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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SCORCHED EARTH: A FUTURE HISTORY OF
PLANET EARTH ***

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SCORCHED EARTH
A Future History of Planet Earth

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Note from Author: April 2004

This was my first novel committed to paper during my initial year of college 1979-80. I was studying Film Production with the goal to becoming a screenwriter/director.

Life rarely allows most of us the opportunity to achieve our life-long goals but this did not stop me from pushing-on with my writing. I recently realised that the real joy of writing was not in the money and fame that comes with publication but the thrill that comes with the appreciation of something that is a monumental undertaking - such as, that of writing a book.

I do aspire to be published at some point, but for now I wish to have the world-at-large read my works and hopefully to enjoy them.

I only request this one thing from the reader - please drop me an email to let me know that you have looked at my work and your honest (and critical) opinion of my material.

Please enjoy, and I thank-you.

Walter D. Petrovic

THE FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF OUR WORLD

APOCALYPSE - THE BLUE INFINITE

The idea simply was. The single Spirit had begun what was to be the test for its being-its endurance and tolerances. It was set into motion by great hands and the power of will, churning the infinite matter and energy and bringing into being the stunning light of a living state. Matter collapsed into itself, separating from chaotic waters the vapours, the gases and ice-imploding into a bottomless abyss that collected everything into one single focus-and not excluding the pureness of the energy itself.

Everything was brought together at one point and at one instant-fire and the waves, also. Everything

was made grand and rock hard, held together by their infinite natures and limits.

The Universe simply was. All its heavenly bodies were compelled to turn and to make their way into infinite end, while they grew in nature and in kind, making their firmament and their gleaming lights to be awakened at their first moment of life-their first day. Time had begun, and with its cycles of night and day, seconds and light years, stellar light joined the spheres in moments so brief as to deny comprehension, in a time that spanned infinite dreams.

Light was life. With this life, the ages passed into a third order. As if a single day had passed twice from awakening, the heralding joys of this new-found life had permitted growth to those things named leaves and trees-the fruits by which the life to come would consume and hitherto live.

Perpetuation . . . assurance by tiny seed that beat with life in a harmonious pulse, the genesis of a new life within the ground that would grow to feed the firmament with breath and thus tempting more life to be.

The further ordered time had lapsed. In passing as if five thousand, thousand years flashed by instantly. In these times the Universe was seen as it reeled and smiled, content with the pleasures of being. Freedom had taken its accounting. Life left the dark waters for the light of land. Propagating in their kind they were of dual sexes, soon to cover the expanse of their terran home.

The Thought knew itself. The Thought was life. The Thought prompted into Its Being the struggle to survive in the harshness of its new awareness and substance.

Flesh came from the earth. Blood coalesced from the dew of morning and eyes that could see the new wonder were carved from the Sun's own rays. Intelligence sprang from the swiftness of the clouds covered by the veins and hair, born from earthly grass and breathing with the life of the wind's own spirit. Each substance could feel and find meaning for its life. The flesh heard, the eyes saw and the souls could smell the life to its fullest beauty. The veins of life knew the touch of life, and the currents of blood tasted life's sweetness. Bones claimed life's stature through endurance while new thoughts explored their cravings and their urges. They knew their pleasures and their joys.

Man was the life and death that followed. The thoughts that served him well in understanding his infinite life had set him to prey upon his own kind and in falling from his cosmic grace, he found mortality through his love for woman.

He cleaved only to her. He obeyed and honoured only her. He permitted his gift to fail him for a suggestion that there was more to life than the bliss of a simple and peaceful being.

There was more than long life and contentment in a world of fruitful abundance, to use at their slightest whim. Yet, all this was to pass away from sight when they allowed their manners to fail them. Whims of habit overtook them and tore them from the eternity of the Universe and its Grand Thought. The Grand Thought that no longer would care for them, but indeed set them onto a path of struggle for survival.

Impatience reigned on a tiny speck of universal dust. The Earth suffered from that day when curious questions began to jab at its Heart, and to tear into the very atoms that insured existence. Life was aware of impending mortality and that life, which called itself Intelligent and Humanity, had turned its struggle to live into one of greed and self-fulfilment.

Millennia passed, witnessing countless struggles between the intelligent human beings who warred over arid and barren parcels of land which could be traversed by foot in a fraction of a day.

Love was locked out of the hearts of men, and hate was to ravage the civilized. Hate and greed tempted all whom were alive to hurt their own kind, and to hurt their stellar home, as well. Through six thousand years, minds and souls searched for truth but turned their hearts away, from the few which had come to help them. They allowed their violations to stain and bloody their souls. They carried on as if nothing could touch them in life, or in death.

Mankind took command of everything and like maggots devouring rotting flesh, grew in knowledge and in material things until the very essence of life itself was at their command.

It became an unsure and frightening time in the Earth's history. Mankind had now realised that the total destruction of everything that they knew, and craved for, could happen within minutes. It was destruction that they, themselves, could cause through the slightest whim ruled by hate. Through pangs of anxiety, the Earth itself spewed forth fire from its bowels. The land shook and called its children, that circled close to her, to come and fall to her bosom and to cry with her.

Even the Earth, the mother, waited anxiously for the Idea and the Essence to intervene.

GINN-JULY 2011

A MOVEMENT TO FINALITY

The Twentieth Century was ravaged by bloody wars and more people lost their lives than in all the wars and all the murders that took place since the dawn of history, and the ancient account of the first murder.

Paranoia reigned on the Earth. Great multitudes scurried about in panic searching for shelter and trying to live without substance or material things. Individuals watched the great Nations rise up against each other 3/4 pulling in all smaller nations to fight beside them, thus perpetuating the global conflict. Twice were such great wars. Many smaller wars were the same, though thoughts in such conflicts were suppressed by being called "police actions!"

Tensions formed between all peoples.

Politics, economics and retarded beliefs set the course for the world to crumble.

Latent barbarism that peeked through the veneer of intelligence and civilisation was set to push the world to its final conflagration. Then, at the verge of bloodshed and misery, nature itself began its assault. Dozens of man named Apollo Asteroids, which circles the Earth, had been moving closer and closer over the millennia, unseen by the naked eye. Ignored by the stupid and the intelligent alike, these rocks fell to the Earth in great fury, blasting the entire surface of the great home.

False prophets cried to the people to repent of their sins, for God had come. They hid themselves in shelters and in mountains afraid of mortality, to be punished for being hypocrites while hoarding and hiding great wealth for use in later times.

When all was done great cities were laid waste and disease moved across the land and seas to visit all people. A billion individuals perished in the cosmic catastrophe. A billion more dropped dead from the diseases that could no longer be controlled.

When normality finally returned those who remained alive united to rebuild the planet. People of absolute opposing views on Politics, Religion and life in general, let their hate go from them and so began civilisation anew. However, each of the sides still had their own future plans and desires. Soon thereafter everything was rebuilt and they resumed in their previous and hateful ways. The people, called Communists, still had cravings to rule the entire world. Those, called peaceful and democratic, were not far from similar aspirations. In utter stupidity, arms were again manufactured for defence.

Trusting no one, the people called 'Americans' resumed in their secret building of great subterranean cities across the face of the North American Continent. These were the cities that were conceived and under construction since the great destruction of two Japanese cities during the period called World War II. Having been the wealthiest of the Earth's nations, the Americans continued with their early nuclear war survival plans, designated as "Proposition Blue". It was this proposal that expedited the construction and populating of those cities named the Omega Sub-Ground Installations: (O.S.G.I's).

Constructed near more populous areas and connected by underground pneumatic travel tubes, each city was designed to host some one thousand individuals made up of the chosen elite. These were the scientists, artists and other members from the intellectual community. The 1950's through the 1980's saw the building and populating of seven O.S.G.I's at the following locations across North America:

OMEGA 1 - SOUTH: Near Eldorado, Texas

OMEGA 2 - NORTH: Near Burke, South Dakota

OMEGA 3 - WEST: Near Pioche, Nevada

OMEGA 4 - EAST: Near Toronto, (Canada)

OMEGA 5 - CENTRAL: Near Manhattan, Kansas

OMEGA 6 - ATLANTIC: Near Atlanta, Georgia

OMEGA 7 - PACIFIC: Near Vancouver, (Canada)

Greatly endangered in the asteroid disaster of the late Twentieth Century, most the cities still survived. Only two cities were utterly destroyed: OMEGA - 2 and 5. These cities were amongst America's greatest achievements, next to their endeavours in space. All the cities were under strict military control, watching the intellectuals and providing them with necessities, to keep them content.

In the first years of the 1990's, however, many of the scientists in these cities were made aware that a nuclear war was inevitable. Unable to control their own consciences and knowing that billions would die, so that they could live, they rose up against the military and passed out of these cities and into the public. They published a document which they called their "Blue Prospectus". This "Blue Prospectus" revealed their government's survival intentions. With adverse feelings towards their respective government, the masses marched on their capital demanding equality to enter these, but nothing was accomplished. The solar catastrophe had occurred and the reasons for their mass discontent were subsequently forgotten.

By the end of the 1999, just over a full year following the asteroid destruction of the Earth's surface, mankind had managed to rebuild their cities and start life anew. Enjoying totally new styles of living, no individual was really poor. The technological advancements during that year of peace were astounding and the entire world now benefited from them.

New sources of power were discovered following great tectonic upheavals caused by the impacting asteroids; small, crystal-like minerals were pushed to the Earth's surface. Their properties were pure and vigorous. Their radiation became useful for everything imaginable.

Remaining secret, those Americans that survived on the surface and those from the O.S.G.I's, converted their power sources to utilise the new crystals. Entire cities were powered by two crystals, no larger than walnuts.

Plans were formulated to build colonies in space, beginning with orbital stations and finally lunar and Martian colonies. These colonies were to be powered by the new crystals and materials for building the colonies would come from the asteroid belt; the very origin of the Earth's cataclysm.

Laser instruments, of innovative design and use, were built to take advantage of this new crystal power. Many of these lasers were used for medicine, however, and only a few thousand weapons were developed, for the police. The police rarely used them, having been given electrostatic guns that inhibited nerve synapses, and in that manner had several non-injured reprobates to their list of captured. The laser weapons that were not used by the police were channelled into the O.S.G.I's, to be taken care of by the city administrators.

During these years of revived human civilisation and technology, there came a movement of great intensity that called for the disarming and dismantling of all destructive weaponry around the world.

The Communist nations were prepared to agree with America and its allied nations. Although there were internal conflicts within the Communist nations, leading to their eventual fall, the governments that emerged from the revolutions eventually fulfilled many promises and commitments to which they were previously committed.

Both great nations dismantled their arsenals and the Americans remained quiet regarding their O.S.G.I's, never recalling those who were assigned to live within them. Not many years following the fall of the Communist Nation, called The Soviet Union, another Communist nation called China, started to experience similar internal problems. Young people and those wishing to have an easier life for themselves, rallied and called for their nation to be more democratic and capitalistic. By the turn of the Twenty-first Century new borders were drawn all about the planet. New cooperations and friendships were formed, even between those people that were considered as past enemies.

Religious societies began to gather strength about the planet, and new societies formed daily. Their influence and power started to influence the politics of the nations where they formed and soon many of these people were in control of those nations. Religious dogmatism had overtaken the sensibilities of most people that were alive. The polarisation that had formed in religious belief was greater than any political ideology. Fighting had ensued everywhere and lead to another great war.

New weapons were produced utilising the new found crystal energy. These new weapons were used.

Violence and war waged on. In the final year, the religious societies openly confronted the politically controlled military, everywhere. Through subversion, propaganda and assassination, these societies panicked the world's population, further forcing the planet's people to take sides.

Every group called themselves "The Saviours Of The Earth," believing that they were sent by God

Himself, to turn the planet into a second Eden.

Not a single soul was saved.

Millions died, and many more perished in subsequent plagues and famines, which spread throughout the entire world.

The surface of the planet was virtually destroyed. Only those people that had some natural protection, and those who remained in the O.S.G.I's survived.

For many centuries the survivors, underground, were put into cryogenic suspension to await the day they may walk and live upon a newly healed Earth.

GINN-NOVEMBER 2027

THE NEXT AGE: THE PREDECESSORS

A thick mist encircled the Earth for many years, slowly dissipating as it radiated out into space. The greater portion of the world was devastated; a population of billions, reduced to several million score. Once great cities were wiped clean from the face of the earth. Those that were spared stood like majestic mountains. With time, they also crumbled away, turning into gigantic mounds that were loosely held together by rusty girders, brittle concrete and broken glass.

Bands of strange-looking humans roamed the face of the land foraging for the scarce and much-valued commodities of food and fresh water.

In the years following the deluge, the surface dwelling survivors died out from exposure to radiation and to the adverse climactic conditions that were inherited from the global fall out.

The progeny of the survivors became strange in appearance and behaviour until they all became new forms of humans, evolved from mutants, to small hybrid races which soon became as distinct and individual as those humans that lived in the late Twentieth Century. The amalgamation of these races found that great tension had formed between them, due to their differences in appearances and forms of speech, and so they broke away from the main body of humanity and headed for their own select areas of the continent.

Many of these new races of humans ventured forth and eventually established unique civilisations. One race went to the extreme western part of the North continent. Everywhere, they found small pockets of survivors and conquered them. They looted their food stores and used those people as slaves; so becoming a feared band of humans that resembled upright, and very dark featured, apes. They called themselves the Teniqués. Those in the east were afraid that the Teniqués would begin to move back their way but although they were warlike, they stayed put and were soon forgotten.

Concentrated cells of normal humans were still alive. They were the ones who lived in the mountainous regions of the continent and although most became larger in size than normal humans, they were the most in resemblance to the people living during the Twentieth Century. They were hunters and gatherers, moving from valley to, in both the eastern and the western mountains. These were amongst the first people to be conquered by the Teniqués, in their move westward. In the east, there was also a race of perfectly normal looking humans called the Sédash. They were a group of hermaphrodites that were compiled and exiled by the rest of human mutants, who disliked them, since they most closely resembled the previous normal humans. The hermaphrodites wandered for many years until a place to settle was found. They began to build a culture that they based on total equality between individuals.

Yet, the Sédash soon became intolerant to any other forms of human. They developed a belief that they were divinely chosen to be "superior and perfect," and so they enslaved and mistreated those who happened to trespass on their city boundaries. For mating, only the true hermaphrodites were allowed to propagate. After several generations of regulated breeding, a pure-bred race of hermaphrodites was formed.

There was another similar band of humans in the eastern part of the northern Continent. They called themselves the Palatkans. Their appearance was much like that of lepers. They had segregated themselves from the main stream years before the great cataclysm. They congregated in long strips of semi-fertile land on the floor of lengthy canyons.

Following several generations of their offspring, they bore a race of ugly and canker-covered beings

that developed a culture of cannibalism.

They believed that all the other humans were left on Earth for them to sacrifice to their gods, then to feast. They were aware of a life force that permeated everything and that was significantly concentrated within the flesh of humans.

Many such bands of human beings were alive, over the entire face of the Earth. Most of these peoples contained and confined themselves within special areas of land and rarely ventured out.

Six centuries passed since the cataclysm.

Lack of productivity and raw stock caused the remaining human people to further mutate into odd looking things. Civilisation had also regressed into a primitive form. Much of the Earth reverted into the appearance of the primitive and the primordial, awaiting the moment to be reborn.

The Earth was not alone in its anxiety for rebirth. There were nearly one quarter of a million true humans that waited, also, to be reborn craving to, once more, walk the mother Earth's surface, and to begin life anew. In six hundred years of waiting, the population of the Omega SubGround Installations grew. To extend the food and water rations, the major part of the personnel was placed in cryogenic suspension vaults upon attaining the age of thirty-five.

Most, of age, personnel stayed to be suspended in animation but some were granted the permission to leave the cities and try to reestablish life wherever they could find hospitable environments. Contact was not kept with those who had left. Only on hearsay did anyone know how these people fared.

Many headed towards the eastern shores where they successfully took up oceanic livelihoods, and so began the city, later to be called, Besten. Others made their way to the mountains and met up with other bands of self-exiled people. They took to herding goats, and sheep; and whatever other animals that were left alive, they could catch to domesticate.

The people took to catching and taming the Continent's greatest animal mutations: gigantic eagles that were as high as trees. These people learned to fly them and use them as beasts of burden. These agrarian peoples were called the Krolalins and the Virunese.

The time had come, in the O.S.G.I's, where all those people in cryogenics were awakened. They organized into groups of thousands then left to set up individual and distinct villages, towns and cities.

The Earth was becoming clean again. Air and water sparkled with freshness and the entire world returned to green.

The only people to stay in the O.S.G.I's were the scientists, carrying on with their work (in every field), as it was done in the Twentieth Century. With those that left and built cities, these cities adapted to a simpler way of life and craved not to progress much in their technology. They did not crave to progress very much in their technology. They did not want the responsibilities that went with having technology. They found that they were just as happy without it, and their attitudes were civilised enough to accept and give their blessings to those still utilising the ancient ways. By 2500 C.E., many of the O.S.G.I's were back to a comfortable size of around four hundred people. Some O.S.G.I's lost people so readily and quickly, that a few had become abandoned and forgotten.

All those who left the cities tried to track down some of their old comrades, heading in the direction of newly established settlements and subsequently joining with some of them.

The surface cities began to grow and the O.S.G.I's were beginning to be emptied, with only a few hundred older people remaining in some of them.

In those Omega cities, that were still densely populated, power struggles often took place. Some of these people who became the leaders, by force or otherwise, set up a form if thought that denied the life and events of the Twentieth Century. Some even went as far as stating that the Twentieth Century never happened, and so proclaimed themselves as Kings, Queens and other types of monarchials because they were descended from the intellectuals who "made the world" what it was. During this period, everyone that was a descendant of these people was given the title "BLUE" — from the old Proposition Blue code since they were from the Great Line of Knowledge.

There were men, in the BLUE, who disagreed with the idea that the Twentieth Century never happened, and long debates were engaged to discuss it.

These debates and periodic skirmishes were the original cause for the initial emigration from the cities. Similar events sparked moves in each of the Omega S.G.I's.

Reginald Jones was a BLUE who opposed the "never happened" dogma, and his life was, at several times, threatened.

Reginald was suppressed from speaking in the city parliament and seeing that he lacked any other option, he removed himself from politics and searched for a wife.

He wasn't successful, though, since his public image had made women avoid him, for fear of being ridiculed. As it had happened, many centuries and aeons ago, a man had been denied comfort for-want-of a fundamental principle way of thought. Reginald became lonely.

Then in 2542 C.E., Reginald found a baby boy abandoned in a genetics lab when he was going to work. Announcements were made for the parents to take the boy back but soon it was found that the two teenagers responsible for the child had run away from the OMEGA 4 EAST City.

They were never found and Reginald's need for companionship made him adopt the child and so he became responsible for him. He gave him the name of Hosea, who grew up to be a brilliant man and a great political leader in the OMEGA 4 EAST City.

Hosea became the most powerful man in the city's parliament, keeping tensions at bay, but allowing the people to think freely. He had allowed debates to continue, concerning the existence of the Twentieth Century and he had, himself, held to the belief that there was a civilisation that they had descended from. He had computer disks and video tapes, books and photographs all showing the life as it was in the ancient past. This was proof. It was proof that could never be used but Hosea was the kind of man that was eager to see what conclusions would be brought by his colleagues by just using logical reasoning.

A conclusion, of sorts, had been found. It was a forced conclusion and had occurred at a time the people of the city were looking for some real direction.

Hosea had been electrocuted at age of ninety-six, while he was trying to make improvements on solar-electric power sources. He was well known for this pursuit within his city.

Hosea's first son was named Cano and when he was young he exhibited a strange spiritual aura and it was an unanimous decision, by the city fathers, to have him trained at the Monastery of St. Tobias, outside the city.

In 2580 C.E., at eighteen years of age, Cano completed his studies of religious history, and other related topics, at the monastery. He became a spiritual healer and a leader, and he later changed his name to Canon Di'Vaticanus.

He was a well-liked man, at first, who seemed stable and secure considering that his mother, Hosea's first wife Anna, deserted both of them when Cano was only twelve.

She had travelled to BanGor where she had become the High Priestess of the Cults, since she was able to endure the rains, without allowing herself to fornicate. All her daughter-descendants replaced her as the High Priestess. Anna was an ecologist while at the OMEGA 4 East City and she had developed a counter-agent that let her and whomever else took the drug, capable of tolerating being caught in the rain without having instantly become sexually deranged.

In 2600 C.E., Hosea married his fourth wife (having lost both his second and third to early death). Her name was Ruth and she was regarded as the best in her field of Aging research. In fact, in the same year of their marriage, Ruth had made a break-through by perfecting a drug that retarded the ageing process.

The first human to test the drug was Hosea when he became mortally ill and with the taking of the drug he miraculously recovered.

The drug was primarily kept for those in the Line of Knowledge but Ruth had sold some to other people in the city for certain favours and services.

In 2601 C.E. Ruth bore Hosea's second son named Gavin. During the same period when Ruth was giving birth, Canon spoke out against the age retardant drug calling it "evil", and in late of the same year, Canon disappeared with a stock supply of the developed drug.

A few years later, Ruth was imprisoned by Hosea for infidelity and he took her formula away from her. When Gavin turned sixteen, he left the OMEGA 4 EAST City and travelled to the southernmost part of the continent where three huge highlands surrounded a lush valley that was the city of Pomperaque, in Lower Phoride. He made his home on the highest mountain and changed his name to the name of the mountain and became, for the city of Pomperaque, a great oracle. A seer and a prophet whose visions

always came to pass. He never seemed to die or grow old; he never had a wife or children, abstaining from all sexual contact. He kept himself pure in mind and body, while he prayed to the one great Living God, to which the majority of Twentieth Century man prayed.

The years passed, then in 2630 C.E., Hosea married his fifth and final wife, Margaret, who in 2635 C.E., gave birth to twins, Richalé and Dioneza.

The following year, Margaret died trying to give birth to a premature baby that also died, and two years after that, Hosea was killed in an electrical mishap. During the subsequent years, the twins grew and each had entered their own peculiar studies. Dioneza studied telepathy and when she turned fifteen she was asked to join the OMEGA operations Council as a reward for her progress, unsurpassed by anyone of her age. She, like Hosea, kept the title "BLUE" from her name.

When Dioneza received her appointment to the council, the Canon Di'Vaticanus returned from his forty-nine year trek in the wilderness of the Northern Continent.

He was eighty-eight years old but he only looked like he was approaching forty. He met his pretty half-sister and immediately began having sexual designs on her, wanting to procreate with her and to have her carry out many of his strange requests.

With her telepathic ability, she saw into his mind and knew exactly what kind of a man he was. She saw in his mind the memories of the forty-nine years that he spent away from Omega 4 EAST city. She had seen that he studied ancient prophesies and obtained his fulfilment from history but she also saw the destruction of his spirit with his fall into accepting all forms of depravity, especially those of a sexual nature. She had seen his encounters with men, women, children, animals and all manner of mutated freaks — all in his attempts to reach total spiritual awareness. After Dioneza had asked a friend to be her protector, the Canon turned to hating her and cursed her with a violent death. He had no problems finding other diversions. Young companions he desired came to do his bidding, and soon he had the young Janis Topler beside him, wherever he went.

Janis soon became pregnant with his child and eventually gave birth to him in mid-2651 C.E.

Soon, thereafter, Janis was banished from the city and Canon took the boy into his care, baptising him as Canis Topler. In late of that year the Abbess Mariot, from the Abbey of Our Holy Virgins, brought to Omega 4 EAST an eleven year old girl, with a story about finding her as a baby during a sojourn at a distant Hermitage. It was a beautiful baby girl, wrapped in elegant and costly cloth, and resting within a cradle overlaid in gold.

She had named the child, Sunshine, since there was the glow and light of life which shone from the child's face. She now had brought the girl to the city to have the child tested.

It was a brilliant child. She could not speak, however, and this bothered the Abbess Mariot. She also wanted an explanation for the child's speedy growth. At eleven years of age, the child already had the appearance of a full grown woman.

Canon lusted after her.

Soon, Sunshine gave birth to the Canon's son. He was called Daey and he proclaimed the boy as the long-awaited Saviour. He pronounced that the new promised millennium had finally begun. This was the new age of humanity; the year he called "ONE".

Canon compiled a book of Laws that he had told everyone was given to him by the great God, Himself. He called the book "The Canon's Laws", and announced that with his receipt of this book, that all which had occurred in the "pre-history", had never happened:

"The Past is nonexistent. This is never to be questioned, and no investigation is permitted to be conducted, in pursuit of the question of history. History begins with "ONE". Only that which, henceforth, occurs from the year ONE will be recognised as history. Death, by torture, is the punishment for this Law's transgression."

(CANON 3:18)

This passage was of the first of Canon's Laws: These Laws, to be followed to the letter, were to be punishable upon the fear of the most imaginable painful torture. No Law was more, important than that of the CANON. All were the Prime Law, and all punishment was eventual, excruciating, death. As the child, Daey, was reaching his first year of age, Canon sacrificed the most beautiful and the most precious of his possessions, in honour of the child's birth. This most precious possession was the child's

own mother, Sunshine. In the weeks that followed, the child weakened and also died, and the death was kept from the people. There was a great fear that the population may panic if they were to hear that their "Saviour" had died, while still in infancy.

While Dioneza studied telepathy and tried to avoid Canon, her twin brother, Richalé, studied many subjects but he mainly concentrated on the forbidden topic: History.

Richalé wanted to compile facts to prove, without doubt, Canon's claims to creating the Universe, the Earth, and all of existence.

In 2660 C.E. Dioneza had found repulsion towards all men, and although she had yearned for children, she wanted no man to bed with her.

Due to her status, in the city, she was given the permission to be artificially inseminated from her choice of genes, preserved from the time of Omega 4 - EAST's construction. She had chosen a sample which was labelled as "David Sannstein: April 1995". The city's parliament had overwhelmingly accepted her choice and granted her the permission that was necessary, for her to use the sample. All the records that were kept in the gene bank were obviously ancient. From what was understood contained within the ancient records, David Sannstein was an Engineer, some 650 years ago. This was several hundred years before "ONE".

Dioneza presented her brother with this fact but nothing ever came of this knowledge.

Richalé married a girl that he had studied with, at the beginning of the same year that Dioneza was artificially inseminated.

Months before Dioneza's birth to Dorin, Richalé and his lovely wife, Dianna, had quadruplets.

Just after Dioneza bore Dorin, Richalé left the Omega 4 - EAST City, with Dianna and his children: Roman, Daphne, Tatum and Wind. They journeyed for the city of Besten, on the Eastern seaboard of the continent. During this century few of the O.S.G.I's were still inhabited. All but the Omega 4 - EAST city and the Omega 7 - PACIFIC city were abandoned and were utterly forgotten.

In the East, Canon's personal religion had subdued the people's belief and knowledge, and everyone in the Omega 4 - EAST city began to think that their city was nothing more than a temple built to Canon.

There were a few citizens that opposed Canon's Laws and some of these were publicly tortured to death, but some had escaped the wrath of, the now-hated, Canon.

Many people, dissatisfied with Canon's rules fled the cities to settle in the small villages and towns that dotted the land. Canon, however, sent emissaries to all of these surface towns and cities, and soon they began to rule over them. Most of these places submitted to the ways that Canon had forced upon them. Only Besten kept up with the rebellious stand against the Canon, but soon, only underground cells of rebels fought the new rule.

Richalé's daughter Daphne became involved with the rebel leader Montgomery Bartlett and married him. Later, the Bartlett line was to become the strongest in Besten.

Dioneza had avoided execution by the Canon, her half-brother since she had the favour of the city parliament and since she had told Canon that if she dies, her protector would surely kill him.

Canon did not have her killed, yet he had prevented her from ever speaking in public by having his men begin riots whenever she called a public audience.

In 2676 C.E., her son Dorin, who was now fifteen years of age, had illicitly procreated with a thirteen year old called Bernice. Soon after the birth of Martin, however, Dioneza had the two youngsters married and they had no more children.

At seventeen years of age, Bernice was put into cryogenic suspension when it was discovered that she had developed a terminal blood disease.

That same year, Martin, who was four years old, was discovered to be a genius and Dioneza took to training him in the ways of biology and true history. To Canon's disapproval, Martin began to delve into the study of the real past, utilizing Dioneza's computer library.

In 2683 C.E., Dorin made a break-through in light energy emission and began to improve the old police stun weapons, enabling them to utilize a laser capability, as well. This study also infuriated the

Canon but he did nothing.

Just after Dorin's break-through, Dioneza, who was now forty-eight, was raped and brutally murdered by Canon's bastard son, Canis Topler.

When Martin was nineteen, in 2695 C.E., he became a top-ranking scientist in the areas of anthropology and archaeology, after graduating from Advanced Technical Training in the Sciences. Martin headed an archaeological expedition to Alugean and there uncovered a huge computer library complex. He ordered his team to keep the find secret from anyone at the Omega 4 - EAST city, in the event Canon was to find out and have the library destroyed.

Martin received the title of "Blue" after his name, because of his great intellect and he did not abstain from using it.

Four years after his discovery, Canon disappeared and his Monks announced to everyone that they saw him turn into a being of light and that he ascended to heaven in a golden chariot.

Canon Di'Vaticanus was declared a God and the monk that was his second, named himself the ArchBishop. His name was Morgan.

Morgan had the same powers as the Canon Di'Vaticanus and only answered to the Canon, for his decisions.

Martin was married three times in his life, though he only had children with his second and third wives.

With his second wife, Lilian, he had a son called Carter and with his third wife, Joan, had triplets: Liona, Aria and Thirst.

In 2760 C.E., Carter went to Alugean, following his father's, directions and found the computer library. He stayed there for several years and studied, alone. Liona, Aria and Thirst left the Omega 4 - EAST city for BanGor when they were twenty-three, so that they could learn the ways of the world, but they never survived. Only one of the three reached BanGor, having met up with a wandering tribe of Teniqués. Only Liona, made pregnant by a Teniqués, arrived in BanGor and was granted an act of abortion by the High Priestess (the great, great granddaughter of Hosea Jones's first wife, Anna).

In 2780 C.E., Carter left Alugean and wandered about the continent, going through Laurentine and then through BanGor in 2785 C.E., where he sojourned for a short time. He represented himself to the High Priestess Lucaea (the third generation granddaughter of Anna), with whom he became close and eventually sexually coupled, unaware of their near relation by blood.

In 2801 C.E., they produced Smith and before she exiled Carter from BanGor, she charmed from him a quantity of the youth drug — the formula which was passed down to him through his father.

In his exile, Carter went to Virune where he later met and married his first wife, Dee'inth, who was seventeen. Carter was seventy-four at his first marriage, but he only resembled a man of twenty-four, having taken the youth drug for so long and he manufactured more after Lucaea took his supply away. There, he became a most important man, organising and turning the city into a powerful city state.

Jessuum Benitar came down off the mountain and told Carter that they were related, that both came from the loins of Hosea Jones. Jessuum told Carter that his real name was Gavin Jones, the son of Hosea; the fourth generation great-uncle to Carter.

Jessuum told Carter that Lucaea was his relative, as well, and that Smith was a product of an incestuous coupling.

When Carter heard this, he was determined to get Smith back. In 2817 C.E., Pomperaque split in two, and was engaged in a civil war. Dee'inth and Carter's son, Calvin, left for Virune.

A few years later, Carter unified and strengthened Pomperaque, and then proceeded to invade BanGor.

Carter executed the already dying Lucaea and Smith came along willingly, back to Pomperaque.

Dee'inth and Calvin were sent for in 2822 C.E., but they refused to come. Dee'inth had married again, to a man called Balfour (who had a grown son called Empal).

Two years later, Carter married his second wife Freida Dilaano, who had a daughter Miri. Carter and

Freida had no children, and after a year of marriage, Smith took her daughter Miri as his wife, and they went to the Virgin Mountains for their honeymoon.

Several years of peace in Pomperaque went by and in 2900 C.E., Carter died. Soon after Carter's death, Smith headed a campaign to unite Lower Phoride and in short of a decade, succeeded.

In 3001 C.E., Smith and Miri went on a vacation to the Virgin Mountains, while she was pregnant with their first child.

They were both fairly aged in years, although their physical and mental make-up was still fairly young due to the age retardant drug which was passed down to them. Smith was one hundred ninety-eight and Miri was one hundred ninety-four, but both looked to be only in their mid-thirties.

On their return, Miri had experienced the pains and when they rested, one afternoon, she gave birth to Smith's first son, Manguino.

During the birth, Smith was walking about in the woods, following the distant crying sounds of a baby. He soon found it. It was a baby boy, swaddled in a sackcloth and left in the skull of a lion, by small stream.*

So it happened that Smith gave the child the name, Brook Scullion-Blue (because of the circumstances surrounded the foundling). *The baby was left there by the great, great-grandson of Wind Jones (one of Richal's daughters). Guinness, and his wife Joanne, while trying to escape from a band of Plains slave traders, left their baby to Fate's caring heart and Smith was led to it.

Testament of Ginn 10:17

Miri accepted Smith's request to adopt it as their own, since it was similar in age to their own first born, Manguino.

When Smith returned to Pomperaque, Jessuum Benitar once again came down from the mountain and revealed to Smith who the child really was.

Since the foundling was from the same line as Smith, Smith regarded it as a son, as equal to that which had come from his own flesh.

At his deathbed, Smith gave his blessings and the land to both of his sons to rule.

A promise was made by both sons, to rule the land with a strong hand and a kind heart, and they received Smith's blessings of material and spiritual power.

The birthright and the sceptre continued with the BLUE.

"... and it came to pass, that in a time,
one was chosen as the one favourite to live
with love, whilst the other died; and in the
eyes of God"

PILLARS 93: A 11

PART I: THE SCORCHED EARTH

CHAPTER ONE

Another day ended. Sol, once again, retired its eternal radiance from man, as it has in its never-ending cycles of dawns and dusks, witnessed by all the generations. In its greatness, it survived all of Terra's hardships and afflictions and it was a living monument to forever.

No one seemed to look to it for comfort any more. The faces of women and children didn't reflect its brilliance, since no one had reverence for its good any more. It was a mindless disregard that was sustained and nurtured by the generations of man that survived. For almost a millennia they forced themselves into ignorance and then blamed it on the chaotic destructions that scorched the earth and that burned the human spirit. Nowhere, it seemed, was there anyone of power willing to point-out a way to betterment.

Trust knew not any man who was strong enough to deny the utter discontent that trembled in the

hearts of men without freedom. To almost every man, innately loomed a feeling of utter hopelessness.

In a dark room of the Blue Mountain, atop Bimini Hill, sat a middle-aged man of high station. He was a man richly endowed with great wealth, majesty and power, and he held the people's respect. This man had taken pride in his accomplishments but he had become saddened by his inability to present himself to the citizens in the way that they revered him; as living strength.

Brook had long since known the problems of the noble land in which he lived and reigned. He pondered its past and its future while he aimlessly stared out of the window at the warming sunset. In his mind flashed a memory of an old writing that expressed in an awesome detail the fear and the agony of oppression that the whole world must have felt in the final days, when the prophesied great abolition had come to pass.

Entranced, his thoughts were prolonged as he sat and watched the sun disappear into the earth; its light casting a reddish hue over his light beard and reflected coolly from his vacant blue eyes.

His mind embraced time. It drifted along its tenses, all at once, as if they were all merged into one music; a music that played continually, along with the troubled voices that cried, only to him, for help.

Caught up within his own thoughts, he payed little attention to the servant boy that set a drink on the table by his chair.

Without a word the boy flamed the gas torches and the room no longer remained dark. Quickly, he left the room.

"The sun was resting," thought Brook, as he reached for the chalice of ale beside him.

He took a drink and the ale soothed his soddy thirst, and his parched manner, much like the milk of a mother's milken breast soothes a distressed babe, thus letting it sleep. But Brook could not sleep.

Brook waited for the moon and he finally welcomed its cool radiance at midnight when he saw it rise over the junipers. Its silvery light reflected its beauty off the scanty layers of the farming terraces.

Brook's eyes were fixed on the view outside his window. He tried to envision himself living a thousand years ago gazing out of the same window, marvelling at the sights that may have been there. In his heart, he recited a badly remembered poem that was written just prior to the War of Wars:

A torn heart dying within the mind
A failure to the reckonings —
Yesterdays, todays and tomorrows."

He lifted the palms of his hands to his sweaty face desperately trying to keep from screaming out his tortured agonies. He believed that he couldn't tell a soul about the truth concerning the past. He knew that the Law was explicit:

"The Past is non-existent. This is never to be questioned, and no investigation is permitted to be conducted, in pursuit of the question of history. History begins with "ONE". Only that which, henceforth, occurs from the year ONE will be recognised as history. Death, by torture, is the punishment for this Law's transgression." (CANON 3:18)

He turned his eyes away from the window and rose out of his chair. He slowly paced to a large cabinet beside the huge entrance doors. From around his neck, he brought forth a key and placed it into the slot of the cabinet door then slowly opened it. Inside this cabinet Brook kept, what he liked to call, "his gadgets." There were rows of buttons glowing like coloured embers. Brook applied pressure to several of the buttons.

Quickly, long drapes on the far wall rolled away and revealed a blank, white, wall that soon began to produce pictures that moved like life itself.

The images were of fire and of raging destruction. There were scenes of huge cities that stood majestically on the horizon one moment, then falling into mountainous piles of rubble, the next. More pictures showed fat people, conspiracies, death and misunderstandings. Every kind of unimaginable horror played upon the wall.

Brook sighed to himself, as he remembered the rest of the poem:

"His music ends ...
His silence devours his soul,
Caging his ever-diminishing days
In a way that any man could lose
His assurance in himself,
And 'why?' he is!"

Then he slowly repeated to himself the words that were the Law: "The Past is non-existent", but he couldn't allow himself to believe this, especially with the truth revealing itself in front of him, at this moment.

He felt a cold tightness within his chest when he let himself think about his ancestors and the way that they destroyed themselves. Their greed for wealth and their crazed megalomania was the cause for the deaths of millions. He saw these men die, in the pictures that played-out right before his eyes. Once more he slowly breathed out the words: "The past is non-existent."

He cautiously looked around so that no one would hear him, if only by chance, as they passed in the hallway.

He remained in private thought.

He sat back down in his chair and closely watched the horrific and colourful images that danced on the wall. "How can a truth be hidden for a thousand years?" he wondered. "For a thousand years no one has even imagined that the very fabric of life itself, had nearly become death for every living thing beneath the sun." He looked at the fiery scourge projected onto the wall, then lowered his head and pondered heavily. How could he tell his people in Phoride, the truth about the past. That the knowledge about it was subdued by fanatic religious rulers, in their attempt to subjugate total control over them. Fear for the Divine Punishment made them surrender their faith and submit to the worship of a handful of man, as their gods.

Brook had long been a powerful man. He was one from the Great Line of Knowledge, yet he wasn't like most of those other men. In his heart he heard the multitudes of voices that screamed and cried out their pleas to him, to reveal the truth and thus lift the burdens from their backs and let them live in peace.

His soul embraced everything that he knew was right and to himself, he nodded an agreement. The time had come to be strong again and to no longer sit idly by and watch evil, as it has its own way in his land.

He moved back in his chair when he heard the sounds of the Monastic Guard, marching in the city square and the painful screams of men and women, that echoed between the buildings and out towards the hills. Brook knew that these people were being blasted by with the lightning-like bolts from the Guard's electrophoric weapons.

His strong and gentle hands slowly rose to his face as he sank down into his chair. He set his elbows on his knees and he cleaved to the thoughts within his mind, trying to force himself to remain in the deepest meditation. He felt the hours pass, until dreams soon began to visit him, making him lose himself and his worries to the mask of the night. With the coming of his last conscious breath before sleep, he recalled some of the words that his father said to him, upon his deathbed.

"Brook, my son ... do not let the land become troubled. Don't be afraid to fight because the horrifying torments of war can become a tool that may prevent future afflictions."

Brook was asleep and everything in the room was left unveiled for any eye to see. Although the pictures on the wall had ceased, everything was left in open view. Each thing presented a danger to Brook's rule and power.

The cool breezed night soared into dawn's amber glory. The sun slowly began to illuminate the room and a robed figure carefully crept in, much in the manner of a thief, yet it didn't take a thing. It had moved softly and with purpose towards the white wall, where it drew the drapes shut. Then it moved towards the cabinet where it closed its doors with a faint click, and again left the room in much the same manner as it had entered.

The sky was cloudless and the sun warmed the land with its radiation. The sparrows outside the window chirped their hellos, while they basked in that life giving light, before they took to flight for the day.

Boy, the servant, carefully walked into the room and looked about in wonder; this was his usual facial expression, before he drew on enough courage to wake his lord Brook. He carefully delivered a pewter basin full of water, for his master's morning washing.

He called to Brook several times in a meek tone but with no response. Moving closer, and touched his master's forearm, again calling Brook's name. This time, however, the boy called in a much louder and demanding tone of voice.

Brook quickly stirred from his deep sleep and for several moments just stared at the boy with an indifference that somehow seemed to be forced from himself.

Brook cleared his throat and sat up in his chair. He prepared himself to play the Lord once again, but on this day he had decided, that the long and horrible game would come to an end and that he would truly be master, as it was his right.

He sat up in his chair and in his usual manner coughed a few times before he spoke. Boy stepped back a bit when Brook coughed but he quickly returned to him, and slightly bowed his head to him.

Brook coughed once again then took a deep breath as he looked about the room then back at the boy.

"What is this call, Boy?" boomed Brook.

"Pardon, Sir, but the lady had asked me to wake you." answered Boy. "I have brought water to wash the sleep from your eyes." He lifted the basin up to Brook where, after a moment he splashed the scented water up into his face then dried himself with the towel that hung over Boy's arm. "Your wish — my Lord!" uttered the boy, obediently leaving Brook's presence as the Lady entered the room. She carried a large cup and as Boy passed her she smiled at him and told him that he could go into the garden until he was needed again. He smiled in reply and thanked her, then hurried away.

Lady Dearborne was in a happy mood. She smiled warmly at her husband as she approached him with the cup full of broth. She extended to him her fair hand and when in reach, he took it gently into his own and guided her to his side. Her smile beamed as she bowed to him then sat down on the floor by his feet. She gently placed her head against his knee after giving him his broth. He drank it and sighed, and stroked her hand as she hummed a lovely tune for him.

He looked at her, taking in all her beauty, regarding her many years of love and loyalty with much pride. He believed that no man on Earth, in the past, present, or likely to in the future, felt as he does.

Dearborne was a vibrant woman, twenty-nine years of age, with beauty unsurpassed by any other in Phoride and the surrounding kingdoms. Her long brown hair ended in curly locks that fell in front of her and that decorated her creamy neck and shoulders, enhancing the fair, light smoothness of her bosom, which emerged from her low cut gown like the pinkish eggs of the great Kenttitan Eagle. Her totality glistened like the polished marble god-statues from Laurentine.

When she spoke, her voice was reminiscent of a loon gliding over still water, during an early morning mist. Her words displayed generations of knowledge which she had taken to her heart and mind, over her seemingly few but happy years of life, with her Lord Brook.

She ceased her humming as she ran her hand across her husband's calf. With affection, he returned the caresses to his love; his hand gently rubbing across her silky hair.

She spoke without looking up at him or breaking the rhythm of her strokes.

"You were not to bed, again, last night. I was worried and came down here to call you. You were asleep. I didn't want to disturb you — but it doesn't matter." she said, then she looked up at him and smiled. "I know that you were not keeping yourself apart from me." Brook moved his hand to her glowing face, stroked it and smiled at her. He gave her a longing kiss.

"I'm sorry, my sweet." he finally said as he helped her up off the floor and onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around her waist and she put hers about his neck. They kissed one another, and held it for the longest time. "Did you close the drapes over the wall, and shut my cabinet door?" he asked her.

"Yes!" she answered loyally and put her head on his shoulder.

"You've done that so many times, and yet you have never asked me anything about their nature. Somehow you seem to know they should not stay exposed, for the random eye to see!"

"It's not my privilege to question what you do, or why you do it. My place is here, at your feet, my love!" she told him in a voice that assured him of her potent and loyal love.

Brook kissed her hand.

"No, my love! Your place is not at my feet, but at my side. Even so, my place is your place. It has always been and always will be. I love you, Dearborne!"

"And I love you, my dearest Brook!" she responded and his trembling heart was calmed by the tranquillizing inflections in her song-like voice.

An hour passed by as they sat together. Dearborne was on Brook's lap. Neither one said very much of anything to the other. Only in touches, kisses and embraces, and the volumes of thought that passed between them, did they say anything.

They kissed each other again and she turned her body to converse with him more directly. She told him that the ArchBishop sent a messenger earlier in the morning before he was awake, with a request that she would try to get him to the Cathedral, to speak with him.

"The ArchBishop," she told him, "wonders why you haven't answered his calls to a conference, earlier. It's been weeks since he asked you to the cathedral. This morning he sent word, to me, to persuade you to see him."

Brook instantly became disturbed and let her off his lap. He stood up and slowly walked over to the window. After a few moments of silence he turned to her and in a loud, angry, voice spoke his mind.

"I do not entertain business with such a man. I hold no men like him, in regard, as friends _ or anything else. I shall not go to him, from my own will, and if he cannot move his bulbous body to come here, I will not exert myself for him." Brook's voice echoed about the stone room, its bass quality full of contempt and hate. Then he noticed that he had frightened her, because her face became drawn and startled. After a moment, she spoke in an uneasy manner.

"My love, that ... that's not proper. The ArchBishop cannot be treated like that ... He's the —"

Brook quickly stepped towards her and put his hands on her upper arms, interrupting her train of thought.

"— He's the biggest hypocrite that has ever lived. He's a megalomaniac who has always taken advantage of these people in Phoride. Yet, I have stood by and watched it, and allowed it. What's to become of it all?"

He dropped his hands from her arms and embraced her. Then, in a breathless whisper, while his eyes were closed, committed himself to subdue the powers that the ArchBishop thought he had under his command. Dearborne, worried and confused by her husband's quickly changing moods, held him closely to herself.

"What is wrong, Brook? I feel like something severe bothers you. Tell me what trouble's you, my love." she pleaded in a concerned voice but, for a while, he did not answer. He stepped away from her and moved towards the window again, and said nothing. Dearborne thought that Brook was going insane and she prayed to her fullest ability that she was wrong, and that she was just entertaining foolish and childish ideas.

On the streets were the sounds of people; talking, laughing, buying and selling, and going about their daily routine; which, in more cases than not, was just trying to survive. In the distance, from the direction of the Cathedral, came the horrific buzzing sounds of the Monastic Guard's electrophoric weapons. The sound was like the drone of a million panicked mosquitos, swarming in a mass confusion.

Brook's eyes filled with tears and Dearborne looked towards the window. Silence took command of the room. Dearborne slowly moved towards the window, touched Brook's forearm and looked at him with her big brown and compassionate eyes. He placed his hands upon her, then they embraced until the nightmarish sounds of the ArchBishop's weapons died and the sounds of the children, playing in the streets, filled the air in its place, again.

Dearborne knew that there was a change in Brook. Never before has he cringed under the sounds of the ArchBishop's weapons, and the results of them thereof. Soon, Dearborne cried, too.

Brook eased his embrace on her. He stroked her hair and kissed the tears from her eyes until she stopped crying.

"It is time, my love." Brook finally said in a low tone. "It's time for me to tell you about all these things here, with me." He motioned to her the whole room and what it contained: the shelves of books, the cabinet, the small statues, the white screen and the musical instruments beside it, in the corner. "After

all our years of marriage, I will tell you about these things that my father, Smith Blue, left for me to use, to keep my rule strong in Phoride."

She dried her eyes with a handkerchief that she took from her sleeve.

Brook guided her to every part of the room and explained to her the uses which every item had during the time of the Twentieth Century, over a millennia ago. He explained to her that the statues were the likeness of the rulers during that time. He told her about how these men's search for wealth and power plunged the whole world into a bloody conflict that escalated into a cataclysmic holocaust, that almost wiped-out every living creature from the face of the Earth. He had let her know of how only a few handfuls of people survived and how they were able to rebuild the world and civilisation, to what it was now.

He disclosed how these people took the best of both simple living and great technology, to make a better and more ordered life on Earth. And he recounted to her how he was descended from a line of knowledgeable men called "scientists", and how the idea of such men was lost over the passage of a thousand years, that eventually became thought of as a royalty. The faction name, "THE BLUE" had become thought of as nobility and so was its adoption for a surname lineage, to which was now his.

Dearborne asked questions about many things. Things that even Brook had long ago asked himself, because he was never able to obtain the answers after his father died, and there was no one else to ask.

All he could do was speculate and read some of the old texts, that explained some questions but never in enough detail to warrant full understanding and satisfaction to his churning curiosity.

Dearborne now understood why Brook kept this room so private, allowing only the two people closest to him, in his life (she and Boy), to enter it. She now knew why she thought it necessary, those many times, to close the cabinets, and drape-over the wall, when Brook fell asleep and left them in the open. Brook was aware that all this knowledge would be misused if it were in the hands of someone like the ArchBishop and his puppet legions.

Brook had mixed emotions about his life and his own power. Although he and Dearborne had been married for thirteen years, this was the first time that he divulged so much dangerous knowledge to her. In Phoride, as elsewhere in the world, the way of life has been one of mistrust and suspicion. Yet, Brook knew that she would tell no one because there were many things that they shared and neither one has revealed them to anyone else.

When Brook finished telling Dearborne most of the important details about the gadgetry, they stood at the window for a long time and just stared at the town, and its people.

The Monastic Guards patrolled the streets while the people went about their day-to-day activity, buying and selling items that they took to the market.

As far as the eye could see down the street people were busy making their livelihood. They talked and laughed with one another and rarely, if ever, paid any mind to the black-clad, helmeted guards that policed the area.

Children played in the streets. Some of the daring one tried to actually annoy the guards who, like zombies, went on their way without showing the slightest hint of aggravation. Afraid of being punished for their children's misdeeds, parents beat their children for everyone to witness. They did not want the "Almighty's Angels" (as they guards were often called), to pour their wrath upon them. They felt that their children's bloody noses and cut lips were enough to show their respect, and submission, to the rule of the Almighty.

Brook put his arm over Dearborne's shoulder and stroked her hair. He set her small and delicate hand into his other, and held it tightly.

Turned towards her, he saw a few shiny tears slide down her rosy cheeks. "They are the ones that I must now tell." he said, pointing out the window at the children.

CHAPTER TWO

The streets were alive with people vending their goods.

The mid-morning was always the busiest time of the day in Pomperaque, and should it have been anything else? Afterall, this city had been the capital of Phoride for some five hundred years. The routine had always been the same. At sunrise the people brought their goods out into the major streets,

where they bought and sold amongst one another. When noon-time came around they all gathered their things together and returned to their homes and rarely, if ever, emerged again until the evening when they made their way to the taverns and theatres.

But even in the evening the city wasn't as alive as it was during mid-morning. This was a time when people spoke to one another and laughed at little humours that they created and therefore strengthened the social bonds between themselves. Men drank and talked at the cafes while their women stayed by the stands and kiosks, exchanging goods and talking also.

Sometimes someone came along and bought something with gold bits, which was surprising and not very common, since the usual manner that the people carried on their business was in barter and in copper. However, the attainment of gold was short-lived.

Every day at noon, one of the ArchBishop's tax clerics went amongst those who received gold and exchanged it for copper bits. Usually, the exchange wasn't just or fair. The town's people were most often given two bits of copper for every one bit of gold. Rarely they received five bits to one of gold: that was a great achievement in everyone's eyes if someone were capable of bringing it about. This was dangerous, however. If someone haggled for anything over five bits of copper to one of gold, they were threatened with Divine Punishment — for their sin of greed — unless they payed a fine, which always equalled the exact number of gold bits that the merchant possessed. Thus was the usual mode of business and economics for Pomperaque, and the rest of Phoride. All this was the common practice of the surrounding provinces, and kingdoms; which the ArchBishop directly influenced.

It was one such morning that Dearborne went out into the streets with Boy, to do her marketing. It was the third day of the week and not the second day, which she usually took to do her marketing, and everyone was happy and pleased to see her because they all thought that something bad had happened to her. The merchants weren't prepared for her absence on the second day and all of them questioned her for a reason why she missed her usual day. She just smiled and told them that she wanted to be with her husband, and they sent their heat-warming greeting to him.

For the thirteen years that she had been married to Lord Brook, she always marketed on the second and fifth days of the week. The sudden change in her market day created a great stir in the hearts of the people. Now that they could see that she was well, they rejoiced and treated her with sweets and fruits, and gave her things to take to their Lord and sovereign, Brook Scullion Blue.

Like every day, the streets were filled with people. Their goods were spread about the ground on blankets, or on top of carts, or set on and around the kiosks in the city square.

Dearborne and Boy made their way down the street towards the square, which was the liveliest part of town during any time of the day. It was here where the best produce and meats were to be found during the morning market hours. It was here that the highest quality foodstuffs were brought in from every part of Phoride and elsewhere.

Also, in the city square, jewellery and fine garments were sold and there were amusements for the people. There were games and story-tellers, and machines were there to thrill the children. All these amusements carried-on throughout the entire day and night.

Boy carried a large basket and was slightly ahead of Dearborne. They both walked slowly and looked around the different stands, at the various things of interest.

Dearborne smiled her greetings at some council men that sat at tables outside the café. Business carried on in its usual manner, the sounds of livelihood resounded throughout the streets and into the other regions of the city, out towards the Hill People, who were the free farmers of Phoride. There was some kind of commotion down the street but it didn't appear to be any different than usual to Dearborne, and she paid little attention to anything but her own thoughts, anyway.

She had never known about the holocaust that had occurred over a millennia ago. She had known that something cataclysmic happened but no one could ever find out the whole story because it was a taboo topic, according to the written Laws of Canon; which denied any kind of knowledge about the past.

She was confused by the Canon's Law, which said the past was a disillusionment. Afterall, there were history books and subjects at the Blaisaman, right here in Pomperaque. The Blaisaman had, at one time, been one of the largest learning institutions of its kind, anywhere on the Northern Continent. This was the very place that Dearborne and many other "Prominents" completed their studies. She remembered the extensive teachings of history and how it had influenced and changed life in Phoride. Only now, four years after she had received her Darnaclust, she realised that even in the highest levels

of study, no one knew, or at least there was no one who would disclose their knowledge, about the history prior to a thousand years ago.

She never questioned why this was so at the time and apparently, no one else questioned it either. She hadn't realised that there was no written or taught history, concerning that period before the officially declared beginning of the world. The only stories that were told to the scholars, about the before-time, was that there was a fiery chaos in the cosmos, before the Almighty created the world and its first earthly family. But anything that was taught to the student-scholars, even concerning this, was very limited. Still, there were no questions.

Dearborne couldn't believe that anyone, not even she, thought to pursue the topic any further than that which was told to them.

She came out of her thoughts for a moment when she noticed that Boy had wandered-off somewhere and without her permission.

She reconnoitred the square; the different stalls and the kiosks then saw him standing with some pretty town's-girl, of the same age. Both watched some dark-skinned woman, with golden hair and sapphire-like eyes, levitate herself and many other weird things, including some of the audience, on the fringes of the stage.

About to call on him, she heard some quick steps behind her and a familiar voice that calling her name.

"Lady Dearborne! Good morning, my sweet friend." said the voice.

She turned quickly to the caller and smiled as he reached her, and kissed her hand.

"Miel, my dear friend, how are you?" she asked him in a surprised and happy manner.

"I am fine. My wife is well, too! She just birthed our twelfth child a son!" he beamed with pride.

"My, my! You do keep yourself active!"

"Yes! That is why I could not answer the invitation to your anniversary celebration."

"You are coming, are you not?"

"Oh, yes! Of course, I'm coming. I wouldn't miss it for anything." he assured her.

"And Aria?"

"I don't know yet. She doesn't recover from child baring as quickly as she had at one time. Nevertheless, I will be there."

"Well, thankyou ... Brook and I shall watch for you!"

"Goodbyes till then!" he exalted, then after he kissed her hand again, he walked off in the direction of the café, and shouted greetings to some men sitting at the nearest table.

Dearborne turned and called to Boy. He glanced over his shoulder to see her waving him in with her hand. He motioned to the girl to stay where she was and ran over to Dearborne.

They strolled over to Empal; the biggest seller of fruits and vegetables, herbs and spices, known on the face of the continent, and perhaps in the whole world.

He greeted her and Boy with the usual good-hearted smile, and warm hello. Then as always, in his brawny Virunese accent he asked about Brook, his favourite Lord, while he slowly filled Dearborne's basket with the best of his produce. In turn, Dearborne asked about his family — his daughter in particular, and unobserved slipped several gold bits into his hand when they shook.

Dearborne wasn't the only one of the nobility to do this. Many others had done it, as well. Not because of pity or any such sympathies but rather s a show of respect for his strength and his odd position in their society.

Everyone in Phoride, except for the ArchBishop and his train of followers, admired his position against the ArchBishop when he was requested for Gaena, his daughter, to bare the child of "The Almighty". He refused to allow his daughter's virginity to be taken by anyone other than a mountain tribesman and so immediately arranged a wedding to take place between her and her betrothed love, Tucker. Tucker was a Krolalin Mountain goat-herder.

Although everyone overpaid Empal for his services, he was forced into near poverty when he dared to live in Pomperaque or anywhere else in Phoride, for any lengthy period of time. This was caused by his obstinacy towards the ArchBishop. In the beginning, after a few months of hardship he returned to Exendria, the capital of Virune. He rebuilt his fortune, and later returned to Pomperaque. Since then, he had kept to a cycle of return to Exendria. Like a migratory bird, he headed North every summer then returned to Lower Phoride in the winter.

Even though extensive and constant travel was difficult on most people, it didn't seem to affect Empal in a very harsh way. In fact, he soon came to enjoy his cycled migration because he made a greater fortune selling his produce during his travel than he did selling in either Pomperaque or Exendria, combined. Now, in his seventh cycle, he had accumulated more wealth than what the ArchBishop could dream of taking away from him; in fines, taxes, licenses or tariffs. Brook had dared to veto the ArchBishop's plan for all merchants, farmers and artisans to pay a monthly tribute to the church, to encourage the building of roads, buildings and the like.

Brook knew that no buildings would ever come out of the plan and that it was just another one of the ArchBishop's ploys to keep the people of Phoride poor and ignorant. His veto helped all the working class people in the land and also greatly boosted the economic strength of Phoride. He made it the wealthiest and most powerful land on the Northern Continent. And all of this was begun by the will of a simple old man, who chanced his standing up to the ArchBishop's tyrannical order of life.

Dearborne and Empal said their farewells and he asked her if she will be back on the fifth day, as usual, but she shrugged unknowingly and smiled a good-bye at him.

Boy carried the basket for a while until Dearborne saw that he occasionally looked back to where the town's-girl stood, waiting for him to return to her. Being a kindly woman, she took the basket from him and let him go to the girl, telling Boy that she would not need him for a while.

She was pleased to see Boy and the innocence of childhood that he, and all those like him, possessed. Their's was the future. This, she understood through her husband's guidance. She knew that it was the responsibility of the Elders to prepare a secure and stable life for their children. It was this idea that caused Brook to become so sensitive to the uselessness of killing the transgressors of the Canon Laws: those laws, more than half of which, were written only to benefit the Great Church of The Almighty.

She was saddened when she realised that Boy, and all those of his age, might not have any kind of future at all.

She continued to look at the boy. Her mind remained deep in thought about him and his vague tomorrow. She almost cried.

"He's a hardy boy, Lady Scullion-Blue!" A sudden, slow and taring voice, that sent a cold flush down her back and that raised the small hairs on the nape of her neck, came from behind. She quickly turned, and when she saw that it was the Cardinal Allen, she curtsied to him and kissed his hand.

"Is your household faring well, my child? asked the Cardinal.

"Yes, Cardinal Allen. We are happy for our blessings." she moved away from him.

"I am happy for you ... I am surprised to see you in the market today. It's not your usual day?" his voice sounded scheming and distrustful as he eyed her. Dearborne felt uneasy, as if she were being prodded or groped by someone. She felt as if swarms of army ants were crawling over her entire body, and were devouring her alive. She didn't answer right away. She quietly looked to see if Boy was still by the stage but he had moved with the girl to another one, where some magician made small animals and shapes transmute in their appearance.

Dearborn turned back to the Cardinal and answered.

"No, it's not my usual day for marketing. I stayed home with Brook, yesterday!" she said.

"No doubt talking about raising a family — I wager?"

"Yes! That is so! We feel that we are now prepared for children."

"True, true! — Just a few days ago I was speaking with some of the Brothers, at Halls, about you and Lord Brook. We prayed that you may soon be blessed with many sons. All of us look forward to your sons' future attendance at out vicarage." Dearborne became somewhat disturbed and briefly lost her pleasant smile. She answered him in a subdued, but still obviously denying tone of voice.

"Yes! Definitely that!" she said then became silent, once again.

Cardinal Allen slowly looked over Dearborne's whole body and sighed. He imagined the pleasures that he could experience if he were to bed with her; to meet her full mouth with his and to touch the full softness of her bosom.

Dearborne moved her long hair allowing it to fall upon her breasts, covering herself from the Cardinal's intensive gaze.

After a few moments of silence, Cardinal Allen glared into her eyes, and in a dishonestly gentle voice, asked her if she cared for refreshment. She couldn't but answer him, and soon she tried to smile as she conceded.

"Shall we sit, then?" asked the Cardinal and escorted her to a vacant table at the café, where several of the men sat about, eyeing them and mumbling with questioning discontent and accusation. Soon, however, they returned to their talking and did not pay attention to the Lady, and the Cardinal, sitting nearby. They resumed their previously gaiety and laughter, and heavy-handed talk.

A large, blond tavern maid soon came to the table. She toted a tray of dirty tankards. With a big smile, she winked at Cardinal Allen then looked at Dearborne. She chuckled a little when he smiled back at her.

"How you, Cardin' — What do?" she asked. Her eyes juttet back and forth between him and Dearborne.

"A small rose wine, please." she finally said.

The tavern maid grinned, then once again winked at Cardinal Allen. With a quick and brisk "it's good!", she left them.

The strange commotion that boomed on the street most of the morning, had grown and spread right down to the café where they sat. Cardinal Allen wasn't too disturbed by the loud shouting of some young man and the discontented, riotous mob that shouted back at him. He was preoccupied with his interest in Dearborne. They said very little at the table or at least, nothing that was of any great significance. Dearborne watched the crowd as they started to throw stones and ripe fruit at the young man, and Allen watched Dearborne's breasts rise and fall with her every breath.

