, see if he couldn't get to the bottom of this. Not a big patrol, though. Just half a dozen men, led by captain...

As he paused to consider a name, that rascal of a Bretonnian strode past as if chosen by Sigmar himself, a shovel slung over his shoulder.

I'll be damned, van Delft thought, shaking his head in disbelief. An officer with a shovel. Wonder what my old colonel would have made of that?

Never mind. He'd save young d'Artaud from the indignity of getting mud beneath his fingernails.

"Captain," he called out, jumping down from the block. "Can I have a word?"

“Well done, Bertrand,” Florin said, gingerly taking the fur cap that the trooper handed to him. Sodden with damp and grey with mildew the lump of bear skin looked ready for the midden.

“Think it was dropped on purpose, boss?” Bertrand said as the stitching of the shapeless lump tore beneath Florin’s fingers.

“No.” Florin shook his head regretfully and passed the thing back. “You know what those Kislevites are like. Ever seen one without his hat?”

Bertrand shook his head and tossed the filthy cap back onto the clump of thorns where it had been found.

The two other members of the patrol exchanged a glance, their eyes wide with anxiety and their skin grey in the gloom the jungle. One of them swallowed nervously and cleared his throat.

“So, if they’ve been snatched,” he suggested, carefully optimistic, “we’d better go back, hadn’t we? Better let the commander know what’s going on.”

“In a minute,” Florin muttered, peering through the floating tendrils of mist into the dank hollows beyond.

So far they’d stuck to the path, more or less, following the track they’d already cut through the strangling darkness that guarded the ruins from the river. The oppressive mass of the jungle, the choking humidity of its breath loud with countless swarming insects, had closed around them eagerly as they stumbled back into its embrace. Already the four men were slicked with sweat, their shins blue with a dozen stumbling impacts and their flesh studded with insect bites.

And yet, although they now had the excuse to slog back out of here, Florin couldn’t quite bring himself to take it. He told himself that it was because of the gold that might lie beyond, and it was.

At least, it was in part.

But there was also van Delft. For some reason that he didn’t quite understand, Florin had fallen prey to the urge to impress the old man.

“Damn it all,” he muttered to himself. “Let’s impress him then.”

“What was that, boss?”

“I said, let’s press on for another hour or so. See if we can’t find a body, hey?”

“That is a good idea,” one of the men muttered sarcastically behind him as Florin led off, swishing a machete idly in front of him as he struggled up the slope.

“Look out for tracks leading off to the sides,” he called back to his little patrol.

“Come on then,” Bertrand reluctantly decided as Florin disappeared into the mist. “Look lively. Let’s get it over with.”

“Can’t we just kill him?”

“Don’t even joke about it.”

It was difficult to keep track of time in the depths of this world. The endless pillars of jostling trunks, and the suffocating mass of foliage and vines they supported, sealed the men off from the sky above. Only the occasional shaft of dazzling light that cut miraculously through the tons of tangled vegetation above gave them any indication of the sun’s progress.

It was difficult to keep track of how far they'd walked, too, when every step was a battle against clinging mud or snatching creepers. After a mere fortnight, it seemed, the jungle was already surging back into the path the intruders had cut, choking it closed with jealous fingers of vines, thorns and heavy, trailing sheets of ivy.

Florin, who'd made the mistake of touching one such obstacle, was already nursing a hand as swollen and red as a pound of sausages. Occasionally, he tried to squeeze it closed into a fist, which eased the itching for a few seconds by making his skin feel as though it would burst.

He was about ready to damn van Delft and return to the relative comfort of his camp when the first hint of a breeze whispered across his brow. Soon the cloying humidity through which they had struggled lifted, shuffled away by the cool fingers of a freshening wind. Up ahead, as if in response, the gloom lifted.

"Looks like we've reached the ridge," Florin told his men, stumbling forward into a sun-washed clearing. As he looked back over the valley Florin realized that this was where they'd first seen the temples, all those weeks ago.

Now, standing in the withering heat of the afternoon sun, the four men turned and stared back down at the city. The peaks of the ziggurats jutted up aggressively from the canopy, their heights dark and brooding despite the dazzling sunlight.

"We'll take a rest here and then head on back," Florin decided. He uncorked his flask, taking a deep, gurgling swig, and then passed it on. "I think we've come far enough."

"I think we'd all agree with you on that one, boss." Bertrand smiled, and wiped a rag across his flushed face.

Florin grunted and turned his attention back to the endless green expanse that rolled away beneath them. Who knew what other cities might be buried beneath that vast expanse, their granite bones littered with treasures?

Behind him there was a clunk and the gurgle of spilling water.

"Careful with that," one of the men said. "I haven't had a drink yet."

True, Florin considered, we haven't found enough gold to pay for our expedition yet. But it's still early. We really need to send out parties to see what else Kereveld's damned sorceries might have turned up.

"Are you all right, Bertrand?" said a voice behind Florin, and he turned to find the Bretonnian collapsed onto the tangled mat that covered the ground.

"Must be the heat," Florin said, joining the other two men as they bent over their comrade. "Let's put him into the shade, shall we?"

They grabbed hold of their comrade, but as soon as they'd done so a second man fell forward as bonelessly as if he'd been pole-axed.

"Damn!" Florin exclaimed, and exchanged a glance with the last man standing. "We should have brought more water."

"I suppose you're right, boss."

It was the last thing the mercenary said. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than a puff of feathered cotton, no bigger than a man's thumb, appeared in the side of his neck.

“Damn,” Florin repeated, his pulse racing in sudden fright. He stood back and drew his sword, examining the surrounding shrub suspiciously. Something snapped behind him and he whipped around to see what it was.

The movement came just in time to save him. The white feathered dart that had been aimed at his neck punched instead into the leather of his shoulder strap, the soft cloud of its tail close enough to tickle his chin.

Florin plucked it free, snatched a glance at the splinter of blue bone jutting out from the burst of cotton, and bolted.

He got four paces before, with a pinch as painless as a mosquito bite, a drop of venom sent him crashing insensibly to the ground.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Florin's eyes fluttered open briefly, then squeezed tightly shut against the painful brightness.

It didn't help. As soon as his lids were closed a kaleidoscope of exploding stars replaced the ice pick of daylight, the wheeling confusion racking his trembling body with a sudden nausea.

Ignoring the splash of the water in which he'd been slumped, Florin lurched forward, his stomach clenching as the acid rush of vomit burst from his throat.

I'll never drink again, he promised himself desperately. Not even socially.

Heaving up the last contents of his stomach, Florin tried to roll away from the mess, tried to curl up into a ball and slip once more into unconsciousness. But he couldn't.

Reluctantly, he felt himself becoming fully awake. It wasn't very pleasant. Apart from the spike that felt as if it had been driven into his head, and the rolling nausea, there were other discomforts.

The burning pain in his hands and wrists, for example.

Squinting as hard he tipped his head back and examined the knotted vine that bound his wrists together. They had been tied above him, clasped tight together above an iron-hard length of bamboo from which he dangled, like a slaughtered pig ready to be gutted.

Suddenly, Florin found himself wondering if this was just a hangover. However, even as he wondered, an image flashed through his fuddled thoughts, an image of a tiny dart and an unconscious man.

He pulled tentatively against his bonds, and a thousand shards of pain burst into life beneath the swollen flesh of his hands, pins and needles.

With another queasy lurch of his stomach Florin pushed the image away and looked around him blearily. He realized that the bamboo pole upon which he had been hung was one of many—a tight grid which chequered the sky above.

The realisation that he was in some sort of cage hit him and he groaned with fresh misery.

What made it even worse was that this was like no kind of cage he had seen before. There wasn't a single piece of iron in its construction, nor of stone, nor of planed wood. Instead there was a vast, complicatedly woven mass of bamboo stalks

and braided creepers, their lengths studded with thorns as sharp as a serpent's teeth. These materials, still green with life, had been woven around him in something akin to a vast basket, the lower half of which disappeared into the torpid depths of a river pool.

Florin blinked away the last of the crusted tears that had blurred his vision and looked down at the tepid water that flowed sluggishly past his chest. It occurred to him that being strung up like this had probably saved his life. One drunken lungful of this filthy river would have put an end to him as surely as a sword's edge.

That was not much comfort, of course.

"Give me water."

Florin started at the voice and turned, blinking into the patchwork of sunlight and shadow beside him. A gaunt face looked back at him, as hollow-eyed and pale as a skull beneath the sodden mat of its straggling hair.

"Bertrand," Florin croaked, and tried to smile. "You're looking well this morning."

"Water," he repeated feebly, and Florin noticed how wide his pupils were, massive with either dope or delirium.

"Don't worry, mate," Florin told him, with forced good cheer. "There's water enough for both of us."

Bertrand rolled his head to one side, a flicker of recognition touched his face.

"Costas?" he said. "Hey Costas! Give me the flask. I don't feel so... so good."

Florin chewed his lip thoughtfully and looked down at the surface of the river. It was clouded with the rotten detritus of an entire jungle. Even boiled and strained it would be a risky way of quenching a thirst, but to drink it in this state a man would have to be desperate indeed.

"Bertrand," Florin decided, trying to ignore how swollen his own tongue suddenly felt. "Look down. There's water everywhere."

Bertrand looked at him blankly.

"Look down," Florin repeated patiently, gesturing with his head.

This time his companion understood. He nodded and dropped his face towards the rippling surface of the river like a cow bending down to drink at a trough.

But even as he opened his mouth to drink he was brought up short. Hanging there, the knots of his spine pale beneath his grimy flesh, Bertrand flicked the dry leather of his tongue towards the water.

It was no use. Whether by accident or design he had been suspended a fraction of an inch too high to be able to drink. Florin tried himself, thrusting his head down so far that his shoulder blades touched and his throat tightened. He pushed out his own tongue, making a clown's mask in the murky reflection he saw in the fetid liquid, but to no avail.

"Swine," he swore vaguely, pulling his head back up. Now that he knew that the water was out of reach, his thirst began to burn as brightly as his anger.

Bertrand was still fighting against the stretched tendons and locked joints that kept him from snatching a taste of the water below. He whimpered pitifully with the strain of his contortions, body and soul torn by the sheer desperation of his predicament.

Florin watched the pitiful sight for a long moment, remembering how he alone had wanted to press on after finding the Kislevite's hat. If he hadn't been such a fool they wouldn't be in this—

Never mind that now, he told himself sharply: Think.

Without knowing that he was doing it, Florin began to grind his teeth. He peered upwards again trying to see how his hands had been tied. It was no use. The knots, as well as his paralysed fingers were hidden behind the bamboo. He tried to pull himself up, but with the strain came a terrible numbness that was somehow worse than the pain.

Florin quickly lowered himself back into the river even before he noticed the thin rivulet of dark blood that had begun to trickle down his wrist.

On the other side of the cage Bertrand started to sob. It was a hopeless, tearless weeping, an eerie sound for such a man to make. It worked upon Florin's nerves like a scalpel.

"Hey, Bertrand," Florin called out. "Bertrand!"

But the man was lost in his own personal hell of poison and thirst; Florin's cries fell upon deaf ears.

"Bertrand!"

It was almost an hour before the mercenary fell silent. An hour in which the sun climbed higher into the sky, the burning glory of its strength beating down upon the cage like a smith upon an anvil. An hour in which the water became blood warm, enlivening the leeches that found them, squeezing the blood from their veins as painlessly as the heat wrung every last drop of sweat out of them.

An hour in which the two men's bodies grew weaker as their thirst grew stronger—a torture that was made all the worse by the constant gurgle of the water that flowed past their dehydrating bodies.

All the while, hidden by shadow, instinct and long, long practice, the builders of the cage watched their captives. They watched with ice-cold eyes and limitless patience, their minds still with a serenity that no human suffering could ever touch. Later, when the cries of the weakest man faded to nothing, a silent command was given by their leader; a flick of a tail sent a group of the silent watchers swarming soundlessly towards the cage.

Amongst the breed that served the race in this capacity, Xinhua Tzeqal was one of the youngest. He had seen scarcely more than three thousand orbits of this world since crawling from his birthing pool, and the patchwork of continents, the massive stone slabs that glided across his planet's skin like lily pads across a pond, had not moved more than a few miles.

Still, his breed had not been created for impetuosity; he had only made one of youth's errors. It had been whilst fighting the long ears in the North. There had been a retreat and, despite the fact that he knew how easily replaced their lives were, he had allowed contemplation of his shattered kindred to cloud his mind. Anger had muddled his thoughts as silt muddies water and he had moved hastily.

True, the long ears had committed sorcerous horrors that were as disturbing as most of their novelties. Somehow their witches had found a way of setting skinks

alight with an unquenchable, slow burning fire. As green as venom, it had taken weeks to crawl from the tips of their tails to their still beating hearts.

The air had been sharp with the acrid stench of their burning bodies as, loyal to the last, the flaming creatures had attempted to go about their duties. Dragging the charred remains of their tails and hind legs behind them, the afflicted had started so many fires that eventually Xinhua had ordered their comrades to kill them.

Almost all of the cursed skinks had lifted their jaws and exposed their throats, although whether through the desperation of pain or the iron rules of their existence the mage priest could never decide.

The iron tang of their blood had mingled with the smoke of their still burning flesh to form a smell that was quite unique. Perhaps it had been that smell that had so unsettled the younger Xinhua. Whatever the reason, as soon as the invader's army had been broken he had inflicted this same torment upon their few survivors.

And yet, although the long ears proved frailer torches than the skinks, he knew that he had been mistaken in the action almost before the last one had stopped screaming. It had been a waste of resources, a waste of effort that could have been better employed elsewhere.

For long decades afterwards he had sat unmoving, a growing understanding of his folly gradually soothing his mind, much as a pearl will form around a piece of grit to sooth an oyster.

That had been centuries ago. Now when the memory bubbled up into the inner pools of his consciousness he watched it with the same unblinking detachment with which he watched the growth of a tree, or the short, flitting life span of a skink. Xinhua Tzeqal knew, with a certainty that in another race would have been called pride, that he would never make the mistake of haste again.

Nor, it seemed, would his bearers. They trudged through the overgrown paths of this near abandoned mangrove with stolid persistence, as unaware of the importance of their master's mission as he was himself.

The reports that the skinks had brought to him had been intriguing. They had told of a pack of intruders that sounded too coarse to be long ears and yet too sophisticated to be lemurs. Apparently they had come from the sea in primitive canoes before making their way to one of the lesser ruins.

Intriguing.

Xinhua wondered if they were a species of the water folk, sickly pale mammals that sometimes drifted across the world pond to die upon the Lustrian shore. He had never seen such beings before, and was contemplating the possibility of studying them with calm anticipation. Runners had already been sent ahead with orders to take some specimens, ready for his study, and he had brought with him exquisite onyx blades and skinks well trained in the arts of live dissection.

Content to wait for that particular treat, Xinhua rolled back his eyelids and slid away from this world into one of the realms of pure mathematics. The cascading streams of numbers and four dimensional geometries had a beauty that even the jungle lacked, and he bathed in their magnificence as he rested.

Beneath the fat mass of his earthly weight, the procession marched tirelessly onwards, their minds free of such distractions as their feet devoured the miles that lay between their master and his interests.

The lizardine forms boiled up from the water, surging around the two captives in a writhing stew of sharp-toothed snouts and snaking tails and yellow, unblinking eyes. So suddenly did they emerge, and so silently, that for the first heartbeat Florin took them to be nothing more than figments of a delirium. It wasn't until one of their number nipped at his heels in its haste to ascend to the surface that he realized that these apparitions were real.

A sudden jolt of adrenaline rushed through his battered system, tearing a cry of alarm from his parched throat. Oblivious to the jagged rip of pain that exploded in his bound wrists he instinctively tried to pull himself up and out of the water, retreating from the amphibians that swarmed around him even as he kicked out at them.

But the skinks had no interest in him. Ignoring the blows he rained down upon their backs they surged past, seemingly oblivious to everything except for the unconscious figure of Bertrand.

"Hey, wake up!" Florin called to his comrade, desperation lending a jagged edge to his voice. The warning had no effect on the Bretonnian. He remained dangling down into the water as nervelessly as a slab of beef as the skinks surrounded him, jostling for position like a pack of jackals around a corpse.

"Bertrand," Florin shouted again, kicking the murky water up in an attempt to gain the man's attention. This time he had more success. As the droplets splashed onto the smaller man's lips he lifted his head and blinked, although his face remained slack with the indifferent stupidity of absolute exhaustion.

"Captain?" he asked, apparently oblivious to the carpet of reptilian heads that bobbed patiently around him.

Then he rolled his dull eyes upwards, his attention drawn by the sudden patter of clawed feet on the bamboo roof of the cage. There was a flash of onyx from amongst the scurrying limbs up there, the sunlight white upon the black stone of the knife, and Bertrand was cut free.

He slid bonelessly into the swarm of predators below, the swarm closing around him like the fingers of a scaled fist. Then his head dipped beneath the water, and the shock of it was enough to slap him back into full consciousness.

It was a cruel trick for fate to play, relieving him of his torpor in the last few seconds of his life. With a shock of terrible realisation, Bertrand's features contorted into a scream, eyes rolling in sudden horror as he finally realized who his captors were.

The skinks ignored his protests and busied themselves around him, each fighting for a pinch of warm-blooded flesh. Those at the back crawled impatiently forwards over their fellows, forming a great ball of writhing limbs and glistening scales. Bertrand's howl of terror was muffled by his captors' swarming bodies. It was the last sound he made before he was dragged down into the drowning depths below.

"Leave him alone!" Florin roared helplessly, hurling himself this way and that against his bonds in a vain attempt to help his comrade.

The last of the skinks turned to regard him, the soulless yellow orbs of its eyes as blank as glass as it watched its dry-mouthed prey trying to spit defiance at it.

"Sigmar curse the skin from your bones!" Florin hissed at it, his bone-dry teeth barred in an impotent snarl.

The skink seemed unimpressed. It was still watching the human as it melted away below the surface of the water, vanishing from sight beneath a swirl of muddy ripples.

“Sigmar curse you...” Florin said, his voice quiet with sudden exhaustion. His rage had burnt itself out as suddenly as it had begun. In its place nothing remained but the dry ash of depression.

What a horrible end it had been for Bertrand, he thought. What a horrible end it will be for me.

Noon came. The furnace of the sun grew hotter. It dried the blood on his wrists into a dry, brown crust that was soon covered with flies. The leeches that glutted themselves on the submerged flesh of his body grew as fat as ripening grapes, their gorged bodies mercifully hidden beneath the swirling debris of the current.

Worst of all was the thirst. It filled him with a constant, merciless desire that soon had him straining against his bonds, stretching his swollen tongue out towards the liquid that flowed inches beneath his chin. And when dusk brought its usual host of mosquitoes Florin snapped at them eagerly, as if the specks of moisture their bodies contained would be of any use to him.

Eventually, he collapsed into, a haunted, restless sleep. It brought him little relief. A quickening fever filled his dreams with countless sharp-toothed phantoms. The worst of them came with the faces of the men who had met their deaths under his command. He pleaded with these hungry ghosts as they fell upon him, tried to tell them that it wasn't his fault; he was a merchant not a warrior, he had done his best, for the love of Shallya he had done his best.

Some of them listened. A few understood. Most didn't; they took their revenge upon their failed leader in the endless maze of his nightmares.

When the skinks finally came for him, pink-skinned in the red dawn of the next morning, their cold grip was almost a relief from these phantoms. Almost.

He still fought them, of course. Despite the weakness of shock and of thirst, Florin fought. What else was there to do?

As the skinks swarmed around him he stamped down on them, the rotting leather of his heels glancing off scale and bone. Then, when he was cut free, he tried to use his trembling thumbs to gouge at their eyes, and snapped his teeth against the slick armour of their scales.

It was all in vain. Drained and unarmed, Florin's struggles were futile. The skinks let his blows bounce harmlessly off them as they piled on top of him, wrestling him down into their midst, and securing his limbs with fingers that felt like steel.

Florin, cursing his foes as his struggles grew weaker, felt himself sinking beneath their evil smelling weight. A horribly human finger pressed against his face and he closed his teeth around it, biting down hard. The finger was snatched away, and his head was pushed beneath the filthy water.

Despite the taste of rotten vegetation and the film of silt it left on his tongue, it tasted wonderful. After two days without a drink, the near sewage of this jungle river was like something from heaven. Florin gulped a second mouthful down, the sheer bliss of quenching his thirst felt almost unbearably good, and the river closed in over his head.

The skinks' long tails churned silently through the water as they accelerated his descent. Ever careful to keep their victim's arms pinned behind his back they hastened downwards, pressing him onto the silty bottom of the river then rolling him beneath the last bars of the cage.

Florin felt the bamboo teeth of its construction scratch against his leg as his captors dragged him beneath it. The realisation that the skinks weren't trying to drown him dawned upon the Bretonnian and he tried to relax, to swim with them.

It wasn't easy. The first tight fingers of suffocation were already squeezing at his throat, whispering terrible, panicky advice into his ears and filling his lungs with fire. But already he was hurtling upwards like a champagne cork, the blinding sting of the cloudy water brightening with the glow of the sky that waited above.

A second later he burst up from the river's smothering embrace. Spluttering and sucking down great lungfuls of air, he let the skinks tow him towards the shade of the bank and drag him onto the stinking black mud. He was still gasping like a landed fish as they bound his ankles and wrists with fresh vines. That done, they jostled each other as they plucked the fattened leeches from his skin, eagerly slurping down the blood-filled parasites with chirps of pleasure. A moment later they hoisted him up onto their shoulders, and carried him off into the jungle.

Except, Florin realized, this wasn't the jungle. At least, not the jungle he'd known.

