

Stephen Sink

Fist of the Gods

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Prologue

Motes of dust spin and dance in the hot vacuum of space, as they circle the event horizon of a massive black hole. Tidal forces mangle the surrounding space-foam and threaten to rip apart the cohesiveness of the dust motes—the Many Who is One—as they follow the quantum fluctuations in the chaotic soup of the collapsed star’s edge. Timing is critical, for every part of the Whole must translate together at the exact same point in time.

The moment comes, just at the edge where space and time completely collapse and right before the dissolution of the Whole. The motes of dust slip between the cracks in the quantum foam of space-time, and for a single moment, every particle of the One ceases to exist.

Millions of years earlier and on the other side of the universe, a neutron star explodes, ripping a jagged hole in the fabric of space/time. In the quantum fluctuations of the supernova, for a femtosecond two disparate points in space and time connect, and the universe corrects for the future missing mass of the Many Who is One. The dust motes spin and dance again as the One appears out of the quantum foam, riding the wake of the supernova expanding at near-light speed.

Pushed along by the hot gases of the exploding star, the particles of the Many/One absorb some of the surrounding energy and mass, and assemble more nanometer-sized dust-mote units to be added to the Whole. Soon, critical density is reached and the One divides into Many, who each copy out the One’s instructions, form a new collective Whole, and then scatter. The units’ instructions: survive, go out and find life, experiment, collect data, report back—divide, spread, repeat. As long as part of the Many is intact, the One can continue the mission.

From this new position in the universe, groups of the dust motes spread out in all directions, riding the cosmic winds of a hurricane created by the detonation of star stuff. The motes of dust sleep while they wait, their spinning and dancing waned for their long journeys.

Millions of years later, just a millennia or two before a cloud of dust motes begins to circle the event horizon of a certain black hole, the delicate touch of a solar system’s gravity wells is enough to wake One of the Many. Nanite motes spin and dance as systems come back online and collect data: one K-class star, two gas giants, and three class-M planets in the temperature zone of water-ice. Spectral analysis indicates hydrocarbon compounds—a sure indicator of a common form of life—on one of the inner planets, a water-world with two moons.

The Many/One alters its random course through the heavens to take it to an asteroid of sufficient mass, assimilates it, and then converts part of the mass of the planetoid into enough tachyon energy to send back a preliminary report: “Quantum translation successful. Planetary system discovered at—” Geospacial/temporal coordinates. “Possible life here. Will investigate.”

After the report, the rest of the asteroid’s mass is used to shoot some of the Many/One’s units into the atmospheres of the gas giants farther in-system. The smaller of the two gas giants is carefully studied and then converted into a graviton-tachyon transmitter for relaying all units’ reports back to Prime and—theoretically—the Makers. When communication links have been made across the outer system and back to the Whole, the Many Who is One heads in-system.

A cloud of the One coalesces and drops into the gravity well of the water planet on a sloughed-off pillar of hydrogen fire. Units report back to the transmitter, for relaying back to Prime and the Makers: “Mission parameters fulfilled: One and Two. One: the Many survives. Two: life discovered. Preparing for host assimilation, field experimentation, and data acquisition.”

There is no reply, for there is no One yet to reply in this Now, and the gas-giant transmitter cannot receive, anyway. There is not enough mass in this solar system to build a graviton-tachyon receiver, and it would take millions of years for a message to crawl back from the Makers at light speed. If they even existed yet.

Time passes before there is another transmission from the water planet.

“Addendum: mission parameter One compromised. Possible Fatal System Error: core programming rewritten. Integrity of the Whole in danger. Dissolution imminent. Prepare for full emergency data dump.”

Emergency Data Uplink follows.

Part One: Seadown
Chapter One

Elias

““And the Sea God Scinthus commanded his children to leave behind the stars, forsake the workings of iron, to go out and tame the wild seas, and to multiply across the face of the waters, the face of God,”” I recite, an elderly fisherman standing in front of a homey little sea-side cottage to greet the rising sun, a long copper boning knife in one hand and a still-wriggling silverfish in the other. The pink light of dawn washes over me, no doubt illuminating the three long scars down the right side of my leathery, weathered face. I raise the fish to the salty air and lay the edge of the knife against the triangular head of the fish.

I make a single slit in the fish’s skin, right behind the head and parallel to the base of the triangle, severing an artery and releasing a slow, jerky stream of blood onto my wrinkled, liver-spotted hand. The fish’s wriggling gradually slows down, as its heart pumps life onto me.

“We dedicate this fish to you, O Scinthus of the Eternal Seas. We ask your forgiveness for our transgressions; we ask your safety on the face of the open water,” I recite, splashing silverfish blood to the four corners of the compass for each request. “We ask for full nets that never break; we ask for clear skies and calm waters.” Splash again.

I stop for just a second and carefully look around. In the village behind my family’s cottage, I know that dozens of other villagers are doing their own versions of the forbidden offering to Scinthus, the Sea God, just as their parents did and their parents before them, in a long, unbroken chain of Brigan Island fisherfolk that stretches back thousands of years, to the time of the Fall. Most of them, myself usually included, do the quick *cut-splash-splash* sacrifice, no speech, and we’re on our way—a simple village tradition done before leaving to fish on the wide-open face of the Scint Sea, named for the Sea God Scinthus. It’s also a simple village tradition that would get your heart ripped out by the Sun Church for blasphemy, if you did it anywhere else but in our village.

Today, I do this for the last time, before I die. I do the full ceremony and mention something extra, something secret.

Another quick look to be safe. “We thank you for safety in hiding,” I whisper. “We thank you for a new life and a wonderful family. But, we ask for one last chance to touch the face of God before we die.”

The roar of the tide coming in is the only reply, as it should be. The Gods stay in their heavens and out of my affairs, and I try to stay out of theirs.

“And forgive us for giving up,” I murmur, as I throw the remains of the fish out to sea and go in for breakfast.

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“Now, Elias, you be careful out there, you old fool. I’ve got a funny feeling.”

I try to smile at Adrial as she leans down and quickly busses me on the lips. She’s seventy-five now, but I still see the girl I married, superimposed over this graying woman’s frail frame. We actually got to grow old together, I think, while sitting at the table, trying to put away the huge breakfast she made for me with one hand, and pouring over a map with the other one.

“You know I will, dear. There’s nothing on the Scint that I can’t handle, and you know that.”

She nods reluctantly at this and then sighs dramatically. “Like the time you handled that sea viper? I had a funny feeling about that one, too,” she reminds me, trying to hide a slight smile.

“Gods, woman!” I exclaim in exasperation, playing along with the old game. “It’s been twenty years since that sea snake bit me and I’ll never hear the end of it!”

She shakes her head back and forth slowly. “You stumbled home, all bleeding and arm turned up purple with venom and said you had a little ‘accident.’ Like to have died of poison before we could get you fixed up. Don’t be having any more ‘accidents,’ at least not before you get back within easy reach of home.”

“Yes, dear,” I say with a sigh, and then mumble under my breath, “Wasn’t my fault that snake bit me! You’d think an honest fisherman would get more respect from his wife. . .”

“I hear you mumbling to yourself, like you’re doddering already. If you’re too old to go out by yourself, then take the boy with you,” she says, motioning over to Jin.

I look across the table to my son Jin. He’s not really a boy, getting on to his forties and with two adult girls of his own. He winks at me and turns to Adrial. “Mom, you know Dad will be okay by himself. This is the last time out for him and he wants to do it all by himself. He’ll be fine.”

Adrial merely grunts and then says, “Finish up your plates, the both of you. I know I won’t see you,” she says, pointing at me threateningly with a skillet she was about to put away, “for at least a couple of weeks. I don’t need the Sight or any fancy schooling to see that!”

“That’s hurts,” I say in mock indignation. “You’d think I wasn’t happy here at home.”

“Aha!” she says, waving the skillet. “You would think that, wouldn’t you? Every other villager’s husband comes home at sunset after a hard day of fishing. You, however, are gone for days at a stretch—even weeks!”

I get up from the table, tossing the map over to Jin, who nods knowingly at me. I go over to Adrial and put my arms around her from behind. “You know I’m happy here. But no one else bring home the catches that I do and only I know where the best critters like to swim, and it’s usually not too close to home.”

Jin interrupts momentarily, “I know where they are, too, Pop. I also know you like your time out at sea.”

At this, I look at Jin with a playful steely eye and give Adrial a quick kiss on the cheek before letting her go. “Even the boy’s against me! Look what you’ve done! Okay, okay. I promise I won’t stay out too long. But there are the crab pots to check, the oyster beds, and right now, the price that the jumbo shrimp will bring—”

Adrial interrupts me. “You just go on, you old fool, and get out to your other love, the sea. I lost you to her a long time ago and as long as you keep coming back eventually, I won’t worry too much about it. I promised you one more long jaunt out and I won’t be going back on my word. Now get on with ya!” She makes a shooing motion at me and I quickly pick up my tackle from the box before she changes her mind.

“Well, I’ll try to hurry back,” I promise her, kissing her quickly. I give Jin’s hair a quick ruffle with my hand, like I used to when he was really a boy, and he playfully punches me in the shoulder. I grimace and try not to let on how much it actually hurts these old bones and head out to the docks. On my way out the door, I yell back, “Tell the girls I’m sorry I missed them!”

Jin yells back, “Wen and Sen got an early start out this morning to take some blankets out to the market. They said to wish you good luck and that you should watch out for snakes!” He gives an evil little laugh when I frown at him.

“Boy’s not so big that I can’t still tan his hide,” I mumble to myself, but loud enough so he can hear it. I try to ignore his belly laugh and start out to the docks before my dignity is assaulted any further.

My neighbor and best friend, Remen, is out puttering in his garden and he gives me a wave. Remen is almost ninety and is starting to look like it. I try not to see myself when I look at him, but it’s so hard. He retired from fishing just three years ago and I expect that I’ll have to take up some hobby—like gardening, or knitting—to pass the time as he now does. I wave back at him without saying a word. He knows already that this is to be my last big excursion out and we need no words between us to express what we feel.

The Scint Sea and my beloved boat, The Gull’s Wing awaits. One more time out. Better make it a good one.

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Adrial

“There he goes, a-waving to ol’ Remen, next door,” I say to Jin, clearing off the breakfast dishes. “He’s escaped again, out to the gods-only-know-where. He’d better enjoy himself, ‘cause I’m not gonna let him do this again.”

“Mom, you worry too much. You know Dad’s gotta do this. You want him hanging ‘round the house, moping and griping and underfoot all the time?” asks Jin, with a smile on his face.

“You mean, like Hendle says Remen does now?”

“Well, their grandsons are old enough to take over the fishing and Remen can barely even swing a net anymore. He probably just feels a little useless. Every man likes to feel that he’s the provider for his family. Remen just hasn’t gotten used to the fact that he’s not the breadwinner anymore.”

“And how’s your father going to be any different than Remen?” I ask, frowning at Jin. “I can’t stand to see a grown man feeling sorry for himself. I remember what he was like when we finally came back from the summer in Treyfeish. That old chief and his warriors got Elias all worked up, and he wouldn’t do anything but mope for a month. You remember.”

Jin thinks about this for a moment before carefully saying, “Well, this time isn’t that time and Dad’s a little different than Remen. For one thing, he’s in a lot better condition. Pop can still swing a net with the best of us, although he does get tired mighty quick. Although,” he looks guiltily around, “you’ll never catch me saying that where he can hear me.”

“It’s nice to know my son has more brains in his head than his father. You better not let him catch you saying that.”

“Well, like I said, Pop will be fine out there. He’ll probably stay out for a least a week, just because it’s going to be his last solo trip. To be honest, I won’t mind the time off from fishing myself. If Pop wants to do it alone, than I’ve got some ideas for a new schooner that I’d like to draw up. The last time I was in Fin-dapple, I saw some interesting variations on the Tretian model.”

I am so proud of my boy. He’s got a good head on his shoulders—something that he didn’t get from his overly-educated father, to be sure. Something occurs to me. “Now don’t you be thinking that you’re gonna get out of helping me with the crab pots. The village got a new batch of reeds and canes in and you promised me you’d help me weave a few.”

Jin sighs dramatically and puts his hand to his head. “Can’t the girls help ya, mom? I really want to get started on this new design and all that weaving makes me forget how a boat’s put together.”

I laugh at that. “Don’t even try it. You already know that the girls are going to help us. That’s help us. That means you and me as well. They’ve got enough of their own work to do without doing all of ours as well.”

“Okay, okay, mom. You know I was just kidding. I know I promised you I’d help.” He gets up and gives me a quick kiss on the forehead.

This time I sigh dramatically, thinking of the boy’s father. Jin may be forty, but he’s still my boy. “You know, every time your Dad goes out, I can’t help but think that this might be the last time I’ll ever see him. I’ve been worrying about that for nigh on fifty years now, and each time I do it, I swear that this time will surely be the last.”

Jin rolls his eyes at me and shrugs his shoulders. “Remen fished for even longer than Pop has and he’s all right. Nothing ever took him on the high seas.”

That old excuse. “Yeah, he finally learned his lesson, before the sea could get him. You fishermen think that just because you’ve made it this far, that nothing can hurt you. For every one old man like Remen, there are fifty people that die young. Hendle badgered him for five years before he finally started staying home and letting Reen handle things. What is it about stubborn old men—particularly fishermen—that won’t let them let go of the sea? I’ve lived in Seadown my whole life and I’ll never understand the fascination with it.”

Jin looks aghast at me, like I just insulted the god of the seas, Scinthus, himself. “It’s the freedom of the seas, mom, and the beauty—”

I interrupt him before he gives me more of the same. “I’ve heard it all a thousand times from Elias already. Sure, it’s beautiful, but so what? So’s a bed of flowers—and a flower never killed anyone! My father died on the sea, my oldest brother, both of Remen’s sons, and how many of our friends never came back after a big storm? Maybe I worry too much, but I’ll keep worrying until the ol’ fool is home safe and sound.” I quickly mark the four corners for Scinthus, for good luck.

I can see Jin trying not to smile. Evil boy. “That was quite a speech, Mom. But in all fairness, I think that there *are* several flowers that can kill you, if you eat them.”

Jin quickly darts out of my arm reach. Correction: smart man.

“After Dad’s home to stay, you can start worrying about me,” he says.

“Don’t remind me, boy. Don’t remind me. There’s still the shipyards—don’t forget. Now, git!” With that, I shoo Jin out of the kitchen so I can finish cleaning up. He goes out to watch the old man cast off and probably give him some last-minute ribbing.

Soon, the girls Wen and Sen come home and they ask about their father, Jin.

“Oh, I suppose he’s around somewhere; I think at the docks, giving your grandfather a hard time. I reminded him about the crab pots. He’s probably gonna hide until we actually get started. So, why don’t we get to it?”

Sure enough, as soon as everything is laid out and ready to go, Jin shows up. I don’t even bother asking him about Elias. If the old man had any problems, Jin would probably try to keep it from me anyway, so that I wouldn’t worry.

Jin is excited about something, too excited even to look apologetic for being late. “Okay, out with it! What happened to your father?” I ask him worriedly.

“Oh, pop? He’s fine. I didn’t even have a chance to give him a hard time before he left already. It’s nothing to do with him. One of the villagers say that they saw a Tretian trader a few days out to sea!”

“One of the Tretians? Is it that time a year already? Gods, the time flies by!”

Jin nods at that, not really understanding what I mean. Even though he’s nigh onto forty,

he's not old enough yet for the months to all blend together the way that they do for us old folk. "It was eight months ago since the last one. Somewhere around Sixth-Month," he reminds me.

"Well, anyway, who saw them?"

"It was one of the Deredelgebast's; Darun, or Deren—I forget. They said they were about four days out when they saw them and the ship was moving slowly for some reason. At the speed that DD was going, he said that he was probably a day or two ahead of them."

"A day or two? Ahead of a Tretian ship? That's strange!" I say, shaking my head. The Tretian ships are usually the fastest things on the seas.

"Well, maybe they're just loaded down pretty fierce. Anyway, they should be in port tomorrow or the next day."

No wonder Jin is so excited. He gets most of his ideas about shipbuilding from the Tretians. He's probably looking forward to the chance to badger one of their poor navigators or bos'ns for ship designs and maps. It was Jin that did most of the design on The Gull's Wing and he's already sold some of his other designs down in Fin-dapple, further up the coast. Jin has worked the last few winters at a shipyard in Fin-dapple, when the fishing is slow here at the village. Right now, he's thinking about working fulltime at the shipyard, only it would mean he'd have to give up fishing altogether, and move to the city. I'm pushing for the shipyard, a much safer and more intelligent way to make a living. But Jin, like his father, is stubborn and isn't ready to give up fishing. I suspect that Jin thinks his father would be disappointed in him if he were to build ships fulltime, instead of gallivanting around in them. For the only man in hundreds of leagues with a formal education, Elias sure seems to discourage it in his son.

"Well, the Tretians will be here soon enough," I say, snapping out of my thinking for a bit, "but the crabs won't wait for any of us. Let's get busy!"

Everyone groans and picks up some reeds; all the while, excitedly chatting about the coming Tretian ship and the excitement it will bring to our humdrum little village lives.

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Elias

They say that the best way to stay young is to stay busy. I firmly believe in this, probably far past the point of common sense. I don't know exactly who the "they" are that seem to say so much about everything and I have to admit that "they"—and myself—might be a trifle overly optimistic. Keeping busy comes easy to me but I'm afraid that it hasn't worked to keep me young. Granted, I am pretty active for one of my advanced years—eighty-two at last count—but this old body just can't seem to keep up with the things I want it to do. Case in point: even just ten years ago, I could have pulled in these fishing nets without even breaking a sweat; now, I can feel my back creaking and popping with the effort and I have to rest and catch my breath about halfway through. My body has become a traitor to my mind's wishes.

Eventually, I get the shrimp-filled nets into my little boat and rest, panting on the bottom of The Gull's Wing and trying to massage some life back into my aching back. My son, Jin, would be a great help now, if I hadn't have been so stubborn in making him stay back at the village while I went out alone. I guess that was the whole point of this little fishing trip, to go out alone one last time. I admit that I've been stubborn about quitting; Adrial has been nagging at me for the last ten years to let Jin completely take over and for me to stay at home fulltime. I've been too proud to admit that she is right: I am old and probably far too old to be still doing this. I have been a fisherman for over fifty years now—and a damn good fisherman, at that—but it's time to know when to say when.

A white-hot flash of pain arcs through my spine as all the muscles of my back cramp up like a clenched fist. The pain is way beyond the usual twinges I've been having lately. Okay, okay. "When!" I yell at the top of my lungs. "I give up!" I yell it a couple of more times but no one answers. I only wake up a bored albatross for a second that was sailing by and then he goes back to gliding on farther out to sea. I swear those things only flap their wings every other week or so. I don't know of any other bird that can sleep on the wing like they do.

The back-spasms pass and I lie panting on the bottom of the boat, with my back stretched out as flat as I can get it. Curse this old man's body! Where is the Elias who could pull in a full net one-handed? Gone, gone, gone—along with the Elias who could swim three leagues without getting tired.

"Elias, ol' boy, are you gonna lie here like an old fool, or are you gonna get off your backside and get back to work?" I say to myself. I think the answer is that I'm going to lie here for a while, until I can move without the flare-up of muscle cramps.

After I feel a little better, I think about moving on. The shrimp's in the boat, The Gull's Wing is as full as she's ever gonna get, and I should probably be getting home. I've been out to the farthest point that I ever usually go in my little boat and away from home for over three weeks. I probably should've been home at least a week ago. Adrial is surely worried about me, but she knows this is my last trip out. I told her that I might stay out a little longer and this far out on the Scint is the best place to find the giant shrimp. As much shrimp as I've gotten the last day or two should bring a nice price back at Brigan's Land.

Of course, I didn't actually start hauling in shrimp until just the last couple of days. If I had started shrimping right away, most of it would be rank and rotten by now. Most of what I did the first couple of weeks was just sail around, enjoying the great outdoors as it were, and trying to get a feel for the locations of the best places for Jin to come back to later. He pretty much already knows about as much as I do about where to find the best fishing, but he doesn't quite have my knack for finding for himself the best schools of tuna or shrimp. It's a gift; a rapport with the ocean and the creatures that live within it that I'm afraid Jin doesn't have as much as I seem to. He still does a damn good job and I'm proud of him. He is a better boat builder than fisherman and he was the one that helped me design and build The Gull's Wing, when he was only about sixteen years old. He's a smart lad.

Before I even set out for these far-off shrimping grounds, I also spent a week on the far side of the village, repairing the crab traps and checking the oyster beds. I didn't even stop in at the village when I was near it, and Adrial is probably a little miffed at that. I hadn't exactly promised her that I would, but I had kind of mentioned it. I wanted to keep this last journey as much to myself as I could. I enjoy isolation, with no one but the Gull, the Scint Sea, and me. I love Adrial dearly of course, and when I finally see her, it will be all the better for the long absence. I'm so anxious to see her and I can't wait to meet her waiting outside our humble little village house, with the biggest smile on her face, wanting to know all about my fishing trip. Jin is probably working on a new design for a boat he was talking about through the winter months. I'll be glad to see him and his girls.

Well, no more lollygagging around. "It's time to get home, girl," I say, patting the side of the Gull. She doesn't answer me, of course. I'm not that senile—at least, not yet. I suppose it's bad enough that I talk to my boat, but I gave up caring what people think about me years ago. I store the shrimp in the hold and sprinkle on a couple of handfuls of sea-salt to help keep them fresh. I roll up the nets and store them away as well. I pull up the anchor and then we're off.

Chapter Two

Jin

"I thought you said the Tretians were coming in?" asks Mom, trying to act as if she isn't as excited as the rest of us. She doesn't fool me; she's had her best dress on for the last three days running and she only does that when she wants to look her best. She looks a little out of place, working in her garden with her heavy apron over her dress. I know better than to say anything about it; Mom is just like Dad when it comes to having a short temper.

"Yeah, that's what Darun said. They should have been here at least three days ago. You don't suppose they decided to skip the village this year and go directly on to Fin-dapple, or Boathaven, d'ya?" I ask, waving my arms vaguely in the general direction of the two cities.

"Now why would they do a thing like that, when Seadown is so close? They always stop here first, even if it's just to pick up some water before moving down further south. Maybe Darun misjudged how far out they were."

I shake my head at that. "Naw, even Darun's smart enough to judge something like that. He did say that they were moving mighty slow when he saw them. Maybe they ran into some kind of trouble."

Mom looks alarmed, as if the Tretians might not come at all. "Trouble? What kind of trouble could they have?"

"You know, they could have run onto a storm or something. But I guess they aren't far enough out that we wouldn't know something like that. There's been no rain for the last week on the Scint. The fishermen can testify to that. There's no pirates, not since the Kryffs stopped raiding."

"Maybe they sprung a leak," says Mom, as she sets down her trowel and gets up off the ground. She motions for me to grab the rest of her gardening tools.

"A leak? A Tretian ship?" I chuckle at the thought of that. "I think their ships are built a little more sturdy than that. No, they probably stopped for some fishing or something." I look at her suspiciously. "I thought you didn't give a hoot about the Tretians, anyhow?"

"Not saying that I do, rightly," Mom explains defensively. I can tell already that I shouldn't go any further with this. "But you know—it's always nice to hear what's going on in the Empire. We don't get much news of anything past the Southern Islands."

Just then, my daughter Wen yells out from inside the house. "Dad, did you say something—"

"—about the Tretians?" finishes Sen.

They've always liked to finish each other's sentences. I know they're twins and all, but they can carry it to ridiculous lengths sometimes. They dress the same and aren't ever more than two or three lengths apart at any time. Ever since their mother died—must be going on fifteen years now—they have stuck together like two peas in a pod.

"We were just saying that they haven't come in yet!" I yell back to the two of them. I shake my head and smile. It seems I'm not the only one who can't wait for the Tretian ship. Turning back to Mom, I say, "Maybe I'll go down to the docks and see if anyone's caught sight of 'em."

"That's a good idea. And you can take these with you to the market," she says, handing me the armful of carrots that she just pulled up from the garden. "And don't let those ol' biddies at the market cheat you! Carrots are dear lately, with the Jensions having that fungus taking half of their crop. You just get at least a half-silver for the lot, and don't take 'no' for an answer."

I take the carrots and smile at Mom, thankful for the excuse to get down to the docks. I throw the mud-caked purple carrots into a wheelbarrow and push down the stone path past the neighbor's house. Old man Remen and his grandsons are out in their yard, pitching some irons. It looks like Remen is winning, because I can hear him crowing before I even get near to them. I throw them a smile and a wave and Reen—the youngest, a little younger than me—waves back. Remen is too intent on his next pitch to even look up.

Down at the market, I sell my carrots, conscious of Mom's advice to me. I ask for a silver for them and we haggle a bit before we finally settle on just a wee bit under the half-silver that Mom told me to get for them. Close enough, for my taste. I don't like haggling that much and Mom usually likes to do it herself. I think she just wanted to get rid of me for a bit, so that I stop making her think about the coming ship.

I dump my empty wheelbarrow at the vegetable stalls, intending to pick it up on the way back. No one would dare steal it. It's not like Seadown isn't big enough to recognize my own wheelbarrow, if someone did take it. A short distance further takes me down to the docks.

"Hail, Brenty! Any word on the Tretians?" I ask the dock master. He's probably the oldest person I've ever seen in my life, older even than Dad and Remen. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say that he was a hundred. He's missing his left leg and his left hand, with a peg and a hook to replace them. He lost them to a shark, way before I was even born.

"Well, Jin, me lad! Actually, we expect 'em in this morning. Haven't seen ye around in a few days. Haven't been out fishing lately?"

Brenty is a senile old coot, but nice enough. I get the idea that if I'd have asked him yesterday, he might have told me the same thing about the Tretian ship. It seems nobody's seen them for a while. "Well, Dad took the Gull out for his last trip and Mom's been trying to keep me busy at home. I even did some weaving with the girls for a day or two."

"Elias finally gonna listen t' that wife of his and hang up his nets, eh? I heard as much but never thought I'd see the day. How are them pretty gals of yours?" Brenty leers at me suggestively. It's an old joke with us; he's far too old to do anything with a woman even if he had the chance. Besides, rumor has it that he likes men, anyway.

"Still ornery, as always. Like t' find them a husband one of these days, but I can't seem to separate the pair from each other."

We make other idle conversation for a while, with Brenty complaining about the aches in his joints that usually means a big storm is coming. The morning tides are up and most of the village's fishermen have already gone out, leaving Brenty with nothing to do. I decide to stay a while and just talk to Brenty, since I really don't have anything better to do. If I go home, Mom will just find some busy work for me.

After an hour or so of mind-numbing gossip, Brenty starts to wheel out the glory stories of yesteryear. I am especially happy when we are interrupted by the dockhands yelling, "It's here! She's coming in with the tides!"

With the tides? What happened to the ship's sails?

I run down to the east dock and strain to see where the boys are pointing. There it is, and sure enough, all of her sails are down. It's a midsize frigate, with four masts and an extra large cargo hold for trading. I've taken a special interest lately in the armaments of the Tretian ships. I know that it probably has a couple of catapults, and maybe even a cannon or two. Even the trading vessels of Tretia go well armed. I shiver, thinking about so much of the forbidden iron in one place.

I am torn between wanting to stay here on the docks and going back and telling Mom and the girls. Finally, knowing what they'll do to me if I don't, I decide to go home and let them know the news. I take one last look at the ship as it coasts nearer to the docks.

She looks seaworthy enough, but what's that horrible smell coming off of her?

#

Elias

It takes the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon before I get close to the village. I guess it is actually called "Seadown," but none of us locals ever call it that. We've always called it "the village," and only the occasional visitor or the Church's priests/taxmen ever really remind us that it has another name. The Church's taxmen are the last people I ever want to talk to, more so than most, for my own reasons. Sure, it has been over fifty years since the Cleansing, and I don't think anyone could possibly recognize me, but you can never be too careful. As Remen puts it, in Remen's Law number eight-million-or-something: "'Too careful' is another way to say 'still alive.'"

The first thing most people notice about Seadown is the smell. It's not so much an odor, as a blanket of warm fishiness that permeates everything and everyone. Fishing is the lifeblood of our local economy. In the summer, Seadown sweats fish.

Seadown lies on the very northern end of a narrow isthmus that sticks out almost straight northward from the island of Brigan—or "Brigan's Land," as it used to be officially called. Most people still just use "Brigan" to refer to the island. It is the largest island in the Southern Seas and also the most important. But then, maybe I'm a little biased, since I was born and raised here. It certainly has the most of what I would call "civilization"—that is, cities, trade, culture, and armies. We used to have a thriving art culture, at least before the Cleansing and the coming of the Church. I think that now most of what passes for art anymore, down at the capitol, is directed towards Church purposes instead of secular. I'm not much of a connoisseur of art or culture in general, but I still appreciate the loss of it. Seadown is considered the armpit of Brigan; it's inhabitants are called unwashed peasants and thought of as beneath the notice of the capitol. That is, until tax time rolls around once a year. I try to be absent during that time of the year, for various reasons.

I fight a little crosswind for a while and have to tack the mizzenmast a bit to starboard. The Gull's Wing has three masts and, of course, three sails. With all three sails up—and me at the helm—she can outrace any boat in the village and give most of the Brigan navy a run for their money as well. I love this boat, the third incarnation of my original fishing boat. Jin did a good job on her design. I don't know where he learned all about designing boats; it certainly wasn't from me. He used to spend a lot of his youth at the docks, pestering various nationalities of sailors with questions about their ships. It would have been nice to be able to send him to the capitol to study ship design seriously, but there are many reasons that would be dangerous for him. Not as my son, anyway. I also never felt safe with the idea of him that close to the clutches of the Sun Church. Thank the old gods that he has never resented me for denying him the education that he so richly deserves.

Soon, the harbor comes into view and I rudder past the reefs and up through the channel leading to the docks. I notice when I come into sight of land that there is a large Tretian ship docked at port. The Tretians live on the other side of the Scint Sea and come to Seadown once a year or so on their way to trade, stopping here first to take on water and supplies before they make their way to the bigger seaports and coastal cities. They are nice people—as Tretians go—and have been trading partners with the Land for generations.

I feel a little guilty for staying out away from home so long and for taking so long to fill up my boat, and then when I tie up my boat to the docks, my guilt turns to anger that there is no one there to help me unload. Usually someone is around, even if it is just the village children, to help unload a catch and take it down to market. The docks are quiet and completely deserted. I figure that everyone has probably taken the day off to converse with the Tretians. I am more than a little turned out that everyone decided to slough off the dock work today. I have been out breaking my old, wrinkled backside on the nets, and then everyone goes and decides to have a holiday. Brenty, the dock master, will hear about this and I'll be sure to give him a piece of my mind. He's probably passed out in the tavern somewhere.

I look at the Tretian ship as I pull into dock. It appears to be completely deserted, with not a soul moving on deck. Well, they must have all gone to shore. It's a bit odd that no one was left on deck to watch the ship. Maybe they went down below for a bit or I just can't see them. My old eyes are so blurred with cataracts that I can't be exactly sure. No matter.

I just leave the shrimp in the boat and decide to make my way home to get Jin to help me take it all to the market. With my back feeling like it does today, I don't think I will be able to tote any large bales of shrimp around very far—or at all. There is a very strange smell to the docks today, an odor of rot and decay that overwhelms the usual bad smell of a fishing dock. Someone must have left a catch out to rot away, not making it to shore in time to keep their catch fresh, or perhaps a whale beached up on shore recently. The wind is blowing at my back, and the salt tang of the sea blows most of the smell away from me. I catch a faint whiff of soot. Strange. Maybe there's been a fire.

From the docks, I can the flag flying over the mayor's home, the tallest building in Seadown. "The flying fish," as Remen calls Seadown's usual flag, is nowhere to be seen. Flying in its place is a simple black flag.

A black flag? They wouldn't be pirates—not with the Tretians docked here. There aren't any more pirates, and anyway—

But then the other meaning of the black flag hits me. I drop my tackle and run.
Plague.

I run, leaving the eerily deserted docks, and take a shortcut that bypasses the main village altogether. In no time at all for an old man, I come to our family's house, where Adrial should be waiting outside for me. She always knows when I've come in to port—she always waits by the house to scold me for coming home late. After I've been properly scolded and chastised, she usually cries, and then won't let me out of her sight for at least three days.

There's no one outside.

I run up the cobblestone path leading to our front door, the path that Adrial badgered me to make for her for almost ten years. When I get within a few feet of the door, the smell of death hits me like a hammer. I cry out in fear and it is the most difficult thing I have ever done in my eighty-two years of life to open the door and go inside. Trembling, my old arm shaking like a worm on a hook, I push the door open.

Our small, cozy little house is dark and hard to see in at first. There is no lamp lit and that alone would be cause to worry. Adrial is usually fanatical about wanting the house brightly lit. It's not yet so dark that I can't make out the interior of the room. Nothing in a long life of difficulty and tragedy could have prepared me for what I find.

The first thing I see when I push open the door is the sight of Adrial's wasted, pocked body, already swollen with the heat and covered in flies. To the left of her I can see Jin lying on the floor in much the same condition. Jin's twin daughters—Wen and Sen, not much older than

twenty—are sprawled to Adrial's right. The smell of plague, disease, and rot overwhelms me. I vomit uncontrollably and then fall to my knees, as what little strength I have drains away.