Once more, he continued his deceit and his lecherous manner.

"Ah, yes! Lord Brook is a very lucky man, to have wed such a woman as you!"

Dearborne became even more upset and she began to fidget. She looked around to see if anyone was listening; most were interested in the young man that was creating the disturbance, and Miel had long since left.

"If I had not become a man of the Almighty, I could have wed such a precious fawn. I, too, could have cleaved to a woman whose blood boils for only the one man that she loves."

Dearborne was surprised by what the Cardinal had said to her. Uncomfortable, she tried to speak while she looked around to make certain that no one else heard him.

"Cardinal Allen — I pray, explain the meaning of that remark, or I will have to tell Brook!"

"I beg your forgiveness, if I have offended, my Lady. It is known throughout these lands, that women who drink of the rose, are warm and passionate to those men that they love."

He looked at her and smiled, his one gold tooth reflecting the sunlight.

No one else, in the café, heard their exchange. Their attentions were rivetted on the disturbance that rumbled a little ways down the street.

The tavern maid brought the drinks, served them, and winked at Cardinal Allen before she left. "Enjoy, Cardin'!" she said, then went to serve someone else.

"I'm sorry, Cardinal! I misunderstood the intent behind your words."

Cardinal Allen bowed his head and smiled at her a forgiving little smile. In his norm, he turned his own decadence around and once more had come clean.

"The mistake was unintentional, my child. Let us pray that this does not happen again." he clasped his hands and lowered his head.

Dearborne bowed her head, as well, and sighed.

The Cardinal, however, did not pray. He looked up at her and only thought about how wonderful she was, and the joys and the pleasures that Lord Scullion must feel when he takes her. He thought about the intense heat that he felt, just sitting near her; watching her smooth glow and the inviting look in her eyes, as if saying "I will take you, my Lord Cardinal." But soon his thoughts brought him back to his place, as it was, at Halls. There was the devotion that he had to show, and the tributes that he had to give, to the other brothers there, and also the obligation that he had to The Almighty, Himself. He sighed and said "amen" and Dearborne echoed him.

"I must leave you, now, Cardinal." she continued with a silent hesitation. "Thank-you for the refreshment, and of course the compliment." She saw him, still over by the magician and the girl. She called to him and before he came he kissed the girl and waved to her even though she stood right beside her. She giggled and Boy ran to Dearborne when she called to him again.

"Here I come, Lady!" he shouted as he ran to her. Along the way he stumbled and dirtied himself, but he sprang up quickly and continued.

Cardinal Allen took her hand. She spun around in surprise and faced him. She glared at him as his voice, heavy and wet, filtered into her mind.

"Before you go, my Lady, please do not forget to request a visit with Lord Scullion. The Archbishop does very much wish to see him." She pulled her hand out of his, in a slow and obviously repulsed manner. She then walked away. Boy ran after her and she handed him the basket of fruit and vegetables.

As they headed in the direction that they had come from, the commotion that was down the street was now before them. They tried to make their way to the main boulevard but when they made it, Dearborne stopped to see what the problem was.

People pushed and shoved one another and screamed obscenities at a man, about Dearborne's age, who jumped up on the magician's stage, knocking the magician to the ground. Throughout the clamour and confusion, the man yelled at the people, but no one listened. He finally had to hit a few individuals, sending them careening to the ground, in order that he could stay on the stage.

"Listen!" he yelled. "Listen — Hear Me!" Now, on stage, the noise of the crowd heightened. Every single person screamed at him. Most screamed insults and profanity while others screamed at him calling him a blasphemer and a heretic. Some men tried to pull him off the stage but he kicked and swung his fists, and made a mark on their faces.

The man lifted a tattered book into the air to show the people, and yelled in desperation at the people to listen to what he had to say.

"Listen, people of Phoride! Hear the truths that have been! Listen so that you too may know!" he screamed.

The anger of the people was coming to a boil and some men shouted as loud as they could at him.

"What truths? Words that we don't understand?" hollered one, in anger, back at him.

"Blasphemies and heresies to destroy our faith in The Almighty!" shouted another.

"We don't listen to lies! — Remove him!"

"These are not lies. These are truths, of the great things that had once been and can be, again!" pleaded the man from the stage. The murmur of the riotous mob grew; people yelled to others to take him away and kill him, and to close their eyes to his devilish words.

"Hear me, friends! Hear the words of the "old ones" from that age that had vanished! — Hear of those who have been in shelter, and who waited to be born again. All of you are the witnesses to them, to reason and to understand them, again!" said the man on the stage as he waved his book in the air, over his head.

Dearborne and Boy moved into the shadows of the adjacent street. She was curious to hear what the man had to say.

Cardinal Allen still stood by the café table and watched some woman grab at the leg-bindings of the

man's sandal. Allen waited. The woman screamed.

"This demon tempts us! Call the Almighty's Angels to destroy him!" and Allen pulled from his habit a small flat, triangular device and passed his forefinger over its surface. Instantly, bells echoed throughout the street and the roar of the mob died down as they moved back, away from the stage.

Two tall male figures, dressed totally in black, with dark helmets and shiny metals adorning them, entered the square in haste, beside the café. Cardinal Allen pointed a bony finger at the man on stage and the two monastic guards stepped up to the stage and drew their weapons on him.

The man on stage was certain that they would fire upon him. He knew that he couldn't allow his book to be taken from him, for then no one would ever see it. He quickly took a glass ball from his hip sack and threw it down at the guards. A twangy sound echoed through the air and the man fell from the stage, to the ground. The glass ball that he had thrown down poured-out a grey green smoke, giving him the chance to drag himself into one of the nearby alleys.

The monastic guards stopped in their tracks. Their guns were still pointed up towards the stage but they did not fire any more.

The mob, aimless and panicked, ran into one another and screamed in horror that they were blind. Others fell to the ground and crawled off, crying and praying to the Almighty to deliver them from the evil that had befallen them.

Cardinal Allen ran off in the direction of Halls, still rubbing his forefinger over the surface of the device. The roar of the mob subsided, giving way to the eerie sounds of the bells that echoed through every part of Pomperaque. As Allen approached Halls, he fell over his habit, dragging behind him, and in final desperation, made it through the gateway and collapsed by the fountain in the courtyard.

Amidst the confusion in the city square was the man's body. It dragged itself into a doorway, his hand cupped over the open fist-sized wound in his side. The intolerable pain made him sway out of the doorway and onto the cobble-stone street. He dropped his book as he tried to stand up, and vomited into the gutter before he passed out.

Some figures quickly rushed towards him. One of them grabbed the book and concealed it with their clothes, as they took him under the arms and quickly spirited him away.

Overlooking pomperaque stood Mount Benitar the rock of wisdom. There sat a man of wisdom, who watched everything that occurred in that great city.

The man of the mountain was not pleased with what he witnessed taking place over the centuries. Alone, he contemplated his descent into the valley.

CHAPTER THREE

Some birds chirped outside, perched on the branches of the giant junipers, hidden by the shadows of the leaves, hiding from the heat of the afternoon sun.

A breeze gently sighed through the window, the lace coverings flapped about their hangings, animating them into a lively dance and scattering the shy sunlight that intermittently peaked into the room.

The room was large and fragrant with exotic incenses. The blue and white of the polished Lazurite walls pleased the eye, as did the intricately carved sandalwood furniture and bed frame. All of this added a most natural aura to the naked smoothness of the marble and the stone, utilized throughout the building.

In the white, fur-lined bed lay a man. His upper torso was propped up by blue satin pillows, stuffed with fluffy swans down. The pillows showed the unmistakable signs of dampness, from his sweat. He lay still, tiny beads of sweat streaming from his brow. His nostrils flared with each painful breath that he took. A blanket was drawn up to his waist. His arms rested on the blanket's end and to his side. His chest was circumscribed by clean bandages that held a herbal poultice against the wound in his side — an attempt to relieve his pain.

The sounds of people outside returned to normal. Business carried on in its usual way and the people carried on in their usual disarray.

Outside the room, in the hallway, was heard the whispering voices of a man and a woman. The

woman was describing an incident that had occurred within the city square, that had injured their guest.

Within the room, the man on the bed stirred and woke up. He tried to sit up quickly but let out a deep, painful groan as he again lay back. His pain subdued him in silence. The voices outside the door hushed for a moment and the man's voice was heard again. It speculated that the injured man, in bed, may have regained consciousness.

The man in bed touched the bandages and grimaced in pain. He was motionless in the bed and looked about the room. The exquisite, luxurious beauty of the walls and patterned ceiling, with the many crystals hanging from it suggested "home". He looked towards the window, just in time to see a tiny swallow turn and fly from the ledge, and a red-breasted Bourbon, was balancing on a branch and singing its aria to him.

The latch on the door clicked as it was opened. The man in bed, lifted his head for a moment and watched three people approach him; the smaller one carrying a tray of food and drink.

For a long time, silent looks were exchanged between them all.

The cautious servant placed the tray over the man's lap and helped him to sit up. He placed another cushion at his back.

The man looked at the food and at the others, until finally, the host smiled and took a bite from the food and sipped the drink.

"Eat, my friend! You will not heal quickly if you do not eat." he said, then stepped away from him.

The man in bed devoured the food as if he has never before eaten. The host and his wife glanced at each other as they watched him.

After a minute, the injured man suddenly stopped and looked at the others who stared at him while he ate. There was thick quiet until the injured man spoke, with a serious mistrust, in the tone of his voice. "Where is my book?" he asked.

The host smiled at him and looked over to his wife. "Your encyclopedia is safe, my friend." answered the host, as he slowly neared the bed.

The servant helped him sit up more comfortably in the bed when he showed too much pain, trying to do so by himself.

Suspicion burned in the injured man's flaring eyes. He questioned his host further.

"Who are you to know of such books?"

"I am the sovereign of Phoride — I am called Brook Scullion. This is my wife, Dearborne and our ... servant, Boy!" said the host, the Lord Brook. He continued. "We know of that book, and about much more!"

There was quiet again for a few moments as their injured guest drank, his thoughts and fears sculpted across his wide hirsute face. "No!" said Brook. "It happens that we have common interests and like goals. You, however, have a strange courage, trying to speak out your knowledge. This is dangerous! — No, my friend, if I were to kill you, it would be like preventing a cure for a rampant plague!"

Dearborne neared the bed and looked at him while she explained to him, how he came to be there, in the room.

"I was in the market today. When I was leaving I saw you, shouting and waving a book over your head, but no one listened. I did not leave, for the sake of curiosity, then after you were hurt, Boy and I brought you back here." when Dearborne finished, a small, thankful smile drifted across his face, then finally grew into a sincere completion when Boy added his thoughts. "You're heavy!" she said, rubbing his arms.

Brook stood right up against the bed and checked the bandages. He sighed and shook his head in disbelief.

"You are a very fortunate man. Never before have I seen anyone survive a blast from those — "

" — Electrophoric guns!" interrupted the man.

"Yes! You know much of the last millennia!" he smiled.

"I do, sir! So do others from where I come. I am Lloyd Bartlet, and I am from Besten."

Brook turned to Dearborne. They looked at one another, their expressions bordering on apprehension, puzzlement and a somewhat odd pleasure.

"Besten?!" Brook ejaculated with surprise.

Lloyd nodded his head and with a smile, he detailed.

"Besten, the 'Hopeless City', as the ArchBishop calls it. We have no tyrant rulers there and no monastic institutions, and because of this we are called 'evil', by him. Well ..." he shrugged at his thought.

"Why are you here, if Besten is so free?" asked Dearborne, confused and now becoming interested about his motives.

Lloyd took another drink from the goblet on his lap tray while Lord and Lady Scullion waited, in anticipation, for him to explain why he had come to Phoride.

Boy stood by. He watched and listened. His face showed its usual bewilderment. He handed Lloyd a large napkin and Lloyd wiped his mouth. After the wiping he sighed and finally explained his presence here in their land.

"My people (my father, Harvard Bartlet, especially), had sent me to try to alter the ArchBishop's trade embargo on Besten. I suppose that I went about it the wrong way by trying to talk to the people first!"

Brook put his hand on Lloyd's shoulder and assured him that he made no mistake. Dearborne agreed with her husband's opinion and she released her suspicions.

"It wouldn't have made much of a difference. Actually, avoiding the talk, directly with the ArchBishop probably saved your life and I believe that you may be fortunate enough to have created a question in some of the citizen's minds. Your injury, I suppose, may be considered a payment for giving men new ideas!"

"I think it to be a little too expensive!" added Lloyd, with humour, laughing at his own pains and inequities while he touched his bandaged chest.

They continued their palaver throughout the afternoon and into the early evening. They learned many intricacies about one another; about their individual lifestyles and their social ideologies.

They discussed the progress that had occurred through the many generations that grew and nurtured along with it the disease of corruption and immorality; the same diseases that were present in all civilised peoples. These powerful progression had meant the inevitable downfall of all the great Empires which once reigned on the Earth. From the first humans that walked upright, to the last of the brave that went into space, in the late Twentieth Century, it had been the same until the fall of man, in his greatest conflagration. Brook and Lloyd exchanged little bits of knowledge about the Twentieth Century and the three great wars that were fought. There were endless columns of living flesh, where people were herded like animals by other people, and transported to large camps. While there, many who were not fortunate enough to die, were made use of in the endless experiments of new drugs, surgical techniques and endless studies of the individual's body tolerances to torture.

The atrocities, that every war carried with it, seemed to grow and spread. They were pandemic. Yet, these atrocities were allowed to continue, where social morals degenerated further with every proceeding conflict and the outrageous brutality that was let to worsen, by the lack of authoritative controls on those madmen. They spoke of the GREAT NATION's 'Proposition Blue'; devised in the last half of the Twentieth Century, to preserve human life, in the event that global annihilation would become reality. Learned men and women were chosen and assembled, and were taken to subterranean cities. There, they were to carry-on with their work and with their lives, in the perfect safety of their restraint.

In the years that proceeded, and no major wars were fought, the young chosen became old and were replaced by newly chosen young intellectuals. They too, continued in the sealed cities.

Lloyd reached for his book and opened at a particular spot. He had read aloud to Brook; Dearborne and Boy listening:

"Two generations of the Proposition Blue personnel lived-out their lives, underground. In the Omega 1-SGI, restless dissention had spread when the time of the last global war had finally come to pass. When the news of war spread through the ranks of The Blue, many scientists forcibly left their protective cities and went out into the world to let the common people know of some meagre ways to protect themselves during the inevitable nuclear strikes and the subsequent fallout.

Some scientists published papers, that they called "The Blue Prospectus". It told the world about their government's secret cities and it made demands for regular people to be admitted into them, also. The people then rebelled, all of them wanting in. In the Far and MiddleEast, the Red Forces fought. They had left death and destruction in the wake of their advancement towards (what was then) the world's greatest, and most Holy of cities.

The masses were terrified.

At home, people fought amongst one another, crying at the terrible lies that the men in power told to them. They desperately tried to understand why some of them were not allowed into the "Proposition Blue" standards. The final chance to allow one young worker from each of the State's counties, an admission into one of the seven Omega SubGround Installations.

FLIGHT FOR SALVATION GINN – 2030

At dusk, as the twilight colours gave way to darkness and the pulsing stars, Brook and his guest had sup and continued with their exchange. Dearborne and Boy attentively sat by one another for many of those passing hours. They said very little but listened a great deal.

Lloyd told Brook of a great vault that was uncovered in the centre of Besten by historian scholars, many years ago. The vault contained a great number of books, journals and visual ribbons which showed the dire panic of the masses when the first bombs began to fall upon their cities.

Pictures showed masses in exodus to the mountains just before the escalation. Those people who left early, during the desperately unsuccessful peace negotiations, had made it to the safety of the mountains, where they hopefully found some degree of protection from the deadly fallout. Those who waited and moved too late, perished in the desolation that came to pass. And the world cried, for the final prophesy was not fulfilled. The Son of Man had failed to return and put a stop to the killing, the persecution and the corruption. Some people died from their lack of Faith, while other stayed with the hope that His return was still to come upon them, a little while later.

Their talk lead them into their own historic backgrounds, to the sum of knowledge which was allowed by the original Canon Di'Vaticanus, in the middle of the Twenty Seventh Century. He declared that this two score and eleventh year (2651 C.E.), was the beginning of the long-promised millennium, as heralded by the ancient prophets. His declaration was made after an eleven-year-old girl gave birth to a son. The eleven-year-old was a foundling in an abbess hermitage, left there by someone who could not care for her.

"She was found, wrapped in richly garb and placed in a golden cradle. As the girl grew she became beautiful, like the sun. She shone with inner light. Her hair was white — shiny like snow and iridescent like the moon. Her olive-skin flesh colouring contrasted her naturally reddened mouth and she possessed dark, almost black, almond-shaped eyes. Her beauty was near Holy and many men felt a jealousy within themselves when they just looked upon her. Then, at eleven, she was in size and stature, and appearance, to that of a full-grown woman; she birthed a son. This son, the Canon had proclaimed as a "Saviour" and sought to conduct a sacrifice in honour of the child, but he told the world that nothing was precious enough for this. It was soon determined, however, that there was one thing of great value, in all the land; the boy's own young and beautiful mother. In the shortness of time, and as if for the redemption for her death, the boy became weak and also died. The child's milk of life was taken from him and nothing else would sustain him.

The child's death was hidden from the ignorant masses and all the people believed in a falsity for nearly a half millennia." Lloyd recounted the story about the foundling that came to be called Sunshine by the old Abbess Mariot, in the common year of 2640. This was the same little girl that resulted the subsequent formation of the spiritualism that has been followed for the last four hundred years.

As the twilight evening gave way to the dark of night, Brook told Lloyd about his own lineage, following it as far back as he was able to, and confessed to him the peculiar ancestry that he had with

the Canon Blue. He explained that his father's line originated with the woman Dioneza, the half-sister of the Canon. In 2660 C.E., she had agreed to be artificially inseminated with Twentieth Century seamen from a physicist, who was called David Sannstein. He confessed to Lloyd that this wasn't really his own line and that he didn't know from where his line actually stemmed. Brook admitted, truthfully, that he was a foundling.

He spoke about that one day, long ago, when Smith Blue and his wife Miri were returning to Phoride, from the Virgin Mountains. Miri was heavy with child and in that mid-summer's afternoon in 3001 C.E., she gave birth to a son and called his name, Manguino. In a thankful rest, while his wife nursed the newborn, Smith Blue walked in the woods, following a babbling stream and a strange distant sound which was like the crying of a babe. And in his curious search, he came upon a hollow, where there was a child, wrapped in a sackcloth and left within a lion's skull. Smith gave the baby to his wife; seeing the baby abandoned and crying from hunger. And upon seeing the unfortunate child, Miri brought it near to her milk-laden breast and let it suckle beside her own son. Having hearts of gold, they accepted the babe to their bosom as their own, and Smith called his name, Brook Scullion; after the fashion that he had been found — by a stream, lying in a lion's skull.

As midnight approached, they talked of their governments. Lloyd proudly explained to Brook, Dearborn and the quiet Boy, about the Democratic system of government that his people accepted from the ancient Twentieth Century. In Besten, the people found it the most suitable form of rule for a civilized people. And even though, in the beginning there was corruption and immorality, their land had eventually overcome it all and soon gleaned a people of extreme honesty and cooperation. It had made Besten a very powerful, and important, centre on the northeast coast of the continent.

Lloyd became depressed when he thought about the Phoridenes closing their minds to the knowledge that he tried to give to them, and he experienced repeated visions of the monastic guard's electrophoric guns wallop him over and over again with their charges.

"My people hoped, that if the Phoridenes were to know the truth about the past, they would rally to oppose the ArchBishop. Maybe then, he would resume trade with Besten and the other territories so affected."

Brook thought that Lloyd's people had a logical plan but he also saw they were too innocent of the facts about the man in the great Halls Cathedral.

"The hopes of your people are too great!" Brook prepared an explanation that shattered any hopes that Lloyd may have had for the success of his mission to Phoride. "These people of Phoride ... they are ardent followers of that weasel at Halls. They follow him as if he is a god. It has been that same way, since the time of Canon. This following has been an deviation, in this land; this worship of him as some Almighty, who is nothing more than a man — a madman!"

Dearborne now broke her long silence and also commented about the people.

"They are all children, in mind, and follow the ArchBishop as if he is their father. To keep this maniacal worship, he has banned citizens from acquiring knowledge; limiting their scholastic learning to the monasteries and to the Blaisaman, and limiting only this to his own supporters' children. These places and their people are controlled by him. He prefers to keep the people as ignorant as he can, for his own ease to rule them." her voice quivered from her constricted soul.

Then, to Lloyd's amazement, Boy joined the conversation. His bewildered expression left him, as his hopeless and saddened voice carried right into the hearts and minds of the adults, in the room with him.

Brook turned to Dearborne, surprised. His eyes questioned her for a reason for Boy's interjection. "Everyone does what they are told or they are made to suffer!" said Boy. He rose to his feet, looked at Brook and Dearborne and walked about the room. He continued to speak his mind while the others quietly listened. "Not long ago, the servant-girl of one of the Cardinals — she was just older than me — refused to bare the Cardinal's holy child. With that refusal came her death, because the Cardinal declared that she will, therefore, never have children ... and in the view of all the people at Halls, and the Phoridene Council, the Cardinal had his vicars cut open the girl and all she had inside was pulled out and thrown to the floor. She did not die right away. The Cardinal wanted her last sight to be the death of her entire family." Dearborne turned away from what Boy had described. The horrible sight of the execution had returned to her. She and Brook were required to attend the execution — as was their slave, Boy.

Brook went to her and embraced her. As he consoled her, Boy continued, his eyes on the brink of bursting into tears.

"Then, they said that she was a demon and impure, and displayed her naked at Halls, for all of Phoride to gawk at."

Boy stopped and lowered his head but his expression showing a determined refusal to cry.

Lloyd was horrified by Boy's story and under his breath he could just sigh, "Barbaric!"

Brook and Dearborne held each other, tears slowly dribbling down their cheeks as Boy went to them for comfort, as well. To Lloyd's surprise, he watched them embrace the child.

"But why? — " Lloyd pleaded. "Why, my Lord, would such an atrocity be done to so young a girl? What was there to be gained by such barbarity?" he wiped his eyes as he thought of his little sister, still in Besten, and imagined that this could also become of her, if they lived in Phoride.

"Lloyd, my friend ... the Archbishop has made some strange laws, that I could not veto. One such law was that the refusal to bare a child by a monastic was a sin, punishable by death. Nothing could be done and fear prevented me from asserting what powers I do have over him, at Halls. More of Phoride follows his words and requests than they follow mine. My power is possessed just out of respect for my Blue heritage. He, with whom I had ruled, died early in our lives. Our co-sovereignty, that we promised to Smith Blue, died as well. It was I who united Upper and Lower Phoride but that Almighty ass of hypocrisy and immorality, took hold of my people's hearts."

Brook became very angry and felt so vulnerable and alone. He stood up and moved away from Dearborne and Boy.

"He banned all forms of learning, unless all the teaching was conducted by his monks, in the monastery. I tried to oppose him with all my power on that resolution. All I accomplished was the formation of our small Blaisaman. The masses listened to him when he told them _ "The Devil is in Knowledge, unless that Knowledge was conveyed by a righteous man of the Almighty" ... but as you see Lloyd, we know the real devil."

Lloyd came to realize Brook's thoughts and confirmed them with a nod. He could see that Brook had some real influence in the local government but no real power.

For the first time since the afternoon, there was a still quiet in the room. A morose presence hung in the air and it felt cold and ugly.

Outside, the people began to yell and scream in ecstasy as the warm drizzles finally began to pour on them. Their moderate prolificacy grew stronger with the coming of the rain; where the men chased their wives and daughters, their mistresses and their whores, out into the streets. In their uncontrolled lust, they rolled around in the mud, like swine, and fornicated with anyone or anything nearby. It mattered very little to them whether it was man, woman, child or animal. That rain was the ill-begotten legacy of the Twentieth Century war. The rain fell only once or twice a year in Lower Phoride. It was the same rain that caused the beautiful vegetation to grow into its remarkable splendour. Throughout the year, the green would survive by the watering from the artesian seas beneath the ground, until the next rain came. Some citizens eagerly waited for the rain to come, on that one day or night, where they believed that the evil within them would be fully satisfied and would leave them if they allowed themselves to be fully indulged in whatever manner of perversion happened upon them, during that season.

There were those who were afraid. Mothers, who didn't want to see their innocent ravaged, hid in their homes until the rains passed, and after the rain, those who hid came out into the streets. They wouldn't be afraid of the pools and puddles because the rain lost its strange properties shortly after touching the ground.

When the rains eventually ended the hiding people would emerge to see their naked friends and relatives in their frenetic prurience. They would walk amongst them, covering their mouths and noses from the stink of the forced orgasms produced by their uncontrolled reaction to being caught in the rains. They would gather-up the injured and cart-away, to the incinerators, those that had died from their over-exertions. The legacy of the rain was a strange one caused by the chemical intermixing of, the now weakened, radiation and the bacterial layers that encircled the world high in the atmosphere, released by that unspeakable war so many years in antiquity.

Several hours passed in conversation within Lloyd's room.

Dearborne cradled Boy, now asleep.

Brook and Lloyd devoured the contents of the book Lloyd had brought, and Brook reciprocated by

showing Lloyd some of the materials and relics that he had in his possession.

The rain, stopping not long before, had resumed. This time it was coming down harder, stealing the attention of the two new friends, as they read.

Dearborne, quietly sitting and relaxed, was jolted by a flash of lightning and a loud bang of thunder that quickly reported itself.

Boy awoke, startled. He looked at his surrounding then jumped from Dearborne's lap and ran towards the window. He pulled a large panel of wood over the open window to prevent the rain from entering the room. But the rain fell of him.

At once, Brook commanded him to lock himself in his chamber and slide the key out beneath the door. The boy quickly ran from the room, in haste to follow what Brook had instructed.

Lloyd, Brook and Dearborne were silent in their concern.

They exchanged several glances of worry about Boy.

"These rains are an evil necromancy over this entire continent. We also experience the rains, in Besten; although, my people do not go into it willingly. We have set aside gardens, throughout the entire city, for those to go, if caught in the rain. We are compassionate towards the cruelty of the madness."

Dearborne looked worried. She touched Brook's hand and questioned him about her fears for Boy. "Will he be alright?" she asked, as he face lost its flushed highlights.

A pounding sound was heard down in the distant hallway. It was coming from Boy's room.

"He made it to his chamber in time. Now he tries to come out. He will have to struggle with the rain's curse until it wears off. It is good that Boy is young and he was not fully soaked. Fortunately, the recovery should not take long."

Dearborne worried for Boy, since he had never-before been touched by the rain and, as far as she knew, he was far too young to have experienced any of extreme, or absurd, sexual drives.

The rain caused his body's glands to react by generating vast hormone secretions, and he convulsed in an insatiable erotic lust, while he poured out on the floor, by the door, by his own hand.

To calm Dearborne and suppress her worry for the boy, Lloyd and Brook continued to talk. Brook told his guest that he recently taught his wife all that he knew about the Twentieth Century, revealing to her the secrets from that now forgotten time.

"Have you taught anyone, other than Lady Dearborne, about the past?" inquired Lloyd.

"Not as of yet, Lloyd! But I am prepared to teach the boy, for I believe that he is ready to understand." Brook answered. "We have no children of our own and though it would be wonderful, without is truly best. Our lives are too short and petty in the existence of this world of miseries. Dearborne is also spared a terrible fate by the monastics who are not permitted their lustful intercourse without the potential of a birth."

Lloyd did not believe in Brook's notion of life being so miserable. He tried to give him a small dose of Bestenese faith.

"That is the very same way that the Old Ones had spoken in Besten, but they found that our lives could be as long as we wished. And our lives could be worth while, too! This may even be our religion. If not, is at least the attitude that we possess!

Lloyd closed his eyes and yawned. The talk that they have had, since that afternoon, was tiring even though it was fulfilling. Now he was weary. A need for rest could be seen in Brook's face, as-well-as in Dearborne. They glanced at one another with tear-soft eyes that craved sleep.

Dearborne checked Lloyd's bandages before they prepared to leave him.

"You will be fine. You are fortunate to survive those evil electrophorics. Maybe the true God is watching over you!" she said as she took Brook under the arm.

"Rest ... tomorrow we will talk some more." Brook commanded. "Tomorrow, if you can move around, I will show you more things that you may not have seen before."

"Thanks to you, both _ my friends." exclaimed Lloyd.

Lloyd fell to sleep once he lay back, and his saviours left the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

The rain fell throughout the night and into the early morning hours. Just before dawn, the rain had stopped and the sky filled with rainbows as the sun rose over Carter Pass (named after Brook's grandfather, who made Pomperaque a powerful city-state, nearly two centuries earlier).

On the streets were the people who hid from the rains, in the dry sanctuaries of their homes. They came out and gathered up their friends and relatives, that laid about in the streets half or entirely naked.

Some were still in the dreadful perverted poses brought upon them, by the rain.

The gatherers wore masks while they tried to separate those individuals still connected in their copulation. They wore the masks to keep the abominable stench of the human and animal excretions, from reaching them.

The heat of the morning sun made the horrid reek worsened to an overwhelming degree.

Medical men and women walked about and offered aid to those injured in the deranged mass orgy. Most were young girls and boys, killed by the frenetic desires of those who found it more to their pleasure to fornicate with the bodies of the dead; after having experienced the added excitement of killing them; with their fists or anything that they could find, to use as weapons.

There were men and boys, dead or dying from excruciating pain, after having their genitalia bitten off by some nymphomaniac harlots and other erotopathic bitches — some of who also died, choking while trying to swallow their prizes.

In the final reports given to Brook at noon, eighty-eight citizens were dead. Forty-three were women (ranging in age from fifteen to forty), twelve were men (mostly around fifty years of age), and the rest were children (boys and girls, six to fourteen).

Brook was saddened and alarmed, for this rate of mortality was the highest seen in Phoride for almost three hundred years. He still waited for word to come to him, from Upper Phoride and he didn't want to think of the numbers there.

The reports of those injured critically and seriously were also high. Their numbers reached close to two hundred; again, mostly comprised of children. Many boys developed venereal chancres and scores of young girls would now, never be able to bare children.

Even those who were slightly injured had reddened mouths, anus and genitals covered with runny infections. The more painful pustules erupted with yellowish-brown, jelly-like fluids that seeped from them, resembling the softened putrefaction of carrion. The most frightening, and eerie, result of the rain was the affects that it had on the human spirit. After the rain, there was always a deathly hush over the entire city. Only the gag-like breathing of those hundreds recovering from their scourged vainery, could be heard. This lasted for several days and sometimes continued for weeks.

There were no regular markets and no trade occurred. At night, the quiet was gravely frightening and it gave the entire land the atmosphere of a necropolis. The buildings were the tombs and the people inside were the living dead.

No one ate for days. Most could not eat from the stink of the ejaculations and blood that still covered the streets. The sight of it all caused nausea on its own accord. Those who were injured didn't eat either for they knew that the good food would quicken the runs of pus, as the poisons were forced out of them, and their pain would become even more unbearable.

The clean-up of the dead and injured was hurried on this day because soon after the sun rose, the heat of the day was intense and by noon, the carcasses of the animals that had died from the rain, began to rot. By now, the sane, unscathed citizens began to remove the corpses from the streets and cart them off to the incinerators for burning.

Many vicars, cardinals, novices and other coenobites helped those on the streets. They administered first-aid and prayed for their souls' salvation. But they were the last to appear on the streets that morning, after they cleaned-up their own mess at Halls. Within the Quadrangle of the Cathedral, all the

members were locked-in during the rain, with dozens of whores and other town's wenches, that were promised good food and a place to stay for one month, in return for their services when the eagerly awaited rain finally arrived.

These merry women adored the great Halls Cathedral. It was the most enormous structure in all of Phoride and the other lands on the continent. The structure reached for the sky. Its lean, slender appearance was capped by a crystal and gold ornate dome, with a spire. Buttresses flew out, all about from the slender central pillar; where at its base, tall and wide copper doors majestically opened and closed as people walked in and out of the main chapel.

Extended behind the pillar and into an oval shaped building was the area of the monastery, serving as the dormitories, rectories, scholarly libraries and private rooms for the monks. This residential building also housed the ArchBishop's office, wherein he conducted all his business of decision. Although this was one day of heavy mourning and discontent, there were plans at hand, and there were thoughts to be exchanged. All this was owed to the ArchBishop's ill-at-ease feeling, that was brought on by Lord Brook's refusal to meet with him for such a long time. The ArchBishop was always in his office, seated in his leather chair, rumped in holy softness, and able to turn in full circles on its rounded legs. The ArchBishop was the same age as Brook but his hair was darker and the lines on his face were less defined. They framed his jutting, hairy brows and silvery-grey eyes, with a sculptured precision.

His physique reminded one of a defeated athlete. His paunchy flab lolled about his waist like Saturn's rings, and the texture of his skin lacked softness, appearing coarse and strangely tight.

His clothing shimmered in rich extravagance as he sat in his chair dressed in his ethereal garb made of the finest white satin. His black surplice, thrown over it, opened on the front and revealed his bulging gut as he sat. On his head rested the constant sign of authority, his tall white and gold mitre, studded about with rare jewels, gifted to him by the Heads of other lands. Across the desk from him sat the Cardinal Allen. Unlike the great ArchBishop, he was more modestly clothed in the handmade magenta habit, that all the other Cardinals and monks wore within the monastery walls.

The ArchBishop in his chair, listened to the choral chants coming from the chapel. The melodic resonance was made by the dozens of novices and vicars as they sang their praise to the great forces of the Almighty. They gave their thanks for their lives, their homes, their food and the virgins sent to them, for the pleasures of administrating their blessings to them.

During the 'Praise to the Almighty' hymn, the ArchBishop, with his greatly inflated ego, listened in quiet and not tolerating interruptions. Afterall, their praise was being made to him alone, and he felt obliged to listen to them.

The chants echoed throughout Halls and its Quadrangle. Soon, all the senior monks joined in the melodic praise from wherever they were; whether in their gardens, in their stalls or strolling along the colonnade beneath the dormitory buildings. After a few minutes the whole area around Canon's Butte, where the Halls Cathedral stood, was filled with this song. This was the only sound heard, making its way through to the rest of Pomperaque, as it struggled out of its misery.

The office seemed to have an identity all of its own. On the walls hung the likeness of the Archbishop and the ancient Canon Di'Vaticanus. On the number of shelves about the room were placed rare and antiquated texts that dealt with their faith, and there were equally-rare statues of long-dead saints; those whose names were all, but few, forgotten.

As the 'Praise to the Almighty' ended and another hymn began the ArchBishop sat up in his chair and resumed the talk that he was earlier engaged in, with Cardinal Allen.

"I am pleased that you had found an opportune time to speak with her." he said in his roguish, powerful voice.

"Her thoughts seemed preoccupied, when I first spoke to her. I finally asked her to arrange the visit with Brook and Your Holiness, but that disturbance had occurred in the square and I do not know if she remembered to tell her Lord Brook. We should have had a reply by now!" Cardinal Allen relayed to the ArchBishop his brief encounter with the lovely Dearborne. He also admitted to him, the desires that he felt for her, during it all.

The ArchBishop smiled, his evil, butterfly lips turned up on each end while the rest of his mouth stayed unchanged. His eyes sparkled with intrigue and cynicism, and with the knowledge of predictability.

"Our Lord Scullion never replies. I really don't expect him to — now, more than usual, and we would waste our time to go to him. We would be told by his wretched servants that 'He is not in, call again!'. Then I, like a fool, would wait for another time. Now, more than ever, we must strive for an alliance between us. His power is a great danger to mine and he knows it deep inside his heart. His is a presence to be feared in Phoride!"

Cardinal Allen seemed confused by the change of the ArchBishop's usual attitude towards Brook Scullion. He couldn't see the true feelings in his Master's eyes and he didn't know whether he was frightened or just being careful about the great sovereign of Phoride.

Allen stood up and went to the window that was behind him, across the room. He looked out to see a number of the monks' service-wenches. They all lounged naked by the courtyard fountain, recuperating from their follies in the rain the previous evening. Beside them were a number of young novices and some messeigneurs. He looked over to a picture of the ArchBishop and sighed in a breathless manner, until he finally looked straight ahead again and nodded to himself in approval of his proposed thought. He turned to the ArchBishop. When their eyes met, he knew that maybe Allen had designed a cunning solution.

However! ...

"Why don't we just dispose of our Lord Scullion? Then we will have no threat and you will be the supreme One, in Phoride!" he shouted to his Holiness.

"But, my loyal Allen, I already am the most supreme. Why do you think that he hasn't told the Phoridenes about the ancient people? He has the proof, just as we do; and because the citizens regard him as highly as they worship me, care must be taken to keep him alive. Our advantage lies in my hope that he does not know the extent of his power."

"That is odd, your Holiness! If he indeed has the power, the ability, to destroy your authority, then we do not fare well. You remember the other rebellions against you, you Holiness? He, too, can destroy our position of power. He can be just like Martin of Ohigh, Hudson of Netheda, or maybe even like Harvard Bartlet of Besten. And don't forget the single disobedience by those people, like that Virunese pig, Empal. Our unity has become weak and their's has grown!" Cardinal Allen worked himself into a frenzy.

The ArchBishop, with a cool attitude towards the talk of his imminent downfall, calmed his loyal servant and set him straight as to the workings of Brook's mind, and the probability that nothing at all would happen.

He lifted his hands and gestured for Allen to stop. He smiled and swayed his chair to and fro while he spoke. Cardinal Allen slinked back towards the desk. Apparently, his nervousness was greater than the Almighty's himself.

"You worry too much. I still have Phoride under control, my favoured-one. I have the advantage over our Lord Scullion. As I said, I don't suppose that he knows the full extent of his power and the people are also unsure. Confusion! ... Confusion, Brother Allen, is our ally. If he tries anything against us, we shall call him a blasphemer, and he does not want this." he smiled at his own deductions, but Allen did not appear to be very pleased.

"Scullion has ruled Phoride for as long as you. Do you really believe that this man, who has ruled for nearly thirty years would cower at a charge of blasphemy?"

The ArchBishop laughed as he arranged his surplice, folded beneath his gut.

"Yes, I do believe it, most favoured. He thinks that the people follow only me. I proved this to him when I passed the Canon Education Law. He will be controlled ... in time." He leaned back in the chair, a dry squeak cut the choral hymn in the background and nurtured the evil mechanism within the room.

The singing in the background moved further into the distance as the monks shifted to a different section of the building. They chanted the appropriate hymns in each of the spiritual rooms.

Allen spoke of Dearborne once again. He seemed to be angry and oddly annoyed about her apparent inability to produce Brook's offspring over the past twenty years. They were the only couple in the land to be together for such a long time without begetting children. Everyone questioned that but the answers were always the same. They weren't ready, and are young enough to wait some while longer. Allen made his fun of the man, Brook.

"What of his wife, Holiness? What of her chastity for these past years? What a coward he is, to be wed to one so fair, as she. Twelve years of marriage and no children, and you do not allow Our right, to have

her bare one of Our Holy children."

"Hush! You will have the chance, my most loyal friend. But we must be vigilant for the appropriate opportunity."

Allen smiled at the ArchBishop's approval and with eager ears waited to know when.

"You are right about the length of their marriage, with no children. Soon they have celebrations of their joining. We shall attend. You may have her obey your whims, at that time, but not before and not after. The time will make itself available to you, then!" finished the ArchBishop.

"May humbled thanks, Most High and Wise." said Allen as he quickly trotted to his master, the ArchBishop and kissed his hand.

"Enough, Allen! You tire me! Go and make the necessary preparations and give it your fullest attention."

"Yes, Your Holiness!" and after his bow, he left the Almighty to his own thoughts, as he listened to the chanting choir, again drawing near as they made their way to the upper spirals of the tower.

He relaxed in his chair and patted his belly. He stretched and sighed, as he leafed through some papers and tabloids.

Soon, he delved into deep contemplation about Brook and himself, and their respective positions in the land. Through his mind ran a whirlwind of thought that concerned the so-believed misfortune in Brook's power. He felt uneasy over the total disunity that could occur, if the mobs of Phoride rose up against him. It could happen if the past were revealed, as truth, in place of the Canon's 'disillusionment' commandment. What if they accepted it? He wondered.

He remembered that he attained his rule of churchly affairs after the death of his father. He remembered that he had to discharge the promise made to his father, after he died, and so changed Phoride and all the adjacent lands, to meet his own needs. His need was to receive the fullest devotion and love from every individual in Halls, and the realm, and to bask in their worship of him, as their god.

He slowly got up and walked about the room. He took off his surplice and hung it in a chiffonnier then, before he closed it, he drew from a small compartment a large napkin, scented with the essence of Nethedan lilacs. He touched it to his nose.

The choir echoed in the background. The heavenly hymn that they were singing was 'God's Tribute to Canon', the first over-praised god of the continent.

Listening to the choir, the ArchBishop's spirits were lifted, as if he were the Canon and the praise was to him. Although he had been considered as a god in Phoride, for nearly two score years, he was still envious of his great-grand-ancestor; for what he had accomplished had set the method for those gods after him, to follow.

He smiled heartily as he thought to himself, about the total unadulterated domination of whatever he chose to control, and whenever he chose to control it. And once, he spoke aloud to himself. "Phoride and its all, are mine!" He clasped his hands as he walked about the room and to the window. He looked out at the naked women lying by the fountain. Around them were young monks rubbing palm-butter on the ladies' bodies, to prevent the sun from burning their overused flesh.

The hours flew by in their relentless journey to forever. Already they had passed into the afternoon. The ArchBishop still looked down at the fountain, where some more regenerated, sweat-greased ladies and some horny vicars were at it again. He was slightly angered when he saw their folly. He knew that he would have to take disciplinary actions on them. He had told them, many times before, not to play with their guests in open view. But this thought, however, didn't deter him from looking at the shapely objects below.

Soon, there was a rap at the door and it slowly opened. The ArchBishop turned to see who it was. It was the Cardinal Levy; a large brawny Nasin man, similar in age to the ArchBishop, but balding. His face always seemed blue from the perpetual shadow of hair, that grew with phenomenal quickness.

In front of him stood a pretty young girl about fifteen years old. Her large, frightened eyes flitted from side to side. Her heart pounded within her chest. Her delicate but firm breasts rose and fell with each breath that she took, and the fair skin on her arms and legs were dotted with goose-bumps. She had a sense of alarm and apprehension within herself, as she stood in that office. She had never before seen the Archbishop, and only one hour ago, she was summoned to appear before him.

What had she done? What sin had she committed?

She felt like crying but she couldn't. She was terrified at the questions that ran through her imaginative mind. She feared punishment for whatever she had done, and she dearly wished that she knew what that may be.

"Will there be anything else, Holiness?" asked the Nasino.

"Yes. Bring food and drink within the hour!"

"Yes, Holiness." said Cardinal Levy, then left them both in his office.

The Archbishop stayed silent as he looked-over the beautiful young woman. He stepped closer to her, but she inched backward and up against the door. She held the veil that she wore over her head and shoulders, tightly in her hands.

He stopped his advance towards her, to let himself take-in the full extent of her pure, young beauty; the tresses of gold that hid beneath the veil, the soft roundness of her form and the delicate prettiness of her bare feet and shapely legs.

Her large, sky-blue eyes, reflected the objects in the room and shone like sapphires when they caught the sunlight that beamed in, from the outside.

The choir still chanted in the Cathedral. The voices of all those men rose into the groins of the chapel within, and then echoed out towards the town.

The Archbishop grinned at the girl and asked her name but she did not answer. Her fright robbed her of her speech and after he asked her twice, in a soft and kindly manner, he at last boomed harshly.

"What is your name, my child?" he ordered and moved closer to her.

She showed nervousness when pinned up against the door with nowhere else to move. She began to speak, her melodic voice trembled and stuttered.

"My name is Mercedes, Holiness! — Please, please do not hurt me! I don't know what sins I have committed but please, I repent them!"

He smiled again and put his hands on her shoulders. He assured her that he would not hurt her. However, he soon began to fondle her, rubbing her shoulders and neck with his fore-fingers. She said nothing. She stood still as if frozen, her heart jumping inside her while the choir crescendoed into the finale of their 'Hymn To The Virgins!' He reckoned her, his sparkling evil eyes sized-to-mind and personal passions, her plump and full mouth that glistened with the juices of youth.

"Sh-h-h-h!" he commanded her in mock gentleness. "You are not here to be punished, my darling child. You are here to be blessed."

By the gentle, fatherly sound of his voice, he quelled the fright from her, and from her confused, unsure expression, emerged a trifle, but still apparently trusting smile.

"Bless me, Holiness? I do not understand. Why bless me? I am no one!" she told him in a half-happy, half-honoured tone.

He smiled at her as he affectionately took her dainty chin into his hand and told her the reason for her being brought to him.

"But you are someone, darling Mercedes. You have been chosen on this day, from all the fair maidens of this land, to mother my Holy Child."

She felt cold again and went aback. His hand dropped away from her chin as he slid the veil off her head. She slowly shook her head and touched her uncovered, golden-fleeced hair, unable to believe that her god would ravish her. And she tried in every way, to prevent what she feared would happen and she pleaded with him.

"My god, I cannot! I am promised to another, and to him I am to give my chastity. Forgive me, Most

High Lord. The honour is great but I cannot accept." she looked down to her feet and waited to be dismissed. She had thought that her appeal to him about her betrothal, would touch him, but instead he was angered by her disobedience to his charge.

"You can't refuse, my child! To refuse suggests that you are possessed by a demon of vast impurity!" his voice echoed throughout her mind. She was frightened again and did, so desperately want to leave but she had to listen.

"To refuse is to pronounce death upon yourself, and you do not want to die ... DO YOU, my darling Mercedes?"

Her mind spun with twisted visions. Jugglers played with her eyes to amuse those watching. Acrobats flew over her netted bowels and wrestlers squeezed the living soul from her heart.

In a desperate craze, she fell to her knees and grabbed his sweaty hands and kissed them with terrorized respect. She grovelled at his feet and further pleaded with him, to choose another, more worthy than her.

"Oh, please, Holiness — don't do this to me! Let me give my chastity to my promised, Hartford. Then you may come in, onto me!"

The Archbishop's indifference to her pleading grew, as did his anger. He had wanted her for days, ever since his searchers showed him a likeness of her, swimming alone in the crater lake. She would be his best, he thought. Of all the others, she is the most beautiful and would bring to him the highest fulfilment and the heartiest offspring.

"You cannot bargain away from a privilege!" he told her. "This is a favour done for you. All the world will look to you in praise and will worship you. You will be proud when you hear the people shout their homage to you ... 'Paise Mercedes, Mother of Grace!'. Don't you want this?"

She continued to beg her position but he paid no attention. She repeated, over and over, "please don't do this to me!", while embracing him, still down on her knees. She cried and tried to regain her breath but her spirit weakened and totally fell to the surrender of his ultimate dominance over her.

"I Am the Almighty. You must obey me!" he barked at her, as he leered down fixed upon her eyes.

Mercedes cried hysterically. She allowed her body drop all the way to the floor. She turned limp and helpless like a weak little kitten with no hopes of survival.

The Archbishop bent down to her and took her face into his hand. He wiped her tears with his scented napkin. He gently seized her by the shoulders and slowly lifted her, and the choir in the background grew stronger in volume. He embraced her and his hands groped for the lacings that kept her clothing closed around her. Then for a final time he rumbled at her, eagerly trying to make her realize that what he was about to do to her, was a blessing and not a violation of her body, as some were sure to regard it.

"You will thank me one day, my lovely child. You will bare my son or daughter — the child of god — and the world will pay fealty to you, and you will be happy." and, as he finished his self-forgiving reasoning to her, he ran his hands over her breasts and down to the smooth roundness of her hips. He kissed her mouth and brought his hands to her shoulders where he moved his fingers beneath the material of her garb and disrobed her. Her dress fell, in around her feet, revealing her silky smooth whiteness.

She still cried but her hysteria left her, just as did her spirit and her self-value, turning her into a submissive bag of flesh that rattled with blood and bones.

Like a child's rag doll, she gave pleasure to her master while he toyed with her until, at long last, he lifted his white satin frock.

The choirs' hymn-sing rose to a grandiose peak that resonated throughout the length of Halls, then stopped.

On the other side of the monastery were the libraries and the private-rooms for learning. Daily, in those rooms, novices and the youngest vicars learned their history of the Canon and all that was necessary to be known, as men of the Almighty.

Cardinals were usually the most learned of the monks, given to train the younger and inexperienced in the ways of life, love, worship and rule over the peasantry.

While the Archbishop made his studies in his office, so did the novices and grade vicars. They learned the proper methods for the torture of rebels and the demonically possessed. They learned that which assured the longest, most painful and lasting punishments that insured against quick death.

Then there were those who taught proper methods of seducing and satisfying women. The Cardinal Allen was one such instructor, in this what he called 'an art'.

In a dark room filled with books and artifacts, the Cardinal Allen was having an instruction session with one of the young vicars named Tohm, and a slanted-eyed wench, from Lÿnondan, called Ssidel.

On a large ruffled couch lay Ssidel, with Tohm, clumsily balancing himself overtop of her as he took his instructions in making Allen's pronounced 'art'. Ssidel lay there. She didn't make a sound or move a muscle. She seemed dulled to what was happening and poor Tohm was once again becoming frustrated at his failure to please her. He felt ashamed at his adolescent inabilities, since this was his third time at his class and the third at his failure.

Tohm begged Cardinal Allen, with all his heart, to tell him what he was doing wrong and requested him to demonstrate that was in which he does it, and how he manages it so well.

Allen showed him, over and over again, until the Rogjan chanted from the chapel spire, calling the monks to their evening prayers to the Almighty; to ask him for his blessings on their food, and on their other necessities.

CHAPTER FIVE

The days passed.

The streets of Pomperaque were silent for most part and only now the people were slowly recovering from the ordeal that was brought on them by the rain.

Lloyd, too, was recovering for several days, ever since Dearborne and Boy dragged him home. Now he strolled from room to room and through the hallways, stretching his stiffened legs and getting to know his new surroundings.

He wore an ivory-coloured frock and a black puma-fur vest, over which a long, dark-blue cape hung down, to keep him warm. The day was oddly cool and cloudy and some feared that the rains would fall again. Others, however, knew that this wouldn't happen. The rains hardly ever fell again after a few days of warmth and clear skies that followed the first and usually last rain.

Lloyd stopped at the end of the hallway, and looked out the window at the panoramic view of the city of Pomperaque. Everything was dry, including the distant farm terraces.

One would never believe that rain fell in the city because the rich land soaked up the water and dispersed the rain's potency into the vegetation, which already seemed to be a meter taller than what it was a few days before.

People were in the streets. They worked in groups of five or ten, called Keys. They were pulling up unwanted weeds and grasses from the hard ground and from around the buildings. Although the rain had blessed the crops and forests, with quick growth, it also cursed the city-people with the task of removing the unwanted, thick undergrowth from the streets. That job sometimes took them several days to complete. They threw the extracted vegetation into carts and hauled them over to the organic recycling factories, outside the city.

He looked straight ahead and saw the great Halls Cathedral, standing tall and solitary atop the butte, on the other side of the valley. That lovely valley had many stone and mud buildings, in rows on the different levels of ground that at one time served as agricultural land. Right in between him and Halls was the town square where just a few days ago, he nearly joined his ancestors. Now, for the first time, he saw the enormous distance to which Dearborne and Boy had to drag him; secreting him, to the Blue Mansion. The feat induced a respect in him, for his frail-looking hostess. That lady that had as much courage, as she had beauty.

Down the hallway, from where he came, he heard a noise and turned around to see what it was. One of the chambermaids went into the room, that was his to recuperate in, to clean it and change the bedding.

Coming from behind her, towards Lloyd, was Boy. His walk had just a suggestion of purpose as he neared the man that he and Dearborne had rescued from death.

"Good morning, sir!" said Boy, while still quite far from him.

Lloyd smiled and returned the salutation, allowing Boy to give him the message that he obviously carried with him.

"My Lord requested me to take you to his private room, sir!"

"Right away?" asked Lloyd.

"Yes, sir. If it pleases you?" continued Boy. "Very well, my lad, lead the way!" Lloyd accepted and Boy guided him around the hallways and down some stairs, to Brook's private room. His viewing den.

Lloyd was astonished to see the polished walls covered with rare paintings and tapestries, and rows of statues dotted each side of the hall, separated by varying spaces.

Some of the paintings were very old indeed and Lloyd didn't even try to imagine the dates of their making, but some he did recognize immediately, as late Twentieth Century, organic-colour pictographs.

He had only seen one other such painting, and that was in the ancient great vault library, unearthed in Besten. He was impressed by the wealth of the prehistoric items that Brook chose to display, without fear of exchanging words with the great feign master of the butte.

Lloyd was greatly confused about Brook's fear of the ArchBishop. If he really was afraid.

He thought to ask his host about the thoughts that he possessed about it all.

Soon, Boy stopped walking and motioned with his hand towards two gigantic doors of oak and iron. He pounded three times on it before he opened it and allowed Lloyd to enter.

When Lloyd walked into the room, Boy closed the door and left for Dearborne's parlour. Lloyd hadn't the chance to thank him but he could see that, to Boy, it didn't make much of a difference.

Brook was sitting in his high-backed chair, in the middle of the room. His back was to the door and this seemed to be quite odd, to Lloyd, when he thought that a man who was afraid of someone, would not sit in such a way, as to lend an advantage to his opponent.

He stood at the door and looked about the room, at the far curtained wall, the huge cabinet, the statues and several musical instruments in the far corner.

"Come in and make yourself comfortable." said Brook.

"Thank-you, my Lord!" he answered, and from beside the doors, with his stronger hand, pulled a tall wooden stool to the Lord's chair.

Brook looked at him with a smile and welcoming face and Lloyd pointed to the musical instruments and smiled.

"You play music?"

"No!" answered Brook and continued. "No! They were my brother's. He played, and beautifully. It was like the great God had entered his hands and his voice filled the walls of this place as if it were made up of the voices of a hundred seraphims. When he departed, these stayed as a reminder to us all of Manguino's goodness." Lloyd couldn't decide the meaning behind those feelings expressed by Brook. His words impressed with thoughts of sorrow, respect and praise, and yet his tone was utterly opposite to them, and seemed as if it were being subdued by him.

There was no mention yet, why Brook called him to his side and he didn't think that it was to talk about the memory of his brother. Then he remembered that Brook offered to show him some materials of knowledge from the Twentieth Century and about the past millennia, when he recovered.

He looked at the shelves of books adjacent to the cabinet and along the wall to the left of the entrance. However, all the books on the shelves were of this age; by poets and literary artists like Maxxwel, Bothelli, Croii, Lapinz and Argynossti. There were no encyclopedias or such books from antiquity and Lloyd grew alarmed and wary.

"You were going to show me some things that you have about the ancient land?" asked Lloyd.

Brook smiled and winked at him.

"My, you are eager, aren't you?"

Lloyd remained quiet and Brook started to show him the promised antiquities.

"Look around you, Lloyd. The knowledge within these pages will never again be conceived by man's mind, and they will be forgotten, if suppression is continued by that almighty megalomaniac."

"But, my Lord, all these writers are from our own time." stated Brook's guest.

Brook grinned, touched his shoulder and pointed to one of the books on the shelf behind him.

"Look inside that book!"

Lloyd looked at the shelf and grabbed for the book. He glanced at Brook to make certain that he took the correct one and Brook nodded, still smiling. With his eyes, he motioned for Lloyd to look inside.

Lloyd eyed the title and his face showed frustration, as his voice rose in annoyance.

"You joke, my Lord! This is poetry. 'Djenaud Smarte' ... it's not even very good poetry!"

"Look inside." Brook ordered once more. "I never imagined you to get annoyed so easily ... maybe you are afraid — or untrusting?"

Brook's words seemed to cut deeply into Lloyd's conscience. For a brief moment he had forgotten that he was saved from sure death by those of this household.

He quietly opened the book and thumbed through a few pages. His eyes finally flamed as he read the actual title page: "ELEMENTS OF DEMOCRACY".

Lloyd looked up at Brook in silent apology.

"All these books are like this one!" Lloyd stated with certainty, but lost his countenance when Brook confessed to him.

"No. Unfortunately, there are just a handful scattered throughout the others here. But I do have one book that surpasses them all. That one, the one I have hidden, is my prize. However, there are other things that I want to show you first!" and he rose from his chair and moved to the cabinets. When he reached them, he turned and showed his key to Lloyd before he unlocked and opened the doors.

"Yes, my friend ... I have much to show you. And I suppose that this one would be the best to show to you first." The doors of the cabinet flew open. Lloyd's eyes fixed themselves into a stare on the rows of buttons and meters, marked with numbers and letters — some with familiar and other with unfamiliar symbols.

In the centre of the unit's structure hung a flat, dark-glassed panel, and when Brook pushed some buttons, writing began to appear across it.

'ARCHIVAL TAPE #371.4931-T
... entry - October 13, 1982.
— Planets line up in even axis, on one side of the sun.
— Earth experiences catastrophic gravity changes,
resulting in quakes and unusual tidal activity.
— Parts of many continents are submerged following
sudden ocean rise.

_ * for further information, select video record m-oo10-1982."

Brook offered Lloyd to push the buttons in the select numbers on the rectangular board and then waited for results, but nothing happened. Brook then turned him around to the wall opposite them, that was draped with a large dark curtain.

"The curtain will move to reveal pictures that move." explained Brook.

Lloyd watched the wall and the drapes covering it, pull back, into the corners. On the wall, he saw the large white screen and moving pictures that he recognized as ancient video tape.

From the cabinet came a man's voice and pictures on the wall, matched what the voice was describing.

'Shuttles were sent into deep space to record the phenomenon of the planets, in our solar system, aligning on the same side of our sun. The world watched as the planets drew closer in their conjunction and in their gravitational resistances, every one of the planets experienced their own fatalities.'

In the utmost quiet did Brook and Lloyd stand there listening to the tinny voice.

'Mercury began to rotate in quick revolutions and Venus experienced a contrary orbit, and fire storms engulfed its surface. On Earth, ocean levels rose and fell drastically with every passing hour, and the land was disrupted by quakes and great upheavals as the planet changed in its polarity. Soon thereafter, the surface was pounded by thousands of small but devastating asteroids.'

The men couldn't believe the sights that were being presented to them, and they couldn't decide what was more terrifying — the descriptions or the actual pictures of the cataclysm.

'Volcanic eruptions broke the surface of Mars. Jupiter's red spot increased in size until it covered the planet's entire centre. Saturn increased in its tilt towards the sun. Uranus wobbled like a balloon in a breeze and Neptune captured Pluto and its moon Charon, claiming them as its own.'

"This is truly remarkable!" said Lloyd, his expression was bewildered like Boy's usually was. He smiled at Brook, and Brook tipped his head towards the screen, telling Lloyd with his actions to keep watching. He did.

The strange voice undulated from the cabinet, as more moving images were vomited onto the screen. The voice made a commentary on the Earth's people joining together, to dig themselves out of the solar cataclysm of 1982. Then the screen went blank and immediately a drone came from the cabinet, and more writing was printing out onto the black-glassed panel.

'ARCHIVAL TAPE #371.5039-D

... June 5, 1986

- As it has been feared for three decades, the final conflict has happened.
- Following their defeat from the Chinese, in May, the Soviets flowed south into the Middle-East, and laid seige to Jerusalem, after a great battle on the plains of Megiddo. As it was Biblically prophesied, Armageddon had come to pass.

— * for more information, select video record OA-06-1986.'

Brook punched up more video playback and taped images continued. The pictures showed people in massive exodus, heading for the highest mountains that they could reach. They tried to find some kind of shelter from the radiation fallout because, the two great nations: China and the United States of America, foolishly agreed to the use of limited nuclear warfare.

Then, on the screen, there were cities falling into piles of rubble, after they were hit by missiles.

People were in confusion over the horrible death. The excited commentator explained the state of tension in the world and made the situation sound hopeless. His message was, that the end had come.

The screen went blank and silence hung over the room, giving a cold and eerie feeling to both men.

"Every time, it is the same for me!" Brook admitted. "My heart is torn apart at the pains that I see."

Lloyd's in awe expression had left him. He too felt as Brook did, full of sorrow and anger.

"If only there was some way to change what had happened." he remarked, and slowly shifted back to

Brook.

"They were supposed to be civilized. They could have prevented that war but instead they chose to rid their problems by trying total genocide. They accumulated great knowledge and possessed god-like powers through their machines. But they used the earth as their toy, until, like infants, they broke it."

Lloyd sat down, removed and folded his cape over the back of Brook's chair. Silence held both men as they collected their thoughts, forcing into their own hearts a coldness of indifference to what they observed.

Lloyd shattered the annoying silence between them as he stood up and went to Brook, by his cabinets.

"What do you call this machine, my Lord?"

"I do not know the actual name, but I call it my gadget. My father gave this one to me and told me of a hollow mountain, where there is one that is much greater. Unfortunately, the ArchBishop has one, too."

Lloyd, calmer now, watched the projected images of the destruction and misery with Brook. He revealed that they also have gadgets like this one, in Besten. It was yet another artifact unearthed from the vault library, there.

"The ancient peoples called them computers, I believe. Knowledge could be given to it and later, one could retrieve it again, if needed. The Prominants of Besten had only just begun to understand their workings and uses, when the ArchBishop banned trade with us. So we had to divert our attentions to becoming self-sufficient."

Lloyd pushed some buttons on the flat key pad and the black-glass panel displayed some more words. The white screen again showed the rapid images. The growth of human life and their transportation, throughout the suppressed history of their people (up to the Twentieth Century). All this flashed by in a matter of minutes.

Lloyd and Brook resumed their conference while they watched the screen.

"Maybe he heard about the excavation and what was found. Maybe this frightened him." Brook considered.

"If so, then why did he impose the embargo on us? Surely he'd know that would only infuriate us; and if we did have something to hurt his power with, do you suppose that we'd hesitate to use it?"

Brook shrugged unknowingly and smiled as he delivered a quick-witted answer.

"I didn't say that he was a smart man!" he said, then they both laughed.

Soon, the note of conversation once again became serious.

"Why hasn't he tried to destroy your computer?" asked Lloyd.

"He knows that I won't use it!"