True, the trees looked the same as they did everywhere else in this green-choked world. The usual bewildering variety of sky palms, thorned sequoia of Ulelander and Cicadia, and the gods knew how many other species thrust upwards from the mulch, each of them struggling to reach the white misted heights above.

And yet, although these ancient wooden giants were the same, their manners were different. Elsewhere they grew in merciless competition with each other, their bodies forming thick scrums of impassable bark as they fought for every scrap of soil and each glimpse of light.

Here, though, that wild competition had been tamed, disciplined. The towering trunks between which Florin was now being carried had been herded into avenues that marched along in lines as straight as Marienburg canals.

Then there were the vines. Again, they had the same form here as everywhere else, but the usual strangling webs they formed had no place in this eerily ordered world. Instead they had been plaited and roped into high, aerial pathways that reached trimly across the heights of the canopy above.

Florin rolled his eyes back to study a complex network of these green capillaries and, as he watched, a pack of skinks raced along its swaying length. Tiny with distance they scurried overhead, as intent on their business as the pack which held him captive were on theirs.

No, Florin decided, this was no jungle. It was more like a city.

As if in confirmation of the thought, another pack of skinks rushed by, each of them bearing a basket on its hunched back. Despite the rotting mass of vegetation through which their errands took them, and despite the scaled skin and twisted physiognomies of the creatures, they reminded Florin of nothing so much as porters in the docks of his own town.

Of course, he mused, where there are porters there are masters, kings or merchants. He was beginning to wonder if these bizarre creatures had ever heard of trade when he saw something by the side of the path which drove that thought, that drove *every* thought, out of his head.

What he saw was Bertrand.

At least, it was what was left of Bertrand.

There wasn't much of him. Perhaps because it had been saved as some trophy, his head had been left intact. It lay in the shadows of the jungle floor, recognisable despite the tracery of dried blood that masked its face. Its eyes, despite being as flat and lifeless as those of the things that had gathered around his carcass, glared up at his captain in an unmistakable grimace of silent accusation.

Swallowing hard against the sudden wave of nausea Florin tore his gaze away, and peered into the gloom beyond. The ruins of Bertrand's body lay there, scattered about like the bloody chaff of a terrible harvest. His ribcage shone white, the vertebrae picked as clean as piano keys. Beside it his shattered pelvis had been driven into the ground like some grisly tent peg.

More bones were in the claws of reptiles that had gathered around. A new breed, these. Grotesque, hulking versions of the skinks that were even now carrying Florin past the nightmare scene. Great slabs of muscle bulged beneath the monsters' blood red scales, an animal strength which matched the animal cunning gleaming in their small, piggy eyes. Bloodshot and glittering, these orbs were protected by the wide plates of thickened scale that tapered back across their heads like great helmets.

These were the first idle lizardmen that Florin had ever seen, if the gnawing and sucking of Bertrand's bones could be called idleness. As the Bretonnian watched, one of them effortlessly snapped a femur into two jagged pieces. Pausing to sniff at the still warm marrow inside, it thrust the slimy length of its forked tongue into the hollow of the bone, its eyes narrowing with pleasure as it slurped out the rich nutrients.

A moment later the skinks rounded a corner, sparing Florin the sight of any more such details. But it was already too late. He knew that Bertrand would be waiting for him the next time he fell asleep, if he were to live that long.

Well then, he thought grimly as the skinks dragged him past a phalanx of more red-scaled carnivores, I'd better bring him some heads of my own.

He studied his captors as they hurried along, fear held back by the sudden desire for revenge. Clinging to the courage it gave him he imagined strangling them, if he could get his hands free, or hurling them from the heights above, if he could lure them there.

Most of all, he thought about his company's gunners, and the damage they'd caused to the foul things upon their first encounter. It was a good memory, and he savoured it despite the pang of loneliness it brought. ;

After another quarter of an hour the party slowed to a walk, then to a halt. Curious, Florin rolled his head back to see why they had stopped and his courage faded, drowned beneath a sudden slick of cold sweat.

Loping forward to receive him from the skinks was another pack of the giant carnivores. Unlike their brethren, who had been busy sating their appetites on another's flesh, these looked hungry.

There was a keenness about them, an alertness that made the heavy bronze cleavers they bore seem light in their claws. They were armoured too, as if ready to fight for their meat. As well as torques, objects identical to those the expedition had recovered, these creatures wore smoothly rounded headpieces, the thick bone of their construction gleaming like ivory as the wearers approached.

Florin tested his bonds for the thousandth time and, despite the steaming humidity through which his tormentors had emerged, shivered as their shadows fell over him.

The skinks, on some silent command, set him down and scurried to one side, allowing the first of the great reptilian warriors to draw nearer. As well as the bone helmet, this one had a great burst of feathers haloing its sharp head, the bright colours of the exotic plumage startlingly bright against the murky green of the jungle beyond. The head-dress bobbed as the creature reached down and, grabbing Florin by his collar, lifted him effortlessly up to study him.

The Bretonnian made himself return this appraisal with a defiance he couldn't quite feel. Swallowing nervously, he straightened his dangling spine and glared into the icy depths of the reptile's eyes.

"I'm going to cut your balls off," he told it, his voice creaking after two days of silence.

Ignoring the challenge it turned him this way and that, the scales that covered its nostrils flaring back to reveal the soft pinkness of the membrane beneath. It snuffled at its captive for several long moments, the sharp tips of its forked tongue flitting out to taste the air around this bizarre mammal.

"What's the matter?" Florin asked it, coughing to clear his throat. "Too stringy for you?"

The lizard turned its head to one side, perhaps an expression of surprise.

"Go on then," Florin snapped at it. "Get it over with."

His captor paused for a moment, as if to consider the proposal. Then it turned on its heel and marched away, dragging Florin along in its wake. The rest of its pack stood back as their leader passed, then fell into two neat columns behind him.

Florin, his swollen feet scrabbling over the sharp detritus of the rough path, noticed the discipline of their march. Unlike the scuttling mobs of skinks, these larger cousins stamped a perfect drum roll into the ground with their taloned feet. The beat of their progress reverberated through the earth in a relentless rhythm, their weapons were shouldered at an identical angle, their faces were as stony as royal guards on a parade ground.

Even to Florin, who was hardly a soldier, this discipline was even more alarming than the reptiles' appearance. They had been frightening enough when gathered together in a mob, but now, marching along in the lock step of a trained regiment, they were terrifying.

For the first time he began to wonder what might have happened to the rest of the expedition since he had been taken. Could it be that he was the last surviving human in this horrible place?

He shivered and tried not to think about it.

The trees on either side disappeared into two neat files as the column reached another clearing and, on exactly the same step, halted. Florin tried to stand up, but his captor lifted him off of his feet and threw him onto the hard-packed earth with savage relish.

The stars were still clearing from his eyes when a human voice, warm beneath a thick Estalian accent, cut through his pain.

“Good morning,” it said. “Welcome to the green hell. And may I say, I hope that your stay will be a pleasant one.”

And with that the pleasant tones shattered into a high pitched braying that might have been either sobbing or laughter.

Florin struggled up to his feet and studied the Estalian as the man shook beneath his fit of hysteria. Rocking back and forth on the dais upon which he sat, well muscled arms clasped around his bony knees, he had crammed his knuckles into his mouth and was giggling as he wept.

Although he seemed to be a lunatic, in other respects he seemed fit and hale. The lithe muscles that moved beneath his tan were as strong as Florin’s own, and the teeth which ground against his fist were strong and white. The line of pale scars that ran down the man’s arm were pale in the gloom—square hieroglyphs neatly burned into his tanned skin.

As to his age, it was impossible to even guess. Beneath the shock of pure white hair that covered his head he might have been forty or he might have been a hundred. It stuck out at wild angles from the crown of his head and line of his chin, his beard the most tangled thing in this strangely ordered jungle.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Florin told the man as he stopped rocking and climbed off of the dais with a clink of chains. Florin glanced down and saw the thick chains and wide cuffs that bound him to the carved wood. Even in the perpetual twilight of these tree smothered depths his bonds gleamed with the rich butter glow of gold. Enough gold, in fact, to have made their prisoner a rich man in any city of the Old World.

“Pleased to meet you,” the poor wretch said, coming to the end of his chains and stopping. Now that his fit of giggles had passed a look of wonder had come into his eyes. With a nervous caution he reached out a trembling hand towards Florin, as if he wanted to make sure he was real.

“Shake my hand?” he asked, with such a tone of pitiful hopefulness that Florin damned the vines that bit into his own flesh and hopped towards the man: The prisoner waited until he was a hand’s shake away then lunged forward with a sudden speed, grasping his arms with sharp-nailed fingers.

“You’re really alive,” he gasped, squeezing the Bretonnian’s arms as fiercely as a goodwife selecting a ham. “By Shallya, you’re really alive.”

And with that he flung his arms around the Bretonnian and hugged him to his chest.

The feeling of the man’s tangled whiskers pressed against his neck was hardly any more pleasant than the snivelling of his tearful gratitude. But, lunatic or not, Florin didn’t quite have the heart to shake off the unwelcome embrace. The gods alone knew how many years the man had spent chained up in his green hell. It had obviously been too many.

“There, there,” Florin said awkwardly, and wished that he had his hands free to pat the prisoner on the back. “It’s all right. Could be worse, couldn’t it?”

“It soon will be,” the prisoner said, pulling back and wiping his nose across the back of his hand. “Sorry. I’m sorry. It’s just that I don’t see many people, and when I do...”

The sentence trailed off in a shudder and, for the second time, Florin wished that he had a hand free to clap around the wretch’s shoulders. Then the Estalian caught sight of something over Florin’s shoulder and his eyes widened. A second later he’d fallen to his knees in a single, well practiced movement and bowed his head.

He wasn’t the only one. Turning to see what had had this effect, Florin saw that the floor was littered with the kneeling forms of his persecutors, their bone covered heads held low and the meaty lengths of their tails pressed flat into the ground.

“Kneel,” the Estalian hissed, scrabbling desperately at the back of Florin’s tunic and dragging him painfully to his knees.

“Your head, too,” the prisoner whispered. “Forehead to the earth.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

The fear in his voice persuaded the Bretonnian, and he followed the example of man and lizards both as he bowed his head.

For a long moment the clearing was still, the bodies that littered its hard-packed earth as motionless as so many tombstones beneath a pair of dragonflies that glided down from above. The insects’ translucent wings were as big as sparrow’s and their mandibles as sharp as pincers. Florin watched them flitting past nervously from beneath his lowered brow, aware of how helpless he was tied up like this.

He was trying to decide what to do should one of the insects bite him when, preceded by a shuddering sigh of adoration from amongst the grovelling reptiles, their god was carried into their midst.

Xinthua Tzeqal’s glazed eyes were silent pools of equanimity as he regarded the waiting saurus. As always in his presence they were kneeling, an instinctive reaction he would one day try to break. Behind them, also kneeling in apish imitation, were a pair of the filthy mammals that had brought him here.

One of them was clearly the property of Scythera, the scar-leader of this outpost. A simple line of branded ownership symbols ran down the pallid flesh of the animal’s spindly arm, and the shackles that bound it carried similar marks, a simple script that spoke its owner’s name and rank.

The other mammal appeared to be wild. It looked weak, and the improvised bonds that bound its limbs were rough and quickly made. It also had the sickly, uncared for appearance of a creature unused to the rich luxuriance of Lustria.

Xinthua studied the creatures for a length of time, watching with interest as moisture formed on their mottled skins like condensation on the cold surface of an onyx blade.

But no, that was a bad comparison. These animals weren’t cold. In fact, even from here, Xinthua could see that they were abnormally hot. With a quick blink,

thermal lenses nictated over his eyes, and the air around the two oddities flared as white hot as the rats that were sometimes brought for his delectation.

Fascinating.

“Scar-leader Scythera,” he said at length. “Is there anything that presses upon you?”

“No, my liege,” the warrior said without lifting his nose from the dirt.

“You and your underlings will stand.”

The score of saurus rose to their feet and, without a further command, stood to an effortless attention that was so instinctive that neither they nor their god noticed it.

“Scythera,” Xinthua asked. “Why is that animal changing colour?”

“It’s how they think, my liege,” the saunas said. “They change colour before they flee.”

“And will it flee?”

“It cannot, my liege, not being strong enough to free itself.”

“Free it and see what it does.”

“Yes, my liege.”

Scythera turned his head and snapped a command to two subordinates. One pounced upon the struggling human to hold him still whilst the other cut his bonds. Then, obedient to their orders, they stood Florin on his feet and waited for him to run.

“He isn’t fleeing, Scythera,” Xinthua observed after a moment.

“No, my liege. These are strange, weak creatures. Sometimes their bodies will not obey their minds.”

“Their natural habitat must be a forgiving place.”

“I don’t know, my liege. Some of the skinks have been trying to teach the other one to talk, as ordered by Our Lord Chuptzl Qo when he passed through ten years ago. But its brain is too small to understand anything. All it can do is point with its forelimbs at what it desires.”

Xinthua said nothing, the icy purity of his mind suddenly filled with a thousand different reflections of Chuptzl Qo, and the implications of the failure of his order to teach these animals to speak.

“I think that I will communicate with the wild one,” he decided, completely unmoved by even a shred of competitive spirit. Competitive spirit, after all, was only something that animals felt. “Hold it still. I want to examine it.”

Once more the saurus closed in on Florin, burying their claws into his shoulders and dragging him towards the mage priest as eagerly as acolytes dragging a sacrificial calf to a knife-wielding priest. The human struggled pitifully against their iron strength, but to no avail. Its muscles were as pathetic as its claws and teeth, it seemed, and after a while exhaustion stilled its rebellion.

“Can you understand me?” Xinthua asked it.

Florin listened to the clicking and piping that came from this vast toad. It made as much sense as wind from a drunkard, and he replied with a string of contemptuous curses.

“It would appear not,” Xinthua mused. One of the dragonflies that had chosen this clearing as its hunting ground flitted past, its long body shining with a metallic lustre. With hardly a thought Xinthua whipped out his tongue, snatching it from the

air. Crunching down on the delicious insect, the meat within its armour all the more delicious for the spice of its dying struggles, he considered his options.

There were a thousand ways in which he could study this animal. It was just a shame that so many of them would break it. After all, it was such a weak thing that he doubted if there could be many of its kind left.

“Scythera, do you have any more of these specimens?”

“No, my liege, though we took a dozen as your runner instructed. This is the only one to survive, despite the mildness of the skinks’ sedative and the shade and moisture in which they were kept.”

“And are there any more where you found this?”

“Yes, my liege. A small colony has moved into the ruins of Ytzel Cho.”

“Fascinating. I will look inside it now.”

Behind the mage’s palanquin one of the skinks that he’d trained to use dissecting tools rushed forward to present itself, but Xinhua waved it away. .

“No, not that,” he decided, watching the captive lick its lips with a detached interest. Its tongue was grotesquely stunted and deformed, an amputated stump which lay behind useless nubs of teeth. No wonder it found it so difficult to feed itself.

“I am not Chuptzl Qo. My methods are more refined.”

The second dragonfly buzzed past, and once more the magnificent length of Xinhua’s own tongue lashed out to snatch it. He pulled the morsel to his lips, crushed its head with a single bite, then plucked it from the gluey tip of his tongue and handed its spasming remains to Scythera.

“Give this to the animal.”

The saurus obeyed with unthinking alacrity, thrusting the dying insect into Florin’s hand. He looked down at the yellow goo that was seeping out of its ruined body, the broken twitching of its wings. Then he looked back up at the bloated monstrosity that had offered him the repulsive snack and opened his mouth to reply. But, as soon as he saw the gorgeous depths of the mage’s eyes, a thousand scintillating lights flashing within them like carp in a pond, he forgot what he had been going to say.

He forgot why he’d wanted to say anything.

He forgot where he was.

Who he was.

What he was.

Florin’s jaw dropped stupidly as his mind began to unravel like a dropped spool of wool, his consciousness a mote in the hurricane of memories. Sometimes the memories flashed past with a blinding speed. Sometimes they were sequential. Sometimes they were replayed once, or a thousand times.

Yet fast or slow, detailed or blurred, they were... fascinating.

The way that small square bones and brightly coloured tiles had followed scraps of metal across a thousand dirty tables, for example. What possible purpose could that have served? Did it have anything to do with the drinking of rotten, toxic fruit juice that so often accompanied the activity?

Then there was the leaking vessel that had carried him and his pack across the world pond. An unbelievably crude thing crafted from splintered tree trunks; its

survival had been a miracle. One of the deep ones had even fallen upon it, then gone away again, its fate confused with some constellation in a way that the mammal obviously hadn't comprehended.

More memories flowed, and the mystery of why clenched faces and bared fangs were considered welcoming disappeared beneath the embracing humidity of the jungle. Yet somehow the luxurious warmth was unwelcome—its bounty of delicious insects was left uneaten, even during the stumbling trek to the ruins of the tertiary observatory, Ytsel Cho.

There at least was sanity, the clear lines of the structure harmoniously aligned with the universe beyond. But only one of the mammals had seemed to appreciate this. He'd somehow combined this appreciation with a book of meaningless patterns and used it to make solid the music of the spheres. Alone of all his race he'd seen the obvious way in which the spirits of the inner worlds could be made to dance like mayflies against the clear blue sky.

The spirits of the inner worlds summoned to roll beneath the blue sky...

By an animal.

It wasn't possible. If it had been possible, it would have been a blasphemy almost too hideous to contemplate.

And yet, possible or not, hideous or not, it had happened. The memory was clear and unsullied, the images bright and unconfused by any primitive attempt at understanding.

A scream tore itself from Florin's throat, although he had no idea why. Suddenly released from the mage's inspection he fell bonelessly to the ground, his forgotten form left to lie and shake whilst the saurus blinked stupidly at their stricken god.

Xinthua's eyelids were flickering in agitation, his chest visibly moving beneath the shock at what he had seen. How was it possible that such grubby little vermin could have opened one of the charms of the ancients?

Ignoring the collapsed body of the mammal before him Xinthua began to recite an ancient mantra, the words echoing soothingly within his thoughts. When the last ripples of agitation had been smoothed from his consciousness he turned to Scythera.

"Scar-Leader," he said, purposefully using the warrior's honorific. "These animals must be driven from Ytsel Cho, and they must be annihilated. Can you do this with your own forces?"

"Your command is my order."

Xinthua regarded the saurus patiently. These things really would have to be improved upon. In many ways a skink's brain in a saurian body was a goal worthy of further pursuance.

But not now. Now the only thing that mattered was the elimination of these terribly frail yet terribly dangerous mammals.

"Do you have enough warriors to succeed in carrying out my order?"

"In this camp we have seventy claws of warriors, another hundred of skinks. We also have a great one, freshly trained for battle. These sickly creatures have some small magiks, but they are no more than twenty claws in number. They also remain as ignorant of us as the dragonfly upon which my liege has just so skilfully feasted."

Xinthua waited as Scythera fell silent, the tip of his tail twitching as he made his calculations.

“Yes,” the warrior eventually decided. “We can carry out your order, unless the stars are against us. And even so, a call to our brethren who dwell at the river’s head will give us certainty.”

“Then make your preparations,” Xinthua decided. “But first send a party of skinks to catch and kill the sickly animal that was dropped.”

One of the surrounding saurus blinked stupidly down towards the spot where Florin had fallen a moment before. There was no sign of him now except for the agitation of the other mammal. It was pulling uselessly against its chains and reaching out with grasping fingers, obviously pointing the direction in which its fellow had fled.

Scythera hissed a sibilant order, and one of the swarms of skinks that had gathered around them set off in the direction the animal was indicating.

“It seems that he did intend to flee after all,” Xinthua said. Then, whilst saurus and skinks busied themselves with their preparations, he stilled his breathing and lapsed into a deep trance. Thus secure within the confines of his vast cranium, he studied Florin’s understanding of his comrades’ encampment, turning the stolen memory this way and that like a jeweller examining a watch.

Barely a week passed before the mage blinked back into the corporeal world, the simple perfection of his strategy so clear in his mind that it might already have happened. While he breakfasted on a basket of delicious little frogs, he explained the plan to Scythera.

It didn’t take long. The first mists of morning still lay heavily about them as, with a single command, Scythera set his forces in motion. The magnificent phalanxes of his brethren marched into the steaming depths of the untamed jungle, a cold blooded avalanche of scale, claw and razor edged weaponry that drove the jungle’s lesser beings fleeing before it.

Skinks swarmed around this great central column, their eyes and ears as neatly co-ordinated as the countless lenses of a dragonfly’s eye. They scurried back and forth from their patrols to feed their leader a constant stream of information about the soil, the undergrowth, the trees and the myriad life forms that held them to be home. In this way, even in the most densely choked swathes of undergrowth, Scythera’s view of his surroundings remained crystal clear.

Xinthua, meanwhile, lolled comfortably on his palanquin. He let his mind wander as he watched his guards’ iron-scaled backs strain beneath his weight. Behind him the tread of the great beast that brought up the rear of the little army rolled on just as remorselessly, the deep impacts of its footsteps shaking the ferns.

The mage’s eyes glazed as he began to construct a complex mathematical model in his imagination, a great shining tetrahedron of an idea by which sound could be connected with the medium of distance to calculate force.

On the humans, he didn’t care to waste another thought. In a single turn of the world they would be gone, as dead as all the others.

They were fascinating animals, though. Perhaps, when time permitted, he would take a force to one of their colonies in the north and study them in more detail.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Florin had known neither his fellow captive's name nor his provenance. Still, he had decided as he had crawled through the undergrowth, he would remember him at the Lady's shrine, if he ever made it back to the safety of Bordeleaux.