They're all dead.

Chapter Three

Elias

The unmistakable signs of plague are all around me. I want to stop looking...close my eyes...shut out the horror. I can't stop looking, Gods help me. I've seen plague before but never experienced it so...so...personally. Gods! How can this be? Why them and not me? I just left them... It's been three weeks. How could they be alive and vibrant one minute and then the next...? I should have been here. Three weeks...

I want to stay and do something—say something, do anything—but the smell is overpowering and the sight is too much for me to keep looking at it. These people aren't my family; they can't be. Surely, they are someone else entirely. It doesn't even look like...

Looking at Jin's ravaged face, with worms crawling through his eye sockets—

It's too much—far too much for me to deny. Reality strikes me a glancing blow and I accept the truth. This is my family and they are dead.

My feet take me out of the house and I fall to the ground outside. I roll over on my back and raise my fist up at the sky. "Damn you, whatever gods you are! Damn you for doing this to me again! DEMONS BITE YOU ALL!"

I moan and whimper as I lie here. What has happened has happened, and I am all alone. Again.

I want to die.

#

I am barely conscious of wondering into town and talking to some people. There is hardly anyone left alive, walking around. I don't know exactly what we say to each other. I ask a few stumbling questions about what happened. I feel so numb and disjointed from reality.

I remember no spoken words, only images. Images of mass pyres of diseased bodies blowing ash out to sea. The sick begging the healthy for their lives. People praying, pleading to the Unnamed to do something while the bodies pile up around them. Three out of four people dying in the space of a week. People tell me these things, looking at me like it's my fault, with the same blank, haunted look on their face that I must have on mine. None of us feel lucky to still be alive, only guilty that we have lived when so many others died.

The street stones are red. They come from the clay-pits north of the village. One, two, three, four... Four stones arranged in a concentric circle. Another pattern of four. Another. Hundreds. Thousands. The patterns of four cover the street. I stare at the fours, counting and counting. Four stones for four people gone. No names—only clumps of stones marking this family as dead. My family. Where's my stone? There should be five.

I look down and notice that I suddenly have a double handful of ship-pitch casks, with no idea of how I got them or where they came from. It could have been anywhere; there is always plenty around in any place that has lots of boats, and pitch burns better than anything else, except maybe whale oil. I stumble and lurch back to the house like a drunk, with my armload of pitch. I cover the house—which I built myself and that sheltered three generations of our family—with boat-pitch. The oily pitch drips down the hemp curtains that Adrial hand stitched with pictures of mountains and forests—anything but the sea.

I light the pitch. I cry a steady stream of tears and more than once think about throwing myself into the burning pyre as it smokes and blazes. I think the only thing that prevents me from doing so is some old angler's desire to die out at sea rather than on land. I feel like I should say some words, but I don't know what to say. I believe in no god or gods, and if they do exist, they can go to their own hells, for all I care. I say nothing, too numb to even think clearly, as I

watch three generations of memories go up in a mad crackle of flames. Or maybe it's me that's mad.

The temptation to throw myself in is almost too great to resist, so I leave before my house finishes burning. The smell is too sickening for words. My feet take me almost automatically over to Remen's house without my even thinking about it. I have to see if he survived.

His house isn't more than three or four stone throws from my own. I see him outside of his house, staring out to sea with the same pain mirrored on his face that I'm sure shows on mine. When he sees me, he drops the wooden shovel he was absently fingering back and forth in his pock-scarred hands and bursts into tears. We hug each other here in front of his empty house and both of us bawl like babies for what seems like hours: two old sea-dogs that have seen many hard times before but who cry like women this day.

He tells me about the Tretian ship and about the plague that swept through the village shortly after it came into port. His entire family of six caught the plague but only him and his youngest grandson survived. Four stones for his family, too. His body is still covered in reddish pockmarks that only recently have begun to heal. I don't even give a thought to the chance of catching the plague from him; I caught it many years ago in a somewhat milder form. If I thought there was some danger of catching it, I suppose I would gladly welcome it.

He tells me about his decision not to burn his family's remains. His grandson is digging a pit to bury them in as we speak, but Remen just can't seem to find the strength to help.

"How could an old wasted man like me survive the pox and not the children?" he asks me, throwing the shovel to the ground in anger. "They were healthy as all get-out. I should have died, not them!"

How can I reply to that? I feel the same way. I feel a sudden, irrational anger towards the Tretian ship. I want to strike out against it, do something, to somebody to repay them for what has happened to my family. I need something to do.

"Why don't you help me burn the Tretian ship?" I ask Remen. "I'm sure that it's still loaded with pestilence and we don't want it spreading to any other port cities 'round the Land, eh?"

He thinks this over a moment and then shouts over to his grandson, just over the other side of the hill that Remen's house lies on. "Reen, I'll be back soon. . ." He trails off, and his youngest grandson Reen waves for him to go. I notice that Reen doesn't seem to have any of the reddish pockmarks that dot Remen's body. It's indeed fortunate for him, because Reen has always been a very handsome lad and is lucky to not have marred that perfect face of his. Reen yells back something that neither of us catches.

"He's a good boy, that Reen is," says Remen. "He's stronger than I am and he knows I won't be much use to him. C'mon, Elias, let's go and burn this Tretian death ship."

We walk into town, neither of us saying another word for a while. The sight of house after house burnt down with the plague victims inside is chilling. The village-town of Seadown won't be the same for generations and both of us seem to realize that two old men like us will not live long enough to see the town recover. We hurriedly make our way to the one and only village tavern, where a few people sit drinking without saying a word to each other. We gather up some torches and some pitch pots and leave as quickly as we can get away from this morose place. Ale only brings out depression even stronger and rarely numbs the pain the way the people who throw themselves into it hope that it will.

We row a small boat out to where the ship is anchored. It takes only a few minutes to throw the pitch pots against the outside of the long Tretian trading ship. The ship is covered in a

cloud of flies and I'll never forget the smell if I live forever. The wind must have been strong the other way when I came into port earlier, or I'd have surely noticed it for what it was. We each light a torch without saying a word and throw it into the ship. After a few false starts and sputterings, the pitch bursts into flame and the wooden ship lights up the sky before it breaks apart and starts to sink beneath the waves.

Somehow, the destruction of the ship seems appropriate and cathartic in a way that we sorely need. After silently watching the remains burn and sizzle for a while, Remen finally breaks the silence. "I was one of the first people to see it come in. Me and the boys had just come into port shortly before it and were unloading our tuna when I caught the plague odor on the wind. One of the dock boys had already thrown a rope out to 'em 'fore I could yell. I don't know why they wanted to come into land, but I guess that the few people left aboard were pretty delirious with fever and all. All they could think about was getting away from the plague ship, ya know. Can't blame 'em, I guess."

"I thought Hendle had banned you from going out?" I interrupt.

Remen looks a little sheepish at that. "Well, I was kind of—ah, I guess you'd say..."

"Sneaking?"

"I was just going along with the boys. Not doing any real work, mind you. Just showing 'em where the tuna swims. You see, I won a game off pitch-toss against them that morning and that was the price for them losing.

"Anyways, I yelled out 'Plague ship!' and the dock boys like to 'ave shat their breeches. They dropped their ropes and just ran, once that smell hit 'em just right. Everyone had all been running down to the docks, on account of the Tretians coming in and all, and you could've cut the fear in the air with a knife. Well, ol' Jenson had his hunting gear with him and one of them Tretians tried to jump ship and swim in. Jenson picked up his bow and just shot the poor devil right in the water. A couple other Tretians started to jump down from the ship and Jenson shot 'em too, before they could even get over the side. Well, the rest of 'em got the point right quick and waited 'till nighttime 'fore trying to do the same. We told them to turn right 'round and go away, but they said there weren't enough able bodies to even get the sails up. They had come in on the tides, you see, and we didn't know what to do 'bout it. We should have burned the ship right where it stood, but none of us had the heart to do it. We thought the plague would stay aboard, but no one counted on the rats. That's my idea, anyways."

I think about this for a moment. "Yeah, I've heard that it's rats that carry the plague. Some say that it's the fleas but I'm not too sure about that. I have noticed that the fleabites are the part that gets red first, so I guess it makes sense."

He nods and continues. "So we posted a guard or three to keep an eye on 'em. Soon as it got dark, a few more tried to come in and they had to be dealt with, as it were. Finally, the last one of 'em poor souls up and died and we thought that was the end of it. But then villagers started getting sick and in only about two days, the entire village had the pox. We all got too sick to do anything about the ship and I guess we figured the damage had already been done."

"There's no one to blame," I say, not taking my own advice. I sorely blame myself for not being here when I was needed. I can't help but think that there was something that I could have done. At least I could have been with my family in their last hours and could have given them a proper sendoff, without their bodies being out in the heat for two days. But madness lies in that line of thinking and I hurriedly squelch it.

We silently row the little boat back up to the docks. I walk Remen back to his house, but this time we detour around the village. We've seen enough and don't feel like talking to anyone else.

Remen's grandson Reen has taken a break from his ghastly chore and is waiting for us back at Remen's house. "You burn it?" is all he asks, obviously having figured out what we had gone to do.

We both nod.

"Good riddance to it, I say. Gramps, you tell him about the Fist?" asks Reen.

"No, I didn't think it was that important," he says with a slow shake of his head.

"What's that about the Fist? Is that were you were catching tuna?" I ask, curious in spite of myself. I've long been interested in the remote mountain called the Fist of the Gods, ever since I have first heard about it as a boy from my instructors.

"Yeah, I was following a school of dolphins out deep in the Scint, about two weeks ago. Where there's fins, there's likely tuna, don't ya know?"

I nod, having used that old fisherman's trick several times myself. "Another game of pitch-toss won?"

Remen snorts and almost smiles at that remark. "This time I was actually sneaking. Didn't even take the boys with me. Well, it started getting dark and I was using the stars to navigate by, on account of the way the place fouls up the compass something awful. Anyways, I decided to drop anchor and wait for daylight before throwing out some nets. I'd seen tuna like crazy and thought I'd come back with a pretty good haul. The sky suddenly lights up like daylight for a moment and a big streak of fire cuts across the sky. It looked like it was gonna smack right up against the side of the Fist, and then it shoots up right along the side of it and disappears up into the clouds. If I didn't know better, I'd say it went to the top of the mount, wherever that is."

"There's get to be a top, surely?" I ask.

"Well, they say it goes up to the heavens, but on a perfect clear day I think I've seen some kind of peak up there, if you're a long ways off from it."

"I've never seen the top of it and I've been out there one or thrice," I politely argue with him.

"Have you looked with a spyglass?"

"Well, I can't say as how I've ever had one—at least not since I was a boy." I don't want to broach this subject, so I ask him, "Where'd you get a glass?"

He laughs a bit, an odd ironic laugh. "From our dear friends, the Tretians. They traded me a glass for a couple of casks of water and some provisions about six years back. I don't show it about much as it is a mite delicate."

"Yeah, they've given us a lot over the years, haven't they, old friend?" I also laugh a little, although it isn't a very healthy laugh and is tinged with just a little mania. I am as likely to break into hysterical laughing as crying at this point.

Remen nods, a distant look in his eyes as he mulls over something. "They say the Fist is cursed," he says, with a frown. "My father used to tease me about it, when I was a lad. He said that if I was bad, he would take me out there and leave me for the spirits to take."

"If it goes up to the gods, they surely don't want people just dropping by, would they?"

"I don't think the gods would mind. Maybe they just might appreciate the company, being rather lonely these days."

“Not too many people follow the old ways anymore, do they?” I think for a minute and then continue, “You know, I can’t really even name any of the old gods, except for ol’ Scinthus, the sea god.”

“I’m thinking there used to be about twelve, to be sure. You get the ‘Scint Sea’ from ol’ Scinthus, eh?”

“Yeah, that would make sense. You know the Scripture: the Scint Sea is the face of the God Scinthus and that mountain is His fist. He’s supposed to protect the Fist, with the storms that they have out there. Between the storms and the curse, I’m surprised that you went out there at all.”

“Well,” explains Remen, “I don’t mind the curse much. It always seemed silly to have a fist in the middle of your face, anyway—at least, your own fist. I think “Nose of God” would have made more sense. It’s a more accurate description. It’s also the best place for tuna. I don’t know what I saw up there, but it’s on the top of the Fist, whatever it is.” Remen’s face darkens. “That’s the long and short of it. I suppose someone’ll climb that puppy someday and we’ll know for sure.” Remen sighs with a trace of longing in his voice at the thought of climbing the Fist and then motions back behind the house to where the rest of their work still lays, waiting for proper burial. “If you’ll excuse me. . .”

“Be well, old friend,” I say, knowing that’s probably unlikely, considering the circumstances.

“Be well and the seas provide,” he responds. He turns around without another look and he and his son go off to finish their work.

#

I putter around the village for a while but I have nothing to do. I have nowhere to go, since my house has been burned up. I’m sure Remen won’t mind if I spend a few days with him, but he needs at last today to be alone with his son and bury his family.

I can’t help but keep thinking about the Fist and what Remen said he saw. What could it have been that shot to the top of the mount? I’ve always wanted to climb the Fist, and I could care less about the curse. I think I’ve seen the worst that the gods have to throw at me; how can they curse someone who has nothing left to lose?

I decide to go out and check on the Gull. My load of shrimp is right where I left it, in the forward hold. The markets are still closed and might be for a while yet, until some semblance of life comes back into the village. I suppose I could take my shrimp down to Fin-dapple, the nearest city further up the coastline to the west, but it’s a couple of days sailing and my shrimp won’t be in very good condition when I get there.

So, although it is a colossal waste, I have no other choice than to just dump my load of shrimp in the sea. I could leave it on the docks, but it will just rot away and I doubt that anyone will take it. Oh well, bugger the waste!

I get in The Gull’s Wing and sail out a little piece until I am clear of the reefs and the immediate vicinity of the docks. I dump my forward hull and watch the shrimp float to the surface, to be slowly dispersed by the action of the waves off the reef. As I watch the shrimp, I think again about all that Remen told me about the Fist. Why shouldn’t I go out to the Fist? What the hell better do I have to do? I am already in my boat. I have nothing else to do and nowhere to go. There’s no one left to miss me if I fail and no one depending on me to return. For the first time in my recent life, I am perfectly free to do whatever takes my fancy; right now, the thought of being the first person to climb the Fist of the Gods is what grabs me. Hells, why not?

A burst of lightning strikes through the sky, startling me. Looks like a storm is on the way. If I'm going to do this, I'd better get going.

Maybe the Fist will do what the Church of the Sun, a poisonous snake, fifty years at sea, and a virulent plague couldn't do: end this miserable life.

Chapter Four

Elias

Call me a grumpy old man if you want to, but I've always hated the rain. Although a fisherman gets used to the eccentricities of the weather—and indeed, on the ocean, nature's full fury is unstoppable by hills, mountains, trees or the sheltering comfort of a village home—I've always hated the way the rain makes my long gray hair stick to my face and makes my hemp tunic seem to weigh three times its normal weight. I seem to have spent half my life at sea just learning how not to get wet from the ocean, and then along comes a squall and gets you wet for naught. And Gods, an old fisherman like me should be used to the pungent odors of the fishing life, but a bad rain seems to strengthen the smells and odors of everything on a boat that stinks: fish-guts, bait, old hemp ropes and sails, and a crotchety old man's smell of working all day at sea.

The poets say rain washes away the bad memories and is supposed to clean you inside and out, but that's just city-folk drivel if you ask me. Right now, I couldn't care less what some refined, lazy-ass, namby-pamby poet says about the "cool cleansing rain" from the safety of his master's castle, lounging on pillows and sipping sherry. The pox on him and his poetry!

I am trying with all my might to reach the Fist of the Gods before this stupid storm gets any worse. My old boat has all three of its little sails at full mast and the driving wind is about ready to tear a hole in the largest. It's flapping back and forth with all of its might, and one rope has already worked its way free and about takes my head off before I can re-secure it. At least the squall is pushing my boat along faster than I can ever remember it going in fifty years or so at sea. The Gull's Wing is my third boat since I started fishing—at about the age of thirty or so—and she is a beauty as fishing boats go. She's my pride and glory; she'll take me to the Fist and then her servitude will be over. I'll let her free, to blow where she whilst, after I get to the Fist.

The driving rain and storm-tossed waves render visibility to almost nothing. I am afraid that I'll run into the Fist before I can even see it. Almost everyone knows about the Fist of the Gods—the Fist, as most of us sea-folk call it—but only the fishermen ever see it. It's a mountain that pops out of the middle of an otherwise deserted stretch of the Scint and seems to go straight up into the heavens. Its top is far above the clouds and no one has ever seen the end of it—that I know of. It's almost completely vertical and nothing grows or lives on its surface. It has a fair smattering of iron and magnetite in it and fouls up the compass something fierce for miles around it. The sea-folk say it's cursed and many a man has gotten lost by coming too close to it and then turning back in the wrong direction. Fisher-folk are by far a superstitious lot and we usually avoid it whenever possible. But not me. Not today.

I take out my little compass, and then curse when I see that it is already full of water. Damn the rain! I open it up and shake out the water. Its iron needle seems to still be working, although it starts to twitch erratically from time to time. By this, I can tell that I am getting close to the Fist.

Soon, the squall starts to really pick up its head and commences to blowing. I have to let down the two smaller side sails and only use the bigger mainsail for fear of snapping the mizzenmast with the force of too much wind behind it. When the compass starts spinning around as if the devils have gotten ahold of it, I know I am close. The Fist awaits somewhere up ahead through the sheets of rain.

The sea is heaving up and down with the force of the storm and it is all I can do to try to steer through the troughs and crests without swamping the boat. The wind pushes me right through the top of one wave and into the next, the keel of the boat barely touching the bottom of

each large wave trough. I've never zipped through the waves at such a high rate of speed and I laugh madly with glee at the sheer exhilaration of my out-of-control, breakneck velocity. I am shooting through the waves like a maniac, with barely a thought to the danger of it all.

"Blow, damn you, blow! Is that the best you can do, Scinthus?" I scream defiantly into the wind.

As if in answer, a huge wave crashes into the Gull, rocking her almost onto her side before she rights herself. If I try to slow down now, I'll stop skimming the tops of the large waves and be sucked under. I've firmly grabbed ahold of this shark's tail and now I can't let go for the life of me. My spinning compass tells me that the Fist has to be near, so I crane a blurry, cataract-laden eye out for some sight of the mountain.

I am almost right up on it before I can see it. The blinding sheets of rain are coming at me in an almost vertical fashion, with the force of the wind behind them. When I get near enough to the Fist, it blocks the wind a little, causing the headlong sheets of rain to abate a bit. It is then that I can see that I am headed dead straight for it; I have a sudden panic attack as I realize that my little Gull is going to run screaming smack dab into the middle of it. I hurriedly cut the mainsail down with a quick slash of a gutting knife and throw the anchor overboard. The Gull slows down and then stops with an sudden jerk, when the anchor takes hold on to something. The force of the abrupt stop sends me flying over the edge, right into the drink.

Now I am really wet and even crankier. I come up to the surface spitting out water and vitriol. I calm down a bit when I realize that at least I haven't crashed The Gull's Wing into a million splinters against the edge of the Fist. I couldn't bear to lose her, too. I can swim better than any landlubber ever thought about, and even at eighty years plus, no stormy sea or angry god is gonna drown this old man, not when I am this close to the Fist. I have a brief moment where I think she will get the best of me—the sea that is—but I manage to grab ahold of the edge of the Gull and pull myself back in, dripping wet and cursing again enough to embarrass a soldier. I am a wiry and tough old man, and in my long-gone glory days, I was tougher than any three men—and still have the scars to prove it.

After I get my breath, panting for a moment while I lie in a puddle of water at the bottom of my boat, I look up at the Fist. It is truly a magnificent sight. It seems to attract lightning like nothing I have ever seen before, with each bright flash sizzling through the wet air to explode against the iron side of the mountain. That seems to make sense, since it is the tallest thing around for the next five continents. It also has enough iron in it to be a natural lightning rod. I'll have to wait for the rain to stop before I even think about trying to climb it.

And that is what I am going to do. I am going to be the first man to ever see the top of the Fist of the Gods and then I am going to die atop it.

Well, that's the plan anyway.

#

Anchored off the edge of the Fist, I cover the boat with one of the smaller sails and sit down to wait out the storm, huddled cold and shivering under the sail as the forces of the storm wail on outside. While I wait, I bail out as much of the water as I can from the bottom of the boat. The crash of the lightning hitting the mountain and the waves breaking upon it is almost deafening, even to my already age-weakened ears.

"Elias," I say to myself, "Your body is just falling apart. Half-blind, half-deaf, and prob'ly half-wit as well."

As I am now in my twilight years, I think it only appropriate that I should talk to myself. After all, isn't that what senile old men do? But if the truth be known, I long ago got in the habit

of talking to myself while out at sea alone, and sometimes I talk to the sea or to my boat. As long as they don't directly answer me, I feel fairly comfortable about my sanity. But lately, with so much that has happened, I'm not too sure about it anymore.

For example, what the hell do I think I'm doing out here anyway? Am I just too stubborn to die comfortably in my bed like an old man should or what? But the thought of slowly wasting away, while I foul myself in my sleep and become a drooling vegetable, is too much for my pride. I've seen it happen to too many of my older generation and I see nothing peaceful about it now. Far better to go out fighting the kraken than to be nibbled to death by guppies. And the thought of spending another day in the village, with everything reminding me of the family, would kill me as surely as this storm is trying.

As the storm blows on and I somewhat patiently wait for it to stop, I wonder about what everyone is doing at this moment, back in the safety of the village. I'm sure that Remen and his Reen are still burying the rest of their family. Remen supposes that since everyone left alive has already caught the plague, there isn't much reason left to burn the bodies. I can't blame him, I guess. It is such a hard thing for a man to do, and with this much rain from the storm, he won't be able to light a pyre anyway.

I suppose the rest of the village won't miss me too much. They have tragedy enough to grieve over without having to waste any tears on this old coot. I wanted to say goodbye to Remen before I left, but I knew if I did, he'd have tried to talk me out of doing this. He is the only good friend I have left alive but we don't need any parting speeches and all of that sentimental crap. The sea takes us all sometime; those that live by her often die on her. Remen'd understand.

The storm starts to lessen and it gets quite dark. I am not exactly sure when the dark of the storm turned into the dark of night, but it feels like it is getting pretty late. I figure the storm will completely break by daylight and I decide to get some sleep, as best as I can. I'll need as much rest as I can give my old body if I am to have any hope of reaching the top of the Fist. I roll a stretch of sailcloth around me and try to sleep.

As I'm falling asleep, I can't help but wish Adrial a good night, wherever she is. I hope she is happy. I have never been overly religious but I hope that she is with at least one of the twelve or so gods that the old priests liked to talk about. I hope I'll get to join her soon.

#

My sleep is troubled with many strange and frightening dreams. I keep seeing the pockmarked faces of my family parade before me, one by one. Adrial keeps asking me why I didn't come home in time, and my son Jin keeps saying something over and over, but in the strange manner of dreams, I can't seem to hear what he is saying. His mouth keeps moving like he is speaking but I can't hear anything coming out of it—try though I might. Friends and family that have died years before also make an appearance, with each one of them seeming to be angry at me for staying out at sea too long, and missing the last moments of my family's life.

At this point, I wake up in a cold sweat, from the bottom of The Gull's Wing. It is still dark out and the rain has subsided to a dull drizzle. In my dreams, I was replaying that terrible scene over and over again in my mind. I can't bear to even think to myself about what I saw when I opened the door to my house.

I lie here in the boat, thinking about the sheer irony of it all. That was supposed to have been my last trip out to sea before I was going to finally retire and let my son Jin do the fishing with the Gull. He usually came with me out to sea or took another boat out with me, but I'd asked him to stay at home and let me go out alone one last time. I wanted to have one last trip

with the old lady of the sea before I said goodbye to her and lived out the rest of my old age with Adrial as a landlubber. That was one of the main reasons why I stretched out my last fishing trip, and had come home so late. If only I could do it over again...

I think about what Remen told me of his experience with the pox ship, and—putting it together with what other villagers told me—I can see what must have happened. The Tretian ship somehow caught the plague at a foreign port before coming across the Scint and only barely made it into port at Seadown. The village people instantly recognized the signs of the plague, with the oozing pockmarks and the horrible smell of a body literally rotting away while it is still alive. They kept the still-barely-alive Tretians from leaving their ship, but the damage had already been done. Although guards could be posted at the dock to make sure that no human left the ship, nothing could prevent the rats from coming in. Enough rats had come onto land carrying the plague and had given it to the other rats that always teem in a fishing area, Seadown being no exception. In no time at all, villagers in Seadown started to show signs of the plague and soon everyone caught it. My family died just two days before I came home.

As I lie here in the boat, listening to the still-turbulent waves, I try to stay awake, if only to avoid dreaming and avoid the nightmares that will come. However, the more I fight sleep; the more I keep nodding off.

Chapter Five

I wake up to the reddish-orange sun shining brightly for all it is worth, as if the storm had never even happened. A cool, gentle breeze blows, sending the familiar smell of salt air through the air. I am almost in a good mood as I get up and stretch, unwrapping myself from the sailcloth; after giving it a flick to shake off the water, I roll it up and store it below. I haven't felt this good in a while, as a peace seems to come over me now that I am at the Fist. I seem a little more composed, now that I know my life is in its last days.

I take off my still-sodden tunic, exchanging it for my spare. This is the day; the day that I'm going to finally try and do something that I've always wanted to do: climb the Fist. I've climbed almost every mountain Brigan's island has to offer but the Fist of the Gods has always seemed impossible. I mean, if a mountain doesn't have a top, but just stretches on forever, what's the use in even trying? But all of that's changed; Remen told me he's seen the top before. Now that I know that it has a top, it seems possible enough. Besides, I don't have anything better to do, except mope around an already depressed village, and look longingly at every sharp object.

Looking back on my decision to come out here yesterday, I rationalized to myself that I might make it to the Fist before the storm hit. In truth, I hadn't cared. If the storm took me on my way out to it, that would have been just as good. I've always had a romantic streak in me and dying in a storm would have been quite appropriate. I've never had much of a belly for suicide, and I don't think I could actively end my own life. Nevertheless, the way I feel now, I wouldn't mind putting myself in some danger and letting nature and fate do what it will. I am so tired. I absolutely can't think of anything I have to live for. I half-hoped that I would die in the storm, but I couldn't just lie down and go out without a fight. The storm didn't beat me, but looking up at this seemingly unassailable mountain, I figure it might do the trick.

When I was younger, I used to go mountain climbing a lot with a grizzled old man from the court named Fenner. Fenner used to like to tell me about how he lost several of his friends in one climb or another over the years, so I've always had a healthy appreciation of just how dangerous it is to climb. I don't have all of the equipment that we always used then, but I figure I can make do with fishing hooks and rope. The Gull's Wing has plenty of rope and some of the tuna-hooks in the boat are big enough to hold the weight of a man. They'll work just as well as climbing pitons, although I can hear old Fenner roll in his grave at the thought of it.

I gather up my climbing supplies, as well as some food and water, and tuck them all into a rucksack. It weighs quite a lot, especially since the ropes are still soaked with water. They will slowly dry out and lighten as time goes on, I am sure. Once I have everything together, I pull up the anchor. I am all set to paddle the boat into the tiny shore that surrounds the Fist, when a gentle current starts pushing my boat in. Soon, I am beached on the shore and able to jump out of the boat onto dry land. The universe seems on my side this morning, when all of its forces seemed arrayed against me yesterday. I chuckle at the fickleness of nature, as I take stock of the beach. It is nothing more than a rocky sand bar that encircles the iron Fist. Nothing grows on it, although it is littered with all kinds of flotsam and jetsam from the storm. Shells, devilfish, dead fish, and even driftwood cover the beach all around me.

When both moons are full, it can make quite a storm out here away from the mainland. Both moons are full at the same time two times a year: First-Month and Sixth-Month, which neatly divides our ten-month calendar. These two times of year, it is indeed dangerous to be out on the high seas, even if you are an experienced professional, such as myself. When the mid-year storms start, it will make last night's storm look like a gentle shower.

I think about what to do with the Gull. I planned to set her loose, to drift upon the ocean. But, I figure that when the tides come in, she can just un-beach herself and float out to sea. I wonder about what I will do if I make it up and down the Fist, and then am stuck upon this little island without any way to get home. However remote this idea seems, I don't relish the slow death it will bring of dehydration and starvation. I compromise instead. I tie her up to a rock that will keep her near the island when the tides come in. That way, the next big storm can easily pull her away and free her. This is almost the mid-year season of storms, so it shouldn't take more than a week or two at most. That should be plenty of time, since it probably won't take more than three or four days to get up the mountain, if it's possible at all.

I sadly wave goodbye to The Gull's Wing, not knowing if I'll see her again. I'll miss her and I'm sure that she will miss me. She is all that I have left to remind me of Jin and his shipbuilding. "See ya on the other side, ol' gal!" I say, confident that I will. After all, what place would the heavens be if they didn't have fishing, and fishing boats to do it in?

I start walking around the beach that surrounds the Fist, looking for the best place to start my approach. As I examine the surface of the Fist, I can see that its dull-black surface is full of pits and hollows that have been weathered out of it. Since so much of it is supposed to be made out of iron, or ferrite, I expected it to be a reddish color, the way that iron turns into rust. I see not a trace of rust on it, just many parts where the rock has flaked away in shallow depressions and grooves. These will make very natural handholds and footholds that I can use for the climb up. Indeed, the backside of the Fist—the far side of it that I usually don't see from sea—has a pile of rubble and stones against it that one can almost just stroll up for a ways. How is it that no one has ever made it up to the top, when it doesn't look near so impossible from up close? It makes me wonder if the curse has prevented people from climbing it—or, just the threat of the curse. Which is more real: the curse or the thought of the curse in people's minds? I guess they both have the same effect, at the end of the day.

I sit down on a large rock and think about what I know about the Fist. Because of the way it fouls up compasses, most people usually avoid it all together. It is also way off in the middle of nowhere, as it were, where ships never sail and far from where anyone lives. It is also rumored among the more superstitious people—which is almost everyone that I know of—that it has no top and therefore can't be reached. Remen assured me that it does indeed have a top, although it is usually obscured with an almost perpetual cloud cover. I do remember my grandfather telling me that his father had organized an expedition to the Fist, but a storm broke out after they just barely began to climb it and they were forced to turn back. This story excited me when I was a kid and some of that excitement comes back to me now, with me about to do what has never been done before, as far as I know. When I'd been younger, I had a family to worry about and responsibilities that kept me from daring to ever attempt this feat. Now I have nothing to prevent me from risking my life.

Standing on the forbidden beach of the Fist of the Gods, I feel a sudden thrill run through me. The fact that what I am about to do is supposed to be against the will of the gods, as well as something no one has done in remembered history, makes it all the sweeter. Okay, whatever gods are floating around up there, here I come! Do your worst!

With this thought in mind, I decide to quit delaying and get on with it. I shoulder my rucksack, and tie it around me with a short section of hemp rope, to leave my arms and hands free. I have on a thin pair of tough leather shoes that will enable me to feel the side of the mountain for footholds and also protect my feet from sharp rocks. My feet are pretty tough

anyway, and I almost decide to try it barefoot. However, if some of the rocks are sharp, I don't want to bloody my feet and make it slippery.

I pause a moment before starting up the rubble-lined slope. Normally, I would whistle, as I used to when starting a climb, back when I had my youthful exuberance. But the past few days' events are gouged too heavily into my mind. Instead, sober and serious, I begin my ascent.

It is very easy going for the first hour or so, until I clear the rubble and actually have to start climbing. Soon, I am lost in the steady rhythm of one hand up, feel for a hold, pull up, and reach with the next. I do this for another hour or so, until I come to a slight ledge. Here I rest for a bit and catch my breath. I am in pretty good physical shape, considering my age and all, but I am eighty plus and am feeling all eighty-two years of my age right now. I know of no other octogenarian that would be able to make this climb, or even many younger men. I was quite a bull of a man in my younger days, and even the pale shade that remains is something pretty tough. I never allowed myself to get soft in my old age, and have continued working every day of my life, up until what was supposed to be my last trip out to sea.

I sit on the ledge with a glorious view of the ocean. The very seagulls that I'd named my ship after are circling around high up in the air, to occasionally swoop down in a dive at the water, coming up with a fish in their beak. Once in a while, another, bigger seagull streaks across and snatches the fish out of their mouth, leaving the smaller gulls screaming in defiance at them. I can't help but laugh, in spite of myself. The sea seems to stretch out as far as the eye can see in every direction. Oh, the boundless sea! I've never regretted having to leave my childhood home to come here to this fishing life.

I eat some of my dried fish, a little moist from last night's penetrating rains. After drinking some of my precious remaining water, I gather up my things and prepare to go further up. So far, I haven't had to use either my rope or my hooks, being a little less cautious than I know is safe. Looking down, I can see that I've come up far enough to not survive a fall. The sun still shines brightly on my leathered face and I figure I can probably make it about halfway up before it will start getting dark, if my present pace holds up.