Lloyd was confused by Brook's reply, and Brook explained to Lloyd his reason for not using the computer against the ArchBishop.

"My people would not be able to understand this machine. So, if I were to use it against the ArchBishop, he would surely turn around and call me an evil sorcerer, out to befuddle and possess the citizens' minds and souls."

"But the people," Lloyd interrupted, "They know you well and they look up to you. Certainly they would like to see the Almighty thrown down from his authority?"

Brook shook his head and paced around.

"I have no guarantees about this and I don't want to engage in a civil war, even if indeed there are enough to back me. I do know in fact, that at least, half of Phoride will back me!" he explained, then Lloyd added.

"I am surprised that he hasn't tried to destroy it. If you were to get half of Phoride to join with you, I am certain that Besten, Virune, and even some of the Krolalin and Ohigh, would unite against that tyrant!"

What Lloyd said was true. Many of the territories would, without question, join with Brook. However, Brook explained to Lloyd that, if he did allow the other regions to join him, they too could eventually become a threat to his rule. Lloyd tried to quell Brook's fears. He promised him that the Bestenese do respect his powers and his abilities, and that they all would, with all their hearts and souls, fight to help him keep his rule. "I play weak to buy me time. To think." Brook confided. "I don't doubt that I could destroy him but it would be at the expense of too many lives. I united Upper and Lower Phoride some twenty years ago. Then, there were many that died. Now, I can't see them divided, and I will not be the instrument to cause it."

"I understand!" is all that Lloyd said, breathing out a wet sigh.

Brook weighed all his reasons for not rising up. He expressed that, if he did indeed decide to go against that pig at Halls, that evil man would have received prior knowledge of it.

"I found ears in the walls and I removed them all. Since then, I have stayed inside and made certain that there were no more intrusions or listenings. Some of his robed geese came here once, and they did try to ruin my gadgets, but they couldn't open or break into the cabinet. It is made of three strong metals and is overlaid with oak, inside and out."

Lloyd began to understand Brook's position. He is a very powerful man, successfully intimidated by petty fears. Fears as trifle as being called a blasphemer or sorcerer but most of all, the fear that the unity of Phoride would fall because of him.

Their attention was focused on the screen, at the images of flying machines. Great metal monstrosities that shrieked when they flew, and that were able to carry countless numbers of people to any place in the whole world.

"They were remarkable, weren't they?" Lloyd admired them, proud to be descended from those who built them.

"I would think that we are the most remarkable." Brook's noting puzzled Lloyd for a moment. "Afterall, we have survived our forefathers' murder of each other!"

Lloyd smiled, realising that his Lord and master made a good point.

"Yes, I suppose that I've never thought of us in quite that way!"

The morning passed quickly while they spoke.

Brook showed Lloyd more taped recordings left for those people who may have possibly succeeded the holocaust and deluge. One of those successors was Carter Blue. He found the machine in Angaent, on his way to Pomperaque, and used it to make the city a powerful state, in itself, and so becoming its ruler and leaving it all to his own offspring.

Brook showed to Lloyd the dozens or so books from the Twentieth Century, that dealt in a wide range of topics. Some of the books that Brook possessed included those on Architecture, History, Mathematics, Art and also Theology.

Lloyd was impressed by the preserved quality and the information contained within them. In just a few books, Brook had a good example of what the ancient people were like, but what Lloyd waited for, with such eager but patient anticipation, was the book that his Lord had been so mysterious about.

"I'm still amazed," Lloyd began, "to see someone with the power to save the world from a madman, lack the will-power to accomplish it."

Brook felt ashamed of his inability to show the definite power that he possessed. But to keep peace and unity in Phoride, he had no choice but to sacrifice his presence to that of the Almighty Archbishop.

He tried to explain that to his guest, but he did not want to make himself look like a coward. He only wanted to show his caution.

"I stayed within the walls of this house. I watched for intruders who would hardly hesitate to hide little listening devices for that great weasel. After he realized the motive behind my seclusion, he stopped his spying. Later, he used my own vigilance to make me seem like a recluse. But now, my friend, I can once again walk the streets of Pomperaque because you are here to hold my place."

Lloyd, loyally bowed his head in trust-worthy acceptance, and apologised for his unjust implication that Brook was a coward. Brook forgave him for speaking so because he knew that, in his heart, Lloyd

didn't really mean it.

"Providence had thrust us together. You and I, Lloyd, will work side-by-side, to return to this land its forgotten freedom and greatness. We shall teach others all that we know. This is the only way to change the ArchBishop's hold on my people."

Lloyd agreed.

His anticipation also grew to see the great book that Brook promised to show him.

Brook made his way to a shelf near the white screen. From one of these shelves he removed some books, slid a panel away and pulled out a large, dark book.

"If ever I am defeated or destroyed, you must care for this place and this book." Brook instructed.

With a silent breath, Brook made a confession to Lloyd, along with a request for a service that would take him a life-time.

"I must ask a favour of you, my friend. If I am not granted the opportunity and time to instruct Boy in what I know about the previous millennia, you must take over for me, and you both must leave this place." Brook sounded very peculiar. Lloyd wondered about that; his mind engaged in waves of thought, while he tried to explain to himself, the reason for Brook's request.

"I do not fully understand, my Lord. You want us to instruct your servant. Why?" Lloyd asked, confused by Brook's behaviour.

"Yes. We must teach all those like him and especially him because, Lloyd, Boy is my son! He will succeed me when I am gone. Which, I pray, will not be too soon."

There it was. The one great secret about his life, that he had finally confessed, and to this man, who was still nothing more than a wounded guest in his home.

Lloyd was muted. He had wondered for several days about the boy. He noticed how the boy was allowed to speak his piece, during his first night with them, but he never guessed that this was the reason for it. He waited to hear more.

"My Dearborne tried to keep this truth from me, for all these years. The boy knows, too. His grandfather taught him well, how to behave before me. But I still found out!"

Lloyd eagerly listened, for a while, forgetting about the great book that he was holding in his hands.

"He arrived here by caravan when he was nine, as a servant for Dearborne — a gift from her father, Loebh of Hennai. However, I did wonder when she was more than just pleased to see him, and then without question accepted him. I wed her in Hennai during a trade conference and the I came back here to Pomperaque to prepare for her to join me. But it was almost a year before she came here, and I didn't find out until just last year, that she gave birth to my son but didn't bring him." Brook observed Lloyd fondling the large book that he gave to him, earlier. Lloyd was deeply enthralled by the story and he wanted to hear more. For a moment he forgot about the book.

"Why didn't she bring him, or at least tell you about his existence?"

"My problem with the ArchBishop had existed long before I married her. This was the reason that I went to Hennai. I wanted to unite the smaller and independent states with Phoride but, in most part, I failed because of that almighty swine. While there, I met Loebh and his lovely daughter. When we met, our love was obvious to us, like an exploding star, and we married immediately. She was only sixteen and I was thirty-five but her father openly welcomed my offer of marriage. She did not object and we were wed. I revealed to her that we couldn't have children right away. I suppose that she was afraid to tell me, later."

"How did you find out?" Lloyd inquired with a sly tone.

"Loebh sent word to me last year. I don't know why he did it, but I am grateful."

Lloyd smiled and shook his head in a manner which suggested disbelief. He got up from his chair and went over to the window. He peered out and sucked in a few deep breaths of air then turned to Brook and laughed.

"You know, I came to Pomperaque for one reason; to alter the ArchBishop's mind to the trade embargo on Besten. Now, all this. It's amazing!"

Brook also laughed at Lloyd's humorous view of the way that his original mission had changed. His presence had brought Brook his freedom from staying in the Blue Mansion. All this happened after his struggle, while he tried to tell the people of Phoride about the ancients from which they were all descended.

Lloyd had become the catalyst for Brook's resurgence of strength. His presence had that special chemistry that worked Brook's will into its new power, and both men new for sure, that Brook would no longer remain in his dormant retreat.

Lloyd finally began to examine the book, feeling the quality of its cover and the raised gold lettered title. In breathless stupefaction, he commenced to read it aloud.

"THE HISTORY OF NORTH AMERICA – TO 1986 C.E.!"

"Yes. This book is the proof of the ancients, of our land, and of that great civilization before our own millennium." Brook admitted to Lloyd. He pointed at the book that Lloyd was now leafing through, and then moved to his high-backed chair and sat down. "That book can make those who are learned, at the Blaisaman, join my ways again. Eventually they will all teach for me, from that

book. That, can destroy the ArchBishop, but first I must find some who will follow it!" Lloyd smiled in awe, marvelling at what he read, and almost, as if in love with the book, he sighed a spiritual praise.

"My God!" he breathed. "This looks like it's complete, right up to the end of it all." He stopped for a moment to collect his wonderment, staying with the aghast manner that he began with. "This is greater than anything that I have ever seen. It's greater than anything that I know of in besten. With this book, my Lord, we possess the means by which to unite the whole world!" Lloyd intermittently lingered on a page, reading it aloud, then followed with the usual spellbound glance at Brook. Each time he reaffirmed that they were within reach of destroying the almighty, the ArchBishop.

Soon Brook became annoyed and in a comparable tone of voice, ordered Lloyd never again to call that maniac at Halls, the Almighty. Lloyd didn't anger. He just apologized to Brook and promised never again to do it.

"We can bring this whole continent together, under a friendly democracy. The Virgin Mountains people of Dantoga, the Virunese, the Elkinii plains people — all would join you. Somehow, I feel that even the Teniqués homosimians from the west, the Palatkan lepers, and maybe even the dual-sexed S_dash would join with you!" Lloyd's excitement filled the room, and as Brook listened to his dream, his heart also pumped the blood of freedom and unity, through his veins. He felt alive, once more.

"Everything can be, as it was for our ancient fathers. But we must not rush into this quick change. We must court the people and slowly introduce the concept to them. I don't want to destroy whatever unity we may already have. We must do it with logic, and I believe that changing the ArchBishop's embargo with your land may be the safest place to begin!"

"I agree!" said Lloyd. "Phoride doesn't receive any of our goods either, due to his insane monopoly."

Lloyd moved over to his master and friend, from the window and sat on the stool beside his chair, while he still leafed through the great book.

"I should not have allowed his embargo against Besten. It was wrong and I am sorry. I wasn't in the position to alter what was to be!" declared Brook, breathing deeply as he looked to the window at the Blue, cloudless, afternoon sky. The skies were clear and the fear of another rain had passed.

Lloyd understood Brook, now. With this understanding he told Brook not to fret and that he was thankful that Besten was an ocean port, and that they had an abundance of fish and other goods coming into the city, by that means.

"My Lord, we must fight for what we believe in. I realize that there have been many wars that the earth has seen. You, yourself, had once forcibly united Phoride and made their lives happier than what they knew." His understanding was saturated with talk of war. Brook looked right into his guest's eyes and shook his head. He did not want war.

"War shall always be, my Lord!" Lloyd was insistent.

"Maybe, but there can be revolutionary changes without battle. My father had once told me, that diplomacy was always better-sought and best fought. Only if diplomacy fails, is war necessary!" Brook explained his view to Lloyd, who was in agreement but again illustrated the futility of talk. "Always, my Lord, there is diplomacy that may prevent war, but always there are many who don't care to listen,

because it may be hurtful to their own interests! To them, wealth and gain is put high above love and life!"

Slowly, the difference in their views pulled them apart, and a trivial argument began between them. Brook became emotional, and rose from his chair. He turned to Lloyd and loudly, took the dominance of his room, which lasted only a moment until Lloyd interrupted him.

"War doesn't solve a thing, no matter how it is fought. The taring up of the ground, the ripping apart of the young mens' bodies, the death ... death ... DEATH!" Brook built up to a frenzy giving his views. Lloyd refused them.

"The realization of wastage is understood, but as our fathers tell us; here, in this book, 'no cost is too extreme when trying to attain freedom!', and I do believe that to be so!"

Silence.

Both stared at one another with heated, flaring eyes. Their faces were contorted in strain and sweat leaked in huge droplets from their brows. Then Brook sighed and put his hand on Lloyd's shoulder. He spoke calmly.

"Young men should not be made to fight and die for the discontent and hate of the old men in power; who create a war, in the name of God, Love or Freedom. It's all an excuse to them. Can't you see that?"

Lloyd didn't answer.

"Most of the ancient wars were fought because of the dislikes between the men in power. Many of the wars, in our times, were the same. Countless numbers of young men died without knowing what they were fighting for. What is worse, Lloyd, is that the common folk had suffered the most, and they weren't even supposed to be involved! Do you understand?"

Lloyd was still silent, his mouth agape and mute or reply to the truths that Brook was preaching. He nodded and bowed his head, as he surrendered his view, with a final thought.

"War is necessary, sometimes!" was all that Lloyd said.

"True, my friend! The souls of mankind burn on this hellish ball, this scorched Earth of ours. Some day we will be able to extinguish those who cause the fatal spark. Until then, I will not let my hatred of the ArchBishop, to become one of those sparks."

Throughout the afternoon, Lloyd and Brook continued to talk. Their emotions toned down somewhat, to a level of trust and friendship, and mutual exchange of knowledge.

Brook freely gave his knowledge to Lloyd without the demand of payment and Lloyd accepted it, promising that he would in turn, give it to Brook's son, and continued to instruct him until the sum of both their knowledge or until one of them was expended.

Brook taught Lloyd to use the computer and showed him the locations of the seven Omega Sub Ground Installations, strewn about the continent. These were the same installations that were abandoned several centuries ago, after civilization was reestablished on the land. Brook showed Lloyd the location of the great library vault that was still hidden near one of those installations. It was the same gigantic vault that was closed down just prior to the great holocaust. It was a vault carved deep into a mountain of solid granite, southeast of the Omega 4 - East SGI, at the head of the Krolalin range, to the north. The mountain was known to them as, Alugean.

"There's enough food there for one man to live on for half a century. If ever something happens to me, Lloyd, take the boy there. Go there and learn as much as you can, and then teach the Bestenese people, and try to teach mine. If nothing happens to me, I will send both of you there, anyway, and you will learn." Brook ended his instructions and Lloyd promised him, that when fit to travel, he would leave with Boy and not return until Boy willed it.

The day seemed short to those in the Blue Mansion. After the Lord, his Lady and their honoured guest had supped, they all retired to a parlour-like room. That room was Dearborne's equivalent to Brook's viewing-den.

She reclined in a large comfortable chair, soft and padded in cushioned splendour while she rolled some yarn into a large ball, and hummed to herself a mellow little tune.

Brook stood in the corner of the room by a small cabinet. He poured wine into some glasses and motioned to hand the glasses to Dearborne and Lloyd, who sat on a sofa near her at the window. Lloyd

looked out the window at the setting sun. He watched and listened to the people coming out of their homes and heading for their evening fun-spots. They had weathered the fretting indulgences brought to them by the rain and they now behaved no differently than they had for months before the rain.

Brook, with a silent tip of his head to the beloved wife, handed her a glass of her once-favoured wine. She graciously accepted it from him and stared at the glass. Her face exposed an expression of anxiety and fear, afraid to drink, as if the glass of that delicate beverage had been laced with some kind of poison. He gave to Lloyd a glass also, breaking his concentrations of watching the columns of people below, as they headed for the centre of Pomperaque, to their taverns and theatres. The Lord lifted his glass and saluted those close to him, within the room, with a toast to freedom and unity. They echoed him.

Lloyd kept his stare on the street, and Brook was curious as to what interested his guest so much. He looked at Lloyd several times, and every time he just stared out into the street. He seemed somewhat intoxicated, although he only sipped once, at his wine.

Brook understood that Lloyd was only longing for his home in Besten. He knew that the thoughts of his homeland and his near death, in Pomperaque, had chilled his mind and made him dopey.

Lord Brook emptied his glass of wine and sighed, the sound of it resonated throughout the room. He spoke, imitating a burly Bestenese accent that grabbed the attention of both his lovely wife and Lloyd.

"Ah! — 'What sweet sustenance we have in our thirst, for the smooth wisp of truth found in a rose!'" said Brook, as he quoted one of Besten's most renown poets. Lloyd glanced away from the window and smile at Brook. Their rapport showed in their eyes and they didn't need to speak. Brook looked at Dearborne and saw that she didn't react to his poetry recital. Instead, she began to develop mannerisms of someone who is disgusted. He thought that she just didn't approve of his jest. Lloyd noticed a strangeness in her, too, but he thought that it wasn't his place to say anything.

"At least you don't quote that Djenaud Smarte, my Lord. You have taste!" Lloyd made ready to make some fun, if the Lord cared to jest, himself — and he did.

"Yes. Moreye was a great poet. I remember that he once jested about Smarte. He said, 'Smarte could only write if intoxicated by the aroma of a peasant's chicken-house, and that's why he lived in one!'" Brook was amused as was Lloyd. He sat up better as not to spill his drink while he laughed. He soon added to Brook's jest by conveying to him a game that he learned in Besten, while he was still young.

"We once played games in Besten. Some Elders told us that these games were very old but our own familiarities could be used to make them humorous, to us. My father, Harvard, taught me this one and I found it funny. The game goes like this. Someone appears at your door and knocks. The one inside asks, 'who is there?', the outsider answers with something and the insider asks again, the outsider's name and 'who?' Then one outside answers in a humorous manner."

To Brook, the explanation of the game, was funny enough for him, because Lloyd began to take on a nature of a lad, Boy's age. Finally, after Lloyd explained to Brook the game, he demonstrated it to him. He told Brook what to say as the insider and the joke commenced. Lloyd rapped on the wood of the chair's arm-rest, that represented the door. He then pointed to Brook.

"Who is there?" asked Brook.

"Djenaud Smarte!" Lloyd replied.

"Djenaud Smarte, who?" asked Brook again, after being cued, once more.

"Djenaud as smart as I am!" said Lloyd and he laughed.

They found this cute little game somewhat interesting and continued to play it for a while until they ran out of names that could be made fun.

Brook soon became restless, when he saw that Dearborne wasn't reacting to their humour, without even the slightest grin.

Lloyd resumed his stare out the window. His spirited smile vanished from his face as quickly as the wine vanished from his glass, that he still held in his hand.

Out on the streets were groups of children walking together. Some chewed on the intoxicating seeds of the Orumen flower. Lloyd shook his head in disenchantment just as Brook also looked out the window and saw the same.

"Sweet children playing in the streets, grow up to become hated by their own kind. And soon they grow to hate themselves!" said Brook, as he turned to Lloyd and Dearborne, then further, "Is that not so?" the room was silent.

After a quarter-hour, while she slowly and perfectly wound her yarn into a tight ball, Dearborne finally broke the silence.

"You cannot blame the children, my husband! They are all good. Only circumstances change them. The times devour their innocent little souls and burn into their hearts the hatred that grows as they do!"

Brook walked about the room and motioned to Lloyd, with his glass if he would like some more wine, and he accepted. He took Lloyd's glass and poured himself and his guest some more wine. He glanced at Dearborne's glass, but she hadn't yet taken a single swallow from it.

"I don't blame them, my love. The devil — the evil — is in all of them. They discover it during their transitions. Some of these mischievous children discover their good and their evil, and some find it to their advantage, that evil is of more benefit to them. So turns the world." Brook exclaimed to his wife and gulped his wine. He studied her for a few moments, in puzzlement, and wondered why she hadn't touched her wine. Then, as if his thoughts touched hers, she stopped rolling her yarn and put the glass to her precious lips and like a little bird, took a sip. However, Brook saw that she was not enjoying it and he worried that something was wrong, but he didn't pry her with questions. He felt that she would eventually come to him herself, when she found the time to be right for her.

Lloyd, on the couch, still peered out the window at the street. He kept an open ear to the exchange between his host and hostess, and he slowly drank his wine. In the distance he noticed some of the farmers irrigating their farm terraces with water, mechanically drawn from the Artesian reservoirs beneath the city.

Throughout the evening, from the time the sun had begun to drowse until it finally bedded-down for the night, Brook paced about the room. He was deeply into his thoughts, and he occasionally surveyed his beloved wife, Dearborne, and also his guest Lloyd. Lloyd maintained his stare out the window during this lulling tide of time. Mesmerized by the beauty of this land, he still longed to see Besten again. Brook empathized with Lloyd's sentiment and left him to it until he felt that Lloyd's thoughts, were causing him to brood and Brook did not want to see people, brooding in the house. He recognized that Dearborne was on the verge of breaking under the strain of trying to prevent her own, and he did not want to see Lloyd in a moody state.

He finally sat at the end of the couch that Lloyd was on, choosing the end closer to his wife. He stared at Dearborne, then at his other side, at Lloyd. His voice attained the quality of a seer. "The days pass too quickly, for one to hold-onto the precious moments in life, however trifle and few!" he stated with the strength of compassion, understanding and love, and in his ultimate wisdom, he imparted to those close to him a morbid idea. "We must all one day die — and may it be in peace, and with God!" When he finished, he saw a shiny tear trickle down Dearborne's flushed cheek.

She sipped at her wine once more, put it on the table in front of her and pushed it away.

Brooks and Lloyd watched as she set the drink down, and for a while, the only sounds that were heard in the parlour were that of breathing and the rustling of their clothes. He observed her and he loathed to see the torment that churned within her beautiful eyes. He finally found it within himself, to question her behaviour.

"Something troubles you, my Love? Don't you like the drink?" he asked, with worry.

Lloyd reckoned the Lady and her glass, drawing a feeble connection between them, that he thought was the reason behind her moody behaviour.

"Why don't you drink your wine, my Lady? I know of no woman in the land that dislikes rose-wine. Some may drink it more than others, but all like it!" Lloyd requested, seeing in her eyes that his observation hit its mark.

She stared at her glass, her eyes burned with contempt therein, and she shrugged in utter abomination, as she, in a nauseated tone, answered her guest.

"I am quickly acquiring a distaste for it." she said, then carried on, as she met Lloyd's eyes, "I am acquiring a distaste for the rest of Phoride!"

Brook raised an eyebrow in surprise when he heard his lovely Dearborne speak so. He leaned forward

and put his gentle hand, lovingly on her forearm until she set her own hand overtop of it and leered into his eyes.

"What is wrong, my love? charged Brook, growing hot with worry. Their eyes became one entity, emanating from both their minds and so joining.

Lloyd got to his feet. Still at the window, he aimlessly gaped out through its portal and added to the earlier tracings of thought regarding his intuitive lore. And, as if in riddle, he recited to Dearborne, who understood his conjecture.

"There may be certain disillusions that are regarded as factual, by some people?" he said, and she agreed.

Dearborne put her ball of yarn to one side and issued from her chair. She peered at her Brook, for a long time, apprehensive at whether or not to tell him the heavy burden that she carried within herself. She still clutched his hand. He felt her tremble like a cold little kitten, and his eyes pleased to her, to reveal her thoughts to him and gain strength from his willingness to be receptive. She told him everything.

"It is something that happened the day that I brought Lloyd to this house!" and she told him everything about Cardinal Allen's advances on her. Brook's forehead wrinkled as he listened, his brow rose, and sweat flowed from it. His lips pursed in anger, and she saw anger emanating from his eyes, along with the storms of worry there, also. Lloyd was poised, still listening to her. "He later assured me that this was not so and I apologized. I don't know why!" her voice quivered as she began to cry. "I don't know why?"

She carried on, repeating that she didn't know why she had apologized. Her words became snarled under her gasps of breath. Lloyd stepped towards her, to give assistance and Brook embraced her tightly trying to impart to her his stalwart volition.

"That Devil's dog has soiled your spirit! He shall pay. He shall never corrupt again!" promised Brook.

"He did nothing to me," Dearborne admits. "It's only what he had said to me when I was drinking my rose wine ... how a woman is hot-blooded towards her lover if she drinks from the rose." she continued to cry while she held on to Brook as if he was a cliff and beneath her was a bottomless void. "Now I cannot enjoy wine, and my mind is frightened of him!"

Lloyd was quiet. He watched Brook's attempts to sedate his Lady. Through Lady Dearborne's words and actions, Lloyd now grasped the full meaning of the struggle and pains in the hearts of those who saved his life.

"I understand, now, my Lord!" Lloyd ejaculated in prehension. "The perversities from mind, to body, to earth. The almi ... the evil ArchBishop's salvation of the world is DAMNATION!"

"Now you know why I need you to help me, in my cause. Even after I am gone! You know why you must ... teach ... all that we know — " Brook appealed knowing the assured outcome to his requests.

"Yes!" was all that Lloyd answered with. It was enough and clear, and proved his loyal promise to one man's vision of freedom and unity.

"You will be alright, my love!" Brook promised Dearborne. "Telling me frees you from your trials. Rest easy now! Lloyd will stay with you. I must go and sort this incident in my mind. I must prepare myself to confront that miscreant at Halls." he touched Lloyd's arm and without words asked him to keep Dearborne company while he retired to his thoughts. Lloyd complied.

Brook kissed Dearborne and with his hand, gently wiped some of the tears from her face, then without further delay, left the room for his den.

Shortly after Brook left their presence, Lloyd and Dearborne quietly sat on the couch and when she finally stopped crying, she thanked Lloyd for being so good in staying with her. Lloyd promised that he was pleased to serve her and that he could never fully repay her entire household for their help in rescuing him from his near fatality in the square.

She was quiet for the longest time. Lloyd remained beside her, also quiet. His manners dictated to him to be polite and not question her thoughts, but after some time of quiet meditation, she requested of Lloyd to be a judge on her actions in telling Brook about what had happened between her and the Cardinal Allen.

He thought for a few moments and told her not to fret because she did, indeed, do what was necessary. He told her that her husband had the right to know about some perverse chancre of a man, who had practised his lechery on her.

"I am glad that I told him this!" she admitted. She felt much better and less guilty from fear that she was an inspiring factor; that she was the cause for the lecher to come forth to her as if she were a harlot. She continued. "I don't know that I should've told him now. Maybe earlier would've been better. I was frightened. I did not want to see him confront the ArchBishop out of rage, for my sake. I did not want to leave this house for that reason!"

Lloyd touched her reassuringly and in a soft but powerful voice, lifted this new burden from her mind. He soothed her fear of Brook's confrontation with the ArchBishop.

"Don't worry, Lady! He will be careful with that vermin. He has motivation, now, to release Besten from the economic blockade, and he has his personal grievances to settle. The ArchBishop will not know how to cope!"

"My husband is brave, Master Bartlet. Because of you ... because of myself and because of all those like our Boy, I see him in the throws of changing this entire land."

More silence crept into the room. Dearborne was turned towards Lloyd, her face filled with an enigma that wanted to break free from her. He knew that in her heart, she had something else that was very, very important for him to know. In recent days that passed, he had seen it in her face. Now, however, it was most prevalent and in their intimate, profound faith, in one another's trust, she finally gave him her private testimony.

"I must tell you something, Lloyd."

"Your servant, my Lady."

"I see our lives closing-in on us, in this place. You, my loyal confidant, must carry on for Brook, for us, if something evil occurs!" she made a familiar request to him.

"I understand, my Lady!" he replied.

"I wish that you really do." she stopped for a second to collect her thoughts and courage. "I pray that you keep what I now have to tell you, private and between us!" she said. Lloyd waited in anticipation, guessing at what she was going to tell him. "Our servant, Boy, is Brook's and mine, natural son." she finished and observed a trifle grin spread over Lloyd's face. Somehow, he had anticipated correctly, and he felt himself to be the most privileged of men, to have such high trust and confidence bestowed on him. A fortunate man, who not more than a week ago was dragged into their house, a near-dead stranger. He nodded his head to her, and took her hands into his own.

"Yes! I was curious about the similarity in his appearance to him and Brook! I wondered at the worry that you both expressed in him, the evening of the rain, and also the privileges that you both indulge him with."

Lloyd, however, did not tell her that he already knew that which she had told him. As before, he found that it was not his place to inform on that which should be done by someone closer.

"You will stay here, won't you?"

"I will, for as long as I am permitted, my Lady. I do owe my life!"

She thanked the eternal God that they were blessed with this man's presence in their home, and then commenced to tell him more about Boy and the fact that Brook didn't know that Boy was his son.

"He was born Boyce Loebh Scullion-Blue, in my father's land of Hennai." she revealed to Lloyd, and he listened with interest to, the already familiar parable.

CHAPTER SIX

The mask of darkened night had passed-over and covered the face of the land until, the rising sun, brought into play the motions of the morning life. People's voice covered the singing poetry of the sparrow and the cooing of the falcon-cranes, that glided on high, with the gods.

As the night progressed, Brook sat in his viewing room and pondered the problems that he knew were destroying the unity of his beloved land. This pretty land that had once surged with the majesty and splendour, created by his father, descended from The Blue.

When the day broke, Brook emerged from his diversion of thought. His mind and soul were determined to make strong his rightful rule in the land.

With Lloyd at his house, knowing Dearborne was safe, he made his way to Canon's Butte to the Halls Cathedral, and the ArchBishop.

The streets were crowded with people that morning, for the Week of Jubilee began on that day.

Slowly, he trod on the walkways by the emporiums and through the square, where he gave his 'good days!', to Empal and other loyal friends who stepped aside, and let him pass without a struggle.

He spoke to his subjects during his walk, and offered some bits of confidence to them and received some in return. Strength returned to him and his apprehensions about his meeting with the ArchBishop decreased in severity. With his faith in good and his will prepared to conquer evil, through a show of strength, he replaced his insecurity.

But evil played the game well and the roles of strength were weighed in a balance by patience and peace. Both were prodded and teased by temptation and mistrust, and attempted to tip the scales in favour of the incubation.

Brook stood in the confines of the cleric's office and looked out the window at the water fountain below, where the vicars and novices pruned the grass and floral scape, and had some fun. They bathed their white skins on this day, allowed for this Week of Jubilee to be without their habits when within the walled grounds of the Cathedral. Their abundant loin-clothes flapped about in the slight breeze that blew off the ocean nearby. So close, in fact, that one would be able to see it from the windows of Halls' southern most parts.

Brook waited a long time. He was apprehensive about seeing the ArchBishop. After all the times that Brook denied his own conference to him, he was now himself being refused the immediate audience that he demanded.

Brook became nerved and enraged but he knew that he'd dare not leave now, for it would show defeat on his foe's ground and on his foe's terms. He knew, that to choose the humility of his waiting for a subordinate, would moreso be forgotten than if he were to retreat from the stand-off with the ArchBishop, and his weapon of time and patience.

He brewed hateful thoughts within him mind. He cursed and prayed for God's vengeance to be his, upon the entrance of his adversary. He was aware of the ignoble egotism in the ArchBishop, with his delusions of holiness and the calling of himself: "The Almighty". But Brook knew what excrement this holy man really was and the utter evil that he possessed, inherited directly from the ancient Canon Di'Vaticanus.

He waited and then waited some more, nearly reaching a point which lacked a noble virtue. Brook waited until the ArchBishop bounded in through his iron-twined door, as if he were a majesty himself.

They stood far apart and silent. The entire length of the room loomed in silent space between them while they just glared at one another.

Finally, the ArchBishop's ill-meaning smile skirted his face as he sat down behind his desk. He never took his eyes off his Lord and master Scullion, until he was first to speak. Brook waited for the most heartless sign of homage, if he was to receive one at all. He never.

"How are you, my ... brother?" mumbled the ArchBishop. His voice carried overtones of mockery, intended to disturb.

Brook moved to the man's desk, his eyes fixed on his brow and the evil smile, which looked as if painted onto his face, until he, too, finally reverberated.

"You tread on soft ground, brother! Your delusions of grandeur have carried your mind off into another space."

"I don't understand?" the ArchBishop's smile left his face momentarily.

Brook laid his palms on the surface of the grand cleric's desk top and mocked him in turn. "What?" Brook laughed. "The Almighty not understand something? Come now brother ... I was made to wait here too long, and for you!" He lifted his hands from the desk and made his way back towards the window. "Maybe I should have you tried. Made an example of; should I not, my dearest brother?" He reached the window and looked out of it to the fountain below. The same time, he slightly grinned,

knowing the effects that he caused to come over the ArchBishop's mind. No sooner did Brook finish speaking, did the cleric challenge him.

"Make yourself clear, Brook. State your business and take your leave!" blurted the man in the holy garb.

Brook's grin left him as he swung around and poked his hand into the air, in the direction of the religious leader, and stared right into his now pale eyes.

"You are but a mere man — and not even so — and you can bleed!" He ceased for a moment and saw a spark of fear flame over the ArchBishop's face as he twitched in his chair.

"Yes, my brother ... You can bleed. Wouldn't a real god be immune to bodily injury? A real god would not sit on his ... broad alter and live off his people, growing fat from their love and their worship and yet give them nothing in return. Not only that ... you had sent for me — so, unless you inform me as to what you want ... you may take your leave!"

"Good speech. State your — "

" — Your tongue will be silenced either by my command or by my hand, Manguino! I shall give you leave, if I care to, and for good." Brook's words, the strength of their usage, greatly startled the great ArchBishop who sat back in his chair and blinked aimlessly as the sovereign continued, after some silence. "Word has reached me, that you are starving several of the united districts, in the north, with an embargo on their trade! As of this moment that will cease and with that, extra trade will commence between Phoride and Besten. It has been long enough, that you have had your petty vengeance on them."

"You agreed on that embargo!" Manguino advanced.

"Yes. Now I change my mind. Your 'will' be ... none!"

Brook turned his head and focused his eyes upon Manguino.

Silence clutched the room again. Brook stood majestic and powerful in the presence of his brother. The evil high priest, Manguino, was now totally disturbed by Brook's show of strength and power.

"It would not have made a difference!" Manguino said as he pushed himself from his chair and moved over to where his brother stood.

"I will make the difference now! As of this moment." Brook shouted at him. "You ... you may only follow. You will not be permitted to exercise your power unwisely."

The sovereign's judgement had been made and the idea frightened Manguino and choked the room with a silence that removed hope of the existence of any breath.

Manguino turned back to his desk. The silence created a term of indecision in him that he had not experienced since before Smith Blue died.

As if against his will, Manguino found himself leafing through some papers on the corner of his desk, desperately trying to formulate a plan in his mind to rebuke Brook. Instead, however, he found himself writing and signing a retraction to the trade embargo. He stretched out his hand, holding the document in offering, to Brook.

"How do you mean this return of trade to take place? By the week, month or year?" asked Manguino, his tone sounding significantly defeated.

"By month. I suppose that this would be reasonable!" An expression of shock came over the ArchBishop. He whined like a child, then took control of himself and finally showed his anger.

"Reasonable? Treating them like our masters and that, you say, is reasonable?" he stopped for a moment and wondered if Brook was indeed sane, then laughed a little in a half-hearted manner.

Brook proceeded.

"Yes, I believe that a monthly caravan should suffice. They would prove more profitable to us as our friends than as our enemies."

"Why don't we send them goods every day? mocked Manguino.

"Careful, Manguino! You tempt the wrong feelings in my heart. Anyway, if Phoride could survive the

strain, I would consider daily caravans. And now onto another annoyance." He looked at Manguino with contemptible eyes, intended as prejudgment on his brother. "I shall not tolerate any further words between the Cardinal Allen and my wife. If I learn that he speaks with her, or another other woman of my household, just once more, I will have him arrested and whipped until death." he turned to Manguino and sneered a grin suggesting a pleasurable thought. "I might even do it myself!"

"I don't know what you are talking about!" defended Manguino, seemingly innocent of the fact that the Cardinal Allen tried to force his will on the Lord's spouse.

"Oh?" is the only response Brook made, then added, "Well, make certain you do not continue with this ignorance, within your own ranks. You would not appreciate the subsequent consequences!" Manguino lowered his head and looked to the floor, but in realization of his defeated mannerisms he quickly straightened and eyed Brook as he moved towards the door of the office. He opened it and before making his exit, he quickly turned to give him one last icy glare.

"You will never again keep me waiting." commanded the sovereign and Manguino tipped his head with unwanted compliance, realizing this meeting was a bounty in favour of his rival brother, Brook.

Manguino, the grand. The great ArchBishop of all Phoride and the continent, slowly dragged himself back to his desk and sat in his chair. Back in it all the way, he breathed heavily a few times and contemplated the last few minutes that had elapsed and Brook's conquest of wills. 'What to do?', was the only question that paraded about Manguino's mind. Finally, the answer came to him. He would have his revenge in a short fortnight, during the celebrations to commemorate the wedding between Brook and his beloved Dearborne. Cardinal Allen will have his pleasure on that night and so would the ArchBishop entertain his satisfaction. He will have the triumph over his noble brother, in the midst of the highest citizens of Pomperaue. He would ruin his brother forever. He smiled to himself and mumbled under his breath, and the gleam of a maybe victory flashed across his eyes.

"Yes, that would be perfect." he said and repeated it, then with this he proceeded to scribble on some clean paper, a request for accompaniment to some select cardinals, for that evening of merry-making.

As the great keeper of Halls set his plans of abasement to honour his brother, another man was alive as a loyal servant, keeping true his word to his master.

Sitting in Brook's chair, in the viewing den, Lloyd leafed through the large book. The night before, he sat up to all hours and listened to the Lady Dearborne as she conveyed to him the circumstances surrounding her husband's apparent meekness, and their son, Boyce. While he read the great book he remembered what Brook had told him about his noble heritage, and the emergence of the elite group of people, that followed the global devastation long ago.

Lloyd observed the details of the colourful pictures that showed the way of life in the age before the time of chaos. He read the ancient lines which spoke of the great rulers of that time. Those men that tried to prevent war at any cost, and others who wanted it, at any cost.

His eyes loomed across the words spoken by the great presidential leader of this ancient land. His thoughts that were spoken the very day that his life was taken from him by an assassin, hired by some warmonger.

"We're called a civilized people. Let us behave as civilized people. Do not let war shatter our tiny planet for the benefit of just a few, who would profit from it — become rich and powerful from the death of those weaker than themselves. Let us seek a world unity — a brotherhood of love — before it is too late ... before we give our all, for nothing!"

Lloyd sighed. The power and spirit behind those words still rang true, even to this day. Where every land was under its own governing directions, ruled by no central idea or council and indeed, being nothing more than a communal feudalism.

He continued to turn the pages of the great book, THE HISTORY OF NORTH AMERICA, and stared in amazement at its details, almost right up to the very day of the holocaust. That detail was mainly in the last few pages which appeared to have been put into the book, at a much later time. He saw that someone did not want a noble life, a great civilization, to die and be forgotten forever. How, to him, the book began to take-on an almost holy aura that drew him deeper and deeper into the words' strength,

until a tear issued from his eye and slowly meandered down his fleshy cheek.

He wiped the tear from his cheek, in one motion of the back of his hand. Boyce rumbled into the den carrying a tray of food and drink, and quietly set it on the table by Lloyd.

"I have brought you food, my Lord!" informed the boy.

Lloyd looked up from the book and smiled as he thanked the boy and requested him to join in the eating. Hesitant, the boy suspiciously looked at Lloyd with questions in his eyes. He nodded and smiled, then boy finally moved to the corner and brought back a stool, and so sat by him.

Lloyd motioned to Boyce to take some food and not knowing what else to do in this circumstance, he took a piece of the roasted fowl and smiled before he bit into it.

"Thank-you, my Lord!" the boy exclaimed.

"You are welcome." returned Lloyd, and continued. "Say, Boy. You will call me Lloyd ... I have had enough people call me sir and Lord!"

"Thank-you ... Lloyd!" Boyce responded, startled by the show of friendship offered to him by the injured man that he helped to carry back to the Blue Mansion.

They ate the dinner.

They didn't say much to one another while they ate. Lloyd resumed his reading of the great book and the boy looked-on at Lloyd's changing expression, his eyes almost bursting into a fall of tears, throughout it all.

Lloyd looked up from the book, at times, and caught the boy's eyes locked onto him as he read. "My Lord Brook promised to teach me to read that," Boyce stated, "but he has not found the time!" He looked hollow for a moment and a feeling of loneliness seemed to hover over him until Lloyd, with a compassionate voice, grabbed the boy's craving for some adult rapport.

"Brook had asked me to teach you. Would you like that?"

"Yes." Boyce's answer was short and direct, and full of obvious excitement. He continued to eat.

"I spoke to Lady Dearborne yesterday."

"She's a very nice lady!" added Boyce. He looked up at Lloyd and smiled, and Lloyd just laughed.

"That she is, Boyce, and you are very fortunate that she and Brook are your parents."

Boyce was astonished. He stopped eating, looked at the meat that he was holding then slowly dropped it back onto the tray. He stood up and aimlessly started to walk a few steps away from Lloyd.

Through the hush of the room could be heard the sounds of life echoing-in from off the streets. There were short playful screams of the little girls being teased by the boys. Boyce faced Lloyd. After eyeing him for a time, he finally spoke.

"She told you? — Why?" he said, as if in order.

Lloyd nodded.

"Will you tell my father?"

Lloyd's face showed apprehension, and he answered the boy.

"No, I won't. But I have a strong feeling that he may already know." he ceased for a moment and grinned a little. "Afterall, you do look more like him with each passing day."

Once again there was a short silence between them but it was broken up by some sighs and a welcomed laugh from Boyce.

"Yes, that is true. Perhaps that is why he asked you to teach me?"

"I cannot begin to know what goes on in someone's mind, but that just may be, my young friend."

With their confirming smile and nod, they acknowledged their new friendship.

There was a powerful understanding which formed between them. The presence of it could be felt

within the room and it was then that Lloyd made a suggestion.

"Shall we start the lessons?"

Excited, Boyce nodded that he would like that.

"Can you read?"

Boyce shrugged with an embarrassed grin.

"I know the old alphabet ... my grandfather taught me, but I can't understand very much.

Lloyd showed his understanding with a nod, and begged Boyce to sit again on the stool, and when he did, Lloyd handed him the book.

"I will do what I can to teach you, young Lord." Lloyd promised then allowed Boyce to leaf through the pages to familiarize himself with the contents. He turned to a large and colourful map and began to read slowly:

"The North American continent stretches between two oceans and from the northern icecaps to the southern tropics. Its land varies from mountains and prairies, to dense marches and arid deserts. The people of North America are united under a political ideology known as DEMOCRACY, which prime advantage lies in the FREEDOMS given to each individual citizen."

Boyce finished his time consuming and irregular method of reading and smiled as he looked up at Lloyd. He waited for a response.

"You did well, Boyce!"

"Tell me, Lloyd ... are we Americans?"

Lloyd quietly pondered the question for a moment then eased back in his chair and tried to answer his anxious pupil.

"In some ways, yes! Every one of us cherish freedom and would like to be proud of our land, rather than collect into small individual districts and territories which are hostile to one another! Lloyd finished, feeling that he had adequately answered the boy's question. He waited for another question, which came quickly.

"I can't understand, how such a strong land could be destroyed?"

"Every living man wanted power. There was tension and there were wars and the people lost faith in those who governed them. Then came the final war. Those who were greedy and survived and those who were of great intellect, took command of the land. Both called themselves Kings, Queens and Lords. Both, to some extent, ruled with fear. We still have this, but there are some men that are sore from this dark heritage. Men like my father and your father."

"And I, also!" stated Boyce, his face lighting up with the spark of freedom that touched his spirit.

"We all learn, my friend," said Lloyd. "you now learn about a once hectic life and subdued value. We now have only these memories and there are some men that would even deny us this."

Boyce shook his head, understanding what Lloyd meant and then followed the motion of his hand that instructed him to continue reading. This time he read the leaflets, added by some obscure person:

"... in the final decades of the Twentieth Century, there came to power, in their world, men of questionable sanity. These men called themselves THE SAVIOURS OF EARTH, believing that they were sent by God to make Earth into a second Eden. Yet, not a single soul was saved. Millions died, and many others had perished in the subsequent plagues that spread throughout the entire planet, after the scourging battles. The only way for great nations to survive, was to wage war. The final years saw the greatest of all wars, fought in the ancient Holy Land called, the Middle-East. It was God's will, at the

beginning, that the war of the end would be fought at that sacred place. Armageddon heralded the end of mankind.

GIN – AUGUST 27, 1986'

The Seer watched the life there, with a teased curiosity, and he foresaw a postponement to his visit; so stayed upon the mountain.

What he was seeing, was of deep interest to him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

During this dark night, the city of Pomperaque was by no means quiet. Everyone in the city was in a jovial mood, celebrating this day, their great sovereign's anniversary of marriage.

All the people rejoiced. They gave their tribute and praise to their Lord Brook Scullion-Blue and his wife, Dearborne, for their fifteen years of being together.

Music blared from the hills to the buttes, and far off over the sea to the islands and down, deep into the distant valleys.

The people sang and danced around, and they ate and drank everything in sight. Everyone made friendly times, and they made gentle love throughout this commemorative evening.

In the city tonight, everyone was enjoying their life. Almost everyone, anyway.

Manguino was ill-at-ease over the love shown to Brook by his people, and there was another that could not climb out of the abyssal pit of her despair.

Mercedes could not find merriment within herself.

The beauty of this child was withered away from her, since that fortnight ago, when Manguino blessed her with his favour.

She suffered greatly from her tortured soul and impregnated body. She had spent the most part of this evening alone in the gardens, in the back of the Blue Mansion. Although she was escorted to the Lord's house by her betrothed Hartford, she had left him for the comfort of the sedating gardens.

Alone, she strolled the cobble pathways between the rows of hedge. She paced over the tiny wooden bridges that spanned the midget streams meandering about the entire estate.

The party was picking up inside the mansion and there were a few betting with each other on whether, or not, the ArchBishop would attend. However, they soon forgot their bets as they became more intoxicated.

Hartford was searching the mansion for his darling Mercedes, unaware that she was troubled. He thought that she was just playing with him, teasing him to find her.

This wasn't the case, though. She was outside, under the stars, thinking and praying to God for strength.

Mercedes was no longer walking. She had sat down on a wide marble bench outside the glass flower house.

Here, with the moonlight beaming through the leaves of the trees over head, her face was modelled by the shadows thereof, and there occasionally glistened shiny tears that slid across her face like meteorites that flashed by in a starless midnight sky. She mourned for her loss.

From a hanging terrace above her head, loomed a figure of a man, keeping himself in the phantom shadows, so that he could not be seen and still be able to watch whatever activity would be below.

He observed the fair young woman below, and wondered who she was.

Lloyd watched her ever since she first entered the garden and since the first moment, he heard her sobbing and crying, and rubbing her eyes.

He wondered how such a pretty thing could be so miserable, and he felt ultimately inadequate by not being able to lend her assistance, or at least, his shoulder for her to cry on. He didn't know who this young woman was but he felt as close to her as he's ever felt to anyone. Somehow he empathized with

her even though he didn't know what her troubles were.

He felt miserable now.

Several times he wanted to call out to her but he knew that if his presence was discovered there, by some coenobite, it would mean the end of his life, and it would mean great trouble to his host for harbouring a sinner.

He thought to climb down the tree, by the terrace, and then approach her with his help, but his physical condition still prevented him from such over-exertions.

So he just stood there on the terrace, blending into the shadows, as if he was one himself, and continued to watch the lovely woman below as she sat all alone with the melancholy hugging her moonlit face.

Lloyd took a drink from his glass that he was holding. When it caught the light of the moon, it twinkled like a diamond set by an open fire. Mercedes didn't notice the moon reflecting off Lloyd's glass while she sat on the marble slab.

The night was beginning to take on a chill. Mercedes' short bursts of breath were illuminated by the moonlight. The breaths quickly passed in and out of her, in strangled gasps.

She whimpered, cutting the delicate music emanating from the house and cutting a notch into Lloyd's already pained heart.

Lloyd was over-head and yet he wasn't there, and he watched the beautiful young woman destroy her own spirit.

He wished that he knew her thoughts and yet he couldn't imagine what they could be. Little did he know the pain that her heart and soul were struggling to overcome. Little was he aware of the agonies that gnawed away at her, from inside — put there by the great god of the land, the ArchBishop.

Mercedes could hardly tolerate it any longer. She could feel the absolute Evil, drawing strength right from her spirit. The Evil grew stronger as it fed off the will residing in her emotions, and so killed them.

The Evil killed all the love within her, including the love towards her beloved and promised husband, Hartford.

She believed that she could not go to him soiled, even if so turned that way by the Almighty ArchBishop.

Her virginity, raped from her by a god, destroyed her fragile spirit and maimed her belief in the True God. Yet, with this belief of her's weakened, she still tried to pray.

A tiny voice issued from her.

Lloyd's ears perked and his heart beat stronger. He could hardly hear her but her voice was like a nightingale, and he forgot the pains from his own wounds as he concentrated to hear her over the music coming from the inside the mansion.

It was a prayer from her heart.

Lloyd felt uneasy as he listened and he could smell the stench of Evil lingering in the night air.

While Mercedes prayed, she heard the ArchBishop's course voice repeating through her mind, saying to her that he will bless her. She knew that she was stained with the kiss of Evil and she prayed to the True Living God, to forgive her.

Captured in the slashes of lunar light that filtered through the leaves of the trees above Mercedes, Lloyd thought that he saw a momentary glint of metal.

Her voice became louder, struggling in hiccupped gasps.

"Oh help me, God! Do not turn your eyes away from me, for I must destroy the demon that was milked into me; and yes, myself, for letting it be within me!"

She lifted her clenched hands into the air and Lloyd finally saw what she was holding. A shaft of light broke the tranquil conformity of darkness and he knew that it could be nothing else but a dagger.

He stepped into the moonlight and looked down as he heard her hurl out some more desperate words.

"Oh God, do not anger at the taking of my own life. Forgive me, Lord, and accept my spirit!" she announced.

She plunged the dagger deep into her own chest and pulled it down through to her belly. Her twinging body dropped to the ground. While in weak convulsions she thrust the dagger to its limit, then lay motionless. Lloyd dropped his glass, its breaking sounding like a the chorus of mourning angels, and he looked upon the scene, in horror and breathed out a word as his eyes were enveloped in tears.

"NO!" was all that he said, and he sank down to his knees and clasped his hands.

Her light and silky gown was dyed in the warm scarlet of her own blood flowing, steadily, from her heart.

Lloyd prayed. He could do nothing to save her. By the time that he realized her intentions, it was too late. On the terrace tiles, he prostrated himself to the great, true and living God. He prayed for forgiveness, for not helping her, and then prayed to God to accept the girl's spirit and forgive her for her act.

Inside the mansion, many guests waited for their sovereign to make the first toast of the evening, while Lloyd made his own salute to the girl, whose name he did not know, that he watched die this night.

Lloyd was the first one to mourn for her, and in some strange way, he believed that God mourned for her after him.

The ballroom was full of people that were having a good time. They were all laughing and dancing, and making conversation with one another while standing near the many tables full of food and wine.

Boy was running around, letting guests into the house and serving others with refreshments.

Hartford still searched aimlessly for Mercedes, and he constantly asked Boy if he knew where she was.

Boy finally became annoyed and told him to stop asking because he never saw her, but he did promise to tell Hartford when he did.

After that, Boy went and served two of Brook's most loyal friends with some stronger spirits.

Miel and Cassta were already quite drunk but they didn't like to admit to such a thing. Only if they ever reached the point of utter unconsciousness did they admit to being 'somewhat intoxicated.' Now, however, they were fine. They were in a happy state and so they made jokes to each other.

"I do so wish that Brook had more of these gatherings." said Miel.
"This is quite a party, Cassta!"

Cassta laughed while trying to swallow his drink, so letting some spill onto his shirt front.

"Yes. It's almost as interesting as those parties that I host!" he said in return.

Miel had a comical expression aimed at him, resembling 'shame on Cassta', but he couldn't hold it very long because Cassta crossed his eyes at him.

"You credit yourself too highly, Cassta! One would begin to think that you are the Almighty, himself!" A few people, standing nearby, were amused by what they heard. A couple of others, however, were offended to hear the Almighty's name used in vain. These high-nosed people hated their comrades' drunkenness, but when they tried to sit, in chairs that weren't there, they realized that, on such a gay evening as this, no one could restrain themselves from drinking, at least a little bit.

"He hasn't shown up yet, Miel. So, you suppose that he'll come tonight?" Cassta asked about the ArchBishop.

"Maybe he will after Brook's toast." replied Miel. "But if he doesn't, you will owe me three gold bits!"

Cassta laughed a little and touched the side of his nose with the back of his hand.

"He will be here, Miel. I heard rumours that he will make a speech suggesting Brook and wife's propagation!"

"Ah — Brook will never stand for that!" said Miel. "They are better off without children, anyway!"

Children are nothing more than a novelty!" he laughed and Cassta joined in.

"Novelty?!" Cassta exclaimed. "Is that why you have twelve 'novelties' of your own?"

Their laughs were the loudest in the area. They rocked back and forth almost falling over themselves.

Miel spoke in reply to Cassta's marking question.

"My WIFE has no self control over herself!" he said.

While they laughed there was a sudden spontaneity of cheering and clapping as Brook ascended a flight of stairs with his beautiful Dearborne, and followed by Boy, carrying a tray with two golden goblets.

Brook stopped and turned towards his citizens and they all bowed and curtsied to him in respect. He tipped his head to them in acceptance of their fealty to him.

He lifted his palms to them and the room murmured into a hush.

"On this night of my love, I want to propose a toast!" Brook said to them.

They all bowed to him and spoke together.

"With pleasure, Lord!" they all said, then quietly waited for him to begin.

"Tonight we are all equal. We are human beings; and with this all, I toast to each of you, the wish of a long life, liberty and happiness!" He toasted his guests in a manner that wholly reflected his nobility and the audience hailed him.

"To you, Lord Scullion-Blue!" they extolled and lifted their glasses to him before they drank. As they all drank their toast, a loud voice called to them from the entrance.

"ALL KNEEL!"

Everyone turned and saw that it was a cardinal, heralding the ArchBishop's entrance.

The room was gripped in a breathless silence. The ArchBishop had indeed come to this formality, clothed in a splendour never before seen.

The majority of the guests did kneel to him. Only Brook, Empal, Cassta and Miel (with their families), abstained from the kneeling to the Almighty.

Manguino was not pleased when he saw this, and he became extremely angered when Brook spoke to the people, so putting him in a lowly position.

"Friends! _ Tonight rejoice for us!" said Brook pointing to Dearborne and himself. "There is no need to kneel before anyone on this happy evening! — Is this not so ArchBishop?"

Brook itched Manguino's patience and with a slight grin waited for Manguino to respond. He looked around the room at the people and heard Miel and Cassta laughing. This made him red-in-the-face but eventually he looked up to Brook then raised his hand, signalling to the people to rise.

Miel and Cassta were amused and shared some of their views of the ArchBishop with Empal and Tucker, when they joined the two men.

The Archbishop continued to look at Brook for several moments, while Brook and Dearborn joined their citizens in their mingling on the floor.

Music started up again and so did Hartford's search for Mercedes. He was now becoming exceedingly worried.

They had made plans to address Brook and Dearborne, after the toast, and ask them to attend their wedding as honoured guests. Now, however, Hartford couldn't ask Brook with Mercedes' delicate presence there to ensure a favourable acceptance.

He searched some more.

Boy had disappeared for a few moments. He went out into the garden for some fresh air. Hartford would soon find out where Mercedes was all evening.

Nobody paid much attention to Boy when he came back from the outside, carrying an odd expression of horror and bewilderment.

Miel and Cassta spoke in loud voices, not caring who heard them speak. Miel was paying Cassta his betted three gold bits; wagered on the ArchBishop's attendance.

"Our Almighty looks disturbed, Cassta!"

"Yes — He looks as though his holy sceptre has been plucked!" ribbed Cassta and so received a laugh from Miel, Empal and Tucker.

"Or else, his is in a place, other than his hand!" added Empal.

While they laughed to almost exhaustion, a couple women approached them and they paired. Now that the wives were back the two men quickly lapsed into civility. Gaena put her arms around Tucker's arm and Aria faced Miel with a light-hearted disapproval showing in her elegant face.

"Aren't we merry, tonight?" remarked Aria pushing some hair from Mile's eyes.

"Ah, my darling wife. Cassta and I made a god-like humour!" he said then glanced over at Cassta. Both began to laugh again and especially loudly when they looked around and caught Manguino's glare as he listened.

"Are you two children drunk again?" Aria asked with a smile.

Cassta and Miel looked at one another and both pointed at one another as they answered.

"He's drunk ... I'm not!"

They carried on some more then Cassta put his arms around Miel and Aria, mostly to keep himself from falling down, and looking at the others there, he slurred a question.

"Tell me, friends! — Have you ever heard the story about the wandering Vicar?"

While he told his friends the humorous story, Manguino separated with his small envoy made up of Cardinals Allen and Levy, and the Vicar, Tohm.

There was an aura of treachery and deceit about them as they distanced themselves from the rest of the guests. Manguino turned to the Cardinal Allen, who seemed very excited. Like a child, he pranced around the ArchBishop since their arrival, waiting for the ArchBishop to give his acceptance to him concerning his honour-paying to the lovely Dearborne.

"I don't care what you do, Allen!" the ArchBishop began. "I do not care! However, if you are discovered, I will not do a thing to help you. I will not know what you are doing, and I will denounce you as a demon, if I am thought to be involved!"

There was a momentary silence between them while Allen made account of all that Manguino said.

"I understand, Your Grace, but do not worry. I shall move like a snake and strike just as silently." promised Allen.

"You behave more like an unsatisfied rabbit, my friend. Be careful, and find your own way back to Halls." Manguino gave Allen his final instructions just as he saw Dearborne make her way to the Mansion's upper levels, to where the bed chambers were.

"Thank-you, Most High!" hailed Allen, then slowly made his way to the stairs and the upper floor.

Brook stood by the banquet table having a drink and chewing on some fruit that his dear friend Empal had brought, for the festivities.

Many of the guests went to him to pay their personal respects and congratulations, on his fifteen years of marriage to Dearborne.

Soon, he stood alone for a while and looked about the entire hall and saw that the people were enjoying themselves, and he smiled in his heart seeing Boy running about serving the people with drink.

He'll be a great leader one day, thought Brook. All great leaders must serve their people and therefore keep them content and happy. He continued to watch the boy for a while then made a silent wish aimed at Boy. Take those troubles, my son, and learn how not to inflict them on your subjects.

From across the room, Miel and Cassta were looking at Brook. They saw the man's face expressing deep thought and they assumed that he had his mind on Dearborne.

"He has a dainty flag to decorate his royal mast, doesn't he?" Cassta commented.

"Yes, but this flag he runs up at night instead of the morning." Miel responded.

They both sighed as they went over to the banquet table to get some more to drink.

Music was playing loudly and the people danced, waltzing in circles and walking about in promenade.

Hartford went up to almost everybody on the floor searching for his beloved Mercedes, but everybody shook their heads in their regret for not seeing her.

Boy was walking towards Brook as did Hartford. He asked the Lord Brook the same question as he had been asking everyone, this evening.

"Excuse me, my Lord. I wonder if you have seen my Mercedes?"

"Yes." said Brook. "She's a lovely girl, and you both look very good together."

"I am sorry, Lord — I meant, that I have lost her at the party tonight. Do you know where she is?" Hartford asked again.

"No, I don't, Hartford. Have you looked in the parlour and checked the water-closet?" Brook suggested.

"She's not there!"

Boy came up to both men. He didn't say a thing but Brook knew that something was wrong.

They exchanged glances at one another and briefly Hartford became pale, then forced a smile.

"You've found her?" he asked.

Boy looked over at Brook then back at Hartford, and nodded.

"She ... she is in the garden." the boy said, swallowing each word.

"She is dead, Hartford!"

Hartford lost all colour in his face and his pupils dilated to pin-prick size, then he ran outside to the garden.

"Oh God, NO!" Hartford had finally found his lovely betrothed, dead. He embraced her limp body gently into his arms and took the dagger out of her body, hearing it scrape against her exposed ribs. He set the dagger to the side and kissed her cheek and he wept. Then, as if her own body cried for Hartford's pains, a tear crept forth from her eye, mixing with his own tears and flowing towards the arm-length gash in her chest.

Hartford moaned and rocked back and forth; for with her death came the death of his world.

Brook was disturbed and directed Boy to prepare a chamber upstairs for Hartford and Mercedes.

Boy went forth and paid no attention to Lloyd standing up on the balcony, looking at the crowd. In his eyes were tears and he too was pale from his witness. In his mind swirled whirlwind thoughts of the demonic masturbation that came out of Halls and touched every living thing with its Evil impurity.

He could not keep all that he saw, from his mind.

All laughed and were enjoying themselves, while outside was an innocence was forced into the obscurity of loss. What had happened to his own love, in Besten, those few short years ago, had been replayed before him, this night. It was a terrible loss brought on by someone's whims of power and glory.

He heard Boy's voice telling Dearborne about the problem that happened and that Brook ordered a chamber be prepared. Dearborne was heard making her excuses to a couple women that she was

talking to in her own bed chamber and went into another room with Boy.

When out in the hall, Lloyd bowed his head solemnly to the lady and she returned with a nod. From his expression, the Lady Dearborne was sure that he knew something about the problem that Boy mentioned.

She finally found out what the problem was when she was preparing the one room with Boy. She was saddened by what Boy told her he had found in the garden and she imagined how Hartford felt. Yet, Dearborne herself could not cry for Mercedes. In her lifetime she had seen too many deaths, most of which were associated with Halls, in one way or another. This must be another death caused by someone at Halls, she believed.

Downstairs, Hartford carried Mercedes into the ballroom and Brook immediately threw his cape around her. He didn't want anyone to know about her death this evening and so tried to hide the wounds.

Hartford's eyes were glazed-over and Brook knew that Hartford wasn't aware of his surroundings any more, so Brook guided him up the stairs and to the room.

Brook gave his leave to his guests and bade them to continue with their merriment, and most of them did.

Miel and Cassta felt uneasy. Although they were in a twilight drunkenness, they knew that something was wrong.

Manguino made his way over to the stairs, smiled to himself and shook his head in a slight displeasure. He knelt down and with his finger dabbed a little red circle of blood that he was certain was the girl's.

"Oh, you naive girl." he said to himself.

Cassta noticed Manguino's actions and pointed them out to Miel. It didn't take much effort to figure out that the great ArchBishop was associated with the trouble that they saw.

They decided that they would check on their Lord a little later, to see if they could help with anything.

The discontented guests soon began to feel uneasy and many of them left the mansion, until there were just a few Prominants left there, finishing off the rest of the food and drink from the tables as if they were beggars at a God-sent feast.

The music began to die down and soon the great ArchBishop also left with Cardinal Levy and the Vicar Tohm, knowing that he didn't have to add his own planned attack on Brook.

Upstairs, Hartford had gently set Mercedes down on the bed and stared at her. Brook, Dearborne and Boy looked on as Hartford continued to weep, in convulsive sobs.