If it hadn't been for the wretch's whispered instructions and his promised misdirection, Florin wouldn't have made it further than the tree-line. As it was, even to have made it this far was something of a miracle. It had taken him long, painful hours to work his way out of earshot of the encampment. Following his saviour's desperate instructions, he had crawled into a thicket of thorns, a seemingly impassable mass beneath which a few inches of crawl space opened up between the plants' stems.

It had been a wise move. No sooner had he wriggled beneath the thorns than an explosion of activity had broken out behind him. His frightened eyes glinting in the darkness of the thicket he'd paused, breathless with anxiety as a rush of scaled feet dashed towards the path he had been meaning to take.

Had he done so he would already be dead, he had no doubt of that. Dead, and devoured.

Scarcely daring to move because of that thought, he had carried on wriggling beneath the thicket. Although every movement had been slow and controlled, and although he had pressed himself down into the dirt to wriggle through the acidic mulch that covered the ground, the undergrowth had written a bloody signature across his back, leaving some of the hooks buried in his flesh to throb with a constant pain.

Florin didn't care. He had more important things to worry about.

His first concern, when he had cleared the tangled thorns and slithered into the relative comfort of the ferns beyond, was direction. Alone and unarmed he was a dead man, he knew that much. Even if the skinks didn't catch up with him (and he had a feeling that they would), starvation and disease would finish him off just as surely as their murderous claws.

He had looked up at the distant canopy and fought a feeling of despair. Even if he had known what compass point to follow, it would have been nigh on impossible to calculate the direction he was travelling in from down here. The sun was hidden by

the familiar, oppressive weight of vegetation, its light diffused into a murky green mist that cast no single shadow, but rather a shifting stew of gloom.

It was his thirst that had decided the direction that he would take. The ferns that blanketed this trackless wilderness stretched away in all directions beneath the feet of the trees and so, knowing that water was never far off in this humid world, he set off downhill, leaving a trail of crimson droplets behind him.

The skinks had raced down the path the mammal had followed with a terrible speed. As well as the instinctive compulsion to obey their mage lord, they were driven by the knowledge that the first of them to reach the mammal would taste the finest portions of his spindly frame.

It was strange that such sickly creatures could taste so good, but there was no doubt that they did. The slippery coils of their intestines were delicious, more succulent even than tree frog, and the soft yellow fat had filled the skinks' hearts with the desire for more even as they had filled their stomachs. They had suffered beneath the constraints of discipline when the succulent mammals they had captured had been held intact, but now they rejoiced that they had become fair game.

It was a shame that there was only one of them left. They would have to make the most of his tender flesh.

And yet, as they followed the path, it seemed that they were to be denied even this small treat. Their eagerness gave way to a growing disquiet as the hard packed earth stretched ahead without revealing a single foot print or trace of scent. A cadre of saurus lay lounging in a clearing before them, and a swift interrogation of them revealed that nothing had passed this way.

It didn't make sense. The animal's chained fellow had shown them that this was the way he had come. And yet, even though he had fled mere moments before, there wasn't a single trace of the warm-blood here, neither sight nor mark nor scent of it.

The first-spawned turned the problem over in his mind. It seemed that the other animal had been mistaken as to which direction its fellow had taken, stupid weak-minded thing that it was.

The skink's tongue flickered out, tasting the air as it considered what to do next. As it briefly considered a dozen differing search patterns it stopped, completely frozen but for the curling tines of its pink tongue.

Faintly, very faintly indeed, it could taste the warmblood's sweat on the air. Divining the direction, he hissed a string of orders to his pack, sending them slipping away into the wilderness to the east.

The sight of Florin falling lifelessly from the scar-leader's grasp had torn something loose within Gottlieb's tortured soul. He'd crammed his knuckles into his mouth, biting down to stop the scream of despair until the taste of copper filled his mouth.

Perhaps because he had touched the Bretonnian he had allowed himself the luxury of thinking that he might also survive.

It was a foolish hope, of course. He knew that. The cruel gods allowed none to survive in the humidity of this, Gottlieb's own personal hell. Hadn't he seen half his friends die of the poisonous air in this place, their corpses scattered like grisly chaff

between the shore and that cursed temple? And then there had been the crushing jaws of the gargantuan structure itself, and the terrible inferno which had lain in ambush at its heart.

At first he'd mourned his fallen comrades, weeping even as he and the handful of survivors had tried to hack their way back to their boats. But that had been before he'd been trapped by the lizards and brought back to entertain them like an animal in a zoo.

That had been eight long years ago. Eight years that had seemed like eight centuries. Countless times since, he'd begged them to put him out of his misery, to kill him as they had killed all the others.

In a way, he knew, he *had* been killed by the lizards. The daring nineteen year old they'd chained and tortured with their attempts at communication had been destroyed by their ministrations. The only sign that he'd ever lived was the broken shell of his older self, passing from one miserable day to the next as a living tombstone to the man he had been.

At least, that was what Gottlieb had thought whilst wallowing in the miasma of his depression. That and the fact that he would like to do to the gods what they had done to him, curse their balls off. But then he'd seen Florin miraculously rise and crawl away from the confusion of his captors and, deep within the confines of his chest, Gottlieb's soul had flared back into life.

Whispering with quiet urgency he'd sent the Bretonnian into the thorn bushes that backed into the wild jungle beyond, snarling impatiently at the stranger's attempts to open his own shackles. He'd tried to free himself from these golden bonds every day for almost a decade, there was no point in the youngster throwing away his chance in another useless attempt.

Then Gottlieb, scarcely believing that his ragged scrap of a plan was working, sent the skinks racing away in the wrong direction. Even now he could hardly believe it. Of course, the skinks probably would catch the fleeing youngster eventually. Almost certainly, in fact.

Gottlieb didn't think about that. As the skinks rushed empty handed back into the clearing, the wizened old twenty-seven year old smiled like a baby.

The Bretonnian had escaped. For the first time in eight years, he'd stolen a victory from his captors. Victory. A beautiful word, and far more than a word. It was a battle flag, a burning flare that was bright enough to cut through the leaden weight of his despondency.

For the first time in half a decade it gave him the strength to start hating his captors again.

Gottlieb lay back on his litter, chains clinking, and howled joyously up into the jungle. His eyes rolled back with a wild exultation as he bellowed his defiance at his enemies, the sound degenerating into a mad cackle.

"Silence that mammal," ordered Xinhua Tzeqal, whose valuable concentration the noise had disturbed.

"Yes, my liege," a bodyguard said and, a club stroke later, Gottlieb Mannfredstein's suffering was finally over.

The sound of the river called to him like a bell and, despite the thickets of needle-pointed bamboo that barred his path, Florin hurried towards it. By now his thirst was strong enough to drag him towards the water relentlessly.

The river was wide here, he saw, perhaps sixty feet across from one muddy bank to the other. Sunlight cut through the passage it had slashed through the canopy, the light glistening on top of the brown water.

The brown, dirty, swarming water.

But never mind that, Florin thought, falling to his knees and cupping his hands to take a scoop. Dangerous or not, he needed a drink. His eyes closed with sheer animal pleasure as he sucked the water down, letting the last of it run down his chin as he bent to take some more. Something wiggled in this handful, and Florin opened his hands to let the thing escape before drinking again.

Damn, that tasted good!

He was still drinking, glugging down his dozenth mouthful of the filthy stuff, when there was a series of sudden crashes into the stand of bamboo behind him. He leapt to his feet and turned, hand instinctively reaching down for the sword that had been taken from him.

The bamboo thrashed wildly from side to side and a rush of bodies came bursting out towards him. As tall as dwarfs, their wiry tufts of hair sticking up at all angles, the beasts barrelled towards the Bretonnian in a confusion of tusks, hoofs and wrinkled snouts.

At first he took them to be pigs. The peel of blood curdling squeals that they emitted upon finding the human before them would certainly have done justice to any Old World specimen. But there was something about their size, and the intelligence which gleamed within their tiny eyes, that hinted of a different breed.

And then there were their teeth. No farmer would keep animals with teeth like these. The long yellow blades looked designed to devour living flesh rather than swill or scraps of potato, dagger blades beneath powerful jaws.

Florin, unarmed and alone, cast about him for a weapon with which to defend himself. Anything would have done, a stone, even a sliver of bamboo. But before he could arm himself the animals were upon him, then past him, then splashing out into the sunny expanse of the river like so many twenty-stone water spaniels.

Florin watched them paddling away, the curls of their tails a curiously dainty touch atop their graceless forms. Then he looked back through the devastation they'd wrought in the bamboo and saw what they'd been fleeing from.

The tide of skinks was moving in total silence. Whether swinging from low-hanging boughs or scuttling along the jungle floor, they moved with an easy economy of motion that seemed almost ghostly. Their slender forms slipped through the tangled web of the jungle as if it were no more substantial than a spider's web, flitting effortlessly over barriers that would have been all but impassable to a man.

Not only did the jungle refuse to slow them down, it also refused to hurt them. The clinging vines and cutting brambles that had tattooed a patchwork of dried blood and painful bruises across Florin's skin seemed to slide off the skinks like raindrops from emeralds. Their smoothly-scaled bodies remained as unblemished as newly budded leaves, their golden eyes as blankly relaxed as a merchant's in his parlour.

The first of them slowed to a halt when it saw Florin, pausing to consider how best to take him. Behind it, its fellows fanned out, groups of them rushing to the flanks to cut off any possibility of escape.

For a heartbeat Florin returned the impassive gaze of the front runner as it started warily towards him. He watched its crest rise up, the veins within the membrane swirling like an insignia on a battle flag, and he watched its forked tongue dart out, as though impatient for a taste of his blood. Then he did the only thing that he could do.

Kicking off the ruins of his boots Florin turned and dived into the river.

The skinks watched in fascination as their quarry splashed and thrashed into the water, his inadequate frame bobbing up and down as he struggled against the unfamiliar element. They observed him patiently. Drowning always added flavour to warm-blooded meat, and there was no reason to fight anything that would soon be dead anyway.

But as Florin inexpertly clawed his way across the river, the mage's orders flared in the first-spawned's memory—the instinct to obey was almost a physical sensation. With a further elevation of his crest, he chirruped an order that sent his brethren streaming into the river, their sleek bodies slipping into it as easily as eels.

They arrowed towards their prey, eyes and crests held level above the gently lapping water, tails beating rhythmically against the lazy current.

Beneath them other, smaller things swam. Some of them turned away at their approach, whilst others turned to observe.

It wasn't until the first of the skinks was close enough to their quarry to spit on it, that there was a sudden frantic splashing from the rear of the swarm. It was followed by a high pitched shrill of alarm, the single sound changing the swarm's whole world.

Suddenly they were no longer predators.

They were prey.

The first-spawned, his quarry momentarily forgotten, turned to appraise the situation that was developing behind him. Three of his brethren were already gone, their life signs snuffed out as suddenly as a mayfly's by the unseen attacker. A dozen others were struggling against it with the abandon of complete desperation. Keening and chirruping they thrashed hither and thither, their flailing limbs churning the cloudy water up into sheets of boiling foam that turned from white to red before the first-spawned's very eyes.

He watched one of the skinks flip onto his back in a horrible, stricken manoeuvre, revealing the bleeding stump that was all that remained of its tail. With a hiss of agony the casualty swiped into the water beneath him with his claws, only to recoil back from his target, his forelimbs reduced to pink stumps of flesh-shorn bone. Beside him another skink's leg floated free, twitching with the last impulses of dying nerves as it was tugged down beneath the surface.

The first-spawned, his crest mottling into a violent orange, ducked down beneath the surface of the water to find this ravenous foe. But it was no good. The silt blinded him just as surely as the frenzied death throes of his brethren deafened him.

He popped his head back up above the surface in time to see a high explosion of water as another victim leapt up out of the river. Its ruined body moved sickeningly, the remains of its skin alive with a covering of small, red-backed fish. They were tiny

things, scarcely bigger than an outstretched claw, and for a moment the first-spawned guessed that they were no more than carrion eaters, scrounging on flesh that had been torn by another.

But then one of the tiny assailants fell loose, its jaws gnashing open and shut, and he realized that these fish were no mere scroungers. Far from it. These little predators were the thousand-toothed scourge.

Piranhas.

The first-spawned spent another split second watching the decimation behind him, his heart beating with an unaccustomed heat as the water was chopped up into red ridges by his dying brethren. From his first breath of this world's air he had been one with them, a part of a great body in which they were all a part. Abandoning them would be harder than severing one of his own limbs.

Much harder.

And yet the first-spawned existed to serve his race. The weakling mammal was his target, and already it was slithering up onto the far bank. With one last fleeting glance at his dying brothers, the skink turned and swam towards the bank, ignoring the sudden nip of pain that cut into his tail. Another followed it, and another and, as the skink reached the shallows and got to his feet, something else bit into his ankle. He raced out of the water, his claws sliding in the mud, and turned to destroy the vicious attackers.

It was easily done. Their small bodies, delicate constructs of tiny bones and razored teeth, crunched easily beneath his claws, their blood mingling with his own as he prised them from his muscles. Then, without a single glance back, he turned to follow the mammal.

But the mammal was standing right in front of him. The first-spawned smelled the torn skin and matted fur that covered it at the same time as he saw the boulder that it held above his head.

It was the last thing the first-spawned saw. The great lump of water-smoothed rock plunged down onto his skull, the crunch of it sparking a blinding flash of light.

Florin stood over the lizard's twitching body, his breath sawing painfully in and out as he watched the last traces of life flicker from it. He held onto his makeshift weapon until the last of his pursuers vanished into the depths of the river, nothing left of them but a fading stream of bloody water. A dozen heart beats later and even that was gone.

Florin dropped the stone, his breath slowing as he recovered from his escape. Then, to his own surprise, he felt a wide grin spread across his face. It pinched his cheeks and bared his teeth with a savage joy as he lifted the first-spawned's corpse and flung it back into the water.

"Gotcha, you bastards," he said and, with a shard of jittery laughter, he turned to make his way back into the jungle.

It was the boars that showed him the way. He'd barely gone half a mile into the jungle, his joy at escape long gone beneath the realisation of how completely lost he was, when the herd found him following their tracks.

Snuffling the air suspiciously for any trace of the skinks they let him approach, their shaggy bodies still within the hiding place of their thickets. Only when they were sure that this strange creature was alone did their leader, a battle-scarred old tusker whose world was a simple place driven by the quest for mates and food, squeal his challenge.

This time Florin didn't hesitate. As the boars came crashing through the bush in crude ambush he leapt for the nearest tree, scrabbling up the wiry ivy that bound it like a rat up a rope. Ignoring the pain in his bruised toes and shaking fingers, he climbed ever higher, unsure of how high the boars' voracious appetites could inspire them to leap.

He reached the first bough and the going became easier. No longer having to cling to the trunk he found that he could merely drag himself up from one branch to the next, almost as easily as climbing a ladder. Below him the boars milled about in their frustration. Some reared up onto their hind legs to bare the yellow chisels of their teeth at him and to squeal their outrage at being cheated of his flesh. Others turned on their fellows in sudden, violent scuffles that jewelled the mulch beneath them with droplets of blood.

Florin paused to catch his breath and to study the beasts gathered below. Almost as if in response to his own slowing pulse they calmed down, their squeals of hunger lapsing into the occasional grunt and their fights degenerating into a game of chase amongst the youngest.

Unfortunately, they didn't seem in any particular hurry to move off. A horrible image flashed into Florin's imagination, a grisly old woodcut that showed the skeleton of a cat laying outside a hole within which the skeleton of a mouse had been drawn. He couldn't remember what uplifting religious point the illustrator had supposedly been trying to make, but the principle had been clear enough. He tried not to think about it as, with a deep, reverberating grunt of patience, the largest of the boars started to roll around in the soil in order to make himself a bed.

Florin swore long and loud, his language startling a flock of huge, velvet-winged moths into flight below him. Then, acting mainly to keep the image of the woodcut from his mind, he began to climb. Moving slowly now, with no particular danger to drive him on, and with the terminal drop to earth growing beneath him, the Bretonnian worked his way up the tree.

A couple of dozen feet further up the light began to become stronger and the leaves of the tree grew larger and more succulent in response to its opulence. Here and there beetles scuttled past, safe beneath their gorgeously armoured carapaces. A lizard, as frightened of Florin as he was by it, hurled itself into space to glide effortlessly into the darkness below.

Half an hour later, as green as a skink beneath his covering of grime and tree mould, Florin climbed into glorious, blinding sunlight. He swung himself up into the last safe branch and basked in the light, the heat soothing his tired frame as his eyes adjusted to the new world beyond.

A breeze picked up, ruffling his sodden hair, stroking through it like a lover's fingers, and he closed his eyes dreamily as he listened to the whispering of the wind in the trees.

No, that won't do, he told himself, snapping back into consciousness and looking down in an effort to frighten himself fully awake.

But there was no down. The leaves through which he had climbed had closed up after his passage, so that the entire, cathedral-high expanse of the canopy seemed as low and as safe as a Bretonnian field. Exhausted as he was, Florin smiled at the image and started to imagine what sort of sheep would graze across these lofty heights.

They would be soft. Slow moving. Cotton white. Gentle. Soooooo gentle.

The day slipped past the sleeping Bretonnian, his eyes flickering behind closed lids with a dozen relaxing dreams that ended when he woke himself up with a snore. Blinking the sleep from his eyes, he watched the sun sinking towards the west and realized that he had been asleep for quite some time. Somehow, though, the nap had just made him feel more tired.

Well, he wouldn't take the chance of falling asleep up here again. Wincing as his cramped muscles twitched back into life, he pulled himself upright against the tree's trunk, deciding to take one last breath of fresh air and one last sight of the sun before starting back down.

Despite the fatigue that still numbed him, he realized that, from here at least, the Lustrian jungle could be a beautiful place. It stretched out in a rolling green carpet into which nature had woven countless shades of green, the endless subtleties of its permutations glowing beneath the falling sun. Butterflies, some no bigger than wasps, others as large as bats, pursued each other across this sunlit realm, their wings painted in shocking swirls of blues and reds that stood out against the verdant backdrop like diamonds against black cloth.

Florin gazed towards the distant horizon, its detail lost in mist, then frowned in puzzlement. A little to the east, thrusting up from the middle distance to rise above the horizon, something gleamed, something uniquely hard and bright in this gently rolling world.

Squinting against the dazzle of the light, Florin studied it through watering eyes. As the sun dipped below the far tree-line, the canopy was plunged into instant twilight, and the blinding flash of the distant stone resolved itself into a triangular tip of quartz. Its uncompromising edges formed a needle point that stabbed upwards towards the heavens, the aspirations of its builders as untamed as the wilderness which surrounded it.

Too shattered to feel more than a slight sense of joy, Florin sighed. He recognised that perfectly carved capstone well enough. It was the apex of the temple and, by the look of it, it was no more than two miles distant.

With a muttered prayer to Shallya that the boars would have gone, he double checked the bearing, rubbed his back and then started back down the tree.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Well?” van Delft asked. Sat upon the powder chest, surrounded by overflowing gold, he had thrust his jaw out and lowered his eyebrows in a scowl that would have done justice to a thunder god. It was an expression he had surreptitiously practised and polished over his years of command, so that now he could slip it on as easily as an actor slips on a mask.

Lorenzo felt himself beginning to sweat beneath the Colonel’s fearsome scrutiny. The only explanation given to him by the squad of Tileans who had arrested and escorted him here was that the commander wanted a chat.

One of the escort, the purchaser of one of Lorenzo’s treasure maps, had glared at him menacingly during the march to the Colonel’s hut but, surrounded by his mates, hadn’t had a chance to mention their transaction.

Now, his brow damp despite the shade van Delft’s crudely thatched shelter provided, Lorenzo wished that he and the Tilean had found the opportunity to get their stories straight. It seemed that van Delft knew all about this little... this little... Damn, what should he call it?

Ah yes. That was it.

This little “side line” of his.

The Bretonnian licked his lips nervously and decided that honesty might be the best policy. To a certain extent, at least.

“I was just selling the lads maps,” he told the Colonel, shrugging his shoulders in a gesture of assumed innocence.

“Stolen from Kereveld’s book?”

“No, no, no,” Lorenzo hastily waved away the accusation. “No. Of course not. I’d never steal. Especially from a wizard.”

Van Delft tugged at the tip of his moustache thoughtfully. That last part, at least, had the ring of truth about it.

“I don’t think that I believe you,” he said, looking at the Tilean corporal who waited behind the Bretonnian. He looked almost as shifty as the Bretonnian himself, further proof that the rumours he’d heard had been at least partly true.

“Colonel,” Lorenzo said, all wide eyed sincerity. “I give you my word, on Shallya and the Lady, that I neither stole from Kereveld, nor sold anything of his.”

The Colonel watched the Tilean surreptitiously, noting the anger that flickered beneath his unease.

"Of course, if you give your word," he said after another moment's unblinking scrutiny, "It's difficult for me to doubt it. After all, we're all gentlemen of fortune here, and a man's word is his bond."

"Er, yes," agreed Lorenzo doubtfully.

"And I've already checked with Kereveld. His book is under an enchantment. Any non-wizard who reads it is struck blind," the Colonel informed them with the clipped sincerity of a truly skilled liar. "The problem is that others have given me their word that you've been trying to sell them treasure maps stolen from Kereveld's book."

"Oh, I see what's happened." Lorenzo smiled with a carefully manufactured sigh of relief. "This has all been a misunderstanding. I have sold a few treasure maps, made by myself and based upon my own observations. Somebody must have got the wrong end of the stick. You know, about their provenance."

"A misunderstanding? My informant told me that you were trying to sell him a map specifically on the strength that it was stolen from Kereveld."

"No, he was mistaken," Lorenzo said, with a confidence that he didn't quite feel. "I told all the lads to whom I sold maps that I made them myself. Based on my own calculations."