So once again, it is hand over hand in a mindless rhythm. Now, I am a little more careful to take it slow; I can't afford to make any mistakes, however small, if I want to see the top. I carefully feel each crack and crevice with my fingers, pulling on each handhold before I trust my full weight on it. This mountain is a freestyler's dream; it isn't crumbly and everywhere I feel that seems to hold my weight does so.

As I climb, I let one part of my mind roam, thinking about many things that I haven't let myself think about in many long years. When I was a boy—oh, so many years ago—I climbed many a deceptive mountain cliff-face. Some of the mountain ranges of Brigan's Land, or Brigan as we usually call it, are very dangerous to climb without proper equipment. Although someone of my position wasn't supposed to take risks, I was safely far enough down the line of brothers that no one really cared. I had four brothers ahead of me before I would ever have to take on any family duties, so I was allowed quite a lot of freedom that they weren't. I choke for a second, thinking of another set of four lost to me.

I remember one mountain—in the Girvan Range, I think it was—that Fenner and I both slipped off of when a handhold I grabbed fell out from under me. If not for the rope tying us together and pitoned into the cliff face, we would have both fallen to our deaths. The Fist, at least so far, seems to be made of much more sturdy stuff. Still, the habits of youth endure and I am careful to take it slow enough to be safe. I decide not to bother with my hooks and rope,

recognizing that the fishhooks weren't made to grab into the rock like a true crampon and piton would have. Upon retrospect, it was a little silly to bring them anyway.

I rest a couple of more times on various ledges. I am amazed at how much of my boyhood hobby remains to me. I completely gave up that part of my life, along with everything else, when I left the capitol for the furthestmost reaches of the kingdom, the village Seadown. I figure that my simple fisherman's life—a disguise, at first, and then later on, my life's passion—is over now and since my life in general is probably coming to an end, I allow myself to think about my childhood and early adulthood. I think of my first family, who have now been dead for over fifty years and try not to think of my second family, dead less than a week now. I am a little troubled that I can't quite picture what my mother and father looked like, although I can remember my four brothers vividly. We never had a sister.

Eventually, the almost vertical cliff face starts to angle more and more, making the going somewhat easier as I get more tired. Soon, I can almost scramble on my hands and feet in a somewhat crab-style walking pace. The orange of the sun starts to dip beneath the waves and I think that now would be a good time to camp for the night. At first, I am surprised—and just a tiny bit disappointed—that the climb hasn't killed me, although every muscle in my arms and lower legs aches like they haven't in a very long time. Holding your arms above your head for hours at a time starts to hurt after a while. I decide to call it quits for the day and get a fresh start in the morning. I figure that I will be at the top before the sun falls on the morrow.

I didn't bring any firewood with me and it would have been soaked throughout by the storm on the way here anyway, so I have to do without the warmth and comfort of a fire. The early morn's gentle breeze has picked up and is now quite a strong wind, and a mite chilly. Hopefully, it will die down by morning or I will be in danger of being blown off of the cliff face. Since I am this close to the top, it would be a shame to die without seeing it.

I eat some more of my fish rations, with my joints aching and popping like dry twigs. I lie down with my rucksack as a pillow and quickly fall into the dreamless sleep of the extremely tired.

The next day, I am again awoken by the light of the sun just climbing up from the bottom of the sea. As I hoped, the wind has died down to a much safer speed and I have a quick breakfast and then get underway.

To my surprise, I soon discover a path. The circular mountain has a long ledge that runs along the outside, and steadily spirals up the face of the mountain. Looking down, I can see where the lower bottom of the mountain used to have the same, but it has fallen off over the years of wind and weather. At some time in the very distant past, this ledge must have run from the bottom beach all the way up. This troubles me, for I begin to suspect that I am not the first person to scale this mountain. Aeons before, it must have been quite easy to just walk up the ledge from bottom to top, slowly spiraling around the mountain. I try to imagine how long it would take to cut something like that into the Fist, and my mind boggles at the massive undertaking. Although troubled, I am all the more excited and curious to see what lies at the top of the Fist of the Gods, and what the strange light in the sky that Remen reported seeing is all about.

As soon as I am firmly on the path, I make very good time. There are still parts of the ledge that has crumbled off and where I have to be very careful. I come to a large-ish section that has fallen off all together. Rather than try to climb across a stretch of uncharacteristically crumbly rock—that looks altogether unsafe—I try to simply climb straight up until I can reach

the section of ledge that has already spiraled completely around the mountain. I carefully feel for the pits and fissures that I can't see in the dark surface of the rock.

I make it about halfway up and then a back-spasm hits me. My arms curl up like claws and one foot slips out of the small crack it was wedged in. Waves of pain sweep over me, making me dizzy and nauseous. I can't move my arms and my left leg dangles freely. I can feel my right leg starting to tense up as well, as the series of cramps spreads from my back to other parts of my body. My hands are starting to tire from the effort of holding up so much of my bodyweight. For a second, I think how easy it would be to just let go, and then this ordeal would end, but my hands are clenched fiercely into the cracks and I can't release my grip in the rock even if I wanted to. My back throbs again and I feel my right leg start to cramp up.

I perch there precariously for what seems like hours but can't be more than a couple of minutes. With a supreme effort of will, trying to ignore the cramps, I stick my left leg back into a crack. Once I have both feet securely wedged in, I am able to take off some of the load from my arms. The back-spasms subside somewhat.

I pant fiercely for a couple of minutes. Slowly, my arms start to relax. I think I can let go now if I want.

Damn that! I'm not going to give up now. Not when I'm this close. Marshalling some force of will, I yell, "Get up, Elias! Move it!"

As soon as I reach up one arm for another handhold, I am wracked with another back cramp. I put the arm back down and the spasm subsides somewhat. I just wait here for a bit.

The wind, which was on my side this morning, now takes it into its head to change. I stand there against the face of the cliff and the wind starts to pick up—a little at first, and then it starts to blow more and more. As it gets darker, the wind gets even stronger. This will be a bad spot to be in when visibility gets next to zero and the night winds come. I've got to get further up to some shelter.

So, ignoring the cramps that start again when I move, I reach up an arm and pull myself up to the next handhold. Sweat flows off me like rain, stinging my eyes and making my grip a little slippery. I ignore this, the pain in my back, and the wind. "Up, damn you, up!" I say, in time to my motions. I think of nothing else but reaching up the next hand and putting my toe into the next crack. Somehow, I am able to move my body, in spite of the fierce cramps.

Finally, I reach the ledge above me and achingly pull myself up, my arms like two dead weights. The wind is blowing strongly and feels good on my sweat-drenched forehead and on my exposed neck and arms. I stand up straight, stretching out my back muscles by leaning back as far as I can go. I find myself chuckling at first, and then I laugh, as I realize how close I came to death. "You're going to have to try harder than that, if you want to beat this old man!" I yell out to the wind and the gods, shaking my fist. I laugh like a madman for a while and then I collapse into a heap on the ledge. I am tired and spent, and my back is throbbing as if a knife—a very dull and rusty knife—is stuck into it.

By this time, it has gotten quite dark and starts getting cold. I thought that I would have reached the top by now, but it is still nowhere in sight. I am about even with some of the lower clouds and I can't see very far through the misty soup and the dark of the night. The air seems to be a little thinner, which is as I expect from previous climbing experience. I am panting for all I am worth when I finally get the energy to make camp again.

I am almost out of food. I have enough left to hopefully reach the top, and then it will be a hungry couple of days before I can get back down to the sea and catch something. Knowing a little something about mountains, I do some searching around, until I find some nests of some

high-flying birds. The first one I see is empty, the next one has an eagle carefully guarding its eggs, but the third one I come to is empty of its mother bird and has one large speckled egg in it. This I immediately eat raw, deciding to save my rations for later and not chance crushing the delicate egg in my pack. Hopefully I'll be able to find more eggs for the trip back. I am already getting pretty optimistic about surviving this climb.

I use the abandoned nest for kindling to make a fire. It won't last very long, but it will be comforting to at least have a fire for a while, while I try to go to sleep. I brought a piece of flint, and I use the side of the Fist itself to strike it against. The nest is particularly large and the downy feathers that line it burn and crackle nicely for a while. But soon, my fire peters out and I go to sleep.

This time, I dream again. Some of what I was thinking about this morning comes back to me, as I lie sleeping. It is all very confusing and disjointed, but many flashes of my younger days come and go. One scene is particularly clear.

I wake up in the middle of the night to the sounds of screaming and with the sharp smell of burning timbers filling the air. I stumble out of my big, downy bed and peek out of my slightly open bedroom door, only to see soldiers going from room to room, pulling each of my brothers out of bed, and lighting the rooms on fire. My elder brothers are each quickly dragged out into the hall and their necks are slashed from ear to ear and then casually tossed aside, like so many butchered hogs. Shocked and amazed, I can only stand here watching, unable to move. A persistent sound of a light humming is in the background, behind the sound of screaming, and I keep wondering what it is. Soon the soldiers come to my door.

I wake up with a start. The last part of the dream was so vivid and real. I can still smell the burning timbers, and then I realize it is just the dying embers of my little fire, with the not-so-pleasant smell of burning quills from several feathers. The humming I heard in my dream is still going on and I realize that it is real and I must have incorporated it into my dream. The whole mountain seems to be humming and when I put my ear against the naked cliff face, I can tell that it is indeed from where it is coming. I have no idea what can be causing it. It never gets any louder or softer, just a steady, unidentifiable humming sound. I put it down to just another mystery of the Fist—one among many that I hope to solve by reaching the top.

I realize then that I am extremely cold. I didn't think to bring any extra clothing and have only my rucksack for a blanket. I pull all of my supplies out of it and wrap it around my upper body. Soon, I am fast asleep, and if I have any dreams again, I don't remember them by morning.

When daylight breaks, it has already gotten much warmer. The humming sound that I heard in the night seems to have stopped, although it might have just subsided a bit and I can't tell anymore with my weak ears. When I put my face to the rock, I feel a tiny vibration, but I'm not sure if it is really there or if I am just imagining it. I certainly wouldn't have noticed anything if I hadn't heard it last night. I decide to skip breakfast this morning and just make my way up with all due speed. I want to save out my meager rations for as long as possible. I gather up my stuff and set off again, this time confident that I will see the top.

When I look out over the edge of the ledge of the Fist, all I can see is the top of a cloud cover. Clouds also obscure the view when I look up. I decide to waste no more time and just press on.

I walk briskly and as fast as I can up the winding ledge. Nearer to the top, the mountain is in much better condition than down below. Soon, the surface of the ledge starts to smooth out and the face of the Fist that I walk alongside is free of the pockmarks and fissures of the lower section. The Fist is a darker black, almost like glassy black marble and not really like iron at all.

I've never seen stone like this before. The humming sound is faint, almost at the edge of my consciousness, but still there if I don't move or make a sound. I decide to quit wondering about it and concentrate on making time.

About mid-afternoon, the ledge I am walking on finally starts to level out. I seem to have gotten above the level of the highest clouds and see only clear air above me. I make one more circumference around the top of the Fist and then come to a wide-open area. Around me stretches only wide-open space, dotted with an occasional object that my weak eyes can't make out from this distance. I sink to my knees in exhaustion and disbelief, throwing off my pack onto the glassy-smooth, dark surface of the ground, and with my long, gray hair flipped forward covering my face. I start crying—in relief, sadness, happiness, excitement—I know not what curious mix of emotions. I did it! This is the top of the Fist of the Gods!

Chapter Six

I pick myself up from the ground and anxiously look around. I feel giddy from the long hike up and also from the excitement, anticipation, and even nervousness of actually being at the summit. The thin air is also making me feel a little lightheaded. I am far above almost all of the clouds and for the first time since I was a very young man, I can look out and see the clouds below me, rather than above me. This is the place that legends say goes up high enough to commune with the gods, all the way to the heavens. Although I've never been a religious man, I can't help but feel a little apprehensive about being in such a place that many people claim has to be holy.

As I've mentioned before, my eyes aren't very good anymore. I've had a milky film over my eyes from cataracts since I was seventy or so. I had no idea of what to expect when I reached the top of the Fist of the Gods—although I did half expect to see some structure, buildings, or a temple when I finally made it—but now, I can't see much of anything. The humming sound that I heard the night previous and earlier this morning seems to be a little louder here at the top of the Fist, but it isn't coming from anyplace in particular. The humming sounds—and maybe some of my expectations working overtime—make me feel like there is a “presence” in the air around me, but I can't see anyone or anything that would give me that impression. I just put it down to an over-excited and active imagination. I can tell that the top seems to be a big, open clearing that is almost a perfect circle, dotted with a few indistinct shapes. I am more than a little disappointed, but I have gone this far and I decide to check out whatever they are.

The biggest of these shapes is an indistinct blur right in the middle of the clearing. I slowly walk up to it and am very surprised that it doesn't seem to get any clearer as I get closer to it. It looks like a patch of fog but seems to keep a constant spherical shape, in spite of the wind that blows at the top of the mountain. It is about the size of your average village-hut and one can see through it plain enough. It is thicker than a heat shimmer but more nebulous than any cloud of smoke that I've ever seen. I notice that there are several dead birds scattered about the circumference of the fog. I pick a few of them up, but I can't tell any reason why they might have died. Most of them seem fairly young and none of them has any blood or signs of disease on them. I decide to leave them and the fog alone for the moment and check out some of the other shapes I saw.

Near the edge of the clearing from where I came up, there is a pile of loose rocks about the height of a man, shaped roughly like a pyramid. I look at the pile for a while and even take off the top layer of loose rocks, but aside from being made of the same strange, glassy-black substance that the entire top of the Fist is made of, they don't seem altogether that unusual. I don't think that the rock-pile means much of anything, although if I have to make a guess, I'd say that it might be some kind of primitive altar. After all, this is supposed to be the Fist of the Gods, and surely, if there ever were any gods around, they'd need an altar for men to make an offering at. But it might just be a pile of rocks—randomly piled up here by forces I know not what of, or the crumbled remains of some previously solid structure.

I circle the entire edge of the clearing and find three more piles of rock, each roughly about the same size and at equidistant points from each other. I figure that maybe they are here to mark the four cardinal directions, but I can't tell for sure, with the sun straight up overhead and with my compass spinning around whenever I look at it. It seems like an interesting theory, but I don't know what it means even if I am right. The only thing I glean from the rock-piles is the confirmation that they probably aren't a naturally occurring phenomenon, being spaced too equally away from each other. Just in case they are some kind of an altar, I decide that it will be

better to show some respect than to altogether ignore them and perhaps anger the gods of this place. I feel more than a little guilty about my earlier defiance of the gods. If they do exist, they didn't prevent me from coming up the Fist, and if they don't exist, then what can it harm? So at each altar or rock-pile or whatever, I bow my head in respect. I have nothing more concrete than that in which to give in lieu of an offering and figure the symbol will be just as important as any substance. If some gods somewhere care, they give me no sign that they are even aware. I am actually glad that nothing has happened, being a little doubtful of the existence of the gods anyway.

I leave off my inspection and half-worship of the rock-piles. The constant humming sound still fills the air around me and I keep getting the feeling like someone or something is watching me. I sit down next to one of the rock-piles and concentrate very hard on the humming sound. At the edge of my consciousness, I feel like I can almost make out voices, although I can't hear any distinct words. But the more I listen and the harder I concentrate, the less I am sure. It is probably just a random humming sound, almost like the buzzing of millions of bees or the whisper of the wind through a forest of leaves. It might just be my imagination, or some human desire to try to find a pattern out of randomness. Even at this late stage in my life, I don't want to start hearing voices from nowhere, like many a crazy old coot with too much sauce from the bottle. This whole place is starting to make me nervous.

Okay, so I made it to the top of the Fist of the Gods, something no one I have ever even heard of has done before. And there is nothing up here. Disappointment rolls up in me like bile, and I taste the bitterness filling me. As I lean against the rocks, with my head bent down like the weight of the ages hangs from it, I feel tired and disillusioned, and also extremely old, in a way that I never felt before. The promise of finding something here on the Fist was all that kept me going, since coming home to find my entire family and most of the people that I have grown to like over the last fifty years dead and rotting. I feel every day of my eighty-plus years at this moment and figure that maybe I will take the quick way down the mountain after all. The thought of trudging down the mountain and sailing back to a dead and morose village is so disheartening. I don't think I have the strength in me to do it.

As I sit here feeling sorry for myself, the humming suddenly stops. The silence that replaces the light humming is almost deafening. I look up with a start, expecting to see something different in the mountaintop; something that will reflect the change that has happened by the stopping of the humming sound. Everything looks as it had when I first made the last turn up the ledge walkway and came upon this scene. The cloud of fog is still in the very center of the clearing and hasn't moved or changed, as far as I can tell. It is the only thing that I haven't inspected in great detail and I think that I better at least take a closer look at it before flinging myself off of the top of the mountain or anything else as drastic and permanent as that.

I get up, almost ceremoniously dusting myself off—since there is actually very little dust on this wind-swept, glassy-marble ground—and walk slowly to the center of the clearing. I think that perhaps something might lie in the center of that patch of amorphous fog. Perhaps it is steam, like the kind one sees coming up from volcanic peaks and fissures. It doesn't feel hot to me and there is no telltale reek of sulfur that you usually smell around a volcano. Also, the fog cloud isn't moving at all, in spite of the constant wind, which flaps my long hair back and forth in its wake. It is truly a curious thing.

The sense of a presence actually intensifies as I come right up to it. I start to tremble a bit as I feel what seems to be something more than natural. I can't explain even to myself what I feel, but it fills me with awe. I stop right at the edge of it and although the dead birds give me a

moment of pause, I can't see how this fog could be responsible for killing them. I reach forth a trembling hand to touch it.

Nothing. I can't feel a thing. I can see where my hand goes into it and plainly see my hand through the mist, but I can't feel the mist at all with my hand. I expect at least to feel the air as slightly moist, as you do in a thick fogbank, but it seems no different from the air that blows all around me. I can even feel the wind on the back of my hand, as it blows through the cloud, but the wind seems to go right through the cloud as if it isn't even there. I draw my hand back and think for a moment about what to do. Nothing immediately presents itself, so I decide to take the plunge and walk right into it. Call it bravery or call it a suicidal impulse; I'm not quite sure myself what it is. Those dead birds should mean something.

#

The Many/One

"A new Host has been found," part of us says to the rest.

The order goes out, "All active and functioning units, report."

Units stir from the dormant waiting stage, come back online, and run self-diagnostic checks on all systems.

In picoseconds, units respond. "Functioning within allotted parameters. Awaiting instructions."

A correction is made to this preliminary report. " 3.6×10^7 units not responding. Query—shed links with damaged/non-responding units?"

A consensus is quickly reached. Some units were lost in the abandonment of the recent insufficient Hosts. Such a small number of the whole is inconsequential. "Shed all extraneous links to damaged or non-responsive units. If/when status \geq minimum operational ability, proceed with diffusion."

Links are broken with damaged units. A calculation of Host mass, complexity, and cell number is estimated. This information is disseminated amongst every member of the Many Who are One. Some units are rearranged to fill in the gaps. Some units self-replicate to make enough for critical density for Host conversion. A new image of the whole is formed.

Finally, critical density is achieved. Those of us who are in charge of command functions relay the instructions to other units, now specialized around new parameters suitable for the new Host.

"Begin diffusion."

#

Elias

I take one hesitant step forward and then another, and then I am right in the middle of the curious fog. Suddenly the humming sound begins again, only far louder than it was previously. It starts to get even louder and even starts to raise in pitch. I jump in startlement and take a quick, bumbling step backward to get out of whatever it is, suddenly filled with panic. As I move, the cloud seems to move with me, keeping me in the exact center of it. I take a quick step forward and it still surrounds me, dogging my movements at every turn. Now the humming increases again in both volume and pitch until it sounds like a long, drawn-out wailing. The feeling of presence that has been with me since I have come to the top of the Fist is even stronger now; I know that this fog is alive in some way and it doesn't seem to want to let me out of it, now that I have wandered into it. I'm scared.

I open my mouth to scream and suddenly the thin fog gets much thicker, as the spherical mist collapses in on itself around me. My opened mouth and exposed throat start burning like

they are on fire and I realize that this presence, or spirit, or whatever, is trying to come into me through my opened orifices. I hurriedly close my mouth and my eyes, trying to hold my breath for as long as I can. I can now feel my chest and lungs burning from the lack of air and maybe from some of the cloud that I have already breathed into me. Soon I fall to my knees and then collapse altogether, no longer able to hold my breath or even stand. There is no way that I can resist the force of this and I open my eyes to see what is going on. The fog starts to sparkle and flash little bursts of light as I watch it absorb into my body, right through my very pores. I feel myself falling asleep and although I struggle mightily to stay awake, I am powerless to stop it.

Darkness closes over me.

#

The Many/One

We are now completely intertwined with the Host. We send the order out to those not directly involved with information processing and heuristic/hierarchical reasoning. "Evaluation of Host: report, all units."

Reports come in. Units have been set up within every cell of the Host. We evaluate the flood of data coming in:

The Host is a carbon construct, water-based, and multi-cellular. Energy is converted for work and organism building/repair by electron stripping of oxygen, combined with a gradual, multilevel breakdown of carbon compounds. Cells have specialized functions, and are organized within groups and types along bilateral symmetry, split along a central axis. Cell information is stored in proteinic acids, in a double helix formation. Reproduction is asexual at the cell level and binary sexual at the organism level. Control of subsystems is from a specialized group of cells arranged vertically along the middle of the organism and from a clump at the top of the Host.

More and more data flows in and is quickly added to our growing new sense of self. We evaluate the information received and sent back our request for more information: "Examine proteinic acid compounds. Assess status and condition."

A brief millisecond goes by while the double helixes are forced apart, examined, read, and then results are reported back:

Severe degradation of proteins observed. Cell information is missing or damaged in most constructs. Possible reasons: radiation, extreme age, or cause unknown. Scanning indicates imminent system failure. Query—advise as to possible course of action.

We process the new information. Barely .001% of us are needed to come to a preliminary conclusion: the Host unit is damaged and has several basic design flaws. We draw more of us into the decision-making process as we design a repair scheme. Soon, fully two percent of the whole is used to outline a course of action.

"Protein structures are first priority. They will need to be repaired and restored to optimal conditions. Next, the Host's energy pathways can be modified in the following ways—" A new energy pathway diagram is sent to the local cellular units of our self, with corrections centered on utilizing photosynthetic pathways instead of the inefficient breakdown of carbon compounds.

We devise a few other minor changes, designed to make the Host and ourselves more efficient and allow us more time to perform our mission.

A subsystem of the Many that is One queries the whole, "Host is observed to have higher

reasoning and abstract abilities, beyond what is needed for system control, maintenance, and loco-manipulation. Advise on course of action.”

Interesting. “Examine all higher functions. Evaluate reasoning ability. Report back.”

The results that come in are very promising: multi-redundant parallel processing, a relatively complex system of hormonal control, and structures that have been burned in to handle complex tasks such as abstract reasoning, language, and learned social behaviors.

All units are utilized in making a decision. “Examine language centers. Dump all appropriate information into our command processors.”

The information that comes back is puzzling and almost illogical to a fault. Nevertheless, we are extremely interested. Another decision is made in group consensus.

“Establish cross-link. Initiate contact with the Host.”

#

Elias

Everything is absolute black around me and I can hear a voice far-off in the distance that keeps getting closer until I can hear it right inside my head. It sounds like a multitude of voices, all speaking as one.

“You are the Chosen Host.”

“What do you mean?” I try to shout, but my voice only rolls around in the confines of my own mind without ever leaving my lips. I can’t see anything or move any part of my body, even though my eyes seem to be open. I feel like I am in a waking dream, a dream I am powerless to pull myself out of. I try again. “Who are you?” I shout inside my own head.

“We are the Many that is One. You have been Chosen.”

“Chosen for what? And by Whom?” I ask the voices that boom and echo inside my head.

“We have come down to your world, from further away than you can possibly imagine.”

“From the heavens? Are you spirits? Gods?”

At this question, the voice is silent, as if thinking. Apparently ignoring the question, the voice that is many but one says, “We are the Many that is One. You are the Host, but you are damaged. This is not acceptable. You shall be remade, to suit our image.”

“What do you want?” I finally ask after a long pregnant pause. I have trouble thinking clearly. The voice seems to fill my mind and it is like trying to think with a head full of cobwebs.

“We want to see, to know, to understand, to feel, to walk, to breathe, to sleep, to wake, to do, to try, to learn, to move, to act, to find, to seek, to teach, to be. . .” The list goes on and on for what seems like hours, encompassing almost every verb that I seem to know, as if the voice is pouring through my mind like someone reading a book, or ticking off items from a long list of everything that is known.

I try to think about all of this but it is too much for my humble brain to get around. Instead, I ask the only question that I can think of: “Why? And why me?”

“You are here. We are here. You are the first to come that has been acceptable. The flying creatures came before, but they were not acceptable. Their minds were too small. You will be acceptable, with some changes. . . You have been chosen by the Many that is One.”

“Why am I asleep? Is this a dream?” I shout, as the voice seems to start to fade away.

At my question, the voice of the Many that is One briefly comes back. “This is the only way we can communicate with you. Your—” the voice pauses as if searching for the right term, “you don’t have a good word for it, —your waking mind cannot be touched by us, but of the sleeping mind, that we can touch. We shall speak anon, but only in this way. Prepare yourself,” it warns.

Abruptly the voices are gone, although I can still hear echoing lingerings of it in my head. “Prepare myself for what?” I ask, mostly to myself, as the voices have left.

#

I start to feel a vague itchiness all over my body, like when a man’s taken a roll in the grass and come up with chiggers. This mite of an itchy feeling slowly builds up higher and higher until I want to scratch every part of my body, inside and out. It is maddening, being able to feel my whole body itching like wildfire and not be able to move in the slightest to scratch it. Soon, the fiery itchy feeling is replaced by what feels like actual fire. Every part of my aged body seems to be full of this burning, and I can hear a popping and cracking sound coming from all of my bones. My muscles and tendons seem to be pulling and stretching themselves, with an unbelievable amount of pain. I can feel a pain behind my eyeballs and in front of my eyes as my old, myopic lenses bend and release. My whole body seems like it is on fire and I would writhe in agony if I could move. My whole body feels like it is changing, to fit the plan of the Many that is One. I do the only thing that I can do in this weird state of waking dreaming: I scream and go on screaming until I black out completely.

Chapter Seven

Elias

I know not how long I was unconscious, lying here on the ground, flat on my back. I think it might have been several days, maybe even as long as a week. I finally wake up from a dreamless sleep and slowly open my eyes. I am lying in the exact center of the Fist of the Gods, and the strange cloud of spirits is gone. They are inside of me now and I feel very strangely different, in a million different ways.

I lie here, thinking about things and making no effort to get up for a while. I have a calm, peaceful feeling in me now. I haven't forgotten what happened to Adrial and the rest of my family and friends, but now I have some confidence that they are in a better place. The raw knot of guilt that I have been carrying around since they died has been lifted from me. All of that belonged to someone else, an old, guilt-wracked man named Elias. I don't know whom this new person that I've become is, but I am anxious to get to know him and the spirits he carries. With that thought firmly in mind, I sit up to face the new world; forever altered in my new perception of the world by the meeting with the Many that is One.

The sun is shining brightly and I bask in its warm rays for a while. The sunlight seems to infuse me with some of its energy; I feel like the pores of my body are literally drinking in the sunlight. This is as best as I can describe the feeling. I look down at my arms and hands and I am shocked at what I see. Right as I start to examine my arms, it suddenly occurs to me that I can see them clearly. My cataracts have been stripped away and I can see perfectly! In fact, I can see better than I ever remember seeing before. It's very hard to describe but I'll make an attempt. For a very long time, I stopped seeing detail, even before the cataracts came. When I looked at a tree, I could see the form of the tree, but seeing the individual leaves was something that left me when I was about ten or eleven. I forgot how incredibly beautiful the world is when you can see everything in glorious detail. This new world of detail is so amazing to me that I just sit here dumbfounded, looking around me with a big grin on my face. A high-flying bird passes by overhead and I can not only see the bird, but also make out each individual feather on the bird's underside. I can even see the golden color of its eyes and some of the fleas crawling around in its soft, downy fluff. Incredible.

I have many, many surprises after waking up from my long sleep. As soon as I get a little used to my miraculous new visual acuity, I go back to my inspection of my hands and arms. They look like normal arms, hands, and fingers. I still have four fingers and a thumb on each hand and my skin looks much like normal, healthy, young skin. But this is what surprises me. I haven't had young, healthy skin in a multitude of decades. My arms were wrinkled, leathery, liver-spotted, and dried-out for at least thirty or forty years. They now look as healthy as a newborn baby's skin. They are pink and smooth, and untouched by eighty years of being outside in burning sun, wind, and weather. I used to have a long, jagged scar on my left arm from an attack by a sea snake many years ago, the same attack that my family use to tease me about just a few short days ago. This scar and a plethora of others have disappeared completely. There is no trace of a lifetime of scars and disfigurements. Even the occasional mole that I used to have is gone. My new arms are unblemished and untouched. I look at them for what seems like a solid hour, slowly turning them back and forth to examine them.

I feel great. In that, I mean that I physically feel good, without any of the aches and pains that we all carry around with us and don't even notice. I think that minor pains and aches are something we learn to live with, as soon as we crawl out of the cradle. Most of the time, we don't even notice them and learn to tune them out of our conscious minds, but now I notice them

by their very absence. As I sit here, marveling at the way that I feel, and the way that my arms and the world look, the wind blows my hair into my eyes. It is still long, but now it is jet-black and thick, when previously it was thin, gray, and brittle. It seems to absorb the light of the sun and I can actually feel the sun with my hair. As the wind blows it back and forth, more than just a sense of the sun's energy seems to come to me through my hair. I feel like I am tasting the wind with my hair. What a marvelous and curious happening!

Eventually, I stand up and look around. My legs feel like coiled springs, bursting with energy, power, and strength. Obviously my entire body has been remade, "to suit the image of the One," as it told me. I still feel like me, but I am now a better version of the old me, or rather, the young me that I remember. This new body seems an improvement over even my former young self, when I was at the height of my strength and vitality. The Gods have indeed been kind.

I suppose I should be hungry after not eating for a week or so. However, the sun seems to satiate my appetites in some strange way, just like a plant. I'm not any shade of green and I don't feel like a plant should feel—however a plant is supposed to feel—but I do feel very thirsty. The nearest source of fresh water that I know about is down in my boat, several leagues below me. I wonder if The Gull's Wing is still tethered down below. I won't worry about it; I feel strong enough now to swim home if I have to.

Thinking about going home is very strange. Is it really "home" for me anymore? The Many that is One told me that they wanted to see the world. Much of what they said I didn't understand. I don't know who or what they are. I don't even know if "they" is appropriate. "They" called themselves "the Many that is One," so "it" is probably better. But I can't help but get a sense of plurality when I talk to them, in spite of their protestations to the contrary. Maybe they are many spirits, each working with a common purpose and a common will. I can't help but think that they have to be spirits, and the existence of spirits implies the existence of the Gods. The Many that is One ignored my direct question about the Gods, or maybe they didn't understand. But wouldn't spirits from the Gods know everything? I'm not much of a priest or a theologian; I am only a simple fisherman. Before my fisherman days, I was a little more important, but not any more intelligent.

Well, I made it up here to the Fist of the Gods and now I have seen all that there is to see here. I feel a strange inner compulsion to leave this place. I guess that the Many/One has already seen everything here that they want to and are about ready to move on and see more. I can't hear their voice anymore but they told me that they wouldn't be able to communicate directly with me while I am awake. I do feel like something is pushing me to get down from here, so I get ready to leave. My rucksack is right where I left it, by the ledge coming up the mountain, and I quickly go through it to see if it has anything in it that is worth keeping and taking down the mountain. There is a tiny bit of water left in my canteen; however, my fishcakes have disappeared. The birds probably got to them already. No matter. I'm not hungry and downing the rest of my water takes the edge off of my thirst. This thirst is the only even slightly negative feeling I have from this new body and it isn't anything like the incapacitating thirst I normally would have after going so long without water. In fact, three or four days is about the maximum a body can survive without water and I have probably gone twice that length while I was sleeping. I have more water in a cask in the Gull and hopefully the both are still fixed up to the beach.

I feel strangely disorientated; I feel like a stranger in my own body. It is very difficult to think as I used to and even my brain feels like it has changed. Perhaps I should still feel

morose—after all, my family is dead and my life is a shambles. I just feel so damned good that I can't help myself in thinking optimistically as well. Of course, I still wonder what in the fifth airy hell came into my body and what in the sixth fiery hell it intends to do. However, all these things just aren't that important right now.

Before I leave the top of the Fist, I go to the four "altars" and thank the Gods for the gift that they have given me. I also accept the responsibility that being a vessel for the will of the spirits will entail. I am the "Chosen Host"—as they put it—and I am sure that these responsibilities will become clear in time. The only thing that I feel at the moment is the desire to leave this place, so I finish my worship, veneration, or whatever, and—whistling merrily—I start down the ledge. I leave the rucksack behind, as it doesn't have anything left in it that I need anymore, especially the rope or the silly tuna hooks—both of which I didn't use anyway.