"She is dead! She has taken her own life, but why?" Hartford was asking while Lloyd stood outside the chamber door listening.

Unseen, Lloyd crept into the room and sat in the window behind the curtains.

Hartford continued his lament for Mercedes.

"Why?" he asked. "Did I displease her? Did she not love me any more?
— Oh, God! I cannot understand!?"

Brook put his hand on Hartford's shoulder hoping to console him to some degree.

"Listen to me, Hartford! Her death is not your fault." said Brook. "I am told that her love for you was greater than anything in the whole world. Something else made her ... Hartford believed Brook, and so did Lloyd as he watched the moon rise from behind Canon's Butte, silhouetting the Halls Cathedral as if it an ancient mausoleum.

Cassta and Miel entered the chamber silently. The misfortune of the past few minutes had a sobering effect on them and they were silent, no longer laughing and no longer making fun of trifles for their amusements.

Hartford's mumbling scared everyone in the room and the two men didn't know how to react. They

just stood there quietly, their mouths agape and their expressions showing a dumbfoundedness.

"My only love. She's gone and I cannot breathe!" Hartford gurgled with irrationality. Mercedes' death finally began to work on his head. "My wife to be, will not be, she isn't — is she? There is nothing. I am nothing. Is all nothing?"

Dearborne looked at Brook with frightful worry and she took his arm.

"He's delirious!" she said. Brook saw Miel and Cassta enter the room earlier and now motioned to them to approach. Without hesitation, they drew near.

"My friends, take Hartford down to the parlour and let him rest!" Brook requested and his two most loyal subjects obeyed him.

They took Hartford, one under each arm, and carried him down to the parlour, Boy leading the way.

It was obvious that Hartford wasn't aware of what was happening to him. His face was pallid and his eyes were glazed-over. He was no longer existing on a mutual level with anyone in this world. Within his grief-afflicted mind and mutilated soul, he searched for that which he had lost.

Brook and Dearborne were alone for a moment, so to speak, since they were not aware of Lloyd's presence, while he quietly sat in the window.

"It is so quiet, Brook. The guests have gone!"

"Yes." confirmed Brook. "The flavour of this celebration had become very bitter!"

How true, thought Lloyd as he looked at Halls in the distance, knowing from experience that the cause of this night's misfortune, originated there.

"I'm sorry for tonight, my love!" said Brook.

Dearborne's moist eyes calmed his heaving spirit. She did not blame him for this evening's tragedy and she knew that his apology was really intended as pity for the loss of such a precious and innocent soul as Mercedes was.

With this, Brook turned and went out of the room.

Lloyd's heart ached with the burden of his witness. He saw Mercedes, inside his mind, thrusting the dagger into her heart, over and over again, and the visions of this mingled with his memory of witnessing his own betrothed Charnan, at her death. This evening devastated him. Mercedes reminded him so much of his beloved Charnan. She had the same golden hair and smooth, fair skin. Her beauty was only surpassed by her innocence.

Lloyd's mind travelled while comparing the two women and his two most painful experiences.

Through a small tare in the curtain, Lloyd saw Dearborne lift her head from a prayer that she had made for the body and spirit of the departed Mercedes.

She was starting to turn and leave when she sat heavily into a chair by the bed and started to cry.

Lloyd was ready to reveal himself to her, to talk and console her, but he couldn't show to her his own weakness. He cried, too.

Brook was down in the parlour with Miel, Cassta and Hartford. The three men stood apart from Hartford. He was put on the couch, reclined and withdrawn, and he appeared to be as inanimate as the furniture.

Hartford, the young man with so many years ahead of him, was no longer alive, in the normal sense of the word. He did breathe and occasionally twitched, and tears periodically migrated in a clean path down his face. Yet, this unfortunate young man lacked the spirit of life found residing in every human.

The men held back their tears, looking-on at Hartford with pity and remorse.

"At this time we cannot lose our wits," Brook told Miel and Cassta. "for there are only two people in all of Phoride that could be responsible for this." he glared at the men with cold, angry eyes. "They shall pay for it!"

The other two men tried to swallow the lumps that blocked their throats and when Cassta spoke, his voice burred.

"I must prevent my beloved ..." he cleared his throat and continued.

"I must keep her from taking her own life. She is dainty and beautiful. We are pledged to marry."

"We must protect our women from our own clergy — that's shameful!"

Miel added.

"I will not let my Ledo die like Mercedes, and God knows how many others. I will honourably join her tomorrow!"

"You are correct, Cassta. Something must be done to suppress Manguino's evil ways." said Brook.

Miel added his own thoughts and sentiments about the ArchBishop's immoral methodology.

"He has gone too far, this time. Unlike the other suicides, this one wasn't isolated. This time, a girl's death affected several scores of people."

Cassta clutched Brook's upper arm.

"Lord, would you oversee my wedding tomorrow?" Cassta asked him and he nodded, accepting.

Brook turned on to his concern for Hartford. He moved to Hartford and covered him with a long cloak that was over one of the chairs.

"I think that we should leave him to rest now!" Brook suggested and Miel questioned in worry.

"Should someone stay with him, Brook?"

Cassta volunteered to watch Hartford, wanting to help in whatever means he could but Brook was aware that there was nothing that any one of them could do for him. He appreciated his two friends' concern for the remnant that Hartford had become, but he didn't want them to stay needlessly, and having the situation under control, he excused them.

"Miel, your wife probably waits for you. You should go."

"Yes, my Lord!" nodded Miel. "You will call me if I am needed?" Miel asked and Brook affirmed.

"You too should leave, my friend." Brook said to Cassta. "I realize that it is late, but I suggest that you go speak to Ledo. Give to her father my responsibility."

"I will leave you, then. Thank-you, Brook!"

Both men left as Boy walked into the parlour.

"Lord?" he hailed Brook. "The guests and musicians are gone now!"

"Alright, Boy. I will be in my den, for a time. Keep watch on Hartford and call me if anything changes!.." Boy sat in a chair opposite Hartford and he didn't take his eyes from him.

Dearborne was still in the same bed chamber with Mercedes' body.

Lloyd still hadn't calmed enough to talk to her. He continued to sit in the window and listened to her lovely voice singing a sad little tune.

Lloyd wasn't the only one listening to her sing. Outside the door lurked the Cardinal Allen.

He had seen Brook repair to his den and Allen knew that he would not re-emerge for some time. He thought that he had enough time available to himself to receive his total fulfilment from Dearborne.

He listened to her sing as he moved closer to the door and finally he entered the room in silence.

"The days pass by... Our lives are brief... To death we all
do cry,
We live in grief... Through all the days — "

Dearborne sang but her words were shattered by the splintered voice of the Cardinal Allen, finishing-off the verse.

"For we all know... We'll one day die!"

Startled, Dearborne swung around and stood facing him.

Lloyd was startled also and he peered through the tare in the curtain again. There stood the man who almost had him executed a fortnight passed; the same man that had made the fair Dearborne to feel dirty.

"Why haven't you left yet?" she demanded of him, and he just smiled.

"It's a pity, is not — I mean, the girl's death." he began. "You know, fair Dearborne, the Archbishop has very good eyes for beauty but he does not understand the mind of women. He pushed too much. He should influence, not frighten." he kept smiling as he moved a step closer to her. "He has only one child to my thirteen, and that child is a cripple, in its mind."

Dearborne had finally taken hold of herself and spoke out at Allen. "Get out, you wretched weasel!" she shouted but this inspired Allen to move closer yet.

"You will be wholly happy to mother my fourteenth."

"I should say not."

"Oh, my dear, you will submit!" Allen's voice sounded of excited promise. "Since you have neglected to bare children to your line with Brook, I (or any other of the Almighty), has the right to have you bare a child from him. This right I claim and demand from you, and by the law, even you cannot refuse." he took another stride to Dearborne and behind her she took hold of an empty vase.

"I am above the law, now leave or I shall call my husband!" she was terrified.

"Really? When Brook goes into his room, he can hear no one. So he finds out about this 3/4denial will be made, and without proof, you will not be believed." He made a final advance on her and took her into his arms.

She struggled then slammed him in the face with the vase. Yet, nothing happened. What's more, it seemed to have inspired him all the more.

He reached out for the part in her blouse, tore it then began to knead her exposed breasts.

Lloyd flew from the window when he saw that the vase did Allen no harm, and now forcibly threw him off from Dearborne. He stood in front of her and watched Allen pick himself up off the floor, several yards away.

The expression on Allen's face was dismay and fear. For a moment he thought that Brook had returned, but now he saw who it was.

"It's you. How can this be?" demanded Allen.

Lloyd gave him a heated glare. "My maker didn't want me, at that moment. And if you do not leave, he may want you, now!"

"Move away." commanded Allen. "This is not your affair!"

"And it shall not be yours!"

At this, the Cardinal Allen rushed Lloyd. Lloyd with all his force summoned, fisted Allen in the forehead. The crazed Allen still attacked as if he didn't feel any ill effects from being solidly squared in the head. On his second rush, he caught Lloyd in the ribs with his head.

Lloyd lurched forward, in pain, as he got Allen in the throat when he wrapped his arms about his neck. He spun around and heaved towards the floor, unto his knees. Allen didn't move any more, his neck snapping into a splintered mush.

Lloyd slowly rose, holding his injured side, and he walked away from the body without hardly a care for what he had done. "Are you injured, my Lady?" he asked, while he took off his vest and gave it to her to cover herself.

"Yes! You helped me just in time, thank-you!"

"I should have been there sooner. I was sitting in the window since the girl's body was brought in here. I'm sorry but I just couldn't move sooner to help you!"

Dearborne looked away from him. She focused upon Allen's lifeless body with a feeling of absolute relief.

Lloyd spoke some more, trying to give explanation for his lateness.

"I had seen her take her own life, my Lady!" he pointed to Mercedes' body and tried to keep his tears from her. She listened and slowly returned to looking at Lloyd.

"She was sitting on the bench, beneath my terrace. The moon was out and when I finally realised what she had in her hands, she had killed herself. I couldn't save her."

Dearborne put her head against his arm revealing to him that she understood how he felt, but she didn't really until he told her that story about his own love, Charnan, who died the same way.

In the morning, Brook was told about what had happened and he some Totemen from the Phoridene Council, take the Cardinal Allen's body back to Halls. With the body, Brook included a letter to Manguino demanding that he keeps the death issue in its place and not to make any trouble by it. He reminded Manguino of the promise that he made to him concerning Allen.

Brook had admitted himself to be Allen's executioner.

In the Blue Mansion, Lloyd and Boy were told to prepare for their journey to the north.

Brook felt that there was no time to lose. He had a feeling of impending doom, and not only that, he wanted to be safe.

On Mount Benitar, the wise man also knew that something would happen. He saw all the signs. Soon, he thought — soon it would be time for him to go down to Pomperaque, again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The events that had occurred over the passed few days affected almost everyone in Pomperaque and other parts of Phoride.

In Gothai, the Holy City, the nuns at the Abbey of Our Holy Saint Mariot, performed a funeral service for Mercedes and most everyone from Pomperaque, and Gothai itself, turned out to pay their respects.

The day before the funeral, Cassta and Ledo were married in Gothai by the Abbey Mother and Brook presided over it. The ceremony was performed in secret, in the name of the True Living God, and just a small number of friends attended. Miel was there with Aria. Empal was there with his family, and the greatest of Pomperaque's Prominants, Brook and Dearborne, were there.

Everyone was happy at the wedding and somber at the funeral, as it was normal to be.

There was anger in the eyes of some of the coenobites when they found out that Ledo had married Cassta. They could now do nothing to her. She was indeed above their rights of having her bare a Holy Child. Cassta saved his darling Ledo, just in time.

To most, however, the saving of a life or a soul meant little when compared to the loss of one such innocence as Mercedes. All that there was to benefit from salvation was the relief that it brought to the saved, and those close to them. Relief, by itself, had no real value.

Good and Evil each made their own laments.

While mourners and wailers cried for the death of an innocent young woman, so did the monks at Halls, cry and mourn for the brutal death of their best and most respected Cardinal Allen.

As it was; a customary show of respect to a dearly-departed coenobite, a pure woman was chosen to be entombed with the body. This chosen woman willingly accepted requests made to her to share her eternity with the dead cleric, and carried with her the love and honour of each individual member at Halls. The love and respect was given to her, through physical sex, by each monk, before she was taken to the tomb with the deceased brother. While the corpse lay in state, there was a room set aside, adjacent the big hall in the chapel. The chosen women lay unclad in soft beds and each was fornicated with by each individual at Halls; from the lowest novice to the Archbishop himself.

Prior to the monks looking upon the body of their dead brother, they entered the room and gave their all to the woman. During the copulation, the men repeatedly chanted: "Take this to our friend; a sign that we love him!"

At the end of the day, when all the men had gone through with their ritual respect, they took the limp, unconscious woman and set her on top of Allen's dead body. Both were then carried to the grotto, in the cliffs at the ocean's edge, and were sealed inside, forever. From the moment of the bodies' entombment, all those that were in Halls Cathedral abstained from any and all normal human functioning for three days. During this three day period — a further show of respect for their dead — no one ate or had sexual intercourse and during this time they kept themselves from sleep, and prayed for the Cardinal's soul.

From the Cathedral spires the Rogjans called out to the countryside some cantorial chants, announcing and honouring, and strangely, even canonizing the Cardinal Allen.

On the evening of the third day, all those residing at Halls made preparations for a day of feasting, and at sunrise the feeding began. To enjoy this day to the fullest, the coenobites brought to Halls a caravan of women from Iynondan and they caught up from their three day celibacy.

Everyone was fulfilled, promising their living spirits to Allen's resurrection as they reflected on his well-rounded life.

After their observations of praise, Manguino and Tohm repaired to the office to speak of their friend. Of all the brothers at Halls, they two knew him best and regarded him most highly.

"How he will be missed by all!" Tohm told Manguino. "Most everything that I know, he showed me.

"Even the few, and greatest, amongst us falter. He made a mistake and so paid for it." Manguino explained to Tohm that Allen's obsession to inseminate Dearborne overtook him. The manner of his death, however, greatly puzzled him.

"I would like to know how such a dainty woman as she could break the neck of a man as physically powerful as Allen?" questioned Manguino. "I don't believe that Brook had killed him."

"That is something we all ask, Your Grace. We must bring them both to justice, regardless of guilt!" Tohm was speaking like his teacher. He didn't care, now. He just wanted Allen's death avenged.

"I agree, but it's said that Allen was caught forcing her and Brook himself admitted to the killing our friend. Yet, I know that he's lying."

"Would you like to know my thoughts?" Tohm asked Manguino. "I believe it was that northern man, that had disappeared, who was the man that killed Allen. What perfect place to hide from us — at the Blue Mansion!"

The Archbishop's eyes glared for a moment but refused this idea. He speculated that the dissident was long gone from Pomperaqua by that time.

Tohm, however, carried on until he began to convince Manguino of his idea.

"We must bring the Lady Dearborne to trial then, if only trying her on the basis of her refusal, as your subject, to bare his Holy Child. We can try Brook on harbouring a dissident and charge him with heresy."

It didn't matter to Tohm about the deaths of more people. As far as he was concerned the whole of Phoride could be sacrificed to avenge Allen's murder.

Manguino wanted no more bloodshed. He couldn't trust Brook either, and he had to decide. Brook's show of power, as of late, had made him seem greater and more beloved, by the people. Then there was the letter that he sent with Allen's body.

Manguino

My promise fulfilled, Brother.
Recompense shall not be tolerated.
Let it pass for the good of your
own condition!

Sovereign Lord B. S-B.

He, as ArchBishop, wanted to fold, and pass on this retaliation, yet, just couldn't convince Tohm of that desire.

His views to go ahead, seemed more sound and he was urged by Tohm, like he was urged by Allen so

many times before.

"She is Lady Dearborne Scullion, Tohm; Brook's wife — you do understand? You did hear me tell Allen that night, I am not responsible for him — even though I did wish him success."

Tohm's impatience poured out of his soul. He sighed heavily cutting into Manguino's line of thought, and in leathery breaths, filled the office with his hostility.

"We cannot hold back, Your Grace. We must act, now! We must take this scourge of the earth, this Brook Scullion, by total surprise. We have to make the Phoridenes to believe that Brook and his wife are Evil, and that they should be punished under the Canon Laws, for their crimes."

Manguino nervously paced around as he listened to Tohm's inspiring confidence and need for justice. This was building excitement within his heart.

"He is not a clean man, my great one. Let us storm his house and find the proofs of his blasphemies and sacrilegious practices. Let them receive their judgement from you!"

The ArchBishop shook with excitement. His whole body trembled, the layers of fat migrating all over.

He sat at his desk and glared with passion right into Tohm's eyes.

"Yes, yes! We could do it, no matter how great our Lord Brook is. We must plan, Tohm. We have much work to do!"

The ArchBishop was finally sparked. He absorbed Tohm's passion and ferocity, and what's more, he no longer feared his brother.

Tohm continued.

"Our Almighty can be swayed to see his practicality. It is grand to have a god in your confidence." Tohm sank to his knees and prostrated himself before Manguino. "Let us go, my Almighty! Let them feel your wrath!"

Manguino stood up from his chair and with fire burning in his eyes, he slammed his fists on his desk.

"Yes — they shall feel my wrath!"

He turned. Facing Tohm, Manguino then lifted the front of his robes.

Tohm looked up at Manguino and smiled then his head disappeared under Manguino's robes.

CHAPTER NINE

Over a week had passed since the feast-day at Halls, and once more the city of Pomperaque seemed to have returned to normal. There was, however, a feeling of apprehension that loomed over the city, though, but no one really gave it much thought.

Pomperaque was relatively quiet. The markets and bazaars weren't as lively and there seemed to be some kind of event, at Halls.

As far as most people were concerned, there wasn't anything obviously wrong.

No one noticed the reek of conspiracy rising from the depths of hell to fill the masses with a weakness that soon took them over.

The nature of the day sapped the power of spirit from everyone, and they all were vulnerable and passive like sheep.

Brook and those in his household had behaved oddly this day. They were loose with their thoughts and spoke out without cares or fears for anything or anyone. Their hearts felt light and Brook had felt at ease and he believed that since Manguino had not avenged Allen's death by now, he had indeed followed Brook's order to 'let it pass'.

All day Brook was in his viewing den with his wife, Lloyd and Boy, going over a map of the Northern Continent, showing his guest and Boy the route that they would take to the great library at Alugean, near the port of Angaent.

They were close to each other — now more than ever — because Brook had revealed to Boy and Dearborne that he had known for a long time, that Boy was really his son. He had made Dearborne and Boy very happy, and they felt relieved that Brook had accepted it, in secret, for so many years.

In the den, Dearborne stood apart from the man. She stood at the cabinets and pushed buttons on Brook's panel, when he gave her the word; and then the men stood at the screen tracing out the route on different maps. Each map was a more detailed version of the sections showing that way to the mountain.

Brook had made plans with Empal to fly Lloyd and Boy to Virune, on his Kenttitan Eagle, during some night when they wouldn't be seen. That night was soon approaching them and they still had some things to learn.

Nearing the late afternoon, Brook showed to his son and to Lloyd a passage-way that ran underground in two directions, built by Carter Blue as a precaution against a personal attack. These passage-ways were still in good condition, leading north to the Joenine Forest and just south to the inlet which leads to the ocean.

Both routes were safe and quick, but Lloyd and Boyce would take the northern route to a clearing where Empal would be waiting with his eagle.

The passage-way ran under the Blue Mansion from Brook's den and the viewing wall was the hidden door that gave access to them.

Brook demonstrated to them the working of the door and showed to them the bracing that they would use to buttress the door; in the case of a sudden attack and an insured escape would be necessary. Lloyd shrugged off these things feeling them to unnecessary to his knowledge, but Boy absorbed every word that Brook said, as if those very words were his life-giving air.

Brook finalized what he thought to be the most important things for him to convey.

"Boyce ... my son. Learn whatever you can at the Alugean Library. Know the truths about the past then return to Phoride. You will inherit this land from me, and you will become a great man." Boyce listened with intensity to his father because he knew that he was communing with a great mind. Boyce nodded to him with silent promise.

"Rule with kindness and love, but don't allow men of evil, men like your uncle, the ArchBishop, to tread over you and grind you into the earth." Brook breathed for a moment then briefly looked away from Boyce. "I have been too kind and have allowed too much to pass into being. Now, it's difficult to fight the evil."

"I promise you, that I will follow your words, father!" promised Boyce, and Lloyd gave his word to Brook, as well.

"I shall watch over him, Lord. I will guide him to do what is right in accordance to the oldest book's ten laws, and my people shall help us!"

Brook forced a grin and slowly nodded.

"Good!"

He motioned to Dearborne and told her to activate, on the panel, the playback for pictures of Alugean.

"I must make certain that you know the entrance to the inside of the mountain. Watch and remember, since this will be the final time I will show you."

The pictures flashed on the screen, showing recognizable landmarks that are in the vicinity of the entrance and finally there came the picture of the entrance itself. It wasn't very large and was almost hidden, and there was one small panel such as that which Brook's gadgets have, and from that panel, entry would be gained into the library.

"Remember," Brook told Lloyd and Boyce. "the numbers that must be pressed are these: Seven, Two, One, Nine — count to five and then press One, again — the vault door will open. Inside there is enough food and water, that you will not have to worry about running out for your duration of stay. There are enough supplies there for both of you to live on for twenty years, and more."

"We will stay there fifty, if need be!" Boyce promised.

"You will try to unite the lands in the north, with Besten?"

Lloyd nodded affirmatively, answering Brook's question.

"They will all help me, I trust, when the time comes. They understand my intentions."

Far in the distance there was a riotous sound. It came from the street and Dearborne rushed to the window and peered out to see what was the cause of it.

"Brook!" she suddenly screamed out Brook's name, but could hardly say anything else. Brook went quickly to the window, and Boyce and Lloyd went with him.

When they saw what was making its way down the street, all that was heard was a deathly silence in the room, being filled in its place by the sounds of impending violence.

"My God!" Brook said, his voice shattering with devastating uneasiness and fear.

Boyce looked, too. His heart jumped within his body as he looked at the frightful expression on the adults' faces.

They all watched the ArchBishop and a dozen monastic guards and clergy march up towards the mansion and disappear as they reached the main door beneath them.

"I can't believe that Manguino is here." Brook started. "Yet... I am not surprised. I understand my dear brother."

Dearborne took Brook's arm.

"What will we do, Brook?" she pleaded with him.

He looked at her and the other two men.

"Lloyd and Boyce must leave right now, and you must leave with them." Brook said to Dearborne and made his way to the viewing wall. He tugged at one of the drape-cords and the wall swung open to a space that was just large enough for the book case where he removed the big book from its hiding place. He beckoned Lloyd and the others. Lloyd and Boyce quickly went to him but Dearborne moved from the window to the room doors and locked them.

Pounding sounds could be heard echoing throughout the mansion, followed by the blaring twangs of the electrophoric guns.

Three successive bangs were heard as the wood and stone main doors cracked and buckled under the strain.

"They're inside." Brook said, with acceptance. "Dearborne, come!"

He handed the book to Lloyd and looked between him and Boyce.

"Care for this book, and use it to teach those in your land. They will not doubt its truth."

"I will." vowed Lloyd.

"May God watch over you!" Brook blessed his son and Lloyd then stretched his hand to Dearborne to approach him and take it. She did.

"I will miss you, my love." he said to her and kissed her.

"I will not leave you, Brook. Boyce must survive for us and there is Lloyd to watch over him. We ... we are no longer important." She embraced Brook and met Lloyd's eyes when doing so. She slowly lowered her eyelids as to say to him that she is staying. He pursed his lips and nodded to her.

Brook, still embracing Dearborne turned to Lloyd and gave him a desperate and hopeless little grin.

"You two will leave now. My Dearborne will stay by my side. Go now, the devil will arrive soon."

Just as Brook finished his thoughts to Lloyd, there was a tinny and hoarse voice come from behind the door.

"Break it in!" it commanded. It was Manguino.

"Quickly, leave!" Brook said to Lloyd, leaving Dearborne and pushing Lloyd and Boyce through the ajar passage door.

"Father ... !" Boyce began but Brook stopped him.

"You must go, my son. There's nothing that you can do!"

They stared at one another, and without further words, with an understood good-bye, they finally left.

Brook patted Lloyd on the back and instructed him to blockade the passage door with the buttress. He did so.

There was a blasting twang and the door splintered apart.

Brook quickly turned towards his gadgets and frantically started to press buttons, turn knobs and adjust levers.

The ArchBishop entered with his men and Brook took Dearborne behind him.

Three of Manguino's Angels grabbed Brook's arms and they put one of the shiny metal armaments under his chin, and another clasped Dearborne around her entire body pinning her arms to her sides so she wouldn't move them.

Manguino grinned at Brook and gave Dearborne a quick look-over.

"Hello, Brother!" he said.

"You bastard!" Brook spat out at him, in return.

"In error as always, Brook. I am the true son!"

Manguino motioned his hand to the vicar Tohm and Tohm thrust his fist into Brook's stomach.

Brook struggled for a moment until Tohm proceeded to bravely punch him, all-the-while the Angels holding him. Brook then slumped over in unconsciousness. Dearborne had turned her head away, through it all and then saw that he was limp on the floor.

"_ And you my darling sister!" Manguino said as he neared her. "The small, barren field will finally be ploughed and seeded."

The ArchBishop ripped her blouse from her body, her breasts were exposed to the air, and each man standing there saw their rosy purity.

She began to scream out and she tried to wrench herself free from the guards who hugged her arms to her sides.

Manguino grabbed each breast with his hands, clutching them until she hollered and cried in the utmost pain. She kicked out but she couldn't hit anyone and Manguino let go of her. From her pale nipples issued whitish droplets, mingled with blood, which slowly ran down her ribs.

Manguino ordered two of his Angels to force her to the floor, and they each held her legs down while the first Angel continued to hug her arms to her sides.

The great ArchBishop smiled at her.

You may even like it, Lady Scullion!"

He got on his knees then bent over. He licked the white and bloodied droplets from each of her breasts and smiled at her when he finished.

He pulled the dress from around her hips, taring her undergarments, all in one quick motion.

"Very pretty!" he said to her, and she heaved with her body to get loose but to no avail.

"Ah, spirited!" was the last thing that he said to her as he lifted his habit and moved closer.

Brook opened his eyes and tried to get up to help his beloved wife, but Tohm kicked his head back to the floor and Brook saw Manguino invade Dearborne in the moments before his lost consciousness.

During the ArchBishop's blessing, Brook's gadgets whirred and clicked, but little regard was paid to the commotion.

Dearborne trembled under her humiliation and was spared the finish when she, also, lost consciousness.

Self-satisfied and drenched with sweat, and stained with his own orgasm, Manguino looked up and smiled. Only then did he realise that the great mechanical thing in front of him was aflame and smoking. He shook his head when he finally noticed.

"You have been an annoyance, my dearest brother!"

On the mount, the Seer cried.

There was nothing that he could do to prevent what was to be, but now it was his time to descend to Pomperaque. He stood on the highest overhanging cliff, spread his arms to the mild evening sky and threw himself off.

"With the i-cam-raff I come — by the will of God!"

As he fell towards the city, he transformed into a beautiful and large swallow, and gently glided down to Pomperaque's town-square.

CHAPTER TEN

On the following day, word had gone to all the citizens of Phoride, calling them to the town's square to observe the execution of a high official, set for sundown. The high official's name was not given.

Most of the men and their male children had obeyed, what was a command to attend. Knowing well, who the unnamed official was to be executed, all but a few of the Prominants had left their wives at home.

That was a direct symbol of their disobedience towards the Archbishop.

Manguino had not regarded the petition sent to him asking for a pardon, for Brook, based on the Canon's Law and its declared punishment.

No one believed the allegations towards Brook and his wife, but they could do nothing to help him. There were many monastic guards watching the whole city and they had made it very difficult for any large groups of men to meet and talk.

At sundown, large numbers gathered in the square and waited.

They all looked at the two spreader-arches set on a platform, about a meter high, to one side of a large podium and the entire square took on the appearance of a theatre stage.

There was an uneasy silence there. With all the men and boys crowded together, the silence had an almost unnatural aura to it. Nothing was said.

Soon, several messeigneurs and cardinals came out of nowhere with the Archbishop. Three walked on each side of him, as if guarding him from approach, and each man carried a club with spikes protruding from them, and Manguino carried a scroll of parchment enveloped by a black lash.

Everyone in the crowd watched as the Archbishop approached the podium and the others swung their clubs from side to side.

Lloyd and Boyce watched the event also. They hid themselves in the shadows of an alley and were able to see the entire square without revealing their presence.

Manguino was apparelled in a festive garb as were his men, and when they reached the podium, they helped him up the steps to it.

He grinned and spoke.

"People of Phoride! — We are all gathered together this day to rid the earth of two blasphemers who think themselves above the law." he shrieked to them.

Boyce was becoming anxious. He wanted to leave but he knew that he couldn't. What's more, Lloyd forced him to stay. He knew that it was cruel to make a child witness his parents' execution but Lloyd hoped that Boyce would understand why Brook allowed it all to happen.

"He's the one that should be killed." Boyce said to Lloyd, trying to keep his tears from showing. They listened to Manguino carry on.

"The Almighty cannot allow any insubordination towards himself and the institution that he created for you all. These two will be made an example of. You all will see to what an end disobedience results!"

He slid the black lash off from the scroll and unfurled it.

"Bring the demons!" ordered Manguino.

Several of his men walked over to the platform and slid a door open and dragged Brook and Dearborne from it, and pulled them to the foot of the podium. When before Manguino they forced Brook and Dearborne to their knees but they stood up immediately. They would not kneel and after several times of their being forced to kneel, and their rejection to comply, they were permitted to stand.

Manguino glared at them and gave them an Evil little grin. He proceeded to read the scroll to the public.

"The former-ruling Lord of Phoride, Brook Scullion-Blue, and his wife, the Lady Dearborne Scullion-Blue, have been found guilty of possession of ancient, sacrilegious manuscripts, and of pictures of Hell." he paused for a moment then proceeded. "In refusing blessing from men of the Almighty, and the performing of sorcery, leading to the subsequent death of the High-Cardinal Allen — they are now charged with practising their subversions against the Canon Laws and the citizenry of Phoride."

The people were quiet and most had tears in their eyes, and they all knew that everything that was said about their Lord Sovereign was not true. Yet, they could do nothing for the square was too well-guarded.

Brook gave a longing look to Dearborne. Both knew what was upon them and they both

knew that they could not change what was happening to them.

They felt dead, already. They were both beaten very badly. They were scarred and bruised and Dearborne's body was violated by each and every coenobite, hurting her to the point where she could hardly walk, or even stand.

Their faces were pale and drawn with blackish-blue rings circling their protruding eyes. Both were dressed in torn and dirty course-woven sackcloth.

Both were made to smell bad, having excrement, from Halls, thrown over them and large insects, and vermin of every kind, crawled all over them.

But now, after nearly twenty-four hours of severe torture, they could no longer scream out in horror of their state of being.

"They pleaded innocent to all their charges. In lack of their confession to these charges, they are found to be guilty and I now pronounce my sentence upon them!" Manguino tried to keep from smiling to himself, his ego inflated with pride at the idea of judging his respected brother.

Miel and Cassta were in the crowd. They looked-on and tried to see some way to help them but there was absolutely no way to do so. Too many guards were positioned in all the key places and no one could enter or leave the square now.

"May God help them!" Cassta exclaimed and Miel pulled on his shirt to quiet him.

"Before I pronounce sentence, you may speak!" Manguino told Brook.

Brook looked up at him with huge blood-shot eyes, then turned to the people. He lifted his bound hands into the air as a gesture of plea.

"I do not accept the kneeling of one man to another, since no man is so deserving." he cried out to the people, and circling above the square was a large swallow that was loudly singing. He

kneeled before Dearborne as he still spoke to the people in his loudest possible voice. "But I do kneel before this dear woman because her love had made her brave and she accepted my woes onto herself." he cried out and there was a gasp from those in the audience.

He stood again and took a few steps forward.

"Stay true, my friends of Phoride. I now die but my lineage is not following me in death."

There was a murmur in the audience and Manguino became nervous and started to look worried.

The swallow that circled overhead was now on the ground behind the people; and Boyce watched with Lloyd, as it turned into a man, dressed in robes of chamois material. They watched him move into the crowd.

"Yes, my brother, Manguino. If you truly were a god, you would know that there is, indeed, a progeny between my wife and I. We have kept him from all the eyes of Pomperaque and he will soon avenge our death! You, Manguino — you have committed the crime!"

"Enough!" Manguino screamed out an order, aimed at Brook.

"Burn in Hell, Devil incarnate!" Manguino began to enter into a fit when he heard this from Brook. The people were also disturbed by it.

Most of the people that were in the crowd didn't know what this Devil was, but those that did know explained that it was the name of a legendary Being who was the ultimate Evil, and was actually Evil itself.

Manguino was shocked to realise that so many knew of Devil. That was forbidden knowledge and it wasn't taught at the Blaisaman. 'How?', he wondered?

He motioned with his hand at Brook and several of the guards grabbed him and Dearborne and spread both out, on the spreader-arches, making the wrists-bonds tight to the point of drawing blood from them.

Boyce began to tear, as Lloyd held to his arms.

"Even now your father is instilling doubt in the Phoridene's minds about the ArchBishop! Your uncle will be obsessed with fright for a long time!"

Suddenly from behind Lloyd came a hand and a hiss of air. He turned around quickly, ready to defend his and Boyce's life, if need be, and saw that it was Empal.

"It's dangerous to stay here any longer, my friends!" Empal said to them.

"A moment!" demanded Boyce and Lloyd nodded in agreement.

"Alright, but if I could find you here, anyone can!"

They understood but they, nevertheless, stayed longer.

Although the Angels were brutal with Brook he continued to yell to the crowd.

"Look at your Almighty now, my people. See him squirm in his discomfort. See that he is only a man, and nothing more. Do not submit to his will. Unite against him or he will destroy you!" Brook struggled as he yelled, shaking the entire arch to which he was tied.

"Enough!" screamed Manguino, hoarsely. "You have said enough ... and that is enough from you!" his incoherency weakened his control.

He raised his hands to them and the Angels ripped the stinking sackcloth from their victims' bodies and began to bludgeon them.

The mob's voices died down and all were dumbfounded, as they beheld the torture.

"Prepare execution!" cried Manguino. "For their transgressions of Canon Laws, I now pronounce the only sentence possible on these two — DEATH TO THESE SINNERS!" he yelled.

The crowd was mute. They watched Brook's and Dearborne's naked bodies writhe and convulse in pain as they bled from huge wounds made on their bodies by the Angels' studded gauntlets and the messeigneur's spiked clubs.

There were a few women within the audience who fainted from what they saw and many had slowly begun to walk away. They refused to watch their best and most beloved leader slain by someone whom they didn't understand, or like very much.

"Remember this day, people of Phoride." Brook forced himself to say as he began to lose his breath,

then with his last ounce of strength he blessed them all. "May the True Living God have mercy on you all!"

He stopped struggling from his stretched out bondage and watched Manguino raise his hand, then drop it.

The Angels had raised their electrophoric weapons and when Manguino dropped his hand, an eternal twang echoed throughout the land. Brook's and Dearborne's bodies trembled and shook violently then, in a short order, just hung there swinging back and forth.

"Quickly, now. We must leave!" urged Empal and they finally made their way across town, heading north to the Joenine Forest where Empal had left his Kentitian Eagle.

Manguino stayed at the podium for a while and gloated over the dead bodies of his rival brother and his lovely wife. With him were several of the guards and messeigneurs, waiting to escort him back to the cathedral.

Soon, a large figure approached him and began to speak to him.

"I had foreseen this event!" said the man.

Manguino looked over at the man and he became pale, as if he just died.

"Jessuum Benitar!" exclaimed Manguino. "Why are you here, I haven't seen you since ... since Smith's death."

"My mourning for your father is over. I now mourn for Brook." Manguino climbed down from the podium and cautiously and shyly approached him. Jessuum continued. "What had occurred here today, my little man, will never be forgotten. You have done something that will never leave you, and I see the eventuality and inevitability of vengeance."

The ArchBishop began to fall over his words but then slowly said what was on his mind.

"Then tell me, Seer, you are prophetic — who and where is Brook's offspring?" Manguino waited eagerly for Jessuum's reply.

"I cannot tell you directly and you know this. All I can do is dream and you must decide what it means to you." he said.

"Tell me, then!" he demanded from Jessuum and he tipped his head showing that would consent to an answer. He began to chant.

"There is a man on a trek to a place
Where the sky is touched by
A legendary grace.
There the little one learns to face
His long road back, uniting the world
In its promised Peace!"

Jessuum broke from his stare and slowly turned, and looked back at the Almighty ArchBishop.

"That's all for now, I must depart!" he told Manguino then began to walk away.

"Wait!" squealed the ArchBishop. "Why do you leave?"

"Patience is a quality that you are not endowed with. How unfortunate!
I will be near, when I am needed!"

Jessuum walked away from the ArchBishop headed for no place in particular.

MIDDLE: THE PROMISE, FULFILLED

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The deaths of Brook and Dearborne had not meant the death of the world, or even that of Pomperaue. Life endured as it was seemingly meant to, and the evil that lived in their time had carried on, as well.

There came a frightening peace in Pomperaque, as there was a frightening quite, since no forms of dissention or negative thought was permitted under Manguino's own amendments to the Canon's Laws.

Public gatherings of men (as were private meetings), were not wholly forbidden, but the numbers of men that gathered was limited to no more than four at a time — unless there was a city conference called for meeting, in the town's square, by the ArchBishop's own request.

Even the Phoridene Council was forbidden to convene without the presence of the ArchBishop Manguino, or a tribunal of Cardinals representing him.

The brisk activities of livelihood that had once occupied most of the morning hours began to fade away and break down in pattern and even the children that once played in the streets around their parents' stalls and kiosks, no longer did so in their usual fervour.

Very few people carried smiles as they once did, in the days prior to their best and most beloved sovereign's execution.

The smiles that the people kept from their faces had equalled that hate and distrust that they carried in their hearts for their great Almighty, ArchBishop Manguino.

There was a very odd change in the lifestyles and habits of the people, not only in the city of Pomperaque but throughout the entire great states of Phoride, as well. The entire population had become somewhat indolent, apparently not caring for what happened to them from day to day. The whole city of Pomperaque walked about the streets in a glazed daze, with blank faces and empty hearts as if they were in a purgatory of sorts.

Whatever there was to Pomperaque's night life, was now gone and forgotten and even the rains that were once eagerly awaited throughout the year, were left to come when they came, and the people kept themselves from partaking of it when it happened. Even harlots and satyrs, of which were once many in the city, had let their passions leave them.

With all those immoralities that had carried on during Brook's rule, those acts of perversion and indecencies that he tried so hard to curb his people from delving into, were now halted by themselves as if in honour for the deaths of their two great and courageous martyrs.

Manguino did not understand what was happening to the people of Phoride.

"They're allowed to do what they please, to whom and with whom they please, and even how they please, and yet why don't they do anything but walk around as if they are all without spirit?"

Manguino asked that question of each coenobite at Halls, from the Cardinals that ranked just

beneath him, to the novices and children training in the monastery. No answer was given to him and no speculations were entered into.

In the first several years following Brook and Dearborne's execution, many of the city's Prominants and even some of the peasantry, secretly sent their female children to some of the larger cities to the north, away from the watchful, lusty eyes of their god.

As if in desperation to produce his own line of gods, his own offspring, Manguino had brought to him young girls and women to play favourites to him, and to bare his holy children.

He had proclaimed though a decree that when upon entering the age of ten, all virgin girls, to the age of twenty-one, would be brought to Halls to be trained by his followers in the ways of life.

While as the first years passed, the females between these ages that were brought to Halls, had been personally attended to by Manguino.

His lust for the flesh of young women soon became weak and his acts were only made on the women purely to satisfy his desire of producing from them his offspring. Yet, with the dozens of women that he had made pregnant not one of the children were free from some kind of degenerate deformities — much like that of his first offspring, now in his twenties.

Through the first days and weeks of birth many of the children died on their own, and some of the women, seeing the monstrosities that they bore from the ArchBishop, had been shocked into eerie cataleptic states of being.

Manguino could not accept the horrible children coming from him and he cried to his physicians to cure him from what he believed was certainly a curse put on him by Brook; but when they could find

nothing at fault with either him or the women that he had copulated with, he had the remainder of his children, with the women that bore them, burned alive at the city's incinerators.

However, Manguino's mind strained even at this subtle act, for not a scream nor even a gag was heard to exude from any one of those that were slaughtered.

Manguino turned to being ill and he spent the major part of the next several years in a state of listlessness.

He had sent some of his Cardinals to various parts of the continent to find and bring back for him beautiful and strong females, no matter from what race they were taken. Manguino had believed that there had to be at least one female, amongst the human-like species inhabiting the northern continent, capable of producing normal and strong children.

He had placed in charge of this mission his regular hunter in these sorts of endeavours; the Nasino, Cardinal Levy. In his silent Nasino manner he compiled a force of coenobites to do their god's bidding and they spread over the continent collecting females and teaching Manguino's ways, as well.

By the end of the following year, hundreds of human-like females and true human women were herded like cattle to Halls Cathedral, by only half the force sent out to collect them.

Some of the women were bought by these coenobites but most were snatched from wherever they could be found. Those not suiting the Archbishop's specification were made to indulge those who had found them, then they were discarded or disposed of, depending on what degree of pleasure the hunters had experienced with them.

Within the first weeks, nearly seven score females were brought back to Halls and the Archbishop immediately began administering his blessings to those who were most to his liking. To his amazement, some became pregnant, came to full term and gave birth within several weeks while other appeared to have an infinite gestation, until they also gave birth. Finally, all those that the

Archbishop bedded had given birth, with the same horrid results — and the same end became of them.

When Manguino desired to turn again to young girls from the city, there were very few to be taken. The choice were married-off by their kinsmen early in their lives and only the homely and very ugly remained. Those were the ones that were not wanted by any man; some not even during the season of the rain.

Manguino, feeling that he knew the nature of the imaginary curse that he thought was put on him by Brook, took those ugly girls and women and set himself ready to have them give themselves to him.

One day, there came to the Archbishop the most unsightly of these wretched-looking women. She was squat and balding. Her body was covered with thick black hair, similar to the hair of the Teniqués. She had yellow irises and a runny pustulated mouth, and thick stringy mucus constantly flowed from her huge nostrils.

Her laugh ran course through men's ears and the town thought of this woman as a witch because of her formidable looks.

There wasn't a single piece of skin on her body that was clear from open sores, and yet she was of the prize of looks from the ugliest of women in Phoride.

However, this woman (if one chose to call such a hideous rind, by that word), had one quality that most all of the others that the Archbishop bedded had lacked. She was clever. She made herself seem worldly to Manguino, the man whom she had secretly loved for so many years.

When Eckma was summoned to Manguino he could hardly look at her without wincing and she didn't hesitate preparing herself to have her hour of delight with him.

She took off her rags and stood before him squeezing parts of her body attempting to excite him and growing in excitement herself.

Manguino was surprised that she was so eager and willing to let him in and he thought, that maybe a woman's willingness was the key to ensuring him healthy offspring. He readied himself to invade her body, for the little that he thought it worthy. Then, Eckma refused to let him come in onto her and he could not understand this.

Now, as it was that Eckma was very clever, she tried not to anger her beloved Manguino and she sat him down on the bed near her and caressed some of his parts while she explained why she refused him so suddenly.

"I have been a virgin all my twenty-eight years, my dearest Archbishop." she said to Manguino. "I had always wanted children but what I wanted more was ... you!"

Manguino looked at her and felt a disgust that he could not shrug, but her gentle caresses, which made him grow with excited impatience soothed him, as well.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded and as she smiled a creamy rheum flowed from her nostrils to the corners of her mouth.

"I had loved you since I was a little girl, and I wished and prayed that some day I would have the pleasure, and the honour, of being blessed by you. But I believed that was all just a foolish dream." she said and she smiled again, with a clear tear issuing from her eyes. "I had also dreamed of being wed to you, my true love." she added.

He grew to completion and she continued to caress him and he felt a powerful but uncomfortable urge to invade her. He was becoming sure that the woman's willingness was the key to his product of normal progeny, but when he pushed her down on the bed, and was just on the

verge of having her, she pushed him off from herself.

"Steady woman, you can't refuse me!" blurted Manguino as he dripped onto the covers by her hand.

"I do not refuse you, me hoped-for love, but welcome your all into me — with an open heart — but I would hope to suggest to you one thought I had dreamed an age ago!" she said.

"What thought, woman?" he demanded of her, becoming frustrated and quickly becoming limp.

"The dream had shown me that you could not have the offspring of your heart's desire; and then there was me, with you as the objective of love, to my own heart's desire, calling me to your bed. But, in my dream I saw that you had wed me. With the union between us and my own desires towards you, we produced many children of godly quality!" she looked up at him as he turned away from her to wipe himself, and she cried.

"What now, Eckma?" asked Manguino in a voice oddly resembling a distant compassion, as never before heard coming from his lips.

"I know that a marriage with you could never be. Forgive me for even thinking such a thing." she said and looked at him, right into his eyes. "You may do with me to your pleasure."

Manguino stood there for a moment and looked at her lying on the bed, her eyes closed and her large legs lying slightly apart.

He thought, what an odd feeling it was to have a living human woman love him so. He imagined what a love from a beauty would be like and he envied his now dead brother, because of his wife, and he envied all the wedded couples in the whole world.

He had never given consideration to such a union, but he thought, maybe it is time? Maybe

that is what was necessary, for him, to have proper children?

Manguino went over to his chamber doors and pulled a small rod out of the wall, summoning a servant to attend to him, and then he went over to Eckma and took her naked cankerous body into his arms and kissed her mouth, smearing some of her pus onto his own lips.

"You will be my wife, Eckma and I will love you, and make love to you, with more intense passion than I have ever, with anyone."

Soon, an attendant knocked on the door and Manguino ordered him to enter. When the servant saw his god lying by that unearthly ugliness and passionately caressing her, he very nearly fell faint but he looked to the floor and waited to be ordered.

"Seek Cardinals Levy, Tohm and Jordas and bid them prepare the chapel for my wedding, and have the Rogjans announce this from the city spires!"

The servant couldn't say a thing. He just nodded then backed out through the doors, closing them after him.

Immediately, he ran to the dispensary and vomited violently into a duct there, and Polis, the physician, gave to him a drink of medicine that stopped the lad's affliction. He explained to Polis about Manguino's strange taste, and his even stranger request, then he went off and rounded up the three Cardinals; conveying the message and telling them who the bride was to be.

"The Almighty had made his choice. Let us abide with his requests!" suggested Cardinal Tohm, and they went to prepare for the ceremony.

Throughout the afternoon and evening the Rogjans sang out the news to Pomperaque, and for the first time in years, since the executions of Brook and Dearborne, did the people laugh and rejoice for their Almighty ArchBishop — and his misfortune.

Manguino was pleased and happy to see his beloved people having a good time and enjoying themselves, even though he had no idea that the celebrants were really mocking him.

At the wedding, a few of the Cardinals and others that were there could look upon the bride as she and Manguino emerged from their wed-eve initiation chamber.

Cardinal Tohm was the ArchBishop's second during the ceremony, and Cardinal Jordas had performed the ceremony of unity. The ceremony was the Bonds, performed to consecrate the union of two in marriage. The couple was fused together as one entity for all of eternity, by promise of eternal love and full allowance to life together, regardless of hardships that may possibly happen between them.

Now Eckma knew she was safe from death, no matter if she had children, and regardless of their appearance.

The bond between them; the cutting of wrists and the joining of them through the drinking of each other's blood, assured the cunning female that her life was her's and that she was Manguino's, forever.

At the completion of the wedding ceremony, this one where the bride and groom were married in their naked flesh, the men of Halls were to pay their tribute and honour to the bride by the kissing of her genitalia.

Although Polis gave all those attending a potion of medicine to keep their stomachs calm, most of the Cardinals still felt gravely ill whilst in Eckma's presence.

All the novices, vicars and Cardinals that passed by the wedded couple bowed down, on bent knee, before their new god's consort. All kissed the sagging brownish flesh that dangled from between Eckma's legs, in a single and complete sweeping motion. And even in this brevity, a vast portion of them quickly ran out of the wedding hall to take full account of their week's food intake. Only Cardinal Tohm summoned enough nerve and will to take Eckma about her hips in a sustained embrace. He kissed the lips of her genitalia until a small split formed in one of her many scabs, letting a thin brownish fluid dampen his mouth, chin and eventually to soak his beard. Some of the stinking pus found its way into his mouth and Tohm, obviously and ceremoniously, swallowed it in full.

"You truly were trained well by Cardinal Allen, my dear Tohm!" Manguino whispered to him, then kissed him on the mouth.

The wedded couple were carried to their marriage bed, prepared with sweet smelling linen and the entire room was decorated with many pleasant flowers.

When they were left alone, Eckma produced a good sized vile from her vagina and she held it up for Manguino to see.

"What is that, my darling?" asked Manguino.

"It is a small bottle of rain water." she answered. "If captured in glass, the water of the rain retains its potency."

"Why do we need that? Put it away!" he ordered but she refused.

"Your promise of intense love to me must be aided by this, my love. I know I am ugly and this will help the both of us, immeasurably." she said.

Manguino finally nodded, and after entering her body, she opened the vial and poured the contents over both their genitals.

Very little was seen of the newly wedded couple over the next couple of weeks. They stayed in their wedding chamber and consummated their promise.

The people of Pomperaque returned to their blank and lifeless style of living, knowing well that their ArchBishop Manguino had indeed found his true love.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The years passed after the fateful executions in Pomperaque.

The years also passed for Boyce and Lloyd, studying the ancient ways in the Alugean library.

Since Besten was close by, Lloyd had at intervals gone there to see his family and obtain some news of events in the city of Pomperaque.

The first years were depressing for the young Boyce, trying to grow up without his real father and terribly missing the kindness, and love, from his beautiful mother, and at times, turning frustrated in not having others of his age to play with, and little girls to pretend being in love with.

Then it happened, that after several years of stay at Alugean, Boyce grew to manhood, possessing a quick mind and agile body, trained to full perfection by the guidance of his mentor and friend, Lloyd Bartlett.

When Boyce was nearing his eighteenth year and he knew his studies of the past, as-well-as

remembering his promise to Brook, and his manly body could hold up against the sharpest blows delivered by Lloyd, Lloyd took him to his father in Besten to meet his father and mother, Harvard and Rae Bartlett.

Harvard was pleased, beyond words, to meet Brook Scullion-Blue's only son and he treated him in the manner much befitting a King.

Several months after their acquaintance, Boyce trusted Harvard enough to tell him that the ArchBishop was really his uncle; Brook's brother. This news, however, didn't disturb Harvard Bartlett because he divulged to Boyce, his own knowledge about his own ancestral relationship to the ArchBishop and indeed to Boyce himself.

"We are much like cousins far removed, yet not removed so far as to keep me content." Harvard told Boyce. "I am the fifth generation descendant of Daphne Jones, daughter of Richalé, son of Hosea Jones. I am from a line of the male twin. Your family of Carter, is on the other hand, from the line of the daughter twin, Dioneza. We are related, so as to say, in common knowledge and theory about our ancestral line." Harvard took a large rolled piece of animal skin and spread it out before Boyce to let him see a genealogy of their common family roots.

"I see the broken line of my father. He is not a true Blue descendant." said Boyce but not without pride.

"Yes, we know that he was a foundling and we also know who his real parents are." Harvard told Boyce.

Boyce was amazed and he smiled, eagerly waiting to hear more.

"My son conveyed to me a story told to him about your father, and in fact it was told to him by your father. He said, that your father was found by a stream swaddled and left in a skull of a lion."

"Yes, that is so, my Lord Bartlett!" Boyce fervently confirmed.

"From the line of Wind Jones, daughter of Richalé, son of Hosea Jones; we have her forth generation great grandson, Guinness with his wife Joanna, pursued by Elkinii plains slave-traders. Having given birth to a son, they continued to run through the Virgin Mountains trying to escape the slaver. Knowing that they would be caught, they wrapped the child in the sackcloth of Joanna's apron and hid him by a river in a lion's skull, where Smith soon found it while his own wife was in heavy labour baring a child. Beside their own son Manguino, the adopted Brook (giving him such a name as he was found), was raised by them as their own." Harvard finished the account, according to his knowledge of it and eyed Boyce for a moment, admiring how the young man was absorbing everything that was being said to him.

"Is that why my father was not evil?" asked Boyce.

"Many of us believe so." confirmed Harvard then continued. "The evil seed befell your uncle, the ArchBishop Manguino through his grandfather Father's incest with Lucaea. As you had studied alone in Alugean so did Carter study, and then he left the great library to learn from the world. He reached the land of BanGor, to the east, that was and is ruled by a cult of high-priestesses that are directly descended from Anna, the first wife of Hosea Jones (yet not from Hosea's own loins). Carter had fallen into relations with the great granddaughter of Anna and their product was Smith, your father's father. Anna's evil seed was passed through Smith to Manguino. As Anna and Hosea's first son Cano turned evil, into being the Canon Di'Vaticanus, so did Manguino become the ArchBishop!"

The fascinating story made Boyce wonder if the old times with Hosea Jones were any different than the times now, since he knew more about the Twentieth Century history than he knew about his own. But now from what Harvard had told him, he better knew who he was and declared that he was ready to prepare for his return to Pomperaque.

Within the next several years, from 3055 C.E. to the end of 3058 C.E., the entire northern continent joined under an idea of unity and love. Under the leadership and guidance of Harvard Bartlett, Lloyd and Boyce became figure-heads of the community. They increased the prosperity in the land two-fold over a period of three short years and they built up a fighting army as powerful as any that had ever fought on the earth.

Soon, the northern nations and dominions were uniting into one power that came to be called the Northern United Alignment. It was a union of free states consisting of Besten, Virune, Krolalin and several smaller city states (Netheda, Ohigh and Elkinii), and from these united areas came an army of one million strong, on land, one hundred thousand strong, on sea and seven thousand strong, in the air. Each of the major united nations controlled their own special force of power. Virune, under the leadership of Empal, trained and took command of the air using the giant eagles that they had learned to domesticate. Krolalin trained their land army to use whatever weapons were available to their utmost potential, as well as developing a land cavalry that was twenty thousand strong. And there was Besten, a sea-faring people who adapted easily to naval warfare with a force numbering one hundred thousand men.

Bestenese scientists were let into Alugean to search the library contents for plans on which to build weapons, like those used by the ArchBishop's monastic guards. With much difficulty and lack of proper equipment and resources, the developments were made but they never seemed to progress very quickly.

For the generals and leaders, suits of rubber, leather and gold plating served as armour protection against electrophoric and laser shock. Although not superior in strength to hold up against constant jolting, they at least served the person to live while in their retreat, if hit.

Monastic spy activity in the north warned the ArchBishop Manguino that an army was being formed that could potentially be used against him. It was an accurate speculation seeing that the spies didn't really know what was being planned or even who was doing the planning.

On the first word of such a mounting of forces and arms, Manguino demanded that an army be compiled for him and every eligible male from fifteen to fifty was ordered into training, for war, while the women between twenty and thirty were formed into separate fighting forces. Even the ladies from the Prominants took over working then men's jobs, since they were the only ones to be permitted to stay at home.

After two years of nothing happening in the manner of war, threats or anything else of great aggressive significance, those of the Prominent class were allowed back to their social life-styles while the rest were coerced into staying in the forces.

Those Prominants who were sympathetic to Manguino's rule, for whatever self-centred reason, stayed on as his generals. They were even so powerful as to order all those at Halls, to do their bidding; all those at Halls except for Manguino.

With the final preparations taking place with the Northern United Alignment, ambassadors were sent to the hostile states and lands between Besten and Phoride, and there asked them to follow them to freely pass through without harassment or troubles.

Agreements were signed with all these states including the ones that were thought to be the most difficult; Palatka, Sedar, Nolunge and Flinnd.

The time was at hand when the two men would leave on their long journey back to Pomperaque.

Although the signed agreement of passage was to make the route shorter for the two men, the distance was still great and would require many days of travel.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In Pomperaue, several years had passed since Manguino's marriage to Eckma and although they had indeed produced children of normal looks and awareness, they never lived passed a couple of months.

Since the marriage, Manguino hardly ever involved his mind with the affairs of Halls, or of Phoride.

During the rains, very large glass tubs of water were collected then taken to Manguino's bed chamber and poured into a huge glass pool, and there the ArchBishop indulged in violent sex relations with Eckma, to the point of drawing blood from one another.

In the few years after their marriage, the physician Polis had discovered that Manguino suffered from a venereal cancer and there was a fear of death, but Manguino told Polis to search for the answer in Brook's machines.

"My cure lies somewhere within those gadgets, Polis! If you value your own life, find it!"

Manguino threatened him.

Polis spent entire days going through the mechanism in his search for the answer and then he found something. It was a formula to retard aging. He wondered if it would cure his master and thus took it to him.

Lacking trust, Manguino ordered the injection to be given to Polis first and then to Eckma.

The aged Polis's hair took on its once younger hue of auburn and Eckma lost her open sores and rheumatic nose, as well as gaining hair on her head while losing it on her body.

Seeing that Eckma now looked like a normal, yet still fat woman, and even somewhat appealing, he had several shots given to him every day until Polis devised a capsule form of taking the drug.

With the new found youth and beauty, in himself and Eckma, Manguino indulged in the pleasures of the flesh with his wife, which now was indeed much more pleasurable for him.

Eckma became pregnant again, and Manguino was certain that his child would be the ultimate, due to the drug that both of them were taking.

Minding the rule of the state and church, was the Cardinal Allen's eldest son. He, too, was now a Cardinal. His name was Orren and he was the child born to Allen, and some forgotten mother, around 3034 C.E.

Now he was twenty-five and he managed the kingdom for Manguino, while Manguino indulged in his debauchery with Eckma, and also with others of both sexes.

Orren took over for the deceased Cardinal Tohm who had gone to visit the barbaric Palatkans, the lepers, to entice them to join Phoride as an advance army in case there was an attack from the north. With their agreement to do so, they ate him, so bonding the contract with Pomperaue.

As in many times before, in periods of crisis and great tension, Jessuum Benitar appeared in Pomperaue to give its ruler a word of foreseen troubles.

Jessuum had not approved of the ArchBishop, of what he was, or what he had become, but it was his duty to give warning to those rulers of Phoride, whether they were good or evil, and all prophecies were given in dream parables and these frustrated Manguino.

In the eighth month of Eckma's pregnancy, she and Manguino still carried on in the glass pool of rain water and since the great ArchBishop wanted to converse and play at the same time, he summoned Jessuum to his chamber.

Jessuum stood majestically over the pool of water, keeping his chamois robes from being fouled by the water, while watching the crazed ArchBishop fornicating with his now better than homely wife.

The sight was the most disgusting abomination to this ancient and noble man, who could see into the future.

"I must leave soon, Manguino. I must go from this place — so would you please consent to take it out and speak with me?" asked Jessuum.

"I will finish soon my trusted Seer. Have food and drink, and I will be with you soon." answered Manguino paying little attention to where Jessuum was.

"I have not eaten for a fortnight and I will not eat, nor drink, till I leave here. I cannot foul my body or my spirit by the uncleanness of this place. I shall wait for you in the chapel for one hour — but no more! It will be your own choice whether or not you hear what will be." said Jessuum then turned and was gone.

Uneasy, the water no longer had an affect on Manguino and so he climbed out of the pool and put on a surplice and headed down to the chapel, leaving a trail of water behind him while Eckma circled the pool and drank some of the scum from the surface of the water.

When Manguino reached the chapel, there was a line of monks parading through the halls and chanting a hymn exhorting the spirits of the passed dead monastic men.

He came upon Jessuum Benitar looking straight into a small group of young boys who were sternly placed on their knees for prayers, undoubtedly as a disciplinary action by some higher cleric teacher.

"What have you to say to me, Seer?" demanded Manguino.

"Don't speak to me in such a tone, Manguino. In a spit you could be no more and there is no one who would grieve." Jessuum responded. "You have been given, and you have taken, many wonderful things that you have never given thanks for, to the one true, Living God."

"If you were not the Seer for me, for my father and his father, I would not permit you to speak so in my cathedral." stated Manguino in an angered voice and Jessuum grinned.

"Do you feel better, now that you have made a threat — so petty, as it was?" Jessuum put Manguino in his place and gave him the feeling of being a child. "I do not like you, Manguino and I do not approve of that for which you stand. I despise your crude manners and even cruder methods." Jessuum backed away from the stench of the Archbishop's body; the stench that was caused by the over-use of the same filthy rain water. Jessuum resumed. "Should the people of this great land lose their fear of you, my son, no one would be here when you needed them, to fight for your precious stick of flesh. Not a single citizen would kneel to kiss your fruit for the redemption of their sins."

"What have you to say for our tomorrow, Seer? You tire me with this worthless palaver about my indulgence." ordered Manguino, scratching at his manhood.

"Very well, impatient god of these ignorant people. This is the final time that you shall hear words from my dreams, given to you. Hear this and hear it only once, and remember! Commit it to paper if you will but remember it. Tell the court of the Prominants, if you will, but never ask it to be repeated to you, for on that day when that request is done, so should it be the end of your rule in Pomperaque." Jessuum's eyes glowed with the fire of wisdom and the light of knowledge. His brow poured forth an anxious sweat while Manguino stood by smiling with less than no faith in what he was told — even if he cared to think of the meaning behind it.

"Four great elements, ride on high
Come from the greatest fears inside.
All suspicions end with feast
Of gilded skins and threaded beads.
Foul water there is all to drink
And wine does burn with chocking stink,
Of dying corpses bleeding free
And refuge cut off, from the sea.
And where to run with hearts that tare
Leave not your sight, from the air.
Black feathers from his shoulders peer
As promised by that Holy Seer,
Shall come and take his place that day
And rule the city where he once did play.
The great one falls in the bloodied sand
And is soon forgotten in the land.
The bones of his body are never found

But his breathing body yet is sound."

Manguino stared at Jessuum for a moment then sneered.

"What do I make of that? It was quick and as senseless as all your other dreamy riddles. How could my fore-fathers trust you?"

"Do you remember those words, Manguino?" Jessuum asked him.

"Yes, but what should I care?" Manguino asked.

"Then ... repeat it to me — once ... if you can!" demanded the great Seer and Manguino did indeed repeat every word to no great avail of knowing their meaning.