The Colonel's gaze remained locked on Lorenzo, his face unconvinced.

"But you don't have to take my word for it, Colonel," Lorenzo continued, shifting uncomfortably, "Just ask Caporell Villadeci here. He bought a map from me only ten days ago."

Van Delft's ice blue eyes fell upon Villadeci like a hawk falls upon a mouse.

"Is this true?" he asked the man, whose face reddened as he glared at Lorenzo.

"No... I mean, yes."

"Which is it?"

"He no tell us that the map is stolen. He tell us that he made them."

"Then why did... yes, what is it?" van Delft snapped irritably as a messenger burst into the hut with a ragged salute.

"Sergeant Orbrant begs that you come to see what he has found, sir," the Marienburger gasped, his sides heaving.

"What's he found?"

"Captain d'Artaud."

"In that case, gentlemen, I think that we should adjourn our meeting for now."

But Lorenzo was already gone, racing to see if the news was true.

Hollow-eyed and shivering with exhaustion, Florin lay slumped in the shade of one of the lesser temples. Beneath the grime and the dried blood that covered him, he was pale, almost anaemic-looking, and his bones stood out from his wasted frame.

And yet, despite the fact that he looked more like a corpse than a living man, Florin's face was animated, his spirits high. After the deprivations of his ordeal, the faces of his friends and the stale bread and sour wine which he was so busily cramming into his mouth seemed like a taste of heaven. He still couldn't quite

believe that he'd made it back. When he'd stumbled out of the darkness of the jungle and into the brightness of the clearing, the guards had hardly been able to believe it either. One of them had almost shot him.

But to hell with that, Florin thought. To hell with everything apart from the fact that I'm alive, and it feels good.

His head was thrown back in laughter, bread-crumbs flying from his mouth as he roared at some jest one of the men had made, when Lorenzo came pelting around the corner.

"Ah, there you are, boss," Lorenzo said, forcing himself to slow to a casual walk as he elbowed his way through the crowd that had gathered around Florin. Bone-thin and covered in dirt, he would hardly have recognised the captain if it hadn't been for that familiar braying laugh. By Shallya, he thought, it's a great gift to hear that again.

"Lorenzo!" Florin bellowed, washing his mouthful of bread down with a deep, gurgling swig of wine before getting up onto his thin legs.

"I hope you're not expecting me to mend those breeches!" Despite the grin that was tugging at his cheeks, the servant made himself frown disapprovingly.

In answer Florin flung a bony arm around his shoulders and gave him a playful punch on the arm.

"Sometimes I think that you were never really cut out to be a servant," he said, and Lorenzo couldn't keep the smile off his face any longer.

"Wondered if you'd make it back. Orbrant kept making us tramp about in the jungle looking for you. And me with only one pair of boots."

"Don't listen to the old villain," Orbrant interrupted. "He's spent the last week dragging patrols out after you. Sometimes I thought that he might even be in danger of becoming a soldier."

"Well, he still owes me six months' pay," Lorenzo excused himself with a gap-toothed grin.

The mercenaries' laughter floated across the camp. If the shades of their comrades still haunted Florin's dreams, these survivors seemed thankful enough for his return. For the first time in weeks there was a joy in their faces that was untainted by the greed and paranoia which had marred each discovery of gold.

And discoveries of gold there had been aplenty. As their captain finished his meal, his shrunken stomach soon feeling painfully full and his cheeks already burning with wine, his men told him of the riches that had been uncovered in his absence. They told him of thumb-long cylinders, their surfaces covered in weird hieroglyphs, of octagonal coins and round plates. Even a life-size statue of a skink had been found, the metal-cast lizard green-eyed with emeralds.

Most of the gold had been ferreted out by Thorgrimm's dwarfs, but that hardly mattered. There was such a wealth of treasure that even the smallest share would be enough to transform every ragged one of them into a wealthy man back in the Old World.

"I'm glad to hear that we've found such riches," Florin told them as they competed to share the good news, "because we have to leave."

A dozen men interrupted each other with their questions as van Delft strolled up to the group.

“Ah, Captain d’Artaud. There you are. I wonder if you’d care to step over to my hut for a little chat?”

A moment after, Florin was seated in the shade of van Delft’s hut, sipping from a pot of boiled water, his fellow officers started to come in. The Tilean, Castavelli, arrived first, sweeping off the sorry remains of his feathered hat as he ducked through the door. When he saw the emaciated wretch lolling amongst the gold, seated on the Colonel’s own chair, he blinked in surprise. Then his face split open in a wide grin of recognition.

“Floreen!” he cried, seizing the Bretonnian and kissing him on both cheeks. “It’s miraculoso, no? The gods have spared you.”

“Good to see you, Castavelli,” Florin responded, resisting the urge to wipe his cheeks.

“What happened to you? Where you went?”

Before Florin could answer, van Delft, who had been poring over the map he’d had made of their surroundings, cut in.

“Let’s wait till we’re all here, shall we? I want everybody to hear everything.”

Next came the dwarf, Thorgrimm. He nodded to Florin as he took his own seat and started to fill his pipe, as casually polite as if the human had just returned from a brief stroll. Nonetheless, when he thought that nobody was looking, he studied Florin through the thickening haze of blue smoke that his pipe emitted, his eyes gleaming with curiosity.

Graznikov soon stumbled through the doorway. Although already flushed his face turned beetroot red beneath his fur cap when he saw the Bretonnian, and his only greeting was a scowl. It deepened when Lundorf barged passed him.

“Sigmar’s blood, it’s true then!” Lundorf roared with the sheer pleasure of seeing his friend again, grabbing his hand to pump it as earnestly as if it were attached to a well. They were still shaking when Kereveld wandered into the mottled light of the little hut. As usual he was clutching his book to his chest, as though afraid that it was going to be suddenly snatched away. When he saw Florin he began to smile, then frowned.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “Good. I wanted to talk to you about one of your men.”

“Which one?”

“Never mind that now,” van Delft told them, settling back onto the edge of the bench. “I think that it’s time to hear what young d’Artaud’s been up to. Come on, let’s hear it. Where the hell have you been?”

So, as the afternoon light waned into dusk, and the sliver of the dying moon grew brighter in the darkening sky, Florin told them. He told them of his capture and of the cage in which he had been hung like a plucked pheasant. He told them of the skinks and the saurus and what they had done with the corpses of his men. Then he told them about the great bloated monstrosity that had ruled over these horrors, and of the sorcery that had prised open his mind.

That was too much for Kereveld. As Florin had unfolded his tale, the wizard's excitement had become more and more obvious, and now he leapt to his feet and ran a hand through the wild mess of his hair.

"So!" he exclaimed, looking at Florin with an expression of hungry triumph. The Bretonnian, snapping back out of the world of memory, flinched back from the old man, wondering if he'd gone mad. "So! They do exist. By all the gods I've heard of these mages before, but I thought that they were all dead."

"Where did you hear of them?" Florin asked suspiciously, glancing down at the wizard's tattered book. Seeing the direction of his gaze the old man clutched it closer to his bony chest, the gesture as unconscious as the way that Florin clenched his fists as he leaned forward. Not for the first time, the Bretonnian wondered what else the ever-jealous Kereveld might have kept hidden in that damned book of his.

"Oh, the mage priests are mentioned in a hundred sources," the wizard said, gesticulating with his free hand as he prowled over to the doorway. The first of the expedition's fires flared into life beyond his stooped silhouette, and he craned his neck to gaze up at the first stars that glittered across the deep blue velvet of dusk. Then, as if drawing inspiration from the heavens, he turned back to face his fellow men.

"Colonel van Delft," he began, drawing himself up and addressing the commander with all the haughty grandeur of a duke addressing a footman. "Your mission is changed. It is now to locate this mage priest that your man has discovered so that I might communicate with it."

The mercenary commander's face hardened and he drew in a deep breath of air, the better to curse this insolent civilian. But then he thought better of it, and his expression of anger mellowed to one of thoughtfulness. He had been hired to serve this insolent civilian, after all. Maybe he should check the contract before telling Kereveld where to shove his bloody lizard.

Florin had no such qualms.

"You can't be serious?" he blurted out, aghast. "Capture the lizards' wizard? You must be insane."

"Insane or not," Kereveld pressed his advantage. "As the sole representative of the college which has funded this expedition, my orders are to capture it. Or perhaps we should try to make contact with it. A parley." Kereveld stooped back down into his more familiar stance and scratched the back of his head as he considered this option.

"Colonel?" Florin turned his attention to the commander, who was biting his lip thoughtfully. "You can't be thinking of listening to him...?"

"He hired me to raise an expeditionary force with which to protect him for twelve months," van Delft shrugged. "But Kereveld, I advise you against wandering off into the jungle after this thing. We know how powerful it is. D'Artaud here only escaped through dumb luck."

Graznikov sniggered at what he assumed to be an insult. Florin glared at him threateningly and the Kislevite fell silent.

"Of course there are risks," Kereveld allowed, waving his hand as though countless reptilian warriors were as easy to dispel as a cloud of flies. "But think of the benefits. What price are a hundred or so ignorant soldiers compared to the chance

of meeting such an ancient creature? Think of the knowledge that I... that is, that the college... could glean. Some even say that the mages of old knew how to step from one world to the next, as easily as we walk between houses. Imagine, the power to hurl yourself through the terrible voids between the planets with but a single step!"

"You make a good argument," van Delft said dryly, his sarcasm lost on the wizard. "But no. You're too important to risk in this way. I am being paid to protect you, and that's what I'll do."

"You're being paid to obey me," Kereveld argued, tearing himself back away from the realm of future greatness to the more pressing business at hand.

"Understand, Menheer Kereveld, that we aren't going to go chasing after a wizard that can hurl us all into the void between the worlds."

For a moment the two men locked eyes. Under the intoxicating influence of his dreams it took Kereveld a surprisingly long time to look away.

"I really must protest," he said half-heartedly. "What an opportunity we're missing."

"Think yourself lucky," Florin told him, a sudden shiver wracking his bony frame as he thought back to his own encounter with the mage. "In fact, the sooner we get back to the boats the better. Colonel, I know it's getting dark, but we should tell the men to start getting ready to move off. If we leave at first light we should be able to make it back to the boats, and then out to sea by tomorrow night."

"Don't be a fool," Thorgrimm grumbled from the growing shadows. He pushed the last glowing embers of his pipe into the bottom of the bowl and inhaled deeply before elaborating. "We'll not leave all this gold here."

"We can take it with us."

The dwarf barked with hard laughter, a cloud of smoke bursting from his nose.

"No, we can't take it with us yet. We have to dig it up first."

"From where?"

"We don't know yet. But there's more gold here. I can smell it, almost taste it." The dwarf's eyes became wistful, and Florin looked at him incredulously. This was unbelievable. Between that moron Kereveld and this stunted little—

No, stop thinking like that, he told himself. Getting angry with them won't do you any good. Especially with the dwarf.

"Menheer Thorgrimm," Florin took a deep breath and tried again. "And Kereveld. I'm sorry that I didn't make myself clear. These lizard warriors are huge, well armed, and well disciplined. And there are hundreds of them."

"You said there were dozens," Thorgrimm pointed out stubbornly.

"Dozens, hundreds, what in the name of Ranald's left ball does it matter?" Florin snapped, clenching his fists as he tried to keep his temper. "With their magician and the skinks they'll eat us alive. You haven't seen them, I have. What's the point of gold if you can't spend it?"

"Calm yourself, manling," the dwarf said, folding his arms contentedly. "We will dig up the gold and then we will go."

"I don't know," Lundorf said, coming to his friend's aid. "Whatever the exact numbers, these lizards outnumber us, and they know the terrain. Besides, we're running low on rations. We can't stay here much longer even if we wanted to."

“Speak for yourself,” said Thorgrimm, who’d discovered the delights of roast tree frog. The humans ignored him.

“Captain Graznikov, what do you think?” van Delft asked the Kislevite, who shifted uncomfortably, greed and fear warring on his face. Then inspiration struck and he leered ingratiatingly.

“Is simple,” he said. “My boys will take gold we found already to ships, buy supplies in Swamptown, then come back.”

Van Delft nodded as Graznikov spoke, privately contemplating what the odds were of the Kislevite returning to the jungle once he was on a ship full of gold.

“Captain Castavelli?” he turned to the Tilean, who had started chewing his thumbnail anxiously.

“Is easy,” he said, spitting a piece of it out. “We must to go. I already lost a lot of my boys, and we have enough gold. Also, I want to get clean, and eat. Floreen is correct, we must to go.”

“After we’ve collected the gold,” Thorgrimm repeated, as though not a man of them had disagreed, “we’ll go. Until then, we stay.”

“Why Captain Thorgrimm,” van Delft said pleasantly, “I didn’t realise that we had exchanged ranks. How embarrassing, that I didn’t realise. Tell me, exactly when were you appointed colonel?”

The other captains chuckled uneasily as the dwarf flushed, his hand drifting down to rest upon his axe.

“We have to go,” Florin told him, leaning forward. “Believe me. If the lizards come for us, we’re doomed.”

“Doom is nothing to be feared,” Thorgrimm told him, straightening his back and lifting his chin so that his beard thrust out like the ram on a galley’s prow. “All that matters is how we face it.”

“But our doom is to return to the Old World tonight, rich men one and all.”

“Then go. My dwarfs will stay and complete the task for which we came.”

“No,” van Delft decided. “We will either all go or all stay. Remember, Captain Thorgrimm, you are still bound by your oath to serve me and the company. Now listen. What I propose is that tomorrow we send out a patrol to see if d’Artaud’s lizards are anywhere near. At the same time we’ll stop all excavations and build up our defences. If the lizards are near, and in such force as might cause us alarm, we’ll go. If not, we’ll spend one more week gathering gold, then we’ll go anyway. As Lundorf says, we’re running low on rations and, as Castavelli says, we need to replace our equipment. Now, is that acceptable to everybody?”

Van Delft peered through the gathering gloom at the faces of his captains. None of them looked exactly happy with the compromise, but that was all right. None of them looked exactly mutinous either.

“Captain Thorgrimm,” he addressed the dwarf. “Tomorrow I would like you to inspect each quarter’s defences and inform each captain as to what he has to do.”

“As you wish, Colonel,” the dwarf muttered, glowering at Florin and banging his pipe out on his palm. The Bretonnian had an idea that the dwarf wished that it was his head he was banging, not his old briar.

So. Let him wish.

“Thank you,” van Delft nodded. “And d’Artaud, don’t look so damned worried. Get drunk and fall asleep, and tomorrow everything will seem a whole lot brighter. You’ve done a bloody good job to make it back to us, you know. Don’t think we don’t appreciate it.”

Florin, his desire to rush back to the ships momentarily forgotten, sat up a little straighter.

“Just doing my best, Colonel.”

“Then it’s damned lucky for us that your best was good enough. Right then, any questions before we go and get our dinner? Kereveld?”

“It’s just that we can’t possibly leave in a week. To inscribe the hieroglyphs from the inner temple alone will take a month at least. As the college’s representative I must insist that...”

“Just a moment, Kereveld,” van Delft said, holding his hand up to stem the tide of the wizard’s complaints. Turning to the assembled mercenaries: “Double the sentries tonight if you would, gentlemen. Now, if there’s nothing else, you can go and eat. I’ve an idea that me and Menheer Kereveld will be here for a while yet.”

In fact the wizard started jabbering again even whilst the officers were filing out, and van Delft smothered a yawn. By Sigmar, he thought as he began the long, thankless task of talking some sense into the old fool, how I wish that I’d stayed in the Emperor’s army.

Six men volunteered to go out on patrol. Why they had volunteered it was difficult for them to say. They told themselves that it was for the chance to get out of digging, or to have a look about for gold, or because they were bored.

They told themselves that, but they were lying. The reason they stood yawning and scratching in the rolling billows of the morning mist was that they were soldiers, and this is what soldiers did.

Van Delft knew it, and was proud of them, proud of the small part he had played in their training. In fact, he was so proud of them that as he approached them a fluttering of guilt stirred within his chest, a dismal and unfamiliar feeling that he tried to ignore.

After all, he told himself, it was quite possible that they wouldn’t meet any of Florin’s lizards. It was possible that they would return as this grey dawn grew into dusk, the six of them plodding back to break bread with their mates with nothing more than a few scratches to grumble about.

But the Colonel didn’t think it likely. There was no doubt that the accursed reptiles were the masters of this vast, devouring land. If they did fall upon half a dozen straggling foot soldiers the outcome would be quick and bloody.

It didn’t matter. Their disappearance would tell him all he needed to know, their deaths serving him as a canary’s death served the coal miners of the black mountains.

Again, that fluttering of guilt. This time the Colonel hardened himself against it.

This is war, he reminded himself. A cruel old business that would be even cruder if he didn’t have the steel to play his part well. What was it that Detlef Sierck had said? Something about the whole world being a stage, every man an actor?

The Colonel sighed and prepared to play his role.

“Morning men,” he greeted his canaries, and returned their salute. “Just wanted a quick word before you head out.”

They remained at attention as van Delft paused.

“Just remember,” he told them, “that you’re trying to find out if these damn lizards are out there, and if so, how many there are. Thing is, though, this jungle’s a pain to waltz around in. What that means is, if you do come across any of the little pipsqueaks, don’t hang about unless you’re absolutely sure you won’t be spotted. Understood?”

“Sir,” the patrol chorused, and he dismissed them with a final salute. They about faced, and marched off into the morning mist. It closed in behind them, blanketing them like a shroud as they broke formation and approached the wilderness.

This close to, their encampment the jungle had a gnawed look about it. The stumps and wood chippings that dozens of workgroups had left behind were damp and dripping with moisture, as wet as if they’d been chewed—a broken blade that had been left half buried in a tree trunk was already turning brown with rust.

A hundred feet further on, all signs of habitation had disappeared. The trees crowded closely to whisper dark rumours above the intruders’ heads. The thorns grew tall and grasped eagerly at them as they pushed their way along a narrowing track. Above them a flock of parrots fluttered and screeched uneasy warnings, their calls louder even than the rasping of the men’s breath as they began to climb a slope.

Half an hour later they stopped for a water break. Although the surrounding bush was getting thicker, at least the air was clearing; the last of the mist was burning away beneath the power of the waxing sun. The men watched one of its beams moving through the funereal darkness of the jungle floor as they passed around a canteen, the bright golden column like the searching gaze of some sky god hungry for souls.

The last man took the canteen. He was no fool, and the thought of the baking hours to come made him drink sparingly despite the sweat that already beaded his forehead. He finished his drink with a sigh, wiped a grubby forearm across his brow, and firmly pressed the cork back into the flask. The fat squeak of cork twisting against metal seemed to stir something in the brush, and he looked up in time to see the skinks’ onslaught.

They came from nowhere. One minute there was nothing but dripping green leaves and tangled black creepers, the next the jungle was swarming with a hurrying mass of the predators. Their crests sprang upwards as they burst from cover, as orange as fire or as red as cockscombs against the green armour of their scales, and even as they rushed their prey their jaws were opened in slavering anticipation.

One of the men, a gunner, managed to scrape a spark into the firing pan of his weapon as they fell upon him. Shot exploded from its muzzle, the lead felling only one of his countless assailants but stunning the rest into a sudden pause. For a moment it seemed that the shock of noise and fire and acrid smoke might be enough to halt the attack altogether.

But only for a moment. Blinking through the black powder smoke, the reptiles drew back the onyx-tipped javelins they carried and hurled them at the men. At first glance the weapons appeared crude and flimsy, little more than toys with decorative points. Yet there were dozens of them, scores even. They filled the air with merciless

hail, the weight of their stone heads driving their razor-sharp edges through cloth and skin and muscle. The men fell back, clutching at the little wooden poles that bristled from their stricken bodies, and the skinks leapt upon them.

With the effortless elegance of long practice, the reptiles threw their weight behind the hafts of their spears, twisting them deeper into their victims. Some of them, their sinuses full of the scent of warm blood, couldn't resist ripping mouthfuls of delicious flesh from the bodies of their screaming victims. Gulping the still-living meat down as hot blood spurted across their cold skins like liquid fire, they chirruped their delight, their exultant cries sending birds exploding up and away with alarm.

Within minutes there was nothing left of the patrol. Nothing that the jungle would remember for very long, anyway: a few useless weapons, soon to disintegrate beneath the mulch; a few decimated carcasses wrapped in the shreds of their clothing, soon to be consumed by maggots and beetles. Had they had the time, the skinks would have scoured them clean there and then. But the mage priest had made his orders clear. There was to be no delay, no hesitation.

Today the scourge of humanity would be cleansed from their world.

With barely a single hungry backward glance, the skinks scurried off to their appointed positions. There would be plenty of meat soon enough.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was the gunshot that saved them. The gunshot and the fact that van Delft was high enough above the camp to hear it. Following his usual habit he had climbed to the top tier of the central pyramid, a suitable eyrie from which to watch his little army working upon their fortifications.

And working they were. The rumours which had raced around the camp after Florin's return, each more bloodcurdling than the last, had motivated the mercenaries in a way that no officer ever could have. Most of the men were already stripped to the waist as they toiled, their backs damp with sweat even before the last of the mist had cleared. Toiling away to the shouted instructions of their sergeants they built up sliding ramparts, or lashed together the bundles of stakes that teathed these primitive earthworks, or sharpened the points on their spikes.

Thorgrimm, beard thrust out with the dignity of his new authority, strode from one quarter to the next, telling the captains what to do. His dwarf warriors marched behind him in two neat files, and occasionally he would dispatch a pair of them to work alongside their human comrades. Their very presence seemed enough to bolster the humans' efforts, the relative chaos of their techniques resolving itself into a clockwork precision as the dwarfs took charge.