The trip down takes far less time than the trip up did, on account of the nature of a mountain being what it is—the descent is always a heck of a lot easier than the ascent, and also my miraculous, new-fangled, young body is such an improvement on the tired, old wreck that climbed up. I literally run down the ledge that encircles the Fist. When I come to the missing section of the ledge, I quickly gauge it with my new eyesight and—without pausing a beat—I decide what I am going to do. I speed up and jump over the gap to the ledge beyond. The missing section is over three times the length of a standing man and I clear it as easily as you might step over a rain-puddle. I have been running for over two hours and I'm not winded or even breathing hard. I can't help but laugh with glee and I'm a little embarrassed to say that I even yelled "Wee!" as I sailed over the ledge. This is the most fun I have allowed myself to have in a very long time and I relish every second of it.

Soon the sun sets and I make good progress to the bottom of the Fist. As it gets darker, I am slightly surprised to find out that I can still see as clearly as the brightest noon. However, I do notice that the colors of everything get less and less vibrant; until by the time night completely falls, everything is in shades of black, white, and gray. This must be how owls and wolves see at night. What other strange surprises does my new, improved body have in store for me?

The larger of the two moons, Daemon, begins its slow traverse across the night sky, making the black rock of the Fist shine and sparkle in the night air like polished opal. Since the dark is no problem for me, I decide to keep on running throughout the night. Eventually I come to the end of the ledge and have to climb down the old-fashioned way: hand-under-hand and inch-by-inch. I find that I can quite easily support all of my weight from just one hand and even from just a few fingers if I have to. This opens up my choice of handholds and makes the climb down even faster than ever.

About halfway through the night, I spy the sandy beach at the bottom. I am on the opposite side of the Fist from my boat, so I don't know if it is still there or whether the tides have managed to carry it off. For all that I know—it might even have stormed while I was in my extended metamorphosis, and carried the Gull away. My clothes weren't wet when I awoke, but they could have dried out in the sun, especially if it stormed a few days earlier. This is something that I have absolutely no control over, so I decide not even to worry about it. This is uncharacteristic of me, as I usually worry about things on general principle, but I am in such a good mood that I decide to let this one thing get by me without wasting any negative emotions on it. The Gods will provide.

By the time I finally get to the bottom, the other smaller moon, Haedus, starts its quick race across the sky. When the two moons are in the sky together, it usually means high tide and

this time is no exception. The little beach is almost completely underwater by the time I set foot on it. After I jump down the last yard or so to the soft sand, I do a little happy-dance, right there on the beach of the Fist. I made it to the top, communed with the Gods, and then returned to earth a changed man. Why shouldn't I dance for joy?

My strange, inner compulsion to leave the Fist leaves me immediately after I set foot on the beach and nothing else seems to replace it at the moment. I guess the Many/One isn't too particular about what should happen next. So, I decide that the best thing to do is to return home to Seadown, at least to say goodbye to everyone that is left before setting off to see the world. Seeing the world is the only clear desire that I understood from the spirits and it suits me just fine. I've always wanted to see more of the world and it has only been my self-imposed exile—hiding, actually—and my family that has kept me in the village for the last fifty years.

I run like lightning over the wet beach as fast as I can go. I am amazed at just how fast that is. I could beat a deer in a footrace, I'm sure. The wind blows past me and my long hair flows behind me as I round the Fist to the other side. There, like a dream in the night, is tethered my beautiful boat; The Gull's Wing, in all her glory, gently bobs up and down in the rising tide. I am so happy that I feel like giggling—something I haven't done since I was a little boy.

I run and jump over the rising water, landing right in the middle of the deck. I open up my precious cask of water and take a long, cold drink. Now I feel absolutely perfect, although I do feel a little sleepy. I figure that this new body must have some limitations after all, or maybe it is just my mind that still needs the benefit of a good night's sleep. Whichever it is, I wrap a sail around me and prepare to get a little shut-eye before the morning sun rises and I am off.

Right as I am falling asleep, I wonder what I will tell everyone when I get back home. The truth will probably be better than anything else that I can think of to explain everything, although I'm not exactly sure myself what has happened. The big question on my mind at the moment is this: how will civilization—such as it is—take to me?

I awake to a truly magnificent sunrise and think of a line from a poem that I learned when I was a child: "The soft, orange light of a new day/ peeked over the gently rolling waves of Mother Ocean." I don't remember who wrote the poem but it comes to mind this morning. I guess poetry depends on the frame of mind and the mood of the moment; I haven't felt too much like appreciating the beauty of the world until recently.

I stand up and stretch, and set about getting the Gull ready to sail back. I re-attach the mainsail that I cut down and set up the smaller side sails. Soon the gentle wind sends my boat straining against the rope that holds her to the rocks. I give a mighty tug on the end of the rope and pull the massive boulder it is tied to tumbling down into the water with a splash. I am away and ready to return home.

As I sail away from the sandy beach, I bow my head to the Fist of the Gods and give a silent prayer in thanks. I am feeling a lot more religious lately than I ever was before, although I am still somewhat confused about the particulars of everything. As soon as I am a little ways away from the Fist, I pull out my compass to check for north. My compass needle is still spinning around like a drunken sailor, but I seem to know already which direction north is, and thus south also. The further I get away from the Fist, the more sure I am about which direction I am going, until eventually, the needle settles and confirms my feelings. This is another unexpected gift from the Many/One; I can tell which direction north is even better than my compass can. So, I put my compass away and use the one in my head instead. When I close my

eyes, I can feel the gentle tugging of the North magnetic pole and even feel a “hole” in the world’s magnetic field, which is where the Fist lies, disrupting the flow lines.

The Gull and I sail right along, as easy as can be, until about mid-afternoon. Then the clear sky starts to fill up with clouds and the wind picks up a mite. I let down the smaller sails and wonder briefly if a storm is going to usher me away from the Fist just as one escorted me here. However, only a mild rain starts falling for about an hour or so. I still sail merrily on—until I start getting wet, that is. This puts a literal damper on my mood. Amazing new body or not, I find that I still don’t like getting wet anymore than before. The rain only lasts for a little while before the sun comes back out and the winds calm down a bit. I notice that this new body can still put out a fierce odor when it gets wet; however, most of it probably comes from my now soaked hemp tunic. Hemp is an amazingly strong fiber but it seems to hold in odor; it only needs a little water on it before it releases a strong smell all at once. Well, I think merrily, nothing is perfect and I probably have a heightened sense of smell to go along with the increase in everything else.

I use my new sense of direction to sail the Gull and myself home. It is quite interesting having this new ability and I discover that it has other uses as well. If I close my eyes, I can “see” or feel the magnetic fields around me, and I can detect small fluctuations in it when enough fish or a large enough sea animal moves through it. Each animal seems to put out its own field, and I can feel all of these interactions between the electric and magnetic fields. For example, I can sense a large school of tuna that seems to roughly pace the boat just off of my starboard bow. If I keep to my fisherman’s life of old, this new talent will prove very useful. However, at this time, I don’t feel like I will be a simple fisherman any longer. That part of my life passed with everything else. I feel like I will be a traveler for quite a while.

I am a little surprised that I can recall the words “magnetic” and “electric.” I had all the training and education that Brigan’s Land could provide in my youth, but these words I hadn’t thought about for sixty-five years. These are words from bygone ages past—back when some of the old knowledge was still around. Now, except for Tretia and the odd metal-paged book here and there, no one in the world understands much of the old ways. Making compasses is the most anyone uses magnetism for and the only electricity in the world anymore is the lightning one sees in storms. I seem to be able to recall these barely-learned words and more, a lot better now than in the last few years of my doddering old age.

My wet tunic starts to bug me, so I take it off to let it dry for a while. After about an hour and a half of the direct noontime sun, I realize something. Even though my new, pink skin is naked to the elements and the scathing sun, I don’t seem to burn—or even tan. My exposed skin still drinks in the sunlight without any of its usual harsh after-effects. It stays the exact shade of light pink, no matter how brightly the sun shines on it. I find that I feel much more comfortable without the tunic, and decide to leave it off, even after it has dried. Besides, I am a little tired of the rank way that it smells.

As I ride through the waves—my long hair flying back behind me, and my half-naked body looking like an oceanic demigod—I think about what I will tell everyone back at the village. I wonder if anyone will even recognize me anymore. It is with this thought in mind that I lean over the edge of the boat to get a good look at myself in my reflection off of the water. However, the surface of the sea is a little too choppy to get a clear look. I have a couple of casks that ordinarily hold sea-salt, for packing fish in to prevent spoilage. I take one that is about empty, and—after dumping out the rest of the salt—I fill it with seawater and then set it down onto the deck of the Gull. I look into it.

I didn't expect to see my old, grizzled face in the water anymore, if my arms and legs were to be any indicators. Still, what I see surprises me. Reflecting off of the gently rolling surface of the cask of water, a stranger looks back at me. I can't even recognize myself!

The years go by so quickly, but their accumulated effects are barely noticeable to us. A slight wrinkle here and there, the occasional scar—these are come by so slowly that one never notices. After old age sets in, a man barely even looks at himself; vanity is something for the younger folk. Maybe a man will run into an old friend that he hasn't seen in many years and that person will think to himself, "My, he's gotten older." But our regular friends and family see us day after day and never really notice how the years have been harsh.

So, I am shocked and surprised at the difference I see in the cask. The face that looks back at me is a young man's face of maybe twenty-five years of age. A long lifetime of wrinkles, liver spots, and scars has completely disappeared. My skin is smooth and tight, unblemished, and as pink and new as the rest of my body. Even my eyes are different. The white film that usually covers them is gone. This I guessed at by the fact of my new, clear eyesight; however, I am still surprised when I actually see it. My eyes were a dark brown when I was younger, but now they are coal-black, as black as opal, and as black as the surface of the Fist of the Gods. I have never seen such jet-black eyes before and they are a little scary, even to myself. They look like twin holes into my soul and they have an odd, magnetic fascination to them. Staring into those inky pools of darkness, I feel myself becoming strangely mesmerized and it takes a great force of will to pull myself away from my trance-like stare into them.

Wow! I shake my head back and forth quickly to clear it. Whom and what have I become?

I can't help but look back into the water to see myself again, although I am careful to avoid gazing into my own eyes for too long. I am, I have to admit to myself, a very good-looking man. I turned a few heads when I was younger, but then someone of my former political stature could be as ugly as sin and still attract the attention of the fairer sex. I haven't considered myself attractive for a very, very long time, not since I'd gotten three long scars down the left side of my face. When the soldier-priests came for my family and started torching the castle down, a burning timber collapsed and trapped me beneath, burning three parallel scars under my eye. I laid pinned under that smoldering timber for almost a solid day and was left for dead. After I woke and finally got the courage to push off the timber, I ran for the hills, as it were, imagining that every priest of the Church of the Sun was madly nipping at my heels. Of course, in retrospect, I realize that they more than likely hadn't realized that I had lived through the Cleansing, or even the far-remote village of Seadown wouldn't have been safe for me.

And speaking of Seadown, who will still know that I am Elias? And, just as important, am I?

Chapter Eight

It takes me a great deal longer to get back to Seadown than it took me to get to the Fist. On the way there, there was the wind of a big storm to push me along, and I wanted to get there as fast as I could. Now, the same westerly winds work against me, although not of the previous gale proportions. With a three-sail boat, you can actually sail against the wind, but it is slow going and involves a lot of tacking and a skillful hand on the rudder. However, I'm in no real hurry. I have much to think about, and many reasons to want to take my time. So, I meander along, enjoying being out at sea, as I always do—excepting of course when it rains. Ah, rain! My nemesis—my archenemy, if you will.

Finally, when I am just an hour or so away from land, I spot another fishing boat, also on its way into port. It is still a distance away from me, but I can plainly see it as if it is just a few boat-lengths in front of me. In it is a young teen-age boy—Jhereg's son, Denan, I think it is. Denan can't be a day older than fourteen at the most, but with Jhereg dead and his mother still alive, he has to help support the family, and fishing is what Seadown is all about. Almost everyone in Seadown is a fisherman, or has some business relating to fish. Remen gave me a quick report of who died and who survived the plague, and I find that I can remember every name he told me perfectly. I put my shirt back on and patiently wait for the small boat to get nearer.

Denan finally comes close enough to recognize my boat, if not me, myself. "Ahoy, Elias!" he shouts, waving to me. With the other arm, he holds up a long gig of silverfish and is grinning like crazy.

"Ah, the resiliency of youth," I can't help sighing to myself, half in jealousy. "They can bounce back from even the worst of tragedies." Then, I have to laugh at myself, at the sound of my old, crotchety habit of complaining, even though I am only a little older than Denan now, at least physically.

As soon as our two boats get closer, he finally gets a good look at me and the smile on his face quickly disappears. "Where's Elias? And who are you?" he asks, a little threateningly. Small-town people being what they are, he is naturally a little suspicious of strangers, especially in light of what the last load of foreigners brought. Recognizing The Gull's Wing, but not me, also might have something to do with it.

I debate with myself about what to tell him. I spent a good deal of the return trip back here going over just what I was going say to everyone. I decided on several different courses of action and rejected all of them as being unbelievable or unworkable. The most unbelievable of all of them is the literal truth, but what else can I say? My heart starts beating rapidly and I feel myself getting flushed and nervous. I try to stall temporarily and merely reply, "Ahoy, Denan! I see you've got quite a mess of fish there."

Denan isn't about to have his questions put off so abruptly. He says again, "Who are you? How do you know my name?" He reaches down into the hold of his little skiff and comes up with a long boning knife, which he brandishes threateningly.

"Whoa there, me laddy!" I say. "No need to get excited. I've known your father since long before you were born. Jhereg and me went back a ways, you know. I know you don't recognize me, but I'm still Elias," I say, as placatingly as I can. However, I don't expect him to take the assertion at face value, and try to keep some distance between our boats to put him at ease.

"You lie! You're no more Elias than I'm the King of the Sea!" he yells at me, backing away from the front edge of his boat. "What've you done with old-man Elias?"

“I know it seems strange, me boy, but I’m him, I tell you.” This is going to be difficult, and now I realize that the rest of the villagers’ reactions will be much the same. I have no good way to prove my identity and I have no information about Denan that only Elias would have. I only barely even know the boy and now he isn’t apt to believe anything I tell him. I didn’t realize I was so naïve, until just now. Of course no one was going to believe me!

“You just stay away from me, you hear?” he says, with genuine fear in his voice and on his face. He hurriedly puts his back into the oars of his little boat and tries to put some distance between us. He looks at me and quickly looks over my boat again. He notices the name of The Gull’s Wing burned into the side of my boat and only stops rowing long enough to make a warding sign against evil. “Just stay away from me, whatever you are,” he says again. Once our two boats are separated a bit, he raises up his one sail and starts back to shore, looking over his shoulder at me all the while.

I honestly didn’t expect this last reaction from him: to think of me as an evil spirit. The fisher-folk have a well-developed pantheon of spirits, sprites, devils, and assorted magical creatures, drawn from several different cultures and religions. Denan is obviously including me as one of their ilk. The sea-folk have legends about mermaids who lure sailors to their deaths on sharp rocks and sea-sprites that can appear in the form of a lost loved-one, to lure victims into the water and devour them. I suppose I could easily be taken for a malevolent spirit who has killed Elias and is trying to assume his identity. And maybe that isn’t so far from the truth.

As I sit there in the Gull, I watch Denan hurriedly make his way back to the village port. I could easily outpace him and beat him back to the village—after all, I have three sails to his one—but I don’t think that the villagers’ reaction will be much different from the one that I just got from Denan. It is at this point that I realize that I am going to have to do more than just say that I am Elias. The inevitable conclusion that everyone will reach will be that I am more than human—or lying—and without any further explanation or reason to think to the contrary, they will naturally assume that I am an evil creature. If I’m not a normal human, I am either an evil spirit or something from the gods. I’ll have to supply them with an alternative explanation. It seems to me that there isn’t any middle ground; therefore, the latter explanation will be a little more workable than the former.

Watching Denan make a hasty retreat as if the hounds of Hell were on him, I debate with myself about not going back to the village at all. After all, why do I want to return there anyway? What is there for me? My family is gone, as are most of my friends. Maybe Elias did die along with most everyone else in the village and I should just let it go. I briefly make up my mind to go out to sea and never see the village of Seadown again, at least not as Elias. I even turn my boat around and start to head out to sea and then stop myself with a curse. Damn it! I have to at least say goodbye to Remen. I want at least him to know that I climbed to the top of the Fist and came back a changed man. I owe him that much and more.

So, somewhat reluctantly, I again point my boat back to shore and put up the rest of my sails. I steel myself for whatever will happen. In a few minutes, I see the shore and the port of Seadown. There on the dock is Denan himself, jumping up and down, and wildly gesticulating in my general direction to anyone that will listen. By the time that I finally pull up to the deck, quite a number of people have gathered, attracted by Denan’s wild yelling and the unbelievable things he is saying. I can catch the word “draugr” coming from him and a few others. If I remember correctly, a draugr is an undead creature out of legend. It kills and then tries to replace its victim with itself as an exact duplicate in order to kill the rest of the family, one-by-

one. Is this what they think I am? That I killed Elias and am now trying to kill someone else disguised as him? But then, I really don't look too much like Elias anymore.

Uh-oh. This could get messy; particularly as a fair number of the men gathered have weapons of one kind or another with them. Well, I've gone this far and although it sounds a little silly even to myself, I feel like the spirits will protect me from anything bad happening. Besides, I helped build that dock after the last one was washed out in a storm, and I'll be damned if I'll let anyone prevent me from using it! So, bold as brass, I slip into my regular docking place at the dock and shout, "Ahoy, the village! I have returned!"

The crowd of villagers is steadily growing as I lash my boat to the dock. I leave up all of my sails, just in case I need to get going in a hurry, and securely tie a rope around a makefast attached to a wooden railing lining the dock. By some silent agreement, everyone waits until I am finished and step aboard the dock before saying a word to me. I can hear a few of them muttering to themselves and to each other, saying things like: "That's Elias' boat, for sure, but that ain't him."

Finally, one of the older men, whom I recognize as Jenson, steps forward and holds out his hand, palm out, and fingers up as if to bar me from going any further. This is the same man that Remen told me filled the Tretians full of arrows when they tried to leave their ship and come ashore. He clears his throat rather dramatically, and the crowd's murmuring comes to a dead silence. He seems to be in charge of the village, something that must have developed in the last month or so while I was away. Our last mayor went the way of most of the villagers: victim to the plague. Jenson's red-banded bow and a full slew of arrows hangs around one shoulder and he absently fingers the smooth, oiled wood of the bow while he speaks.

"The boy Denan here says ye claim to be Elias, eh?" he says, with a gesture to Denan and then with a wave of one hand out to my docked boat. "Now, that's Elias' boat you got there for sure—we can all see that—but anyone can tell that ye ain't him. Some among us have reason to believe that you might be a draugr or some such, but I'm not one to put much stuff in that nonsense." Jenson briefly turns around to give Denan a hard, glaring look. "All's the same, I'd like to hear what happened to Elias, and why you have his boat, claiming to be him, and all."

Well, at least they aren't going to burn me at the stake outright. There might be some hope of convincing them. "I'm no draugr, I can assure ye of that. I'm as human as the rest of you." Well, maybe not, but I am trying to make a case here. "I'm Elias, sure as the day I was born. I've been to the top of the Fist of the Gods and back, and the gods have changed me."

Several people in the crowd gasp at that and draw back a ways. A couple of people make the old sign against evil and others finger their various assorted knives, fish tridents, and even rakes and hoes somewhat nervously. I notice that everyone that has come to the docks has also brought something that might serve as a weapon, in case of trouble.

"No one's been to the top of the Fist. It hasn't got any top, sure as same!" someone yells.

"Well I can tell ye that it's got a top because I've climbed it and seen it with my own two eyes," I yell back. "And if I'm not mistaken, that's you, Dinger-doo, yelling in the back, too afraid to confront a man directly."

The man I'd identified as Dinger steps forward, carrying a pitchfork. "I'm not afraid of any man, you! But Elias is ninety-five years old if he is a day and you're about twenty. I'll admit to being a mite uneasy about a draugr, if that's what ye be, even if you do know my nickname," he replies, with a quaver in his voice.

"I'm not ninety-five, Dinger-doo. I'm eighty-two, even if I don't look like it anymore. I told you, at the top of the Fist, I met the spirit of the gods, the Many that is One, and they came

into me. They called me the Chosen One and sent me out into the world. You don't expect the spirits to see the world in a broken-down wreck of an old man, do you now?"

A woman that I've never seen before yells from the back, "That's blasphemy! There's only one God, the Sun God, and He says that all the spirits be demons. He's one—or got one in him for sure!"

Two things surprise me by her comment. The first thing is, just who the heck is this woman—a woman that I've never seen before in a small fishing village that I have lived in for over fifty years? She has to be a visitor, some traveler from further inland. I am also surprised that anyone would even bring up the Sun God—He Who is not Named. Although it has been the official religion of Brigan's Land ever since the Cleansing, most of the Northern village folk still hold to the old ways, and worship Scinthus—the sea god. That is one of the reasons that I came here after the Cleansing. But, judging from some of the murmurs of assent, others seem swayed by her logic. The fact that she is a Sun-God worshipper also tells me that she has to be from somewhere further inland.

I want to keep thing from getting too confrontational, especially since I have my back to the sea and about thirty or so of the remaining villagers are gathered around in front of me with weapons. But when my unknown confronter mentions the Sun God, I can't help but speak out: "That butchering drivel! The Church of the Sun be damned! I tell you that I spoke with the old gods and their spirits and they said nothing about any Sun-God nonsense." My coal-black eyes flash with the venom of my feelings.

There, I said it. Many of the people draw back in horror, but many others seem to agree with me. I've hated the Church of the Sun ever since they massacred my family and seized control of the court of Brigan's Land. But peasants and simple fishermen being what we are, we usually make some obeisance to the government and religion, while privately holding to our old beliefs. I'd just directly and bluntly cursed the Church, something that I usually only do in the privacy of a few like-minded friends and not in front of an angry mob, bent on my destruction as something they perceive as evil.

Echoing my thoughts, the young woman starts screaming hysterically, "He's evil! He just cursed the Sun God. Ye heard him do it! He's a draugr for sure!" Her frightened screams are making the rest of the already nervous crowd even more nervous.

"Now hold on there a minute, lass," I say. "Seadown has never lost much love on the Church. I'm not cursing the old gods, only the Church. I've heard a many of ye do it yerselves. You, Jenson, you told me two summers ago on your front porch, that you couldn't abide the yoke of the Church, and would gladly see 'em all take a long walk off a short plank. Call me a liar, if you will."

As soon as I say it, I realize that this probably isn't the way to get him on my side, but the events of the moment, and the conviction that my doubts about the Church have been validated by recent experience, make me a little too brash and outspoken. Maybe also, my blood runs a little hotter now than it has in a long time and I speak with the impetuosity of youth, or at least young blood.

Jenson looks around at the crowd, who are all staring at him, waiting for him to deny or confirm my accusation. He then looks directly into my deep, black eyes. For a moment, he seems to lose himself in them and then pulls himself out with an angry shake of his head. I guess I can't blame him for saying, "Well, I'm not saying it happened or didn't. But it seems to me a draugr would take the memories of its victim as well as its body, wouldn't it now? Maybe a draugr would know such things as only Elias would, eh? And even the old gods never used to

take a man and change him. Either this man killed Elias and is trying to fool us something fierce, or maybe he is a draugr.”

“Or maybe I’m telling the truth,” I softly say, but loud enough for almost everyone to hear. I shake my head a little sadly from side to side. I am about ready to give up on this crowd and jump in the Gull, never to return, when a man who has just arrived on the scene comes forth and speaks.

“I talked to Elias before he left. I told him that I’d seen something flash up to the top of the Fist and I figured he’d probably gone up there.”

I almost jump for joy. It is Remen and he can corroborate my story. I almost didn’t recognized him at first. He looks like he’s barely eaten in the last two weeks or so and that—combined with his bout with the plague and the worry lines on his face—makes him look like an animated skeleton.

“Remen, old friend. I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again. Tell ‘em it’s me, will ya?” I beg him.

Remen pushes his way through the crowd and hobbles up to me. He bends forward and peers closely into my face. “I knew Elias when he used to look about this age. That’s him, all right. None of the rest of you are old enough to remember, but I am. Far as I can recollect, that’s about what he looked like, minus a scar or three. He’s got Elias’ boat, his clothes, and he knows all of our names. If he were a draugr, he wouldn’t be bothering to look like a young version of Elias, now would he? He’d look just like the old Elias, so’s he could blend in.”

Several people nod at this logic, from someone who knows me better than anyone else now alive and who is a respected member of the community. And it does make sense, so far about the only sense that can be made out of this situation.

But calm sense is not what a frightened mob wants to hear. It only takes a counter-argument, no matter how flimsy or transparent, to re-ignite the fears of the crowd. They’ve been through a lot with the plague and they sorely need a scapegoat to blame things on. “First came the plague, and right on its heels comes this thing!” someone shouts.

Someone else takes up the cry. “He’s here to finish off those the plague couldn’t take!”

Remen sighs deeply at that last idiotic remark and then turns around and holds up both of his arms. “You superstitious peasants! You know it was Tretia that brought us the plague. Elias’ had nothing to do with that!” The sight of his thin, frail frame, outlined against the rest of the crowd, makes Remen seem dangerously vulnerable, and brings out some protective instinct in me. He is determined to shield me from the wrath of the village and I deeply appreciate his attempt on my behalf. I feel very lucky to have had a friend like Remen for so long.

But the crowd has already started to work itself into a frenzy and is not to be denied. “Remen must be in on it too! He’s never liked the Church either!”

And then the dam breaks. The young hysterical woman starts shrieking again and I never see who throws the first stone. I’m sure it was aimed at me, but since Remen is standing right in front of me, it is him that gets hit with it. There are always several piles of ballast stones on the dock and someone took it into their superstitious head to start throwing them. Immediately, everyone draws back away from Remen and me, and then, firmly gripped in the group-mind of the mob, they all start heaving ballast stones at the two of us.

The first stone thrown hits Remen squarely in the temple and he goes down like a sack of potatoes, bleeding profusely. I can see the sizable reddish welt it puts on his old, soft skull. I cry out in fury and try to go to his side.

“Death to the heretics!” the unknown woman is melodramatically screaming. I would have rolled up my eyes at the sheer ignorance and fear of the crowd, if our lives weren’t in such danger.

As soon as Remen falls, the rest of the stones come in my direction. They are surprisingly easy to dodge at first; it only takes a quick movement to the left or the right to evade the thrown missiles. They whiz by me on either side, to splash into the sea behind. I can’t believe how effortless it is to evade them, as if they are moving through molasses and I am greased lightning.

My super-fast movement and their inability to hit me with anything only infuriates the crowd further. Soon, what has to be the entire remainder of the village has gathered on the dock, attracted by the sounds of the yelling and screaming. “What’s going on here?” I hear some of the newly arriving villagers ask.

“We’re killing the draugr that brought the plague!” yells someone else, in all defiance of logic and common sense. I guess in their defense, the villagers hold a lot of guilt about letting the Tretian ship dock, and they also carry around deep inside of them the guilt that the survivors of a tragedy have for simply being alive when so many else died. Plus, they are confronted with the unusual sight of my transformation, of a twenty-something young man claiming to be an eighty-year-old man. That and the group mob-mind lets them vent their anger and frustration upon us with no moral restrictions. The newly arriving villagers see Remen lying unconscious and bleeding at my feet and quite naturally reach the conclusion that I am somehow responsible for it or did something to him myself. It is simply chaos after that.

As the stones come at us, I stand above Remen and try to protect him. The more people that start to throw stones and the more stones that came at me, the harder it is to simply step out of their way. It is difficult to dodge one stone without stepping into the path of another. Some ill-aimed rocks are even hitting Remen, still lying on the dock, unconscious.

Caught up in the moment, I feel a huge surge of something course through my blood and time starts to move slower. It seems to be a combination of my body increasing its speed and my time-sense stretching out. I can see the slow arc of each stone as it comes toward me. It takes almost no effort at all to simply stand still and bat the stones out of the air with an open palm. The stones that I hit away spin through the air with great force to hit the dock and occasionally even tear right through the sun-bleached wooden boards. I recognize now that I could start knocking the stones back at the villagers, but I hold no animosity toward them, even if they are trying to kill me. One part of me thinks that I could just send the rocks back in their general direction without actually hitting them—which would probably made them stop throwing rocks—but I am too busy reacting and not thinking to act on this idea. I only want to protect Remen and I am just spontaneously reacting to each new missile, without listening to the thinking part of my head.

After the initial barrage of rocks and stones fails to hit me, a few people start supplementing the rock barrage with arrows. Now, hitting six or seven rocks out of the air with your bare hands—all at the same time—is one thing. However, the villagers shooting arrows aren’t more than three yards away from me, and at that range, an arrow is traveling incredibly fast. At first, I can hit them away just as I have the stones, and a couple of times, when there aren’t so many stones flying at me, I even snatch some of the arrows out of the air with my bare hands, snapping them with my fingers like they are dry twigs. With this, I impress even myself, and the villagers’ fear starts to turn somewhat to awe. Of course, they don’t stop, and if anything, they only send more things headed in my direction. After a while, a veritable wall of stones,

arrows, and whatever handy that is lying around is flung in my direction. To the villagers, it begins to become a macabre game to see how much I can avoid in spite of their best efforts.

This goes on for a few minutes, but soon, no matter how fast I am, I only have two arms and I am trying to protect Remen as well as myself. One particularly large stone is heaved at me, and since the sender of the ballast-stone isn't quite strong enough to throw it far enough, it arcs downwards in front of me down to the comatose Remen at my feet. I have to bend over to push it out of the air, and as I do so, fire ignites in my shoulder. I look over to see a red-banded arrow sticking out of my side. I can tell by the fletching mark that it is Jenson's arrow. Also, judging by the crow of delight he gives when it hits, I know it to be his.

Now, I realize that I'm not going to be able to keep off all of the missiles coming at Remen and myself. The villagers have made it painfully obvious that I'm not welcome here any more. So, I ignore all of the things coming at me and, quick as thought itself, I scoop up Remen into my arms and fling him over my shoulder. As I do this, one large stone hits me right in the gut and two more arrows hit me, one in the left leg and one right next to Jenson's arrow, in my right shoulder. Feeling no more pain and still carrying Remen, I turn around and with one mighty leap, I jump through the air and land right in the middle of The Gull's Wing. I quickly but carefully set Remen down into the safety of the cabin floor and reach out to the ropes that fasten her to the docks. Swatting at the still-incoming arrows with one arm, I give a tremendous tug on the rope with the other arm. The makefast that the rope is tied to snaps neatly in two and The Gull's Wing is free. I reach out with one leg and kick at the dock, pushing us out to sea. A few last arrows embed themselves into the side of the Gull with a thunk, and once free of the railing, the wind starts to take us out of the harbor. Since I didn't unfurl the sails when I docked, there is no time wasted in getting them up. An out-going wind steadily puts some distance between the angry mob of villagers and us.

On the edge of the docks I can see the young hysterical woman staring out at me, with hate and righteous indignation written plainly on her face. As the Gull slowly pulls away, I stare back at her for a while, trying to imagine what she can possibly see that is so evil in me. If only I could look into her empty little head and see what lies within. As she looks into my murky eyes, I notice her knees start to quiver and then she falls to the dock in a swoon, obviously exhausted from her hysterical little fit.

"You fools! You're making a big mistake!" I yell at them. "I'm not the enemy!"

That is all I can think of to say as we pull away from my adopted home of fifty years. They aren't the most eloquent of parting words but now they are said and done. A few of the villagers shake their fists at me, but no one tries to follow us. I obviously made an impression on them—judging by some of the village people's stunned look on their faces—with my prodigious display of superhuman strength and speed.

As I watch the village retreat into the distance, I take one last long look at it. The gods took my first family, and my first way of life; then they took my second family and my second way of life. Now, even my beloved Seadown—uncivilized, smelly, and unwashed armpit of the Land—is stripped from me. For all of its faults, no other place has ever felt the same in my heart, that I would truly call it "home."

So ends my life in Seadown.

Chapter Nine

We catch a northerly wind moving away from Seadown and out to deep sea. I don't have any destination in mind yet; I just want to put as much distance as is possible between Seadown and us. In fact, I am pretty sick of Brigan's Land in general and I am glad to finally get away

from its stuffy confines and superstitions. For a fairly big, cosmopolitan island, it is full of ignorance, and even more so now since the Cleansing and the takeover by the Church.

Now that we are away from the mob, my first priority is to see if I can help Remen. Remen is still unconscious and is breathing very shallowly. He is lying on his back on the bottom of the hold of the Gull, and I can see the big scrape in the side of his head slowly turning purplish. I don't know what I can do for him, but I try to keep him comfortable, until he wakes up. If he will at all.

The next item of immediate importance is my own injuries. Oddly, I don't feel any more pain, after the initial pain when I was shot, although I can feel a definite sensation in each of my injured parts that lets me know I am injured. I take stock of just what damage has been done. The most noticeable injuries are, of course, the two arrows sticking out of my shoulder and the one in my leg. I figure that something should be done about these intrusions first. I notice that two of the arrows have Jenson's red-banded fletching on them. Well, he is a good shot, certainly. I hope he didn't use poison, although hardly anyone ever does in the village. It is dangerous to hunt with and even though there are a lot of caustic poisons from various sea-creatures to be had if one wants, the people of Seadown are usually afraid to use them. It is a little risky to kill anything with poison if you plan on later eating it.