"You play alone, now, Manguino!" said Jessuum and he bound out of the chapel.

Manguino ran after him to question him on the meaning but Jessuum Benitar was gone.

Manguino, in a maniacal craze ran about the teaching rooms and ordered the scribe-vicars to make copies of the words, and he recited the puzzling riddle until he found every word copied onto paper, then he returned to his bed chamber and saw Polis give to Eckma a capsule of the age retardant drug, and she drank it down with the water from the pool in which she was still wading.

BIPARTITE: JOURNEY BACK TO POMPERAQUE

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

3058 C.E. commenced with the onset of those in Besten who were in the final throws of preparation for the invasion of Pomperaque.

Throughout the year, while the plans for invasion were being finalized, Harvard Bartlett ordered the armies into a building programme, to make Besten and the other major cities in the alignment larger and more beautiful than imaginable.

The men in the armies welcomed the building programme that Harvard had engaged them to do. They didn't want to feel the anxiety and the excitement of war until the war itself was fought. So the men, as they created great architectural masterpieces, left their worries of death while they welded their concentrations on this new work.

In the days, weeks and months that passed, Besten and many other cities grew to a majesty, remembered only from the clouded, nightmarish dreams of the late Twentieth Century.

The northern cities became the jewels of the continent, and from all around the continent, every type of human went to them to purpose trade and alliance, and many treaties were entered into and signed by the respective parties involved.

Lloyd and Boyce discussed, with Harvard, the proposed routes that they had some choice on which to use, on their way back to Phoride and Pomperaque.

Boyce was eager to return and take what was his, and Lloyd also felt that now would be the best time since the ArchBishop had also begun a great building programme in Pomperaque, soon after Besten commenced with their's.

In Pomperaque, Manguino's spies described to him that Harvard Bartlett's army was being used to build up the cities, and that they grew at a surprising rate.

On the advice from his wife Eckma and several of the noble Cardinals, Manguino thought that the idea of an army building force was brilliant, and he thought that Besten had engaged itself in such a programme only to rise above Pomperaque, as an economic power.

He set Phoride's entire army to work in building the city into one great mass of moving machinery and light.

Using the knowledge available in the gadgets that had once belonged to Brook, towering buildings were built and were powered by currents of energy — electricity.

Light illuminated the evenings in the city of Pomperaque from tall glass posts that were filled with

conductive gases that glowed when energy was passed through them, and the citizens travelled around in little propelled carts with wheels that were set upon endless tubes of steel that also utilized the same electrical forces.

The city's incinerators were converted to produce the power since the furnaces constantly

burned some kind of waste material throughout the entire day and night, and huge storage batteries, such as those in the Blue Mansion, were built to preserve energy for emergency use.

Pomperaque grew into a grandeur never before seen by those living there, and it hardly took a year to complete.

The sudden boost in the lifestyles of those in Phoride made many of Phoride's citizens, from the peasantry to the elite Prominants feel alive again, and many returned to praising Manguino.

Manguino was proud of his own brilliance and praised himself.

He had taken notice of the words spoken to him by the Seer, Jessuum Benitar, and his spies' news about the north compiling an army was all he needed to order the male citizens into a compulsory army of his own.

Throughout the first years of the arms build-up all the women, even those wives of the Prominent elite, had to do the work of their husbands, as-well-as their own domestic chores while their husbands trained to fight a war which gave no indications would ever be fought.

Now, however, the new city of Pomperaque stood as a monument of strength, and with this, Manguino released the Prominent men from their service duties and most of them returned home to their wives and families. Only a few of the Prominents, who had personal gains from staying in the service, remained as the generals.

There was an odd contentment in Pomperaque and the people had a tolerant and even kindly regard for their Almighty ArchBishop, and they thanked him for improving their lives, unaware that the improvements were all made for his own benefit, and not really intended for them.

The entire Northern United Alignment heard of the progress that Manguino forced in Phoride and they also heard about the common people's change of heart towards him. Now they all favoured him.

Harvard, thought, felt confident that the Alignments' forces could annihilate the Phoridene armies, and before his son and Boyce left Besten for Phoride, he wished them God's speed and safety.

"We will send Empal with word of mobilization." Lloyd said to Harvard. "It is a long way back to Pomperaque but we should save several days in travel, taking this shorter route." He pointed-out the route on a small map while they made their final plans. His finger etched the line through Krolalin's Dark Forest and other possibly hostile lands.

"Take care in those places." Harvard cautioned. "Though these nations are small and have agreed to let you pass, we cannot trust them with their promises. Remember, some are friends of the ArchBishop. In consideration of this, you will first go to Alugean and get proper weapons to carry on your trip."

Boyce and Lloyd both agreed to Harvard's request and they left on their long journey, on foot.

It was unanimously decided that the men's journey would be taken this way in order to confuse the attention of any spies that were watching. Machine travel, and even travel by horse, would have directed attention upon them.

A small performing caravan was sent south, as were tinkers of every kind, and all knew their purpose for going to Pomperaque.

Lloyd and Boyce made their way slightly to the south-west towards Alugean where they were to check the production of weapons and receive some for their personal use during the trip.

When the height of people leaving Besten was reached the two men left the city for their day's jaunt to the vault library in the Alugean Mountain. To break the stress of their exertions, they spoke of many things during their first day of travel. The talks were mostly centred on what they thought Pomperaque would look like after all the changes. Another topic that lasted them was their views on Manguino's illogical assumption that Brook had cursed him and that it was the cause for his women baring him monstrosities. They spoke of Eckma and her, one day, turning into an almost appealing woman and Boyce speculated that the ArchBishop had found in Brook's gadgets the formula to the age stunning drug — originally designed by the fourth wife of Hosea Jones, called Ruth.

While the day waned and Alugean grew larger, and closer, Boyce and Lloyd shared a worry that they both had about the invasion that they had planned.

It came to Boyce's mind early in the day that, when the war was under way, many innocent women and children would probably be caught up in it and would die.

Lloyd understood Boyce's feelings but knew that nothing could be done about it; but Boyce really knew that Lloyd wanted to taste vengeance through the death of one particular woman.

Lloyd considered Eckma an evil woman. A woman of tasteless love that sank into deeper evil through her marriage and violent consummation. He knew that the loss of those many ugly and pretty children, at their birth, drew no tears from her.

Lloyd wanted to see her die, with her child and with Manguino, and yet, he did not want to kill them himself, although the temptations was great for him to do so.

His reasoning for this judgement of her was simple and Boyce accepted it.

"This past time that she gave birth, Boyce, she gave birth to twins. One was the beautiful son child that both she and the ArchBishop desired. The other twin, whatever sex it was, was drowned in a pool of water by its mother, because it was hideous looking." Lloyd explained to Boyce. "She held that child's head under water, watching it writhe and convulse, and she enjoyed watching it die, since she had never before killed something that was alive." Boyce was quiet and he just listened. "What's more, my friend, the water was rain water. Can you imagine?"

They turned onto a short path that lead to the hidden entrance doors and Lloyd punched-in the numbers as taught to them by Brook, a decade earlier.

"I remember the rain that touched me. It wasn't much but it made my sanity depart from me. I can imagine how it must've been for the child, drowned in such fluid."

Lloyd also remembered that night when his injured form was given comfort. It was the night when Boyce first proved his courage by isolating himself in his room after the rain fell on him.

The doors of the entrance slid open and they walked down a lengthy hallway that was dark, but also oddly shiny, until they came into an enormous cavern that hosted a number of gigantic machines of knowledge, and around them were a number of Bestenese scientists learning how to operate them.

They made their way to the other side of the busy cavern to a flight of stairs and descended them until they came out to a large area that at one time had stored food and other supplies. Now it was converted to the production of weapons, and all the other contents that were once within were taken down to another storage level.

They sat down their gear then headed to where the labs were and walked into one. The endless number of workers, that worked on weaponry in front of them, paid little mind to the two men.

Inside the lab doors the two men stopped, looked at a red light and became encircled by a smoky mist that smelled like flatulence.

They held their breaths until the smoky mist subsided and a green light came on, and with it the door before them slowly swung ajar. The full smelling smoke had actually made their bodies and clothing free of bacteria, since what they were now entering was a very clean area.

Just as they pushed the door all the way then closed it after they were in, one of the supervising technicians, in charge of small side-arms production, approached and welcomed them.

"My Lords Bartlett and Scullion-Blue, welcome!" said the tall dark man in the white plastic oversuit. "You are here just in time. We have two little gems to give you!"

He offered them the direction of the test lab and they went to it.

"It seems that my father has sent to you some more men, Burman?" Lloyd questioned Burman, in passing.

"Yes, Lloyd. They have been invaluable. Already we have attained a forty percent increase in our production levels and only three percent of that is rejected as battle perfect." Burman sounded proud and Boyce was pleased.

Boyce remembered the day that he and Lloyd first set foot inside Alugean. It was a huge lifeless place full of silence, machinery and cratesful of supplies.

They went into the test lab and watched a half dozen men and women trying out the strength of the small, hand-sized weapons.

Twenty meters from them were sheets of different materials, that came down automatically after the weapons were tested out on each piece of the materials.

Materials of plastic, glass, wood, splintered and burned up after a single blast of the small guns that had both laser and electrophoric capabilities built into them.

The power of the small weapons evenly cut into the strongest metal slabs that they had on which to test these devices.

Burman was pleased to flaunt the devices that he helped to construct and both Lloyd and Boyce were impressed.

Lloyd looked at the weapons and tested the weight in his own hand. He fired a shot of the electrophora at one of the foot thick pieces of the wood and it splintered into a countless number of pieces.

"I'm glad that the ones I was hit with, when you found me, were not like this one." Lloyd commented to Boyce with a slight grin.

Boyce studied the weapon for a moment switching it from the electrophoric to laser, and back again until he was satisfied with its performance.

"These guns, Burman — they use the same source of power for both elements?" Boyce questioned Burman.

Burman looked confused for a moment and questioned Lloyd with his eyes and Lloyd knew what it was that had confused Burman.

"Gun, is an ancient term for such a weapon of aggression."

Burman then remembered that word 'gun' and he answered Boyce letting him know that its power source was indeed common for both settings.

Boyce was satisfied with the answer, and so was Lloyd, since he had thought of asking a similar question. Now both of them knew that, once the source of power was used up, that was the end of that energy cell.

They each took a belt case and a spare cell, as their armament for the trip.

They did ask Burman to show them some of the larger-gauged weapons that were to be used in the invasion and these had a strength five times that of the small hand guns.

Everything seemed to be going well with the production and already the weapons were being sent all through the Northern United Alignment, to the armies that would get two more weeks, so it was hoped, of training with them until the invasion.

Impressed and fully satisfied with what they saw, they made their way back to the upper levels of the mountain.

"We have prepared your quarters for tonight." said Burman. "You will find food and baths, and if you wish, women can be sent to you at the completion of their shift?"

"No, the food and baths will suffice!" Boyce told Burman. "We depart early and we should rest — unless you would prefer some company tonight, Lloyd?"

Lloyd smiled at them both.

"Maybe, but they'd probably tire me too much and that would make the trip harder on both of us!"

"We'll find out if that means 'yes', later!" Boyce joked with Burman, and all three of them laughed.

"Good sleeping then, my friends!" hailed their host then left them go to their chambers.

They thanked him and entered.

They both bathed before eating and Boyce put on some sweet sounding music from a time long before

the Twentieth Century, and they lay down on their respective couches and listened.

"Of all that we found in this place," Boyce began, "the music archive must've been our greatest discovery."

"True!" was all that Lloyd said and they fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next day came early. The two men woke up in the hour before dawn and after having their fill of good food for breakfast, they readied themselves for their long trip to Pomperaque.

They made up a list for the rations supervisor to fill for them before they were to leave Alugean. The list was common to them both and they were comprised of field hiking packs full of dried meats, fruits and vegetables, two four-litre water sacks and two electric lights.

When Lloyd and Boyce finished giving Burman and the library steward the final details of how and when they would be notified about their own advance on Pomperaque, they left the city, hailed with luck from each worker within.

It was an unusually hot day and it wasn't yet nine o'clock in the morning.

Not far from Alugean, they took their first break by a stream and sucked back a few healthy gulps of water from their sacks.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the air felt thick to breathe as they slowly advanced south.

They took to walking in the shade of the trees that were all around them on their path, and only after Boyce noticed a dragonfly fanning itself on a boulder, were both of the men aware that there was a strange lack of insect life.

The men didn't speak. Boyce just pointed to the big beautifully coloured insect and Lloyd knew what was on his mind.

It seemed, to the men, that they were stopping every few minutes to drink their water but they did indeed walk a long distance, losing sight of Alugean several hours into the afternoon.

All the vegetation around them was dry and brittle, especially that which was under foot. The trees and shrubs, however, were still green and were waxy looking, and sap ran sown the bark of some of those trees.

Their feet burned and it wasn't until the late afternoon that they finally came across a stream that was to give them some relief.

They stayed at the little river for an hour, partaking of its fresh and crystal qualities, and Lloyd caught, with his bare hands, a couple of good-sized fish for their supper.

They built a fire and a shading lean-to by the water's edge and there roasted the fish, then ate them.

When they finished they speculated on the distance that they had travelled and they looked at their maps, putting them fifty-five kilometres from the library at Alugean. This surprised both of them and Boyce joked, remarking that the entire walk must've been down hill.

They knew that they had several hours of sunlight available to them, but both agreed that the time would be better spent in search of a proper shelter, where they could sleep that evening.

They doused the fire and scattered the materials of the lean-to, limiting the evidence that someone was there, in the chance that someone was following them.

Although no one followed, their caution spurred them into a steady pace that allowed them to gain a good distance with each passing hour.

It wasn't until dusk that Lloyd caught sight of a large hole in a hillside, which was overgrown with trees and other vegetation.

Since the sun was sinking quickly, Boyce agreed to Lloyd's decision to check it out as a possible shelter for the evening.

It indeed was a cave and it was incredibly large, and the floor of the cave was relatively smooth, as

far down as they could see.

Their curiosity was sparked by the looks of the cave opening, and they couldn't see any ledges or nooks until they went further into the cave. Then before them they saw a huge hole, that stretched into darkness. Normality, Boyce threw a rock into the hole but it was never heard hitting the bottom.

There was light in the cave since the entrance faced towards the west and the setting sun. They each took out their electric lights anyway, but the beams of light could not illuminate the other side, if there was another side.

To their right was a large road, seemingly joined to the smooth surface that ran through the entrance, so they began to walk on it.

"I wonder where this leads?" Boyce thought to ask, not expecting to be answered and especially with Lloyd's remark.

"Hell, maybe?" he replied.

This annoyed Boyce, but more from not really having a concept of what hell was supposed to be. He could not imagine that which had been described in legend since the dawn of man _ both times.

He sometimes shone the light onto the wall to their right and Lloyd shone his straight ahead so that they wouldn't fall into nothingness if the road was to suddenly end.

"Maybe we should head to the entrance, Lloyd. We have been here for some time."

"I thought I saw my light reflecting off something just ahead. We'll head back after we check that."

Boyce nodded to resuming and as they neared that which was returning Lloyd's light, Boyce shone his on the wall again and lit a large black, cube that didn't look like it was made of stone.

"What is that?"

Lloyd stopped and looked at it, then went over to it. He touched it and set his fingers into a groove that he found on the side.

"I don't know, but — " he pulled on the groove and half the cube, which was hinged, flew open. "It seems to be opening!"

There was a row of six small levers and beneath those was one large dusty one. Lloyd tried to move it but it didn't budge.

He sighed then dropped his pack to his feet and drew from it a small axe, gave the lever a good slam then tried it and he pushed it right around until it stopped.

There was a sudden rush of air followed by a screaming whirling sound, and the entire place became lit with dim yellowish light.

They turned to face the direction of the light and were totally flabbergasted by what they saw.

In the utmost of awe, both stood with their mouths agape and were silent as their eyes combed the entirety of the huge pit that extended far below them, with the road on which they stood, spiralling in a terraced fashion down to the very bottom.

Throughout the immense hole, there were huge machines; dormant and silent. Only God knew for how many years this place had been abandoned.

Lloyd saw that which had reflected his light earlier. It was a huge yellow hauling machine, several dozen meters away from them and covered with faded writing. It had many large, black wheels and a gigantic load bin, still filled to the limit with whole rocks, many of them larger than either of the two men.

"This is a mine!" Lloyd began to explain to this companion. "It's odd, though, that this place would be mined like this?"

"Why do you say that?" Boyce was puzzled.

"This style is called an open-pit mine, yet it's in this small mountain. That is why I think it's odd. Shafts are usually dug for mining in mountains or for something that is found very deep!" Lloyd pointed to the floor of the pit, maybe a kilometre below them.

"I would like to go down there, but we don't have the time. Let's get back." Boyce suggested.

The shrieking whirl suddenly stopped and there was no more drafty air flowing about them and the lights went out.

"I suppose that we'll have to go back now?" Lloyd chaffed, picking up his pack.

They lay back on the flat, even floor of the cave, using their water sacks as pillows.

Bluish starlight filtered into the cave and it was barely enough to let them see one another.

They stared up into the dark of the ceiling and thought about what they had just found.

"What a strange and fantastic place!" said Boyce.

"Have you noticed that this entire road, that runs to the floor of this mine, has been carved right out of the rock?" Lloyd was formulating a theory about the odd method of building such a place.

Boyce remained quiet, knowing Lloyd well-enough by now, to let him continue with his thoughts.

"They must've used lasers, like ours!" he continued. "How else could they make it's surface so flat and even all the way down?"

"I was thinking, Lloyd ... wouldn't this great hole make an interesting city — like the Alugean library?"

They both were quiet for a moment, reflecting on Boyce's idea, until Lloyd resumed.

"I'd wager that both places were made by the same people!"

The silence that came next lasted until morning when Boyce and Lloyd were snatched from their dream states by the shrill cawing of some crow on a boulder outside the mouth of the cave.

Bleary-eyed, the men got to their feet and stretched until they were fully awake, but still relaxed.

"What a noise to wake up to!" Lloyd complained.

"Oh, leave it be. It's not hurting anything!" Boyce gurgled.

"Besides, at least we can get an early start today."

They left the cave and sat on the big rock that the crow had vacated. They took some food out of their packs and filled their bowels with the fuel for a rest.

Their curiosity and sense of awe had made them go back into the mine. They were in there

only briefly while they took some notes and made some calculations approximating the overall dimensions of the mine.

They marked the location of this sight on their maps and then proceeded on their journey back to Pomperaque.

Not very far from the mine there was a wide, rapid-moving river that they had to cross before they continued their trek overland to the Dark Forest which spanned most of the northern part of the Virgin Mountains. It was a part of the land where no one lived since it was too hostile for any groups of people to settle. Only hunters and criminals roamed those desolate areas.

Lloyd and Boyce tried not to think of what lay ahead. They were given the choice of what routes to take and they chose the shortest and most perilous way.

They were beginning to see more wild life now, some larger than they had ever seen before.

They knew that they were nearing the Dark Forest because of these signs. The forest was home of every kind of titan-like animal, many of which were devilishly ferocious.

They came over a rise and there they rested because, across the small aspen rose an escarpment a few hundred meters in height. To keep on schedule, they had to scale the escarpment walls by evening.

Overhead, a black bird was circling, quickly nearing the ground with each successive round, until it finally came to rest in the top of a tree between them and the cliffs of the escarpment.

It cried out in dry sounding quavers and flapped its wings in a silly-looking manner before it dropped itself off the tree and flew over to the cliffs.

"Funny!" voiced Boyce.

"What?!" Lloyd asked him, thinking that maybe he did something worthy of being made fun.

"That's the second raven they we've seen today, and I wasn't aware that they were indigenous to this area."

Lloyd didn't even notice the bird until Boyce pointed-out its presence to him.

"Maybe it's lost?"

Boyce shrugged at Lloyd's suggestion. He watched the bird fly over the scarp ahead and he sighed with envy.

"Too bad we don't have wings to fly over that thing!" Boyce said about the escarpment. "I don't feel up to the climb."

"I can do without it, also, but we can't go around it; that would take too long."

Boyce looked at Lloyd with a perplexed expression.

"Why did I agree on taking this route, anyway?"

Lloyd grinned and closed his pack while he spoke.

"It's shorter, for one thing." Boyce began. "I wonder, at times, if we will make it there, by taking this way?!"

He drank some water then slung the sack around his neck and shoulders, and Lloyd did the same with his pack.

They both got on their feet and looked at the escarpment then started in its direction, pacing themselves steadily and surely until they were quickly on the other side of the aspen, and were standing at the base of the escarpment's towering cliffs.

"Looks high!" Boyce's brief comment drew a look from Lloyd until he finished his thought. "But — we can't turn back now!"

He laughed for a moment then looked up.

"You know, if someone told me, back when I was a boy, that I would be climbing an impossible rock when I was twenty-one, I would have laughed in their face." Boyce continued to laugh, watching for Lloyd's reaction.

"At least you're young, my friend. I'm nearly twice your age, so this trip is that much harder for me!"

"Strange," Boyce began. "this thing, Fate! It made us friends through your hardship, kept us as friend through my own, and now we're going to a place where we will engage in battle... and maybe die, together."

Lloyd gave him a strange look of disgust and shook his head.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd swear that you were still reading Djenaud Smarte." he said to Boyce.

"Knock, knock ..." Boyce smiled and then gave Lloyd a pat on the back.
"Who'll go first?"

"I will have to go first. I've done more climbing." answered Lloyd.
"Watch where I put my hands and feet and climb up the same way."

Boyce nodded in silence and Lloyd gave him a concerned looks as if to calm him.

They began to climb the escarpment which was almost a straight vertical rise of brittle rock. Several times Lloyd lost his footing on the rocks that flaked off with every inch that they climbed.

They had set for themselves two goals, the first being a wide ledge about half-way up, and the second was the flat summit itself, where they were to sleep when the evening came.

By late afternoon, after a slow and painful climb that almost claimed them both, they reached the ledge and took off their packs.

Boyce looked down over the edge and he felt a chill go through him.

"If I wasn't so tired, " he said. "I think that I'd get sick."

Out of breath, Lloyd laughed and looked down himself.

"You never ... you never get used to it, Boyce." He lay flat on his back and saw how far they still had to go. "We can't rest here for too much longer or we'll lose the strength to finish the rest of the way!"

He lifted his arm towards the summit and let it drop down again.

"I would rather have gone by caravan." Boyce sighed.

Exhausted, Lloyd grinned and slowly rose to his feet. He helped Boyce up onto his and they put their packs back on and started up the cliff-face, gain.

As it was Lloyd's experience in climbing a few times before, the second-half of the climb was a little easier for him.

Boyce had also found the next part easier to scale, losing his hold only briefly, near the top.

The skies were beginning to take on a purple-orange colour as the sun fell behind the clouds far on the western horizon.

Summoning the rest of their strength they finally reached the flat summit.

It wasn't until an hour passed, and the sunlight was gone, but for the dimness left over, that the two men stood on their feet and cleared an area on which to sleep.

The skies were turning to black velvet, with the diamond stars covering every space and some galaxies were seen lingering far behind some brighter stars. Directly overhead, a galaxy of fingernail size seemed to slowly pass over as they both lay back and watched it.

Meteorites streaked across the sky ever-so-often and Boyce told Lloyd that they were angels racing one another through the heavens.

It was a clear and beautifully warm night, and a splendidly colourful borealis shined in the north-western sky.

Neither one knew when they fell asleep, and neither one woke up until noon the next day, barely noticing that they were being baked by the sun.

Every bone in their bodies cracked and there wasn't one muscle excluded from feeling the brunt of their climb.

Nothing much was said between them while they ate. When they were through, however, Boyce praised God, and turned to Lloyd.

"I just thought of something." he said and Lloyd waited, interest shining from his eyes. "We could have cut holes into the rock face with our lasers! The climb wouldn't have taken us half the time!"

"I considered that before we started to climb." Lloyd admitted to Boyce.

"Why didn't we, then?"

"It would have been too simple and you would not have valued the skill of the climb if we made it without the hardship and sweat. Climbing this escarpment is much the same as striving for a goal in life — you do understand what I am trying to say?" Lloyd finished.

"Yes, Lloyd, I do! You are teaching me things that you haven't promised my father you would teach to me. Nevertheless, I am grateful."

The two men spent the day on the escarpment looking at the land that stretched for miles on each side of the precipice, but their main interest was in the land that was set directly ahead.

The Krolalin Mountain Range was before them, with the chain of desolate old mountains at the head of the Virgin Mountains.

They sat on the southern part of the escarpment and stared at the awesome sight. It was a mammoth forest canopied by clouds.

There was the river before them, flowing through a channel that it dug out of solid rock over its many years of erosion. Its banks sloped up from there, on each side, with short underbrush on this side of the river and the forbidding Dark Forest, on the other side.

Lloyd had Boyce hand him a pack and from it he took a dark cylindrical case that he opened. He pulled out from it an instrument of glass and light metal.

He pulled the instrument apart and put it up to his eye, pointing it in the direction of the river.

Boyce quietly watched him for a while.

"Is that one of those distance aids for the eyes?" he queried.

Lloyd smiled taking the thing away from his eye and showing it to him.

"It's called a telescope. To see further and clearer you pull it out, like this." he showed him and Boyce knew right away what it could be used for. "It is compressed for easier packing and travel. A very handy toy, I might say!"

He handed the telescope to Boyce and told him to look at the river near the huge rock and tree, as he did. He saw a cable there, stretched across the river from one rock to another on the other side.

"That's what we're crossing on." said Lloyd.

Boyce gave him an odd look as if asking him, 'why?'.

"We can't swim through that tempest. The current would rip us to shreds and we couldn't control a float on her either." he said. "That wire cable is all we have."

"Who put it there?"

"I don't know, really. All I know is that when I was maybe nine or ten, some hunters came to my father with news of its existence. We came with a couple of Virunese to see it and it didn't look in very good shape." Lloyd took a breath that shuddered slightly. "I had to carry a thick rope to the other side and back in order to strengthen it until some others were sent to replace it with a new cable."

"Why did you have to carry the rope?" asked Boyce.

"I was the smallest and therefore the lightest, but I could feel the thing under my weight the further I went." Lloyd smiled reassuringly and took a gulp of water. "I've been over it a dozen times since then."

Boyce continued to look through the telescope at the other side.

The Dark Forest didn't look any more welcoming closer up and Boyce wasn't looking forward to going through it.

The Dark Forest was densely overgrown with titanic sized trees, the diameters of which ranged from one to ten meters in thickness. They were extremely tall, too. So tall in fact that most of the forest ceiling was constantly hidden in the clouds, which never seemed to dissipate.

No one knew the actual height of the trees in the Dark Forest because of the clouds. Over the years, folk lore and tales had formed about their origin and formation. Mythical civilisations of evil gremlins were said to have built a city up in the trees and kept it shrouded from human eyes by the soupy canopy of clouds. The same lore explained why the entire forest teemed with hostile life; that which was the gremlin king's way of venting his anger on the world and on mankind.

"We'll stay here today and sleep. Tomorrow, when fresh and strong, we'll go down there and carry ourselves across to the other side."

Boyce bore a pensive smile to what Lloyd had said.

"Lloyd?" he began. "Exactly how will we get down from here? Will we have to climb?"

Lloyd grinned at Boyce.

"It's easier climbing down!" he answered and watched Boyce's facial colour draw away. "Really! — We will climb down part of the way."

He got on his belly and leaned over to the edge of the cliff and motioned to Boyce to do the same, and he did. He pointed to a large ledge that was about the width of a forearm, which continued on to a piece of this big rock where there was a gentler slope and a path down to the base.

Boyce shrugged and smacked his lips as he looked beyond the path and straight down to the base of the escarpment, strewn with rock and dotted with dry bush.

"That's still a climb!" he said.

"I would guess twenty meters! I like to think of it as a morning exercise."

They rested on the summit through the rest of the day and talked about their past decade together, as friends, and they discussed the great city of Pomperaque and what it would be like when they finally reached it.

Their second night came to them on the scarp, hardly different in its beauty than the night before. The only noticeable change was that of the full moon, which was big and bright.

Each man was silent and rolled about in his own thoughts.

Boyce laboured with the vision of Brook and Dearborne's executions, being played repeatedly in his mind while his uncle, Manguino, watched with murder-hungry eyes.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and took the telescope that was beside Lloyd and put it up to his eye. He aimed the instrument at the moon and was amazed at the details that he saw on its surface.

Lloyd had his eyes rivetted on the moon, as well. His mind played with him, showing him the memories of Mercedes' suicide mingled with that of his own beloved Charnan's death. His tears never formed, though. With his, at one time's ease to mourn, all he had now was the respectful love and praise for her.

He never married since his betrothal to her, and rarely did he ever have relations with women. The only woman since Charnan, who interested Lloyd in the slightest, was his father's maid-servant, Torella.

She drew and teased his desires from him, until with her scalding passion gave her body to him, before she left the Bartlett household with a wandering artisan.

He never found out whether it was Torella's desire to leave or his father's desire to expel her; so to keep him from fraternising with the lower-classed help.

Lloyd's second love was removed from him and since that time he had never again engaged himself with thoughts of love and passion.

He was deeply depressed and Boyce's voice was the welcomed hammer that shattered his flagonful of thoughts.

"Have you ever wondered about the moon's perfection, Lloyd?" asked Boyce and Lloyd responded with a questioning mumble. "There are large holes on the moon and mountains, larger than any in Krolalin."

Lloyd turned on his side, faced Boyce and reached for the eye-glass. He looked at the moon and agreed with what Boyce had said.

Boyce continued. "It's strange how it looks so warm and beautiful by our own eyes, then so cold and empty with the telescope. The stars, also! They just hang there, each a sun like our own!" he finished and they both sighed.

"It's truly beautiful!" Lloyd added.

"Remember our studies, Lloyd? Wouldn't it be some life to sail between those worlds?"

Lloyd expelled some air and he sounded in agreement.

Soon, the men fell asleep and travelled the uncertain routes between the stars in search of those precious things that they had lost in their youth.

Those harmonious dreams were fleeting, yet blessed moments of comfort given them by the love of God.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Morning saw the men eat little and collect their possessions, in their preparation to make their descent to the floor of the other side.

Carefully, they hung off the edge and made their way, a hair and a-breath-at-a-time, until they reached the narrow ledge.

Reaching the ledge didn't take the two men very long and they sat on it, with their legs dangling over its edge while they ate their breakfast.

The rest of the way would be quicker and easier because, to their left the ledge soon became a wider path that gradually made its way down, coming out at the river, very near to where the cable was anchored.

While they ate they watched a Kenttitan Eagle fly over them with a rider. It was heading south over the Dark Forest and they thought that it was Empal on his way back to Pomperaque.

"Do you think it's him?" Boyce posted.

"If it is, he'll be in Pomperaque by sun down." Lloyd replied.

They didn't eat too much food for breakfast, conserving it for when they needed it most, after walking for several hours without a rest.

They packed up their stuff and made their way slowly until the ledge became the path and there they quickened their pace, finding that they soon came down to the river, whose noisy roar grew stronger the nearer that they came to it.

They sat down their packs and tested out the cable.

Although it looked rusty and brittle, it still had seemed to support the weight of both of them. That was near the anchoring and Lloyd wondered how the middle and other side would hold out.

The river was indeed fast, pulling air over its surface as it flowed along, making the banks seem somewhat windy to the two men. The air passing over made the huge cable buzz as it vibrated, sounding like some of the sustained orations chanted by the monks at Halls.

They sat on a couple of rocks by the water and observed the river and cable for a few minutes, trying to draw the courage to start across.

Suddenly, both men were thrown off the rocks that they sat on but they didn't know by what.

They gave one another a couple of curious and worried glances and Boyce hollered.

"Was it an earthquake?" he yelled.

Lloyd shrugged and they watched the rocks slowly rolling away and then digging themselves into the mud at the water's edge.

Lloyd moved over to Boyce and told him in aloud voice, trying to overcome the roar of the river, that the rocks on which they sat on must have been living rock.

Neither man had ever seen one of those strange mutations until now.

They had always thought that the stories about the strange rocks were nothing but stories, but they really were able to buck a man from off their backs.

They became calm now, and they knew that once they crossed to the other side, they would have to become more careful.

These rocks that they had encountered were passive, but on the other side of the river the beast were all but shyly submissive. In fact, they would attack their own shadows without the slightest forewarning that they would do so.

The day before, Lloyd and Boyce discussed the possible perils that they would encounter, not knowing for certain since very few men had ever successfully passed through the Dark Forest.

Now, however, no more discussions could keep them from trying to cross the river, and they knew it.

"We can't sit around here forever." yelled Boyce. "We have to cross, so I'll go first!"

He put his pack on and tied it to himself and Lloyd grabbed his arm as he moved towards the cable.

"Why do you want to go first?" he asked him.

Boyce just smiles at him.

"I'm lighter than you are. Besides, you went first on the climb."

Boyce turned to the escarpment and pointed at it.

Lloyd put his other hand on Boyce's shoulder and nodded his head to him, approving the decision that the young man had made.

Lloyd tied his own pack to himself and they went over to the cable where it was anchored to a huge boulder.

Boyce reached up and pulled on the cable a few times.

"Be careful!" Lloyd hollered to him and slapped him on the back.

He eased himself along. First sliding one hand out then his other until his hands were together. He kept to this method but half-way across he began to tire and he hung there motionless for a moment.

The cable didn't vibrate with that odd tone any more, and Lloyd became worried for Boyce. Within his heart he egged him on and he prayed that God would grant him strength to make it the rest of the way.

He was relieved to see Boyce continue to pull himself along and after a short while made it across.

Lloyd watched Boyce drop to the ground and not move for what seemed like several minutes, until he sat up and took the pack off.

He waved to Lloyd from across the river and Lloyd waved back.

He watched the cable vibrating, more now than before with the buzzing evening-out into a low tone. He stepped up on the anchoring rock and looked at the wedge that held the cable in the rock, and it was moving about a little.

He waved over to Boyce and pointed to the anchoring and Boyce went to the anchoring on his side, looked at it and pulled at it. He then waved to Lloyd to make his way across.

Lloyd was unsure of the crossing. The anchoring on this side seemed very weak but he had no choice but to go over.

Once he grabbed the cable it lost its bass-tone hum. He didn't ease himself along, however, seeing the wedge showing itself more and more.

He began to wish that they had a rope that Boyce would've strung across to strengthen it for his crossing.

He threw one hand and grabbed the cable, then followed by throwing out his other hand far in front of the first while he tried to keep his body straight.

He kept his legs firm and straight, though, and the cable moved very little, yet on the last dozen meters he felt the cable give way.

A booming twang was heard accompanied by a whistle. He held on to the cable and for an instant saw the other end recoiling towards him while he was pulled closer towards Boyce's side of the river.

Unable to hang on Lloyd fell and Boyce hid behind a big rock trying to keep the snapped end of the cable from cutting him in half with its whip-like action.

The end finally fell into the water and Lloyd had made it to the bank of the river having fallen only a couple of meters from the shore.

Boyce came out from behind the rock and helped Lloyd onto the rocks nearby.

"Are you hurt?" shouted Boyce.

Lloyd breathed heavily and shook his head. The only thing that was at fault with him was his torn clothing and scraped hands.

They spent the evening at the river's edge, trading off on staying awake throughout the night, guarding from attacks from animals, but the night was calm.

The only hostilities that the two men experienced through the night were the horrific sounds of wild animals fighting somewhere deep in the forest. The noises were so great that they, at times, drowned out the roar of the river. To their relief, however, not an animal was seen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Morning took a long time, so it seems, coming to the two men.

They were both awake by the time the sun rose and by the time that it was fully light, they had finished eating and made their way into the forest.

It was a perfectly clear day out by the river, but the odd clouds that towered over the forest were still there and they were maybe even thicker than the day before.

At any rate, the inside of the forest had a night look to it.

The trek through the forest was the part of the journey that the two men wanted most to do without. They were afraid of the forest because they knew very little about it.

The veil of mystery and the stories of horror and evil, surrounding the place, didn't make their nerves any calmer.

Not much time went by since they had entered the forest. All was quiet inside and they

began to feel easier until they came across a gigantic, ox-sized carcass of a rabbit that was being devoured by huge larvae as large as big rats.

They didn't know the nature of the larvae, whether or not they attacked their prey or just fed-off of dead animal bodies, so they both took their weapons and carried them as they continued.

Soon after, the men heard a strange grating sound overhead that got louder and louder. As the sound became louder, so it changed, sounding like the beating hooves of stampeding horses and finally like a droning whistle.

"Maybe it's the gremlins!" Boyce joked.

Suddenly, before them was a small swarm of hornets, larger than anything that they had ever seen, flying straight for them.

Lloyd shouted to Boyce to dive to the ground and he immediately did it, always trusting that Lloyd had a good reason for telling him to do such a thing.

When Boyce threw himself to the ground Lloyd pointed his weapon at the swarm and shot into it. The laser setting managed to hit and kill only one hornet which was the size of a human head.

He quickly put his weapon on the electrophoric setting. By then Boyce had already set his weapon and shot into the swarm that moved towards Lloyd.

A bunch fell to the ground dead, and after Lloyd killed some more, the few that were left took off for the clouded tree tops.

They both got up and looked at a couple of the hornets twinging on the ground as they died.

They bent down and prodded one with a stick and saw that it had a stinger that was about five inches in length. Its mandible was large and sharp, too. It looked as if it was able to snap a hand off at the wrist. They looked around to see if there would be another attack.

They continued to walk, hoping that the direction was still south, since the only way that they could assume that they were heading south was by taking a straight line right through the forest, ever so often looking back from whence they came, in order to make sure of their direction.

They made steady and rhythmic their jaunt through the thick underbrush, keeping their eyes open for anything and everything that could possibly be harmful to them.

They kept walking, not stopping for a rest or a drink. They didn't speak or look at one another, either, although each knew exactly where the other one was at all times.

The forest seemed to be slightly brighter the further they went into it but this boon to them soon passed, also.

It soon became very dark again and they knew that it was time to find a place of shelter where to sleep.

They were fortunate to find a resting place not too much further into the woods. It was an outcropping of rock that was fairly high and there was a recess in the rock, some ways up. Over the recess there was an over-hanging piece of rock, which would be a nice guard against the condensing moisture that was beginning to fall now.

Boyce set his weapon on laser and blasted holes into the rock, to make the climb up to the recess easier for them.

The recess was large enough for only one person so when they climbed up to it they carved out a much larger hole. It was smooth and warm in the shelter that they made. The cutting edge of the lasers warmed the surrounding rock while they melted a strong smooth surface on the ceiling and walls.

It was another night spent in trading watch by each man, keeping guard from the ferocious animals that stalked their prey at night.

They were high enough up the rock, though, to be safe from most animals, so they hoped. They remembered the size of the rabbit and the hornets, and they couldn't really presume safety even that far up.

What made the watch worse for the two men was the utter lack of light that prevented them from seeing anything, including their own hands in front of their faces.

They used their electric lights only when they heard noises that were nearby, but they never saw anything.

Throughout the entire first day in the forest, Lloyd and Boyce barely said anything to each other, or even stopped anywhere to eat or to drink. The evening was quiet, too; the only things said between them happened when they relieved one another from their watch periods.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The forest began to take on a lightness and Boyce knew that it had to be morning. He had stayed on his watch longer, letting Lloyd sleep because he knew that Lloyd needed more rest, being thirty-nine years old. Boyce didn't mind sacrificing his sleep to let him rest longer. God knew how much Lloyd had sacrificed in his own life to fulfil his promise to Brook and Dearborne.

When Lloyd woke up he asked Boyce why he didn't wake him for his second watch period. Boyce answered that he had just lost track of time.

Lloyd knew that Boyce didn't tell him the truth, but the topic wasn't pursued any further because he was grateful for the few extra hours of rest.

They finally spoke for a while as they ate their first meal in the forest.

"I don't like this place!" admitted Boyce.

"We'll have to tolerate it. We still have a day's walk ahead of us." Lloyd said to him and took a bite of meat, then continued. " — If we're lucky!"

The woods were noisy, continuing from the night, but the men now felt safer because they could, at least, see much of what was around them.

Growls were heard all about them, and birds screamed and fluttered around. One huge bird flew past their line of sight, soaring silently, then with a loud screech, quickly rose into the clouded tree tops.

"What a damned place this is!" Boyce stressed. "It is so ungodly."

"It may be but it's the legacy given to the world by the ancient men!"

Their attention was diverted when they heard a gagging roar and grunt. With it there was a loud shriek, like a scream, and they looked at each other with puzzled and surprised eyes.

"That did not sound like a scream that a bird would make!" Boyce suggested as he got on his knees,

drawing his weapon and trying to follow the unusual sound.

It came again and was getting nearer and more frequent.

The, there it was. To their utter dismay, there was a woman running out of the thicket of brush some twenty meters away.

She constantly turned to look behind her. The bushes waved and buckled as if a herd of elephants were breaking through in the same direction that the woman was running.

Lloyd hollered out to her, calling her to run towards the cliff where they sat, and then they saw what was running after her. It was a wild pig the size of a horse.

It advanced more quickly on the woman, now that she was in the open.

"Drop to the ground!" Boyce yelled at her several times until she finally did it.

Before the pig came upon her in its rampant and hostile charge, Boyce fired a laser at it split the pig's skull in two.

Lloyd quickly climbed down from the ledge and ran to her, picked her up and ran towards the cliff just as the pig fell from its momentum.

He guided her into the notches in the cliff face and push her up along the way. At the ledge Boyce took hold of her arms and pulled her up. She looked at his face for a moment then lost consciousness.

Lloyd and Boyce were ready to leave before this strange woman happened along. Now they felt a duty to stay with her until she came to.

They wrapped her in Lloyd's blanket after touching her skin and finding that it was ice-cold.

Lloyd looked at the woman and made a comment to Boyce about her beauty and strangely frail-looking quality.

She wasn't very tall yet her build was slim and firm. Her hair was very long and dark, shaded with copper highlights and her shut eyes were oblong and appeared to be larger and slightly slanting.

Her whole face had a serious beauty about it, the patches of dirt, here and there, made little difference to its overall appeal.

Lloyd was taken with her. He didn't know whether it was because of her beauty or because she was in the middle of this most naturally hostile place on the northern continent. Nevertheless, he found it very hard not to look at her.

Boyce had found her extremely attractive, also, but the idea of this woman's presence in the forest made him wonder about her.

"She is beautiful!" Lloyd began. "I wonder who she is; how she came to be here?"

"I question her being here, at all. She's a day's journey from both the river and the end of this forest. How has she survived here?"

Boyce was becoming nervous about her and he disliked her due to his mistrust.

"How she had come into the forest, is another point." Lloyd added to Boyce's train of thought. "We shall find out, but until then let's enjoy her beautiful company."

He leaned against the ledge wall and kept his eyes on her until he poured some of the water from his sack, into his warm hand and ran it across her face.

She stirred and opened her big green eyes. She looked at Lloyd leaning over her and Boyce staring at her with frozen eyes.

She looked about at the recess in which they all were in, and she took an excited deep breath and then shivered.

She seemed frightened. Lloyd took her tiny trembling hand into his own and spoke to her.

"We're friends." he said then helped her sit up and look at the wild pig, that didn't move any more. "See — it's dead!"

Lloyd pointed to the animal then handed to her his water sack, and she nearly drowned from her incredibly quick drinking.

She gagged and coughed and Lloyd pushed her forward and rubbed the centre of her back.

The woman soon caught her breath and quietly looked at her two gallant saviours.

"My name is Lloyd Bartlett and this is Boyce Loebh ..." something kept him from finishing the whole name and Boyce was relieved. "... we are making our way to the south."

"We are in a hurry to get to our destination, so we took this route. It is shorter by several days."

By the manner of Boyce's speech, Lloyd knew that Boyce didn't want any details of their journey to be revealed.

"You almost had yourself stomped into the ground by that animal. What are you doing in these woods?"

The woman looked to the dead animal and at Boyce. When she spoke, she turned to Lloyd.

"I was running." she said, and the two men eagerly listened. "My father is an over-lord. He wanted to force me into a marriage with a Teniqués. I refused and he had me whipped and branded." she pulled the single support strap from her shoulder and exposed the breast of the same side, that looked scarred, with the symbol of a trident burned on it.

Lloyd lifted the shoulder support back onto her shoulder covering her up.

They stared into each other's eyes and Lloyd felt warm from the glow emanating from her.

She took the blanket from around her, dropping it to around her hips where it no longer covered her.

She only wore the single piece of clothing, made of a dark, thin and short fragment of material.

She was barely covered but for her torso, and she didn't wear anything as undergarments.

She put her hand on the upper, inside part of her thigh and when she brought it away there was blood on her fingers.

Boyce just sat back and watched the strange unfolding of her story and actions, all of which were aimed right at Lloyd.

"Are you hurt?" Lloyd asked with much concern.

"I have a small gash in my leg! It must've happened when I was being chased by that!" she pointed at the dead pig.

"Here, let me take a look!" Lloyd offered to assist, genuinely feeling concerned for her.

He took some water on a strip of cloth that he had in his pack and wiped the wound clean, then wrapped the wound with the same cloth.

Although Lloyd was an honourable man, gallantly aiding a distressed female, he could not keep himself from glancing at her naked extremities.

"Does it hurt very much ..." he stopped and with his eyes conveyed a question of need to know her name.

"My name is Grenadine." she said and Lloyd echoed with a smile.

Boyce was annoyed by what he saw. Everything was kindness and appreciation between them, but he felt that something was at fault.

"I'm alright." she said and she made a little smile that poked a hole into Lloyd's heart.

"Can you walk, Grenadine? We wish to resume our journey soon and we don't want to leave you behind." Lloyd asked her.

Grenadine nodded to him and they packed up the two packs and climbed down.

Lloyd gave Grenadine his blanket and she wrapped it around her body into a kind of dress that looked like it was made for her.

No seam showed and no string or thread was used to keep it together.

Boyce walked behind Lloyd and Grenadine, keeping all his attention focused on the woods and making certain that they continued to walk in a generally southern direction.

Above them the tree tops were still hidden and sounds like mute whistling came from there.

Boyce began to believe in the gremlin lore and the evil that was supposed to be associated with it.

If it wasn't for the woman travelling with them, Boyce believed that they would have been out of the forest by this time.

Grenadine limped very little but she held on to Lloyd's right arm at all times.

Boyce didn't like that. He saw that Lloyd would have a very slow response in drawing his weapon if it became necessary.

They kept walking and never stopped for a rest.

Grenadine didn't ask for any rest and Boyce had thought that, for a woman, that was peculiar.

With every hour that passed, and they made it further through the forest, Boyce trusted that woman less and less. He couldn't tell this to Lloyd, however. His preoccupation with Grenadine would have made him unreasonable towards Boyce's views about her, so Boyce kept his thoughts to himself and kept his wits about himself.

Lloyd and Grenadine talked to one another throughout the entire distance travelled since they left the rocky ledge where they slept last night.

Lloyd had forgotten an agreement that they made way back in Besten when they chose this route. It was Lloyd's suggestion, too.

"We should keep as quiet as possible when going through the Dark Forest. We won't draw as many wild animals to the sounds we make."

Boyce remembered those words each and every time that Grenadine's bird-like laugh reverberated through the trees.

There was huge crashing sound that came from their left side, and it wasn't far from them.

They stopped in their tracks and silently waited.

Lloyd had briefly lost his interest in Grenadine and he looked at Boyce's angered contours, yet he didn't understand them.

They stood still for several minutes, looking about.

Lloyd made Grenadine squat down and he readied his gun for defence.

He and Boyce looked around their immediate proximity but saw nothing. They became edgy.

Lloyd looked at Grenadine's calmness and helped her up from the ground. He was proud that she could keep her courage when their's was waning.

Boyce watched both of them with amazement as they sluggishly milled their way in their intended direction.

He followed once again being the eyes for the entire party.

Time passed and the forest grew dark for the second time. Night was again, at hand. Boyce was not at all pleased.

"Lloyd!" Boyce cried out. "We should seek a shelter!"

Lloyd nodded to him and they reconnoitred the entire area around them, in search of some place.

The only shelter available, with any degree of safety offered to them was a gigantic bird's nest.

"Should we try it?" Boyce asked with his answer already suggested in his tone.

"We couldn't find better in this light!"

With Lloyd's answer, they took out their lasers and sliced several dozen rungs into the tree leading up to the branch with the nest.

"Well?" Boyce thrust his hand up at the tree. "Tonight we'll be sleeping with the gremlins."

Grenadine gave Boyce a strange glare of disapproval and Lloyd smiled because he thought it looked amusing.

"We go up in a moment!" said Lloyd then went a few meters from the tree to urinate.

Boyce came up beside him and did the same, taking his first opportunity to speak to Lloyd about the girl, since they took her along.

"Your mind hasn't been on the journey." he told Lloyd. "This place is dangerous and you've fully dropped your guard."

Lloyd didn't say a word while Boyce spoke.

They both finished urinating and Lloyd began to turn but Boyce stopped him.

"Haven't you given any thought on how or why she came to be in this forest?"

Lloyd was still quiet in such a way as to seem like he was ignoring Boyce.

"You don't believe that story that she gave us, do you?" Boyce demanded and answer.

Look, Boyce! She's a very nice and beautiful woman. We can't leave her here to die!"

"Yes, Lloyd, but don't you see? — She shows no apprehension about being in this place!" He stopped his monotonous whisper and pointed to her. "Look at her Lloyd, does she look frightened to you?"

Lloyd glanced over at the woman but he couldn't see what Boyce was talking about.

All he could see was Grenadine leaning against a tree with her arms crossed and her eyes staring straight ahead.

Lloyd walked away from Boyce and soon was helping her climb up the rungs towards the branch where the nest was resting.

Boyce watched them climb. He was disturbed when Lloyd never came back down to get his pack.

Boyce put both packs on, one around each shoulder and he slowly made his way up the tree and then swung his legs astride the branch when he reached it.

Lloyd and Grenadine were already reclined in the nest when Boyce took the packs and set them inside the nest with them.

From his pack Boyce took out his cape and electric light. With a little food and his water sack, he made his way to the butt of the branch and sat against the trunk of the tree.

With the final particles of light scattering through the forest, Boyce scanned the area to make certain that no animals were in the vicinity. He looked up into the clouded tree tops and wondered about the lore of the gremlin kingdom and whether or not it was true.

It was dark now; pitch and silent but for occasional sounds of night-birds whistling through the trees and, at times the sounds of rocks being overturned by large and hungry animals looking for grubs.

Many hours had passed since Boyce took the first watch.

He was finished slowly eating his food and keeping awake because he didn't dare risk leaving them defenceless.

Hours later, Boyce crawled along the branch to the nest, having his light on it so that he wouldn't fall from it.

At the nest, he was ready to call Lloyd to his turn at watch, and he came upon them when they were at the height of love making. Grenadine was obviously the aggressive one.

He turned off the light and crawled back to the tree trunk, and leaned up against it, throwing his legs around the branch to keep himself stable.

Something, he thought, was happening to his friend. Lloyd was behaving oddly and not like himself, and what's worse, Boyce didn't know how he could help Lloyd.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lloyd stood up in the nest, stretched and tucked his tunic back into his pants. He looked over at Boyce wrapped tightly in his dark cape, staring right back at him with withdrawn eyes. His face was pale and his lips were dry and slightly cracked from the trifle breeze that filtered through the forest during the night.

Lloyd tipped his head to Boyce and Grenadine peaked over the rim of the nest and look at him, as well.

Lloyd and Grenadine shared some of his rations and Boyce began to straighten up from his uncomfortable night of sleeplessness. His legs dangled off the branch while he sprinkled water on his hand then patted it over his face.

Breathing coarsely and heavily, Boyce looked over at Lloyd and Grenadine setting their clothing in order, and he looked way when he saw Lloyd kiss Grenadine's hand.

Boyce lifted his pack around his shoulders and then threw his cape about himself and climbed down the tree.

It was an eerie peacefulness on the ground and he felt very ill-at-ease all by himself. He took his laser from his belt case and seared some marks on a few dozen trees, heading in a straight line, south from the tree in which they spent the entire night.

Lloyd watched Boyce walk in the direction of the blazed trees and he knew that Boyce was going ahead, alone. He climbed down from the tree with his pack and Grenadine, on his back. Her beautiful legs and delicate arms tightly clutched him about his body, and she sensually rubbed her lips on the back of his neck.

They followed the trail that was hastily marked by Boyce, who was far ahead by the time that they started.

For their own protection and welfare, Boyce knew that they had to hurry out of the forest. This place was taking its toll on the both of them; Boyce with his potent strength and Lloyd with his immobility of character. He was certain that their safety was only assured by the speed of which they could make it to the other side of the forest. A third night would surely taken them, thought Boyce.

Many hours were spent in Boyce's struggle to make the other side. His weapon was drawn at all times and in his speed he shot several large animals, regardless if they motioned to attack him, or not. He couldn't chance any friendly influences in this forest. He could not trust this place of legend and mystery while he worried for his friend, helper and teacher, Lloyd Bartlett, to make it to the other side.

On the other side was an immense canyon, stretching to each side of him, as far as the eye could see.

There, far to one side, was a swinging cable bridge connecting the two sides of the canyon; they were certainly a kilometre apart.

He waited at the place that he came out of the forest, for about an hour. Then, as if beckoned back into the forest, he followed his markings back towards Lloyd and Grenadine.

One half hour into the forest, Boyce saw Lloyd and Grenadine leaning against a large boulder, embraced and oblivious.

Grenadine was in front of Lloyd and she was kissing him while, unnoticed, a large pack of dogs came out of the shadows of the trees and made their way towards them.

Lloyd didn't see the dogs and he didn't even hear some of them snarling as they neared.

Boyce saw the dogs quickly move upon them, and he saw that Lloyd didn't have his laser out of its case. There was no time to warn them.

He rushed down on one knee and set his gun on the electrophoric setting. He fired into the middle of the pack of dogs. Several fell, kicking as they died. A few others howled into a whimper and scurried away. A few of them turned and advanced upon Boyce.

Lloyd looked up and saw the dogs run towards Boyce. In a sleepy daze he drew his laser and pointed

it at the dogs. Just as he was firing Grenadine grabbed his arm and pointed it towards the ground, allowing the laser to gouge a large hole into the earth.

Unsure of what had actually happened Lloyd slowly focused his eyes upon Grenadine. As he stared at her he was transfixed upon her green eyes which began to change to a shiny rust colour as she slowly began to back away from him.

Once more he fired several rounds at the dogs, vaporising one that committed to a jump upon Boyce, giving the young man the chance to duck and roll away.

As Boyce rolled he came to rest upon one knee. He raised his laser, bracing his wrist with the other hand. The power cell within the laser was dead and one dog was too near to him for either he or Lloyd to kill it from the positions they were both were situated.

Boyce, fearful of this circumstance, still remained calm. His eyes scanned the ground about him. Quickly he had noticed a large tree branch resting inches from his left hand. Without much plan or thought Boyce scooped the tree branch with his left hand sending it in flight towards his right hand. As surely as rises the sun the branch found its mark. He wielded the stick high over his head as he sprang to his feet. He stood with his feet placed far enough apart for a sure-footed balance and allowed the stick to come crashing down upon one of the dog's as it hurled itself towards him. A thundering crack echoed about the forest as Boyce found the mark of the dog's back, crushing it into a bloody pulp.

Lloyd, now achieving a sense of sobriety, shot at a few more of the dogs and failed to notice Grenadine moving away from him. She picked up a jagged rock and flung it towards Lloyd's head.

Without surprise at what he saw, Boyce quickly sprang off of his feet and lunged towards Lloyd. But the rock found its mark hitting him behind the left cheek before Boyce knocked him to the ground.

Boyce reached him as he had sunk to his knees and toppled to one side. But Lloyd did not lose consciousness. Boyce lifted him onto his lap and Lloyd's head shifted over, his eyes seeking the beautiful waif, Grenadine.

Their eyes caught each other; Lloyd's displayed his broken heart and Grenadine's showing a satisfied mania.

Before them both, Grenadine broke into a shrieking laugh and fell down upon her hands and knees. In their amazement and horror, she began to transform into a large black wild bitch.

She growled at them, foam frothing and flying out of her mouth. Sharp and moonlight white fangs glistened, only out-shined by the ruby red glint of her eyes. She sprang directly at Boyce catching him in the chest.

Boyce tried to fend her off by flailing his arms, but he was weakened by the shock to his body, knocking the air from him.

With glaring, burning eyes and the flash of the lightning white teeth, she howled then violently thrust at Boyce's throat. Boyce grabbed her head inside his bent elbow and attempted to turn her over. When he finally got her beneath him, he tried to clamp her snout shut with his left hand. In a frenzy but yet in control Boyce made a search of the ground for Lloyd's laser, which had dropped when he was hit by the rock, but he wasn't able to find it.

Boyce suddenly let go of Grenadine's snout, rolling quickly away from her then in a blink of an eye moving into a standing position and defenceless.

Grenadine got onto her feet as well and growled as they both stood there staring and circling one another.

Once more she leaped in Boyce's direction but this time the loud twang of an electrophore resonated about the woods. Lloyd had fired at Grenadine.

Lloyd crawled over to Boyce. He was lying on the ground with Grenadine's lifeless but, again, human body draped over him. He rolled her off from him and put his hand on her chest. In an instant he reached over for Boyce and did the same, then sighed with relief when he found him still breathing.

"Boyce ... you're alright!" was all he said.

Boyce silently nodded and spent the next few moments trying to catch his breath, and Lloyd kept a watchful eye for any more dogs.

Boyce sat up and they just looked at one another. Nothing was said. Nothing had to be said. Both knew exactly what had happened and what was, was. Lloyd understood what was on Boyce's mind. He knew that Boyce could see the potential danger over the last few days, but had nevertheless, allowed it to manifest. He, himself, should have realised the danger especially with her unafraid attitude, at the tree, the last evening.

Lloyd pointed his laser at her body. He severed her head then shot a large hole into her chest where he dug out her heart with his bare hands.

Boyce made it to his feet and staggered about the area until he found the laser that he dropped early into the struggle. He finally found it near the body of the dog that he killed with the tree branch.

He tucked the gun into his belt case and surveyed the woods.

Several dogs were still pacing to and fro watching Lloyd mutilate Grenadine's body. They watched as he dug out her heart and stuff it into her dead mouth. They quickly ran off into the woods when he threw her head at them.

"Let's get out of here."

No sooner did Boyce suggest their departure that they began to run through the forest, following the markings he had made earlier.

At the end of the forest they were still running. Boyce lead the way to bridge and entered a few steps into it.

"Is it safe, I wonder?"

"It has to be safer than what we had just left!" Lloyd admitted, pointing in the direction from which they came.

It was at this point that the yelping and growling sounds of many dogs began to echo from the forest not very far away.

They looked at one another and shrugged in unison as they began to run across the bridge. They laughed as they ran especially when the bridge began to swing wildly with every step they took and they prayed to the one true living God to strengthen the bridge until they made it across the canyon. The other side of the canyon seemed to move farther and farther away and the chasm below them became bottomless to their minds.

They pushed on.

Lloyd looked back to see the distance that they had made to this point and there, also making their way across the bridge, was a pack of blood-hungry dogs.

"This is very disconcerting!" Boyce commented.

"Hold on, Boyce!" Lloyd ordered then stomped his foot on the part of the bridge directly behind them and the shock wave travelled back towards the dogs upsetting the lead dogs balance and footing, forcing them off the bridge and into the chasm. A couple others dropped when Lloyd shot at them, but this seemed to egg-on the other dogs even more.

In seconds the shock wave returned to their side of the bridge making both of them nearly lose their footing.

In short order the two men regained their footing and their balance but only to see the relentless dogs steadily, and quickly coming nearer.

"We'll have to do this the hard way!" said Lloyd then motioned to Boyce to follow what he does.

They wrapped their arms about the tension cables that held the bridge up and they wrapped their legs about the support ropes which held the partly rotten wood that was the bridge. Lloyd then drew his gun and shot into the middle of the bridge just ahead of where the dogs were now encroaching.

The bridge split. Wood splinters flew everywhere. The dogs tumbled hundreds of meters to there deaths on the chasm floor.

Grabbing for the tension cable with his gun hand, Lloyd had released his gun as the bridge head they

were hanging on to recoiled towards the opposite cliff wall of the canyon.

Both hit the wall hard, their eyes closed as if that would cushion the pain of impact in some way.

When the bridge moved no more, they opened their eyes and checked to see if the other was still there. Their eyes met and with a reassuring nod they looked up and slowly started to climb.

Although the distance they were climbing was not far the tangled mess of the bridge was difficult to negotiate and both were near to exhaustion from their battle, and their run.

Lloyd's cheek was bleeding but his hands each stretched and searched for the next rung and his feet each found its mark, though it was all through a virtual unconsciousness. What kept him going was his memory of the promise he made to Brook and Dearborne; it was the promise he had, once again, remembered. It pushed him onward to his success and he continued to climb as he felt a self-embarrassment for their predicament. He had allowed the memory of his promise to escape his mind when he was with Grenadine and now he was sorry.

Lloyd had made it to the top and Boyce pulled him up to the edge and dragged him over some flat rocks. There they both lay for rest, staring at the immense evil forest from which they came, looming on the other side of the canyon.

"Let's not do this again!" Boyce pleaded, with a grin.

Both passed out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The sun slowly ascended in the east, appearing to rise from the distant end of the canyon, giving light to the rocky gap, through to its other far end.

Boyce opened his eyes to see some birds flying overhead. He quickly sat up but after he saw they had made it across the bridge he felt more relaxed. He stared back, at the immensity of the Dark Forest and its perpetually clouded tree tops.

Now he wondered, more than when they were inside the forest, if the mythical lore about the gremlin city, in the cloudy tree tops, was true.

Lloyd now sat up, as well, and with hazy eyes looked towards the forest, too.

He glanced to Boyce who wasn't looking at him at the time, very much intent in his study of the canyon.

"That place will get a man — one way or another!" Lloyd said waiting for a response from Boyce. "Boyce ... I can't begin to say how sorry — "

" — Let it be, Lloyd!" Boyce cut into his apology, but not in a manner suggesting disrespect. "You weren't yourself and nor was I. I suppose the forest reached the both of us."

Lloyd nodded and sighed as he stared towards yesterday's events.

"It was an awesome teacher, my friend." Boyce began. "It taught us what we feared the most. It taught you the pain of loneliness and duty and it taught me that fighting, and killing, is unavoidable."