Not for the first time, van Delft congratulated himself for having had the foresight to hire Thorgrimm's company. Time and again they had proven their worth, even though they'd driven a harder bargain than anybody else. Van Delft turned to look at the cannon they had positioned up here, the metalwork around the muzzle a gargoyles' head of bronze. He was staring at it unseeingly, his mind playing with the idea of becoming an agent for Thorgrimm's band of mercenaries after he'd retired, when he heard the gunshot.

It was very faint. In fact, it was so muffled by undergrowth and distance that if it had not been for a chance gust of wind, van Delft wouldn't have heard it at all. But carry the sound the warm breeze did, and van Delft turned in the direction from which it had come. He was squinting through the last rising tendrils of mist, wondering if he'd been mistaken, when Sigmar sent a sign.

It came as an eruption of tiny coloured shapes, dozens of them bursting up from the canopy like fireworks on Walpurgisnacht. The flock's distant plumage was

startling against the dull vegetation from which they'd sprung, the fiery colours unique in a world of green.

Van Delft watched them fluttering skywards, the beat of their wings so panicked that the whole jungle might have become one huge predator. Every instinct in his scarred old body screamed to him that this was the warning he had been expecting, and he cursed himself for a fool. Why had he listened to Thorgrimm and Kereveld? He had known, deep down, that they'd been wrong, that yesterday had been the time to go.

"May the gods curse money-grubbing mercenaries," he muttered to himself, then, for once careless of his dignity, he made a funnel of his hands and began to bellow the call to battle stations.

"What's he shouting about?" Lorenzo asked sourly, looking up from digging towards the gesticulating shape of van Delft above them.

"I'm not sure. Can't quite make it out," Florin frowned. Although still pale and sickly-looking from his week of "gallivanting", as Lorenzo had called it, he was already feeling strong. Apart from the discomfiting way in which his bowels seemed to have turned to water, and the discomfort of the tapestry of cuts and bruises that purpled almost every inch of him, he felt as good as new.

That was what he had told Orbrant, anyway. The sergeant had tried to protest when Florin had left his pallet to come and take charge of his quarter's defences, but Florin had overruled him. After the lonely desperation of his escape he wanted to be amongst others, wanted to see them and hear them. He'd even taken some pleasure from smelling them, although the reassuring qualities of the soldiers' stale sweat was already losing its novelty.

Florin had even made Thorgrimm welcome when he'd come to give his advice. Although even more dour than usual after last night's argument, the dwarf had eventually shared some of Florin's tobacco, mellowed by the alacrity with which his instructions had been carried out.

They had been following these instructions, knee-deep in mud whilst cutting the sides of their defensive ditch into a steeper angle, when van Delft had started yelling.

"Quiet, men," Florin called out. "The Colonel's saying something."

The scraping of improvised picks and wood-carved shovels came to a ragged halt, the men leaning on them and peering up curiously at their colonel.

This time his words rang out as loud as a funeral bell.

"What is it?" Lorenzo asked warily as he saw his master's face pale.

"They're coming," Florin muttered, running his fingers through his hair and chewing the inside of his cheek.

"What?"

Ignoring the question Florin swallowed against the sudden dryness in his mouth and turned to his men. Holding his posture and modulating his voice into the bluff confidence of a true poker player, he creased his eyes into a confident smile.

"Right, men. Looks like this is it. Tools away, weapons out. Sergeant Orbrant," raising his voice against the burst of sudden activity Florin singled out the warrior, keen to seek his advice. "A word, if you please. And Lorenzo, go and see the

Colonel. Tell him you're the company's messenger. Tell him we'll be ready in five minutes."

"Right you are, boss," Lorenzo said, gratefully dropping his spade and vaulting out of the ditch. Behind him he could hear the cries of the company, the excited chatter and nervous laughter of the men interspersed with the harsh snap of commands as Florin and Orbrant bullied them into a line abreast their defences.

Their voices faded as Lorenzo rattled up the scaffold that climbed the pyramid, the particular sounds of their preparations lost amongst all the other companies. The Kislevites, for some reason, seemed to be preparing themselves by bursting into song.

Drunk again, lucky wretches, Lorenzo thought, and snapped off a salute to the Colonel.

But the Colonel wasn't watching. His eyes were focused on the tree-line, his mouth drawn into a hard line of determination as he waited for the enemy to come.

The skinks that had devoured the patrol had taken the longest route. As swiftly as hares in a field, as silently as trout in a stream, they raced through the tangled depths of their domain, cutting through the jungle in a long, wide arc that took them around the human infested ruins and into position on the far side.

Elsewhere other swarms were racing to their own positions, each pack of skinks sweeping a great stampede of fleeing prey animals before it. Savage boars smashed their way through the undergrowth, the thorns sliding harmlessly off their armoured hides. Golden-eyed pumas slunk through clearings or leapt from branch to branch. Poison-toothed komodos ran high-legged along the runs of their territories, or disappeared into deep, defensible burrows.

And all the while birds leapt and fluttered nervously from tree to tree, flitting up and away when the skinks approached. The sloths and lemurs they left behind froze into near invisibility, their bodies moulded tightly to the bark of their trees.

But the animals' fears were, for once, misplaced. The lizardmen were hunting for only one type of prey today. They didn't even pause to gather abandoned eggs, or to overwhelm the solitary sow whose desperate courage kept her standing guard over her newborn boarlets.

Soon, even as the commotion of their advance spread through the surrounding jungle, each of the skink swarms found its position. They waited then, the pink snapcases of their mouths opening like flytraps in the jungle gloom as they panted and waited.

Noon approached. As the shadows shrank, the skinks' breathing stilled, their pulses slowing as they waited in calm anticipation. There was none of the nervous energy that fizzed amongst the humans here, not a trace of any tension, just the unmoving silence of ambush, and the certainty that soon, very soon, their bellies would be full of sweet meat.

"What a noise," Florin snapped irritably, and wished that the guinea fowl were within range. They had hurtled out of the tree-line five minutes before, the commotion they'd made sending a thrill of alarm through the waiting men. One of them had even fired, braving Orbrant's wrath with the waste of ammunition.

Not that Orbrant seemed to share the tension that permeated the defenders. He stood behind the battle line that he had drawn up against the palisade, his warhammer resting on his shoulder like a favourite pet. And where other men chewed lips or tugged earlobes or sweated and scratched Orbrant remained absolutely still, his features composed into a perfection of contentment.

Florin watched him with reluctant admiration. He was beginning to realise that, unlike any other single individual here, Orbrant was actually looking forward to the coming battle.

Somehow that didn't surprise him.

The guinea fowl wandered closer, filling the air with the rusty screech of their voices. The noise grated across Florin's tightly strung nerves, and he glared at the birds viciously. As if in response to his disapproving stare they suddenly fell silent, as if themselves listening to some other animal.

"Here they come, sir," Orbrant smiled, and began to limber up his arm by swishing the warhammer back and forth.

"How do you know?" Florin asked him irritably.

"Watch those birds," the Sigmarite said, nodding towards the silent guinea fowl.

Florin watched. Right on cue the entire flock burst out of the elephant grass, stubby wings blurring as they dragged their plump bodies laboriously up into the sky. A moment later the waist-high grass that marched to the forest's edge began to shift and stir, the seed-topped tufts of it shaking back and forth as if in a high wind.

"Is that them?" Florin asked, although he already knew the answer. Careful as the skinks were, there were too many of them, moving too fast, to remain hidden. Occasionally their crests would bob into view, the orange triangles cutting through the elephant grass like sharks' fins through water.

One of the Bretonnians, the sweat pouring off him, fired. The noise of the shot brought an uncharacteristically gentle reprimand from Orbrant.

"Reload," he told the man, his voice calm. "And wait."

As the skinks drew closer Florin could hear cries of warning coming from the other quarters of their primitive stockade. The musical chatter of the Tileans' voices mingled with the guttural snapping of the Marienburgers and, from the other side of the complex, the harsh sibilance of the Kislevites. Yet despite the differences in accent all the voices were united by a common emotion.

Now the enemy were a hundred and twenty yards away, now a hundred. Florin fought with the temptation to give the order to fire. The skinks were already in range, barely, but he and Orbrant had agreed to wait until each of the companies' dozen gunners could be sure of a kill. They would only have time for one volley, so it had better be made to count.

Now the skinks were within eighty yards, the black, onyx tips of their spears glinting with an eerie white light as they bobbed above the trampled grass.

A ragged volley of shots rang out behind Florin, then a series of shrill sounding commands. There was a sudden scream, the bloodcurdling sound drowned out a sudden, deafening roar as the dwarf cannon lent its voice to the argument.

Now the skinks had drawn close enough for Florin to see the dark slashes of pupils that cut through the gold of their eyes. They had started to run with their heads up, abandoning any attempt at stealth as they closed in on their prey.

Florin looked at Orbrant, who nodded.

“Gunners,” Florin called, as he saw one of them blink. “Ready!”

The dozen gunners sighted along the lengths of their barrels, eyes watering against the smouldering matches that hovered above the firing pans.

“Aim!”

Through the steel Vs of their sights the gunners selected their targets, watching them leap or snarl for the last time.

“Fire!”

The gunners fired. With the single deafening boom of a perfectly timed volley their bullets hissed through the elephant grass to smack into the cold bodies of the enemy. They died even before they smelled the blackpowder stench, their bodies thrown back to twitch brokenly beneath the rushing feet of their brethren’s advance.

Taking the volley as their signal the bombardiers, five men chosen for the strength of their throwing arms, rushed to take the fire from the gunners’ fuses. Cradling their bombs they turned them this way and that, trying to ignore the pattering of the approaching horde as they coaxed the fuses into sparkling life.

“Bombardiers,” Florin cried, dismayed that the gunners had done nothing to slow the onrushing horde. “Throw!”

With a last anxious glance at the hissing fuses the men drew their arms back and lobbed the bombs forward.

“Heads down!” Florin warned as the steel spheres tumbled into the grass beyond, their white fuses disintegrating into ash.

The first of the skinks had already thrown itself across the ditch, its claws scrabbling at the sliding earth of the palisade, as the iron cases of the bombs blossomed into sudden, horrific violence.

One explosion followed the next, a fire-cracker peal of terrible destruction which choked the air with billowing smoke and splattering blood. Hail storms of iron shredded through the stunned ranks of the enemy, the Shockwaves tossing their leaders high into the air to spin around like gory Catherine wheels.

Despite the ringing in his ears, and despite the fog of acrid black-powder smoke which burned in his nose, Florin felt a roar of savage joy burst from his lips. One of his men, who had been too slow to duck, staggered past him, his face a mask of blood from the iron splinter which had buried itself in his scalp, but Florin was deaf to his screams.

His fear had gone. His restraint had gone. Now at last he had the chance to pay back the cruelties which these filthy lizards had inflicted upon him, and upon the vengeful ghosts who had haunted his dreams. He hefted his machete impatiently, and a dangerous, maniacal grin split his features as the first of the enemy struggled over the parapet.

It didn’t stand a chance. With a single, backhanded stroke Florin sent its head spinning back into the mud of the ditch. On either side of him halberdiers chopped down into targets of their own, their heavy blades biting hungrily into scale and bone.

But for every one they killed two more came surging up, squeezing between the gaps in the stakes that lined the palisade. Despite the ferocity of the defenders the skinks pushed forward, trampling their dead in their eagerness to be upon the foe.

A few of the gunners had managed to reload, scrabbling wild handfuls of powder and shot into their steaming matchlocks. As some of their comrades stumbled and fell beneath the weight of the assault, they aimed into the mass of reptilian bodies before them and fired.

The shock of the volley punched the assault back and, as the explosion of one of the guns sent another man screaming to the ground, his mates charged forward with a ragged cheer. Swinging the intricately crafted weapons with savage cries they fell upon the skinks, hacking into them with a desperate ferocity.

Florin shared their bloodthirsty enthusiasm. The madness of battle sang in his veins as he slashed at the enemy, swearing with frustration when he missed, jeering when he drew blood.

Gradually the battle reached an uneasy equilibrium, both sides locked in a brutal close quarter brawl that staggered back and forth over the top of the palisade. In an attempt to break this grinding deadlock, the skink first-spawned sent parties of his brethren clambering over the ruins which marked the flanks of the humans' stockade. They swarmed upwards eagerly, their webbed feet gripping the cyclopean stonework as effortlessly as chameleons on an outhouse wall.

It was Orbrant who saw the outflanking manoeuvre. Some instinct whispered a warning in his ear and he looked up in time to see the first of the flanking parties cresting the stonework. Bellowing above the sound of the battle he raced down the line, pulling half a dozen gunners from the fight and roared at them to reload their bloodstained and splintered firearms. He watched them fill and prime their weapons and then, using his hammer to direct their fire as a conductor uses his baton to conduct an orchestra, he sent their fire into the interlopers.

The Sigmarite watched the first of the skinks slapped off the stonework before turning and throwing himself back into the struggling mass atop the palisade. By now the first wild exhilaration of battle had left the men, leaving in its place nothing but a numbness, a single-minded drive to slaughter the enemy before the enemy could slaughter them. Blood and sweat slicked the men's skin, as, with joyless determination they fought on.

And gradually, one by one, the Bretonnians were being slaughtered like draft horses, falling beneath the relentless onslaught of the skinks' attack.

But the skinks were faring even worse. Funnelled by Thorgrimm's sturdy engineering into a narrow battlefront, their advance became stuck upon the sharpened stakes of the palisade like butterflies upon pins, where they were easy prey for the steel of the humans.

Yet still they charged forward, their assault aided by the countless corpses that filled the ditch and blunted the palisade. More of them scaled around the sides, scuttling up the sheer stone surfaces of the outer temples. Most of these were plucked from their perches by gunfire, the rest threw themselves down with a mindless courage to die from crushed bones or vengeful blades.

Cold blood and hot mingled on the barricades, steel met onyx, razored teeth met fire and lead. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, the skinks' attack began to falter. As

the corpses of the strongest were trampled underfoot by their weaker brethren, and as the dwarfs turned their cannon to rake across the rearguard, the ferocity bled slowly out of their charge.

When the attack stopped it seemed like a miracle. One moment the Bretonnians were fighting tooth and claw with an endless tide of the horrors. A moment later and the lizardmen were drawing back.

The defenders let their arms droop, snatching the couple of seconds' rest the respite gave them, and then, with a single, shrill chirrup of command, the attacking swarm split into two columns and streamed away to either side.

A wild cheer went up from the humans' line, exultant despite the jagged edge of exhaustion and shock. It climbed higher as the last of the skinks burst into a sprint, the wordless roar interspersed with jeers and insults. Then the last rank of them melted away, and the Bretonnians fell suddenly silent.

Expressions of joy melted into grey masks of shock, raised fists were lowered, stomachs grew heavy with despair. Even Florin, hardened by his hatred of his erstwhile captors, felt the fight bleeding out of him as he realized that this was no victory.

This was just the beginning, the calm before the storm of the lizardmen's true assault.

The great bone plates of their wide-jawed heads towering over the scattering flotsam of their lesser brethren, their taloned feet beating the earth in perfect step, a single, vast column of saurus marched into view. Their armoured hides were untouched by shrapnel or bullet, and their bulging muscles were untired by any combat. As fresh as a new dawn they hurried to do one-sided battle against their exhausted foe.

Florin knew now why the skinks had fled when they had. It was a tactic he'd seen often enough in the bar brawls of Bordeleaux. They called it a switch and cut, a muggers' trick whereby one man ducked out of the way a second before his mate's cosh came swinging through the space where he'd been standing.

The skinks had been the cover. The saurus were the cosh.

There was no doubting who the victim would be.

Florin spat and swore, and tried to look confident.

"Looks like we're in for another round, men," he said, holding his voice steady in an iron grip of manufactured confidence "We'll cut through this lot like we did their mates. Let's close those ranks."

Much good it would do them, though. This time the channelled melee would go against the men, that much was certain. In the messy, face to face butchery of the palisades the saurus had every advantage—strength, ferocity and sheer brute force. They had the weapons, too, great sickle-bladed swords and chitinous shields that glinted in the sun like the doors of one of the hells.

"Gunners," Orbrant called as the saurus, their pace neither rushed nor hesitant, approached to within the last hundred yards. "Gunners to form a back rank. Come on, come on. Keep those heathen temples clear of the little 'uns, or at least keep their heads down. I'll keep the palisade clear."

So saying the Sigmarite strode forward, the boisterous grin which creased his face making him look younger. Stronger. He found his place in the decimated line of defenders, cut the air with his warhammer like a cat with its tail, and punched the man beside him on the arm.

“Are you ready?” he asked him, eyes alight with an unholy joy.

“Yes, sergeant,” the man muttered miserably, his own eyes locked on the advancing monsters. Somehow they seemed to be grinning.

“I said,” Orbrant repeated menacingly, “are you ready?”

“Yes, sergeant,” This time the man tore his eyes away from the foe for long enough to look at his officer.

“What?” Orbrant snapped.

“Yes,” the man dared to snap back.

“Are you ready?” Orbrant snarled, teeth bared.

“Yes,” he bellowed.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes!” More voices were raised in answer to the question and Orbrant, seeming to swell with a terrible energy, chuckled.

“Are you ready?” he roared, lifting his warhammer aloft so that sunlight flared from the gromril of its construction, as white and blinding as a banner of the Sigmar himself.

“Yeeeeessss!” the men roared back, the fire of the warrior priest’s burning spirit leaping amongst them as a flame leaps from one straw thatch to the next. The hairs lifted on the napes of their necks. Their spines straightened. They lifted weapons that felt suddenly light, and their faces split open in death’s head grins. Orbrant watched them with a terrible pride, seeing in their battered bodies and ugly faces the presence of his god.

By all that’s holy, he thought, thank Sigmar for the gift of war.

And he prepared for the charge.

Van Delft had watched the lizardmen’s assault unfolding with a professional detachment; a certain admiration, even. The enemy had launched four perfectly synchronized attacks, the separate groups not only emerging from the tree-line at the same time, but managing to time the impacts of their charges almost to the second.

If it hadn’t been for Thorgrimm’s fortifications van Delft had no doubt that the first wave would have annihilated his little army, washing away his formations as easily as a rising tide destroys a sandcastle.

As it was the flanks held, just. The Tileans had balked once, but a well-timed volley from the dwarfs’ gunners had given them the breathing space they’d needed to regroup under their captain’s passionate entreaties.

The Marienburgers had fared a little better, their well equipped and expertly disciplined ranks forming a meat grinder into which the enemy hurled themselves with suicidal courage. The Bretonnians had done just as well, although their losses had been heavier. Fully a quarter of their number lay dying across their palisade, and the rest were so blood-soaked that the gore almost seemed to be a regimental marking.

But the real surprise had been the Kislevites. Despite their captain's obvious reluctance to lead from the front they had fought like daemons. Their barbaric Ulrician battle hymns had cleaved the air as their axes had cleaved the enemy, the razored blades chopping through their ranks with the easy confidence of lumberjacks felling trees.

It was no surprise then that the real attack, when it came, came against the Bretonnians.

If van Delft had dared to hope, that folly left him when he saw the enemies' true warriors. The massive reptiles that came marching out of the jungle in a single, well ordered column were every inch the horrors that Florin had described. Taller than men, their massive heads flared back from their snouts like arrowheads, the weapons they carried seemed almost superfluous.

Van Delft realized that his jaw had fallen open whilst he'd been watching them. He snapped it shut.

"Captain Thorgrimm. I have a new target for you."

The dwarf, who'd been busily pacing up and down the ranks of his gunners, tossing his axe from hand to hand with bloodthirsty impatience, turned and followed van Delft's gaze.

"Yes," he nodded, as he saw the vast column of saurus warriors. "They could do with a bit of softening up."

He spat a stream of orders at the cannon crew, the language as hard and flinty as the stone of the temple upon which they stood, then stooped to help them drag the weapon to a new position.

The first shot rang out a moment later, the cannon vomiting out a blur of iron. It whistled over the Bretonnians' heads, bounced on the churned-up earth beyond them, and sliced through the saurus' ranks as uselessly as a razor through a slab of ham.

Without waiting for the order the dwarfs were already swabbing out the barrel, ready for the next shot, but van Delft knew that it wasn't going to be enough. Turning away from the Bretonnians he looked suspiciously at the southern tree-line. It seemed to be empty. Seemed to be.

The Colonel bit his lip and cursed himself for not having used more time clearing the obscuring undergrowth. He wanted to take men from the remaining three flanks upon which the skink charge had faltered, yet if he did, how could he know that another attack wouldn't fall upon the weakened defences?

He tugged at the tips of his moustaches and turned back to watch the saurus as they advanced towards the remnant of d'Artaud's command. Even above the din of battle he could feel their feet beating the constant, remorseless rhythm of an executioner's drum roll.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes in silent prayer.

"Sigmar be with me," he muttered, his hand closing around the hard edges of the hammer talisman he wore beneath his uniform. His daughters had given it to him a decade ago, and although he'd mocked them for being so generous with his money, he had come to treasure the tiny memento.

"Be with me."

The sounds of battle faded. A moment passed, long and silent. He opened his eyes again, and the world had become clear, his decision obvious. After all, what other choice did he have?

“Lorenzo,” he said, singling out the Bretonnian from the runners that stood waiting for his orders. “Go back to your unit. I don’t need you here anymore. And you other three, go back to your units and tell your captains that every other man’s to go to the Bretonnian line. Once there they’ll serve under d’Artaud. Got it? Good. Well, go on then!”

Van Delft watched them scurry away, secure in the knowledge that for the moment, he had done his duty. He stepped back and almost trod on Kereveld.