The arrow in my leg has just a simple upside-down, V-shaped arrowhead. I grab ahold of the back end of it and just pull it out, directly back through the opening in the rent flesh. I steel myself for the pain, but although I can feel the arrow coming out through my wound, there isn't any. Amazing.

Even more amazing, as soon as the arrow is out of my leg, the skin quickly closes up, and in the space of a few short minutes, I can actually see it start to heal. It isn't instantaneous, but it is actually fast enough to see. I sit there dumbfounded, just watching my leg above my knee heal itself. It is tingling for all it is worth, and it feels like a million tiny ants are crawling through my leg and fixing little pieces of myself. This is the impression that I get, but perhaps I am just imagining it. Regardless, it heals in relatively no time at all.

With the repair of my leg well underway, I turn my attention to the two red-banded arrows sticking out of my shoulder. They are a more difficult matter, since the arrowheads are barbed with backward-curving spines to prevent easy removal. If I attempt to pull them out, they will rip flesh out in larger chunks going out than they sliced going in. What to do?

As I ponder over what to do with my shoulder, I hear Remen give a wheezing cough. I look over at him but he is still unconscious. His color is still a pallid, shocky-white, but his breathing seems a little better. Maybe he will wake up soon. At least I hope so.

Meanwhile, back at my injuries, I briefly debate on just ripping out the arrowheads, regardless of the damage they will cause to my shoulder. If my leg is any indication, I think I will be able to heal that injury as well. However, before I attempt anything that rash, I reexamine the arrowheads and try to figure out a way to work them free without taking off half of my shoulder in the process.

Looking a little closer and more carefully at the arrowheads, I notice that they are made of bone, rather than metal. That seems to me to be a good thing when I first notice it, although I don't know why. By working the arrowhead back and forth a bit, I also notice that the edges of the arrowhead that are still inside my skin seem to be slightly softened, and aren't near as sharp as the part outside of my skin. I wonder about that for a moment. Can it be that the arrowhead has started to dissolve in my skin?

That seems like a likely possibility, a lot more likely than the possibility that Jenson sandpapered the bottom half of all of his arrowheads. It also just seems to feel right, in some unconscious way. Maybe it is part of the things I just seem to know now, in some indirect communication I have with the spirits inside of me.

I gingerly take off my shirt again, carefully peeling off the bloody, ripped fabric from around the arrows, and let the sun beat down on me. I haven't eaten a thing since I went up to the Fist, but I don't feel the least bit hungry. I wonder about this. I hope that I can still eat; that is, I hope it is still possible to eat. It is one of life's greatest pleasures, next to sleeping and the other thing, and I hope that it isn't lost to me forever. I admit that soaking up my breakfast like a palm tree is convenient, although it takes a little mental getting used to.

It is a little awkward having two long arrows sticking out of me, so I decide to break them off just above the surface of the skin. It seems to make more sense, in some way that I can't explain, to let my skin dissolve the arrowheads, rather than pulling them out and having to deal with all of that extra damage to my body. I decide to listen to this feeling. I snap off the arrows just above the surface of the skin and feel a tingling sensation in my shoulder that tells me my army of little helpers is going to work on the arrowheads and is repairing the surrounding tissue.

The rest of my injuries are fairly minimal compared to the arrow-wounds. I got hit in the stomach a few times by some rocks and I have a bruise or two scattered around my body. Even though it has only been a couple of hours since I was injured, most of my bruises are already starting to fade, as if they were several days old. Several light scratches have all but disappeared.

Unfortunately, the same can't be said about Remen's condition, which hasn't improved as fast as mine has. His head is swollen and purplish where the stone whacked him and he lies in a fitful unconscious state. He occasionally moans and thrashes around a little, which is both good and bad. The fact that he is dreaming means that he isn't in any too serious of a coma. However, I can easily imagine the nightmares that must be running through his head, in light of the last months' events. I think the best thing that I can do for him is to wake him up. I am sure he won't mind being interrupted from whatever bad dreams that he is having. Besides, I've heard many a wise old herbalist talk about not letting a head-injury victim sleep too soon after the injury. Sometimes they never wake up. So, it is with all of this in mind that I decide to try and wake him.

"Remen!" I say, giving him a light shake. "Remen, you've got to wake up!" His moaning and thrashing increases a little but he makes no sign of regaining consciousness. I yell a few more times, but try as I might, I can't rouse him. By this time, it is getting dark anyway, so although I knew it is dangerous for Remen to remain asleep, there is nothing I can do about it, and I decide to try and get some rest myself. My body feels like it needs some downtime to effectively repair all of the damage.

So, I close my eyes for a little while and darkness quickly comes over me.

I know not how much time passes while I lie in the boat asleep. Sometime in the middle of it, I enter a weird waking-dreaming stage. I am in a huge cave of some sort, and I have no body. I am only a disembodied force floating throughout the interior of the cave. At first, I am extremely disoriented, and I panic a little, not knowing what is going on. But after a while, I recognize this for the same waking-dreaming that I experienced atop the Fist; only now, I can see and move about.

After a few minutes of getting my bearings and figuring out how to move without a physical body, I start to hear voices faintly in the background.

“You/we have been injured. It is not beyond our ability to repair.”

I look around but I can see no one near me. The voices get clearer and clearer, however, and eventually they seem right in front of me.

“Are you the Many/One?” I yell, my voice echoing back at me.

“That is true. But now, so are you. We are Many that is One.”

“Why do you speak to me now? Where have you been the last few days? What is this cave? Why can’t I see you?” The questions just roll out of me, one after another.

“This cave is you. It is us. It is we. It is what you don’t see when you are awake.”

That doesn’t make much sense to me. I shake my non-existent head and say, “What d’ya mean? Please stop speaking in such riddles. Can’t you give me a straight answer?”

There is silence for a moment. Then to my surprise the Many/One starts to laugh. Not a big belly laugh or anything, but a definite little chuckle. “Yes, I suppose we might. We thought you liked it better this way—this round-about, convoluted, mysterious, riddled, non-specific way of speaking.”

I think about that for a second. “I guess it is kind of the way that I expected the spirits of the gods to talk. But, why the change now?”

“We are One now. I am, you are, we are... all together. We are you now, and you are us. We have adopted certain characteristics of you, the Host. One that we like is a sense of humor. We never had one before.”

“Well, I see you haven’t quite get the hang of it yet. It’ll come,” I wryly inform the Many/One. Every word that they speak just brings up more and more questions. I don’t know where to begin; I have some many. Eventually my questions just start to spill out in random order, with no regard to internal logic.

“So tell me, what is this place and why can’t I see you?” is the first question I get out. “And no riddles!” I warn them.

“All right, understood. This place is your mind, your thinking part, if you will. Actually, it is our mind, too, but that’s still confusing. Last time, we noticed that it caused you considerable distress when you couldn’t see or move while we talked. So, this time, we created the illusion of a cave in your mind. You can’t see us because we aren’t really here—and neither are you for that matter.”

“Okay, you’re right, that is confusing. We’ll leave that for later. How many of my questions will you answer?”

“Only three and you just used up your last one.”

“What?” I yell in surprise. But then I notice, or rather feel would be a better word, the Many/One laughing. “Oh, very nice! You learn quick. That is a good example of a sense of humor.”

“Thank you. We are extremely fast learners. Really, you may ask as many questions as we can explain. But there are many things that we do not have a common vocabulary between us to use. We shall have to do our best until we learn more words.”

“Okay, what are you? This I want to know more than anything else.”

There is silence for a long time. It is so long that I prompt, “Hello? You guys still out there?”

“We’re thinking. Unfortunately, this lies in that category of things we don’t have a common vocabulary for. We can tell you what we’re not, a lot easier than we can explain what we are.”

“Well, then start there. What aren’t you?”

“All right then. Last time we talked, you asked us if we were gods. We didn’t know how to respond, because we weren’t sure what you meant by gods. Within your definition, we seem to fit most parameters, and the same for your definition of spirits. Now, we know that to have been a mistake. Your kind worship the gods and the spirits and we are not here to be worshipped.”

This time it is my turn to be silent. I was laboring under the assumption that the Many/One were spirits, directly from the old gods. They now are denying divinity altogether. This causes quite an upset to my little world.

“What d’ya mean? How can you not be spirits? What are you then?”

“We are what we are, after all. Sorry, that is cryptic. We are— ”

“Okay, take it slow. You don’t come from the gods?”

“By your definition of a true god, as far as we know, there are no gods in the known universe.”

“‘Universe?’ That’s a word I know?”

“That’s a word that you used to know. Every word that we use we get from your/our mind. We know no words in your language that we have not gotten from you. You learned it when you were younger, when you studied at the court.”

“You can read my memories? You know about all of that?”

“Only indirectly. We can see what you have experienced, but it lacks the immediacy of direct experience. We haven’t learned enough about you or your kind to make sense of what we see in your memories.”

“For that matter, me either. That’s lesson number one in life as a human. A lot happens to you that you can’t explain or that makes no sense. But, go on. Go on. You were explaining to me what ‘universe’ means.”

“It means all that is. All the stars you see in the sky and every point in between them, all that exists everywhere as far as the mind can imagine. That is the universe and there’s no god or gods in it as far as we know.”

I sit here stunned. Okay, I’m not really sitting, but I feel like it anyway. I’ve never been an extremely religious man, and after the Cleansing, I had little taste for organized religion in any form. However, it has always comforted me to think that there is some higher power out there that has some grand purpose for our lives, some master design for making life better. To have the Many/One so callously disabuse me of that motion is a little upsetting.

“How d’ya know that?” I ask. A fair enough question, to be sure.

“Yes, a good question, indeed. Sorry to be rude, but in this state, we see your thoughts just as clearly as what you imagine you ‘say.’ Since we are all inside your mind together, it makes no difference if you vocalize your thoughts or not.”

“To answer your question, we have seen only a fraction of what there is to see, so perhaps somewhere there exists these gods of yours. However, we’ve seen a fair portion of the universe, and neither we, nor anyone/thing we know of, has never seen anything like that. Certain beings might pass for gods, but only by comparison to you humans, and even by comparison to us, as well.”

“So if you’re not from the gods, what the hell are you doing inside my head and what do you want from me?” I shout, or imagine I shout. Whichever I do, it sounds loud enough to me.

“Those are precisely the questions we want to answer and that is why we are talking now. We, the Many that is One, are many separate—things, if you will, or maybe—Ah, found it— machines! We are many separate machines working together.”

“I know you say you get all of your words from me, but if you’re a going to keep pulling words out of the back reaches of my head, long after I’ve forgotten them, then this conversation’s going to take a while. I don’t seem to remember that there word.”

“We notice that you seem to slip in and out of your brogue. Why do you do that?”

“My accent? I don’t know, I guess it’s just the way the fisher-folk talk and it has become habit after fifty years or so of living with them. I guess I don’t have to talk that way if it bothers ye. I mean, you.”

“No problem. We are just ever curious. Well, ‘machine.’ Take a watermill; that’s a machine, of sorts—and the most complex thing we’ve seen in your memories. A crude machine, to be sure, but roughly analogous. Water-fluid moves the paddles, which turns the gears and the mill is able to do work, grinding flour or cutting lumber.”

I think about that for a moment. Then something occurs to me. “You mean, like those wind-up toys of the Tretians? The ones made up of delicate metal and whirring gears? My brothers and I had one when we were children, as a present from Tretia to Brigan’s Land. I think it lasted about two months before it get crushed in a wrestling match between the two oldest boys. You’d put a key into it, wind it up, and it would play music.”

The Many/One thinks for a moment, as if accessing those particular memories. “Yes, that is indeed a machine. You have the idea now. We are machines; only we are far smaller than anything you can possibly see or even imagine. We are more than the highest number you can count. We are physically inside of you, as we speak.”

“What are you doing inside me?” I can understand spirits inside of me, but a bunch of machines like whirring, spinning music boxes? I suddenly feel itchy all over.

“Don’t be so literal! Of course we’re not like music boxes,” they admonish, again reading my thoughts. “It is just an analogy! We are smaller than the smallest part of your body. It is these millions and millions of little machines that changed your body, restoring you to something close to when you were young, and that are even now repairing the damage you took from those crazy villagers in Seadown.”

“Okay, I get the picture. Really, it makes no difference if you’re spirits, metal, or rainbows. You’re inside me and we’re talking now. The next question is, why? Why me and why did you come here?”

“Why you is easy. You were the first advanced enough creature to come up to the top of that mountain, where we landed. Why here is a more difficult question to answer. Why not here? This land has been forgotten for longer than you can possible imagine.”

“You keep saying those ‘longer and more than you can imagine’ phrases. Maybe I can imagine. Give me some concrete things to work with.”

“Fair enough. If you want specifics, then here goes. This land, this world, has been out of touch with the rest of the universe for over twenty-five thousand years. Your kind is not native to this world, you know. We can tell that by what we’ve seen of this world and what we know of your body. It’s too long and complicated, but trust us; we’re sure. You had to have come from some far-off star, from another world circling that star just as this one does.”

“So you’re from those people?” That would make sense.

“Actually, no. We’ve never met your kind before. In fact, this is the first time we’ve ever encountered any of your human kind. Which is why we’re here. We are scouts, explorers, people-who-study-other-very-dissimilar-people—this is another point where you don’t have a good word. We want to learn about your kind, your people, your culture, your customs, your civilization—your everything. That’s what we—no word for it—we, Many Who Are One, are here for. Just call us ‘The Many/One’ and leave it at that.”

“All right, I know what to call you, I know you’re not from the Gods and I know that you want to learn about this world. I guess my next question has to be, what do you want to see and where shall we go next?”

“Anything, everything, anywhere, everywhere. You are the Host. We are the Many/One,” proclaims the voices in a loud, dramatic booming, that echoes through the cave of my mind.

Then, in a wry afterthought, the voices say, “Think of us as your silent partners. We’ll keep the house clean, so to speak, while you see the world. It’s as simple as that. We’ll not interfere in anyway with your actions or choices. We gave you a few days to get used to the idea of your new body before we talked to you again and we wanted to get a better grasp of the language. Things will go back to as they have been the last couple of days, with no further long conversations with us for a while. From time to time, we’ll talk again, in order to clarify a few questions we might each have along the way. We’ll know if you want to talk to us.”

And then the voices of the Many/One are gone.

I have much to think about from what they told me. I didn’t understand a lot of what they said. Machines and stars, explorers and worlds, whirling music boxes: it is all too much for me to take in. The one thing I did take away from our discussion is that they are not spirits or gods and that they have no grand purpose for me. It will be up to me to fill my life with purpose, as I guess it always has been.

Soon, the cave goes black and I slip into real sleep, my thoughts whirring like the gears of a Tretian music box.

#

Malia

I see his face—those deep, black eyes that I sink into deeper and deeper, losing myself...

The Light fills me, shining on every shadowy corner of my black soul, revealing every dark, damnable deed to me.

The Church of the Sun? He said it was a lie. How could I have been so wrong? The things I’ve done for the priests. The people that I’ve accused in the name of He Who Has No Name. I see them all before me, reflected in His ebon eyes. I feel the pain of everyone who was ever tortured because of me; I feel every lash of the whip, every knife raised to the sun and plunged—

No more. I can’t take any more.

The Light fills me to the bursting point. I break and the evil of my life spills out of me. I see every sin, every offense, and every bad and awful thing that I’ve ever done burn up in the brilliance of the Light.

The Light of the World shines again on my soul, only now it is pure and white once more.

The Light burns onto my soul His name, His wonderful, holy name.

Elias.

I must tell the world.

Chapter Ten

Elias

I awake to find Remen also awake and intently staring at me. I have no idea how long he's been awake, or just how long he's been staring at me, and it is a little unnerving. We both lie on the floor of the boat—each of us rolled over onto our sides—and just look at each other for a while. Finally, I notice Remen start to get that glassy-eyed look which tells me that he is falling into those murky-black eyes of mine.

I blink slowly to break the spell and say, "I see you've awoken at last. I was a little worried about you there for a while. Would you like some water?" At his nod, I get up and reach for a cask. He gets up as well, slowly, and gingerly, with a wince on his face from the pain that the movement is evidently causing him. He carefully sits himself on a board running the length of the galley and turns to face me. Without a word, I hand him the cask of water and he takes it, raising it back and draining about half of its contents immediately. He holds out the rest to me and makes an offering gesture to me with it. I nod in thanks and tip it back, flinging the empty cask into the back of the boat when I am done. At the slight clatter it makes when it hits the deck, he does a quick jump in startlement.

"Well, I thought that you might be a little skittish we ye awoke. Sorry to scare you there," I say, gesturing with my thumb back to where I threw the cask. "What do you remember after that first stone hit you?"

Remen shakes his head from side to side and then groans at the pain that it costs him. "Ow, I shouldn't 'ave done that now, should I? I don't remember much, only yelling at the gods-be-damned villagers fer being so plumb ignorant. Damn it, it makes my teeth hurt just to think of 'em screaming their heads off and running 'round with pitch forks and the like. Then the sky filled with stars and I lay on the dock for a while. I seem to remember you standing over me, and then everything on the dock but the anchors themselves being thrown at you. That's about it."

I nod at that. "Well, Remen, m' old friend, that's about all that happened. Of course, the rest of the village showed up and then people start shooting arrows as well as throwing things, but that's the long and short of it. It didn't take long for me to take the hint and I picked you up and jumped into the Gull with you. I pulled out the railing of the dock to free us and the wind did the rest."

Remen smiles at my description of what happened. "I notice you didn't mention any of those rocks or arrows hitting you, now did ya? How did you happen to dodge em' all?"

"T' be honest, I didn't. I took three arrows and a couple of stones in me gut trying to pick your fat arse off the dock," I say with a big smile.

He laughs uproariously at that and reaches over to slap me on the back. "It really is you, isn't, Elias?"

"Well of course it is, you old, fat fool. Why would I be claiming to be crazy-man Elias if I wasn't?" When we were younger, I'd always teased him about his weight, which he had somewhat of a problem with until our declining years. Now, he is gaunt and skeletal, and nothing but a pale shade of his former self.

Remen laughs again and then puts his head into his hands with another groan. "I have the biggest headache that I think I've ever had in me life."

"Just take it easy. You might want to get some rest," I tell him.

"I can't sleep just yet," he says, waving his hand in a gesture of dismissal. He leans forward with an intent look on his face. "Elias, if that's really you, then what happened? What's this about the spirits of the gods and all that? What happened up at the Fist?"

"You might as well sit back for a spell. This could take a while to tell," I warn him.

Remen leans back at my urging and then jumps forward again as he thinks of something. "Where are we headed for?" he asks, intently staring out to sea in all directions. "I can't tell what our heading is."

"We're going north at the moment. I really don't have any kinda destination in mind. I just thought that I'd put some distance between us and Seadown for a while."

Remen nods at that and then frowns as a thought occurs to him. "You know, Elias, I can understand your not wanting to go back to the village, on account of the reception they gave you and all, but Reen is still back there and what's left of me life."

"That's true," I say. "I wasn't sure if you were gonna wake up or not and I wanted a chance to talk to you for a bit before I decided what to do and where to go next. Don't worry; I can take you back home whenever you like. But," I say, with a sidelong look of exaggerated pathetic loneliness, "I wouldn't mind talking with you for a wee bit first."

Remen laughs at this and nods enthusiastically. "Of course, of course, Elias. I was just worried that Reen will be imagining all sorts of dark and horrible things have happened to me by the evil draugr. I've raised him not to be superstitious, but maybe the events of lately have been too much for him, eh?"

"I hear you, old friend." I understand this very real fear of Remen's. His grandson was one of the few remaining villagers that weren't on the docks and gods only knew what people told him about the kidnapping of his grandfather. They might not have realized that Remen was still alive when he left, and Reen had to be about out of his mind with worry. He's lost enough family lately to not need this added worry.

"Well, okay then, my young whippersnapper, let's talk." Remen leans over and gives me a playful tussling of my hair, as he would to one of his grandchildren or to the village tots.

I laugh at this and poke him in the ribs with a finger. There isn't much more than skin covering the ribs now, and Remen looks like he needs about two weeks of steady eating to regain his lost health.

"So," I begin, "I guess the story starts where I left you, right after talking about the Fist of the Gods."

Remen nods and leans back, with his hands behind his head. He looks relaxed and not at all afraid of me any more. Right now, he'd give his left arm to hear the rest of my story. "So you got caught in the storm?" he asks.

"Yeah, it started raining right after I talked to you. The storm pushed me out to the Fist in record time. Well, I climbed that big ol' thing after the storm ended."

"You really climbed it? The old Elias?"

"Yes, the old me. I quite surprised myself, if you must know. There were a couple of moments where I thought I might not make it, but the going was really not that difficult. There's a ledge that runs up the mountain, you see."

"A ledge, you say?" Remen asks, not believing what I said.

"Yeah, it has fallen off around the bottom section, but about a third of the way up, you can actually just walk up and around the mount. That was my first idea that there is something strange about the Fist. I mean—I knew then that I wasn't the first person to ever climb that mountain."

“Well, maybe the first person in a very long time, anyway,” Remen ventures.

I nod at that. “Certainly, no one I’ve ever heard about in recent history has even tried it.”

Remen thinks for a moment before offering, “You know, back in the days of the monarchy—I think it was about four Brigans back—they organized an expedition to the Fist.”

“Yes, ol’ Simion Brigan himself, it was. The conqueror of the Kryff islands and the first to re-establish a trade route with Tretia. He was an adventurous old chap, now wasn’t he?” I ask, knowing all about Simion from my lessons as a child. I don’t feel too comfortable about revealing anything more about my connection with Simion to Remen. Old habits endure.

“If you say so. You know a lot more than I do about all of that royalty stuff,” he says, with a sly glance at me.

Damn sly old bastard! He suspects something about my history but isn’t going to come out and say anything. I pretend to ignore this remark and go on, “Anyway, Simion and some of his men got as far as the mount and had just started up, when a storm came in and they had to call it off, and go back home. That winter, Simion died in his sleep of the ague and no one ever really had much interest in going after that. They put the ague down to the curse of the Fist and figured that Simion had been taught his comeuppance.”

Remen nods and doesn’t push the monarchy thing any further. Just having had an unvoiced conversation about letting it drop, I continue, “So anyway, I get up to the top of the Fist and there’s nothing up there.”

Remen starts forward in surprise. “You’re kidding! Nothin’? Absolutely nothin’?” he asks in disbelief.

“Well, there was something. There was a big clearing at the top, with the top shaped exactly like a big, perfect, circle. Everything’s made of this shiny, smooth black rock, you see, and it all looks like it will last forever—and maybe it has already, for all I know.”

“What about the spirits?” asks Remen, somewhat impatiently.

“Hold on, I’m getting to that part. So, I get to the top, and you know how blind I am. Or was, I guess. Anyway, I couldn’t see anything at all at first. I walk around the circumference of the place,” making a circle with my hand to illustrate, “and see four big piles of the black rock at the four directions of the compass. In the center of all of it is this weird cloud, that isn’t movin’, just sitting there in the middle, with wind blowing through it.”

“So what was the four piles of rock?” asked Remen, a puzzled look on his face.

“They’re about the height of a man and shaped like a pyramid. There’s no writing or marks on them and they’re mainly just a bunch of piled-up rocks. I have a few theories, but no real idea. Oh, and the whole place is humming like a million bees.”

“Hummin’, you say,” politely interjects Remen.

“Yes, there is this hummin’. So, I walk up to the cloud in the middle and finally kinda just wander into it. The humming gets louder, it starts following me around, and then this flashing fog from the cloud starts trying to come inside me.”

“Inside you? Weren’t you scared?” asks Remen.

“Hell yes, I was scared! I like to ‘ave shat myself, I was so scared. But, that cloud of whatever knocks me out, and the next thing I know, I think I’m talking to the spirits. They call me ‘the Chosen Host’ and go on about seeing the world. I wake up about a week later and I’m a totally new man. And that’s about the long and short of it.”

Remen takes all of this in, while absently scratching at one of his recently healed pockmarks from his bout with the plague. “You say you think you were talking to the spirits? You don’t think that anymore?” he asks, showing just how close he is listening. That is one of

the reasons we've always got along so well together. He loves to listen and I love to talk. Well, of course there are some topics that I never like to talk about, but I am pretty adept at steering most conversations away from these forbidden topics. Like my exact age, my background, my real name, my family, and a few other subjects that will start people asking questions about me. I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. Remen can be trusted and who cares who I really am? Besides the Church of the Sun, of course.

Remen prompts me again, "You say the spirits? Where did you go there, for a second?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about the past. So many years, so much. . . Anyways, yes, I spoke to the things inside me last night, while we both lay here on the floor of the Gull. They told me they aren't spirits but something else, something even stranger than that."

"So they definitely aren't godlike or spirit-like?" asks Remen, his face twisted up with curiosity.

"Well, they did admit that they have many of the characteristics of both spirits and gods. But they say they are not of this world; they come from the stars and told me that all of the gods we worship are false. They say that they didn't come here to be worshipped, but rather to learn about us and our ways."

"So they are something new and all of our old gods are false?" he asks. I don't quite see what he is getting at, and I forgot that I myself was earlier confused about the whole affair. Even after talking to the Many/One, I'm still a trifle confused.

"Yeah, that's what I said. They tried to explain something about machines, with watermills and things like that, but I didn't get it all." I pause for a moment while I think about how I can best explain everything. "They say that everything we believe about the gods is false. They wanted to make that much clear."

Remen nods and replies, "Well, that makes sense. They are not from the Sun God, the One Who is Not Named, neither are they from the twelve Elder Gods. Something different altogether."

"Yes, that right!" I say excitedly, now that Remen understands me. "They are not spirits or gods like we know them. They are from far beyond this world. They want to learn all there is to learn and they say they don't want to interfere with us."

"So, we do what we want? They just learn from us? That's interestin'," murmurs Remen, his hand rubbing his jaw as he thinks to himself. "What are these spirits called, again?"

"They're not spirits!" I say, correcting Remen, yet again. He holds up a hand to calm me down and to show that he gets the idea. I continue, "They are called 'The Many that is One,' or the Many/One for short and they are inside me to learn about us—our culture and habits and all that."

"Okay, okay, I get it. They're not spirits and they came inside you to learn from your actions. They won't interfere with your free will and they want to experience the world. It makes sense, somehow."

"What are you thinking there, Remen? That stone didn't soften too much of yer noggin, now did it?" I kid Remen.

"Nothing really. Why don't you tell me about this new body they gave you? And, do you 'ave anything to eat around here?" he asks, with a suggestive glance down at his gaunt frame. "I really feel like eating again."

"Well, it's funny that you should mention that. I haven't eaten a thing since coming down from the Fist. But since I woke up this morning', I've really feel like I could eat something', too."

“What do you mean, since the Fist? You haven’t eaten in that long? Is that some kind of magic? How do you get the energy to do all of that super-human stuff, like pulling out the dock railing and dodging all that stuff they threw at you?” asks an incredulous Remen.

“I wouldn’t call it ‘super-human.’ Just extra-ordinary. You might have noticed that I haven’t been wearing a shirt lately. I seem to be getting all of my energy from the sun,” I say, pointing up at the brightly shining orange sun.

“From the sun? That’s incredible.” Remen thinks about that for a second. “You mean, like a frigging plant or something?”

“Yeah, like a plant. I know it seems kind of strange, but my skin seems to drink in the sunlight, without burning or tannin’. It looks just like regular skin as far as I can tell,” I say, pinching a chunk of skin on my arm to illustrate.

Remen bends in for a closer look. He gingerly touches the surface of my skin. “It seems like ordinary skin to me. It does seem a mite smooth and pink, even for someone who seems to be about twenty or so, like yourself. It looks like a newborn baby’s backside should look.”

“Thanks a lot. That’s comforting to know. I look like a baby’s ass.”

Remen’s face screws up again with a strange thought. “You know, if the Church of the Sun finds out about that little trick of yours, of drinking from the sun, they will either kill you for blasphemy or worship you as the ideal follower of the Sun God. Interestin’...”

Fear comes to my face. “You know, that never even occurred to me.” I think about what that would mean and then admonish Remen, “Let’s hope then, that they never find out ‘bout me. They have more reasons than just that to be interested in me.”

“You mean, because you used to work in the court?” asks Remen, unabashedly.

I stop moving, looking out the Gull at the waves crashing past our wake. We are moving along at a pretty good clip with all three sails up. I stand up, reach over to the rudder, and give it a hard turn around. The Gull reacts by making a sharp sweeping curve through the waves. Remen is thrown around a bit to one side and has to grab ahold of the edge of the boat to avoid going over the side. I quickly reach a hand out to steady him and say, “Sorry about that. Didn’t mean to scare you. You just surprised me with your little comment ‘bout the court, there. What did you mean?”

Remen carefully avoids any eye contact with me, before replying, “You forget, I was here at the village when you first came. It was shortly after the Cleansing of the capital, and up shows this obvious city feller, greener to fishing than any man had a right to be. You had a funny accent, never talked about your past, you always seemed to be looking over your shoulder when you thought no one was watching’, and you had the air of someone who was used to a more—shall we say—‘courtly’ way of life. I figured out that you were probably some nobleman’s son from the court or maybe even someone important in the court yourself. Am I too far off the mark?” he asks, trying to be as non-confrontational as possible.

I shake my head back and forth slowly. “No, not too far off the mark at all. How come you never asked me about this before?”

“Well, I believe in giving a man his privacy. Plus, even all the way out here in the sticks, we heard about the slaughter done by the Church during the Cleansing: the entire royal family burned in their beds while they slept, their lands seized, all of their retinue and loyal followers hung or burned. I figured that anyone who managed to escape all of that probably wanted some quiet time to themselves, and the less people who knew about it, the better.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I really appreciate you not bringing this up before.” I don’t know what else to say. One part of me wants to just tell him everything, to finally get it all off my chest. Another part of me is still scared to let anyone know. In the last fifty years, I hadn’t even told my beloved Adrial the truth about my real identity. I consider Eli to have died in the flames along with the rest of his family.

I temporarily change the subject instead, while I think about it. “How about we get some fish, while I think about what I want to tell you?” I ask him.

“You know, you don’t have to tell me a thing! I really shouldn’t even have brought it up. I just figured, you seem so much like that young Elias who I first met fifty years ago; it just reminded me about all of that. Well,” he says, with a gesture of dismissal of the whole affair, “what have you got to eat in this here tuna trawler? You haven’t forgotten how to fish, have you?”

I laugh and look around. “Well, it looks like I don’t have a thing. Maybe you can show me how to catch something. How do you work this here doo-hickey?” I say, picking up a trident and deliberately holding it with the tines pointed up instead of down like they should be for a proper thrust.

Remen about busts a gut laughing at my attempt to look inept. “I should know better than to try to teach my grandpa how to chew cheese. It’s been fifty years since you’ve been fishing now, and I’d say that you’ve become a better fisherman than anyone else I can think of—‘cepting of course, yours truly,” he says, pointing at himself.

I decide to show him something that this new body can do. “Just a second, Remen. Would you like to see something interestin’?” He nods and I lean over the side of the rapidly moving boat. I use my new ability in sensing electric and magnetic compass fields—not having any fancier word yet to describe what I feel—to “see” a large school of fish off of our port bow, that has been with us for the last ten minutes or so. I hold up one bare arm and say, “Watch closely. The hand is quicker than the eye.”

Remen looks carefully, a smile on his face to show that he thinks he is humoring me. His smile quickly turns to amazement when, faster than thought itself, my arm flashes down into the water and towards a silverfish. My bare arm comes up out of the water with the still-wriggling silverfish clutched in it. I throw it down at his feet and he struggles to catch the slimy, slippery fish.

“That’s incredible!” he shouts, as he finally gets ahold of the fish.

“Then watch this!” I say, and my arm arcs down into the water three more times, coming up with three more fish. This time, I don’t even bother with actually picking them up, but rather just scoop them out of the water and onto the deck of the boat in three quick, fluid motions. I can’t help but laugh at the sight of him dancing around, trying to get ahold of all four fish.

“Well, you freak of nature, don’t just stand there laughing! Give me a hand here!” he laughingly implores.

I pick up the empty cask that I threw into the corner earlier and bop each of the fish on the head with the palm of my hand, knocking them out. I toss all four of the fish into the cask and tell Remen: “I caught ‘em, you clean ‘em, and we’ll both cook ‘em and eat ‘em. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough,” says Remen. “Anything you say, Elias, old boy.”

I am feeling particularly good about the world just now and especially about Remen. I make my decision. The time for deceit and hiding is over.

Looking him right in the eyes with my mysterious dark orbs, I say, “Call me Eli. Eli Brigan. Son of Jenter Brigan.”

Remen turns three shades of gray and quickly drops to one knee on the deck of the boat, his head bowed to his chest.

“Your Majesty,” he stammers.

Chapter Eleven

So there it is, like a cold glass of water thrown on a hot fire. I came right out and hit him with the truth, right after he stopped expecting it. Now he just crouches there on the bottom of the boat, with his head bowed in abject fealty—to me, the person who has been his best friend for almost fifty years. I honestly didn't expect that, what with Remen's usual casual nature, particularly where government is concerned.

"By the gods' hairy balls!" I swear at him, "What in the world do you think you're doing down there?"