Lloyd placed his hand firmly on Boyce's shoulder, offering a silent thanks for his understanding and forgiveness.

"I know the need that you had for the company of someone like Grenadine. I suppose the forest knew that and used it against you. Yet, it didn't have the power to turn us against one another!"

Lloyd felt ashamed of his behaviour of the last few days but he did believe that Boyce was genuinely sympathetic about it all. He also knew that Boyce was right about the Forest using fear against its trespassers.

Boyce finally looked away from the Forest and riveted his eyes on Lloyd.

"Your father told me about Charnan." he admitted to Lloyd. "I can't tell you how very sorry I felt about that. That's the only reason that I am able to understand."

Lloyd's eyes glided down to his hands. "I began to fall in love with her." he confessed, remembering

how soft and smooth Grenadine's skin was to his caresses.

"She was very beautiful ... too bad she was a gremlin."

"She was a lycanthrope." Lloyd corrected. "In ancient times they called her kind, werewolves!"

"Whatever she was, Lloyd, I will never dismiss myths or legends after this trip."

Far across the canyon the winds carried the howling cries of the dogs that never made it to the bridge, in pursuit of the two men.

Through the telescope Boyce peered at the other side of the canyon at a scant few dogs that paraded back and forth, and then throwing themselves off of the cliff to join their dead comrades below. He passed the glass to Lloyd.

"The parts couldn't survive without the rest of the body."

Boyce listened and nodded at Lloyd's insight. It was personal to his friend, but Boyce understood the consequences of the dogs'suicide.

"Instead of living with the loss, knowing they would bare great loneliness, they decided to die rather than carry on by themselves."

Several hours after the sun rose high in the sky, the two continued south on their journey back to Pomperaque.

The next five days were relaxing and uneventful, in comparison to their trek through the forest. Many animals were seen along this path but none seemed hostile — to the men's relief.

They only had the one weapon left between them. Physically, they were becoming weaker with each meter that they travelled, but regardless of their discomfort, they relentlessly carried-on.

On their eleventh day of travel they came across a God-sent farming community where they replenished their food and water supplies.

There they spent the evening listening to tales of a once great nation before the great scourge of man. They already knew all the truth, but they didn't anticipate the stories events, and they both kept their knowledge to themselves.

They knew that Manguino's spies and his influence were already reaching into the hearts of little towns, such as this one.

A small skirmish broke-out in the town that night. It was all about the tales of the old ways, but Lloyd and Boyce laughed at the fisticuff like it was part of the story being told, and later graciously accepted an offer by an older man to spent the evening on his farm.

"The loft in my stable is dry and very warm." promised the old man.

Refreshed, with a new supply of food and water, they continued south until two days later they saw the Sedarin capital on the horizon of the Sedarin Plateau.

They spent the evening on a small mesa several kilometres from Sedara and the next morning they made their way into the heart of the city.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Entering the city, Lloyd refreshed for Boyce the details and customs that were peculiar to the Sedash.

"They're hermaphrodites, but some exhibit qualities that are more inclined to one, or other, sex to which we are accustomed."

"How can you tell which is which?"

"You will be able to tell." Lloyd grinned. "They wear obvious clothing, and the two distinct types do carry themselves in a noticeable manner. Plus their title will be the give-away. Those hailed as 'Mas', in their name are the more masculine type. Those that are the more feminine are addressed as 'Dam'."

Lloyd recounted the basic formalities of custom for Boyce and explained that these people were not known to be very hostile. Yet, just as they neared the city centre they were surrounded by a dozen of the city's Eminent - the palatial security force.

"You are not of our people!" accused one of the guards, pressing the tip of their lance up against Lloyd's throat. The others did the same to Boyce.

Surprised by this, the two men stared at the main guard, and expressed their displeasure at the aggressive halt of their path to the palace.

Lloyd took the point of the lance into one of his hands and nonchalantly moved it away from his throat, then cleared it before he spoke.

"We are from Besten. We have permission to pass through your beautiful city!" he said.

"We know nothing of such a thing!" yelled the main guard, then ordered. "Follow!"

"They are 'Mas'?" Boyce guessed.

"Yes!" confirmed Lloyd, as the guards took their supplies from them.

"No speaking till you are given permission!" ordered the guard.

The two men began to follow the lead guard but were stopped momentarily by another one who ripped the belt case from around Boyce's waist.

They were escorted to the palace of the Sedash ruler, Mas-Trephor.

Under a strict watch, they were forced to sit for several hours. That was to be their wait for an audience with the great ruler of Sedara.

During the lengthy wait to see Trephor, there was a Dam that brought to them some food and drink. The guards refused to let her through at first, but then as if they had no choice, allowed her entry to see the two men. She served each one individually but said nothing to them.

The men glanced at one another when she handed them some goblets of drink.

"Don't drink it, yet!" Lloyd whispered.

He took Boyce's goblet and took a sip from it, then soon after took a gulp from his own.

"Can't be too cautious!" Boyce whispered back at him and the Dam hermaphrodite smiled.

"I assure you both that the drinks and the food are quite safe. If you do not believe me let me drink."

Lloyd examined his server. From the slight form he guessed sixteen years of age, and from the look of those bright green eyes, he soon nodded to Boyce that he could drink.

"I am Dam Lehnar. I am the Dam offspring of Mas-Trephor."

She bowed her head to the men and Lloyd introduced himself and his friend. He told her that they hailed from Besten, but didn't burden her with much more.

The response excited her because she had heard many interesting stories about that fantastic city and it was always her wish to one day attend the Blaisaman there.

"My apologies for your detention. I will go now to Trephor and ask that your petition be expedited."

"It would be our greatest appreciation if you did so, Dam-Lehnar."
Boyce kindly smiled at her.

She smiled back at him then turned and hurried down the long hallway adjacent to the room in which they were being kept. In a very short order a page entered the room and summoned the two men to appear before Mas Trephor.

Lloyd was beginning to realise why these people were behaving unlike the reports of their non-hostile ways. They had arrived in Sedara at the time of the month when the major part of the population was in their phase of inconceivability; as relative to their menstrual cycles.

It was during this week-long period of time that was usually set aside for public exhibitions. Prisoners and slaves were violently beaten and raped, and even killed during those festival days. These violations became

a part of the Sedash culture, where they tried to display their superiority over the one-sexed humans.

Trephor, as the ruler, usually molested the first prisoner of his choice, so opening the week-long

celebrations.

Throughout the regular times of the month, violations took place regardless, since the Sedash had found great pleasure and entertainment in the inflicting of discomfort on their subordinates. The reports of their non-hostile ways were less than accurate.

Gallant gentlemen as they were, self-taught in the presentation to those who are royal, they both went down upon one knee as they bowed to Mas Trepbor.

"Stand!" Trepbor's voice cut like a blunt knife through old leather, and although it had an underlying female quality, its hoarseness made both Lloyd and Boyce assume that the voice was practised into being more masculine over the years.

They rose and faced Trepbor, still remaining quiet.

"You are handsome men. We welcome you to our court of Sedara. We ask you stay and rest with us before you continue on your journey." Trepbor stopped for a moment then leaned forward on one elbow, letting a portion of his wrinkled breast show through the lynx wrap that he wore. "Where are you two lovely men going?"

"Gothal, your majesty! We are scholars from the Blaisaman at Besten, called to Gothal to teach the children there — in the ways of alchemy and medicine." said Lloyd.

Boyce stood there quietly not reacting to anything that Lloyd said.

Lloyd continued. "And may I, also, modestly add that we are quite proficient in the arts and in literature."

Dam Lehnar was seated to the left of Trepbor, at all times, and she stared at Lloyd with a warm and affectionate eye. She was displaying attraction to him since the first time that she saw him. Now, with her believing that he was a scholar for the Bestenese Blaisaman, she was sure that she loved him.

"We were to be allowed safe passage through your lovely city, Mas Trepbor. There is an agreement between our two nations." Lloyd continued.

"Yes, friends. There was an agreement but we were not told who was to pass through here, or where they were going. You may rest here for a day or two, if you care to, and you will be escorted to our southern perimeter." Trepbor was being quite congenial. "Until then, anything that you desire you may receive at your request!"

Boyce bowed his head slightly to Trepbor never removing his eyes from the leader's face as he thanked him.

Lloyd bowed also and Trepbor gave them a dismissing nod.

"Escort our friends to the state-room!" he commanded to the guard.

When they exited the royal hall, Trepbor called to another guard and whispered to him.

"Do not let them out of the state-room. I want them here for the festival the day after tomorrow!"

Dam Lehnar's comely face lost its radiant gleam when she realised that her father was truncating the agreement signed with Besten.

"They are beautiful and smart men. The prime specimens of their kind, perfect for opening this month's celebration."

Lehnar was panicky and afraid for Lloyd and his companion. She knew that at the celebration they would be tortured and most probably killed.

"Trepbor?" Lehnar pleaded with her father. "Do not hurt these two men."

"I cannot permit them to live, Lehnar. They are dangerous and they are men. They lie like demons and would sooner cut out your heart than to give you a nice greeting."

"But one pleases me, father." said Lehnar.

"Which, my dearest — the young king or his faithful teacher?"

"Young king?" Lehnar was astonished by what she heard.

"Yes, Lehnar. That young man is a king. He is called Boyce Loebh. He carries himself like a powerful leader, and that older one — he is a brilliant man, but not a scholar. The Bartletts are leaders in Besten — not students of knowledge." he told her.

"Bartlett pleases me, my dear parent. Will you spare him for me?"

"I will give him to you my sweet daughter. My designs are for the young king — that one possessed this remarkable weapon!"

Trephor took from his lynx wrap a small device. It was Boyce's laser gun. He turned to Lehnar and showed it to her.

"Scholars do not carry such things on lengthy journeys. They just use their minds to defend themselves."

He lifted the gun towards the door, at the other end of the royal hall and fired a burst of the electrophore. The stone doors blew off their hinges and crumbled into dust.

"Yes, indeed. I do so want that young Loebh!"

"And, Bartlett?" pleaded Lehnar.

"He is yours. Do with him, as you will!"

The men had bedded early, after taken into the state-room by the guards.

Aside the fact that the men had fallen asleep early, they didn't wake up until noon.

Now, during their first day of stay in Sedara, Boyce and Lloyd weren't aware that they were being held captive. They slept much of the morning away and relaxed most of the afternoon and evening. they didn't care to leave their chamber and when they requested something to be given to them, their request were carried out without a word.

The following day found the men waking early and by noon they were beginning to feel restless.

They tried to leave their state-room but the guards just asked them if they could bring something to them. But what the men wanted was to just go outside and walk the city. It didn't take long for them to realise what was happening to them.

"It seems like Mas Trephor intends to keep us here.!" Lloyd had said to one of the guards, but received no reply.

It was to their fortunate circumstance that Dam Lehnar had come along and caught what Lloyd had said.

"My dear Mr. bartlett, you are not being confined." she said to him, in a soft tone of voice suggesting sincerity. "Here, walk with me and I will show you our gracious city."

"Thank-you, Dam Lehnar!" Lloyd accepted her invitation but before he left he moved close to Boyce and whispered to him that the Sedash knew who they were.

Boyce responded with a nod and motioned for him to go with Lehnar.

Throughout the day and evening, Dam Lehnar escorted Lloyd to various parts of interest in the city. Many of the sights that she showed him dated back to the time of the first colony of hermaphrodites that established a settlement on the Sedarin Plateau.

In the late evening Lehnar took Lloyd to the theatre and they watched a very graphic account of the Sedash becoming a great and powerful people in their region. There was much violence and bloodshed.

Lehnar sat very close to Lloyd during the evening. He noticed it immediately and prayed that another situation would not develop with her as it did with Grenadine. He also did not feel sexually inclined towards Lehnar, even though she was predominantly feminine and was generally speaking, pleasant to the eye.

Shortly after midnight Lehnar took Lloyd back to the palace. They continued to stroll through the gardens where she was showing Lloyd the various statues that dotted the path. All were of hermaphrodites in erotic poses. She was hoping that he would become interested in her by what he saw. The opposite was true.

"I must thank you for your kindness, Lehnar. Boyce and I appreciate the gracious hospitality that you and your father have extended to us during our stay." Lloyd was starting to become diplomatic. He wanted the stroll to end soon because he was afraid that Lehnar would begin to expect something from him that he was incapable of giving to her. "If you ever come to Besten, it is my hope that you will enjoy yourself as much as I have!"

He thanked her and she began to melt for him. The tone of his voice, expressing his gratitude and trust, made her want him all the more. She had also become very sad, knowing what Trepkor had planned for the both of them.

"I feel that I love you, Lloyd!" she announced to him.

He tried to keep any emotion from showing. He tried not to give her any impression of his feelings in regards to her declaration.

"I am very flattered, Dam." he finally replied.

She looked at him as they walked back towards the garden entrance to the palace, and before entering she took his hand. She kissed him on the cheek then asked him a question that made him feel very uneasy.

"Would you mind it very much if you were to live in my city?"

Lloyd wasn't at all perplexed by her question. It was a clear invitation and it clearly displayed her intentions towards him.

He slowly turned away from her resuming his way to the state-room.

"Besten is my home." he answered her. "My family and friends are there. You do understand?"

"Yes. I understand. It seems that you pure humans will never accept our kind!" she said.

"Please, Lehnar ... don't speak that way. Man is strange in his ways. I suppose that is why the world is, as it is. We all have our own peculiarities and these are what set all people apart. With some this creates love. With other people, only hate."

She took all her view of him as he spoke and she wished that he was a Sedash, like herself.

"I don't hate the Sedash, and I do like you." he resumed. "But because of our physical differences I would have difficulties in giving you the love that you seek."

She let her head tip forward, her chin resting on her chest. She understood exactly what Lloyd meant.

"You are attractive, Lehnar. You will find someone else. That person will be much better suited for you than I could ever be."

She glanced at the state-room door as they finally reached it.

"Tell me, Mr. Bartlett ... is that young man a good king?"

Lloyd didn't respond. His eyes were enough to question her about how she knew who they were.

"My father knew the both of you from the very start. The young one carried himself with great nobility, and you always look to him for approval." she continued to reveal to him her knowledge of them.

Lloyd quietly laughed as he answered her. "Do you really believe that if my friend were a King that we would surely travel the trade route by caravan, rather than travel by foot?"

"My father taught me, methods can often be misleading." she said. "Then there is that strange and powerful weapon that your friend carried. It is not the compliment of an intellectual."

Lloyd took Lehnar's chin in his hand and gazed deeply into her eyes.

"You certainly are an inquisitive one!" he said to her, trying to sound praising. "We will talk more of this tomorrow. I will then explain to you who we are. Now it is late and we both better get some rest."

She smiled with acceptance and Lloyd kissed the back of her hand.

She left him as he entered the state-room and realised for the first time since he was standing with Lehnar that there were no guards. He momentarily became concerned for Boyce's safety. He looked about the dark room until he saw him reclined upon one of the divans.

Boyce was still in the state-room. It was obvious that he had been there all this time without being bothered, but it mildly confused Lloyd that Boyce didn't notice that he was left unguarded.

He quietly shut the door to the room and began to remove his tunic. It was then that he noticed, under the crack of the door, light and the movement of feet.

One shadow crossed the light, but only one.

He bent down and looked along the floor under the crack of the door and saw the callused feet of one guard on each side of the door.

Lloyd now knew for certain that they were no longer as safe as he hoped they were.

He quietly went over to Boyce and touched him on the shoulder.

Boyce got up quickly and before he had a chance to say anything, Lloyd hushed him.

"We're in danger, Boyce." he whispered.

"I know!" Boyce replied then closed his eyes in sleep again.

Lloyd was surprised by the answer but he remained quiet.

Boyce was capable in observing dangerous situations. Afterall, he noticed the problem with Grenadine so Lloyd now trusted him all the more.

"We have been watched every moment since we arrived here. There are a few guards below our window and tonight, at the theatre I overheard some of the Sedash speak of their festival." Boyce's keen senses picked up much as Lloyd discovered in his whisper.

"We have at least two guards at the door!" Lloyd informed him and then told him about Lehnar's mention of their suspicions about Boyce being king.

"They have rescinded the contract!" Boyce stated and Lloyd nodded affirmatively.

"What now, Boyce?"

Boyce eased back and looked at the shadows dancing on the ceiling.

"Festival begins tomorrow night." Boyce started. "That gives us several hours to sleep. This is my suggestion, for now."

"Sleep?" echoed Lloyd, questioning.

"If we're to run tomorrow, we don't want to run tired." said Boyce.
"You taught me that!"

He smiled at Lloyd and wished him an easy and fulfilled sleep, and both quickly nodded off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It wasn't until mid-morning when Lloyd and Boyce finally awoke.

Boyce stretched and went to the window, catching sight of several guards marching back and forth, occasionally looking up at their window.

Boyce smiled at Lloyd and pointed down to the ground.

He went back to the table and sat down.

"Well, Lloyd! What should we eat?"

Lloyd smiled at the ease by which Boyce took the situation and he leaned over the table to him.

"You're calm enough to eat?" he asked.

"We need strength for later. So, while we still have this mock service from these people, we should

accept it in our own mock way.

Lloyd grinned from ear to ear then went to the door and opened it. He thrust his head into the hallway and told the astonished guards to bring some food and drink to the room.

It would be very difficult to leave the room this day. They had to wait until dark before they could try anything but dark was many hours away.

Dam Lehnar came around in the afternoon dressed in a snug, short white dress with open shoulders, and she sat about with the two men for several hours listening to Lloyd making up more details about who they were and where they were going.

Finally, Lloyd took her hand and told her that all that they had told her was nothing but lies. He told her that they were sorry for lying to her but it was a matter of their safety and need to stay alive.

Then came a want for a favour.

"You told me the other night that you loved me? If you do, let us go. Help my friend and me to escape the festival opening tonight." he asked her.

"How do I help? My father has me watched, too!"

"Try to get our supplies to us and before the guards come, to take us to the stages, divert their attention and we will try to make our way out of the city."

"I may be able to get most of your things." she promised them. "I can't recover your weapon, however. My father carries it with him."

"We don't care for the weapon as much as we care to take our leave from the city." said Boyce.

There was silence in the room for a moment and Lehnar soon stood up.

"I promise you both that I'll see what I can do!"

With this Lehnar left the state-room and the two men sat back and waited.

Sunset was just a couple of hours away and Lehnar had been gone since the thick of the afternoon.

They were worried that she either couldn't get their supply packs or she went against them by telling her father about their plans.

Regardless of their anxieties, however, they waited for her to come back to them.

As the sky began to darken and the hours quickly gained speed, and Boyce and Lloyd became more restless and nervous. However, their long agitated wait was rewarded, for Lehnar had finally come back to their room with just one of their packs. The pack was Lloyd's and much of what was inside was still there. Only the telescope and its case was gone but the change of clothing and the maps were still inside.

Lloyd kissed Lehnar and thanked her.

Boyce had also kissed her hand.

"Thank you so very much, Dam Lehnar!" gleamed Lloyd.

"There are no guards at your door. I told them that I will watch you both and that you would still think that they were outside the door." she said to them. "Leave the palace through the garbage chutes and make your way in the shadows of the fire alley."

"Thank-you for your help, Lehnar." Boyce said graciously and she smiled.

"That alley will take you to the southern plateau and don't stop until you have reached the Divider's Ridge. My people still stop their pursuit there, if they will follow you at all."

"You are as helpful as you are beautiful, Dam Lehnar!" Lloyd complimented her.

"Take care, my friends!" she said, and the men made their way out of the room and down the hallway to a closet door, and they found that they inside of the closet had no floor.

Lehnar came out of the room and after Boyce, and Lloyd, jumped into the hole, she closed the door behind them then went to her own room.

They hit bottom in a pile of rotting fish.

"This stinks!" Boyce acknowledged.

They looked around themselves trying not to breathe as they saw the mouldy pieces of bread and meat and other food-stuffs that have been down there for a good lengthy time, which only God could know for certain.

They exited the garbage stores and found themselves in a narrow passage with an open ceiling.

This must be the fire alley that Lehnar spoke of, they thought, and bent down low, they slowly but steadily made their way down.

A quarter-hour later they were at the end of the alley, and to each side of them they saw the walls of the city extending in a forbidding manner.

It was very dark now and only the stars were giving the men enough light to run by.

The plateau spanned kilometres before them, and in the distance they saw the small rise that Lehnar called the Diviner's Ridge.

They ran and kept running. Silently they covered countless meters of ground with each breath that they took.

They had to make it quickly to the ridge but they also had to watch the ground for holes and crevices. If one, or both, were to fall into one of them, they would surely be caught and returned to Sedara.

Behind them they now heard a great commotion and the city of Sedara became lit up like a sun.

Trephor was looking for them and they knew it. They were both tired, almost to the point of expiration but they wouldn't stop, lest they be caught.

It was very dark, and although the stars shone enough light to guide them to their destination, they couldn't tell very well if they were being chased by Trephor's army.

Sedara, behind them, emitted substantial light to produce silhouettes of anyone following them, but because of the size of the outer walls of the city, the two men couldn't see their pursuers until they were almost upon them.

Their hearts beat heavily within their bodies.

The pounding was hard and they soon wondered if their hearts were moving around in their bodies. First their chests throbbed, then the sensations moved to their stomachs and legs, then into their necks and head.

Over and over they were becoming weary and they felt like only the beating of their hearts had been pumping their legs the few extra kilometres to the rise.

Boyce looked back and then saw that they truly were being pursued.

With heavy breaths that wheezed and gagged he told Lloyd that they were being chased, but Lloyd kept his head about his and was steadfast.

"Just a little further, my friend!" he urged.

"I'm with you!" Boyce assured him, in three short gasps.

With strength summoned from the deepest recesses of their souls, they began to run faster and steadier, and the ridge that was once distant began to move closer and closer with each

successive stride that they took.

Behind them, the light of Sedara shrank and the stars revealed a small cloud moving in the same direction as the men.

The cloud was Trephor's army. Some were on horse-back but the major part of it was made up of infantry, running as the men ran.

The faster that Boyce and Lloyd had run, the lesser ahead they thought that they were going.

Lloyd turned his head for an instant and saw the small hermaphrodite army, in hot pursuit, gaining

ground with every second that expired.

In his heart Boyce prayed that they could make the crest of the ridge before they passed-out, and there it was. The ridge.

"Oh God, lend us strength!" he gulped to himself.

The sounds of horses and feet grew louder and louder. The hermaphrodites were nearly upon them. Abruptly the men lost the sounds of the army as they lost their footing and they plunged into a drop in the ground, then lost consciousness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When they came to the sun was already high in the sky.

On his back, Lloyd looked up at the sheer face of a cliff some dozen meters in height and the way that he now felt, he knew that the climb up would be difficult.

Boyce was lying on his stomach and he was regaining consciousness, too. He soon tried to push himself up off the ground and this he tried a few times.

Lloyd heard him finally stagger to his knees and he called to him.

"Boyce!" he said. "Are you hurt?"

"No — just a little sore!" he replied.

"Look at that!" Lloyd pointed to the cliff and upwards.

Boyce looked at it then he said the same thing pointing in the opposite direction.

Lloyd looked and there he saw rolling mountains and shrubs and deep gullies of rock. What he saw was the tail end of the great Krolalin Mountain Range that swung down from the north to the south-west.

They made it over the Divider's Ridge, and the Sedash troops did not pursue them.

Still feeling somewhat exhausted, Lloyd and Boyce didn't eat anything when they awoke. They saw that it was late in the morning and they still had a long way to go before reaching Pomperaque.

They kept their pace steady as they headed south, keeping to the ridges along the route which they were taking so as not be vulnerable to possible ambushes if trapped in one of the dry river beds.

The sun was beating down on them and they found the heat very intense and uncomfortable; yet, between the Dark Forest and Sedara, it was a welcomed blessing of peace to them.

They gained a good distance as they walked and observed the nature around them; amazed at God's handiwork.

Boyce saw a black bird flapping from tree to tree. He wondered if it was a crow, having seen a couple other crows throughout the journey, and when he heard its mocking caw, he knew it to be so.

"Lloyd?" Boyce began. "Do crows travel in groups, pairs or singularly?"

It was an odd question, thought Lloyd, but he did see the crow and he knew that so did his friend.

"I really don't know!" he admitted.

"Do you think it could be the same crow from the mine?"

Lloyd shrugged, not caring one way or the other.

The day slowly passed by while they hiked through the countryside, and night was only a few hours away.

Boyce had told Lloyd that it was to their benefit to stop this day's travel early and rest longer for tomorrow's walk.

On his advise, they stopped beside a trickling brook and built a small shelter and a fire, and had their first meal of the day.

They were both tired but they knew that they could not rest until they've reached Pomperaque, and indeed until Boyce regained his rightful position in Phoride.

They slept under the breezy, starry sky and were blessed with peaceful dreams that put them both apart from hate and struggle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

For the next two days the men took to walking quickly and for long periods of time, without any rest.

They would wake, have some food then head south to Phoride, and they wouldn't stop walking until it was almost pitch dark night.

They only had one pack between them and they took turns carrying it. Every several hours that elapsed, one would hand the pack to the other while they walked.

They were making good time and were covering long distances with each day that they walked.

They never stopped to eat food, they ate while they walked until they reached the Serpent Strip; the land of the leper race.

In the three days that Boyce and Lloyd travelled from Sedara, they covered over one hundred eighty kilometres (a remarkable sixty kilometres per day, of walking).

The men cast their eyes on the city of Palatka, sitting in the distance on the floor of the Serpent Strip.

It wasn't an impressive city, made up of squat clay buildings that were cube-shaped. Yet, there was something about the whole place that made Lloyd and Boyce feel very ill-at-ease.

Boyce thought that they felt that way because of the hermaphrodites' renegeing on their agreement passage, signed with Besten. He was afraid that the Palatkans would be the same way.

Lloyd was more optimistic about this leg of their journey. He told Boyce that he shouldn't jump to any conclusions about trusting the Palatkans. Nevertheless, Boyce was hoping to convince Lloyd to circle around the Palatkan territory. He argued that going around the Serpent Strip would only take an extra day's journey, but he believed it would be peaceful, as-well-as uneventful. His other argument was the notion that they could replenish their supplies with wild fruit and they could kill game for food, along the way.

Lloyd finally agreed to Boyce's prodding suggestions and seeing that his judgement for such things, throughout the course of this trek, was indeed good.

Off to one side of the rock mound on which they stood they found an old lion's den. There they secreted their pack and they went to sleep.

The trip would be more or less uphill for a while since the Krolalin Range split into two parts; a smaller chain running all the way south to Pomperaque and its three rises of land surrounding it: Bimini Hill, Canon's Butte and Mount Benitar.

They knew that they were close to their destination, now just a week's journey away.

They weren't going to take the chance that the Palatkans would turn on them, as well.

Tomorrow they would circle the strip, endeavouring to avoid further injuries and wear to their bodies.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It was in the morning during the men's second wave of sleep that was coming over them in the before-dawn hours, that a cawing shriek was heard coming from overhead.

The sun wasn't out yet, although it wasn't totally dark.

The men had, at least one hour of sleep left to them before they were to wake and make their way around the strip. At first they tried to ignore that squawking but it soon became so frantic and intense that they could no longer bare it.

Boyce's slight affection for the single crow he had seen flying around, during their journey, was quickly waning and he quickly sat up to see where it was and shoo it away.

He opened his eyes and saw six male figures standing around the opening of the den.

"Lloyd, we're surrounded!" Boyce screamed out to him and Lloyd quickly sprang to his feet when he saw them.

"Lloyd!" Boyce called out and Lloyd answered him quickly. Boyce continued. "This is getting ridiculous!"

"I would say so!" replied Lloyd. "We should've thought twice before charging our friends, here!"

The men took their capture in stride with the rest of their delays, and Boyce laughed.

"Under the circumstances I couldn't see being cordially invited."

One of the hunters poked Boyce in the ribs with the end of his club and Lloyd watched.

"I guess that means silence?" Boyce jested.

Lloyd and Boyce were quiet while the leper hunters took them into the heart of Palatka.

Hung in discomfort, they heard the sounds of life get louder until they saw buildings and people pass them on each side while they were carried deeper into the heart of the city.

The haul into the city finally ended and they were dropped to the hard ground, and plumes of dust lolled about their heads.

When the dust settled from in front of their faces they saw a pair of scabby and puffy, sandled feet before them.

Each man slowly leaned backwards as far as they could and looked up at the tall body of a heavy set man, dressed in plain-looking robes and he was fanning himself from the heat.

"Release them!" said the leper and several of the hunters cut the ropes and the two captives got up from the ground beating themselves clean from the dust in their clothing.

"Thank-you!" said Boyce.

"Yes!" echoed Lloyd.

They looked at one another for a long time, then the Palatkans that had them released spoke.

"I am Urre, ruler of this race!" he said then proceeded. "I will ask you why you attacked my men?"

Lloyd and Boyce glanced over at each other and Boyce spoke.

"We seek forgiveness for that aggression!" he said and the Palatkan ruler waited. "We slept on the hill and when we woke we saw your men. Unaccustomed to seeing Palatkans, we undertook to defend ourselves. We are sorry!"

Boyce finished and Lloyd felt ill because of Boyce's statement about the Palatkan's appearance.

Urre had an insulted expression and from behind him came a sedate and shy voice. It was a man's voice yet it was very gentle.

"Are you the travellers from Besten?" asked the man.

"Yes!" answered Lloyd. "I am Lloyd Bartlett and this is my friend and apprentice, Boyce Loebh."

"They are the ones we have agreement, to let pass through Palatka!" said the man.

"Hold your tongue, Munsen!" ordered Urre. "They had broken their agreement with their attack upon our people."

Boyce and Lloyd looked at one another, realising that they were in a predicament.

"Take them to their cells." ordered Urre.

Several Palatkans grabbed Boyce and Lloyd, and dragged them off to one side of the city, to the cliffs of the canyon where huge dungeon-like cells were made for Palatkan prisoners.

They were cold and dingy rock cubes, barren of anything on which to rest on and to keep warm with.

The cells smelled musty and there were unrecognizable things written on the walls and ceiling, and some were even seen on the floor when the layers of dust were kicked up by the men's pacing.

"You should never have said that we weren't used to Palatkan appearance!" Lloyd scolded Boyce then sighed.

"I was being honest with them!"

Lloyd put his hand on Boyce's shoulder and tried to console him, from his error.

"It's alright, Boyce. Maybe we can talk to Urre and see if we can apologise properly." He moved away and looked out of the hole in the rock door. "Until then, we should make the best of this place."

"It is so cool in here but outside the heat is blistering!"

"Wait until his evening. It'll be worse in here."

Lloyd came away from the door and leaned up against one of the walls and huddled himself into a ball.

"Better get some sleep now because it will be too damned cold to sleep later tonight!" Lloyd instructed Boyce and he went down on the floor and tried to sleep.

It was difficult but they finally managed to fall asleep and after sunset, Munsen came to them with offers of warm blankets and a hot broth of cooked fowl.

He called to them several times and Boyce finally got up and went to the rock door.

Lloyd also had gotten up and went to the door.

"I am Munsen, the high-priest of Life." he said to them. "I was told that you will be in our rituals of Life and Energy, after-tomorrow." Munsen told them.

"I will make a tough meal, my friend!" Lloyd promised to him.

"You know of our ways, then?" Munsen urged for clarification.

"Yes, we do!" Boyce said. "Would there be any way for us to appeal to Urre, to honour the passage agreement?"

Munsen looked down and shook his head.

"I am afraid that our Lord Urre had never intended to allow you passage."

Lloyd and Boyce glanced at one another and Lloyd sighed.

"You were right, Boyce!"

"I had brought for you blankets and hot broth to drink. Your cells will be unbearably cold by dark, and these should help!"

He pushed the blankets through the hole, followed by the large amphora of broth.

"I am truly sorry that it's not very much, but it is all that I could get for you!"

"At least we'll be more comfortable before we die!" Lloyd commented in a sarcastic tone of voice.

"Please don't!" pleaded Munsen.

"I am sorry!" Lloyd was apologetic, realising that this man was really and sincerely trying to be kind.

"Listen!" he told them. "Long before we had your Bestenese Emissary come to have us sign the agreement of safe passage, I had a dream-vision about it and about you."

Boyce and Lloyd eagerly listened to the man.

"I saw that Urre would not honour the agreement. Now, I set in motion a plan to throw him down from power if you did come and if you were captured. You came and you were captured."

"What is your plan, Munsen?" requested Boyce.

"I have many friends that are, at this very time, arming themselves for our attack tomorrow. If we succeed in destroying Urre's rule, you will be given supplies and be allowed to go freely, and in peace."

"What if the overthrow fails?" Lloyd had wondered listening to Munsen speak.

"I have other friends that will risk their lives to free you, if the rebellion fails."

"Why?" Boyce was confused momentarily and he needed to be given a reason why someone, who they didn't know, would die for their release.

"I had seen the doom and destruction of Palatka with your deaths, and so if you had but a hair harmed on your heads. Palatka must have peace with you, Boyce Loebh; yet, I don't exactly understand why?"

Munsen's reply fit into the men's understanding.

Somehow Munsen knew these prisoner's importance and he knew that their harm would mean the extinction of his civilization.

"We engage our uprising tomorrow. When you hear commotion and thunderous booming, keep low to the floor. We have found a way to make a burning substance that is explosive. It can shatter rock and kill."

"Please take care and may the true living God bless your victory."

"If we believed in Him, I would hope that it would be so!" Munsen said and before he left he told them that he would try to see them once more before the battle, and then he left them.

"He has a leader's compassion!" Boyce stated.

They wrapped themselves up in the blankets given to them and they drank the broth.

They fell sleep and the blankets helped to keep some of the chill from them and they managed to get some sleep, though uncomfortable as it was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A beam of dusty light shone into the oubliette of the murky rock vault in which the men were being kept as prisoners for tomorrow's ritual of Life and Energy. Some of the sun's rays moved across Lloyd's face and he turned his head away before he opened his eyes.

He gave a deep and hollow sigh that gurgled from the catarrh that settled in his chest, from the night spent on a cold and damp floor.

He opened his eyes and watched the sunshine glisten off the frosty rime that painted the walls and ceiling of the cell.

He gave Boyce a few pats on the back and he soon woke up in a similar condition.

"Do I look as bad as I feel?" he asked Lloyd.

"I could ask you the same!" he replied.

Lloyd slowly got to his feet, not a single part of his body escaping the rheumatic cracks that such adverse sleeping conditions bring upon one.

Soon, Boyce attempted to stand up, too and his condition was not much different than Lloyd's.

He let out an exasperated gasp as he stood up, half hunched-over.

"Oh!" he moaned. "You would think that Palatkans would want to eat healthy people!"

"I could use another ewer of that hot fowl-broth, that Munsen brought for us last night." Lloyd mentioned as if hoping that someone would hand him some through the hole in the cell door.

"My sentiments ..." echoed Boyce.

Both of them simultaneously began to bend and move their arms frantically, and then their legs. They didn't miss a part of their body that ached. They had to exercise themselves or else the arthritic pains would never leave them.

Later, each of them took turns basking their chests in the rays of sunlight that penetrated into the cell and soon they were both able to breathe freer, and more easily.

"I'd rather be eaten than spend another night in here!" Boyce offered the statement as something easy to think about, but it turned to annoy Lloyd's own thoughts and fears about it all; he had taught Boyce about the fact that the Palatkans cut up and ate their victims alive.

He still kept that fact to himself, needing Boyce's strength of ignorance to keep himself from going mad.

The sun was higher in the sky and they waited for someone to come and bring them food, assuming that prisoners were also allowed to eat.

Then their relief finally came.

A hooded Palatkan priest walked up to the vault door and gave each of the men a small pail of broth and a long stick of bread.

"Munsen conveys his best wishes and a hardy appetite." said the hooded man then he came

closer to the hole and whispered to them. "We shall let you go free very soon, friends. Do not worry!"

The message was brief and strong, and with the wholesome food given them, they believed that they soon would go free.

The silence was disquieting in the city and Boyce and Lloyd both knew that it was now or never, that the uprising would be put into action.

They waited eagerly and they could see that the day was slowly losing time, the sun already disappearing overhead from their view.

Then it happened. Near the centre of the city, a plume of hot red fire and smoke of purple, black and blue, rose in force up into the sky, with the roar of a hundred thousand thunders.

Screams soon followed the sounds of buildings crumbling and the men watched the citizens of Palatka running about aimlessly, caught up in the uprising between Urre's army and the high-priest's advocates and friends.

On the flat top of one of the cubed clay buildings stood Munsen and he hollered into the midst of the city towards Urre's palace.

"Give us honesty, purity and freedom! Give us your life and we shall spare your families!"

He lifted a cylindrical package into the air and put an ember to it, then threw it.

Momentarily, a great whoosh was heard and dust and rock spewed all about the area and towards the cells, to where Lloyd and Boyce watched.

They dove to the floor and covered their heads, but in short order looked up at one another.

"That's why he told us to keep down!" yelled Boyce.

"I presume so!" Lloyd returned.

They looked to the cell door and saw a hair-line crack running down the centre of it. Boyce touched the crack then pointed to it after he nudged Lloyd with his elbow. Lloyd followed to where Boyce pointed and nodded his head.

"We'll be free ... " Lloyd began. "providing we have a couple more blasts like that one, but let's get our backsides to that wall and keep close to the floor!"

"As Munsen said!" Boyce grinned as he pointed out the obvious. "If we had our electrophore-lasers, we'd be out of here a long time ago!"

Lloyd lost the last few words that Boyce said. Outside their cell was another blast. This one was louder, and this time they heard the door start to give-way.

Lloyd crawled towards the wall and stood up, edging close to the window to look out. From his vantage he could see scores of Urre's archers shooting at their enemy, just below the palace battlements.

Screams, explosions and sounds of stampeding people and animals continued through the afternoon and evening, and finally, very late into the night, the panic seemed to subside then totally fade away.

The only sounds left were that of burning buildings and cracking rock, and the sounds of the Palatkan multitudes crying and moaning.

The battle was over and the men wished to hear news of Munsen and whether his uprising was a success. They were up on their feet and both peered out of their cell window. They watched the city burning and the people's attempts to bring their small holocaust under control.

It didn't happen right away, but following a quarter hour watching the scene, both had realised that there was no sound except for the physical movement of the citizens. No one cheered.

There was no one making speeches or announcement. There was no one about shouting direction for the people to mount their rescue of the city, from fire.

The fires were the priority, and the bandaging of the seriously hurt in the fighting.

The sky was illuminated by the blaze of the fires. When the night gave way to the sun's morning rays, there was hardly notice that a new and majestic day had begun.

For many hours, Lloyd and Boyce kicked at the hair-line crack in the cell door but couldn't smash it in two. They couldn't get free and in the quickly approaching daylight they knew that there was no hope.

Soon after the sun rose in the distant end of the Serpent Strip, and the two men were morosely seated on the dusty cell floor, the door fell open and there before them stood three Palatkans.

The two young women each had a horse by its' reigns, in one hand, and a large travel pack slung around their arms.

The same young man, who had brought for them the previous morning, stood before them now with a golden goblet of wine in each hand.

He handed a goblet to each man and they held them for a moment, silently waiting for something to be said.

At the edge of a burned out clay building, a crow was picking at a piece of garment showing under a pile of large rocks.

It didn't caw or flap its wings nervously, but Boyce had seen it just the same, and he pointed to it, never saying a word.

In the eye of the young leper man, a tear was forming until it was finally born onto his cheek and trickled into the dry crusts of his face. He kneeled before the two men.

"That was our friend and leader, Munsen. His own sacrifice assured, for us, the death of Urre." he told them and they listened, very saddened.

"What is your name, my friend?" Boyce asked him.

"I am called, Virgil!" he answered.

"Rise up, Virgil, and rule this place with peace and compassion. See life and all its energies for what they really are. Make your own power and forces of life, through love, compassion and trust ... and never again will you need to eat human flesh in hopes of attaining it all."

Virgil rose to his feet and looked at the two men, in such a way as one master would look with respect to another.

"We drink to Munsen and his vision of peace." hailed Boyce and he lifted the goblet to his lips to drink.

Lloyd touched his forearm but Boyce shook his head slightly, then nodded at Lloyd, to drink as well. Lloyd complied with his request.

"With the trust I show to you, in drinking this, which may otherwise have been poison, so it shall be a reminder of the trust that you will seek and find."

"With all the power given me through my promise to Munsen, I now let you and your friend go freely and in peace, through Palatka."

They bowed to one another and Virgil helped the men put the travel packs about their shoulders and then up onto the horses.

They pointed in a southern direction to a pass that lead up through the cliffs of the canyon but before they urged the horses on their way, Boyce turned to Virgil.

"The Palatkans truly are a beautiful people. May you multiply and become a truly great nation."

Boyce blessed his new and goodly friend then motioned to Lloyd to ride, and they kicked their heels into the horses and galloped towards the pass in the cliffs.

Behind them, Virgil and the two young women watched them ride away, and the crow that had picked at the rocks, lofted into the bluish skyway and soon disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

They rode the horses hard and steady, each day and in their five days of travel they managed to cover over seven hundred kilometres.

The last five days, since they left Palatka were the safest and easiest five days of travel since the day they had left Besten.

The horses were strong and they made good time. The few rests that they had along the way were enough rest for the horses, too.

Boyce was pleased that Pomperaque was soon within his grasp and Lloyd was pleased that Manguino would soon feel his death, like the common man that he is.

Ahead of them stretched the lush and friendly Joenine Forest.

Each man could still remember the glen from which Empal helped them escape to Virune, then on to Besten.

The beauty of Upper Phoride was just as Boyce had remembered it.

"I know my way from here!" he said to Lloyd as they slowly rode through the forest. "Shall we go to the entrance of the Blue Mansion's underground passage?"

"No!" Lloyd answered quickly. "It would not be safe and it may draw unnecessary attention to us."

"You are right." Boyce agreed. "We'll stop at Gothal for a while. I must see if the Abbey Mother from the Abbey of Our Holy Saint Mariot, is still alive."

"Is it wise to do so?" Lloyd questioned. "I mean, she may now be a spy for Manguino."

"Lloyd, she believes in the same God as we do. She always has and she dislikes Manguino."

Lloyd sighed and soberly warned Boyce. "You'd better be right, Boyce. We've come too far to be stopped now."

They rode some more and near the late afternoon of their fifth day out from Palatka, the two men spotted Gothal and its main, and most majestic monastery, the Abbey of Our Holy Saint Mariot.

It rose out of the ground like a living being. A refuge across the crystal River Clains, that crossed their path before them.

"There must have been rains here, recently." noted Lloyd. "The river has swelled some and is moving faster!"

"It's so lovely this way." was all that Boyce care to respond.

"That it is!"

They rode towards the river and slowly proceeded to cross it.

They were on the other side of the river and there they briefly stopped to take-in the beauty of their surroundings.

Suddenly, the horses beneath them were frightened and they bucked, without warning, and several men came out of nowhere, and proceeded to beat on Lloyd and Boyce.

In a nearby tree, was a crow, as dark as midnight, and it squawked and cawed when the men got to the other side of the river, and it watched the other men attack.

In frenzied excitement it eyed the struggle that took place at the river's edge, and its shrieks were echoing throughout the entire forest.

Caught unawares, and while weakened by their journey, the ambushers knocked both men unconscious and took all of their possessions, including their two horses, and their clothes. They left them both naked, lying unconscious and bleeding, half in the water and half on the river's bank.

The crow left the tree and went to where the two men were sprawled. It crowed and flapped its wings around Boyce's head, and began to tug at his hair with its shiny beak. Some bloodied hair hung from the crow's beak, but there was no movement from Boyce.

They lay in the water for some time until several women came walking along the river from Pomperaque, leading a cow.

The women were members of the Abbey. Three were abbey sisters, the full nuns, and with them walked two novices.

They were discussing the good fortune of their being gifted a cow by the Prominent, Miel, in the market that very morning. Then they heard the frantic crowing and one of the novices looked for the origin of the noise and saw Lloyd and Boyce, motionless at the river's edge.

She ran to the bodies and turned one over onto its back. Her eyes opened wide and she could not believe the beauty of this young, but badly injured man. She checked his body for broken bones and severe cuts. She did the same with the other body, taking the same care inspecting it until the other novice and the three nuns came to help her.

She returned to the gentle handsome man, the younger of the two. She put her ear against his muscular chest and sighed with relief when she heard his heart beating.

"This one is still alive!" she said as if relieved.

"This one, as well!" the others confirmed about Lloyd.

The pretty novice ripped her plain white dress and wet it in the river then wiped the young man's cuts and bruises.

He stirred but never came to.

The other novice ripped her dress, too, and rendered care to the other man. The third nun looked around, keeping a vigil in the event that those that did this to these two men might return and inflict further harm upon all of them. She held onto the rope that was tied around the cow's neck.

"We have to take these men back to the Abbey, my children!" the first nun told them.

The other non-avowed, with her big beautiful eyes, questioned the safety of doing such a thing but the nuns accepted taking the men back to Gothel.

The crow was still hopping around Boyce's body but the young novice didn't chase it away. She helped the other four women lift the men onto the cow and they took them back to the Abbey, inside of Gothel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

One day passed by and the men were still in an unconscious state, just as they were in part of the following day.

Since the late afternoon, when the five women found the men, the novice first to be at their care, stayed and watched over them — especially Boyce.

She counted away the hours while they just lay there, pale and unaware of existence.

It wasn't until the middle of the afternoon of this second day that Boyce stirred and the young novice was there. She wet a clean cloth and wiped the sweat from his head and face, and watched him slowly open his eyes. As she went to wipe his face once more, he took her hand into his own and felt its delicate softness.

"Can you hear me?" she asked him in a whisper.

"Yes!" said Boyce and he tried to get up but he couldn't.

"You will be alright soon, but now just relax."

He looked around the room, which he was in, and on a window ledge he saw the crow that he had been seeing since they left Besten.

He couldn't take his eyes off the novice and he touched her face once more.

"I am real!" she told him. "My name is Lilith."

"You are very beautiful, Lilith!"

She smiled at him.

She was happy that he liked her appearance because, since that day when she found him and his friend, by the river, she was in love with him.

"My friend?" he asked her.

"He is fine. Some sisters are looking after him!" she told him and he smiled, taking her hand.

"This is the abbey, then?"

"Yes!" she answered.

He held her hand and lapsed back into a deep sleep after sighing with a relieving breath.

"What are you called?" she asked him but he didn't reply.

She kissed his hand that clutched her's. She kissed him on the forehead, too, and stayed with him for another night.

Lilith was slumped on the floor beside the bed. She was asleep but she was still holding on to Boyce's hand.

Boyce stirred and opened his eyes.

He was sore all over and his head throbbed. He touched the small gash on the side of his head, with his free hand, then he became aware of the hand that he was holding. He looked down to where the pretty novice was, her face resting on the bed, like a sleeping angel waiting for a waking kiss.

He stroked her hair and her cheek until she, also, finally woke up and accepted his gentle caresses.

"How do you feel today?" she asked him, getting up off the floor and sitting at his side, on the bed.

"I can imagine how Grenadine feels!" he muttered.

"What?" she asked him but he never answered.

"You are Lilith?" he checked and she nodded. "I am Boyce!"

She smiled at him.

"Boyce!" she repeated. "That's a beautiful name!"

"In comparison to yours, Lilith, mine is but a name like barren dirt."

"I am flattered!" she thanked him with shyness.

"I, also! To wake to a beauty such as yourself is indeed a blessing from God."

"You have been unconscious for a couple of days now. Do you remember what happened?"

He looked around the room and saw a crow perched on the window sill outside.

"It was strange, but we crossed over the River Clains and I heard that crow making a racket." he told her and pointed at the crow. "Suddenly, several men came out of nowhere and the next thing I know I'm gazing into your lovely eyes!"

She took his hands and pressed them into her own.

"You'll be fine, in a day or so. Then you'll be well enough to get out of this bed and walk about."

A knock came at the door then it opened.

One of the sisters that helped to find the men brought into the room a fairly large tray full of food, and she helped Boyce to sit up for eating before she exited the room.

Lilith sat closer to Boyce and gently began to feed him.

"Are you hungry, Boyce?" Lilith inquired.

"Yes, I am!"

Boyce enjoyed the attention being paid only to him by this wonderfully beautiful girl, and as the day carried on and his feeding was done, she sat by his side and spoke with him about all manners of things.

In the late afternoon, when Boyce was telling Lilith about his life in Besten, the door of the chamber slowly opened and Lloyd walked in.

Boyce saw him and forced himself to sit up. He smiled. He was happy to see Lloyd and, at that moment, was also happy to realize that his trust in the women at the abbey was warranted.

Lloyd had his left arm in a sling and his open tunic revealed a bandaged chest.

"Did you hurt yourself, my friend?" Boyce asked him, sarcastically.

Lloyd smiled and he soon saw that Boyce had no bandages around him.

"How are you faring?" Lloyd asked him, looking at Lilith.

Boyce took Lilith's hand into his and smiled at her as he answered Lloyd.

"I am fine, but I was told I should rest for a day or so!"

"I was told the same!" admitted Lloyd. "But I am older and must keep moving lest I become immobile."

"Next time, we'll fly!" Boyce joked with his friend and they both laughed.

A nun marched into the room and put her hands on Lloyd's shoulders and turned him around to face the door.

"Out of bed, again! I did ask you nicely to stay in bed and rest. Didn't I? Now come with me!"

She nagged at Lloyd for leaving his room, obviously not being the first time he did so and both Boyce and Lilith laughed as they watched her parade him out the door.

"You have a strong friend in ... Lloyd, is it?" she said, making certain that she remembered Lloyd's name correctly.

"During times like these, one must be strong." he told her, putting his hand around her waist. "He is my right arm, and I am his!"

The crow was still outside the window but it was now no longer quiet. It squawked and pecked at the glass of the window pane and they stopped speaking and looked at the bird.

They were annoyed at being disturbed in such a manner but Lilith didn't show her aggravation.

"Your pet seems disturbed about something!" Lilith said to him.

"It's not my pet!"

Lilith became puzzled and told him that she and the other four women found it hopping around on the ground and on his back when they found them. They presumed that the crow was a pet and let it come to the abbey with them.

"Let it in!" Boyce told her and she slowly went over to the window and opened it, pushing the swinging pane enough to let the crow hop in.

It stretched its wings and cawed then flew right to Boyce and hopped around on his lap.

"It's a very strange bird, I think. I haven't seen many crows, only a few during my childhood, then I see this one throughout my entire trip from Besten." He told Lilith, about his odd feelings towards the bird and the sudden affinity that seems to have formed between them.

"Lilith, will you push that small table over here?" he requested to her and she didn't hesitate to do his bidding.

When she brought the small table to the side of the bed, he took the crow on his wrist and set it down on the table.

They talked and watched the bird make a joking spectacle of itself and this continued through to the evening when Lilith collected some of the dirty compresses that she used on Boyce when he was unconscious.

"I must leave now, Boyce. The Mother Abbes had given me chores to do when you are well enough to be let alone."

Boyce lost the smile that he had on his face. He rolled his eyes and gasped while he stretched out his hand to her.

"But, I'm not well, Lilith!" he cried to her, hoarsely, and she laughed at his sweet attempt to keep her near to him.

"You are a very silly man." she told him then went over to him and kissed him on the forehead. "You're sweet, too!"

"Will I see you later?" Boyce asked her in a solemn voice and he took her hand.

Smiled and nodded.

"You will be on your feet tomorrow and we can walk in the garden." she promised and he kissed her hand while he gazed right into her beautifully large brown eyes.

"Sleep easy and may your dreams be sweet!" she said.

"They will be sweet ... I will dream of you!"

Her heart was beating heavily and her quick breaths passed through her like burning spears when she made her way out of the room.

She felt uplifted, as if she was no longer of mortal body but of spirit. She knew that Boyce was beginning to feel for her; it was the same as she felt for him, at the river, and saw his face.

Inside the room, Boyce continued to stare at the doors through which Lilith exited and the crow beside him bounced up and down, flapping its wings and crowing in its unusual 'zoar-caw, zoar-caw' manner.

"She's a gem, crow!" Boyce spoke aloud and the crow continued its usual, strange squawk. "I am pleased to see that you agree with me."

He let the crow sit on his arm and he looked at it for a silent moment before it continued to caw.

"You are a strange bird, crow, and you sound strange, too. Shall I keep you as my friend?" he spoke to the bird as if he believed it could understand him, and the crow cawed back to him as it balanced itself on his arm. "Alright." Boyce continued. "You are now my new companion and my friend. Now, what shall you be called?"

He looked at the bird, in an odd way as if wanting the bird to tell him its name, but the bird just cawed at him: 'zoar-caw, zoar-caw'!

"Very well, crow. I will call you Zoro! Do you like that?"

The crow stopped cawing and bounced up and down on his arm.

"Now sleep, bird. We have a great day before us!"

He set Zoro on the table and he slowly sank down into the bed and fell asleep.

When daybreak came, Boyce didn't hesitate waking and getting out of his bed. He made his painful way to the window and looked out onto the majesty of Gothel. Below him many nuns were already awake and working on the vegetable gardens, and fruit groves. Over to one side was the flower and tree garden and there was a group of nuns maintaining its beauty through their trimmings and cultivating.

Lilith walked into the room and Boyce slowly turned around to greet her.

Zoro only looked at her when she came in. He was very quiet and squawked only once when he sensed someone at the door, but otherwise, he didn't make a ruckus.

She wheeled a small cart into the room, laden with a variety of foods for Boyce to dine on.

"Will you eat with me?" he invited her in.

"Yes, thank-you!"

They spent a long time eating breakfast then, when they were finished, Lilith had Boyce get

back on the bed and she looked him over once more to make certain that nothing was at fault with him.

"I'm just a little sore now, that's all. I can walk!" he informed her.

She helped him put some clothing on himself and she showed him around the abbey; through the school and chapel and through the library. There they heard Lloyd having an aggravated discussion with a nun, about the poet, Djenaud Smarte. This made Boyce laugh because he knew that Lloyd didn't think very highly of that particular poet.

Lilith knew that the opposite was true of Sister Rhonta and she could hardly keep from laughing, herself.

"Listen to them!" exclaimed Boyce.

"Does Lloyd dislike Smarte as much as Sister Rhonta admires him?" Lilith asked him.

"It certainly sounds like it!" he said then listened some more to the highly vocal discussion between his friend and the sister.

Soon, however, Lilith lead by the hand, to the garden and there they walked about for several hours and told one another some other about themselves then they sat on a marble bench in a cosy gazebo.

Boyce had fallen into a mutual love with Lilith and each of them were aware of it. Now, however, was the first time that they had voiced their feelings and no one else was anywhere in the garden to disturb them, accept for Zoro, quietly watching them from a tree top.

"I love you, Boyce!" Lilith revealed to him and he gently embraced her.

"I love you!" he also admitted, and they embraced each other's wanton bodies and kissed each other's lonely lips for the first time.

Their time together was brief and yet their love for one another bonded them together so strongly that their spirits became fused as one.

Boyce felt dishonest in keeping most of the truths about himself, from her, and he now decided to tell her every detail and account of his life, and why he came to Phoride.

Lilith also told Boyce more about herself revealing to her love that she was the daughter of the Laurentine Consul, Debran. To keep her innocent and safe of monastic validations, he left her at the abbey before going on to Pomperaque.

Boyce learned that this young man was more than just a beautiful, dark hair and dark-eyed novice, waiting to turn seventeen so that she may take her vows and become a full fledged nun of the abbey.

That was a wish of her father, Debran. The only way to save her from the lustful designs of some carnal coenobite at Halls, was to have her become a simple and uninteresting sister.

CHAPTER THIRTY

A week passed by and although Boyce and Lloyd had recuperated they didn't make plans to leave Gothar and its peaceful atmosphere. However, near the end of the second week, both Boyce and Lloyd were visited in their dreams, by the spirits of Brook Scullion-Blue and Dearborne.

To Lloyd, Brook's vision reminded Lloyd of his promise and his destiny to help Boyce attain his rightful place as the Lord Sovereign of Phoride.

Boyce's vision urged Boyce to leave Gothar and take Pomperaque and the rest of Phoride, away from Manguino. To that vision urged by Brook, Dearborne urged Boyce to hold Lilith close to his heart and to take her as his wife; his Lady of the Blue.

Boyce conveyed his dreams to his beloved Lilith and he asked her to be his wife.

With all he heart and spirit, she promised herself to Boyce, as his wife.

In the days following the proposal, Boyce and Lloyd made plans to enter Pomperaque and how they would begin their recruitment of the common people to Boyce's side.

The plans were finalised and two days before they left Gothar, the Mother Abbess married Boyce and Lilith, in a private ceremony performed at the tomb of Brook and Dearborne.

With all their love shared between each other in their consummation of marriage, Boyce promised to return for her when his duty was accomplished and his invasion of Phoride was successful.

He did not want to leave her and her heart couldn't let him go but Lloyd promised Lilith that he would watch out for Boyce and she somehow knew that Boyce would be safe.

Lloyd found it difficult to leave Sister Rhonta. Their utter differences of opinion towards Djenaud Smarte brought them close together to a point that resembled love for one another.

Although such things weren't permitted of the full ranking nuns, Rhonta gave Lloyd a kiss before the two left for the gates of Pomperaque, not very far away.

They were given their old clothes and some dirty travel packs full of clean clothing, food and two sacks full of copper and gold coins.

They looked like they travelled for years from some unknown place on the world, to Pomperaque.

On the morning of their fortnight's stay at the Abbey of Our Holy Saint Mariot, the men left the abbey for their short walk to Pomperaque.

The five women who brought them into Gothar also watched them leave and the Abbess Mother, Mariot, blessed them in their promised mission and its hoped-for success.

PART II: THE BIRTHRIGHT AND THE SCEPTRE

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Patches of wispy-like clouds passed over the moon, in the humid night sky.

Pomperaque was unusually quiet this night and the star-gazing Cardinal Orren had noticed it. He also felt ill-at-ease, this night.

With pale blue eyes he looked at the moon for most of the evening and after midnight he saw an odd sight in the northern skies. It was a vision that he did not want to accept. At first he thought that his tired eyes were causing the vision but the corresponding feelings that he had when he saw the strange sight, made him take notice, and he reported it to the Archbishop.

Orren was one of the most trusted Cardinals in Manguino's legion of coenobites. He had all the qualities of his late father, Cardinal Allen, and this was fitting, as he was the great sainted cardinal's eldest of thirteen sons.

Cardinal Orren had gained the favour of the Archbishop, not only because of his decent from Allen, but he had saved Manguino's life when some oppressed peasant attempted to kill him several years ago.

For his reward, Orren was given the command of Phoride's armies and he became somewhat of an administrator, in place of Manguino.

He resembled his father, Cardinal Allen, so closely that many were led to believe that when Allen died, his soul entered into the body of his first-born son, Orren. With this belief came Orren's high honours and unquestioned obedience from those around him. He was conscientious and he improved on Manguino's spy network, spanning the continent. He wanted to know anything and everything about the other states and kingdoms, realising that Manguino's concentration on producing progeny with Eckma left his rule and life vulnerable to hostility.

Now, Orren had never before played on his intuitive impressions concerning threats against the cleric rule, but this night had actually frightened him.

It was late when he went to call on the ArchBishop Manguino, finding him in his usual circumstance with Eckma — even that late at night — and being accustomed to it all, Orren didn't hesitate to reveal his vision to him.

He pounded on Manguino's chamber doors until he was told to enter and while he watched his master, and Eckma, in the glass pool, he paced around them recounting the details of his vision.

"I had been startled this evening by a sight in the sky, my Almighty!" Orren told him.

"What kind of sight?" asked Manguino while he sucked on Eckma's neck.

"I was watching the moon and from behind a cloud, I saw the Mons!" Orren revealed.

"Now how is it, Orren, that you hadn't seen the Mons when there was a personal threat upon me?" queried the ArchBishop.

"Mons is an omen of threat to all — not just to one. It's an omen of war. What's more, a great war. I was not the only man to see the Mons. Several others have seen them, too. Peasants and Prominants, and some of our own Monks saw them." Orren told Manguino.

Manguino took Eckma's breast from his mouth and he looked at Orren with annoyed eyes.

"Do the Mons tell of what kind of danger may befall us?" Manguino demanded. "If so tell me. If not, find out!"

Orren took all his strength to keep from showing anger against Manguino, then he spoke calmly.

"The Mons are a portent of doom and destruction, my ArchBishop. The visions came to us to warn us and to have us prepare for surprised aggression."

Manguino listened to Orren but didn't feel threatened by what Orren thought he had seen.

Manguino was certain that nothing would happen to his rule. Jessuum Benitar promised him before giving him the puzzling prophesy:

"Tell those of your court, the Prominants, if you will, but never is it to be repeated to you, for on that day when that request is done, so should it be the end of your rule in Pomperaque."

Manguino remembered and he told Orren about it, but Orren didn't believe in Jessuum Benitar's words.

"As long as I do not hear the prophets' words again, all will be well, and since I will not ask it to be read to me, I shall be safe." promised Manguino.

"Do you believe in a prophesy that may have no merit and dispel that which your most trusted servant, and others, have seen?" Orren was angered and spoke in a booming voice.

Manguino bobbed in the water and Orren just stood there. Both were quiet until Manguino came out of the water and wrapped a robe about himself.

"How did you see the Mons? Single, coupled, regimented?" Manguino requested to him to tell more of his vision.

"There were four separate apparitions, great one. Each was a knight of his own colour — black, red, white and ashen. Each rode on a horse of their same colour. They came from behind thin clouds, and made their way towards the city and its heart. Yet, as they reached the roof tops of the city, they vanished."

The account assured Manguino that nothing was amiss. He knew, as well as anyone, that doom only came if the Mons were seen to ride through the main streets of the doomed city.

He told Orren not to worry about the Mons, ensuring him that everything would be fine.

"We are safe, as long as we don't become stupid, Orren." Manguino calmed down.

"Could I be granted the privilege to study that prophesy that Jessuum gave to you? he made a small plea to Manguino and was to do so under the condition that he doesn't read the prophesy aloud!

Orren also asked Manguino for his permission to mobilize the Phoridene Army, as a precaution, but this he wasn't given to do because of Manguino's belief that they were under no threat of overthrow.

Orren left Manguino to continue his obligation with Eckma, and he was more disillusioned now, with Manguino's attitude, than what he was when he saw the Mons.

He never went to sleep that night. He had all his Generals meet with him in his own chamber, and with them, he decided to have the armies in battle-ready status, as a precaution.