“Ah, there you are...” the Colonel began, then stopped. The wizard’s bony old body might be there, but his mind was far, far away. His eyes were rolled up like a dead man’s, his skin as pale as death. In fact, the only sign that he was still a living man and not some standing corpse was the movement of his lips as they whispered silent gibberish, and the spasmodic twitching of his fingers.

Van Delft remembered the devastation that Kereveld had caused last time he’d practised his godless art, and for a second he considered shaking the wizard out of his trance.

A second later he thought better of it. After all, what did they have to lose?

Miles above him, bright in the dark void where sky met space, energies burst into life as spontaneously as matches left in tropical sunlight. At first no more than sparks they grew stronger and hotter, fluttering around one another like newly hatched chicks in a nest. Eventually each of the sparks joined the others, coalescing into a single mass that slowly began to descend towards the world below.

If Florin had made the decision he would have waited behind the barricade. Despite the fact that the ditch was now filled with a mass of the dying and the dead, and despite the fact that most of the defensive stakes had long since been pulled down into a tangled mess of splintered wood, the bank at least remained, giving the defenders some small advantage of height.

Yes, had Florin made the decision his men would have waited for the impact of the saurus onslaught, and would have been scattered before it like autumn leaves before a winter storm.

But Florin didn’t make the decision. Orbrant did.

He waited until the saurus were near enough to spit on and then, with an animal roar of fanatical hatred, he vaulted over the palisade and charged.

The Bretonnians followed. Caught up in the invisible storm of the Sigmarite’s energy they had little choice. Perhaps it was because of the warrior priest’s savage oratory, or perhaps it was because of some other, more subtle magic. But for whatever reason in that moment, in that one, glorious moment, they became all that they had ever dreamed of being.

Battered and bruised, rotten of tooth and vicious of habit, the score of mercenaries fell upon their foes with the righteous wrath of the heroes of old. They

hurled themselves against the advancing horde, meeting it with the bone-shattering impact of a fist meeting a sledgehammer's swing.

And yet, incredibly, it was the saurus who faltered. The spirit which had possessed the Bretonnians seemed to blind them to the fact that their enemies were massive, iron-scaled, invincible.

Thus forgetful of their weakness they scythed through the first rank of lizards, their halberds and swords biting deeply through their scaled hides with a keen-edged hunger.

A dozen reptiles were felled by that first, crazed impact. A dozen more thrown back bloodied and dazed by the ferocity of the charge. Orbrant, his ragged robes flapping around him like a bloodied storm cloud, seemed to be everywhere, the silver blur of his warhammer smiting through his foes like lightning.

Now he was hammering down the bearer of the enemies' blasphemous standard, smashing the totem in half and crushing the armoured skull of its bearer on the backstroke.

Now he was stooping to drag a man free of the saurus he'd killed, picking the mercenary up by the scruff of his neck as though he were no heavier than a pup and throwing him back into the fight.

Now he was singing a deep throated battle hymn that reverberated in the bones of all who heard it, the savage chant punctuated by the constant metronome of gromril splintering bone.

But Orbrant was only one man, and the saurus were legion. As the shock of the charge wore off they pushed forward, their strength waxing as the defenders' waned.

Florin snatched bloody glimpses of the turning tide as he fought. Beneath the total concentration and numbing stupidity of combat he knew that he should be thinking of a plan. He ducked and parried, his wrist flaring in pain as it was bent backwards, and a snarling mouthful of curved teeth lunged for his throat.

He let himself fall back away from the attack, gripping the cold iron of his assailant's arm and stabbing the sharpened point of his machete into its belly. His entire weight travelled through the blow, driving the steel home with a force that would have gutted a pig.

It didn't gut the saurus. With a bellow of pain it smashed Florin to one side with the leather disc of its shield, sending him sprawling over the cooling body of one of his comrades. Stars span through his field of vision as he watched the saurus pluck the blade out of its torso and throw it to one side with a contemptuous snarl.

Before it could turn on him once more Florin snatched the eating knife from his belt and, ignoring the certainty that he should have started running, pounced forward to stab it into the joint behind the lizard's knee. The little steel blade punched through skin and into a knot of gristle and cartilage he found there.

Florin twisted.

This time it was the saurus that fell back, and Florin followed him. Using the heavy scales that armoured the creature's head he pulled it to one side, then plunged his knife through the serpentine eye and into the brain beneath.

The fallen lizard thrashed like a landed fish as it died, the creature's flailing claws holding its brethren back for the second Florin needed to jump clear.

Suddenly from behind, he felt an impact on his shoulder. He turned, knife at the ready, and met Lundorf's white smile.

"Take it," the Marienburger told him, throwing him a sheathed sword. "Looks like you'll be needing it!"

"Thanks," Florin laughed, a little hysterically. "After you."

Losing no more time in banter Lundorf winked, turned, and led his men into the Bretonnians' line.

A moment later the Tileans appeared, pikes held at hip height as they charged into the saurus beneath a hail of dwarf fire.

It was a great effort. A heroic effort. But as all mercenaries know, heroic efforts never end well. Inch by inch and corpse by corpse, van Delft's little army was being pushed back towards oblivion by the unstoppable weight of the jungle's true masters.

Xinthua Tzequal lolled on the comfort of his palanquin, eyes half closed as he listened to the reports of the battle unfolding. The plan he had decided upon was working with the blunt elegance of all mindlessly simple things, yet still he derived a certain satisfaction from it. Success, after all, was success.

The skinks had first washed around the humans' defences, wearing them away as they surged and probed, drawing them to their barriers and trapping them there like wasps in amber. Then, when they had found the weakest point, Xinthua had unleashed the saurus warriors. The combination of his delicate appreciation of space and time with the brute force of the warriors was proving to be the decisive manoeuvre.

Even now, he had just learned, the saurus were smashing their way through the mammals. Their desperation had made the warmbloods fight with a surprising courage, but it was not a trait Xinthua admired. In his world there existed only force and mass, and the purity of calculation. Everything else was a distraction.

Nor would their courage do them any good. The constant relay of skink runners all told the same story. The skinks were holding the warmbloods to their ridiculously overextended positions whilst the saurus, as wisely careless of their own expendable lives as they were of the enemy's, ground their way through to the heart of the mammals' position.

It was as good as over, Xinthua thought with a sigh. Lowering his eyelids further he dismissed the fighting from his mind and sent the focus of his intellect in pursuance of some newly conceived geometries that had just fluttered into his consciousness. In the clearing around him his entourage remained standing and alert, the blank perfection of their eyes searching the surrounding jungle for any sign of danger.

Another skink came up and threw itself into the dirt in front of the mage, its sides bellowing in and out in near terminal exhaustion. For a moment Xinthua considered dismissing its report until later. He had more important things to think about than pest control. It was only a sense of duty that persuaded him to turn his eyes upon the lowly messenger and gesture for it to speak.

"I bear a report, my liege," it said, its chirruping voice uneven from its panting breath. It had obviously run here much faster than its brethren. Perhaps a stronger strain than the usual, Xinthua considered.

“Speak,” the mage said lazily.

“The humans are employing magic, my liege,” it said. “Scar-Leader Xutzpa begs that you come to bear witness.”

For a second Xinthua froze, his calculations whirling into a fresh set of combinations. He had begun to suppose that human sorcery had been either a figment of his captive’s deranged thought processes, or perhaps the subject of some anomaly. It wouldn’t be the first time that the power of the ancients had momentarily manifested itself through one of the lesser races, much as the power of the skies sometimes struck skinks with bolts of lightning.

It seemed not, though. It seemed that these primitive mammals did have some small understanding of their own.

Fascinating.

“Messenger, lead my entourage to the field of battle. I want to see this sorcery for myself. Oh, and send another runner to Scar-Leader Scythera. Tell him that it’s time to commit the final element of the attack. We will now end the battle.”

Despite the men that he’d thrown into the Bretonnian line van Delft knew that it was doomed. The ferocious lizard hordes were chewing through his forces like rats through leather, making a bright red carpet of their corpses. The Colonel could almost smell the animal instinct to flee rising off his surviving forces and, loosening his sword in its sheath, prepared to stiffen their resolve with his presence. Better to face death together than alone.

He was about to hand the last shreds of his command to Thorgrimm, a final act of responsibility before he rushed through the doors of the enemy’s fangs and into the paradise that lay beyond, when something stopped him.

Most men wouldn’t have noticed it. Between the clash of battle that roared without and the fearful pounding of their own hearts within, most men would have been incapable of noticing such a small thing. But van Delft, whose long and violent life had taught him the art of constant awareness, did.

It was his shadow that caught his eye. At first it seemed normal enough, the distorted shade having the right amount of limbs and heads. The only thing wrong was that it wasn’t the only one.

His forehead furrowed in puzzlement as he watched the second shadow flicker and grow, prowling around him as if he were a sundial in a speeded up world.

Then he heard the sound, the constant hiss of boiling moisture. Looking up in sudden alarm, half expecting to see a rain of snakes, the Colonel squinted at the star that was tumbling down from the skies above. The eye-wateringly bright mass of it was followed by a white trail of steam, the condensation marking its path across the blue sky like a snail’s trail.

“Kereveld,” the Colonel told himself, and glanced across at the wizard. His eyes were still half closed, his hands and lips still moving in incantation. The Colonel resisted the temptation to ask him what was going on. Instead he turned back to watch the comet tumbling downwards, feeling a gambler’s rush of adrenaline as it fell screaming towards the combat below.

As it dropped through the last few hundred feet the back ranks of both sides paused, craning their necks to stare up at the white hot inferno as it yawed towards first one side and then another.

A second later it impacted onto the earth. With a blinding flare of magical energy the comet punched into the ground, crushing a great swathe of figures beneath the holocaust of its own destruction and flinging their shattered bodies high into the air to rain down in a gory hail.

Xinthua Tzeqal was quite impressed. To summon a comet was a simple enough spell, true. It was also as easy to dispel as it was to pop a mudfish's bladder. This one had been well controlled, though, landing almost entirely on the saurus warriors that beset the mammals.

Xinthua spent a moment contemplating the shattered remains of those that it had caught, unconcerned by their fate. There were still more than enough of their brethren to do the job in hand, and replacements were easily spawned.

He looked up then, the complex symmetries of his great golden eyes readjusting to peer at the tiny group of humans that stood atop the pyramid. One of them had a glow about him, an aura that identified him as a magic user.

For a moment Xinthua considered having the animal captured alive. It would be interesting to unravel the strange twists of its tiny mind, to see what scraps of anomalous knowledge lay trapped within.

But no. He had a duty to preserve his forces, and already he could feel the beginnings of another comet overhead. Leaning back in his chair he changed his focus, letting the physical world dissolve into a blur of murky colours whilst, high overhead, the winds of magic became clear and sharply defined.

With an effort the mage tore himself away from the contemplation of their beauty and began to search for the comet.

Ah, there it was. Just blossoming in the troposphere.

The mage let the second comet grow into full life and begin to descend before he reached out to take it. Gently he exerted his will on the incantation, wresting the fireball from the human's grasp with barely a struggle.

* * *

Scar-Leader Scythra had wanted to send in Hotza at the very beginning of the battle. He had seen enough of the puny foe they faced to rest assured in his contempt for them. The first one he'd experienced had disintegrated beneath his claws as he'd torn it apart the better to sample its soft flesh. A single charge from Hotza would, he was sure, have broken open their formation as neatly as he'd broken open their bones to reveal the succulent marrow inside.

Yes, he had wanted to send in Hotza, but then Mage Priest Xinthua Tzeqal had told him to wait and the wanting had stopped. Until, that was, the skink runner had brought mage's latest order. The order that now was the time to unleash the wild strength that he had spent so long in disciplining.

Scythera's blood began to race as he strode over to Hotza, letting the warm steam of her breath condense upon his scales. He felt it trickling down between them like morning dew as he bent to remove a tick from one of her legs. Only then did he look up to the skink handlers that waited perched on top of her and give them their orders.

With an excited chittering the lesser brethren scrambled to their positions and, with a dozen carefully placed prods, set Hotza lumbering forward. The ground trembled beneath her feet as, with slow, steady deliberation she started off.

The scar-leader and his guard followed in her wake, their going made easy by the creature's passage. With never a pause, she smashed a path through thickets of small trees and overarching vines, trampling the undergrowth beneath the great crushing pads of her feet into a scratch built road.

Such effortless destruction, Scythera thought, and felt his mouth water with pleasure. Such careless power.

His blood pounded with anticipation as he considered what would happen when they reached the humans. With an impatient bark, he bid the skinks to move her along faster. Once more they wielded their long, sharpened poles, and this time, with a low rumble of protest, Hotza broke into a heavy, lumbering run that set the earth trembling.

The warriors had to run to keep up with her. Leaping over the smashed detritus of her passage and dodging the splintered trunks she left behind they raced along, their breathing becoming deep and heavy. They were gasping for air, when, with a final cacophony of smashed wood, Hotza broke into the clearing.

She paused as she saw the ruins, and the bloodstained ground around them. Lifting the great beak of her nose she snuffled uncertainly at the coppery tang of blood and the rich smell of scorched flesh that hung in the humid air. The scar-leader, panting after the sprint through the jungle, came to stand beside her.

He too sniffed the air, letting the glorious smells of battle soak through his sinuses as he watched the confusion of violence which was unfolding before him.

They had emerged on the eastern side of the clearing, as arranged. The nearest group of humans was hidden from them by a swarm of bloodied and battered skinks. Meanwhile, to the right of the minor temple which marked the end of that flank, he could see his brother saurus grinding forward in a single great phalanx, its ranks snaking away towards a distant tree-line.

It was a glorious sight, despite the fact that so many of them had been torn into steaming corpses by some foul magic.

The scar-leader, every synapse humming with the pleasure of instinct satisfied, prepared to hurl Hotza into the battle. He'd use her unstoppable strength to smash through the eastern side of the humans' pitiful defences and then, cutting up like a knife beneath a ribcage, he'd throw her into the back of the remainder who were still struggling with his brethren.

Hotza shifted uneasily beside him, and it was easy for the scar-leader to confuse her unease with anticipation. It goaded him into action and, with a last admiring glance at her huge, armoured bulk, he stood back and gave her skink riders the order to charge.

At first she seemed hesitant, but the skinks had trained her well. With a series of carefully timed jabs and pokes with their herding sticks they squared her up to the

battle line and, with a final jab at her rear, sent her rumbling forward. The ground shaking beneath her feet she lowered the three great horns that sprouted from the armoured plate of her head and bellowed miserably.

“Damn,” Kereveld said, his voice low with disappointment. Van Delft, who was watching the mountainous beast that had just burst out of the jungle, admired his understatement.

“Damn indeed,” he said, looking at the monster. Bigger than his town house back in Marienburg, and as well armoured as a steam tank, it came lumbering towards them with a series of bloodcurdling howls and roars that sounded incongruously fearful.

What could such a beast have to fear? Certainly not them. The great armoured plate that covered its lowered skull bore three great tusks, each as sharp as a stake and as long as a man. It had a sharp-looking beak of a muzzle as well, a great jagged mantrap of bone that snapped threateningly open and closed as the beast drew nearer. It was more than a match for any man.

Nay, van Delft corrected himself. Not any man. Any regiment.

No wonder the skinks scattered at its approach, abandoning their attack to turn and flee despite the vengeful blades of the Marienburgers. No wonder either that the Marienburgers, when they saw the avalanche of armoured rage that was bearing down on them, fled in turn, dropping helmets and weapons in their panic.

“Damn,” Kereveld said again as the monster crashed through the remnants of the eastern barricade. Van Delft, an anaesthetising wave of euphoria washing through him now that he knew that the end was drawing near, turned and looked at the wizard. He was sitting on the stonework of the pyramid, pale and shaking beneath a sheen of sweat, with his thumbs pressed into his temples.

“Cheer up, old man,” van Delft told him with a wild grin. “Sigmar loves those who die against a mighty foe.”

He waved towards the stampeding tonnage of the reptile below them. It staggered from side to side, trampling fleeing Marienburgers underfoot even as its handlers drove it towards the back of the Bretonnian line.

But Kereveld wasn’t looking down. He was looking up.

Van Delft followed his gaze as the comet filled the sky above.

It was the last thing he saw. The white hot intensity of the falling star was enough to melt his irises, fusing flesh to bone in a smeared deathmask. Mercifully the heat boiled his brains as it tortured his flesh, blotting out any pain he might have felt before it annihilated him completely.

Hotza was of a breed that disliked blood even more than it disliked noise. Or pain. Or anything, in fact apart from wallowing in cool mud and eating. The sharp beak of her mouth wasn’t designed to crunch bodies, it was designed to crunch through roots. Nor were the three curving horns that jutted from the thickness of her skull meant for anything more than protection.

But what nature had created, the lizardmen had tried to perfect. Hotza had been trained from the egg to associate tasty fibres and roots with the scent of blood and the

noise of war gongs. She'd also been trained to obey the goads of her skink masters, the tiny controllers that swarmed across her back like fleas on a boar.

The training had been a terrible experience for a young stegadon, a nightmare of fire and pain and sudden, savage nips. The memory of it had sunk into her tiny mind like diamonds through mud so that now, when she felt the lightest prod from one of the skinks' goads, she responded, drawn by the chains of conditioning that were stronger than iron.

Yes, the lizardmen had spent long, patient years turning her into the great war beast that was now smashing through their enemy's line. And every second of her training had been done with a single aim in mind—the subjugation of instinct to discipline.

It had been an enormous effort.

And, in one second of blinding light, it was gone, the countless hours of training vanished beneath a floodtide of terrified instinct. As the comet struck the top of the temple, blinding her and filling her nose with the scent of unnatural death, Hotza went berserk.

The skinks clung to her as, bellowing in terror, she stampeded away from the sorcerous fire, charging through the scattering Bretonnians and into the tightly packed saurus warriors that now stood between her and the jungle.

They stood in ranks, packed too tightly to flee or even to dodge as she trampled over them. Her pounding feet crushed their armoured skulls as easily as snail shells, splintered their bones, and pressed their broken bodies deep into the graves of her footprints.

One of the skinks jabbed at her desperately, aiming for a pressure point beneath the plate of her helmet. It missed, piercing the wrong nerve ganglion with the needle point of its goad. Hotza screamed in agony and raced forward through the remainder of the saurus warriors, brushing their bodies aside like elephant grass and fleeing for the shaded sanctuary of the jungle.

Xinthua Tzequal had enjoyed wresting the human's incantation from his feeble grasp. It had been an act of simple artistry which he had found deeply satisfying, so much so that he was committing every detail to memory, closing his heavy eyelids to replay the event before it faded.

It wasn't until he opened them again that he realised that something was happening on the battlefield.

At first he assumed that it was the final victory. It had been only a matter of time before the mammals' frail defences had cracked like an eggshell between his teeth. Then he looked again, and all thoughts of elegant victory slipped from his mind. Even as he watched, the rampaging monstrosity of Scythera's stegadon smashed its way through to the rear of the saurus warriors, rolling over them in an avalanche of scale and bone and sheer, unstoppable power.

Xinthua blinked uneasily as the monster broke through the final rank of saurus. Trampling the last of them underfoot it let out a rumbling, bone-shaking roar and fled towards the tree-line.

Towards Xinthua Tzequal himself.

The mage priest calculated what the result of the maddened creature's trajectory would be and blinked again.

"Bearers," he decided as Hotza's approaching silhouette grew against the sky. "Run away."

They didn't need to be told twice. Before the last syllable had left their master's mouth they had turned and raced into the jungle, desperately weaving amongst the tree stumps as Hotza smashed into the undergrowth behind them.

Xinhua Tzeqal's messenger skinks fled too, scurrying off to every corner of the battlefield with their master's last order.

Within minutes, every lizardman that could had left the clearing. Not long after that the first of the vultures that had been circling overhead descended, ready to start their feast.

As the mage priest had predicted, the battle had lasted for no more than an hour.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Captain.”

The voice rolled over Florin. He was sitting on the remains of the parapet, gazing sightlessly at the crushed bodies that lay beyond. One hand still gripped the hilt of his chipped and notched sword, the sticky blade already swarming with flies. The other lay trembling in his lap.

“Captain,” Orbrant said again, his gentle persistence bringing a flicker of recognition to Florin’s eyes.

“Captain, we have to make provision for the wounded.”

“Yes,” Florin said, blinking around him as if surprised by the carnage amongst which he sat. The bodies of his men littered the ground in a bloody harvest, their corpses twisted into grotesque poses. Clouds of fat bluebottles were already landing upon them, and, even as he watched, a vulture flapped slowly down. It danced around whilst it folded its wings, then stooped to pluck an eyeball from one of the fallen. There was a squelch as it swallowed the titbit. The small sound was enough to galvanize Florin.

The ashes of his fighting rage stirred faintly and he lurched to his feet, flexing his sword arm and stalking towards the carrion eater. The vulture saw him coming and, with an alarmed squawk, began to unfold the complicated width of its wings.

It was too late. With a single, backhanded sword stroke Florin sent its head spinning from its scrawny neck. He kicked its body for good measure, then straightened his back, brushed the bloody tangle of hair away from his forehead, and looked around him.

Amongst the dead lay the wounded. They screamed or sobbed or called out, their accents mingling into a single, international cry of pain. Their companions stood by them, or at least by some of them. Others had been left to bleed or to die alone, their comrades lost in the same fog of exhausted shock from which Orbrant had pulled Florin.

“Right then,” Florin croaked, waving his hands in a helpless gesture of encouragement. Nobody paid him any heed.

Get it together, Florin told himself. Take control. You are their captain, their leader. Do your job.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, held it for a moment, and then stabbed his battered sword down into the ground.