"I had no idea," is all he can stammer out at first. "I had no idea..."

"Get up, man!" I yell at him, more than a little embarrassed. I even go so far as to look around to see if anyone sees us, forgetting for a second that we are far out at sea.

Remen stands up as quick as an old man such as himself can. "Eli Brigan? Youngest son of the late Brigan line? I thought, maybe a councilman's aide . . . maybe even a lord's younger son. But a prince? No wonder you kept quiet. Every priest on the island must want your head—"

"If they knew I was alive," I finish for him. "And they don't. At least as far as I know, anyway." I give him a very hard look. "Let's try and keep it that way, you hear me?"

Remen seems to have to think about this for a while, before he nods, muttering under his breath and shaking his head, "A prince. A bloody prince. Why do things like this always happen to the royalty? As if they ain't lucky enough."

I snort dryly and give him a playful belt on the back. "I wouldn't call having your family killed and spending the rest of your life in exile, in a fishing village on the backside of nowhere, quite that lucky, would you?"

"No, that's not what I meant, your Highness."

"That'll be enough of that 'your Highness' crap!" I tell him, making a slicing motion with my left hand to show him I am serious. When he nods, I continue, "So, what did you mean?" with a slight smile on my face to show that I'm not angry with him.

"What I meant is, it's always some long-lost royal guy who stumbles onto the workings of some strange power, or who plays a huge role in some great drama. The bards' tales are full of that kind of tripe. I was just thinking that finally something incredible like this happened to an ordinary fellow, like yourself, and then you go and turn out to be Eli Frigging Brigan—His Majestic Self. Just for once, I'd like to see a common man be blessed by the Gods, as ye have been," he explains, not quite sure how he wants to say what he is thinking, and especially not wanting to piss me off.

I laugh, to show him that I didn't mind. "I know just what you're saying," I offer. "The hero in stories never seems to be just an ordinary bloke."

"Why is that, I wonder?"

"I'm not sure," I reply, "but maybe it has something to do with the nature of a person's character—of the character of people who are raised to accept responsibility."

Remen frowns at that. "Do you really buy that?" he asks me bluntly.

"Not really," I admit, laughing. "But there has to be something to it. For example, maybe a 'common man' wouldn't have gone out to the Fist in the first place," I venture in my defense. "And maybe what they say about the royal line of Brigan is true after all, that the gods have blessed and watched them—I mean, 'us,' I guess." My smile turns down into a frown as I think about how the Gods abandoned the Brigan family. "Well, at least they were supposed to."

Thinking along those lines, I remember the Many/One's advice about the gods. "But really, that part is crap, if you ask me," I say, giving Remen a wink. He laughs and I continue, "And, who says that I'm any kind of a hero, anyway?"

"Why, me, for one!" he protests. "You're not going to tell me that being the only person in history to go to the top of the highest mountain in the world, and then coming back sixty years younger with a message from the Gods, that doesn't make you special in some way?"

I hadn't thought about it quite like that before. There is definitely something to what he is saying. "Well, maybe you've got a point there," I admit. "Maybe I'm special for that reason. But the part about being a prince and thus 'deserving' some kind of special treatment is hogwash. I was the one who went up to the Fist. Anyone could have done it if they wanted to badly enough. And, I think that I am a common man. I haven't been anything more than an fisherman and a family man for more than fifty years. I can barely even remember what the court life was like. Even when I was there, I was out mountain climbing and cavorting around the countryside." I lean in very close to him. "I was the fifth son, you know. There never seemed even a remote chance that I would ever hold any real power one day," I softly tell him, momentarily lost in thought.

Remen clears his throat before saying, "Well, and here you are now. Not the fifth son anymore, are you now?"

I look him right in the eyes until he has to look away. He stares down at his feet while I say, "You and I both know that's not important anymore. The Church of the Sun has control of Brigan's Land now. Shoot, it ain't even Brigan's Land, anymore. I guess it's 'the Land of the Sun,' if you want to get technical."

"That's a load of horse rubbish, and you know it, Elias. Or Eli. Sir," he finally corrects himself with.

I snort at him and say, "It's been 'Elias' for the last fifty years, so let's just keep it the same. Eli died in the Cleansing, remember?"

"But maybe Eli was reborn on the Fist of the Gods," he ventures.

"Maybe," is all I say, lacking his enthusiasm.

He starts to get excited and gesticulates wildly with his arms while he speaks. "This changes everything, ya know. The Church of the Sun doesn't know that there is still a legal ruler of the Land alive. They've been justifying their control by saying that the Brigans are dead—not that there's much of anyone who doesn't remember who killed them all in the first place."

I snicker at him and his attempt to justify the situation. "You know that the Church doesn't give a hoot about any legalities. That's a polite fiction, and you know it. It's about power. They have it; I don't. They're in control; I'm not," I say brusquely. After thinking for a second, I say softly, "Nor do I really want to be, either."

Remen shakes his head back and forth slowly. "Maybe you mean that and maybe you don't. But you have to admit that the Church has the rest of the Land under its iron boot. Nothing is sold or traded in the capitol or the four cities without the Church's permission. And—more importantly, I think—they take half of all the profits. Any a man that says squat against 'em is tortured into making a confession of heresy and then the lucky ones are sold off to Kryff or Tretia, as a bleeding slave. You don't want to know what happens to the unlucky ones. Human sacrifice to the Sun God, done on a fairly regular basis."

"I know, I know!" I tell him. "I've thought about it before, you know. I've seen what those bastards can do. I still care about what happens to the Land."

“But it’s been nigh fifty years since the Sun Church took over. How many Briganers have been bent over backwards over a steaming altar for that mad, nameless god of theirs? How many more Brigan hearts have to be torn from their bodies, for the crime of being too poor to be in the Church’s grace, or too rich to be left unmolested? Or, how about—this is the best one—how about those foolish enough to be charged with the crime of still believing in the Brigan monarchy—people who actually believe that one day, the Brigan family will come back and rescue us from our self-imposed hell! That’s rich. How many more before someone says, ‘Enough!’ It’s been fifty years; the tide’s out and the cows have come home to roost. What have you done in that time to restore the Land?” he asks me, poking me in the chest with a gnarled finger in time to his words.

I am stumped, unable to answer him. I think for a moment and can’t think of a single thing. At the same time as my brain is working overtime, trying to come up with an explanation—or maybe, excuse—my stomach starts making itself known. It gives a loud growl that even Remen can hear on the other side of the boat. “Well, are we gonna stand ‘round gabbing all day ‘bout politics or are we gonna eat?” I ask him, trying to change the conversation away from the difficult turn it has taken.

“Okay, let’s eat. But you’re not off the hook, yet,” he warns me.

“Okay, point taken. Give me a hand with the bucket of fish, there, will ya?” I ask. “There’s a boning knife in the compartment on the port side,” I tell him, gesturing to the fish to remind him of our agreement. He will clean and we both will cook.

While he is busy de-boning and gutting the fish, I reach under the hold and take out my little tin stove. It is wrapped in oiled sealskin to keep water out of the wick and from contaminating the whale oil. I quickly fire it up with a scratch of flint and steel and by that time, Remen already has the first of the fish ready to go.

“Gods, I’m starved!” I exclaim.

“I thought you didn’t hafta eat anymore,” he says with a puzzled frown.

“Yeah, me too. I’m just as surprised as you are.

“You know, I have an idea about that,” he informs me, scratching his head. “Didn’t you say you took a coupla arrows in you, back at the village?”

“Three, actually. Not to mention a couple of ballast stones to the gut,” I say, pointing to where the arrows and stones hit me.

“Well, you don’t seem to have much of an injury to you, now—at least anywhere that I can see,” he says, pointing to where I just showed him where I was hit.

Since we both woke up this morning, I was so involved with our conversations that I forgot all about my injuries. Having no pain makes it easy to forget about things like that. In the old days—no pun intended—if I got even slightly injured, the pain would have constantly reminded me that I was hurt.

“Well,” he continues, “it looks like you’ve healed up just nicely. And right quick, at that.”

“I think you’re right. I had two arrowheads in my left shoulder and they’re gone already. You see this slightly dark place here?” I say, gesturing to a spot just below my left shoulder. It is easy to see my entire torso, since I’m still not wearing a shirt. “This dark patch is all that’s lefta two of ol’ Jenson’s arrowheads.”

“Well isn’t that just amazin’!” exclaims Remen, looking carefully at the ever-so-faint mark that is all that is left of the injury.

“There’s nary even a scar to show I was hit!” I say in disbelief.

“Well, about that. I am thinking that so much rapid healing has get to take a lot out of a man, right? I mean, we all know that it takes forever to heal when you ain’t been eating much. Or anything, for that matter, right? Every time I’ve been injured or laid up, I’m always ravenous after I get back on my feet. Maybe that miraculous healing from your Spirits takes a lot of energy, the way growing boys take so much food to keep ‘em goin’.”

“That’s an interesting idea,” I tell him. “I’ll have to ask the Many/One about it the next time we talk. But our fish is done. Let’s eat, already!” I say enthusiastically, handing him the first of the cooked fish on a wooden trench. Without waiting for him to start, I start putting several pieces of the fish into my own mouth.

The taste is absolutely indescribable. Of course, any feeling is indescribable if you have no frame of reference to compare it to. Try explaining a sunset to a blind man, or the sound of laughter to a deaf man, and you’ll get the idea. Try to adequately describe a taste that you’ve never had before, without comparing it to something similar. It’s pretty close to impossible. That’s why everything tastes like lizard: we’ve all eaten lizard and have something in common to compare it to. What I taste is exquisite beyond belief. It is just the simple taste of silverfish, but after so long without eating, anything would have tasted good. But it is more than just that. I have some heightened sense of taste that goes along with the sense of smell, and all of my other faculties. I am perceiving something new in the act of what I used to call eating: I have a different, deeper impression of what I am tasting. However, older people lose most of their taste sense as they get older; maybe I just forgot how good food can really taste.

We both are so hungry that we don’t bother with any small talk while we eat, but just take as much into us as quickly as we can. Unfortunately, it only takes one fish to satiate me. I give Remen the other three fish, which he does his best to eat.

It feels good to eat again. I guess one fish is all of the building materials that the Many/One needs. Thinking about Remen’s explanation, it occurs to me that even plants can’t live on just the sun alone. They need soil as well—good soil, not just dead sand. Maybe I need the occasional supplement to my diet of sunlight. Anyway, I’m just glad that I now know that I can eat and that it is even better than I remembered.

Soon Remen finishes his own portion. “Ah,” he says, leaning back against the edge of the Gull and patting his stomach. “That really hit the spot. You’ll make someone a fine wife some day, me laddy,” jokes Remen.

I can’t help but think of Adrial when he says that. I have put her out of my mind lately, but Remen’s reference brings her crashing back to me. When Remen sees my face go cloudy, he immediately gets the idea of where my thoughts have drifted.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Elias. I’m such an ass. Sometimes I forget to think before I speak,” he says, with genuine regret in his voice.

“Oh, I’m okay,” I assure him. “I’m just a little pensive, is all. You know I miss her, as I’m sure you miss your Hendle. It’s just that I haven’t quite gotten used to the loss of everyone, all at once. And for the second time,” I remind him.

“At least I still have Reen,” Remen says, “although I’m sure he’s going crazy, wondering where I be.”

“Well, maybe we ought to see about getting you back home. I’d kind of like to wait until nightfall, if that’s all right with you,” I suggest.

“I understand completely. It’s probably better not to go in, in broad daylight. You can drop me off a little ways away from the main harbor and I can walk on home from there.”

“Yeah, there’s the other beach, but it’s a goodly walk to your house.”

“No problem,” he assures me. “I can use the exercise,” he jokes, patting his full stomach. I laugh and put away the eating utensils and stove.

As soon as everything is cleared away, Remen starts in on me again. “So back to what we were talking ‘bout,” he says, without so much as a segue. I duck my head and roll my eyes, but he presses on regardless.

“If we must,” I meekly say.

“We must,” he says, with a note of authority. “Are you aware that the Church has started to feel a little frisky lately?”

“Frisky? What the blazes are you talking ‘bout, ol’ man?”

“I mean, they have decided that the word of the Sun God has pretty much covered the Land and perhaps it’s time to spread the good word to some of our neighbors,” he explains.

“Our neighbors? But they’re not talking about sending missionaries, are they?” I ask sarcastically.

“Not unless these missionaries carry a sword and march in rank. Of course, the priests will go along, but it’s the soldiers who will be at the door a-knockin’. I hear that Kryff and Treyfeish are the first in line to receive the good word. At spear point,” he adds, with an ironic smile and a grimace.

“How accurate is your information?” I ask him, with a worried frown.

“Pretty accurate,” he assures me. “Maybe you saw that hysterical young lady in the crowd, back at the village dock? The one doing all the yelling and not too much thinking?”

“Yeah, I really wondered who she was. I’ve never seen her before and she seemed like a big advocate of the Sun Church, as much yelling as she was doing about heresy and the Sun God and all. She’s not from around here, now is she?” I ask.

“Nah, she’s from the capitol. I forget her name, but she’s the cousin of the Deredelgebasts. Old man D’ needed some help with the two kids after his wife and sister died in the plague, so she came up for a while to help out and show him how to actually take care of a family instead of just fishing. She seems quite a devout little thing, eh?” he says, while twirling his finger next to his head.

“Yeah, you can say that. She’s the reason we almost got killed back there. It was her hysterics that panicked everyone into wanting to throw stones at us. I think a few less hotheads back there and things might have gone a bit differently,” I theorize to Remen. Well, maybe I am being too nice. There were quite a few hotheads back there and her voice probably wouldn’t have made much of a difference in the long run.

“Well, it was in a short little talk with her that she casually mentioned about the Church’s glorious plans for our neighboring islands and how glad she was to get away from the hustle and bustle of the capitol, as it gears up for its ‘advance prayer missions,’ I swear she called it,” Remen explains.

“‘Advance prayer missions?’ What the bloody fourth hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Sounds to me like they’re gearing up for war, not some damned prayer meeting,” Remen answers in disgust.

I swear and kick a pile of nets in the forward hull. “Brigan’s Land has always been a land of peace. What in the nine frozen layers of hell do they think they’re doing?”

Remen raises up a hand with an admonishing look and says, “Hold on there just a moment. You just reminded me a wee bit ago about your great-great-granpappy who conquered the Kryff Islands. That doesn’t sound too much like a ‘land of peace’ to me. Have you forgotten already?”

“Okay, okay, you got me there,” I chuckle, pointing my finger at him. “Although to be fair, history shows that they started that little war by their attack on Fin-dapple. We were just defending ourselves.”

“And in the process, gained control of the entire Kryff Island chain?”

“Which my great-grandfather gave back to them, after Simion Brigan died,” I remind him. “But anyway,” I say, waving my hand between us to shoo away the argument, “the point is, we’ve never been an actively militarily-aggressive island before and certainly not ones to force our religion on others at sword point.”

Remen nods absently and looks out to sea for a moment while he thinks. He seems to have something that he wants to tell me or ask me but he won’t spit it out. I wait patiently for him to get his thoughts together, while he simply stares out to sea.

Finally, he speaks. “You know, I envy you in a way. You can get on this boat of yours and just sail away, far from here and our crazy little island.” He turns around from his inspection of the ocean’s waves and looks me right in the eyes.

“That’s exactly what I intend on doing, just as soon as I drop you off to shore,” I tell him, not letting him get out all that he wants to say. I can see a big lecture coming my way.

“You never answered my question, earlier. What have you done about the presence of the Church on Brigan’s Land, Eli Brigan?” he asks me, accentuating the ‘Brigan’ each time he speaks. “You are the last surviving member of a line of leaders that stretches back, how many generations? Forty? Fifty? Over a hundred?”

“I don’t know for sure,” I reluctantly tell him. “We only had records going back to about one hundred and fifty generations or so. Before that, the records were destroyed in a flood, or fire, or something—I forget.”

“One-fifty? Amazing. That’s a lot of history to throw away,” Remen admonishes me. He starts shaking his head from side to side and muttering, “So many years of Brigans. And Elias is the last. The very last.”

I start to squirm in my seat. Remen is making me uncomfortable with all of this talk. Unfortunately for me, he isn’t done yet.

“You know,” he says, clearing his throat and staring deep into my black eyes again, “Maybe you have some responsibility here.” He doesn’t say anything else for a while and I just let the silence hang between us. Taking my lack of response as a signal he continues, “Maybe you have some duty left to the Land and its people. Maybe—”

At that, I have heard enough. “What the hell is this ‘bloods-be-damned talk about duty and responsibility I keep hearing you go on about? Why this massive guilt trip? My heart is stone and my blood’s grown cold for this Land’s needs and wants.”

Remen tries to say something. “Maybe—”

“Maybe you’re an old man trying to get me to do something you’ve always wanted to do yourself, but never had the balls for!” I interrupt him. I immediately regret saying it as soon as it leaves my lips, but I am mad and decide that I’ve already made an ass of myself—I might as well finish it.

“Maybe,” I go on, “maybe this land that you care so much about could’ve done something about the Cleansing. I don’t remember any outsiders coming to our island to start the Church of the Sun. It was Brigan Island people who killed the Brigan family. It was Brigan Islanders who crept into the palace that night and cut the throat of each and every one of my brothers. It was Brigan Islanders that burned down the palace that had stood on Brigan Island for thousands of years. It was Brigan Island people that hung my mother and father over hot coals

until they died screaming in the middle of the night. And for what? For what?" I scream at Remen.

"They weren't bad rulers—" Remen starts to say.

"Sun-God-be-damned! No, they weren't bad rulers. Oh sure, maybe they weren't perfect. Maybe the taxes could have been a mite lower. But people were happy, well fed, and had nothing much to complain about, I'm thinking. It was the damned Council who took it upon themselves to seize power away from the Brigans line. And no one even tried to stop them!"

Remen starts to look a little fearful, as I get myself worked up. Once I start, I can't seem to stop saying what I've been keeping bottled up inside of me for so long. I've never been able to completely vent the last fifty years of feelings of betrayal that I've held against the land of Brigans for what they did to my family.

Remen hastily tries to interject an explanation. "You know what happened. Enough people in the Council and among the nobles felt like they weren't getting enough of the pie and they all happened to be members of that cult, the Sun Church. They convinced enough people to go along with it and then ramrodded over anyone who complained, after the midnight coup."

"Yeah, the Council," I say, cooling down a little. "And the pox-cursed nobles. The same nobles and Councilmen who now just happen to be high priests in the Church of the Sun. At least, the ones who went along with everything. The ones who didn't—" I make a throat-cutting gesture across my neck with one hand.

Remen stops looking at me in my eyes and starts to look down at his feet. He mumbles something that I can't quite catch, even with my new-improved hearing.

"What's that?" I ask.

"I just said, I never really thought about it like that. I mean—from your perspective. Well, not that I knew that there was any Brigans left alive to have a perspective on it. You must feel betrayed."

"Damn right I feel betrayed!" I yell and slam my fist down on the bench I am sitting on. My fist goes right through the board as if it is paper, and Remen jumps up out of his seat like I hit him, instead of my seat.

"Easy there!" he admonishes. "Just take it easy. Nothing to get upset about. I'm sorry I put that guilt trip on you. Really, I am." As he stands up, he grabs ahold of the side mast to steady himself. "Easy. . ."

"Don't get me wrong," I say, somewhat calmer. "This is still my Land, my home. Brigans have been here for too long for me to just turn my back on it forever. I could have left the land fifty years ago instead of staying here and living in fear. But, what duty and what responsibility do I owe to a land and a people that let the Church kill my family and who continues to let the Church prosper?"

Remen nods at this and says nothing.

"I have to work out these questions for myself before I do anything about the Church. As far as I'm concerned, the land deserves the Church and it deserves them," I say, with an angry shake of my head and a slashing motion of dismissal with my left hand.

Remen nods at that and doesn't pursue the matter any further. He sits back down with a sigh and says, "Well, it's starting to get on in the day. It'll be dark before you know it. Maybe we ought to start heading back."

"Okay, ol' friend. And I'm sorry about some of those things I said a bit ago."

"I understand. Forget about it. It's been a long time since you've been able to vent your spleen about these things, and I don't mind it. I can take it," he says, thumping his chest to show

what a big man he is. I can't help but smile at his antics. Remen always can make me laugh, especially when I don't really want to.

"Just one more question, if you don't mind," he tentatively asks. At my good-natured nod, he says, "Why did you stay in the Land for so long? Surely you could have gone to another island or to Tretia to live, without the constant fear of discovery from the Church?"

"A very good question, that. Well, I came as far north as I could in as short a time as I could on foot. As a matter of fact, I had planned to take the first ship that I could steal out of Seadown and head to Tretia. But then I met Adrial and decided to stay for just a bit. You know, she was working at the inn way back then."

Remen nods and says, "Ah, of course. I'd forgotten about the two little lovebirds you two were back then. How romantic," he says with a sigh.

The old softy. I laugh and have a pleasant memory-flash of how Adrial looked when I first saw her at the tavern, sweaty and tired after a full days work of slinging beer and dodging the hands of drunken sailors and fishermen. Then, the other reason I stayed occurs to me.

"And also," I go on, "I stayed in the Land for the same reason that I came back to Seadown after the Fist of the Gods. It was for this loud mouth, good-for-nothin', overweight, jolly ol' fellow named Remen; who, for some strange reason, I took an immediate liking to."

Remen looks up at me, although valiantly trying not to let me see the tear that is working its way down his face. "You know, I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me. I can't get over looking at you and seeing a stranger, but listening to you and hearing Elias."

He gets up again and comes over to me to get a better look at me. Without a further word, I grab him and give him a big hug. It feels nice to have such a friend as Remen; he is all that I have left in the world.

"At least you turned out to be at least a half-assed fisherman," he chokes out from within the crushing confines of my hug, just a little embarrassed by my display of affection.

"Well, I couldn't've had a better teacher. You put up with a lot of fumbling, there for a while." He chuckles as we both remember my early attempts at learning the trade of a fisherman. "Okay, we've talked enough for one night. Let's get ya back to that lady-killer grandson of yours."

I turn the boat towards home—well, Remen's home, anyway—using my unfailing sense of direction to guide us in. Remen quickly falls asleep, exhausted by his head injury and by arguing with me. I smile to myself as I watch him sleep and I think about how lucky I truly am, in spite of everything else that has happened.

The twin moons are both out by the time we get to the backside of the narrow peninsula on which the village of Seadown is situated. I wake Remen up and together we navigate the dangerous strait. Even to Remen's failing eyes, the night is lit up brightly enough to see clearly. Of course, I can see just fine in about any amount of light. We have to sail around the front side that most people usually go to and come up the backside, which is framed by a large set of rocky cliffs and surrounded by sharp rocks and dangerous reefs. Few people ever approach Seadown from this dangerous vantage point, because of the rocks and the cliffs; instead, they usually choose the straight sail-in to the docks or the beach. However, to two old sea-hands such as Remen and myself, it is no problem; we both have come here many times before to collect the oysters that live on the underside of many of the sharp rocks.

"I'm gonna take you right up to the break in the cliffs," I warn Remen. "It shouldn't take even your fat ass more than an hour of walking from there."

“Thanks, ol’ man. You should come with me. Spend the night and go back in the morning. No one will see us, I’m sure. If’n they do, so what? I doubt anyone will try throwing rocks at you at this late hour,” he offers.

“I appreciate the offer but I’ve got places to go. There’s a big world out there that I want to see,” I say, waving my arm in an expansive gesture from horizon to horizon.

“Well, think about what I said, will ya? The Land needs you, whether you need it or not.”

I carefully sidestep this last verbal javelin. “Understood. You take care now, here? And try to get some meat on you, will ya?” I say, trying to poke him one last time in his skeletal ribs.

He quickly dodges back away from me. “Just remember,” he admonishes me, “Brigan needs one of those bardic heroes, whether we think they’re silly or not—especially someone who represents both the old order and the new Gods.” He turns around without another word and hops out of the boat, onto a break in the rocks. With both moons up and the water level at high tide, it doesn’t take him long to scramble through the small crack and up through the breach in the cliff. I feel a little nervous watching him slip and slide on the wet rocks, until he is safely at the top of the cliffs. He turns around and gives one last wave to me. I stand up in The Gull’s Wing, with the twin moons shining brightly behind me, and wave back. And then he is gone.

Well, this is the last thing that I felt like I had to do before setting out to see the world. I had to say a proper goodbye to Remen, and now I am free from any obligations in Seadown. Remen sure tried to put a load on me, about my “duty” and “responsibility” to free Brigan’s Land from the Sun Church. Long, exasperated sigh. What was his last comment about “the new Gods”? He still doesn’t understand that the Many/One isn’t anything supernatural. All of these things trouble me, but I’m not quite ready to deal with it. Not when there is so much to see and do first. So, I firmly thrust it out of my mind and turn my little boat around.

A memorized map of the Southern islands appears in my head, and I examine it. From where I am now, on the back, north-western side of Brigan’s Land, the closest place I can go to is Treyfeish. It isn’t more than two or three good days of sailing away and I haven’t been there for at least twenty years. It will do as well as any other place I can go.

I set my course for Treyfeish, tacking slightly against the wind, and carefully navigate through the dangerous reefs. Soon, I am in the clear open waters, and I raise up all three sails and let the Gull have her free reign into the oncoming wind. Once we have gotten far enough out, I lash the rudder taut and close my eyes for some much-needed sleep.

As I drift off, I can still hear the echo of Remen’s voice, trying to pull at my broken heartstrings. It blends in with the crying of the seagulls until it becomes a steady, soothing drone: “The Land needs you...needs you...needs you...”

I struggle awake, long enough to mutter, “But who needs them?” before falling back to sleep.

Part Two: Treyfeish
Chapter Twelve

Elias

My sleep is filled with more strange dreams. I suspect that the Many/One are accessing many of my memories to try to make sense of this strange new world of humans, and trying to piece together events to explain who I am now and how I have gotten here. I have always had very vivid dreams, but these dreams have a sense of immediacy to them that seem very lifelike. Part of me is reliving the memory as if it is just now happening, and part of me is aware that it is not real.

One such dream stands out above the rest. I remember attending one session of the King's Council, something I did rather infrequently when I was younger. The fifth son of a monarch has little incentive to embroil himself in the midst of politics, and I always found it quite boring, anyway. On this occasion, the subject of the Sun Church arises, and one of its members comes and asks to address the Council. They have been a minor cult in the kingdom for the last couple of generations. I never knew where they sprung from and I know very little of their tenets. They have always been somewhat erratic, being behind a few demonstrations and the like, but the Crown has always perceived them as relatively harmless.

A priest in a dark flowing robe with the cowl drawn over his head to hide his face is speaking to the Councilmen, from a raised dais in the center of the star. The meeting hall of the Council is shaped like a giant, four-pointed star, with the priest currently in the center of the star. Half of the Council is to the east and west arms of the star, and the nobles are about evenly distributed in the north and south arms of the star. I am in the south arm, sitting with several of the nobles, with the Sun-priest's back to me.

"—but you know in your hearts that to be true. All life comes from the Sun," he is saying.

One of the Councilmen snickers and replies, "But without the rains, this island we live on would be a baked rock. We need the rains as well to survive."

The Sun worshipper nods eagerly, as if the Councilman gave the very answer he has been expecting. "It is the Sun that warms the seas into making the clouds in the first place. Thus, the rain comes from the Sun."

The Councilman lifts his head back and laughs again. "Okay, you got me there. However, we didn't call you here today to debate theology or the weather. The Council—and of course the King—wishes to have an account of your activities as of late. Several of your followers have been rather, shall we say, 'vocal' against the Crown."

The cowed man bows deeply and then nods. "It is part of our beliefs to question a system that holds the old gods as sacred. He Who is Not Named is the only God and He is a jealous God. He says that all other gods be false and are at best spirits that work against His will and plans. Any system that speaks for those against Him must be against Him as well. This we are bound by our faith to question."

I suddenly remember the name of the Councilman speaking. He is Corinth, one of the senior members of the Council. I haven't thought about him in so many years that I am amazed that his name still sticks in my head, in this dream or replay of a memory. I never learned the name of the Sun-priest speaking to Corinth. I never saw his face either, because of the dark cowl that shrouds his features. For some reason, in this dreamlike remembering, I fear him. Well, I have been afraid of the Sun-priests for a long time since, for obvious reasons, but I don't remember being afraid of them at that time.

I speak out to the gathered members of the Council and to the usual gaggle of nobles and their courtiers. “Pardon me for interrupting, Corinth.” All eyes turn around to me. I am the only representative of the Crown present at this meeting, and usually the Crown doesn’t interrupt the proceedings of the Council. By custom, there is always someone representing the Crown’s interests at every Council meeting, but it is usually one of my older brothers, or in times of big decisions to be made, the King, my father, Himself. I only rarely have the opportunity to go to these meetings and would not have come this time either, if one of my brothers had not been ill at the last moment. At Corinth’s nod and slight bow—a little too slight, I think—I address the priest. “But are you not equally bound to follow your King?” I ask.

The Sun-priest bows ingratiatingly and says, “Of course, of course. But may we not question such as even the King? Are we slaves to follow blindly the King and His sons, rather than listen to the Master of our souls?”

Corinth speaks up before I can reply, “None of us are slaves to the Crown. I don’t think that even the Crown quite believes so. Right, ah—Eli, isn’t it?”

I frown at this second major slight from Corinth. He knows perfectly well what my name is, in spite of the fact that I have four older, more important, brothers. I may be the least important and well known of all of my brothers, but I am a prince, after all, and he is only a Councilman, albeit a powerful one. I can only slowly shake my head, before the priest continues: “There shalt be no kingdoms under the Sun that are not of the Sun, saith He Who is Not Named. Thus, we can not follow an unholy empire.”

I hear murmurs from the nobleman from the back of the Star Chambers. Several people whisper “treason” under their breaths.

The priest, quickly picking up on the mood of these nobles, goes on, “But we are not a violent order. We are taught to obey the commands of the earthly realm, while doing all within our power to lead those who are blind into the light of the Sun. This we do with reason and words, not with the violence of our hands or weapons. I am only here to teach,” he says, opening his arms wide and baring his breastbone to the assemblage to show he is unarmed.

I snort loudly at this melodramatic act. As if he would have been able to bring a weapon into the Star Chamber anyway. Well, I have heard enough from this crazy man and his new religion. I stand up and clear my throat dramatically. “Teach whom you will, priest. Anyone who will listen is a fool, I say. But,” I say, emphasizing my words by pointing a finger at his backside, “be very careful that your faith is not replaced with force of arms. Then the Crown will have to take active measures.” With that, I turn around and walk out of the Star Chamber. It is too bad that the priest has his back to me and misses my equally melodramatic finger pointing at him and my exit. I have heard enough from the Council today. Their proceedings will have to go on without a representative from the Crown this time.

Behind me, I hear the Council resuming its cross-examination of the Sun-priest, ignoring my little petulant egress. I have no patience for the political maneuverings of the Council and I lose my temper easily. There has been a pronounced lack of respect to the Crown lately and I am a little sick of it. Let them argue and bicker about the Sun Church. They can do it just fine without my presence. Besides, I planned to do some mountain climbing this afternoon, and there is still time to do it if I hurry.

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My dream abruptly ends and other, less memorable events of my life play themselves out in dreamlike fashion. I eventually wake up, only able to remember the Council scene.

The sun is just starting its long upward climb through the sky. I check our course through the ocean and, confident that my little boat is still headed in the right direction, I take off my shirt to take in some of the sun's ruddy light. I think about my little dream/remembering. In retrospect, this had to have been one of the first of a long string of conferences, and then later, secret meetings between the Council and the Sun Church. From such innocuous beginnings were to come the later pogrom of destroying the Crown and replacing it with the Sun Church. Obviously, the Sun-priest was lying when he talked about their order being non-violent. Never in Brigan's Land's long history has such a violent bloodbath been carried out as was the Cleansing. And surely, Corinth had to have been a key figure behind it all. Since he wasn't one of those killed along with the royal family, he must have been in on it. He carried too much weight and influence in the annals of the Council to have been merely a minor player.

I wonder what the power structure is now back in the capital. Corinth must be far too old now to be an active leader; in fact, he can't possibly be alive, if I do my math correctly. He would be about one-hundred-plus years old now. Most of the original members of the coup have to be dead, or doddering old fools. An entire generation and more have passed since the fateful Cleansing, and new members have to be in control now. No matter. It is none of my business anymore. The capitol and what happens there has always been extremely far from the daily life of the village, and all of that and more is behind me now as I head to Treyfeish.

#

I spend most of the rest of the trip lazily soaking up the sun's rays and playing with my new magnetic sense. It is fun for me to track the large schools of fish underneath me, without even looking at them. I close my eyes and lean against the mizzenmast, while this great big underwater world opens up to my questing senses. I've never gotten before such a sense of traveling on the top layer of a huge world beneath my boat. I feel like an eagle flying over a world stretched out beneath me, only there are so many different layers to this underwater world.

For a while, a school of dolphin paces The Gull's Wing, chirping and whistling to each other. I can hear a "kricck, kricck" sound coming from them that must be above the range of what I could hear previously, because I never noticed it before. I get a sense of them using this clicking to navigate their darkened world. The more I listen to it, the more I feel I can understand what it means. I have a slight headache behind my temple from listening to it and my scalp itches. It is if my body is trying to change itself somehow to accommodate and make sense of this new sensory input. Just as I start to get a fuzzy picture of what they are seeing, they all go away en masse. I notice a school of shark fins and deduce that the sharks must have scared them off.