Orren had never proceeded against Manguino's orders and better judgement, but this time it was unanimously agreed between his men that, to be safe, they should pay heed to the Angels of Mons.

The next morning was beautifully sunny and warm.

Lloyd and Boyce had walked for about two hours, from Gothal, before reaching the northern gates of Pomperaque. Pomperaque was truly different than they remembered it to be when they left it, some eleven years ago. There were hardly any horses and carts in the city. Most of the transportation was made up of large cumbersome cars, with wheels, that ran along metal tracks.

The city was highly mechanized and all the machines were powered on electrical energy, and there were few things in the city that were old. Everything was newly built and only a few years old.

Some of the few older buildings in the city were the Halls Cathedral and the rundown, and abandoned Blue Mansion. Also, the town square was just a renovated version of the old square and the men walked through it remembering the way it used to be.

At the very spot where Brook and Dearborne were executed there was a marker made of precious metals and it was put there by the citizens of Pomperaque who never wanted to forget the two greatest people that had ever lived as Phoride's elite.

It wasn't a large marker. Manguino had forbidden that. He also forbade the writing of specific sentiment, or the placing of names. All the marker said: "May they be forgiven in the next life."

Zoro bobbed up and down while sitting on Boyce's shoulder and it cawed in a frantic manner. Due to its behaviour, then men moved away from the monument and off to one side of the town

square where there were many vendors busily selling items such as food and clothing, jewellery and home-stuffs.

The men slowly walked from kiosk to kiosk and they checked some of the goods being sold until they finally came upon the kiosk where Empal had his goods displayed.

The market brought back memories for Boyce; remembering the fun that he used to have when he was out with Dearborne.

Empal's kiosk was in the same place as it had always been. This brought for Boyce some degree of security and stability, and it also helped his confidence to go ahead with the plans that have been made for his retake of Phoride.

Empal had seen the two men and was now finally relieved from the worry that he had for them throughout the passed month, since they left Besten.

He knew that they were supposed to have arrived in Pomperaque long ago, having taken the shorter

route, but he knew that there had to be some good reason and he was certain that they would be told to him.

He saw the strange crow perched upon Boyce's shoulder and he saw how dirty and ripped their clothing was. Other than their wandering appearance and their stale smell, Empal thought to himself the traveller's prayer of thanks, to God.

They came up to Empal's stall and they stayed around there for a while choosing fruits that were the ripest and biggest for their price.

"You have good fruit here, old man!" said Lloyd, as he picked up an apple and bit into it.

"Would you trade or pay money, for that?" asked Empal as he pointed at the apple.

Zoro jumped down onto the stall, from Boyce's shoulder, and started to pick at some grapes and corn. Empal waved it away and he looked somewhat annoyed.

"We'll have that, which my bird began to eat, and a kilo of apples, and two pomegranates!" said Boyce.

"I don't wish to sound less than trusting, sirs, but I would care to see my payment first." Empal stated while he looked at them with wariness.

A huge monastic guard came to Empal's kiosk and glared at the two men, and Empal. He saw the strange crow, now back on Boyce's shoulder and squawking at him.

In a booming, but tinny sounding voice, the guard spoke to the strangers and Empal.

"Do these men give you trouble, Virunese?" he asked Empal.

"No!" he answered. "I just wanted payment for my goods before I give it to them!"

The guard looked to Lloyd, who took another bite from the apple that he had in his hand.

"Pay the man, vagabonds!" ordered the guard as he put his right hand on the case of his electrophore.

He watched the younger of the two men throw a gold bit to Empal and Empal put on a half-happy, half-surprised expression, while he filled a small basket for them.

The guard turned to Empal after he saw the gold coin thrown to him.

"It would be wise not to judge strangers on their appearance, vendor. You never know what wealth you may accumulate from them!"

The guard started to walk away and Boyce laughed a little to Lloyd and Empal, then the guard turned around once more and showed Empal a small triangular device, slowly rubbing his finger over it.

"Don't forget to pay the tax cleric when he comes around."

The guard continued to walk away from the stall and Empal filled the basket with the rest of the fruit that the two men ordered.

Boyce cautiously winked at Empal and spoke to him in a taunting voice.

"Old man ..." he said. "Where can my friend and I get lodging and a bath?"

Empal stopped for a moment and looked around, then he pointed across the square to a small side-street.

"Down that way is a tavern called The Lion's Skull Inn. The owner should be able to put you up there for a few days. Just tell them that Empal sent you."

"We are greatly obliged ... Empal!" exclaimed Boyce and he took the basket of fruit and they made their way around the square to the small street where the tavern was located.

Boyce had thought it to be an odd sight, seeing some of the old familiar people, who were now older, still working their same kiosks, and some of the stage shows that he remembered were still exhibited for the people, but now just a little different and less spectacular. Of course, he thought that they lacked spectacle value since he was now older.

He turned around for a moment and looked towards Empal, standing with a tall Cardinal beside him. The Cardinal was collecting the church's share of the tax.

They made their way slowly to the tavern and when they got to it, they walked in and headed for the flat-table and he ordered a mug of cider.

When the tender brought to him the cider, Lloyd stopped him and asked him for lodging.

"Tender! We are strangers in this city and we would care to stay here in the inn. Empal, the vendor, said that you may be able to have us?"

The tender was going to tell them that there weren't any rooms available, but Lloyd's mention of Empal's name, and the leer that Lloyd gave to him, made him reconsider.

"I do have one room that you can both use. I'll take you to it when you are finished here!" he told them.

Lloyd downed the cider immediately and the tender shrugged then showed them to their room.

"My name is Cavander!" said the tender as they walked up the stairs to a room at the end of the top hallway. "If you want privacy, this is one of my best rooms."

He lead them down the hallway then motioned for them to stop while he went into a large room, which was obviously his own, and brought out a large bundle of bedding.

Once inside their own room, Cavander closed the door and looked at them.

"I know who you are, and why you are here!"

He kneeled to them and kissed Boyce's hand.

"I'm your servant!" said Cavander.

"To your feet Cavander." ordered Boyce and helped him to his feet. "I will not be like Manguino to have men, who are in most cases better than he, to kneel before him."

"I hope that we can trust you, and count on you for support!" said Lloyd.

"Whatever you ask of me I shall do, even if it means to lose my life for you!" promised Cavander.

"The main thing I ask of you, Cavander, is that you do not treat us as our status. This I ask of you even so to the point of treating us as lesser than peasants."

"It is important that you do this!" added Lloyd.

"I will do your bidding!" nodded Cavander, then he took the bundle of bedding and from inside it brought out a small cask and a smaller square box.

He opened both containers and the two men saw their contents. The cask was full of gold bits and the smaller square box had two electrophoric-laser guns, like those which they had lost.

"You will need this while in Pomperaque, masters!" Cavander echoed to them what Empal had told him they were to be used for.

He was ready to leave their room after he made the beds for them, and he was about to open the door, he looked straight into Boyce's eyes.

"We all loved your father and mother, my Lord!" he said.

Boyce nodded to him.

"Yes, I know, Cavander!"

Cavander sighed then left the room and the two men decided to sleep through part of the afternoon.

By the time that dusk came around, Boyce and Lloyd were awake and they had a nice bath down the hall. They dressed in clean clothes then went down to the tavern and had something to eat and drink.

When they were dressing they discussed with each other their needs to start recruiting people and

their only conclusions were to either risk being given away by some satisfied follower of the ArchBishop, or to be killed by some desperate sorts who would take them for spies or just as troublemakers.

Their final decision was to start with the lower classed folk of Pomperaque; those who

usually had to steal in order to survive. These were the oppressed.

Moreso than going down to the tavern to eat and drink, the two men went down to the tavern to flaunt their moneys and so to entice some criminal types to come and rob them.

They weren't going to walk the streets of Pomperaque this night. Instead, as soon as they ate, and listened to some of the common folks' songs about the history of Phoride and its heros, they returned to their room and waited for their, hoped-for, late-night visitor.

The moon had already traversed most of the night sky and morning wasn't too long from coming.

It wasn't until about two hours before dawn that the men heard the sounds of uninvited guests entering their room.

Boyce quietly took to the door while Lloyd slowly crept to the window and they both waited for the predicted rush that the visitors would make into the room.

Then it happened. Both door and window flew open and the expected men rushed into the room and dove onto the beds jabbing into them with knives.

Lloyd and Boyce allowed the men to stab the beds for a while until they realized that there wasn't anyone in the beds.

Now, Lloyd switched on their portable electric light and illuminated the bed and two scruffy-looking young men.

"Trying to rob someone is one thing, killing is quite another!" Boyce said to them and suddenly the two men rushed Boyce, thinking that only one of them was in the room and when they came very near, Lloyd punched the men and took their knives from them when they were on the floor.

They rushed both men this time but Boyce and Lloyd's training to fight hand-to-hand, helped them to quickly subdue the two robbers.

The four men just looked at one another while Boyce had them seated in a corner, Lloyd covering both of them with what the men knew was an electrophore, of sorts.

"Are you two the ArchBishop's spies?" one of the criminals asked Boyce.

"No, we're not!" answered Boyce, then he took a small sack of gold and poured it out on the nearest bed. "We are grateful that you accepted our invitation to join us here!" he added to them.

The two criminals looked at one another and they both knew that they were tricked into coming.

"It seems to us both that you dislike the ArchBishop Manguino!" Lloyd said to the two men.

"We are not the only ones that feel his tyranny! There are many, but only a few of us try to do anything about it, in whatever way that we can!" the larger of the two criminals said in a voice that started to get louder.

"Now there's no need to scream, my friend. We are not unlike yourself." Lloyd said to him and then he put away his gun.

"We would like to hire your services and buy your loyalty!" proposed Boyce.

"Loyalty cannot be bought, but what do you offer?" asked the larger of the two criminals.

"We offer to you this gold," Boyce pointed to the gold on the bed. "and we offer to you honourable positions in the new government. If you accept you must follow both of us blindly or else you will be killed. If you do not accept we shall hand you over to the monastic guards and have you charged for whatever crimes you have committed, or even those you haven't committed."

"You give us a hard choice." said the smaller man.

There was a brief quiet in the room while they all exchanged looks.

"Hard choices ..." Lloyd began. "are often-times the choices most worth making!"

The bigger criminal stood up and folded his arms upon his chest.

"It seems we are inclined to accept your offer ... Masters!" he said.

"Very wise!" Lloyd responded.

" — And in this new wisdom, you will be our compatriots and will not address us as master." Boyce expressed his intent of partnership. "I am called Boyce Loebh, and this is Lloyd Bartlett."

"I am Mingo, and this is my brother, Bix." said the larger man, pointing to the smaller man.

"Mingo ... Bix; a new era has dawned in Phoride with your acceptance to serve this man." Lloyd said to them, regarding Boyce. "In the shortness of time you will be told all about this young man and our plans to depose the ArchBishop."

Bix got up off the floor being helped by his bother. They both turned slightly, and faced Boyce.

"On this new day you have become honourable warriors — the lieutenants of the only son of Brook and Dearborne Scullion-Blue — heir to Phoride and the protector of the Northern United Alignment. This is Boyce Loebh Scullion-Blue." Lloyd finished.

Mingo and Bix gawked at Boyce then kneeled as they whispered his name in surprise. They new his great and respected name.

"Do not kneel, my new friends! We are all equal in the eyes of God. In battle, don't fight for me, but fight for the freedom of Phoride and for your families — as I will fight for the same. And from this time forward call me only by the name, Boyce."

"We pledge our lives to you, Boyce!" Mingo and Bix hailed Boyce as they slowly stood up.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Pomperaque woke up and Mingo had left Boyce and Lloyd's room, with Bix. They had denied themselves the gold offered by Boyce and they set out to meet many others like themselves, to encourage them to join Boyce's cause.

Lloyd and Boyce caught themselves a few hours of sleep between the time that Mingo and Bix left, and Empal came to their room.

Empal had come to the room in order to receive his instructions from Boyce concerning the finalization of the invasion plans. He had also come to tall Boyce about the blue Mansion, since he wanted to know if it was possible for him to purchase it.

Empal came to their room that day carrying a large basket of fresh fruit, as if he was delivering the fruit to a buyer, and he woke them from their sleep.

When Lloyd let Empal into the room, he embraced both Lloyd and Boyce and welcomed them properly back into Boyce's city.

When the formalities of welcome were observed, the two men sat with Empal and ate the fruit that he had brought along with him, while Boyce listened to Empal's detailed first report that was assigned to him before they left Besten.

"The Blue Mansion has been sacked by Manguino's vermin before your parents' bodies were even laid to rest." Empal told Boyce. "The great building has been left unattended and abandoned since the time of their death, and although it had been put on the market, there has been no one interested in buying it."

The needed information that Empal was reviewing for Boyce, was depressing but Boyce was satisfied to hear that the Blue Mansion could still be his home.

He was strangely happy in realising that his old home was still his and available to him, but even though he legally held it as his own, to keep Halls from knowing who he was, he would have to buy it.

Empal was glad that he had finished giving his report. Now he could have his two friends recount

their journey to him and possibly explain to him the reason for the tardiness of their journey from besten.

Boyce and Lloyd didn't leave out a single detail about their trip. Unusual as it was, Lloyd told of their meeting of Grenadine and his reactions to her. He told the story with such honesty that there was almost a feeling of melancholy in the room when he finally came to telling Empal about her death.

Empal could see, in Lloyd's face, that the woman called Grenadine had really left her mark on Lloyd's heart and he sympathised with him.

On the other extreme of Empal's sympathy for Lloyd, so was Empal's ultimate delight in hearing the news of Boyce's marriage and to such a girl like Lilith; daughter of a Laurentine Consul. Empal had envied them, listening to their adventures and their victories over danger and evil.

He had mentioned to them that he wished that he was young, like them, so that he could've made the journey with them.

"We would have cherished your company!" was the statement that Boyce made to Empal's wish, and it was enough to make Empal feel the importance that he held with both Besten and Virune.

"What of the Nolunge and Flinnd?" asked Empal. "Did those two peoples let you pass through their lands or did they go back on their word, also?"

Empal questioned with curiosity, since they told him that Sedara and Palatka both rescinded their signed agreement of passage with the Northern United Alignment.

"Everything was smooth with those two nations. They are learned and cultured peoples and they honoured the treaty." said Lloyd.

"Yes!" Boyce added. "And I would like to send to them a token of appreciation after Pomperaque becomes rightfully mine!"

It neared noon when Lloyd and Boyce decided to mill around the town and finally go to Halls for a look around the lands-office.

Empal left them and returned to his stall where he opened it to public, later than usual. Oddly enough, no one had really noticed his late opening since it was an off-day for market and there weren't as many people buying goods in the towns square.

When Boyce decided to go to Halls, he and Lloyd split up. They did this for two reasons, namely; to keep anyone from possibly recognizing Lloyd, and have one supporter free to come to the aid of the other if there arose a situation where one might be imprisoned.

Lloyd had a task to do, which was to save time for him and Boyce, from having them to do it together. This task was the locating of Miel and Cassta — two of Brook Scullion-Blue's most trustworthy and loyal friends.

Boyce had hoped to seek out these men and persuade them, and their families, to follow him into forming a new rule that would prevent a monastic institution from governing the land.

Lloyd's job was just to find these men's residences and make a brief observation of whether, or not, the men and their families could still be loyal to a Blue rule.

Boyce, with Zoro on his shoulder, slowly made his way up Canon's Butte with his travel pack containing a small cask of gold bits. When he reached the top he looked at the enormity of the Halls Cathedral, which touched the blue sky above him.

The front gates were open and there were hordes of people walking about, doing business.

At the gate sat a notary vicar and he had all those who entered the cathedral state their name and reason for going in.

Boyce went in and the vicar stopped him and asked him to return. Boyce did as he was asked; the vicar wanted Boyce to sign in the visit logs.

"What is your name?" asked the vicar while he stared at the crow on Boyce's shoulder.

"I am Boyce Loebh!" he answered promptly.

"What is your business here?"

Boyce smiled and looked around when Zoro cawed a few times.

"I am here to see the estates Cardinal. I would like to buy some property on which to live."

The vicar looked at Boyce suspiciously then proceeded with the questioning.

"You don't have a request for an audience with our estates Cardinal. If you care to wait, he may be free to see you!"

"I will wait!" Boyce exclaimed, then he went over to a tree where a long rock post had fallen-over, and he sat on it.

The notary vicar rang a small hand bell and a young novice ran to the desk where the notary sat. He was given a slip of paper and some instructions. He ran off into the Cathedral's quadrangle and not too long after that, ran back with a slip of paper that he handed to the notary.

The notary vicar looked over at Boyce and Boyce noticed it. He got up the fallen post and walked over to the notary.

"It will be a while but the estates Cardinal will see you." the notary vicar told Boyce.

Boyce leaned over to him then pointed over to the post where he was sitting before.

"Tell me when he'll see me. I'll be over there!" he said then slowly made his way to the rock post and then reclined on it. Zoro stood watch on his chest.

The wait wasn't very lengthy and soon one of the novices came over to him and woke him up.

"It's your turn!" the novice informed him, and taking his pack with him, Boyce entered the Cathedral grounds, following the novice and ending up at the door of the lands-office.

The boy left him there and knocked on the door before entering, not caring to wait for permission to do so.

The office was strange-looking for a lands-office. It had two floors and was full of books on both floors.

In the middle of the office was a rather large table where the estates cardinal was sitting with his nose in a large book in which he was writing something.

He finally looked up from his book after Boyce sat down in a chair opposite him and Zoro jumped down on the table in front of him.

Overhead, standing against a railing, on the second floor, Cardinal Orren looked down at the strange young man and his even stranger pet. He wanted to hear what this wandering fool wanted in his office.

"You are Boyce Loebh?" the estates Cardinal asked him.

"Yes!"

"How can we be made of service, Mister Loebh?" the Cardinal asked him.

"I am looking to buy some property with a habitable building on it. What I am seeking, is something that is quite large."

The Cardinal looked at him for a moment then stood up and went to a flat shelf and brought back a large portfolio of sketches.

"I have here some twenty sketches of sturdy buildings on good property. Of course, most are probably out of your wealth capability."

"I would like to see whatever you have available regardless of the cost!"

"Very well!" submitted the cardinal and he handed Boyce the archaic looking portfolio.

Orren, from above had grown a little more suspicious and mistrusting of

Boyce. What's more, Orren detested Zoro's presence.

Boyce was dressed in clean clothing and he didn't smell as bad as when he first stepped into Pomperaque with Lloyd. He really loved his loyal women in Gothar for giving their dirty clothing back to them. It was that necessary little detail which helped to cause confusion in many people's eyes.

For sure Orren didn't understand how a rogue like Boyce could be so unaffected when he was told that he would most likely not be able to afford that which he sought.

Boyce went over every drawn likeness of the houses that were available, seeming quite uninterested in any one of them, including the Blue Mansion, which has had passed over.

"They are all well and nice, Cardinal, but I am searching for a large place with atmosphere. I, and my friend, are artisans and scholars, and we were hoping to use such a building, in-part, to expand your own Blaisaman; where we could teach the arts and other human studies."

The Cardinal sat down, at his side of the table, and questioned him further about his proposed academy.

"Do you have a license to teach in Pomperaque?"

"Not as of yet. I was planning to come tomorrow to inquire about a license." answered Boyce with an odd confidence that, in a way, inspired the Cardinal.

This same confidence inspired Orren in another ways — it made him angry.

Orren had read the prophesy given to Manguino by Jessuum Benitar and somehow he felt that maybe this man, below him, had something in common with it.

"I am planning on bringing to Pomperaque many diverse people from all over the continent." Boyce let the Cardinal know. "I am personally fond of philosophy and I would like, at the very least, half of the building to be devoted to that topic."

"Very well, Mister Loebh! I can only suggest one place that could be large enough to house such an academy. But I must inform you, that if you want it, you must also buy the all the land on which it stands!"

If there is plenty of land, reasonably priced, I would be happy to take it. We need the land to display works done by our students of sculpture." said Boyce. "Can I see a sketch of this land and house?"

The Cardinal laughed a little and Zoro cawed, and bobbed up and down.

"You have seen the drawing already!" the Cardinal informed him, and he took it out from the portfolio and handed it to him.

"I passed this by because it doesn't seem large — in the drawing, I mean!"

"Come with me and I will show you the real size, Mister Loebh!"

The estates Cardinal stood up and so did Boyce. He led Boyce up a spiral staircase to the second floor and Zoro flew to the top railing beside Orren.

Zoro was spooked by Orren and he quickly flew to a window on one end of the floor.

Soon Boyce and the estates Cardinal arrived at the same window and the cardinal asked Boyce to look to the far side of the valley.

"The rise, over there, Mister Loebh, is called Bimini Hill. The entire mount and the Mansion which stands on it was once the estate of several sovereigns of Pomperaque and Phoride." the cardinal said to him.

Boyce looked out the window, mainly to play along with the Cardinal but also it was the first time that he saw the majesty of the Blue Mansion in this vantage point.

"Oh, yes. I saw that place coming into the city, but I didn't realise that it was the same land as on the sketch. You are right. I probably couldn't afford to but that." Boyce stopped for a moment to look out the window the continued with a simple curiosity. "How much is the lands-office asking for it?"

"Seven hundred gold bits." replied the Cardinal.

"That is a great deal!" exclaimed Boyce.

"Seven hundred gold bits is for the Mansion and the land on which it stands!"

There was quiet again, except for Zoro's occasional 'zoar-caw' squawking, and then he flew out of the window, towards town.

Cardinal Orren peaked through a shelf of books that touched the ceiling, and he saw Boyce quickly turn to the estates Cardinal and nod his head to him.

"I think that I will buy it then!" he ejaculated.

"Good!" said the Cardinal. "Let us go down to my table and write up the papers!"

He took Boyce back down to his table, and while making their way down the stairs the Cardinal asked Boyce in what manner he would be able to pay.

They stopped on the spiral staircase and Boyce took the cask of gold from his pack and opened it for the Cardinal. The cardinal was amazed and pleased.

Above them both, Orren looked at the gold with surprise and contempt. He felt certain that the crow man was not to be trusted.

When the papers were drawn up and Boyce counted out seven hundred gold bits to the Cardinal, he left Halls Cathedral and headed for the Blue Mansion, with his key.

Before he made his way up the path to the Mansion, he first stopped at the inn and had a drink while he waited for Lloyd.

Lloyd soon came into the tavern and sat down with Boyce, at a table.

"Did you buy it?" he asked him.

"It was easier than I thought it would be!" he said, showing him the key.

Lloyd smiled at Boyce.

"I found our friends' homes and I overheard the younger man, Cassta I believe it was — saying to someone that he was getting tired of this life in Pomperaque and he was planning on moving to the Elkinnii Plains and live there!"

"Good!" sighed Boyce. "We still may be able to get the numbers that we need within the city."

"I had seen Mingo, earlier, and he told me that he had convinced a dozen of his peasant friends and relatives to join us. They are out, this very moment, looking for more of the oppressed to come in with us."

Boyce smiled with delight. He was happy because he had the Blue Mansion back and now the throng of peasant farmers that are willing to risk their lives for Boyce, son of Brook Scullion-Blue.

"If we can get Cassta and Miel to our side, they may just be able to get for us the Prominants that we need to join us."

Boyce had much hope and belief in his father's friends.

He would truly feel the power of a ruler, if those men served him as they served his father, he thought.

Cavander approached the two men and asked them if they wanted anything more to drink, or if maybe they were hungry.

"No!" said Lloyd.

"You can help us, however, if you have some time and friends who would like some work for a few hours!" inquired Boyce.

"What do you want done?" he sarcastically asked.

Cavander was playing in the way that he was asked to act before Boyce, treating them as lesser humans.

"Now, Inn Keep. There's no need to bite off our heads!" Boyce commented. "All I want is some help to move into my new house."

"And what new house may that be, may I ask?"

Lloyd was having a good time listening to the performing that Boyce and Cavander were doing and a few times he could hardly keep from laughing a little.

"It is the house on Bimini Hill!" he exclaimed with a proud smile.

Cavander was delighted beyond words when he heard that the heir to Phoride had successfully reacquired his own estate.

"How do you come by purchasing that?" asked Cavander in an extremely agitating voice that was really beginning to bother Boyce.

"I had gold — so either say that you will give me help, in my moving into the house, or take your leave from me!"

Cavander smiled but only a trifle. He knew that he had actually annoyed the son of Brook Scullion and he also knew that he could not give him an apology while in public. He had, therefore, kept the taxing down, from that point onwards, and agreed to have a few men help him whenever he needed them.

Boyce and Lloyd made their way up to the Blue Mansion, after Cavander had agreed to give them help.

It wasn't a long way to walk to get to the Mansion's door, but the once gradual path leading up to the top of the hill was now rugged and grown over with vegetation. The entire property was like this, from lack of use.

For a decade, since the executions, no one had been known to go up to the Mansion. Even coenobites had, for some reason stayed away from it. But it didn't matter now, because it was all Boyce's again.

They had finally made their way to where it all first happened.

Boyce's heart beat faster and faster, the nearer that he came to the door.

"Here it is, Lloyd!"

Lloyd saw Boyce's excitement as he put the key into the lock and turned it. He also felt a certain presence looming over the entire hill, as soon as they set foot upon it.

For Lloyd, this place had a different meaning than it had for Boyce. For him it meant the extension of his life which may have been cut short before he even had a chance to realize what life was. It meant the love and the admiration that he had for Brook and Dearborne, and this place was a reminder of evil's earthly triumph over good, through death.

"Would you have ever believed that I'd be back here?" a tear issued from Boyce's eye as he spoke and Lloyd cleared his throat, trying to keep from Boyce his own feelings about it all.

"It was predestined, Boyce!" he said then touched Boyce's shoulder to urge him to open the door and enter the house.

Boyce hesitated for a moment longer then smiled a little, and with a sigh he opened the door.

There was a sudden but slight whoosh at the door, as air rushed into the vacuum of the house.

It was dark and quite cool inside the house, in comparison to the intense heat outside, on this particular day. There was also a foul smell within which would have been more suitable for a

slaughterhouse. It was sour-like odour mixed with the linger type of stink of boiled chicken feathers.

They walked into the huge entrance hall and looked around the bare grey walls, and at the cracked ceiling covered with cobwebs.

"No wonder no one had come here since it was closed up!" said Boyce, his voice echoing far into the distant rooms, along with the clip-clop that their boots made on the solid wood floor.

"With enough helpers it won't take us long to make it liveable, Boyce."

Boyce nodded as he heard Lloyd's sentence carry throughout the mansion's vast number of rooms.

They walked further through the mansion going from the kitchen, to the ballroom, Dearborne's old parlour and to Brook's private den.

Every room, every corner of the great house was the same. The house was empty and stripped of anything of value, and of anything without value.

Blue-green lazurite no longer adorned the walls. There were no more crystals hanging from the ceilings, no more carpets were on the floor and there were no sculptures left in the hallways.

Only years of dust could be seen inside with the shells of hundreds of dead insects and arachnids strewn all over the place.

The windows of the mansion were still intact but they were so yellow and dirty that barely enough light penetrated into the interior, let alone having anything seen through them.

Lloyd took a knife from his belt and began to scrape some of the years from off the panes of glass in Brook's viewing den.

Shrieks echoed throughout the massive structure, as the dirt gave resistance to the knife grinding into the glass, but soon the windows of the den were cleared of dirt and the light of the afternoon sun shone through the cloud of dust suspended before the window.

Boyce jabbed Lloyd's knife into the seams and catches of the window and then pried it open with a creak that seemed to force itself into their very hearts.

They just stood there and looked at the once beautiful room that was nothing more than a void now. Absolutely nothing was left in the house after the monastic sacked it.

"Manguino is truly a mad dog warranted of dying!" said Lloyd.

"This was such a beautiful place, once!" was Boyce's only response.

Suddenly their came a loud shriek at the window and it made both men jump back in fright.

"Zoar-caw!"

Both men sighed when they saw that it was only Zoro perched at the window.

"It's only Zoro!" said Boyce. "I wondered where he's been all afternoon!"

While Lloyd and his friend looked over the house and decided what they needed to clean up and move in, Cardinal Orren was making his own assessments. His assessment, however, was not of buildings, but of the two strangers that came to Pomperaque, from the north.

"I had finally received a report from some of our spies in Besten, and I found out that these two men had left Besten a little under a month ago." Orren said to the ArchBishop.

The ArchBishop sat in his chair, at his desk, in his office as he was asked to by Orren for the meeting with him today. Orren wanted the meeting this way because he was tired and somewhat repulsed, by seeing Manguino and Eckma fornicating, almost every time that he spoke to him. Now Orren knew that he had Manguino's attention, and he listened to Orren.

"Since they've left Besten they walked south west then disappeared until they were seen passing through Flinnd on horseback. Now they had entered Pomperaque, apparently to stay!" continued Orren while he tried to find fault with the two strangers from Besten.

"Fine, Orren. I agree that we should not trust these men but I can't understand why we have to be this fearful of them. How can two men pose us a threat?"

In his typical way Manguino had once again failed to see a potential danger.

As in any nation, the greatest threat, almost always, seems to be from strangers. Since they were not known ... so Orren also believed.

These two strangers were not known. Except for their names; Boyce Loebh and Lloyd, and also the fact that each man carries with him a substantial wealth, without the slightest fear of being robbed, no one really knows who they were.

Then there was the crow that was the younger man's pet. It was a strange pet that, to Orren, seemed to be as great a threat to Phoride, as the two men were.

Yet, for all their feelings, neither man could quite understand why they felt uneasy with these two men's presence. They gave no indication of being treasonous and they had even taken up a peaceful residency within the city.

They heard the story of their wanting to set up an academy of arts and philosophy, to be run as a part of the Phoridene Blaisaman; but the fact that the Blue Mansion was bought, had both monastic men worried.

Orren had been studying Jessuum Benitar's prophesy, made for Manguino, but it was odd and open to innumerable interpretations.

Manguino himself had been wrong many times about the prophesy, seeing the doom of Halls, and the rest of Pomperaque, through natural elemental causes: fire, water, earth and air. Yet, with the several natural disasters that befell Pomperaque since the executions of Brook and

Dearborne; the earthquakes tidal waves, the three-day hail storm and the great fire of four years ago — that almost burned half of Phoride — before the rebuilding, the great city had always seemed to survive.

Cardinal Orren refused to believe in whatever the Benitar prophesy had to say. Like his father, years ago, he only believed and trusted in what he could see, feel, hear and smell, and touch. Anything that was beyond those senses were just illusions.

Orren had seen the Angels of Mons several nights ago, and he knew that they meant an impending doom, but he believed that the doom would not be that great since the Mons did not ride through the main streets of Pomperaque.

Since time immemorial; from the first time that vision had foretold doom, in the years before the nonexistent holocaust which ravaged the world, the mons had been an accurate omen that warned those who saw them, of incalculable disaster.

"I am apt to disregard Jessuum Benitar's prophecy, Almighty. It is difficult to understand and can be made to mean anything, but the Mons that I had seen, came in the night prior to the men entering the city." he said.

Manguino laughed a little when Orren said that to him.

"You are just like Allen was. You only believe in what you see and nothing more. Now, tell me ... how many strangers came into Pomperaque — or to Phoride, for that matter — on the same day as these two Bestenese came?" Manguino asked him.

"There were many, your grace, but these men have something about them, something that I just can't explain!"

Manguino laughed and told Orren not to worry because nothing would happen unless he asked for the prophesy to be read to him.

To make Orren feel better and calmer, Manguino offered to him a suggestion that he find himself some virgin and have his tensions relaxed through her.

"You'll feel much better!" he told Orren.

Orren left him, angry and unsure of his own suspicions.

He went back to his chamber and tried to study the prophesy some more, trying to use his logic this time.

Manguino also went back to his own chamber and jumped into the pool of rain water which Eckma was already wading in, and drinking the scum off the surface before he entertained his pleasure.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

With Cavander's help, along with some of his friends that were enlisted to the cause, the Blue Mansion began to take shape as the smooth clean structure that it once had been. Having the clean-up and all the detailed restoration take place over several shifts, the great estate began to resemble its old grandeur, with every hour that passed by.

Hundreds of litres of blue-green metallic paint was mixed and the walls inside the house were

painted, and the local craftsmen — those masters working with rock, metal, glass and wood, designed and reconstructed duplicates of everything that was once inside the house. All the duplicates were made from the memories, of that house, that Boyce and Lloyd carried with them over the last decade.

Boyce ran about the entire estate with Zoro perched on his shoulder and he supervised the workers with every detail that they were doing. He wanted everything just as perfect as he could have it.

Lloyd ran around and did the same, but this all was really Boyce's dream and destiny needing fulfilment. All he was there for was to ensure Boyce's succession.

Dearborne's old parlour began to look more and more like it did on the day before the execution, and Brook's den had been reconstructed nearly to the last detail, the only item excluded from it all, being the computer that Brook had called his 'gadget'!

The land and its gardens were weeded and replanted with plants, and flowers, from all over Phoridae.

The change that took place on Bimini Hill was so great and quick that the citizens of Pomperaque began to notice a strange presence emanate from it. Such a presence was unknown since the time that the Blue line had ruled from there, and now it was back.

During the night time, working only by the light from the stars and moon, and by the pole lights of the city, the outer walls of the Blue Mansion were painted with the purest white paint that could be mixed, and the following night they were polished until the whole building gleamed.

Many days had gone by but the building was finally ready to move the rest of the necessities into it. Most of the furniture, and other such things, were especially build within the house or garden, for the man for whom it was being made.

Boyce and Lloyd were pleased beyond their knowledge of words, to express how they felt. They knew that what had once been the home of a good, kind and strong man, was once again going to be the home of a man that would be as well-loved.

All those that put in their time and love for Boyce, knowing who he was, were pleased in their accomplishments and they gave praise to him in a grand ball that was given for him, and for Lloyd, when everything was finally completed.

Many people from all walks of Phoridene society were invited to the mansion for the ball.

Curious to see who these men were, many of those citizens that were invited had eagerly accepted to attend the ball at the new Blue Mansion.

Most of the guests were surprised upon entrance to the great building. Memories were rekindled and many citizens had tears in their eyes and lumps in their throats. It was remarkable that no one commented on the Mansion's old sameness during any part of the ball. Not a single guest questioned Boyce, or Lloyd, about how they made everything in the house to be as it was years ago. They just took it in stride and tried to have a good time; and for the first time, in a very long while, the Phoridenes did enjoy themselves.

Amongst the guests invited to the ball were Miel and Cassta, with their families, and several higher coenobites from Halls. They were Manguino and his wife, Orren, Polis and Cardinal Levy.

Miel and Cassta came to the ball for much the same reason that everyone else did, curiosity. When they came in, it was as if they walked through some door that threw them back into time, to the night when the Mansion saw its last festive night, the evening of Brook and Dearborne's fifteenth anniversary of marriage.

When they saw Boyce he looked familiar to them but while at the ball they didn't discuss it. Only once that night when they came to meet the two men, Boyce had mentioned that he would like to speak privately to them the next day and they had agreed.

The arrangements had been made so quickly that their entire intercourse seemed to take place in the span of time it took the men to shake hands.

That was Boyce's only contact with the two men, all evening, and later Empal mentioned to both men that it would be to their benefit to listen to and to respect the young man called Boyce

Loebh, and that made both men wonder since they knew that Empal wouldn't say such a thing to them unless it was serious.

Manguino and Orren had walked through the Mansion and finally Manguino ended up at the room

which was once Brook's private viewing den. That was the room Brook and Dearborne had been taken from before they were executed.

Manguino felt discomfited standing there and Orren couldn't help but notice it. Everything in the house was just as it was before it was ravaged by him and his men, thought Manguino. He was petrified to open the door and looked inside but Orren had never seen the original room and what it contained, so he bound into the room and looked around at the rock walls, drapes, shelves of books and the large wooden cabinet.

The room was beautiful; decorated with small statues and paintings, and although it wasn't an identical duplicate of Brook's den, it closely enough resembled it to warp Manguino's mind back to when he had the cabinet opened to his view and saw Brook's computer.

The ArchBishop had finally summoned ample courage in order to enter the room and he let out an exasperated breath which sounded like he was in pain, when he saw the room. He quickly stepped over to the book shelves and read the names and titles on the books: Lapinz, Argynossti, Smarte. All were identical to those books that Brook kept there.

"This is some room!" said Orren and oddly glanced over at Manguino. "What's wrong?" he asked the ArchBishop.

"This room is hardly different than Brook Scullion-Blue's was, so long ago. How did these men know what was within? How did they know what was in every room, within this house?"

Manguino trembled as he spoke then he looked at the far curtained wall and went over to it.

He violently pulled the curtains away from the wall exposing a dingy grey.

"Why did you do that, your Grace?" asked Orren.

"This wall was supposed to be white in the centre. If it was, I don't know what I would've thought!" he answered.

He looked at the large wooden cabinet near the entrance and went to it. He tried to open it but it was locked. He shook his head towards Orren then punched at the cabinet doors.

"Just like Brook's, always locked until the day that I finally knew for sure what was inside!"

Manguino was feeling ill and angry, and most of all frightened.

"You were right to suspect these men, Orren!" he told the cardinal.

There was a sudden angry and loud voice blaring from the entrance to the room.

"What are you doing in here?" It was Boyce and he majestically trooped into the room and glared at the ArchBishop. "I don't mind if the guests roam around the house, but I do mind if the guests try to destroy the things that are within the rooms!"

"We are not destroying anything, my young friend!" Manguino assured him while he was leaning against the cabinet.

Boyce looked around the room and saw the undraped wall.

"Why is that curtain pulled away?" he demanded.

"Why isn't that wall white?" asked Manguino.

"White?" questioned Boyce. "Was it white, originally?"

Manguino nodded his head.

"I wish that I would have known this, earlier. I want this place to be as authentic as possible to its original interior!"

Orren and Manguino looked at one another with puzzled eyes and Boyce continued.

"I had found out the history of this place from a few of the towns' people and I had decided to talk to a few of the people who have been within this house when it was lived in by the ruling Lord. I had every detail of their memories reconstructed. My academy will have the atmosphere it needs, to inspire our artisans and great thinkers."

"What's in here?" Manguino demanded of him, touching the cabinet with a few pats of his hand.

"Nothing is in there!" replied Boyce.

"Open it for me!" Manguino threw another order at Boyce.

"I don't believe that I am obliged to do so without being given a reason for my opening it!" Boyce denied obedience to them, knowing exactly who both of these men were.

"If you are to live in Pomperaque," said Orren. "you must learn to obey the ArchBishop. He wants you to open that cabinet and you will open it!"

Boyce put on a bewildered expression then sighed, nodding his head as he went to the cabinet.

He took a key from around his neck and put it in the slot of the cabinet door. His actions with the key, and the manner in which he used it to open the doors, disturbed Manguino but he made himself think that Boyce was told about the way that Brook handled the cabinet key.

Boyce slowly opened the cabinet to reveal the empty interior.

"There!" Boyce exclaimed. "I had told you that there was nothing inside!"

The ArchBishop Manguino breathed more easily when he saw that the cabinet was truly empty as this stranger called Boyce, had truthfully told him.

"I would think that you would like to mingle more with the common folk." said Boyce. "I had heard some rumours that you, ArchBishop, don't present yourself to the people as much as you should!"

Orren didn't like what Boyce had said and he was ready to say something to him until Manguino stopped him by raising his hand.

Manguino made for the door and Orren followed him. It was obvious that the Almighty wanted peace, for now, and Orren held to his respect of it.

However, before the two men totally exited the room, Manguino turned around and saw Boyce closing the cabinet doors. He smiled at Boyce and asked him a question while Zoro flew into the room and to his shoulder.

"Tell me, Boyce Loebh ... do you know what was inside the cabinet?" he asked him.

Boyce shrugged and a squawk came from Zoro.

"No, I don't!" he answered. "Apparently no one knows. It ruins the authenticity — I feel. Besides that ..." Boyce smiled back at him. "... it must have been something that really annoyed you."

He stared right into Manguino's eyes than asked him if he would tell him the contents of the cabinet, but Manguino just continued to smile and left the room without telling him.

Boyce let Zoro onto his left forearm and stroked him while the bird balanced itself.

"That, Zoro, is a man that ancients called 'an ass-hole!'" he said to the crow.

Zoro cawed, as if answering, and Boyce left the room with him, too.

Downstairs, the party was coming to an end and Lloyd was saying good-bye to everyone, and he reminded Mingo and Bix to bring their friends over to the Mansion tomorrow for their first class.

Late into the night everyone was finally gone and the two men felt extremely good in having their confusion tactics work on those who were unfriendly present here on this night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The following morning the men went to market and saw Empal. They bought from him some of his special fruit from the lands to the west, called İynondan, and they asked his opinion of last evening's gala.

Empal was pleased for its success and he told them that many others thought so, as well. He also told them that Miel and Cassta were expecting them in Gothai for a luncheon.

Boyce was ultimately pleased because he had a chance to see his wife and Lloyd was also glad for being able to see Sister Rhonta, to argue some more Smarte with her.

The two men went to the town stable and borrowed a couple of horses and rode into Gothel, as soon as they finished their talk with Empal.

Gothel was close, just a few kilometres from Pomperaque's northern gates but Boyce pushed the horses hard to reach Gothel as quickly as possible, Zoro riding all the way on his shoulder.

He went to the Abbey of Our Holy Saint Mariot, where Lilith was staying and found her in her job today, tilling and trimming the flower and tree garden.

She was grimy from the dirt and heat but the sister in charge of today's work let her off her job, under the circumstances, and Lilith had a very quick bath before going to her husband, waiting for her in her bed.

Rhonta was happy to see Lloyd but all they did was talk while she was in a room repairing some clothing.

She was a full nun, as she was when she cared for Lloyd until he recuperated. For the innocent kiss that she gave to Lloyd when he and Boyce left Gothel, for Pomperaque, she was highly reprimanded and she was made to work in the abbey kitchens until just recently.

Lloyd was disappointed, and she was probably more disappointed than he was, but they were both mature enough to understand the circumstances in which they both lived, so both made the most of their time by talking.

At noon, Boyce left Lilith's bedroom and went to the Abbess's private dining room where Miel and Cassta were both waiting for him.

Lloyd wasn't there and Lilith stayed in bed, waiting for Boyce to return while she pictured in her mind the account that Boyce gave to her about his reintroduction to Pomperaque.

He walked into the dining room with Zoro and the Abbess Mariot (as all abbesses were called Mariot, since the first one that found the child called Sunshine, so long ago), was serving the table where the men sat.

She curtsied to Boyce and left the room as both Miel and Cassta took to their feet and watched him approach them.

They both came from behind the table and they embraced Boyce with tears streaming from their eyes.

"Empal had told us who you are, Boyce Loebh Scullion-Blue!" said Miel between snuffles.

"We didn't know that our great friends had any children, Master Scullion! Where did you stay as a child? How is it that your father didn't tell us?" Cassta asked desperately.

"I remember both of you so well, Cassta and Miel. My father only had two friends that he trusted with his life!" said Boyce.

"How do you remember us, Boyce? We had never seen you before this day!" Miel's tears subsided allowing wonder to dry them.

"I was hidden before everyone's very eyes and there wasn't a soul in all of Phoride that knew. Only Empal was told and that was just before my parent's death." said Boyce and he then proceeded. "I was Boy, my parent's servant!"

Astounded, the men kissed Boyce's right hand and they didn't even pay attention to Zoro cawing at them.

"How it is to me, now, to realise that a great ruler truly served his people!" Cassta praised Boyce.

"I had once served, both of you, with things of substance and now it is time for both of you to serve me." Boyce's voice sounded demanding.

"Yes!" the men echoed one another.

"We kneel, humbly, before you Lord Scullion-Blue." promised him as he and Cassta went on their knees.

Boyce put his hands on each man's shoulders and told them to rise. He let them know that

they had no obligation to kneel before any man, even if that man was their leader.

"From this time on, neither you, nor any of those who you persuade to join me — to help me reclaim Phoride in the name of my father — shall kneel before me. Only God, who speaks to men's hearts deserves to be knelt before. I am not God. I am just a man and because I am just a man, I need loyal friends to help me regain my birthright and share my sceptre with me, in this land."

"Only a truly God-sent leader would speak that way. We will die for you, Boyce!" Miel vowed and Cassta nodded to Miel's offer.

"You did not die to protect my parents, old friends!" Boyce sounded stern, his voice mirroring the guilt felt by both for their passiveness when action was the necessity. And Boyce continued, "But I will die for you, if it be so ordained."

Both of the men's heads sank down upon their chests in a visible shame, and both had weepy eyes.

Boyce motioned for them to return to the table. They sat down and ate the banquet that was prepared for them by the abbey sisters and they discussed the plans that Boyce and Lloyd had agreed to with the Northern United Alignment, concerning the invasion of Phoride.

Boyce told the men that it will be their job to find loyal and trustworthy Prominants that would join his side in order to abolish the canon rule forever and return him as their heir apparent to the Blue descent.

Everything was agreed upon. Plans were set and fealty was paid through vows and oaths, and when the meal was finished, the men returned to Pomperaque.

Boyce returned to his Lilith's bedroom and made love with her once more before the invasion was to come over this troubled land, and so separate them for a while longer.

Zoro squawked, having been left out in the garden by Boyce before he went to Lilith.

Zoro flew back to Pomperaque and circled it until Boyce and Lloyd left the abbey for their second time.

Risking another reprimand, Sister Rhonta kissed Lloyd good-bye when Lilith did the same to Boyce.

When the men returned to Pomperaque they rode right for Empal's stall.

Zoro had already soared down onto Boyce's shoulder when they road through the town's gates, and to Empal's kiosk, Boyce let Empal know that the invasion could commence.

Empal knew the rest. He had made his plans with the alignment, too.

This was the day that Empal would fly back to Virune and Besten, on his Kenttitan Eagle, and tell his people and Harvard Bartlett that it was time to mobilize the armies for their advance on Phoride.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The days and nights passed by with an odd swiftness that has never before been seen or felt.

Boyce and Lloyd didn't appear to do much else than run the learning sessions in the Blue Mansion, catering to whomever, and from whatever, class they were from.

One cardinal attended the first two days of the academy's opening and he reported to the Archbishop Manguino that everything was being handled straight as in the Blaisaman and that political ideologies were discussed as philosophical arguments rather than as private opinions.

Everything in the academy was normal and there were no conspiracies or treasonous talk being made within the mansion and so the cardinal stopped attending the classes there.

The second day after the cardinal stopped coming to the classes Boyce and Lloyd finally began to teach all those enlisted to their cause, about the Twentieth Century civilisation.

The great book that Brook had given to his son and Lloyd, was passed around to each person that knew how to read the written English, which had survived to some extent, since that fallen age.

Those capable of reading the book, read it aloud to those who could not, and all those who had been made familiar with the ancient book, gawked at the wondrous pictured in the book. The pictures were of strange machines that could fly and ships that travelled space, and there were pictures of giant

buildings that touched the skies. They were great hollow mountains made by man, out of glass and steel and rock.

The most loyal and many of the more intelligent students were taught how to battle, hand-to-hand, with someone. They watched the hours of demonstrations presented by Lloyd and Boyce.

However, due to the lack of time available to them to train, all that they could do was watch Lloyd and Boyce's movements, then later teach other; again, by demonstration and example.

Several months of military training were condensed into a week of intense study and what's more, Halls never knew what was happening.

Throughout the two men's instruction, Zoro was present, relentlessly perched; either on a piece of furniture or upon Boyce's shoulder.

To many of those loyal citizens there to learn Boyce's knowledge, Zoro became a symbol of freedom from the evil monastic rule.

Boyce, with his interesting pet, had become quite popular in Pomperaque, the word passing throughout the entire land of Phoride in a manner that resembled that of legend.

Orren was certain that the two men from Besten presented a clear and present threat to the ArchBishop and his established rule on this continent. He couldn't allow his feelings to go without notice and he discussed the prophesy, given to Manguino by the Seer, Jessuum Benitar, with other cardinals who specialised in the interpretation of scripture and prediction.

All of them agreed that the Seer's words were indeed strange and none of them could agree on their exact meaning, so the Cardinal Orren took to examining the recorded text by himself.

With every subsequent reading of the words, Orren became more frustrated and less did he succeed in his understanding of any of it.

He hoped that he would soon free whatever hidden meaning was held within the vision that Jessuum conveyed to Manguino when he began to degenerate his power and standing, for the sake of copulating with Eckma.

Pure thought and logic slowed Orren's perspective for the explanation of the prophetic forecast.

It happened one night that something that resembled an answer came to Orren, and it was a strange coincidence that Manguino had glimmers of thought that were similar.

In their like dreams, certain lines in the prophesy seemed to repeat themselves and both Manguino and Orren began to realise their meanings.

The lines that held the most clarity for them were: 'Four great elements, ride on high' and 'Black feathers from his shoulders jut'. These lines reflected the omen and possibly even the new strangers. However, there was no proof that they were upon the correct considerations.

The next day that ArchBishop and Cardinal Orren confided to one another about their dreams and about the interpretations that came to them thereof.

Manguino told Orren that he heard the prophet's chant repeating itself through his mind and peaking in clarity and volume at certain lines.

Orren had said the same thing to the ArchBishop and they discussed their dreams, and what they thought their dreams meant, over the span of several hours since they woke.

Both men were eager to strip clean the text of the prophesy in order to reveal, to themselves, the long awaited answer.

"I understand the Mons, Your Grace!" Orren blurted out to the ArchBishop. "It was the night before the two strange Bestenese entered Pomperaque. I saw the Mons."

Orren paced about the ArchBishop's office, and Manguino sat at his desk in his respective garb, listening to the great Cardinal Orren.

He walked back to the desk, from the window, lifted his palms before him as if weighing the air that he passed through.

"The Mons were four, each on a horse, and each rider was clad in armour and was the same colour as the horses. They were in the sky. So I believe now that our Seer's predictions may be true. The Mons are these four elements that ride on high."

Manguino sighed and rocked back and forth in his chair. He was pleased to have made some headway in answering the puzzling prophesy. Yet, somehow he felt that there wasn't enough proof to be able to point to Boyce and Lloyd and say that they were involved.

" 'Black feathers from his shoulders jut' ..." said the Archbishop. " ... is strangely similar to that Boyce Loebh and his dirty crow. There is one point, however, that has me question if that is so."

He stood up and moved around to the front of the desk and sat on it. He motioned with his hands as he spoke to Orren, giving him his explanation and other questions concerning it.

"That odd crow rides on Boyce Loebh's shoulder, it doesn't just from it. Shoulders are mentioned instead on of shoulder — this may be misleading! It may be making us seek the reality of the forecast by invoking within us our own dislikes for these men." he said to Orren.

Orren nodded and then shrugged while the chair on which he sat gently swivelled to and fro. He looked right into the Archbishop's eyes as he thought that the Archbishop may actually be right.

"I understand your thoughts. We don't want to make it a habit of unjustly accusing those people that we do not trust only in order to quell our own fright. Both of these Bestenese are popular with the people as being great teachers. My men have reported to me no treasonous news about them."

Orren raised himself from the chair and went over to the chiffonnier behind Manguino and poured himself some wine.

"The Mons just rode across the Phoridene sky. They never rode in the streets. Whatever happens will be minor." he said to Manguino before he gulped the glass of wine into his gut.

"We should keep our wits about us and look for some strangers with black feathers either growing out of their shoulders or adorning their apparel."

"I will get some of my men to watch out for that happenstance." Orren promised his master. "I will also put the Phoridene army on battle-alert. I feel that to be the prudent action."

"We should wait, at least for a few more days and I don't believe that the army will really be needed."

Orren became tense and he Questioned the Archbishop's reasoning for not letting him ready for defence. Afterall, Orren was in charge of the army.

"We don't need tension between ourselves, Your Holiness!" Orren finally said. "We have to be ready for anything. The people of this city, and outlying towns and villages, have been behaving very strangely in recent times. They don't seem to be expressing their dislike for their living conditions and over-taxing. They wane in their fear of you. Something is very wrong."

"You are surely like your father, Allen, was. You worry too much, Cardinal. We should not worry about anything. We are strong and no sane person would try anything against us. I am god of Phoride, and of this hemisphere. Gods cannot be harmed."

The Archbishop has always been thought of as a god, and has been made to be worshipped as much but he had never before shown that he believed it, too.

Orren left his presence and called a necessary meeting with the higher cardinals and convinced them to back his giving his army a full alert status.

Later, Manguino called on Orren to bring the two strangers to his office for questioning. He was seemingly having second thoughts about his own suspicions but, being a god, he didn't admit to it.

That afternoon Boyce and Lloyd came to Halls to see the Archbishop. Boyce had Zoro on his shoulder and it was making a great deal of noise, listening to it echo throughout the cathedral and looking as if it was enjoying itself.

Lloyd felt uneasy because this would be the first time that the members of Halls could see his face clearly and he prayed that no one would recognize him, from that day in the square, a decade ago.

They entered the Archbishop's office with a majesty and saw Manguino sitting at his desk with Orren in a chair off to his right side.

"We are pleased to have this visit, my friends!" said Manguino and he smiled. "We would like to congratulate both of you on your successful start with your school. I may be interested to attend some of your lectures one day soon, but before I do, I would like to know something about your backgrounds."

Boyce and Lloyd looked at one another and Zoro jumped off of Boyce's shoulder and glided to the window. Boyce and Lloyd waited for a moment and Lloyd knew that he had to speak since he was the older of the two.

"We are honoured to appear before you!" said Lloyd and he moved closer to the front of the desk. "Thank-you for your notice and maybe with your satisfaction we may be able to join our academy with the Blaisaman?"

"Anything is possible!" exclaimed Orren in a snide voice.

The men didn't understand the tone coming from Orren but they took it in stride. They didn't want anything to anger them this afternoon since they were supposed to be intellectuals, not barbarians.

Both knew that it would be difficult to keep their anger subdued but it was necessary for the success of their years of planning for the take-over of Phoride.

"I would like to know of your educational background!" Manguino said and motioned to both of them to sit down and they did.

"We had many years of study at the Blaisaman in besten and we have travelled and studied, in many other places before deciding to come here."

Boyce spoke slowly and steadily to the ArchBishop and Orren, trying to ensure that each word sank into their minds.

"How long did you travel and how did you come to be in our city? You have not been seen travelling along the known caravan routes and this makes us curious."

Orren was the type of man that dove right for the heart of whatever he wanted to know. He could not engage in side-stepping discussions because they became dull and took too long to reach the information that was desired.

"We have been travelling, fairly extensively for almost ten years now. We have been to nearly every part of this continent, always taking routes that were not extensively used." said Lloyd.

"Just as our trip from Besten to your city." said Boyce. "We travelled as directly south as we could, going through the Dark Forest, Sedara and Palatka. In fact, we were just leaving Palatka when Urre's government was toppled!"

Lloyd wasn't pleased with Boyce telling these two evil clerics about their taking the passage through the Dark Forest. He saw the two men's expressions when Boyce told them that.

"How very interesting that you survived passing that inhospitable forest." jeered Orren.

"Yes, it was interesting," began Boyce. "but it wasn't as dangerous as our avoiding of the Elkinni slavers."

Lloyd felt better now, and more at ease. Boyce was adding some fantasy to the truths that he had told them earlier. He was satisfied that Boyce was handling the situation and so he relaxed more.

There was a shaky silence that rippled through the mood in the room.

All four men had experienced it, and when it came about, Zoro became spooked and flew out the window and back to the Blue Mansion.

As it flew back to the Mansion, Empal was coming down, on the Kentitian Eagle, to the clearing in the Joenine Forest.

Zoro swooped up into the air and after displaying some silly-looking acrobatics, he soared down to the roof tops of the mansion.

Only Orren saw Zoro fly out. Boyce and Lloyd were both too busy keeping their thoughts in line while in their hosts' presences, but this effort of theirs appeared to be to no useful avail.

Orren had come right out to them and told them both about his idea behind a prophesy that they had

been given.

Manguino sat back and studied the men's expressions but didn't see too much that was odd or revealing.

"I must tell you both that we do not like your presence in Phoride. We do not trust you, but in so long as you keep to what you have been doing you will be tolerated."

Boyce felt like laughing and he had to ask the cardinal exactly what he meant.

"I meant to say, " Orren replied. "that you will continue to teach in accordance to those rules and methods, as are followed by other learning institutions, within our domain. No personal thoughts or opinions concerning the certain 'questionable' topics, will be allowed."

"You two are doing fine as academicians but we do not want to find that treason is being discussed at the mansion." added Manguino.

Boyce and Lloyd said nothing, they just bowed their heads in submission, necessary as a sign of protocol.

They stood up and bowed to the ArchBishop and waited for their dismissal from his office. Following a few moments of intense glaring between themselves, Manguino gave them leave and they left.

Orren walked around to the front of the desk and made his way to the window and looked down to the interior of the quadrangles where many novices reclined, near the fountain.

"Can you believe their supposed travels?" Orren asked but more as a statement.

"You never know with the human animal, my loyal friend. Men have lied since their

dawning. There is no such thing as truth, only variations of an accepted lie!" commented Manguino.

"We should have asked how they survived their passage through the Dark Forest." said Orren, then he gave a little laugh. "Maybe the gremlins helped them through."

Whatever the case may be, Orren, I am not certain that they should be totally mistrusted. They do not appear to have a threatening quality about them."

"I still believe that we should keep them both under surveillance for a while."

"Alright. Do that, for your own benefit and arrange for me a social evening. I want to celebrate my safety."

Orren wanted to disapprove his request but he knew that Manguino would only get someone else to do it for him.

He agreed and left the ArchBishop's presence, to carry though with the order.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

When Boyce and Lloyd returned home, Zoro flew down to his master's shoulder from the mansion's roof top.

"Zoro! There you are!" said Boyce. He had wondered what had become of him, at the cathedral.

They went into the house and soon found Empal waiting for both of them in the room that was Brook's viewing den.

He had come in through the underground passage from the Joenine Forest.

"Empal, our dear friend!" said Boyce, and he and Lloyd shook hands with him.

"I'm surprised that the passages, beneath this place are still in very good shape." he said.

"Have you told the alignment to mobilize for its advance on Phoride?" asked Lloyd.

"That was why you sent me back there, and I have done your bidding."

"Very good, General!" praised Boyce.

"I had also brought some things for you. A gift from Lloyd's father, Harvard." he told them and Lloyd

wondered what his father could possibly send to him and Boyce from Besten.

Empal opened the passage door and went in, soon coming back into the room with two large and heavy looking sacks.

"This is yours, Boyce!" Empal said handing him one of the large sacks.

Lloyd took the other one when handed to him, and when they opened up the sacks, what they found was the beautiful sight of armour.

The armour was of gilded gold, bolted onto sweaters made of woven lead and steel, fitting perfectly over the wearer's form, as it was the nature for such armour to behave.

Electrophore-laser rifles were in each sack with two energy cells for each weapon, and to supplement fighting, arm-length tempered sabres were given to them, as well.

Both men received helmets characteristic of their own personalities.

Lloyd had received a helmet made of silver, symbolising steadfast loyalty and promise to serve. It had a low fall to the back and the front, covering the forehead was square and moulded into the figure of a computer.

Three great spikes jutted along the centre crest of the helmet from the frontal section to the hinges of the fall.

Boyce's helmet was also very impressive. It was perfectly rounded and was made of thick gold. The round front section, that covered half of his forehead, had a horizontal, oblong inset of the bluest sapphires that could be found and on the top back of his helmet was a cluster of three long plumes, of straight blue horse-tail hair.

Each single knot of hair was of a slightly different shade and hue of blue, and when the light hit the clusters, they all shimmered like a clear waterfall.

"Your father has exquisite taste!" Boyce said to Lloyd.

Lloyd nodded and Empal continued to help the men to remove a large box from each bag, and the men opened them. Within each box was a shiny cross bow.

"These are beautiful!" sighed Lloyd.

"I wonder if we'll use them?" asked Boyce.

"Where will you keep these things?" inquired Empal and Boyce smiled at him, raising his finger to the air.

He took from around his neck a key and put it into the slot of the cabinet doors and opened them.

The cabinet was empty but Boyce pushed a part of the back panel and the inside compartment swung around to reveal the men's maps and hand guns.

Everything was hung on certain hooks and the entire case was beautiful.

Before Boyce was to close the cabinet, Empal took out of Boyce's sack one more piece of armour. It was a body harness with shoulder protectors made of gold and long strips of black onyx, resembling feathers.

Boyce and Lloyd laughed a little when they saw the beautiful Virunese air command epaulette.

Empal wondered why they were laughing at the gift that he had included for Boyce. He was somewhat irritated and insulted by it until he was told the reason.

"Black feathers jutting, Lloyd." Boyce grinned while he spoke.

"I thought of Zoro when I first heard them say it!" admitted Lloyd.

"I believe that they did, too, but it didn't fit their interpretation. That's why they called us to talk to them." said Boyce.

He put the epaulette-body brace into the cabinet and swung the interior around to the empty false front, and he closed the cabinets.

"Later this evening Tucker and his cousin Tellis are flying in two eagles for you." said Empal. "He will bring them to the back of the mansion, on the base of the hill. No one will see them there or think of checking there."

Empal conveyed to them the expectant time of arriving invasion force, letting them know that most of the main fighting force would be in Phoride within a week, with the second wave being a day behind.

Zoro cawed. He enjoyed looking at the shiny metals of the armour but the discussion that took place afterwards was making him restless.

When Boyce asked Empal to stay for supper, Zoro flew out the den's window and flew around Pomperaque for a while until he disappeared.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

There was a great dinner party at Halls the next evening.

Orren was against the idea of having it but the ArchBishop apparently was very warm for his idea.

It has reached the point for Manguino that his whole days spent with Eckma in the act of fornication was beginning to tire him. He wanted an interesting diversion in order to get his life to seem fulfilling and exciting once again.

Orren didn't participate. He went up to the cathedral's spire early and watched the sky for hours.

At the height of the gala this evening the urge returned to Manguino and he left his higher cardinals to entertain the guests while he took Eckma back to their chamber.

When they entered the chamber, disrobed and were just to get into their pool, Manguino looked to the window and saw Jessuum Benitar standing there.

"Jessuum!" exclaimed Manguino, walking towards him, still naked.

This was quite disturbing for the prophet but he said nothing about it.

"I thought that I'd never see you again!" Manguino said to him.

Jessuum looked about the chamber and saw Eckma staring right into his face while she stroked the nipple of her left breast.

He looked away from her and turned slightly away from her direction while he spoke to the ArchBishop.