“Right then,” he started again, this time his voice firm with a grim determination. “Sergeant Orbrant, take every man who isn’t wounded and pair him with one who is. From now until we get back to the ships, every one of the whole will be personally responsible for one of the injured.”

“Yes, sir,” Orbrant snapped a salute, the gesture as neatly executed within this bloody chaos as if it were a parade ground. “And what are your orders for the water carriers, sir?”

“Water?”

“After a battle men are always thirsty. It’s as well to give them water, especially as we have no wine.”

“Yes, of course. All right, you get on with forming up the pairs, I’ll organise the water.”

“Yes, sir,” Orbrant saluted again, and Florin, realising how comforting that sign of normality was, snapped a salute back.

“Made it through, then boss?” Lorenzo’s voice made the gesture seem ridiculous, and Florin dropped his fist as he turned, a tired smile lifting his bloodstained face.

“More or less. It’s going to be one hell of a laundry bill when we get back.”

Lorenzo, for once, seemed to be lost for words. Then he rallied. “The butcher’s bill looks a lot higher.”

“Yes,” Florin agreed, taking another look at the massacre amongst which they stood. What a victory, he thought bitterly. I’ll be damned if I ever play this game again. The decision made, he shook himself back into action.

“Well, I haven’t got time to stand around here all day chatting,” he said. “And neither have you. Come on, we’ve got to find men and buckets and start passing water around.”

They gathered a handful of men on their way to the cooking tents, bullying them down to the stream with the company’s palm leaf buckets whilst others lit the fires beneath the cauldrons.

Florin’s detail worked mechanically, taking empty pails down to the stream, then back to the boiling sterility of the cauldron, then from the cauldron to their comrades, then from their comrades back to the stream.

It was hard, mind-numbing work, which was good. Anything was better than sitting and contemplating the ruin of their companies. Many of those ragged regiments had formed little worlds within which the men had lived for decades, the nearest thing to a family a mercenary could get.

The sun was sinking mercifully into the west, bringing an end to this hideous day, when Florin and Lorenzo found Lundorf.

“Avoiding all the hard work, I see,” Lorenzo said as he dragged the last scaly corpse off the officer. “Typical aristo.”

Lundorf scowled as he struggled to sit up, his clothes so soaked with the blood of the slain saurus that they squelched when he moved.

“Hold your tongue, peasant,” he snapped and started to say something else, but the effort was too much for him. Eyes rolling back upwards, Lundorf collapsed back down into unconsciousness.

“Why did you have to say that to him?” Florin scolded Lorenzo, who remained unrepentant.

“You weren’t so delicate,” he defended himself. “Anyway, if it hadn’t been for me we’d never have found him.”

Florin sighed and knelt beside his old friend, rolling him over to see where he was wounded. There was a bone-deep cut along the side of his ribcage, but it seemed to have already clotted, thank Shallya. There was also a bruise as big as half an apple on the back of his skull, although Florin doubted that that would do much harm to a Marienburger.

“He’ll live,” he decided, his surge of relief giving him an idea. “Although we’ll need to find him a minder until we get back to the ships. Lorenzo...”

“What?”

“You’re it.”

Keeping the smile firmly off his face as his servant’s protests degenerated into muttered curses Florin turned and left. It had gradually dawned on him that, with the Colonel dead, there was nobody to give the decision to leave.

Well, he’d soon see about that.

Compared to the council of war they’d held the previous day, tonight’s was a depressing affair. The Colonel was dead, his body vanished. So was Kereveld. Lundorf, bandaged and propped up against one of the chests of gold, slipped in and out of consciousness. And Graznikov...

Well, nobody knew where he was. Graznikov had disappeared.

Nobody had seen him leave, nor had any sign of his body been found. The only clue to his fate had been when they’d come to the Colonel’s old tent and found the pile of treasure disturbed, although even Florin had to admit that that could have been done by anybody.

“I say we go,” Castavelli said, breaking Florin’s chain of thought.

“No point now,” Thorgrimm shook his head and, despite the burn marks which cascaded down the left side of his body, lit his pipe. He inhaled, his bare cheeks bellowing out beneath the few scorched hairs that were all that remained of his beard. It occurred to Florin that he’d never actually seen a beardless dwarf before.

Then it occurred to him that he was staring. And that Thorgrimm was staring back.

“Why is there no point, menheer?” he asked as he hurriedly looked away.

“Because we’ve beaten the enemy. They couldn’t stand against the expertise of my lads’ gunnery. I didn’t even have to use my axe on them.”

“They withdrew,” Florin forced himself to correct the dwarf. “Because Kereveld exploded and sent their monster berserk. They’ll be back, though.”

“How do you know?”

Florin was trying to think of a good enough reply when the sergeant the Kislevites had sent interrupted.

“No matter, all this,” he said, tired of trying to follow all of these ridiculous accents. “Me, my comrades, we go at dawn. Want gold now.”

“So do we,” Castavelli nodded his head eagerly.

“Lundorf?” Florin asked, and the Marienburger nodded.

“Yes, of course we’ll go,” he said, wincing with the pain of nodding his head.

“Good. You see then, Master Thorgrimm, that despite our respect for you, it’s four to one. We go in the morning.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“You can go if you want to. Me and my men will stay here.”

“Why?” Florin’s voice rose in frustration, and he lowered it. “The lizards will return, and they’ll overcome you. There are so many of them... Why won’t you come with us?”

For the first and the last time since Florin had known him a look of uncertainty passed across the dwarf’s face. He reached up to stroke the frazzled stubble which covered the square block of his jaw, and sighed.

“No, we must stay in this wilderness. For at least a year.”

Florin and Castavelli exchanged a mystified glance. Then the Tilean shrugged.

“I understand. All right, you make a good bargain for your men. How much percentage you want to come home with us? My boys, we are very civilised, prefer life to gold. How much you want?”

“Stop,” the Kislevite burst out, not sure if he had understood. “We all take same gold. Contract.”

But Thorgrimm waved both their arguments away. He shifted his pipe from his right hand to his left and felt the naked skin of his cheek. The three of his kinfolk that the comet blast had killed had been the lucky ones. Not for them the humiliation of... of beardlessness.

In fact, Thorgrimm was beginning to wonder if the charm that had saved them from the fire might actually be elvish. Not that it mattered.

“You humans can go,” he said with a miserable sigh. “With our blessing. You weren’t bad, for your kind. But my brothers and I must stay in this wilderness. Our honour demands it.”

“We can take your gold, yes?” The Kislevite asked eagerly, and Thorgrimm’s hand moved in a sudden blur. There was the hum of sliced air, a flash of mirrored steel, and his axe thumped quivering into the corner post behind the Kislevite’s head.

“No,” the dwarf said, taking another draw on his pipe. “We’ll keep our gold.”

The meeting broke up soon after.

* * *

Mage Priest Xinthua Tzequal was content. After the unsettling events with which the battle had been concluded he had immediately sent out runners to all of the surrounding military outposts. Then, after a fortifying meal of tree frogs, he had sat back and reviewed his failed plan of attack.

As he compared the projections he had made for the skirmish with the actual reality, turning each element this way and that within the deep ocean of his intelligence, it became clear to Xinhua whose fault the defeat had been. It had been his.

No feelings of guilt attached themselves to the thought. Such an emotion was as alien to his ancient soul as was pity. Instead he focused on what had caused the errors in his calculations. As always, he decided, it boiled down to a mismatch between the gross physical world and the model of it which he had so carefully built up within his head.

In other words, he had underestimated the enemy, and overestimated his own forces.

Pleased by the elegance of this lesson, Xinhua sent some of his attendants down to the river to find him a dessert of water snakes. Now that he had seen where he had gone wrong, he had nothing to do but to sit back and wait for the forces he had summoned to arrive.

As the sun set, and as the first of the defanged snakes his skinks had brought crunched between his teeth, the first elements of the army arrived. Xinhua sent them to rest and then, for the first time in half a century, closed down his own mind to get a full night's sleep.

Florin was woken at dawn by Lorenzo who, perhaps for once remembering that he was a servant, had brought him a cup of black tea. It was good and sweet, and Florin drank deeply before looking up at his friend.

The hot liquid slopped over the sides of the mug as he burst into a peal of laughter.

"What's so funny?" the smaller man demanded, drawing himself up with a series of clinks.

"How far do you think you'll get with that?"

"Far enough," Lorenzo sniffed, with a metallic jingling. The fragments of gold which he had strapped to himself clanked like armour as he turned, gleaming queasily beneath the greasy sheen his fingers had left on them.

"It must weigh a ton," said Florin. "And don't forget, you'll have to help Lundorf."

"Lundorf's back with his own company. Now that the gold's been divided, nobody's going to waste energy on someone else's wounded."

Florin slurped his tea and nodded. It was understandable. They already had too much treasure to carry out with them. The mercenaries might be willing to sacrifice their own wounded comrades' weight in gold, but not somebody else's.

"And are the men ready to set off?" Florin asked, getting stiffly to his feet and hobbling over to pull back the thatched mat of the door. Like almost everybody the rigors of yesterday's battle had left him feeling as weak and arthritic as an octogenarian.

"All ready to go," Lorenzo nodded, following his master out into the morning mist.

The shapes of the company were dark shadows in the whiteness before him. Those who weren't ready with crudely built stretchers were stooped and hunchbacked, their gargoyle forms bent beneath the weight of their treasure. With the stench of rotting flesh that hung in the air, and the buzzing of the flies, it could well have been a scene from purgatory.

There was a sudden, savage cry from the left, and for a moment Florin jumped. Then he realized that it was just a mule, its distress quickly soothed by somebody with a Bretonnian accent. Florin frowned.

"Does Thorgrimm know we've got one of his mules?" He asked Lorenzo suspiciously.

"Yes, of course he does," Lorenzo said hurriedly. "Shall we get a move on? The Tileans left half an hour ago."

"In a moment. First of all, I want to find Orbrant and do a head count. Make sure we've got everyone. Would you go and tell Thorgrimm we're off, by the way. And thank him for the mules."

"About that..." Lorenzo began, and licked his lips. "The thing is, I knew that you wouldn't want us to steal from the dwarfs. So we bought the mules from him."

"Good idea," Florin agreed. "They're worth all the gold we couldn't carry."

"We didn't pay with gold," Lorenzo said, starting off into the mist.

"What did you pay with, then?" Florin called after him.

"Gunpowder."

"What!"

But Lorenzo, hidden by the billows of rolling fog, didn't appear to hear him. Neither did he care to return until Florin and Orbrant were in the midst of counting off the remains of the company, the pitiful few survivors filing past them and into the first inklings of the rising sun.

There were eleven walking men, in all, not counting Orbrant. They carried with them five of their comrades whose injuries were too great for them to walk, and the two mules, one of which helped to drag another survivor along behind it.

Despite the fact that they were rich men they walked with the lowered heads of destitutes, dragging their feet like dockside beggars. Even Orbrant seemed subdued. He had taken the lead with the grim tread of a chief mourner at a funeral. He'd sheathed his warhammer, the gromril of its head as useless as the gold which weighed down the company, as they hacked a path through the undergrowth.

It was almost noon by the time they'd climbed, struggling and slipping, to the clearing which overlooked the pyramids. Some of the men, staggering by now under their loads, begged for a stop. But Florin, the certainty that the lizardmen were in pursuit combining with the fleeting memory of his capture in this place, refused.

They pushed on, some taking a single backwards glance at the temples. They looked as stark and alien now as they had on the first day they'd seen them. Despite the mercenaries' efforts they seemed untouched by their scraping excavations, unsullied by the litter of rotting bodies they'd left behind.

To Florin, they looked triumphant. He spat in their direction, then followed the last of his men into the jungle beyond, kicking aside a golden goblet one of them had dropped in the path.

Thorgrimm and the remaining dwarfs breakfasted well that morning. After the last of the humans had gone they had built a huge fire pit and burned the remains of their shacks. When the flames had died down into red glowing embers they'd strode amongst the bloody harvest of the enemy, hacking off great steaks of lizard meat to throw upon the sizzling coals.

The blackened steaks were as tough as leather but as succulent as chicken, especially when washed down with wine the Tileans had left. Thorgrimm watched his brothers as they gorged themselves on lizard meat, trying not to stare at the nakedness of their faces as they tried not to stare at his. Grease ran down their uninsulated chins, an obscene sensation that had them constantly dabbing at their faces with strips of cloth.

After the meal, the hot breeze cool on their chins, they took the armour they'd gathered along with the meat and began to build a forge. None of them mentioned what it was they were doing, or why. They didn't need to. It was clear to all of them what needed to be done.

The waning sun combined with the heat of the forge to slick their bodies with sweat as they worked, so that, to the watchers in the trees, their pale bodies gleamed like the cogs of a well oiled machine. An anvil was hacked out of a fallen granite boulder, a trough dug out and filled with water, golden bowls emptied and cleaned to be used as alloy vats.

A few hours later Thorgrimm tried out the first example of their rough, battlefield craftsmanship.

It was perfect. The chief smith had fastened a simple hinge to either side of his helmet and, attached to that hinge, a long, beard-shaped faceplate. As yet there was no decoration on it, none of the scrolling steel curls which each dwarf had imagined, but that didn't matter. Elegance was the last thing anybody needed in such a prosthetic.

Thorgrimm's eyes gleamed with a flinty satisfaction above the top of his new beard, and he nodded his approval. The production line immediately went into operation, work continuing even when the scurrying and crashing in the surrounding jungle became too much to ignore. In a rush of activity the last dwarf was handed his modified helmet, and, even as he crammed its burning weight onto his head, the tree-line split asunder beneath the juggernaut of the enemy.

They caught up with the Tileans at the river where they'd first seen the skinks.

"Hey, you there," Florin cried out as the last of them splashed across to the far bank.

"What do you want?" the mercenary, red-faced and grimacing beneath the weight of a golden statue, growled.

"How about some creamed ice?" Lorenzo sniped, but the Bretonnians were too exhausted to laugh at his wit.

"Where's your captain?" Florin asked the Tilean, who was ploughing on into the jungle beyond.

"Ahead."

“How far?”

The Tilean shrugged, the effort of hunching his shoulders beneath the weight of his loot bringing a wince of pain to his face.

Florin decided to leave him in peace, and contented himself with following silently in the man’s footsteps. The elephant grass that lined this track had already started to grow back, the new shoots fresh and green. Hidden amongst them, ready to turn treacherously underfoot, were abandoned pieces of gold. Orbs and cups and bundles of twisted wire, each of them worth a fortune back in the Old World, had been left to sink back into the earth’s soft embrace.

Florin was tempted to stoop and take at least one of them, but the leather stitching of the satchel he carried was already squeaking beneath the weight of the golden ingots he’d taken. There were a hundred of them, each as long as a man’s thumb, covered in the same blocky hieroglyphs that he’d seen in the temple.

He was looking at a piece of jagged shrapnel which stuck out of the tree ahead like a sign post, the metal already orange with rust, when he stumbled forward over another object. Steadying himself, he turned and kicked the offending object and was surprised to hear, instead of the clink of gold, the dull thud of leather. A water bottle, perhaps, or a wine skin.

“All right boss?” one of his men said as he filed past.

“Yes, fine thanks,” Florin said, and stooped to find the object he’d just kicked. In fact it wasn’t a canteen of either water or wine, but Kereveld’s book.

The edges of the pages were scorched and stained, and the front cover hung from a thread, but it was still legible. Florin flicked through the damp pages as the last of the company marched into the path the Tileans had cleared.

“Why not?” Florin muttered in sudden decision and shoved the book beneath the strap of his satchel.

The sound of marching feet became more ragged as they marched on, the litter of abandoned treasure thicker. Kereveld’s book slipped and chafed against Florin’s skin, and he cursed himself for ever having picked it up. And yet the farther he carried it the more difficult it was to throw away.

He was trying to decide whether or not to finally abandon it when he walked straight into the back of one of his men.

“Sorry,” he said apologetically, and then remembered that he was an officer. “Why have you stopped? We don’t have time to waste.”

The mercenary shook his head.

“Don’t know, boss. Have to ask the Tileans. They’re blocking the path ahead.”

“Let’s see what they’re up to,” Florin said and worked his way past the man and up the line. Soon, by squeezing past the men and tearing his clothes on the brambles which hemmed them in on all sides he drew level with Orbrant just as Captain Castavelli came back down the column.

“What is it?” Florin asked him. “Why have we stopped?”

“We can’t go this way,” the Tilean whispered, sweeping his hat off his head and wringing it between his hands.

“We have to,” Orbrant told him, but the man just looked back over his shoulder fearfully.

“We can’t. They are waiting for us up ahead.”

“Damn,” Florin swore.

“How many?” Orbrant asked. “What kind?”

But before Castavelli could reply a shout of warning cut through the jungle, followed by the crack of a pistol shot. Some of the Tileans pushed backwards against them, wide-eyed with fear and confusion. One of them tried to barge passed Orbrant, who shoved back with an angry curse.

“We’re going to have to fight through ’em,” Florin shouted above the cacophony of raised voices. “We’ve got nowhere to fall back to.”

A distant scream sent another ripple of panic through the claustrophobic masses of their packed ranks, and this time it took a crack from Orbrant’s fist to quell the rush of frightened bodies.

“Castavelli,” Florin said, gripping the Tilean by the shoulder and looking into his frightened eyes. “You have to give the order to advance.”

“Yes,” Castavelli agreed unhappily. “Yes, all right.”

So saying he crammed his hat back onto his head, and took a long, steadying breath. It pushed out his chest and lifted his head so that, with the battered plumage of his head gear he looked as glorious as any farmyard cockerel. Only then did he bellow out the order to advance.

His men shifted and looked back uncertainly. They saw Orbrant.

They advanced.

Thorgrimm and his dwarfs formed a solid phalanx; a square block of muscle and steel. They had left the ruins and the bloodied remains of their own camp behind them now. There was no point in hiding. Their doom was upon them, and they wanted to die well.

Shoulder to shoulder, with their axes buried deep in their enemies’ flesh and the corpses of the fallen heaped around them.

On every side but one saurus warriors stood, their own lines disciplined into the same merciless geometries of the dwarfs’ formation. Yet, despite their numbers, the reptiles made no move to attack.

Thorgrimm, feet planted firmly in the centre of the front rank, eyed them contemptuously and hefted his axe.

“What are you waiting for?” he roared a challenge. “Come, and test your hides against dwarfish steel.”

There was no response from the waiting saurus, save for a single thrash of one of their leader’s tails.

Thorgrimm laughed mockingly.

“Come,” he commanded them. “Let us see if you taste as good as your kin.”

Still the watching ranks remained silent and unmoving, showing neither fear nor aggression. Thorgrimm felt a certain respect for their discipline, and was glad of it. His life was valuable, he didn’t want it to be taken by the unworthy.

A distant series of crashes interrupted his thoughts, the sounds growing slowly louder. Thorgrimm listened and watched, his eyes scanning the patch of jungle the

saurus had left clear. With a determined glint in his eye he reached up to stroke his beard, the feel of cold steel reminding him of his loss.

The light in his eyes became harder.

“Thunderers, ready your weapons. The beast returns. Let us see if our bullets can find the path through its eyes to its brain.”

There was a click as the Thunderers drew their hammers back, and levelled their weapons at the jungle beyond.

The noise of the beast’s approach drew nearer, the devastation of its passage sending flocks of birds screeching upwards out of its path. As Thorgrimm listened to it he began to feel it too, the pounding of its tread drumming a rhythm deep into the bones of the earth.

Then the towering trees ahead began to shake, and bend, and snap like rotten teeth before a fist as the monster burst eagerly through them.

It wasn’t the monster he had expected. That thing had been heavy, yes, and ferocious in the charge. It would have made an excellent enemy. But the thing which now came striding out of the jungle’s dark heart was a thousand times more terrible.

It stood on two legs, its powerful haunches as big as cart horses beneath the smoothly scaled surface of its skin. Its forelegs were tiny by comparison, held up uselessly beneath the sharp ridge of its chest and the vast, permanent snarl of its maw.

“Don’t fire,” Thorgrimm told his gunners. It wasn’t as if their bullets would have done any good against the perfection of the thing’s scale and bone, and sharp, gleaming intelligence.

The monster lowered its head slightly at the command, tiny eyes blinking as it turned its head to one side and sniffed at the air. It was almost a delicate movement, as was the slow step it took forward. Its three taloned toes opened and closed on the soil as though it was eager to seize a firm, predatory hold on the earth.

Then, bending its head even lower it opened its mouth wide, revealing the forest of blades which lined its jaws. Thorgrimm could hear the hiss of its indrawn breath, see the swelling of its vast chest.

He waited for the challenge to come. When it did, the roar shaking the earth and shimmering through the air in a heat haze of pure aggression, Thorgrimm felt an answering roar bellowing from his own throat. Fumbling at the straps of his helmet with a sudden, mad inspiration, he tore it from his head and hurled it at the monster.

The last thing he remembered before a berserk madness sent him charging forwards was the laughter that echoed in his brothers’ throats, and their prayers of thanks to the ancestors that had sent a worthy enemy upon which to annihilate their beardless shame.

Miles distant, another, smaller combat was drawing to its bloody conclusion. It had been swift and violent and, thanks to Orbrant’s sudden appearance, one-sided. The last of the skinks lay scattered about the entrance way to the overgrown canal in which they had been waiting. There had only been nine or ten of them, a spying party rather than an ambush group.

“Not many of ’em.” Florin, who’d fought his way to the front of the congested column of men just in time to miss the fight, said, and kicked one over onto its back. The mouth fell open in a lifeless snarl and he kicked it again.

“At least two escaped,” sighed Orbrant, who was busily cleaning gore from the gromril of his warhammer. “I wonder if we should go after them.”

“No,” Florin decided, peering into the tangled undergrowth into which the survivors had vanished.