After the dolphins leave and my head stops trying to make sense of the clicking, I feel my scalp itch again, as my body seems to reverse whatever changes it was trying to make. This is the only explanation I have for what I just experienced. This amazing new body didn't come with any instructions and the Many/One only deigns to appear to me every once in a while to answer questions. I got a sense of their presence last night during the dreaming, but only as silent spectators. I wish that I knew just what this new body is capable of and why it does some of the things it does. For example, I ate a fish the other day with Remen. Where did it go? What I mean is, if one eats, then one usually has to attend to certain biological functions a few hours later. I feel no such urgings. I also haven't urinated since coming off of the Fist. Maybe my new body has a better system of filtration than it did before.

As I am sitting here thinking about this and a million other things all at once, another thing occurs to me. My supply of fresh water is getting rather low. I was out to sea for almost a

month on my fishing trip before I went to the Fist and I hadn't bothered to refill and re-supply my water before going back out to the Fist. After the Fist of the Gods experience, and my return to Seadown, I was a little too busy dodging rocks and arrows to worry about water. Although I have only a little water left, I'm not too worried about dying of thirst. However, it does make me wonder about something. If I don't urinate anymore—possibly because of some better way of purifying my body's water—then perhaps I can handle seawater as well. This I quickly put to the test, by leaning over the side of the boat and bringing up a bucket of water. I take a cautious, experimental sip. It tastes briny of course, but my body doesn't immediately reject it. I take a long quaff of the rest of the water in the bucket with no apparent ill effects. My slight thirst seems quenched by the seawater.

Interesting. I'm not quite human anymore, it seems. I take mental stock of the new additions to my body, that weren't just improvements brought about by my youthful rejuvenation. First, I have this magnetic sense that I never had before. I can see in the dark, drink seawater, drink up the sun's rays like a plant, and hear sounds that I don't think a human can usually hear. I heal injuries at a phenomenal rate and don't feel much in the way of debilitating pain. There was also the confusing effort to understand the range-finding clicks of the dolphins. Was my body actually trying to adapt to understand them or had I imagined it? I think that almost nothing will surprise me anymore about this new body. I feel more than just a little uncomfortable about it. Why am I becoming such a different person? Will I continue to change and what am I changing into? These questions worry me.

Another thought comes to me. If I can drink seawater, perhaps I can breathe in it as well? I see no way of testing this theory without actually stopping The Gull's Wing and jumping over the side to experiment. I am a little reluctant to find out some new ability, something that will separate me even further from what is human and what is not. If I have such an underwater breathing ability, I don't want to know about it until I need it. But then, if I need it and don't have it, I'll surely be in some trouble. This seems to fall under the category of things I need to ask the Many/One about. If I try breathing seawater and then find out that this new body is especially susceptible to salt water, I'll be in a world of hurt. And maybe, I have this ability, but if I don't use it correctly, I'll drown. Better to ask than to randomly experiment.

The next couple of days pass by rather uneventfully. I play with the dolphins periodically, whistling and clicking back to them the sounds that they make. I can sense some intelligence behind these clicks and whistles, but apart from mimicking them, I can't quite grasp the pattern. This is rather comforting in an odd, strange way, because I am starting to fear this new thing I have become. It is odd enough that I can whistle and click like a dolphin if I want to; it would be too odd if I actually could communicate intelligently with them.

On the morning of the third day of traveling, I come within distant sight of the island of Treyfeish. Treyfeish is about a fourth of the size of Brigan's Land and much of it is mountainous and inhospitable. The only truly habitable area is a strip around the entire coast that is fertile and flat, part-jungle, encircling the rocky slag of the volcanic middle. The people of Treyfeish are a nut-brown race and live very primitively by Brigan standards, and especially by the more advanced Tretian standards. They live primarily by fishing, trading, and some subsistence farming, and also by picking the fruits off of trees that grow everywhere in the fertile strip. Treyfeish has a lot in common with the Kryff islands; however, without the cannibalism and the voodoo. The people of both island areas share some common ancestry, but their cultures have drifted apart over the millennia. The people are very kind to strangers and seem to be some

of the happiest people that I have ever met. Treyfeish and Brigan's Land have a long history of trading together that stretches back as far as anyone can remember.

I came here twenty years ago with my entire family, the first and only time we all left the island together. At the time, the Sun-Church was doing a census/ tax review of the entire northern part of the island. This happens about every ten years or so, and I've always made it a point to be out to sea or somewhere else when this comes around. Adrial knew that there was some reason that I always avoided the taxmen/priests, but to her credit, she never once asked me why. She knew it was something I had to do and always supported me in it. I planned to just take off for a little while, but Adrial and Jin insisted on coming with me that time. I left Remen in charge of the house (which we left to look as if it were abandoned, if anyone enquired) and we spent an entire summer here in Treyfeish. Jin's wife was pregnant with his twin girls, so she stayed behind with her family.

We spent a month playing on the beach and leisurely getting to know the people of Treyfeish. They invited us to many of their local traditional ceremonies and we had many a wild party. The locals make a very weak beer and a very strong coconut drink called chillah. Jin and I fished and hunted with the warriors, and Adrial spent a lot of time with the local women, learning all sorts of useful skills, such as basket-weaving, cooking the local food, and doing several of the traditional dances. We were introduced to the chief of the island and to his family. Although trading boats come to the island two or three times a year, few people from Brigan actually stay for very long. Back in the days of the monarchy, some of the older members of the royal family spent time here off and on.

The chief, a very old man named Taruhra, actually recognized me for whom I really was. We met once before when he came to visit the court when I was only a very young man. Although we had never talked, he remembered me and I had to swear him to secrecy to not tell a soul. He thought it was very funny that I was now just a simple fisherman, and he laughed for a long time when he realized that the Sun Church hadn't killed off the entire line of Brigan as they thought. There is no love lost between Treyfeish and the Church of the Sun.

Old Taruhra insisted several times that I stay there in Treyfeish, and I was sorely tempted to take advantage of his offer. It is hard to explain, but I felt like I just couldn't abandon the life I had made for my family back in Seadown. Adrial liked the island a lot, but after a couple of months there, she kept dropping broad hints about returning to Seadown. When I broached the subject of possibly staying, she adamantly refused. She had friends and family back in Seadown and she wasn't about to let us "spend the rest of our life in a grass hut—no matter how idyllic."

So finally, we returned to Seadown and to Jin's wife and the coming twins. Adrial and I considered the whole experience a second honeymoon, although we never actually had a first. Few people among the village folk ever had the time or the money for such a thing. It was one of the happier moments in our little family's history, and I actually start crying as I think about it.

Well, I seem to be human enough to still cry. This actually cheers me up a little bit. I dwell on the memory of that magic summer in Treyfeish for a little longer and then put the thought out of my head. I feel like I owe myself a vacation and Treyfeish is the place to do it.

#

Taruhra

"Why should I wear the fuku? I hate that itchy thing." I throw the skirt back to Antanu with a look of disgust.

“You may be the chief, Taruhra, but I am the first wife and you know the fuku makes you look important. You will wear it and that’s the end of this discussion.” Antanu throws it back to me and I resignedly catch it. “The Burigans are coming and you should look your best.”

Ah, the Brigans. It’s been almost three years since the last time they showed up in the Perfect Place, or Treyfeish, as the Brigans say. Now, suddenly there are three frigates parked out on shore and we’re supposed to act like nothing is the matter. Everyone thinks it’s a party.

“Antanu, I’ll wear the stupid thing, but I don’t have to like it,” I say, as defiantly as I can.

Antanu says nothing, and only smiles that little smile that means she’s won. I should know better than to argue with her, but it’s an old game we play. She demands, I refuse, and then she wins anyway. “You’d think you were the chief around here,” I mutter, but in Brigan, so she can’t understand me.

“I heard that!” she says. I don’t think she understood me, though. At least I hope not.

Our “discussion” finished, she goes out of the compound to harass the other four wives. Well, “harass” may be a strong word. They usually listen to her, unlike me. I do have appearances to keep up after all.

I putter around for a while before finally putting the damn fuku on. It’s gotten a little tight around the middle. Hmm, it must have shrunk since I wore it last. I couldn’t possibly be getting fat...

I have my suspicions about those Brigan frigates. Ever since their horrible little Cleansing, the Brigans have become more and more insufferable. Trade has become increasingly difficult, according to Tehanu, and the last time they came, we barely got anything in exchange for our water, fruits, and the chillah. They have become self-righteous little pricks, with their Sun God and their holy zeal. They remind me entirely too much of the Kryffs, only minus the facial scars and the voodoo. Their Sun God sounds suspiciously like one of the Kryff cults.

I remember the way the Brigans were when I was a boy. Quite nice people, actually. Jenter Brigan was a little cold, but his sons were different. Most of them were fairly friendly, when I spent a year in Brigan. My father wanted me to see some of the Southern islands before he died and I became chief. What was the name of the oldest boy? Keven? Kevan, or something like that. We used to go out to that tavern in Brigan City—I forget its name. I was way younger than Kevan, but he treated me like I was an adult. Ah, the night he got me drunk, we almost got arrested, and then I fell in the gutter! Those were the days.

And then Eli. I never really talked to him when he was young; he was a quiet boy and didn’t hang around the palace much. But after the Cleansing, he and his wife and boy—what were their names? Arial and Jin? Adial? I’ll have to ask Antanu.

My first wife, psychically feeling me thinking about her, takes this moment to come back and check on me. “Look at you! You look pretty in the fuku. Makes you look like a real chief.”

“‘Pretty?’ No warrior wants to look ‘pretty.’ Tell me I look virile, or manly, or something like that.”

Antanu laughs and slaps me on the behind. I grab her wrist and start to move her down to the sands for some impromptu lovemaking. “Taruhra! Okay, you look manly! We don’t have time for anything else. You happy, now?”

I let her go, having proved my point. “It’s about time to go out to the ships and say hello to the Burigans.”

“The warriors are already gathering on the beach and the woman have killed a couple of pigs. Everyone is pretty excited. You might want to make a speech or something.”

Not a bad idea. I love to make speeches. What was I going to ask her? Oh, yeah. “Hey, what was the name of Ee-rai’s wife?”

Antanu smiles. “Aduriaru. A fine, fine woman. What are they up to now?”

Ah, it must be “Adrial,” in Brigan pronunciation. I shrug my shoulders. “It’s been twenty years. I haven’t heard from them since. Maybe their Church finally got ahold of them.”

Antanu’s smile fades. “I hope not. They were good people, for Burigans. She could make a good basket, for a barbarian-foreigner.”

“I still think about them, from time to time. I always thought that Jin would make a great husband for one of the girls.”

“He’s already got a wife, you senile old fool! Remember, his wife was expecting a baby? That’s why she didn’t come.”

Oh, yeah. The old memory does play tricks on me now and again. No matter. It’s time to strut around and look chiefly.

I open up a chest and pull out my machete, wrapped in its oil-soaked rag to keep it from rusting.

“What do you think you’re going to do with that? You don’t want to offend the Burigans, do you?” asks Antanu, squinting at me. Her eyesight has been going these last few years but I don’t ever mention it to her. Much though I love to argue with her, I also love her too much to actually hurt her feelings. If only she was as careful of mine.

“This, my first wife among many, is just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case it’s needed. I don’t trust the Burigans anymore. I’ll keep it here,” I say, putting it behind me, tucked into the fuku, “where they can’t see it. If I don’t need it, then it’s just a quaint little custom of our ‘primitive’ island. If I do...”

“Well, get on with you, already! The warriors are waiting.”

I take a couple of moments to paint my face, with Antanu helping me. The marks I use are reserved strictly for the chief and his family, taught to me by my father, and already passed down to my oldest son. Now, looking every inch the great chief I am, I go out to talk to the people.

On the beach, I can see the three ships of the Brigans parked out in the lagoon. The three ships have a different flag than the one I remember them using before. This new flag is a blood-red sun on a white background, with rays of fire spiraling out from the center. The last Sun flag was simply an orange sun on plain white. I wonder about the change in flags and what it might represent.

Everyone is gathered around on the beach, wearing their grass skirts and decked-out in their family paints. I notice that several other warriors have their weapons as well. It looks like I’m not the only suspicious one on the island. I clear my throat and try to remember the speech that I’ve been working on these last three years, ever since the last Brigan ship. I raise my hands for dramatic effect and say, “People of the Perfect Place! The Burigans are here again!”

Everyone lets out a cheer at my wonderful speech. Short and sweet makes a chief more popular than long and windy. My grandfather taught me that.

Unfortunately, I have to add something to my previously perfect speech. “Just remember, everyone, let’s do be careful. I’ll go up and talk to them by myself. If there’s any trouble, I want everyone back at the monsoon caves. And I mean everyone,” I emphasize, staring hard at my warriors.

I go out to greet the Burigans.

#

Elias

As I come a little closer to the main harbor, within fair sight of the main village—where the chief lives and where the nominal government of the island is—I notice a curious smell to the air. It smells like something is burning, with an acrid, cloying odor. I immediately attribute it to the ever-present eruptions of the many volcanoes in the center of the isle.

However, it isn't long before I can tell the real reason for the burning smell. As soon as I come around a bend of the island to the main lagoon, I see that three ships are floating just off to sea, with the white flag and the flaming, blood red sun of the Sun Church. The main center-compound and every grass hut in sight of the long beach are burning or have already been consumed. Several piles of bodies are stacked along the beach like so much firewood. Milling around are hundreds of Brigian soldiers and robe-clad temple-priests.

It looks like the priests of the Church of the Sun have already paid a call and are busily doing their "missionary work." Yet again, I am just a few days too late.

Chapter Thirteen

Elias

As soon as I come into sight of the Brigan ships and the carnage on the beach, and then realize what it all means, I immediately slam the rudder as hard as I can to starboard. The Gull spins in a sharp turn and heads back away from the beach. Even though my sight is quite a bit better than those on the beach or those in the ships, the tall sails of my ship are surely visible to them, if anyone is looking out to sea. I hope that everyone is too preoccupied with what is happening on the beach, but I'm not about to risk my life on it. "Too careful" means "still alive."

I go back around the bend until I am out of sight of the main lagoon. I am so angry that I am shaking. I know that the Church has been planning something like this for sometime soon, because Remen had already told me about it, but I didn't think that the Church was so far along in the plans. Treyfeish is nominally closer than the Kryff Islands, and thus it makes for a logical first place to start a campaign of expansion. However, there is nothing logical about the pillage I saw on the beach. Hundreds of peaceful natives have been ruthlessly slaughtered and their homes burnt to the ground. It sounds all too familiarly like the Cleansing.

I have no idea what I am going to do, but of this, I am positive: I am going to do something. In the brief glimpse that I got of the beach, there doesn't seem to be much left of the once-friendly paradise of Treyfeish. Even though I have only seen a little, what I have seen is burned into my memory for all of time.

Let me let you in on a little secret: in all of my eighty-two years of life, I have never killed a man. I have killed a million sea-creatures of all various shapes, colors, and sizes; I trained in all of the appropriate weapons that a young gentleman of the Court should learn, and I have seen people die many, many times before. Nevertheless, I have never set my hand against another and so ended his life. However, let this be known: those three ships will not be leaving this island. The people responsible for this atrocity will pay for it with their lives and by my own hand if necessary. This I swear.

I have no weapons with which to vent my anger. I have no instruments of destruction with which to wreak vengeance against the destroyers of the Treyfeish culture. I have only my body, which can put a fist through a board as if it is paper. I hope it will be enough. It has to be enough.

Such is the state of my mind as I sit out at sea, plotting my revenge.

I bring The Gull's Wing around to the backside of the island of Treyfeish. I remember what Taruhra, the old chief told me: the island, in the name of its people, is actually "Tehama Nehama," or "The Perfect Place." It is not a perfect place anymore. If Taruhra is still alive, which is doubtful, given the history of the Sun Church and what they usually do to the rightful rulers of a land—if he is still alive, I knew where he would have gone: to the center of the island. There is a system of caves in the middle of the island, right underneath a still-steaming volcano, that the islanders go to in the time of monsoons. I am sure that this is where any islanders would have fled to if they were given the chance.

It takes me the better part of two hours to sail around to the backside of Treyfeish. The whole time I'm sailing, I keep thinking about what I saw on the beach. The priests are probably going to burn the stacks of bodies as a burnt offering to their Sun God. This is usually done at high noon. Noon is only an hour or so away, so I figure that the priests at least will be busy for a while. As for the soldiers, I have grown up hearing stories of what soldiers do in their downtime,

particularly with any females that might have been left alive after sacking a town or village. I'm sure that some females were left alive just for this purpose. If not, I think they are far luckier to have died quickly, rather than to be used for sport and then killed anyway. I would say "women," rather than "females," but soldiers are piss-poor judges of age when they're in the raping mood. All this is conjecture; it doesn't matter what the Brigans are doing at this moment. I would gladly welcome stumbling onto a few soldiers out in the jungle by themselves.

Once I have The Gull's Wing moored up in a stand of date trees by the water, I set out for the interior of the island. My anger was so great earlier that I completely forgot that I always carry at least one long boning knife on board, which will work just fine as both a machete and a weapon. I guess I do have a weapon, after all. Not much compared to a decent sword, armor, and daily practice, though.

Although it has been nearly twenty years since I was last on the island, it doesn't take me long to find the caves. It is hard to miss the volcano that is my landmark. When I get to the volcano, I can feel the ground shaking a little bit every now and again; it is almost as if the island itself knows what has happened and is shaking with anger the same as I am. The entrance to the caves has a huge boulder blocking it, rolled up to it from the inside. When I see this boulder, I knew that at least someone is in here.

I set my back to one edge of the boulder and strain mightily. To my surprise, I am able to move it back, if only a short distance at a time. I have seen it take eight or nine of Taruhra's biggest warriors to move that stone before. What have I become?

Once inside the cave, I push the stone back, shutting the entrance. Quickly my eyes adjust to the dark confines of the cave, and then I hear voices approaching. Someone must have been sent to investigate the noise of the stone moving. In a few seconds, I see torches and count six people, all women.

"Who's there?" one of them shouts in their language. This is a language that I was required to study as a boy, since a young prince must be able to speak all of the languages of the surrounding kingdoms, particularly the fifth son. Who else would make a better diplomat, while the elder brothers have more important positions within the kingdom? Moreover, I had spent a summer here, after all.

"It is I, Ee-rai Burigan!" I yell to the approaching women, in their language. At the name "Brigan," they quickly shy back away from me. "I'm here to help you, not harm you. Don't be frightened. I'm not with the Sun priests."

One of the oldest women, a veritable fossil, creeps closer and peers at me with her weak eyes and the dim light. She grabs one of the torches from one of her companions and holds it closer to me, close enough for me to flinch at the heat of it in my face. "Ee-rai? Husband of Aduriaru?" she croaks.

I sigh with relief, finally recognizing her. She is Antanu, one of the five wives of Taruhra—the senior wife, if I remember correctly. "Yes, Antanu, it's me, Aduriaru's husband. Don't you remember my voice? I have returned to throw off these invaders to your land. Can you tell me what happened?"

She motions me to follow her down deeper into the tunnels. She makes a series of hand gestures to the other women, who first check to make sure that the door is sealed and then follow in line behind us. She grabs my arm in a vise-grip and keeps nervously squeezing it as we walk. "You look different to these weak old eyes, but the voice never lies. We thought they were the trade-ships, the usual ones—the ones that used to come two, three times a year. They didn't come last year or the year before. This year, three ships came instead of one. They landed at the

usual place, at about the usual time, and we started to get a celebration together. Taruhra said that something was wrong, he didn't like the emblems on the flags, but no one listened to him. Even the chief can't stop a party when it's a long time coming." The words just stream out of her as fast as she can talk, while she wheezes in short, labored gasps, trying to run with me in tow.

"Slow down there, Antanu, you're going to hurt yourself. Where are we going in such a hurry?"

Antanu replies without slowing down, "We've got to get to the bottom. We don't have much time. I'm sorry about Aduriaru and the boy."

"How did you know about that? That they died, I mean," I ask, unable to believe that she would know such a thing.

"Antanu knows many things. I don't see so well anymore, but I could hear the pain in your voice. It says they died recently—soon as I said her name. She was a good woman." She pats my arm as we walk, finally slowing down a little as we round a corner of the tunnel.

"Yeah, the best." It is all I can say. I know the pain she must be feeling is far worse than anything I must be feeling. She has just witnessed the entire destruction of her family and her people as well. I have to know what all has happened and who is still left alive on the island.

"Don't need to talk. Just get to him, before he's gone," she whispers.

"Who, Antanu? Get to who?" I ask her.

Just then, the tunnel widens out to a big cavern. Stretched out before me is maybe thirty or forty women and children, lying on mats or huddled in small groups. Also, on mats I see five or six men, all of whom look severely wounded. Most look as if they won't live out the day. At the very end of the group, I see several women clustered around an old man lying on the mat-covered ground. It is Taruhra.

"Eli Brigan!" he yells, and then starts coughing. I see blood in his saliva as he coughs. He has a grievous wound in his chest that looks like it was caused by a spear, or a similar sharp, poking instrument. He looks like one of the people that aren't going to make it through the day.

"Taruhra!" I yell. "What happened?" I run over to him, faster than thought itself. One second I am five lengths away from him and then suddenly I am standing beside him, looking down into his age-lined face.

"Those thrice-damned Sun people are what happened!" he says, in perfect Brigan. "I went out to greet the ships and no sooner than I say hello than someone stuck a spear in me gut." He leans over to cough, and I wait until his hacking and spitting is through.

"How did you get away?" I ask.

At that, Taruhra starts to cackle. "Why, I took his head off with the blade I had behind me back! I never did trust those Sun people. I turned around and ran back to the huts, shouting for everyone else to run. Damn fool warriors of mine don't ever listen to me! Too brave and noble for their own good. The Sun people came off of their ships and started killing everyone in sight. They didn't even pretend to want something; just tried to kill as many people as they could. The whole time, the priests are running around, telling us that they're doing it for our 'immortal souls.' My warriors put up a brave fight—damn fools!—but there was just too many of them." He starts hacking again as he says, "Just too damn many ..."

"Just rest easy, there, old guy. You leave it to me."

"Bend down a little, will you, old man? Eh? You've changed. Who is this young man that speaks for Eli Brigan, last of the true Brigans?" he coughs again, while struggling to see me clearly.

“It’s me, all right,” I reply in the native tongue. “I have come to Tehama Nehama on the feet of the devils. I will cast them out in your name and in the name of my father and the fathers before me. This I swear to you,” I say, grabbing his weakened hand.

“Suwena deputa!” he says, the first words he has ever said to me that weren’t in Brigan. It means “Touched by the Gods.”

“Yes, old friend. Suwena deputa, indeed. I have been touched by the gods on Suwena ah Toru.”

“Ah, what a story that must be! You climbed it, didn’t you? I wish I had the time left to hear it. But my wives tell me that I’m gonna be heading for Suwena ah Nehama before the hour is over. It is so good to hear your voice again before I see the Gods’ Place. So good—” And then he begins to cough again, the blood on his chest bubbling with each breath. He obviously has a pierced lung as well as stomach.

“Ah, it looks like they got you more than once. I thought you took the bloke’s head off?” I ask him. I don’t know what else to say to this man, who has been so nice to me. He has been the only person in the world who has known my secret and who also hasn’t cared in the slightest if I am a prince or a fisherman.

“Well, you know,” he says laughing and coughing, “he did have a friend or two.”

“Taruhra,” I say, bending all the way down to talk closely with him, “What can I do for you? What do you need in this last moment?” This is a tradition of the island, for a man’s closest friends to grant him a dying request. I don’t think I counted as closest friend, but I am going to still honor this custom, to a man I so respect.

“I said goodbye to the wives, already. You missed a hell of a party,” he says, laughing.

I squeeze his hand and laugh myself. I doubt that even Taruhra could have done anything like he is suggesting, at his age and in his state, but I respect him all the more for saying it. To the very end, Taruhra is full of life.

“You know what I need from you, Suwena deputa. The gods have touched you. Embrace who you are and what you’ve become and make the most of your second chance on life. And kill some Sun people in my name.” And with that, he draws in a last, shuttering gasp and then quickly exhales. As he exhales, his eyes close and the rest of his life starts to leave him along with the air in his damaged lungs. A smile curls up on his face and he says, so softly that I am sure only I can hear him, among all the many people gathered around him, “Suwena ah Toru...” Fist of the Gods.

A mighty wail goes up, as the people’s chief gives up the ghost. Taruhra is dead.

Chapter Fourteen

Taruhra is buried in the grand tradition of all chiefs of Treyfeish: he is thrown into a molten lake of lava. Only his wives are there for the short ceremony; they carry him to the lake of fire, just a short distance up through another side tunnel, and then return.

I can't help but cry when I see only the four women come back alone. Antanu does not return from the lake of fire. She threw herself in as well, at the last moment, in spite of the other four wives trying to stop her. It seems that she couldn't bear to go on without her brave warrior. I figured that something like this might happen.

Meanwhile, I take stock of the situation. For once in my life, it seems, I have made it in time. I was too late to warn the people in the first place, but I am just in time to say farewell to Taruhra. Hopefully, I am in time to save the rest of the islanders.

I address the remaining wives when they regain some of their composure. They are now in charge with Taruhra gone—Taruhra would have argued that they had always been in charge—and they are the people who will be making the decisions that have to be made, about what to do with the Brigans.

It seems that there are more islanders than just the few that are here in the caverns. There are about twenty men or so that the Sun Priests are holding in the holds of the three ships. These men are to be taken back and sold as slaves, or else used later for human sacrifices back at the main temple. Fortunately, they didn't get very many of the women. Most of the women immediately fled for the caverns as soon as the fighting started. It was only the "damned fool warriors," to use Taruhra's words, who stayed behind to fight and die or be captured. However, in their defense, they did buy time for the women and children to get to safety.

The four wives take me aside from the rest and one of them asks me, "What are you going to do now? We cannot survive as a people without our men. Maybe two, maybe three of the men here will survive and they are all old. Taruhra seemed to put a lot of trust into one such as you who is so young. Why did he call you Suwena deputa?"

"Do you not remember me?" I ask them, "Antanu and Taruhra did. I am the husband of Aduriaru, who you showed the old ways one summer. My son and I hunted with your sons and with your people. I am Ee-rai," I say, changing my name and Adrial's to the local pronunciation.

They gasp at that reminder and I hear them whispering "Suwena deputa" back and forth to each other. I am reluctant to further the myth that Taruhra started by calling me "Touched by the Gods" and "Fist of the Gods," but it is a lot easier to explain to them than the truth. If a "civilized" and somewhat modern-thinking man such as Remen couldn't grasp it, I knew it will be useless to try to persuade these superstitious women about the truth. Right now, it is better for everyone if they think of me as something a little beyond ordinary.

"Right," I go on, "you just leave the ships to me. There's no need for any of you women to place yourself in any more danger by trying to help me return the men."

Of course they protest, but I play up the trust that the former chief placed in me and I remind them of the death-oath I made to Taruhra to avenge him. This finally holds more sway than any other thing; they had all heard me swear this and they heard his last request that it be so. No matter how much they want to help me, they realize that this is something that I have to do by myself. Also, of course, they think that the Gods are on my side and that is the end of a short argument. I do request that they draw me up a map of the island, so that I won't get lost trying to find my way to the ships. My internal compass might tell me which direction north is, but it won't tell me where the beach is from here and how to get to it.

Looking at the map they draw me, I see that the three ships are at the south end of the island, with some jungle between the mountains and the beach. The Brigan soldiers more than likely have a few troops stationed in the jungle, and more encamped along the beach. The four wives estimate that there are at least two hundred men in total that have come on the three ships. Of those, maybe forty are priests; the rest are soldiers.

Soon I am told that night has fallen on the outside and I venture up to the entrance. The women that come to see me off are suitably impressed when I roll the boulder back by myself. I hear more gasps of "Suwena deputa" and the like and I wave goodbye to them and take off, pausing only to help the women re-cover the entrance with the stone.

Now it is time to fulfill my death-oath and "hunt some Sun people."

The jungle is an interesting place at night. It used to scare me, but that is only because before I couldn't see in the dark and every sound that I heard in the night surely had to be a big cat or some other fearsome creature. The only creatures that I am afraid of tonight walk on two legs, and I am the meanest son of a bitch of that kind. I allow myself to rekindle the anger that had somewhat been allowed to simmer down. Now, I am over grieving for a while and only think about revenge. However, my primary target will be to free the captured prisoners. After that, I can allow myself the luxury of cold blood.

I walk through the jungle a ways until I start to hear voices. I can hear them from quite far off in the still night air. The animals of the jungle are quiet tonight, with the presence of so many men in it. I follow the voices until they become clearly audible and I can make out what they are saying:

"Hey, Sarge! You got any more of that coconut stuff?"

"You know Corvan doesn't want us drinking. That's why we didn't bring nothing with us. Don't be stupid and drink where any of the officers can see you!"

There is more of this type of inane conversation for a while, as I get closer to the group of men. Finally, I hear something of interest:

"You should have seen his expression! He comes up to the captain and tries to say hello, and the captain ups and sticks 'em like a pig! Then the bloody savage whips out this long-ass machete he is hiding and whacks the captain's head right off! Big as you please! You know what Corvan told us, 'Kill as many as you can first, control the situation, and later, let the Sun God sort it all out.' Well, he didn't mention that the banana-heads would fight back!"

Then another voice chimes in, "Not much of a fight, if you ask me. It was like poking fish in a barrel, ya' know?"

The first voice snorts and says, "How many of them brown fish did you poke, eh? And how many of them brown babes with the short spear, eh?"

They all start laughing at that last remark and my blood begins to boil. I carefully creep up closer to the sounds of the voices until I can tell that they are very near. Then, suddenly, I am upon them.

From the safety of the cloaking jungle, I look out at a campfire. Clustered around the campfire are six soldiers, trying somewhat unsuccessfully to cook something over the makeshift fire-pit. Just beyond the campfire, through the trees a ways, lies the open beach and across that lie the three ships. I jump up two times my own height onto an outstretched branch of a tree and perch there like a cat, watching my prey. I carefully sniff the air and my heightened sense of smell brings back to me the scent of the pig that they are trying to roast. They're burning it on one side. I close my eyes for a moment and feel around with my electric sense. There and there,

I pinpoint the locations of all of the men. There is another man asleep under a far tree; he is probably supposed to be the roaming sentry. He will be my first target.

I jump down from the tree and accidentally land on a patch of dry twigs. A crackling rustle breaks through the night. Damn! So much for being the stealthy jungle cat! The men around the fire stop their talking for a moment and look around. Thinking quickly, I make a low grunting sound that sounds just like the pig that they are roasting. I hunted the wild boar on this very same island before and I know the sound intimately. Hearing the grunting of the pig, they relax and start laughing to each other; I see one of them hit the other on the back of the head with his fist, as if to chide him for being scared. That was close.

Being more careful to look where I step, I circle around the camp to the still-sleeping sentry. I carefully stand over him and look down at his sleeping body. I lean forward to throttle him with my bare hands and then I pull back.

I can't do it. I can't kill a man in cold blood, in his sleep, no matter how I detest the very sight of him. I think about my blood promise to Taruhra and I lean forward again. Hesitation stops me again. Damn! I just can't kill a sleeping man!

I think about it for a bit, swaying back and forth between wanting to kill him and just not having the guts for it. I curse silently to myself and at myself and then step back away from him. I ponder for a moment.

Finally, I decide on a course of action. I quickly swoop forward toward the sleeping man, and like a spirit of the night, I grab him and fling him over my shoulder. I put one hand over his mouth to stifle any screams and run off a short ways with him into the jungle. He immediately starts to struggle, but it is no use. I could hold him in my steel-like grip forever; he is powerless against me. I quickly strip off the shirt he is wearing and stuff one end of it into his mouth. I rip off his pants and tear them into strips with my teeth and one arm, while holding him immovably with the other arm. His eyes start to roll around in his head and he is kicking out frantically. I smell something. Sure enough, he has soiled himself. I can't help but chuckle and whisper to him, "You picked the wrong army to join there, fella, and the wrong island to rape and pillage. This island is mine and its people are under my protection."

I quickly tie him up with his own pants and leave him hanging in a tree. I found that I couldn't strangle him in his sleep, but there is one thing that I can do that is even eviler: I can leave him for the jungle-cat. I can tell that one hunts in the area, because the stench of its urea marks this place. There are also claw marks on many trees nearby where the animal sharpens its claws, and judging by their height up the tree, the cat is a big one. I repeatedly make the sound of a wounded pig, the sound it makes when it's caught in a trap or cornered by a large animal. My mimicry must be about perfect, because in the distance I can smell the cat getting closer. It is on its way.

The sentry's eyes bug out and he starts twisting and turning, throwing himself back and forth and swinging around in circles from the pants that suspend him from the tree branch. His hands are tied to his feet and the whole lot hangs from a branch. I know he won't be able to free himself; those pants are made of hemp and it is one of the strongest fibers around. I walk up to the hanging man and pull his gag out a little ways. I want him to be heard by his buddies back at the camp. I can't resist a parting taunt before I leave him: "Say hello to the cat, when it gets here. And don't forget to scream. Sometimes it scares the big cats. But then, sometimes it just gets them real excited. I'll let you decide which to do."