"I come to ask if you remember the prophesy that I gave to you, once upon a time?" he asked Manguino.

"Yes, and don't repeat it to me!" Manguino replied in a hostile voice, then continued. "But, you can tell me something, Seer. Are the two men from Besten, Boyce Loebh and that Lloyd friend of his, part of that prophesy?"

"I am not here to inform one someone, or to falsely accuse another." answered Jessuum. "I am here to tell you that you will soon answer for your life and for all those things which you have done throughout it. Be warned and prepare yourself!"

Manguino began to stomp in anger and he boiled with a fit of temper, brought on by Jessuum's strange way of frightening — by not saying very much.

He turned back to Jessuum but Jessuum was gone. This made the ArchBishop even more angry.

"Where'd he go?" he hollered.

"Out the window!" Eckma said in an apathetic tone.

Manguino looked about the window and saw nothing but a little bird circling around the windows below him.

"That strange man will be the end of me!" Manguino said, then he sprinted back to the pool, jumped in and had his usual violent sex with Eckma.

Up in the spire of the cathedral, Orren was staring at the moon and at the rest of the sky; and not long after midnight he once again saw the Angels of Mons coming towards Pomperaque, from the northern sky.

They were the same four Mons that he saw before but this time they all separated and descended upon the streets of the city.

However, the Mons did not ride the streets. They did, in fact, ride a meter above them.

Cardinal Orren was nervous and frightened beyond his reasoning and he couldn't sleep. He spent the remainder of the night in his bed chamber reading the scripted words of Jessuum Benitar, to see what more he could recover from its cryptic verses.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The week was nearing its end and the invasion force, including the intended second wave support, would soon be pouring into the northern perimeters of Upper Phoride.

Boyce and his right arm, Lloyd, ran around the mansion and parts of Pomperaque wishing all those who were voluntarily enlisted to their cause, the greatest of luck and they let them know that the forces would be along.

Everyone knew that they would be the advance lines that were to try and take Pomperaque, and the rest of Phoride, from within.

They had all noticed a sudden concentration of monastic police, walking the streets and securing certain important streets and buildings.

Mingo and bix were worried that those at Halls knew something but Lloyd had explained to them the prophesy that the Seer from Mount Benitar had given to the ArchBishop and they were becoming lunatics because of it.

"Just relax, men. They will wait until they see more signs in the sky, like there were last night. They will interpret those as bad omens. They expect a takeover that is more supernatural than a take-over made by the discontented people of this city."

Lloyd somehow made sense to them and they became calm again and they were sent to round up all those who offered their support to Boyce and they took them to the underground passage running beneath the Blue Mansion.

Lloyd and Boyce had gone to the other side of Bimini Hill, at its base, where Tellis was keeping the two eagles calm and happy.

"Beautiful, are they not?" asked Tellis and the two men nodded with admiration and helped to feed the majestic birds.

"I am amazed that men could domestic them!" Lloyd said in a soft exclamation.

"They are fit for kings to fly!" Tellis looked at Boyce when he said that and Boyce was pleased by it.

They made their way up the hill when they were finished with Tellis and they didn't go into the mansion right away.

They were silent for the most part, while climbing, but when they came to the back of the mansion, where the beautiful garden was, they sat down on a warm marble bench and reflected on the past for a while.

"We have gone through much in our lives." Boyce said as he sighed. "Now, the hour approaches. I hope that I will take Phoride as mine — as we had promised my father."

"Those were great years." agreed Lloyd. "We learned much, and have seen more than the most men see in ten lifetimes."

"That is so, my friend. What's more, we could never have done it without you and your family. I needed your guidance and you obliged by giving me the fullest possible education that you could."

"I had learned just as much through your help, Boyce." said Lloyd, with a degree of modesty that made what Boyce had said before, less than fantastic.

As the two men talked so did Orren, at Halls. He had a private council with the high cardinals and he arranged with all of them to bring into Pomperaque, the entire monastic army.

It wasn't unusual that all the high cardinals would give their consent to Orren's requests. They, too, had seen the strange signs in the skies and each one of them had their own ideas concerning the meaning to the Seer's prophesy.

When Manguino found out about the armies being put on a battle alert status he was enraged. He didn't want to have a battle because he believed that the city had nothing to fear. Only he, he thought, had a threat on his life and rule.

Jessuum Benitar had told him that he would answer for his actions and that he should prepare himself, but in that, there was no indication of war. He had imagined that the ancient Christ would judge him. That was odd since he had kept that ancient religion from the people, as did the Canon Di'Vaticanus, from so long ago.

The ArchBishop didn't know what to do and no one could give him advice that sounded sane. His prophet didn't come to him any more and he knew that it was his own fault for being lewd towards the only one who could possibly help him.

He should've controlled Phoride and his life differently, he now began to think. He thought that he could have had the same power, as he now has, if he had half as many people executed and had partaken less in his debauchery with whatever women he could invade, under the excuse of wanting progeny. Maybe he cursed himself, and it wasn't Brook's curse that produced horrid creatures and idiots as his children.

He wondered if he could save himself if he got to his knees and prayed for his forgiveness from the True Living God, which he still didn't love or believe in.

He promised to kill no more or crave to look upon or participate in sexual obscenities with women and, like a few untold times, with men and animals.

He didn't know how to react to Orren himself. Orren had been rash and quick in having all his men take their respective positions in the city, but Manguino couldn't tell him why he should not have done it.

Boyce and Lloyd saw the interesting manoeuvres of the Cardinal Orren's army, all stationed facing outward from the city, waiting for an attack from outside.

There was news from Orren's spies in the north. The messages stated that the Bestenese army had disappeared.

Orren waited for an invasion.

All the activity amused Boyce and Lloyd. They predicted that the monastic army would be called to defense ready alert when the ArchBishop's spies informed Halls about the move south by the Northern United Alignment forces. The surprise attack from within the city would take Orren's army, totally by surprise.

In the evening the ArchBishop called Orren to the office and Orren became impatient during their talk.

Orren wanted to go to the spire and watch the skies again, but Manguino wanted to talk about himself and his thoughts about the prophesy. He came to the office with the prophesy rolled up in a sheet of off-white paper. He had read the words some more this afternoon and became angered at the great ArchBishop's naivete of it.

He stormed into the office and just stared at Manguino.

"With the drug that Polis had developed from the old formula," said Manguino while staring out of the window, "I thought that I would live forever."

He looked at Orren for a moment and thought about the remarkable resemblance he had to his father, the late Cardinal Allen.

"I do so love power. Anything that I wanted I would get, no matter what it was!" he said to Orren, then looked out of the window again.

Orren came closer to him.

"So are the benefits of having no one above you to be afraid of, Your Grace." he told Manguino.

He laughed and with wet eyes he continued to speak in a soft voice while he rubbed his groin.

"Power is beautiful. If I demanded to someone to kiss my scrotum, it would be done. If I commanded someone to rub my refuse over themselves, or even to eat my refuse, it would be done."

Manguino's tone of speaking was soft and had a pleasurable quality about it, as if the imagery that he was conveying to Orren was pleasing to himself.

Orren felt disgusted but tried not to let it show, and he began to speak of something other than the fantasies that go with power.

"You do not have to worry about being overrun, Holiness!" he told Manguino. "My army is out there ready to die for you, if necessary."

"That would be a beautiful sight to see, I think. I will bless each one in paradise when they die." he muttered.

"My men also fight for the survival of our ways, in Phoride." Orren reminded the ArchBishop that there was more than just he, as a reason to fight in Pomperaque.

"There has been a great error on your part, so I believe!" Orren said.

"I cannot make errors!" the ArchBishop rebuked him. "Watch your words, Orren. No matter if you are my most favoured cardinal I will have you killed if you continue."

"Have me killed, then! If you can find someone who will do it!" Orren threatened back to his master.

Manguino was angry, and like a child, he turned his face back to the window and pouted as he stared out.

"I have found that the prophesy is clear, and yet we all have sought interpretations." he explained. "Yours is an error of trust. You have disregarded the two Bestenese and their crow, and you have disregarded my vision of the mons, as being omens of our destruction. I am prepared for anything, even if you are not!" he blurted at Manguino.

"Prepared!" Manguino screamed. "Prepare yourself! — that's what Jessuum Benitar said before my ejaculation!"

"You are behaving as if you are mad, Manguino!" Orren pointed at him as he drew nearer. "It's not becoming of someone of your greatness."

"Yes, I see that — and I also see that you are not kind towards me while I am troubled about what is being done to me!"

Orren shook the written prophesy in his hand and he returned to a steadier and more controlled way of speaking to his master.

"We can only see that which is written but after it happens." Orren sounded as if he understood the prophesy and he wanted to reveal his knowledge to Manguino. "I have read about my vision of the Mons, that bird on the stranger's shoulder, your trust of the two men and your feast afterwards — "

" — What are you talking about?" Manguino interrupted him.

"I am talking about the prophesy, Your Grace. It is clearly states and no interpretation is needed."

There was a convulsive silence in the room. It lasted only for a blink of an eye, but seemed like an eternity.

"Let me see that, Orren!" he demanded.

Orren unravelled the document and read aloud from it:

"Four elements, ride on high
Come from the greatest fears inside.
All suspicions end with feast
Of gilded skins and threaded beads — "

Manguino began to stomp his feet as he screamed at the top of his voice, that carried through every part of Halls, for Orren to stop.

"Stop. Don't read it! Don't read it!"

He rushed to him but tripped on the robe that he was wearing over his naked body, and Orren skipped to another familiar part of the transcript.

"Black feathers from his shoulders jut
As promised in the Holy verbal blab
Shall come and take his place that day
And rule the city where he once did play."

Manguino raved, screaming to Orren to stop reading the words out loud to him.

"Stop it, you fool! You don't know what you're doing!"

Suddenly there was a silent spell, after Manguino went down on his knees and pounded the floor with his fists.

Far in the distance the cawing of Boyce's crow, Zoro, was heard as it circled around the city in a frenzy.

Orren helped Manguino to his feet and they went over to the window.

The moon was out and it was full, its light filling in the shadows of the buildings made by the city pole lights.

As they watched, red streaks began to etch themselves across the surface of the moon. It looked as if it was bleeding and very soon the entire surface was red.

Manguino and Orren both felt ice-cold as they watched the four Angels of Mons appear before the moon and ride towards the city.

The sky around the Mons flashed with lightning that was absent of thunder, and overhead they saw a great comet slowly pass into the horizon.

They fell aback as if hit by a huge boulder.

"What happened?" cried Manguino as he held on to Orren's arm.

Orren pushed him away and as he got to his feet he felt the floor tremble beneath him.

"It was an earthquake, or maybe it wasn't — I don't know!" said Orren, a little bit irritated by Manguino's effeminate actions.

They thrust their heads out the window and watched the Mons slowly walk their horses through the streets. The horses' clip-clop echoed throughout the city, replacing the thunder when the lightning flashed.

Halls shook, but the rest of the city appeared to be calm and oblivious to the signs.

"You are truly stupid for reading the manuscript to me. I have told you many times, never read it to me. I made that a law. You have brought doom to Phoride."

Cardinal Orren listened to the ArchBishop and when he was finished, turned to him.

"How you have ruled Phoride for such a time is beyond me, Manguino, but if you will, I will take responsibility for whatever befalls this great land." he promised Manguino, then added. "You go back and practice your bestial arts with Eckma, and with whomever else strikes your fancy. I have served you for a long time, and I will continue to serve you until one of us dies!"

He huffed towards the office doors before he exited the room and he stopped.

"Jessuum should've warned me about you!" Manguino hollered at Orren.

"You can go fornicate with Jessuum, as well. He may just give you the pleasure that you have been searching for."

Orren slammed the door of the office and Manguino turned his head and looked out of the window.

Zoro was flying around squawking his head off while the stars, in the dawn sky, began to fade away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Something strange had taken place over the last couple of weeks in Pomperaque and the rest of Phoride, as well. Under normal circumstances, something like this happening would have been welcomed by those at Halls, especially if they were the monastic guards — the police force.

Cardinal Hint, who headed the guards, had made a report to Cardinal Orren, that there has been a steady decrease in crime within Phoride over the last few weeks. He added a footnote to that by telling Orren that many of the known criminals had disappeared, not to be found anywhere in Phoride.

Orren had revealed this observation to Manguino when he went to his office to tell him that he should start arming himself.

Manguino listened to Orren, even though Orren was beginning to get on his nerves, and he agreed to prepare himself.

"I wouldn't have to do this if you didn't bring on this craziness!" the Archbishop said to

Orren, making certain that Orren knew that he would never be forgiven for his act of disobedience towards him.

"I had considered these criminals some time ago, when the renovations of the Blue Mansion were taking place, and those men used them. It strikes me as odd that these criminals have begun to vanish. There must be a reason for it!"

Orren paced around the office then sat down in the large chair in front of the Archbishop's desk, as he spoke. He watched the Archbishop's face. It was as stern and rugged as he once knew it to be and Orren believed that Manguino had accepted what was happening to Phoride and himself.

"It's my opinion that we need a show of merciless strength, here in Phoride, in order to avert internal rebellion." Manguino finally said to Orren while he stood before him.

Orren looked up at him from the chair and had an expression of deep thought.

"How do you suggest we do this, Holiness?" Orren inquired. He was calm and she still respected Manguino, even though the problem between them was severe a few nights ago.

"Those criminals that have not disappeared; Cardinal Hint's men will round them up and take them to the square for execution." he answered Orren.

Orren's expression still showed deep thought and he took a deep breath and sighed.

"Do you think that executing those criminals is a good idea?"

"I have had enough people executed to be sure that I am doing rightly with this decision." answered Manguino. "It's too late, anyway, to turn compassionate!"

Orren thought so, too, and he made a little jerky nod and rose to his feet.

"I want you to do it, immediately, Cardinal Orren!"

"I had presumed as much, Almighty One!"

Orren exited the office, heading for his own command office near the defence room.

He dressed in his command uniform and headed for the defence room where some high cardinals and officers waited for him.

His uniform was impressive and frightening. His helmet was high and sickle shaped, that went from the front to the back. On the crest of the helmet, below the sickle, was a small ridge that looked like the knots of a rope. Sticking out from these knots were many barb-like pins, about finger length. It looked menacing when it was on his head and especially when he wore his chromium armour with it.

He stepped into the defence room and stood at the front of the room beside a large table.

"We have been instructed to take and execute what criminals we can find and use this act as a show of our strength. The Almighty feels that by doing this, it will deter any possible rebellion from within the city."

Cardinal Orren stood there, resembling a majestic statue of a demigod, waiting for the men that he spoke to, to ask him questions. To his surprise, the men in the room accepted the Archbishop's suggestion and so were not opposed to the performance of the order.

"Seeing that there are no questions or statements to be made, we should go ahead with the order, immediately."

Orren left the room and went up to the cathedral's spire and gazed over the entire city of Pomperaque, as-well-as some of the surrounding countryside. The beauty of the panorama before him faded within his heart. What he observed was no longer that to which he had become accustomed. Everything looked dark and ominous even with the sun shining brightly overhead.

Scores of criminals were rounded-up and chained. They were herded, like cattle to a slaughterhouse, to the town's square. Many of them guessed what was going to happen but they couldn't believe it, and yet, there was a remarkable absence of fear within them.

The citizens of Pomperaque were already beginning to gather in the square. They, too, displayed no great fear. This disturbed Orren to his very core. He was certain the people would be touched by the event. There have been countless executions in Phoride, ordered by the Archbishop, but always there was some semblance of trial. This time all the deaths were to be summary but there was no outcry.

The criminals knew that something unpleasant was about to happen. They realised, immediately, there was no trial. Nevertheless they remained calm and oddly curious to what was about to happen to them. Not one of the criminals — man or woman — struggled against the monastic guards who were fastening their arms and legs to the shock wall.

Word had finally reached the Blue Mansion and the hundreds of men within its underground passages. Everyone had a friend or relative that was about to be killed. Many felt they could no longer wait with their new leaders, to prevent the carnage.

Soon, five of them made their way out through the shorter passage, to the south east, to where the sea coves on Canon's Butte hides the exit.

Mingo, Bix and three other men circled around the butte and through the back streets on their way to the square. They merged with the crowd forming there then remained in their one place, watching everything that was transpiring and waiting for Orren to arrive.

Orren was riding slowly from Halls and could be seen approaching, like a demon on a cloud, his armour glinting ominously with every fall of his horse's hooves.

Boyce was told by Cavander that Mingo, Bix and several others had gone to the square.

"They were afraid for their people, my Lord. They couldn't wait for you!"

For a moment, Boyce was angered. Lloyd, as well, especially when they found out that those men had taken with them the new electrophore-laser weapons, issued to them.

"I suppose this changes our plans somewhat!" Lloyd stated.

"It does but we'll have to go with it, now." Boyce replied as they made their way to the viewing den. "I sent Cavander to keep them from using their weapons too soon, in case something goes wrong and helps Orren's army to prepare itself for our attack. I just pray that he gets to them quickly."

"That was a wise precaution!" Lloyd praised Boyce's tactical handling of this little inconvenience.

They entered the viewing den and Boyce opened the cabinet and its secret space, revealing their treasure of armour and weapons.

They donned their armour and set their weapons in their respective holsters. Their laser rifles were strapped onto their right legs, the hand guns on their right hip belts and their sabres were hanging on their left side. They were ready for battle and they quickly made their way down to the rear base of Bimini Hill where Tellis was keeping watch on the eagles.

Tellis was not surprised with their requests for him to prepare the birds for immediate flight. He didn't ask any questions or said a word. He did what he was told and he waited for further orders.

The saddle harnesses were quickly but effectively put on the eagles and Boyce ordered Tellis to go to the passages and order all those inside to attack the army and the guards near the centre of the city.

Tellis ran up the hill and into the mansion.

Orren had arrived at the square and he quietly looked at the people while Cardinal Hint and his police, the monastic Guards, were grouping the prisoners into fours and lining up two on each side of the shock wall.

Motorized freight cars moved near to the square and slaves were brought also, to heave the carcasses of the prisoners into the cars for shipment to the city incinerators.

Orren straightened up and motioned to the executioners and several dozen criminals were killed, each group of four being brutally forced in front of the wall, and attached to it, after seeing their friends killed. Yet, even with this, the people in the square did not respond with fear.

Orren motioned again and the executioners stopped. He turned to the people and hollered to them.

"It was a divine order ... every criminal should be executed. It's an example of what will happen to anyone that is disloyal or rebellious to the ArchBishop's ways." he said to them.

Mingo and Bix had tears in their eyes and the three other men moved to the back of Orren without being seen.

"Conspiracy and treason will be dealt with harshly, in the same manner as you all witness here, today. There will be no trials and even those who are only suspected of wrong doings towards Halls, will be executed."

Rising up behind the Blue Mansion were the two men on their eagles, riding on the base of the eagles' necks. They circled overhead, surprisingly unnoticed by those below them, and they were soon joined by Zoro, circling with them. Boyce was pleased to have Zoro near him, as luck.

Orren ordered more criminals to be killed and a dozen more men fell and were thrown into the freight cars as if they were piles of excrement being shovelled into a pit.

There was a loud cry that came from the midst of the crowd and everyone turned to it.

"DEATH TO ALL AT HALLS - DAMN THE ARCHBISHOP!!"

The cry was coming from Mingo and he began to fire his electrophore-laser towards Orren.

Orren was hit a few times but wasn't hurt, the chromium armour protecting him from the blasts. He was astonished to see that this man, who he recognized as the thief, Mingo, possessed that kind of weapon.

Soon, several more blasts were heard and Mingo fell dead, along with his brother. The others charged Orren, screaming death-cries, but Orren swung his horse around and brandished his sword at them, cutting them down, too.

"Get their weapons!" Orren ordered the nearest guard and the guard fetched them, but when he reached the dead men, there were no weapons at any one of the five bodies.

"Everyone here will die if those weapons are not recovered!" he threatened.

Above him was heard a ridiculous cawing and Orren looked up to see Boyce and Lloyd, in battle dress, gliding down towards him, with that wretched crow beside them.

Lloyd screamed down to him. "Will you die as easily by my hand, as did your father?"

Orren's eyes studied the two men's battle garb and he saw Boyce's feather-like, black onyx epaulettes. His attention, however, quickly focused upon Lloyd. An instant hatred overtook him at Lloyd's admission of killing the Cardinal Allen, his father.

"You will die, whoever you are and whatever devil had sent you here!"

"It is obvious that you are a progeny of a whore and a mad dog, Orren!" Lloyd screamed down at him. "Get on your knees before the son of Brook Scullion-Blue." Lloyd yelled to him and pointed at Boyce.

A buzz rang through the crowd but it sounded both panicked and somewhat pleased. This caught Orren's attention, immediately.

"I kneel to no man!" maintained the Cardinal.

"You do when you kiss the Archbishop's anus!" Lloyd taunted Orren and Zoro cawed in a frenzy.

"You will die, scum!" declared the Cardinal.

"We will see, little man — and my name is Lloyd Bartlett!"

When he heard the name, Orren knew that this was the son of Harvard Bartlett, and he was indeed the one that killed his father.

Lloyd brought forth the rifle from his leg holster and shot at the Cardinal, toppling his horse out from under him and sending him into a pile of corpses heaped beside the shock wall.

Orren got to his feet and ordered the guards to shoot them down but, Boyce took his eagle and flew to the east, over the butte.

It was a godsend to Boyce that the armies of the alignment had reached the Joenine Forest.

The commotion had drawn curious eyes from those religious citizens of Gothel. Lilith had a perfect view of the assembling army and she finally caught sight of who she knew to be her beloved husband, with Zoro still by his side.

Boyce landed and arranged for a short aerial battle to divert the monastic force's attention from the army that would charge into the city by surprise.

There was only some dozen eagles for this stage of the attack. The scores of eagles that were to fight were scheduled as the second wave that were to arrive tomorrow, but at least the cavalry was only an hour away.

Boyce hoped that Halls wouldn't know what hit them even considering the strange forewarning that they had for the invasion.

While Boyce was quickly taking charge of the operations from the Joenine Forest, Lloyd had flown across the open ocean to find the Bestenese navy. Before long he found them. The fleet was amassing several kilometres to the south east of the Phoridene coast.

He landed on the flag ship and let the fleet commander know that they could make their way to Phoride, for a landing and their attack.

He soon made his way back to Pomperaque.

By this time, one of the high cardinals suggested to the Archbishop that Lloyd had not flown out to sea for no reason and that there was probably an armada out there, somewhere.

With this suggestion, Orren was ordered to secure the coastline and he had one man placed every twenty meters on the southern shore.

If any kind of attack was to come from the sea, these soldiers would sink the modes of transportation, while still in the deep, annihilating the enemy.

Boyce was flying back towards the city as the sun began to make its way towards the far horizon.

Lloyd flew back to Halls and fought, from the air, with a few of the monastic guards that were there, keeping the Archbishop safe.

Manguino was watching the entire show but he felt no real emotion for either side.

Cardinal Orren had come back to Halls after the two men flew off. He watched the battle with Manguino and he was frustrated and furious.

"Look at those stupid fools!" he said to Manguino about his own guards. "They don't know what to do but die like rats in a burning pit."

"I do not worry. We will be victorious here, as always!" said Manguino, actually believing it. "I will give each of my men some of my godly power and I will fight through them!"

"You do that — but meanwhile I have to find some way to destroy their birds. Now their cavalry has come in. We have to regroup without their aerial observation of it." huffed the cardinal.

"Why don't we just shoot the birds? That shouldn't be too difficult!" Manguino suggested.

"Our weapons don't have the range to shoot the birds that high up!"

He sat down for a moment and removed his great helmet and ran his fingers through his sweaty hair.

Manguino went to his desk and opened a side of it revealing a hidden recess. He took off a couple support bolts, a huge cross bow, similar to those that Boyce and Lloyd possessed.

He took it to the window and aimed at Lloyd's eagle as he soared by, and he shot the longest and thickest arrow, right at the bird.

The arrow pierced its way right through the bird and it convulsed in mid-air, and began to fall.

Lloyd was caught by surprise for a moment but he glided the bird to the road leading up to Halls.

He jumped off the great bird before the bird buried itself into the soft earth at the road side and he ran for cover as the guards, stationed above upon the quadrangle wall, shot down at him.

Boyce swooped down from above and wiped out the men from the wall and Zoro cawed in victory, directed at Lloyd.

He and Boyce waved back to one another and Lloyd ran to the centre of town, followed by Boyce, above him. By this time the great mass of the people that congregated down in the square were embroiled in the battle. Few were fighting on the side of Halls and the square was quickly secured.

Orren sent several of Hint's men, mounted on horses, to pursue Boyce. Each of them carried a cross bow and they rode headlong towards the town, after Boyce.

The entire city was nightmarish in appearance. Like an abstract picture, a foggy dream, it was dark out but parts of the horizon was purple and orange colour, and it looked like it was aflame with yellow and blood red.

The entire sky was filled with birds, most of them white in colour and they shimmered when their flapping wings caught the remaining twilight and hurled it back towards Phoride, and Pomperaque.

Boyce flew by a tall building and set down on the flat roof of another nearby. He looked over the ghastly empty city and announced his mind to it.

"PHORIDENES! Come out and fight for peace! Come out and fight for the memory of your beloved Brook Scullion-Blue! Come out and fight, for me — his son!"

He took off from the roof top and quickly rose and swung around the tall building again.

Lloyd watched him from an alley near the square and he also saw the horsemen with the cross bows.

They dismounted and took a circular position, facing outward and upward. They raised their cross bows into the air and waited for Boyce to get closer.

Lloyd took aim with his electrophore and shot them but before they fell dead, two of the men let go with their arrows and their arrows found their mark.

Boyce's eagle writhed in pain and heaved in the air and Boyce could not control it. The bird collided with the tall building nearby and threw Boyce over the rock railing of the building's main balcony.

Lloyd watched it all and soon became extremely worried when Boyce didn't show himself, and there was the Cardinal Orren riding to the square with five other men, their own electrophores blazing their trail.

CHAPTER FORTY

Lloyd was extremely concerned for his friend so he sprinted over to the building, to help him.

It was almost totally dark when he reached the building.

Lloyd saw that Orren and the five other horsemen weren't far off, and as a matter of fact, were so

near that s he climbed up the stairs inside the building, he could hear Orren's order to his men, to bring him the head of the enemy leader.

Lloyd couldn't let this happen.

He finally made it to the balcony and he peered through the gaps in the rock railing as the horsemen dismounted and headed towards the entrance, below.

Lloyd couldn't bring Boyce to consciousness. Boyce had been hurt and Lloyd knew that he was passed out because of the pain.

Boyce's entire left shoulder was bleeding through his armour.

Lloyd had to get Boyce back to the mansion and have him bandaged up there. First, however, he had to make the squad below him less of a threat. He drew his gun, leaned over the railing and started to fire down on them. He managed to kill two of the men but the rest retreated with Orren, out of range from Lloyd's weapon.

When they became calmed and after they regrouped, they charged the building but then quickly turned and retreated back to Halls.

Lloyd was astounded then he looked up into the dark northern skies towards the strange thunderous clapping and searing whistling. He saw a great squadron of Kentitian Eagles being led by Empal.

The eagles circled the city over the square.

The men controlling them weren't aware of Boyce and Lloyd below them, but they did see Orren's squad (or what was left of it), quickly withdrawing to the relative safety of Halls.

Some of them attacked Halls and others continued to circle.

This gave Lloyd the perfect opportunity to take his best friend back to the Blue Mansion.

Boyce had luckily regained consciousness and got to his feet with Lloyd's help.

"I saw you crash into this building." Lloyd told him, then gently touched his shoulder. "Does it hurt very much?"

Boyce painfully looked into Lloyd's eyes and smiled.

"Just when I laugh ..." he said, then continued. "... what do you think?"

They smiled at one another and Lloyd helped Boyce to slowly descend the stairs, while he watched out for the enemy.

For further protection he had Boyce keep his helmet on and his gun out.

The thrill of the fight and the accident was still with both men and Boyce didn't really feel the pain in his shoulder because of it.

He was sluggish in his movement but he didn't have to be totally held up by Lloyd. All he needed was to be steadied by his friend while they rumbled up the road, back towards the Blue Mansion.

They were just about to reach the door of the mansion when there was a sudden escalation of fighting centred around Canon's Butte, but slowly spreading to the mansion's side of the city.

The Virunese were firing electrophora and lasers down at the monastic army that had a regiment of archers that were quickly grouped by Orren for the fight against the eagle power.

There was a huge, hot orange colour rising from behind Halls and the butte.

Lloyd felt devastated because he knew that the colours could only mean the unsuccessful landing of the Bestenese navy.

The great glow of the sky suggested to him that most of the navy was burning.

Bursts of laser shot over Halls from the other side. At least some of the force had landed and was engaged in a battle and Lloyd did so wish, with all his heart, that his friends from besten would be triumphant.

He helped Boyce into a large room that faced Halls. The room was being used as a hospital, to help those who were severely wounded.

Boyce was cared for by Cavander and it was good news for both him and Lloyd.

Boyce wasn't very badly hurt, only having cut up his shoulder like a deep scrape.

Cavander told him that he would have to take it easy for a few hours.

Lloyd agreed with Cavander that Boyce should get some sleep, promising Boyce that he could handle the situation out there. Boyce was sure of that and subsequently submitted to their request for his rest.

The fighting that was at the butte and the square had now spread to the mansion itself. Several companies of men were inside the mansion, kept there on the off chance that the mansion would be subjected to a siege and they all readied themselves when they saw that the monastic army was steadily moving closer to the building.

The Virunese, on their eagles, were dropping out of the skies, being shot down by both electrophoric charges and arrows.

The fighting continued unbroken and soon those within the mansion were trying to keep the ArchBishop's armies from getting within reach of the doors and windows.

The outside of the building was pitted with holes and cracks, as well as burns, caused by the bolts of electrophora and laser heat, from the enemy.

From all those men shot down from the sky, Orren had commanded that their weapons be taken and used on them. Soon the two armies were closer to equal in their advantage over each other, but Orren's men fought harder as if the devil was in each of them.

Boyce slept as he was asked to and he didn't seem aware of the trouble that was breaking all around him.

Lloyd had gone through the wall in the viewing den, taking the short underground passage to the cove exit, on the shore behind the butte.

He took off his helmet as he looked across the glassy ocean and saw that a few ships retreating from battle, while most of them burned on the rocks which rose out of the water.

The bodies of dead Bestenese were everywhere, with only a few of the bodies being those of the monastic armies.

He noticed that the powerful weapons, made for Boyce's cause, were nowhere to be seen, and he had no doubt that the enemy was now using them.

He looked up at the evil shape of Halls, reaching to the pitch black sky above him.

Monastics were no longer keeping an eye on the shore line. They believed that the Bestenese would never come back to shore for more of the same defeat that they had already suffered.

Lloyd was having doubts about seeing those who retreated, coming back for another go at out-flanking the ArchBishop. He didn't blame them, though.

He put his helmet back on his head and slowly walked to the base of the butte and started to climb the rocks.

The take over of Pomperaue, which both Boyce and Lloyd wanted to accomplish with the minimum of blood shed had become a blood bath.

Unknown to Orren's army, half of the Krolalin cavalry was held back from the initial battle. Now, however, under Tucker's capable leadership, the cavalry charged through Pomperaue from the north and began to annihilate the army that had the Blue Mansion under attack.

Orren retreated, with a few other high cardinals, back to the Halls Cathedral. They were soon followed by monastic lieutenants leading their own battalions back to the relative safety of Halls' quadrangle.

The men, fighting from the inside of the Blue Mansion, were relieved to see the cavalry because the energy charges that they did have in reserve, for their weapons, were all drained of their power during

the battle around the mansion.

The cavalry spared a few dozen charges for the men within and a small celebration was started to express their pleasure at still being alive. Everyone took the opportunity to eat something while the retreat armies stayed away planning their next attack phase.

Lloyd had found his way into the Halls Cathedral and trying to keep himself from being seen, he searched as many rooms as he could, looking for Manguino or someone that was closest to him.

Tucker had made a decision to attack the Halls Cathedral with the help of Empal and what was left of the Virunese air support.

Word was sent to the Bestenese commander of the retreating naval fleet, which was comprised of only five ships (from an original compliment of fifty), and he agreed to give his landing another try, but farther up the shore.

The attack was swift and they caught Halls by surprise.

Tucker's cavalry hit them straight on while Empal's air force struck them from above, and the navy hit them from behind after the cliffs on the butte's north eastern side.

The battle escalated into a full conflict, and soon, both sides no longer had any power left in their energy cells. This didn't stop the battle however. In fact it spurred the fighting into more of a hand-to-hand mode, with swords and supportive cross bows.

As the fighting continued and turned more bloody, the moon began to rise over the Joenine Forest, adding a silvery-blue light to the arena of fighting, and giving the entire city the look of a necropolis, with bands of demons fighting over its control.

Boyce was looking out the window of the hospital room and was wondering how Lloyd was doing in battle.

Lloyd was wondering if Boyce was awake and fighting, but soon, this wondering left him when he found the largest and most luxurious looking bed chamber of those that he'd looked into.

He silently crept into the room, making certain that he wasn't seen, and he slowly walked while he cautiously drew his sabre. He looked ominous in his armour and parts of it did scrape and screech with every step that he made.

"Come in!" said a ratty feminine voice.

Eckma was in the chamber with her and Manguino's only living child.

The child was less than a year old and there was nothing physically wrong with it, and it acted normally but to Lloyd the child seemed to have a presence of evil emanating from it.

It wasn't a weak presence of evil, either. It was much like the light of a candle in a dark void, even seen for miles.

He followed the voice until he passed through some heavy blood-red drapes and saw Eckma lying naked on a huge round shaped bed, with the child beside her.

Cardinal Polis, the physician, hadn't given her a capsule of the age retardant drug, because of his prior commitment to the war. Now, sores were returning to many parts of her body and she picked at them.

Lloyd felt nauseous looking at her doing it and he didn't particularly get very excited when she took to stroking the fleshy layers of her vagina with her forefinger.

"The stories about you are true ... you are foul looking!" he said to her.

She sat up quickly with anger on her face, only to recline again, with a smile.

"Come to my bed, dear warrior. Let me touch you!" she called him to her and almost unnoticeably spread her legs a little wider.

"Cover yourself, bitch. Man was not meant to fornicate with animals!"

She still smiled. She was apparently moved by him.

Besides Manguino, Lloyd is the only other man that she has felt like taking into herself.

His toughness and gruff manner towards her made her quiver all over with anticipation.

"You can hit me, if you so wish. You can rape me. I will not make a sound even if you decide to bludgeon me!" she told him.

"You wretched evil hag. You sexless bacterial malignancy! One such as you cannot be allowed to live!"

Lloyd grabbed the baby by its leg and cut the baby in half, in front of Eckma's eyes. After he did that, he cut the halves in half and did so again.

Eckma was terrified of him now and as he went for her, with his sabre, she let out a curdling scream that carried above the battle noise and throughout all of Halls.

Eckma became hysterical until Lloyd silenced her similarly to ridding the earth of her evil child.

Manguino was watching the battle from his office window and Orren called the battle tactics from a balcony, halfway up the side of the cathedral.

Both men heard the horrific scream and both of them left their positions and quickly went towards Manguino's bed chamber.

Lloyd had entirely hacked up the bodies of Eckma and the child until all that was left of them was bloody flesh, severed bones, and pieces of internal organs strewn all over the bed.

Manguino and Orren met one another in the long hallway that led to the main chamber and they didn't say anything to one another. They just continued on their way until they reached the ArchBishop's room.

They bowled through the door and pushed their way through the curtains to where the bed was.

Lloyd, in his beautiful armour turned around when he heard the noise and he saw the cardinal dressed in his battle garb and Manguino in his robes.

Manguino didn't seem to be overly disturbed seeing that his wife and child were mutilated.

"Thank-you!" Manguino said to Lloyd. "I was getting tired of her, anyway!"

"May the true living God forgive me for murder but evil must be destroyed. In my life I served my God and I served my earthly king and friend, Boyce Loebh Scullion-Blue. In death I shall only serve my God!" stated Lloyd.

"If you will!" replied Manguino to Lloyd's statement, the looked at Orren and pointed his finger at Lloyd.

Orren raised his cross bow at Lloyd.

"The murder of my father, the Cardinal Allen, is avenged." he said then he shot Lloyd.

Lloyd didn't fall though. He stood straight and firm; his blood gushing from where the arrow penetrated his armour, right through to his back, and he even spoke.

"Your father's death was its own revenge!" Lloyd said to Orren, with blood spattering from out of his mouth. "You will not live Orren." Lloyd fell to one knee and Orren shot him a second time, nearer the heart, but lloyd continued before he fell forward. "You won't live in the next life!"

While Lloyd lay dead on the floor, in a pool of scarlet that spread about him, Orren put another arrow into his cross bow and shot the body once more time.

When he did that a surprising shriek was heard and Zoro flew around the room three times.

Orren ran after it brandishing his sword, trying to hit it in mid air, but Zoro flew out of the window and towards the Mansion.

There was a very long pole that kept a canopy of lace up over the round bed, and Orren

pulled it down. He cut off Lloyd's head, after taking the gallant helmet off of the corpse and he shoved the head onto one end of the pole.

Orren and a party of men then made their way slowly from Halls to the Blue Mansion, carrying the pole with Lloyd's head mounted on it.

The fighting had subsided, and the electric twang of the electrophore weapons was no longer heard. Only far in the background there could be heard the tinny sound of hand-to-hand sword fighting.

At the base of the cobbled walkway, leading up to the mansion, some twenty meters from the main door, Orren and his men planted the headed pole and left it there.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The first rays of sunlight illuminated the wisps and billows of smoke that rose from the damaged city. With every passing minute the sun rose higher into the morning sky, lighting the pole that was standing at the head of the cobble walkway. Soon, there was enough light to reveal the head that was on top of the pole, bringing out of the mansion several dozen men including Boyce, carrying his cross bow in his left hand. His left shoulder was in great pain but he was forcing himself to make use of it.

He walked out tall and straight, and from somewhere above, Zoro flapped his way down onto Boyce's other shoulder. It made no sound as the men slowly walked towards the pole, with Lloyd's head mounted atop it.

There was an odd, colourful aura around the head, probably caused by the play of the sun's light, but Boyce believed, with his whole heart, that it was God's presence blessing his dead friend.

The sounds of battle started up again in the distance. Electrophora blared and thunderous sounds followed.

Looking in the direction of the battle's origin, which was north, Boyce and his men saw laser light being shot into the air, and they knew that it could only mean one thing — the second invasion wave had arrived in Pomperaque, as planned.

Boyce fell to his knees and wailed, mourning his fallen friend and teacher, while he still held onto his cross bow.

His cries rose above the thunderous clamour of combat that was drawing nearer to the city.

The young sovereign finally rose to his feet again and looked at Halls with an ultimate contempt that he summoned from his soul.

His eyes had tears in them, and they were red and painful looking. He spat on the ground and took his sabre from its casement and lifted it to the air.

Boyce took a few steps passed the head of his dead friend, and in a voice that carried through the entire city, he yelled at those in Halls.

"Dirt of the world! — Fornicators of men and animals! — Oppressive son-of-whores and satyrs! — Welcomers of saturnine thought! — You foul children of Satan!" Boyce cursed at them. "Maybe you all die in the most prolonged and torturous pain!"

The fighting stopped as the battalions came upon the centre of the city and heard Boyce's booming anger shake all that was around.

Zoro quietly left Boyce's shoulder and then disappeared, unnoticed.

"Prepare yourself for damnation, Manguino. You will die, Orren!"

Boyce's hollering sounded like a promise, more than it did threatening, and he slid his sabre back into its scabbard.

He began to walk towards Halls with the men that came out of the mansion with him.

Those coenobites at Halls were all lined up on the wall of the quadrangle looking towards Boyce, when he yelled.

Cardinal Orren stood in plain sight and watched Boyce slowly approach with his men.

Manguino had listened to Boyce, also, from his office window and he was discomfited by it. He waited for Orren to return to his office. He needed advice on what to do with himself because he could not easily think on his own.

Orren waited for Boyce to reach the wall where he stood and he had ordered his guards not to fire at him. He stood on the wall dressed in his chromium armour and impressive helmet and he stared at

Boyce as he stood at the base of the wall in his own majestic armour and helmet.

This was the first time that Orren actually had a good look at this man's battle garb. This time he was certain that he saw on his shoulders the black wing-like epaulettes bringing to mind the 'black feathers' line, in Jessuum's prophesy.

"We had known from the beginning," said Orren. "that you were not to be trusted!"

He looked at Boyce while he spoke and Boyce had a strange smirk on his face when he responded.

"It only means your own downfall, and don't stay under the misconception that you will live to see the end of this day!"

Orren laughed at Boyce, pointing at him, at the same instant.

"Your threats will lead you to the same end as your Bestenese friend!" said the cardinal. "It is to our utmost disappointment that the ArchBishop didn't let us destroy you when we first suspected you!"

Boyce shook his head in defiance.

"My uncle Manguino has never been very intelligent, and you can cease that elitist way of talking because it doesn't become you!"

There was silence for a moment while they exchanged hate-filled glares.

Boyce took a deep breath and called Manguino out to fight.

"Manguino!" he called then waited. "Uncle! — Come and we will settle this war's outcome between ourselves!"

There was no answer and Boyce looked at Orren, laughing menacingly at him.

"He will not answer you!" Orren told Boyce. "He will not fight either, and why should he? He has hundreds of us to fight you for him!"

"Then let me fight each of you until only he remains!" Boyce said provokingly.

Orren shook his head at Boyce and tisked at him.

"Don't you know about the laws of nature, son of Brook?" he tauntingly asked him. "The strong survive while the weak die!"

" — And my God's universal law says that 'good shall destroy evil' — so shall I destroy you, and all those who follow you!"

There was silence again, for a brief moment until Boyce yelled to Manguino again.

"My uncle, ArchBishop! Coward of the world and Evil incarnate. Come and do battle with me, alone!"

Once more there was no answer from within the cathedral. This time Orren was bothered by it. The people could not be allowed to see the ArchBishop as a coward. He looked down at Boyce then mentioned to some of his high cardinals to come nearer.

Boyce raised his cross bow at Orren, and Orren's men did the same directed back at him.

"I will see him, Boyce. We will speak again within the hour!"

Orren and two of his high cardinals left the wall and Boyce waited for Orren to return.

Before Orren went into the cathedral he told his high cardinals to watch Boyce from another vantage point in insure that he doesn't attack.

"If he attacks, destroy him!"

The order was plain and simple, but Boyce didn't attack. Even when his men suggested to him that they charge all of them with surprise.

Boyce didn't want to. He knew that something grave would occur if he did something. Anyway, he

had come too far to let stupidity ruin all the sacrifices that he and his dead friend had made, in order to regain the Blue sovereignty.

Orren entered the ArchBishop's office and saw him standing at the window dressed in a purple robe with a scarlet surplice thrown over it.

He didn't say anything for the first while but he eventually glanced over at Orren then looked out the window again.

"I wonder what it would be like, to be killed by a relative?" Manguino asked but not looking for any answer.

Nevertheless, Orren moved closer to him and asked a question in the same manner. "How did it feel to kill a relative?"

Manguino grinned and slightly turned to the cardinal.

"I've wondered that for ten years!" he said to him and he snickered under his breath.

Cardinal Orren went over to the window and faced Manguino peering through the window.

"You don't want to fight him?" Orren stated to him.

Manguino just looked at him and whimpered.

"Where can I go, or what's more, when and how?"

Orren thought for a moment then sighed.

"The old place ... the citadel at Tannisea, but you will have to go alone and around the southern coast."

"The route to Tannisea is long and dangerous, Orren. Especially is the southern coastal loop is taken."

Orren touched Manguino's shoulder.

"It's either that or you have to fight Boyce!"

"That's quite a choice!" said Manguino.

"I will take your place while you get along to Tannisea." said Orren. "I'll send you word when to return. That son of Brook Scullion-Blue cannot win."

Manguino took a deep breath and looked out the window again when he heard Boyce's voice calling him out to fight.

"Your time is running out, Manguino. Come fight me or Halls will crumble, never to rise again!"

Orren looked out of the window, too.

"I told him, an hour." said Orren. "I think that he is trying to frighten you!"

"He's his father, all over again." Manguino stated to Orren then leaned his head against the wall by the window.

"Prepare yourself to leave. When I fight him, all will watch and you will be able to get away."

It was strange that Orren was seemingly guiding the ArchBishop's life. After all the years that Manguino, as ArchBishop, was the undisputed ruler of Phoride, he had fallen to a level of mind that very closely resembled that of an idiot.

Orren has really been the one man, who had been controlling Phoride since Manguino's marriage and unending fornication with Eckma.

Orren didn't care on way or the other about his idea that the ArchBishop's unending years of debauchery and perversion had effected his mind. Whether or not that was true was beside the point, right now.

This god's survival was at stake. He couldn't let someone like Boyce show that he was nothing more than a physical and mental weakling.

Orren helped Manguino pack a survival travel bag and saw him off at his personal tunnel that exited,

at an isolated cove, on the southern most part of Pomperaque.

With good-byes that were neither sad nor elated, the Cardinal Orren closed off the passage and went back to the courtyard, in front of the chapel. He was dressed in his same battle armour and before leaving the safety of Halls' enclosed quadrangle he instructed his high cardinals to destroy Boyce and his men, if he is beaten. He also told them to destroy the entire city of Pomperaque if he doesn't survive the combat with Boyce.

Boyce had given Tucker and Empal similar instructions, as well, but Boyce's instructions didn't call for the total destruction of his city, if he lost against Orren. His instructions only called for the destruction of the Halls Cathedral.

"Let not one stone remain standing on this butte!" he told them and waited until his rival came to him.

He finally heard the heavy gates of the wall clang and screech open.

He watched the huge doors swing inward and soon after they stopped moving, he saw his personal rival come out to fight him.

There was a great disappointment and feeling of being cheated in Boyce's heart when he saw that the man he was about to fight was the Cardinal Orren instead of the ArchBishop Manguino.

"What's this, Orren? I had called on Manguino to fight with me." Boyce said in anger.

Orren drew nearer, his chromium armour reflecting the morning sun.

He was carrying a cross bow in his left hand and he looked as if he was equally matched, weapon-wise, with Boyce.

Many of those watching Orren slowly walking up to Boyce were frightened that Boyce would not survive.

Orren looked ominous and indestructible and even though Boyce looked like a formidable opponent, his friends were not certain that he would be victorious.

"I want Manguino here before me, immediately!" Boyce demanded and then took a few steps towards him.

"As far as you should be concerned, I am the ArchBishop!" Cardinal Orren told him calmly.

Boyce slowly came closer to Orren and he prodded him with his cross bow, and with a strangely provoking little smile on his face.

"Am I to take Manguino's cowardice as the surrender of Halls and Pomperaque, to me?"

Orren was somewhat disturbed by what Boyce said to him and he pushed Boyce's bow away from himself.

"You are out of your mind." said Orren. "Halls will never surrender to you, or to anyone else. So long as I live, so long as anyone within those walls lives, Halls will not surrender!"

Boyce glared right into Orren's eyes and spoke to him as if he was a little boy.

Orren was annoyed by it all but it helped to build his hostility towards his young opponent.

"I like watching grown men like you and Manguino throwing little tantrums of temper. What is interesting is that these tantrums affect the entire state; where, to relieve your own tension, you have innocent men, women and children murdered."

Boyce stopped for a moment, watching Orren's reaction to what he had said and saw that he was irritating him.

"You and my uncle put my mansion under siege and yet we left Halls alone. We could've destroyed Halls before this war even began!"

Orren interrupted Boyce's momentum by showing his hostile nature.

"You did have Halls under siege!" hollered Orren. "That friend of your, that Bestenese, Bartlett ... he had come into Halls and had brutally murdered the ArchBishop's wife and son. That is why I must kill you. I have to avenge their deaths for him as I have avenged the death of my father, Cardinal Allen, by killing his murderer!"

He pointed down the road towards the Blue Mansion and the pole with Lloyd's head on it.

"You prepare yourself to die, then!" announced Boyce. "I have to avenge deaths, as well. I must avenge the deaths of Brook and Dearborne and my friend, Lloyd!"

He threw his cross bow to the ground and drew his sabre from its scabbard.

"Senseless bloodshed is not the way to fight a war, Cardinal Orren. Battle, like this, can be the only way!"

They circled around one another, their eyes locked together in an icy stare.

"I take a different view, young Scullion-Blue!" blurted Orren.

"I know — so much is the shame!" replied Boyce just as Orren swung his sword down at him.

Boyce caught the attack with his sabre and he spun around deflecting Orren's sword out and away from him.

Orren momentarily lost his balance but regained it in time to defend himself against Boyce's attack. They moved around a large area while they brandished their blades at one another.

Boyce's men watched-on in worry and with heated excitement, many of them twitching and grinding their teeth with each whiz and clang of the blades.

The coenobite army watched-on also but they didn't display concern for Orren. Each man's face was expressionless, and they made no movements throughout the fight.

"You fight well!" Orren complimented Boyce.

"Thank-you ..." Boyce grunted. "... and you fight, like a pregnant old woman!"

He hurled his sabre horizontally at Orren, but Orren came down on it sending the end to the ground and slashed-out at Boyce.

Boyce lurched back in pain. The armour plating on his chest had a large gash in it and blood was spurting out from the cut.

"You will soon die, Boyce. Be still and I will end it painlessly!" Orren offered to him.

They stood there gasping for air, hunched over a little as they just stared at one another.

"So long as I have breath, I shall fight you!" Boyce promised to his opponent.

"Suitable!" Orren agreed.

Orren stepped closer and lunged at Boyce.

Boyce shrank backwards, out of the way and managed to land a blow over Orren's back, with his damaged sabre, but all that happened was that the blow dented and cracked the armour. The force of the blow, however, was enough to send Orren toppling over. He landed face down and Boyce went over to him.

He stood over Orren for a moment then helped him to his feet only to be pushed away by him.

"You are a stupid young man." Orren commented. "I would never have helped you!"

Boyce, holding his side with one hand, smiled and staggered backwards a few steps. "Yes, I know!" he added.

Boyce now attacked, brandishing his sabre over and over, rotating it fervently and not giving Orren the chance to make a good swing back at him.

Orren fell back to the ground several times, and Boyce chopped at him, then stepped back. The

rhythm of his movements were monotonous and anticipatory, making Orren to constantly step backwards. It was all Orren could do to defend himself.

Then, Boyce stopped and squatted, and glared at him.

Orren slowly made it to his feet, the armour from his own left arm totally ripped off of him and the bloody flesh just hanging off of the bone.

With great pain Orren forced a smile at Boyce clutching his profusely bleeding abdomen.

"You are getting better!" Orren said to Boyce. "But why didn't you finish me off?"

Boyce smiled. "I am having too much fun ... besides — I am giving you the chance to live and to surrender!"

Orren shook his head and Boyce knew that he could not reach a compromise with Orren. Now, he had to try his hardest against this man.

Orren felt the same way. He now realised that Boyce was trained very well for this kind of fighting. It was then that Orren's mind was illuminated to all that has occurred up to this moment. He understood the prophesy and he could see the truth behind his killing Lloyd. Yet, he also understood that there was now no turner back or reconciling.

"Be on your guard!" Orren warned with a hint of affection and admiration in his voice.

"And you!" echoed Boyce.

Orren lunged at Boyce but quickly withdrew as Boyce pitched forward at him.

The move momentarily confused Boyce and catching him unaware for an instant, but he quickly fell to the ground and rolled forward a few times to escape the deadly reel that Orren had followed him with.

Dust flew up from the ground as Orren gouged the earth with his sword, again missing Boyce.

Boyce came to his feet slowly and was smiling, and Orren nodded complimentarily to him for anticipating his tactic.

They continued to fight and the time passed. Soon it was an hour passed since they had started to fight.

They hadn't said very much after the first hairy tactic that Orren had tried on Boyce. The rest of the time was spent in offensives and countering, each man trying to out-think and out-skill the other.

Boyce would wave his sabre at Orren only to change his direction at the last second, while aiming at a totally different part of Orren's body.

Orren soon caught on to it and he played the game according to Boyce's rules, but both men were exhausted and weak from a loss of blood.

Boyce's men were extremely worried about him and throughout the hour of combat they winced and cringed with each grind on the bashing blades.

Each of the men had scored blows against the other, but none of them were of sufficient force to do much else than dent their armour.

Just as those warriors, that were watching, thought that their leader's fight neared an end, and an end for Boyce especially, Boyce pushed on and disarmed Orren.

He stood there feeling stark naked and he waited for Boyce to run him through. Instead, Boyce slackened his sabre off to one side.

Breathing heavily, Boyce lifted his sabre to Orren and asked him if he wanted to continue with bare hands.

"You are mad!" Orren answered him then got to his feet.

Orren was first to charge head-long into Boyce's stomach, the top part of his helmet gouging into Boyce's wound.

Boyce grabbed Orren's helmet and twisted it until Orren sank to his knees and pulled himself away. The helmet came off and Boyce threw it off to one side. Boyce then took his own helmet and threw it beside Orren's.

Orren looked up at Boyce who was now bowed-over, and while breathing heavily he held on to his injury.

"Maybe we should stop now and pick up where we left off, tomorrow!" Orren joked.

Boyce shook his head. "So long as we breath, we fight. We agreed, Orren!"

Boyce ducked as Orren came upon him, and he was sent flying over Boyce's back.

Boyce caught Orren's injured arm and pulled on the flesh that hung from it. Orren screamed in his utter agony, rolling on the ground with his gauntlet clutching his totally damaged arm.

Boyce was in great pain, too, but he stood on his feet and approached Orren, still on the ground.

He was entirely covered in a coat of dust and his face and hair was caked with dirt and partially drying, clotted blood.

He was coughing mouthfuls of dust that he had sucked up in his painful gasps while rolling around on the ground, and Boyce threw the handful of flesh to the ground beside their helmets.

Boyce looked down at Orren, now breathing steadier with cleaner mouthfuls of air.

Their eyes welded their gazes together and boyce felt sorry for his adversary. He saw that Orren could not speak from the pain, but he saw in his eyes the unmistakable plea for mercy — the mercy of being totally released from the pain and agony wrought by an injured body, and mutilated confidence.

Boyce knelt down and took Orren about the head, embracing him.

"Somehow you seemed to be more different than any of the others at Halls!" he said to Orren.

Boyce then quickly stood up while still holding Orren's head tightly in his arms. He made a very quick jerking motion and spun around simultaneously. By the time Boyce was fully on his feet Orren's neck was snapped.

The act was painless and quick, and merciful, and Orren did not struggle while it happened.

Boyce gently lowered Orren's limp body to the ground by his feet. He bowed his head to look at his dead opponent and he preyed to the true Living God to forgive both him and Orren for their transgressions in life. He then looked up at their two helmets and at the three birds that picked at the flesh that he threw to the ground beside them.

Suddenly, Boyce heard a muffled whistling sound and a cold stabbing pain penetrated him from the back.

The high cardinals were carrying through with Orren's final wish, to destroy the city and all those who lived therein.

One of the archers shot Boyce through the back with an arrow, from a cross bow.

Tucker led a charge of the cathedral forcing the guards to withdraw into the chapel itself.

Empal ran to Boyce's limp body and pulled the arrow out, breaking off the point.

Cavander soon came along after seeing, from the blue Mansion, that the fight between his master and the Cardinal Orren was over.

He helped Empal take Boyce back to the blue Mansion, leaving behind the two warriors' battle helmets and swords, and the three birds that picked at the flesh that was once part of the living Orren's arm.

EPILOGUE: THE REVELATION

Lilith had been summoned immediately on that day when Boyce was severely injured. Without hesitation she came to the Blue Mansion with Sister Rhonta and together they patched Boyce's critically wounded body.

For a fortnight Lilith stayed by her beloved husband's bedside caring for him and praying to the great and true Living God to spare his life.

Rhonta had spent her time also praying, but her prayers weren't all taken up with requests for Boyce's recovery. Her prayers begged for forgiveness, for feeling close to a man such as Lloyd, and for feeling a deep personal loss with his death.

She prayed for guidance and strength to forget him and soon she only prayed for Boyce to heal and be as he was when he was at Gothel.

All of Pomperaque prayed, as did Gothel and the Northern United Alignment.

Even Jessuum Benitar, atop his great mountain, kept himself from food and sleep for the fortnight, while he prayed to God that Boyce would recover from the wicked hardship that he had

experienced since his birth.

Then, one morning, Jessuum saw a great white dove glowing brightly as it emerged from the sun, and the beautiful bird was being ridden by a small boy.

The little boy on the dove circled Pomperaque three times and an array of trumpets were heard echoing throughout the land.

Jessuum sighed with relief and threw himself off of the mountain and turned himself into a dove. He circled the great dove, with the boy on its back, and he heard the boy call to him.

"Henceforth, all will be well!"

The dove then soared back to the direction of the sun and disappeared.

That same morning Boyce rose out of bed and woke his loving wife, who was asleep at his feet. They embraced and kissed one another, and Boyce wiped the tears of love from Lilith's eyes with his kisses.

When they settled into each other's arms, and all was truly well, word was sent out of the Blue Mansion to the rest of the northern continent announcing that the sovereign of the entire northern continent was alive.

Gifts of homage and loyal praise were sent from all parts of the continent to the Blue Mansion.

Pomperaque was not the same as it was during the time of Brook, or of the Archbishop Manguino. As was instructed, Halls was totally destroyed. Not a rock was left standing on Canon's Butte.

The rise that had been known for centuries as the Canon's Butte, looked more like a small, round mountain.

An edict was made to all the citizens of the northern alignment, that from the day of Halls' destruction, no more building would ever be allowed to take place on the rise of land that now was called, 'Lloyd's Hill'.

With the help of his wife Lilith and his trusted friends Empal, Tucker, Harvard Bartlett and Cavander, Boyce began a program of building and social reforms for the entire continent.

Knowledge was made free to everyone who was interested in learning the truths about their past and many citizens did partake of this freedom.

The poor peasant class was taken care of as they all became a new class respected farmers that now loved and enjoyed producing food to feed the multitude.

Many of the unreasonable taxes were abolished and the citizens were permitted to give Boyce's new government whatever they felt they could spare for the governing welfare of the entire land. The people, having the freedom of paying taxes, had allowed the land to grow quickly through their generous contributions to the government.

The entire continent was transformed into a grandeur that was never before heard of, in the history of mankind.

News of this remarkable civilization spread throughout the world, and many before unknown nations, sent ambassadors to Pomperaque to negotiate a union with them.

Knowledge had made quantum leaps and bounds, and ideas and technologies that were once lost were rediscovered and improved upon by a new generation of scientists.

That knowledge that was once use for evil and sinful purposes, was put to use with only good intents.

The most part of planet Earth had become one of universal love and trust. There was no prejudice between the diverse types of people that were the descendants of the survivors of the great world holocaust, and all places became lands of having, rather than have-nots. The world economics was engaged to follow an ancient scriptural term that suggested that it was better to give, than to receive, and the people's prolific giving spread material possessions, as well as necessities, to every single individual. Every living person had that which was needed to survive by being given gifts of it.

Giftng became proper and there soon came to be a life that became happy and alive, rather than miserable and morbid.

One could not tell the difference between the wealthy and the poor since everyone lived modestly, but well.

Even Boyce Loebh Scullion-Blue, living in the Blue Mansion lived modestly, not selfishly keeping the mansion only to himself, but having citizens stay with him for some specified lengths of time, if they so wished.

All was peace. All was love and evil only had control of those few who did not accept the new ways.

Truly, a new age of understanding and cooperation had come to man by man, and their love for the one victor over damnation.

Jessuum Benitar watched the growth of the world and was pleased and excited with the abundance of life and treasure of love an trust.

He went down to Pomperaque because it was his time to speak with Boyce.

He went into the Blue Mansion and found Boyce and his beloved wife Lilith, in the viewing den; watching images on the wall, of the ways life once was like in the world.

They sat and talked for hours and Jessuum gave to Boyce an account of the thousand years that had passed by since man's greatest madness. He told Boyce about his roots and confided to him his own true name and relationship to him.

"I was born Gavin Jones, the son of Hosea Jones and his fourth wife, Ruth." he told Boyce. "You come from the line of Hosea Jones and his fifth wife, Margaret, and their daughter Dioneza (twin sister of her brother Richalé)."

He described to Boyce his intricate line of descent that reached right back into the Twentieth Century through Dioneza's artificial insemination with sperm saved from that age.

Boyce was impressed with his seventh generation great uncle Gavin, called Jessuum.

Jessuum explained to Boyce that he had been alive since Hosea's time and had never aged _ a gift given to him by God, at his birth.

Hours after the story of their relationship, Jessuum finally told him that he was here to tell him of something that would make the earth the envy of all worlds.

"You have done well, my son!" Jessuum told him. "You are good and have fought, not for your own gains, but for the gains of the entire world."

Boyce listened with anticipation and Lilith was amazed, as if she was living through a dream.

"The scriptures have promised that the Son of the true Living God would one day return to establish His kingdom of love and happiness. I am here to tell you that the day of His coming is at hand."

Jessuum stopped for a moment and saw Boyce smile a little and give Lilith a loving glance.

"What will you do on that day, Boyce?" Jessuum asked him.

"I am not a god and could never be one. I would gladly step down from my rule to submit to

a way of life as promised through Him. I will patiently await Him, and try to rule my people as best as I am able until that day when He comes — then I will rest." promised Boyce.

Jessuum shook hands with Boyce and bowed to him.

"You are surely a king among living men and may God bless you with the strength to deny evil, a single breath!"

Jessuum walked over to the window and transformed himself into a large crow. Glancing back at Boyce he squawked a few times.

"Zoar-caw, Zoar-caw!" his crowing echoed about the room, then he jumped from the window, to fly back to his mountain.

Boyce had thought that Zoro had been lost, too. Yet, he was neither with him nor gone far from him. Jessuum's concern had guided him through the most demanding times of his life and now he left him to rule with Lilith, until the Son of Man returned.

Jessuum looked down on Pomperaque, and the world, with tear-filled eyes of happiness and contented fulfillment.

"His truly will be a wiser rule!" Jessuum said to himself then he turned into a great bird of light, ascended into the sky and disappeared.

THE END

SCORCHED EARTH

A Novel Written By: Walter D. Petrovic (c) Copyright January 1980 + April 2004 Committed to MSWord 6, April 1998 Approximately 111,591 Words WALTER D. PETROVIC walter.petrovic@3web.net

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