Captain Castavelli agreed. “We will run on to the boats,” he decided, and led the column off himself. Florin followed him and, remembering the urgency with which Castavelli had wanted to flee from the handful of skinks, a dozen hilarious jibes sprang to mind. He kept them to himself, though. He quite liked the Tilean, for one thing. And for another, they had enough problems without bickering.

“Well, captain,” he said, stepping up to walk beside him as they entered the long, cavernous hollow which followed the ruined canal. “Looks like we finished off the last of them. Let’s press on anyway, though. Just in case.”

“Good idea,” the Tilean agreed fervently and, shouldering his clinking knapsack, led the way into the gloom of the verdant tunnel beyond.

The bones still lined the slimed depths of the canal, and the sour smell of decay hung heavily in the air. A detritus of leaves and bones and twigs crunched underfoot as the column of men tramped along, as it had the first time they’d been here.

Up ahead, cutting through the darkness like a flare, a slanting column of sunlight marked the exit from this oppressive underworld. Castavelli hung back as Florin stepped forward, slashing the edges of the gap back with his machete and stomping back out into the jungle path. The column followed him as he picked up his pace, marching with anxious speed that soon brought them to their first base camp.

And, more importantly, to their boats.

Only one of them was missing, washed away by the storm, perhaps. The others lay in a neat line in the grass, their hulls baked as white as clay by the sunlight. Chuckling with pure relief Florin knocked on the bottom of one as happily as if it were a tavern door, then turned it over to find the oars tied safely inside.

“Six men and three wounded to a boat,” he announced, his face split open in a wide grin that was reflected on every face. “Come on, lads, we’re not on a picnic. Get a damned move on. Think of all the meat and brandy that’s waiting on the ships.”

“Think of all the girls in Swamptown!” Another voice lent encouragement as they splashed their boats into knee-deep water and started ballasting them with bloodstained gold and bleeding comrades.

“Yes, think of her,” somebody else added. “Her and her tooth both.”

“Well, I want first go.”

“Nah, that’s the boss’ privilege. But don’t worry, you know what they say about officers...”

“Get that boat moving,” Orbrant snapped. The men rolled themselves into it and pushed away into the rippling expanse of the lily-covered lake. Dozens of streams and rivulets flowed from it, the entrances they cut through the surrounding jungle shrouded with steam.

Florin looked at them and frowned doubtfully. Then he looked at Lorenzo, who'd just finished loading a groaning man into their boat.

"Lorenzo..."

"Yes, I remember," he said and, with a sucking splash rolled himself into the long boat with surprising expertise. Florin followed him, rocking the boat clumsily as they pushed off the shore.

"We'll wait here for the rest of the expedition to get into their boats," he said, watching the first of the Marienburgers stumble into the clearing. Lorenzo, who'd taken charge of the steering pole, grunted and pushed them safely off shore. Somehow, the very fact that they were on the water seemed to mark an ending to their ordeal, a cut off point as neat as the end of a play.

As the boat spiralled aimlessly in the gentle currents of the lake Florin leaned back, the sun bright even through his closed eyelids. Yes, a play. He would see a play when he got back home. He'd see a hundred. And he'd have velvet breeches and silk shirts, oysters in cream sauce with chilled champagne and girls whose corsets were big but not big enough.

A slow smile spread across his face as, to the relaxing chirruping of lily frogs, he drifted off into a world of pleasant daydreams.

Half an hour later the harsh singing of the Kislevites who'd crammed into the last boat brought him back to the reality.

"Right then, men," he said, drawing himself up and waiting for them to ready their oars. "How did it go?"

"One," said Lorenzo.

"Two," a couple of the men joined in as they dipped their oars into the water.

"Three!"

The boat shot off, gliding slowly though the lake and towards the safety that lay beyond.

Behind them they left no sign. The ripples faded. The leaves of the lilies closed back in to cover all trace of their passage. The frogs and the dragonflies continued to hunt undisturbed. Apart from the fading patches of scorched earth where their fires had been, the humans might never have existed.

The first of the pursuing skinks stopped to sniff at the month-old embers before slipping effortlessly into the warm embrace of the water. A dozen of its brethren followed it into the lake, then two dozen more. They swam to the beginning of the tributary down which the current had swept their quarry's boats before, at a signal from their leader, they dived down to continue the chase submerged and unseen.

Xinthua Tzequal studied the body that had been brought to him. It was shorter than the others he'd seen, and better built. Indeed, although no bigger than a skink, its bulging muscles had something of the saurian about them. Also, although its skin lacked even the most rudimentary scales, it was tougher than it at first seemed.

This must be one of their warriors, he decided, a type of human saurus to protect their workers. It was an elegant theory and one which had a pleasing symmetry about it. Odd, though, that one of the lesser races should have followed the same path that

the Old Ones had set for the lizardmen. There had been nothing in the ancient texts about that. Could it have been a spontaneous development?

The intriguing possibility danced in the front of the mage's mind, but he had the wisdom to realise that more research was needed. Perhaps it had been a mistake to kill the one surviving captive they'd had?

No matter. He'd have fresh specimens soon enough.

He sat back with a contented sigh, and barked an order to one of the skinks who was operating on the present specimen. With sure, expert moves it cut around the dwarf's scalp, peeling back the skin as two of its fellows got ready with a saw.

Xinhua Tzeqal looked on as the sound of crunching bone filled the clearing and the top of the dwarf's skull was removed. The dead brain inside was all very interesting, but Xinhua decided to wait until he had a live specimen before drawing any more inferences.

Somehow, the Kislevites had managed to get drunk. They passed around a shrinking wineskin as they rowed, the splash of their oars becoming increasingly uneven as the tide sucked, them towards the sea.

The song they were singing collapsed into a chaos of raised voices and harsh laughter, the sound bringing a disapproving frown to Lorenzo's face.

"Lucky swine," he muttered, and jabbed angrily down with the steering pole.

"Foolish swine," Florin corrected him. "They could have brought more gold instead of that poison they brewed up. Did you ever taste any?"

Lorenzo nodded.

"Yes, it was revolting. And to think I swapped a treasure map for a measure of it."

"A treasure map?"

"It's a long story."

The Kislevites', dispute resolved itself and another raucous chorus floated down the string of boats and towards the widening river beyond. In two hours the current had carried them the same distance downstream that it had taken them two days to row up. The muddy bottom of the watercourse had already deepened out of the reach of their steering poles, and its banks had drawn away from them just as eagerly.

The jungle, it seemed, was as keen to be rid of the men's intrusion as they were to be rid of its cloying embrace.

Up ahead, the river curled around in a final oxbow bend and, as the boats were carried around it, a salty breeze picked up to brush across the sweat of their brows. After the constant humidity of the jungle it felt almost chill, a glorious freshness that encouraged the oarsmen to row harder. Their mates, meanwhile, leaned anxiously forward, eyes fixed on the slowly opening horizon as they sniffed at the sea breeze.

The banks of the river suddenly peeled away as the boats slipped forward bobbing up and down on the waves which marked the end of the river and the beginning of the ocean. It stretched away in front of him, as bright and fresh as a new dawn after the suffocating confines of the jungle. Sunlight danced and sparkled on top of the thundering rollers, and the breeze picked up as if in greeting.

Now even the oarsmen paused, joining the search for the ships that should have been waiting for them here. All movement stopped as the men scanned the vast expanse of the distant horizon or peered back towards the tangled shoreline, their oars held dripping out of the water as the current spat them farther out to sea.

“They’re not here,” Lorenzo said at last.

“Of course they are!” somebody shouted at him, his face flushed with sudden anger. “They’ll just be around the corner.”

“Yes, that’s what it is,” his mate agreed and a doubtful chorus of voices rose in hopeful support of the theory.

Lorenzo laughed bitterly.

“All right then, they are here. Look, right in front of you.”

A couple of the men, still unwilling to give up hope, looked towards the expanse of empty water that lay beyond. It stretched as far as the eye could see, the blueness of the ocean misting into that of the sky as it disappeared over the far horizon.

“No,” Lorenzo said. “They’ve left us. Left us for dead.”

This time there was no disagreement, just a series of vicious curses, and one low moan.

“All right then,” Florin said, shaking off the despair that threatened them all. “We’ll set up a camp on the shore for now. Light some signal fires, perhaps.”

He sighed and took a last look at the empty ocean. For all he knew there was nothing between him and Bordeleaux but two thousand miles of empty salt water.

Behind him another explosion of harsh Kislevite cries broke out, and he scowled irritably.

“Ranald’s teeth I wish those damned savages would... would...”

The sentence trailed off as he saw the cause of this latest uproar. This time there was more behind the Kislevites’ raised voices than vodka, dice and sibling rivalry.

This time their rage was directed at a real enemy.

The skinks had chosen this moment to strike. A moment before, the little flotilla had been alone in the muddy expanse of the delta’s mouth, with only the rolling waves and the seagulls that circled high above for company. But now, without even a ripple of warning, the sea was thronging with reptilian life.

Shaking beads of water from their crested heads and blinking the salt out of their eyes, the hunters emerged from the hidden depths below, short spears held clear of the water as they paddled towards their prey.

And their prey had already been chosen. It was the last boat, the Kislevites’ boat. No matter where each new skink breeched the surface it turned and surged towards it, its lithe body drawn to the target like an iron filing to a magnet.

As Florin watched, the first Kislevite died, spraying a fountain of blood over his comrades as he pulled a short-hafted spear from his throat and toppled into the ocean. More spears were thrown, bouncing off armour or slicing through skin as the skinks closed in on the confusion.

A pair of high-crested heads popped out of the water beside the Bretonnians’ boat. They ignored it completely as, blinking water from the yellow orbs of their protruding eyes, they made for the Kislevites.

“Looks like it ain’t our fight after all, boss,” Lorenzo said. “Let’s make for the shoreline.”

“Don’t make such jokes,” Florin snapped, although he’d been turning over exactly the same unworthy thought. “Get us turned round and headed towards the Kislevites. Come on, get a damned move on. Do you want to miss all the fun?”

Once more Lorenzo started to call out the oarsmen beat and, turning reluctantly back into the resistance of the Lustrian current, they rowed towards the quickening violence.

The sea was boiling around the Kislevites’ boat now, rocking it dangerously against the swell as scaly claws gripped its gunwales, onyx sparked against steel and bodies were pushed back and forth.

There was a high-pitched scream, cut off by a terrible gurgling sound, as another one of the human warriors was slain. This time, the man’s body fell halfway out of the boat, the dangling arms and torso making a bridge over which more skinks scampered.

Desperate orders were hurled about as water started to surge into the listing boat, and half the Kislevites threw themselves against the opposite side in an attempt to keep it from capsizing. The skinks took advantage of the collapsing defence and scampered over the gunwale, only to be cut down by the Kislevite sergeant’s axe. Bloodshot eyes glinting with a berserker rage he lunged at the skinks, a white froth of spittle flecking the tangle of his beard as he roared a blasphemous combination of curses and prayers.

Scale and bone slit asunder beneath the northerner’s frenzied attack, and as Florin’s boat came level the skinks drew back. His men shipped their oars and hefted their weapons.

For once, the lizards were outnumbered. Bretonnians and Kislevites chopped downwards in a flurry of steel as their two boats drifted closer together, and the skinks, their fearlessness matched only by their tactical good sense, fled from the killing zone. Risking their tails to the vengeful steel of the humans they dived down, resurfacing to swim in a wide circle around them.

As they fled a wild cheer rose up, echoing from throat to throat as the skinks swam clear.

Florin cheered too, although he knew that it was only a respite. The skinks hadn’t retreated, they had merely regrouped. Even now, fresh swarms were emerging from the depths of the jungle and disappearing into the depths of the sea, bobbing up to join the survivors of the first attack.

His comrades’ cheering grew louder as Florin licked his lips and studied the enemy. It seemed a shame to dampen the men’s spirits, but regardless of their morale it was time to prepare for the next assault.

“Watch out,” Florin warned, raising his voice above the celebrations. “They’re going to hit us again. Get ready!”

He readied his machete just as a dark, cold shadow fell across his back. Gritting his teeth he looked back over his shoulder, ready to face whatever fresh horror the jungle had sent against them.

He gaped stupidly when he saw what it was, and at last he understood what all the cheering had been for.

Bearing down on them, the sea curling into a sparkling filigree before the sharp edge of her bows, came the *Destrier*.

"There you go, Master Graznikov," Gorth grinned, slapping the pale-faced Kislevite on the shoulder. "Told you that you were mistaken."

"Yes," the Kislevite nodded unhappily, and ran his fingers nervously through the satchel of treasure he wore. With an obvious effort he squeezed his cheeks up into a big smile, although the fear never left his eyes.

"And captain? No to tell the men I said they were dead, yes? Don't want to hurt their feelings."

Gorth's grin grew wider, until it resembled a shark's.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, watching the sweat bead on Graznikov's forehead as the first of the mercenaries tumbled onto the deck of the ship. "They'll probably think it a fine old tale to tell back home. Anyway, they'll want to reward Costas. If he hadn't looked back just before we lost sight of the coast, or if his eyes had been a little less sharp... Well, friend Graznikov, it doesn't bear thinking about, does it?"

There was a sudden bang as one of the longboats the sailors were hauling up hit the hull. Then a sudden pause, the crew's usual foul-mouthed efficiency silenced by what they saw glinting in the bottom of the boat.

"Please, captain. It would only upset them. Say I asked you to wait."

One of the mercenaries, a Bretonnian who Graznikov didn't recognize, seemed to recognize him. He turned and tapped one of his mates on the shoulder. Within minutes even more faces had been turned in his direction.

"Please, captain," the Kislevite hissed, the false smile melting away like butter in a frying pan. "Don't tell them I said they were all dead. I thought they were."

Despite the fact that Gorth seemed not to hear him, Graznikov lowered his voice.

"I'll pay you."

There was another series of bumps and booms as the sailors manhandled the longboat onto the deck, and then tipped it out. Amongst the bloodied cloth and blunted weapons a hundred misshapen golden fragments gleamed, twinkling like fallen stars against the dark woodwork. The sailors lapsed into a reverential silence at the sight.

Gorth licked his lips, the only movement in a face gone suddenly still.

"Is that real?" He asked quietly.

"Yes, yes. It's real," Graznikov told him, desperately trying to ingratiate himself.

"Well, then. Looks like you don't have enough to bribe me with. Sorry."

A look of sheer terror passed across Graznikov's face as Gorth leapt down onto the main deck, the better to study the haul.

"Looks like it wasn't a wasted journey after all," he told Florin, who was too busy watching his men gathering up the spilt gold to have seen Graznikov yet.

"Wasteful enough," Florin replied. "Van Delft didn't make it. Neither did a dozen of my men."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Gorth said, and it was true. Even so, his eyes glinted with the pleasure of seeing so much treasure.

On the far side of the ship more sailors stood lined up whilst their mates recovered the expedition's boats and men. Armed with a motley collection of hunting bows and handguns they'd been standing ready to guard against the strange, reptilian goblins that their arrival had driven back into the shallows.

Gorth roused himself from his appraisal of the loot, and nodded towards the shoreline where the enemy waited, eyes held above the water like giant frogs despite the occasional shot that churned into the water between them.

"Who are your friends?"

"No friends of mine," Florin scowled humourlessly, and glared past the strangely familiar figure that stood silhouetted on the foredeck and into the jungle beyond. It seemed to glare back, the great stinking mass of it as threatening and as alien as the first day he'd seen it.

Yet despite the men he'd lost to it, and the blood, Lustria's hungry wilderness no longer filled him with fear. He had faced it, after all, . had taken every peril and every beating that it could throw at him.

And he'd won.

A wolfish smile appeared on Florin's gaunt face, and the falling sun caught the glint of victory within the hollows of his eyes.

"I beat you," he whispered, the chill ocean breeze carrying his boast into the steaming jungle beyond. Behind him he heard more gold clinking onto the deck. His smile grew wider.

Graznikov, who was still huddled against the stern rail, saw the expression and whimpered with fear.

"Treacherous dog," he quietly cursed Gorth. He'd seen the captain talking with that psychotic Bretonnian, and a second later his face had twisted up into that terrible snarl.

The *Destrier* rolled beneath a wave, and Florin took a step forwards. That was the final straw for the Kislevite. His world collapsed into a single calculation, a weighing of the odds of survival in the jungle balanced against the odds of survival on a ship full of the mercenaries he'd tried to abandon there.

It was an easy calculation.

With barely a second's hesitation, Graznikov kicked off his boots and, holding them in one hand and pinching his nose with the other, vaulted over the railing and into the sea beyond.

There was a cry of alarm from behind him, the call suddenly cut off by the hiss of the cold water which closed in over his head. The momentum of his fall sent him plunging down into the silty depths, spinning him around until, even when he opened his stinging eyes against the murky salt water, he had no sense of up or down..

Another man might have panicked. Tumbling down through a drowning void of blinding water, the hiss of his own blood whispering terrible rumours of suffocation in his ears, another man might have lashed out blindly, muscles burning the last of his oxygen as he pulled blindly through the murk.

Not Graznikov though. For all of his faults he was a Kislevite, and Kislevite blood is strong. If he was a coward that was a matter of choice rather than instinct.

With a discipline forged by his inbred survivor instinct he forced himself to wait, floating as limply as a corpse through the bubbles and currents that would soon send him bobbing up towards the surface.

He waited for a few seconds more.

Any minute now, he told himself, I'll float back towards the surface. My boots are full of air, my body is lighter than water, my clothes...

Then he remembered the bag that he'd strapped around his shoulders, and the gold that it contained.

A whimper of panic sent a mouthful of precious air twinkling up towards the surface as he sank further down. He fumbled at the straps of the satchel, tugging at them uselessly. They seemed to have become tangled in his shirt.

Eyes wide against the stinging salt water Graznikov sank further, water pressure starting to squeeze at his temples, black spots of oxygen starvation whirling through the silt that clouded his vision.

Now he was pulling at the hem of his shirt, trying to squirm out of the whole murderous tangle of cloth and leather and useless gold. It was no good. The burning in his lungs began to fade and his panic slipped away.

Death, it seemed, was at least comfortable.

But then he felt his rescuers' hands upon him. Some seized his shoulders in an iron-hard grip. Others grasped his ankles or his wrists, their bodies churning the water around him as they pulled him back up towards the surface.

Graznikov felt the pressure receding as they ploughed upwards, and sunlight began to glow through the muddied water. A moment later, just as the garrotte of suffocation was about to snuff out his breath for good, Graznikov felt his head thrust back out of the sea and into the air above.

He sucked in great, gulping mouthfuls of air, pain flooding through his head as the numbness of drowning faded. A wave punched into his face, forcing water into his open mouth. He vomited it back up before gasping down another delicious lungful of air.

His rescuers, seeing his plight, lifted him higher above the surface, their fingers pinching into his flesh. But Graznikov didn't mind. The pain felt good. It meant that he was alive.

He turned to thank the nearest of his rescuers. It looked back expressionlessly with cold, alien eyes. As the ships fell behind him, and as the Lustrian coast drew nearer, Graznikov began to scream.



EPILOGUE

It had been well worth the Inconvenience of the journey. Not only had it afforded him with the opportunity to hone his tactical skills but, more importantly, he had gained personal experience of a whole new race.

Yes, Xinthua Tzequal considered his decision to investigate this small matter to have been a wise one. These sea folk, or coastal apes as he'd decided to rename them, were fascinating animals. So fascinating, in fact, that he was contemplating subjecting their humble species to his full attention for the next few decades.

It was a shame that battlefield necessity had compelled him to kill their shaman, but that was only a short term setback. Already, his skinks had been dispatched, scurrying northwards to the small colony of the creatures that clung so tenuously to the coast. When they returned, their captives would provide months of interest.

The mage let this thought spin lazily through his mind. His eyelids lowered contentedly as it vanished into the stillness of his consciousness, leaving behind it a void, a blank immensity of pure, unsullied awareness in which he bathed like a chameleon in sunlight.

The novel sound of sobbing brought him back from that blissful emptiness. Xinthua swallowed and blinked, the myriad lenses of his eyes adjusting to the failing evening light. The skinks, it seemed, had found a survivor after all in the coastal waters. They had shackled the noisy creature to the palanquin which had held their previous captive, and the mage priest watched with interest as it tested its paltry strength against the solid gold of its chains.

Xinthua hummed with pleasure.

"Your success pleases me," he told the first-spawned, sending the skink's crest rising into a vermillion fin of delight. "Now bring the dissecting tools. I wish to examine this specimen fully."

Far above, the red ball of the sun disappeared over the tangled horizon of the jungle. The azure heights of the sky faded to the sheer black of the universe beyond, the stars glittering with an icy splendour that cared nothing for the pain of the world below.

Night drew on and the stars grew brighter. They lit the steaming depths of Lustria's interior with a pale luminescence, turning her swirling mists into blinding

fogs. They burnished the waves that battered against her shores, setting their crests alight with a white fire that was fierce enough to match their rolling thunder.

And, out in the black expanse of the midnight ocean, they glowed upon the stained sails of three fleeing ships. They billowed and snapped gleefully, the canvas as fat with wind as the ships' bellies were with gold.

In the crow's nest Florin shivered, and sniffed happily at the clean salt tang of the air. Around him the rigging sang, humming a discordant lullaby in the darkness.

Or perhaps, he considered, as he lay back and wriggled his toes, it was trying to warn him of dangers to come. It was all the same to the Bretonnian. After all, whatever lay ahead couldn't possibly be any worse than the living nightmares which thrived within Lustria's dark heart. Nothing could be that bad.

Nothing at all.

The thought brought an easy smile to his face and he stretched, and sighed. Then he wrapped the ragged remains of his cloak around him and drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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