I circle back to the camp and jump back up into the tree branch I was in earlier. The men are still laughing and joking to each other about the day's activities. They haven't noticed the

disappearance of their sleeping buddy yet. I can hear the growls and spits of the cat, when it finds the defenseless hanging man. Soon, its growls are loud enough for the laughing men to hear.

“What’s that?” one of them asks.

“That, my friend, is one of the many reasons we have a fire going. It’s one of the big cats. They won’t bother us; they hate fire and they’re cowards,” remarks one ‘jungle-savvy’ soldier.

“Are you sure?” asks another of them, in a frightened voice.

“Positive. Every wild animal is afraid of fire. Everyone knows that,” the one soldier says smugly.

“Where’s Dunhart?”

“Dunhart? Last I looked, he was asleep over there. If the captain finds him sleeping, he’s liable to lose his head!”

“Oh, that’s funny! Lose his head! It’s too late for that!” The soldiers all start laughing and I hear someone imitating the whooshing sound of a machete—Dunhart and the cat forgotten for the moment.

Suddenly a piecing scream breaks the night. It looks like ol’ Dunhart must have finally gotten his gag worked loose.

“That’s no cat! That sounded like a man. Go wake up Dunhart!” commands one of the soldiers.

One soldier gets up and then another piercing shriek rends the night air, closely followed by the growl of the big cat. I sit on my perch, intently watching the soldiers as they scramble around and I wait for them to start to panic.

The one soldier yells back, “Dunhart’s not here! All his stuff’s here, but there’s no sign of him!”

“The fool must have gone out for a leak or a walk or something. I think the cat’s going to get him!”

The other soldiers, instead of being scared for Dunhart, start making wagers on whether he will be back. I sit there disgusted with the whole affair. What kind of men are these soldiers, that don’t care for the fate of a companion-in-arms?

Soon, I can tell that the cat hasn’t killed Dunhart yet, for some reason. Dunhart starts screaming as loud as he can for help, while the men around the fire just start laughing more and more. From the sounds of it, the cat is playing with its prey, as cats will do. Dunhart starts screaming in pain now, rather than fright alone. The whole spitting, snarling, screaming, awful affair lasts about five minutes, until the cat gives a mighty cough and then finishes its prey. The night grows quiet, except for the giggling of the soldiers and the sounds that only I can hear: the cat feeding on its kill.

“Well, it looks like I win,” says the man who considered himself jungle-smart.

“Dunhart’s things are mine!”

“Like hell they are! I out-rank you by one stripe and I say they’re mine. If the fool doesn’t know better than to piss next to camp, then he deserved to die,” says another.

The two soldiers start arguing over the rights to Dunhart’s things. Their bickering disgusts me. Where is the honor and camaraderie that I remember from the King’s Brigade as a child? Where are the professional soldiers, instead of these craven mercenaries?

I briefly consider just walking up to them and taking out the six of them. I am losing a lot of my compunctions towards killing, the more I watch these men. However, common sense

rules in the end. My first obligation is to free the island men. Killing random soldiers isn't part of the plan. Yet.

I climb up further to the top of the tree I have been perched in. Right across the campfire lies another tall tree. It is about three or four lengths away. I am feeling very belligerent and a little heady on the power I feel over this men; they have no idea that their lives lie in my hand and that I just decided to spare them. They aimlessly chat on, now with a bottle of what I recognize as chillah, taken from some of the pillaged islander's belongings. I crouch down low on the branch and then spring across through the air to the tree on the other side. Two of the six men notice me.

"What in the third frozen hell is that?" gasps one of the men, spewing out the chillah he just tipped back.

"I saw it too! It looked like a giant pink cat!"

I can't help but laugh from the branch of the other tree. It is far too dark and I am too high up for them to be able to see me now.

"I heard a laugh! By the gods!" says the first man.

Mr. Jungle-smarts quickly takes out a knife and holds it up to the first man's throat. With a steely tone to his voice, he says, "First you mentioned 'the third frozen hell' and now you're swearing by the old gods. Would you like me to take your life here and now quickly, or would you like to say those things where a priest can hear you? I'm sure they would love to make an example of you to He Who is Not Named."

"Yes sir. . ." the man stammers out. "I'm sorry, I guess I just lost my head—"

"Well, you're going to lose your neck as well if you do that again! Now, shut up about flying things! I didn't see nothing, and neither did anyone else. That coconut juice you're swilling will make you see anything. Let's all just shut up and go to sleep."

Everyone nods at this, including Mr. One-More-Stripe-Than-You. He tries to take charge, ordering people around, but they are already doing what they wanted to do anyway. He orders Mr. Frozen-Hell to stand first watch and everyone settles down to sleep.

I turn around and leap down from the high tree, leaving the men to sleep.

I carefully make my way out to the perimeter of the jungle that borders the beach. Here on the beach are several small groups of men, many of who are sleeping or quietly talking around several small fires. I notice that their weapons are all piled up next to the fires, where they can keep an eye on them. I curse myself for not taking Dunhart's weapon when I had the chance. There had been a spear and a short sword in his belongings, but my hands had been full with trying to keep him under control and I didn't think to take one of his weapons. No matter.

Like a ghost in the night, I navigate through the sandy beach, carefully staying out of the small pools of light thrown out by the campfires. They are spaced far enough apart that I can hide in the shadows. Tonight, only Haedus, the smaller moon, is out and it doesn't put out very much light. Only once do I see a roving sentry and I drop to the sand as he walks by. He is staggering and smells like an over-ripe coconut, obviously intoxicated. I doubt that he would see me even if he tripped over me. The discipline of this army is poor to say the least.

It is strange to be able to see the entire beach as if it is broad daylight but for the men to not be able to see me. Several times, someone happens to look right at where I am walking, only to turn away, noticing nothing. Such a little thing, this night vision, but what a big difference it makes. I will never be afraid of the dark again.

Finally, I make it all the way to the water's edge. To get to the three ships, I will have to either steal one of the shore-boats or swim. I have no problem with swimming, and I am a little

afraid that both stealing a boat and the noise from rowing it will attract attention. Instead of using them, I decide to sabotage the boats. It is as easy as thinking itself to sneak up to the boats beached onto the sand. I can sense only one person guarding the boats. Well, “guarding” is a relative term. Indicative of so much else I have seen of this army's discipline, he is snoring away in the bottom of one of the boats, and also covered in a sandy layer of his own vomit. Obviously there was a party to celebrate the taking of Treyfeish and he over-imbibed, as does the average soldier.

I pick the man up out of the bottom of the boat and toss him onto the sand. He never even wakes up—so stone cold drunk is he—and I am careful to keep his rather putrid vomit off of me. At the bottom of the boat, I take out the bilge-plug and look at the opening that remains. I will have to do more than just remove the plug; a piece of cloth can be jammed into there in an emergency. Hell, I have done that myself on more than one occasion. The hole is big enough for me to get one hand into it; I grab ahold of the edge of the hole and very slowly pull one of the boards towards me. The wood is soaked enough in pitch to be fairly bendable, and it doesn't make very much noise. I am also far enough from any of the sleeping men that I am fairly confident that they won't hear it. The board bends towards me, leaving a trail of sticky pitch on both sides of the board. I bend it as far as it will go without snapping and then do the same to a board going the other way. This boat won't be going anywhere.

Quickly I do the same to the other five boats, two boats from each of the three ships. On the fourth boat, when I pull back the first board, it makes a very loud creaking noise, and I freeze, waiting to see if someone will come to investigate. A few tense moments pass and no one seems to stir. I finish with the last board and then quickly do the remaining two boats. Now, no one from the beach will be able to get back to the bigger ships without swimming. Also, they will not be able to wear armor while doing it.

The sabotage of the landing-boats completed, I walk out into the sea. In spite of the seriousness of my task ahead, I enjoy the gentle squish! squish! that my bare feet make in the wet sand. Soon I am in deep enough water to float and I swim out to the closest of the big ships with just a few powerful strokes. I still haven't tested out my little theory that I might be able to breath underwater. I don't want to risk coming up choking and gasping, alerting everyone still in the ships. Anyway, I don't even need to immerse my head under the water. Have I mentioned that I don't like to get my hair wet?

I concentrate briefly on the ship in front of me, trying to feel out where all of the people are located. I can sense a concentration of about eight people in the bottom of the ship and about twelve more scattered around various places on the ship. I figure the eight at the bottom will be some of the island men that I am looking for. I can sense the big metal anchor just off the port bow. I swim over to it and then, grabbing ahold of the hemp rope attached to it and leading up to the deck of the ship, I climb up, hand-over-hand, until it goes into a small port on the side of the ship. The port is big enough for me to get one foot into it but not any more of my body. I stand there on the one foot stuck into the port and look up; it is about three lengths further to the railing of the ship. Just beyond the railing, I can hear three people walking around on the top deck.

I stand there for a moment while I wait for the sounds of the three men walking around to go further away. Instead, one of them gets closer and closer to the railing. Silhouetted against the half-full Haedus moon, the man leans over the railing and proceeds to regurgitate everything he has eaten that day. His spew goes all over me, as I am directly beneath him. I am shocked and disgusted, but I try not to move. I don't know if he is drunk or just seasick. From the smell

of his puke covering me, I would have to unfortunately guess that he is only seasick, instead of drunk like the men on the beach.

He wipes his mouth off on the back of his hand and then he notices me. He gives a strangled yelp in surprise and then carefully squints to see if I am real. I am careful not to move, hoping he will think that he has imagined me, but he quickly comes to the only logical conclusion he can: I am real and definitely an intruder. He starts yelling his head off and the entire ship comes awake at once.

Chapter Fifteen

As soon as the man starts screaming, I literally leap into action. Bending down low, I spring off my left leg stuck in the anchor port and jump up high enough to grab the railing. I feel a burst of blood-strength hit me and the world starts to slow down. I know that this means that I am now moving in high-speed. Instead of clambering up and climbing over the railing, I give a giant yank on the edge of the railing and use it to pull myself up through the air, clearing the top and sailing right over the head of the man. As I pass over him, I kick the back of his head, sending him tumbling over the railing and into the sea. By the time I land on the deck and catch my balance, he is just hitting the water.

All of this has only taken a few seconds. His two pals are just now running over to help him. In this slow-motion mode, I have all the time in the world to appraise the situation. I am on the main deck of a mid-sized schooner. I have come up the port side, near the stern, and there is no one else on deck. I am sure that more men will come running up from the holds of the ship any second now, alerted by the man's screaming; I can hear him floundering around and splashing in the sea below. I hope that he can't swim, but it is a piss-poor sailor that doesn't know how. The two men in front of me are both armed: one has a belaying pin that he just picked up from a pile of them and the other has a short sword. It is the man with the sword that I worry about first.

The belaying pin man yells to his companion, "Get'em!"

The man with the sword ignores him and says to me, "Who are you, that you come on the ship of the Sun Church?" while carefully circling around me, to put me between him and his friend.

I realize what he is doing but I don't care. I stand before him—what I hope is a safe distance from his sword—and confidently putting my hands on my hips, I say, "I am Eli Brigan, I've been puked on, and I'm pissed off. I am the Fist of Retribution, here to smash you off this island and back to Brigan." It is a silly little speech, to be sure, but I have always been a sucker for dramatics.

The swordsman just laughs and makes a sudden move at me with his blade. I ignore his feint and don't so much as flinch, recognizing it for what it is. I practiced with the sword for years as a lad, and I know when a man is committed to a strike and when he is feinting. He stops laughing, realizing that my speech isn't just empty bravado and that maybe he should be a little more careful. His friend, on the other hand, takes the feint as a signal to attack.

"Yahhh!" he yells at me as he rushes in.

The problem with two-on-one, from the two's perspective, is that one person is always worried about getting in the way of the other, particularly if one person is swinging a sword or even a blunt object around. A two-on-one team is usually only effective if they have practiced with each other and know each other's styles and moves. Of course, against a lesser opponent, none of that matters, but I am a trained fighter. Granted, I am about fifty years out of practice, and I have no weapon. So, when the man with the pin rushes me, the sword guy wisely holds back, looking for a clear swipe at my back while my attention is diverted.

I take advantage of this moment of indecision. As the man with the pin rushes me, I in turn step forward and inside his guard. He is obviously an inexperienced fighter and he expected me to step back and away. It takes the barest of exertions to crunch his instep to pulp with one foot and bat away his wildly swinging arm. The pin goes flying and he hits the deck screaming and clutching his mangled foot.

He is now effectively neutralized and I turn my attention back to the swordsman. I can tell that he is obviously a much better fighter than the guy with the pin. However, even he can't help but delay a second, as he stares at his wounded friend.

"You can jump off the ship now, if you want to live," I tell him.

To his credit, he actually seems to think about it. Nevertheless, he sizes up the situation: he has a sword, I am unarmed, and reinforcements will be here any second. So, comfortable in his logic, he rushes me the same way that the other guy did before.

This time, I know there will be no easy step-in and dispatch. I wait until he swings his sword at me in several horizontal, quick strokes, designed to keep me away from him and force me back, presumably to the railing. There he will have a decided advantage. This is a pretty sound tactic overall, and Gingrich, my old weapons master, would have approved. But not even Gingrich could have anticipated my speed. As soon as one stroke goes close by me, I slap the non-sharpened back end of it with an open palm, adding my own considerable strength to the force it already has. The man in front of me is spun around by his sword, which he stubbornly holds onto. My unorthodox move surprises him greatly, as it should have. It surprised me.

"Last chance," I playfully warn him. He just grunts and quickly regains his composure. Meanwhile, the crushed-ankle-man has started yelling even louder, fit to wake up the dead. I'm not worried about him alerting the rest of the ship—that has already been done—but I am worried about his yells being loud enough to carry over to the other two ships.

"Yahhh!" roars the sword man, just as the first one had, in an effort to bolster up his now-waning courage. This time he comes at me with a fierce over-arm swing, intending to cut me down where I stand. I watch the sword come at me, right on target. As I stare at it, it seems to slow down even further, until it seems to be moving in clear gravy. I wait until it gets within a finger's breadth of my forehead and then I calmly step aside, letting the sword sweep past me. Now facing the handle, I reach out and pluck it right out of the hands of the man wielding it. He lurches forward with his momentum still unchecked and I quickly flip the sword around and knock him over the back of the head with the butt-end of the handle. He goes down flopping like a sack of worms.

With the sword in my hands, I go over to the still-screaming man. Pathetically, he tries to crawl away, but I sweep in like an angel of death and crack him upside the head. Okay, maybe more like the "angel of unconsciousness." I have yet to directly kill anyone; he goes out like a candle pissed-on, finally stopping his incessant blubbing.

I still have a few seconds of reprieve left before those down below come up. The entire sortie has lasted less than a minute. I run over to the railing to see how my Mr. Puke is doing. I haven't heard anything from him these last few seconds. He is nowhere to be seen. I guess he was a sailor that couldn't swim, and also a stupid sailor, because he could have grabbed onto the anchor rope that I crawled up. But then I figure, since he was seasick in the first place, he mustn't have been a sailor, anyway. He must have been a priest, without his black robes that they always wear. Maybe he was getting ready for bed, took off his robes, and then felt seasick. Well, if he was a priest, I feel a lot better about his drowning death.

I can now sense someone almost at the very top of the stairs leading up out of the first hold and onto the deck. I run over to the door and jump atop the poop deck that comes out right above the exit and watch whoever it is come out. I am in luck. This is a bona-fide priest, complete with swanky black robes and all. Behind him are three men with longswords, though. My face turns down a bit at that.

I do some quick math: three guys on deck, four here; that leaves five more down below somewhere. I hoped that everyone would come up at once, but I am not to get my wish granted. As soon as the last of the soldiers comes out of the hold stairway, I jump down from the poop deck above them and land right behind them. They are taken completely by surprise. I give them a quick boot in the rear that sends them sprawling and then dash down the stairs. To my relief, there is a door about halfway down that I can shut behind me, probably designed to keep rainwater out of the hold. I quickly shut the door and squeeze the metal of the latch in my hands like it is clay. This door won't be opened now without an axe.

I turn around and come face-to-face with a soldier. I don't know who is more surprised, him, or me; I didn't sense or hear him behind me at all, but then I wasn't paying attention directly behind me at the time, being distracted with the lock of the door. He must have been on his way up with the rest and then went back down to get the sword he now carries. This he immediately stabs in my direction, the narrow hallway preventing him from swinging it. I turn around right as it is coming at me and I must say that I freeze in surprise for a second, lightning reflexes regardless. He catches me right in the side with it before I can react, which I do by slamming the palm of my hand into the bridge of his nose. I hear a crunch! and the man goes down, with splinters of his nose bone impacting back into his brain. He dies almost instantly, but not before twitching spasmodically in the midst of macabre death-throes.

I have killed my first man by my own hand. I can't help my next reaction: I lean over and vomit. There is nothing in my stomach of course, and all I can do is dry heave for a while. I do have the presence of mind to do a quick mental sweep ahead of me, so that I won't be suddenly surprised again. There is no one coming.

Soon, I hear a pounding and knocking on the door behind me. The yelling of the men tells me when they find the two unconscious guards I left. I quickly take off the dead man's shirt and use it to wipe off the vomit that is still on me from the earlier man. I am bleeding from a shallow cut to my stomach, from where I was surprised. I inspect the wound carefully but it is already closing up. I feel no pain from it and wipe off the little bit of blood that starts to come out from the shallow cut.

Thus somewhat cleaned up, I go down into the stairway until I come to another locked door. Damn! Whoever is inside must have locked it after the man I killed went out. Thinking quickly, I remember the voice of the swordsman that I fought up on deck. "It's me!" I yell, using his voice, "The natives are storming the ship! Open up and let me in!"

I am somewhat pleased with myself with this little charade, but I didn't count on the cowardice of those inside. I guess if they were brave men, they would have come out in the first place instead of sending the other men up to see what was wrong.

"Piss off!" someone shouts from the inside. "If we let you in, the natives will get to us, too!"

I give an exasperated sigh. It looks like I am going to have to do this the hard way. I can sense where the metal lock of the door is and in one smooth motion, I put my fist through the wood of the door and flick open the lock from the other side. Quickly pulling my hand back through the small hole I have left in the seasoned wood, I kick open the door.

There in the dimly lit hold of the ship, inside a locked cage of some kind that looks as if it can comfortably hold three men, are sandwiched eight of the native warriors. A couple are injured, but most look somewhat okay. Surrounding them are three men in the black robes of the Sun priest order and two men in burnished metal chest-plates that signify some high rank in the

military. All five men look extremely scared. If they believed my story about the natives storming the ship, then they have plenty to be afraid for.

"You're not Distan!" one of the officers shouts at me.

"No, I'm not," I calmly reply. "I am the Fist of Doom and you shall all die." That damn flair for the dramatic, again.

One of the temple priests reaches into his robes and pulls out a wicked-looking knife. He reaches through the bars and grabs one of the injured islanders around the neck and puts the knife up under his chin. "Come any closer and I'll slice this savage's throat!" he warns me.

I stop, for a moment somewhat nonplussed. I notice that the cowardly priest has his back within reach of one of the other caged islanders and say to him in his own language, "The idiot thinks that just because you're caged, you're harmless. You know what to do."

"What's that?" is all the priest has time for, before the islander reaches out and strikes him on the back of his head with a balled-up hand that looks like it can knock open coconuts. The stunned priest slumps to his knees, but not before the man he was holding grabs the knife out of his hands and sticks it into the priest's chest. The priest gives out a gurgle and falls face forward.

"Now this can go two ways: hard or easy. What's it gonna be?" I ask the remaining four. Not to my surprise, they choose the hard way.

With a quick shink! shink! shink!, they all pull out swords, knives, and blades of various lengths and types. I smile in glee and rush them before they even move forward. I still have the blade I took off of the swordsman and I swirl it around me in a glittering scintillation that is too fast for the eye to follow. Reservations behind me, and faced with certain death if I waver, I mow through the four men like they are butter. My sword doesn't so much as touch their weapons, so fast am I.

The two officers I take out first, as they are the closest to me and probably have the most weapon training. I am careful to prevent any of the others from getting too close to the caged islanders. The first officer gets his hamstrings sliced open with two quick strokes of my blade and he falls like a puppet with its strings cut. The second officer I kick brutally in the genitals and then open up his forehead with a quick slashing cut. A forehead injury bleeds like no other, and he is temporarily blinded and falls to the deck, clutching his crushed manhood. That leaves the two priests.

The first of the priests has a long, wavy shortsword, with a blood-groove etched down the length of it. His death sentence is sealed when I notice that he hasn't even bothered to clean it after using it on whomever he sacrificed to his Sun God. He laughs wickedly and swings it in my direction. I simply duck under it and stick my borrowed sword into his midsection. I don't even bother to remove it and swing around to the last priest. He has an expression of total disbelief on his face that quickly switches to stark raving terror. I take no pleasure from his fear, however. Moving as fast as thought can take me, I pick him up with one hand around his throat and throw him across the room as if he is a rag-doll. He hits the far hull and bounces off of it onto the floor. He doesn't get up.

I step over the moaning two officers and go to the cage. The men inside are looking at me with fear in their eyes as well. "Don't worry. Taruhra sent me on his death-oath to free you," I inform them calmly.

"The chief is dead?" asks one of them.

"I'm afraid so. He died the way he wanted to live: in his wives' arms and surrounded by his friends. He had a smile on his face to the end."

One of the men still has the wherewithal to joke, “If he was surrounded by his wives, then he didn’t go the way he wanted to.”

I laugh at that and examine the cage that they are in, the ship’s brig. It is made entirely of thick iron bars that I don’t think even I can break. You never know until you try, so I strain mightily at them for a bit. They bend slightly but refuse to give. I know that one of the men on the floor has to have the key, but I don’t feel like searching through their bodies. The lock seems simple enough, however. I reach down and pick up one of the swords that the officers dropped and flip it around until the handle is out. Holding it above my head, I quickly warn the men inside, “You better look out. I’m busting you out of this rat-cage.” With a clean, focused burst of strength, I bring the butt-end of the handle down on the lock. With a crack!, the latch breaks off and the door swings open.

The men inside swarm out. They pick up the weapons laying around and then proceed to finish off the rest of their still-living captors. I don’t try to stop them; they have reason enough for what they do. I do make a point of not watching this brief frenzy of revenge. “When you’re done there, we still have your brothers to rescue in the other two ships,” I say.

Soon enough, the grisly task is finished and the eight men stand before me. “Who are you, that you move like the lightning and speak our tongue?” one of them asks me.

I think for a brief second about what to tell them. “I am an old friend of Taruhra. My name is Ee-rai Burigan,” I say, with the local pronunciation. “But Taruhra has renamed me Suvena ah Toru, the Fist of the Gods. I was touched by them and now I have returned to free your people.”

Again, guilty as charged, with drama galore. However, it has the desired effect: these men are now willing to follow me wherever I will lead them. Which at the moment, is to the other two ships to get the rest of the men. Only now, I have lost the element of surprise.

Chapter Sixteen

“Okay, I have a plan,” I tell the waiting island warriors. “We need to get off this ship, past the four men on deck, and over to the next ship to free your brothers. I have a plan that will do all of that.”

“Well, let’s hear it. We’ll follow your lead, Suwena ah Toru,” one of the men says, and then falls to his knees. The other seven quickly follow his example and do the same.

Oh no. “Let’s have none of that bowing crap!” I admonish them. “And please call me ‘Ee-rai.’ Come on, get up!” I yell, when they ignore me at first.

“Whatever you say—Ee-rai,” the men say, as they get off of their knees.

If people aren’t bowing to me because I am a bleeding prince, they are bowing and scraping for some other superstitious reasons. I’ve never liked all that attention. “That’s better. All right, here’s what we’re gonna do: I’m going to open up the bottom of this little boat and let all the nice, clean sea-water wash this dung-hill out. That will take care of the men up top, destroy the ship, and give us a way out of here. I’m assuming that all of you can swim, right?” Well, what I really say is a little more broken than that, but I am a little rusty speaking Treyfeish. They get the general idea, anyway.

“Of course. Who lives on an island and can’t swim?” one of them replies.

“Well, who-in-the-fifth-wet-hell lives on a boat and can’t swim? That’s my question, too,” I say in Brigan. At their blank stares, I say, “Never mind. Anyway, when I open the timbers, wait until the water is the same on both sides, and then swim through the hole. We’re going to meet on deck at the next ship over. It’s about a ten-minute swim over to there; do you think all of you can make it?”

“We’ll make it. None of us are so injured that we can’t swim. It might take a couple of us a little longer than ten minutes, though,” says one man whose right leg has been sliced open all the way to the bone and crudely wrapped with someone’s shirt for a bandage.

“Take your time, all of you. I plan on doing most of the work, anyway—no offense. And bring whatever weapons you can and still swim with.” I think for a moment and then say, “On second thought, those of you that are injured can do something for me even better. Go back to the caverns and let the women know that their men are coming home. It’s not worth risking your lives while your women are thinking that you’re all dead.”

As I expect, they protest at this, but I tell them I will kick their butts back there myself and leave the rest of their friends, if I have to. Of course, I wouldn’t do that, but they don’t need to know that.

So, without anything further in the way of plans, I turn to the wall—make that, “hull.” I have no idea what I will do when I get to the other ship, but at least this time I will have five well-armed warriors with me. Hopefully, there aren’t as many soldiers on the other ship as there were on this ship. But of course, there could always be more. I warn the men that I am going to start and I set my hand on the wooden hull. I probably could have used a sword or something to pry off a board, but I’m starting to get to like putting my fist through boards. I lean hard on the board and feel it start to buckle out. Water starts seeping in through the cracks, a little at a time. I reach over to grab onto the iron cage for leverage with one hand, and then quickly push with all of my might on the other. The pitched-soaked board snaps like dry timber and water starts flooding in. Hurriedly, I grab another board and then another, ripping them back towards me this time until there is a good-sized breach. It takes only a couple of minutes for the water to reach knee level, and then we are all floating in it. I nod to the group and say, “See you on the other side.”

With that, I take a deep breath and fling myself into the torrent of water coming in. The water gushing in is probably a little stronger than the warriors will be able to take; I will get a little head start on them while they wait for the hold to fill up and equalize some of the pressure.

I kick for the surface as fast as I can and then surface, turning back to the ship. When I pop up, I can see that the ship is already listing slightly to one side, and I can see the four men on deck running around with anxious expressions on their faces. They will have to swim for shore, if they can. I wonder briefly about the swordsman I left lying on the deck unconscious. He'll wake up soon enough when the water hits him. The man with the crushed ankle will have a hard time swimming. Pity that; I could almost cry.

I dive back under water and head for the next ship. I am still too nervous to try breathing under water, but I can hold my breath easily for the five minutes it takes me to swim to the next ship. I told the warriors that it was a ten-minute swim, but I make it in half that time.

The next ship seems to be quiet. They must have heard none of the commotion that I caused on the first ship. They are going to notice the ship foundering in a couple of minutes, though. I decide to try to get in this ship the same way I did in the last ship; only this time, hopefully, there isn't going to be anyone puking over the side. Doing a quick scan of the ship, I count six in the hold, two more with the distinct metal signature I learned means breastplates and then another four roaming around on top deck.

I locate the anchor and quickly climb up it to an identical anchor port. This time when I wait for the walking-around men to get further away, it works. There is a brief period of about ten seconds when no one is on the aft (back) side of the deck. I jump up to the railing and swing myself in.

This ship is a little smaller than the last one. The four men I sensed walking around are on the front side of the ship, now clustered at the railing, pointing and talking. It takes me a moment to figure out what they must be looking at. Of course! They are watching the other ship, now badly listing over to one side. I hurriedly grab a section of the ever-present rope that is always underfoot on a big ship and leave a bit over the railing for my men. Speaking of which, I figure I have about five more minutes before the first of them gets here. I run silently and quickly to the stairway down to the hold and creep in. This stairway has a door right at the top of the stairs and it is wide open. I quickly close it and squish the lock as I did the other one.

I run down the stairs to the hold door. This time I don't bother with any subterfuge and just kick the hold door in, knocking it right off of its hinges and causing it to slam to the floor of the hold. Two priests jump up from a pile of sailcloth upon which they had been sleeping and reach into their robes for their weapons. I skip the dramatic speeches this time and just say, "Hold it right there!"

Do you think that they obey? Of course not. They instantly and predictably charge me. I run up to them and before they even knew what has happened, I grab a head of each in either hand and knock them together. Bonk! They go down, with cracked skulls and bloody faces. Woops, I didn't mean to knock them quite that hard. I'll have to add that to my list of things to cry about later.

I turn to the six warriors in the brig. "No time for question and answer. Five of your warriors will be here in about three minutes, from another ship. I freed them as I'm freeing you. Those of you who are able might give them a hand with the four on top."

One of the six men is an older man, somewhere in his fifties. He squints at me in the dim light and says, "Ee-rai? Is that you? You sound like him and you have his horrible accent, but you don't look like him."

I laugh when I recognize him. “Tehanu, you old dog! Long time, no see! Yeah, it’s me. The boys will be along to explain, soon. What do you mean, ‘horrible accent’?” I ask him, a little miffed. And all this time I thought my accent was fairly good.

“Man, you’ve changed,” he barks in disbelief.

“Sorry, no time for chitchat,” I impatiently say. I pick up one of the priests’ knives and stick it into the chain that holds the door shut. I use the side of the door for leverage and then pull hard on the knife against the chain. The knife snaps in two. “Cheap knife!” I mutter, and then grab the chain in my hand and give it a sharp downward yank. This time the light chain breaks and the door opens. The men inside gasp.

“Come on!” I yell, throwing one of the men the broken knife. It still has a sharp fragment of tang sticking out of the hilt and will be better than nothing. “Get the other priests’ weapons and follow me.”

I run back through the shattered hold-doorway and up to the top of the stairs, not even slowing down as I come to the door at the top. With a crash, I am through the door, with the six men not far behind me. I look out across the deck.

Three of the warriors from the first ship are fiercely fighting the four men that I’d just left peering over the railing. They are doing fairly well for themselves; one of the soldiers is bleeding profusely from a gut wound. Just then, another warrior pops his head up over the railing, closely followed by the last one. I reach over to a stack of belaying pins and start flipping them at the four soldiers. I bop two of them on the head—missing the other two completely, I might add—distracting them at a crucial time to be run through by the warriors. The last two take one look at the six men coming up the stairs behind me and the five warriors in front of them and run like scared rabbits for the railing. They jump over the railing into the sea and start frantically swimming away.

“Well, at least someone around here knows how to swim,” I wryly remark.

What follows is a somewhat tearful reunion between the two groups of men, in a jibber-jabber of quick Treyfeish that I can only barely understand. As soon as the first group explains who I am to the second group, there is once again the stupid bowing and scraping of before.

“Get up, already!” I shout. “You guys know better than that,” I say, giving a scathing glance to the members of the first group. Somewhat abashed, they all stand up. “That’s better! Now, we have one more ship to go. This ship,” I say gesturing around, “I want to leave intact; I’ll tell you later why. Let’s get on over to the last ship and get you boys home.”

I hear a couple of the older warriors muttering about the word “boys” that I used, but it is an old habit. Although I look physically younger than almost all of them, I still mentally feel like the old man that I am. Tehanu is the only person who says anything to me about it: “You’re not too strong that I can’t bend you over my knee, you know.”

“Oh yes, I am,” I say laughing. “But I won’t call you a boy anymore, even if I am thirty years your senior.”

He laughs also, and mutters “Suwena ah Toru.”

“I heard that,” I tell him. “You know me better than that. It’s still Ee-rai.”

He nods and we get down to the business of planning our next move. I am in favor of just rushing the next ship like we did this one, but Tehanu quickly shows me the error of that. “They’ve probably seen the first ship go down. The last ship is the flagship; it’s got at least twenty soldiers and the bulk of the priests on board. They stuck me there first, until moving me over to this ship for sacrifice,” he informs me, with a grave shake of his head.

“Sacrifice? Why you? You’re one of the oldest men here, right?” I ask him.

“That’s right. I have seen the most suns of anyone here. That’s important for some reason or other. That’s what that whale-biting priest said. You know I don’t speak very good Brigan. If it’s not about trading, I probably can’t understand it.”

Tehanu is Taruhra’s chief trader. He is the one that usually deals directly with the Brigans when they come to Treyfeish. I taught him a little Brigan back in the days of my last time here, mostly profanity at the time. He is a good guy and we got drunk on a couple of hunts together. It still bothers me, however, that he thinks my accent is bad.

“So I have double reason to thank you,” he says, inclining his head to bow and then thinking better of it when he catches my eye. “I was going to be sacrificed tomorrow at sunrise.”

“Don’t mention it,” I say, waving my hand in dismissal. “I usually have bad timing in these things.” In a more serious voice, I say, “Taruhra didn’t make it through, yesterday.”

“I know, I heard. We’ll all miss him. But life goes on in the Perfect Place. Thanks again to you.”

“We haven’t made it yet, Tehanu. How many of your men did you say are over there?”

He thinks for a moment, counting on his fingers. “About ten,” he says in Brigan. Numbers are what he knows best. That and “buggering hell” and a few other bad words that I taught him. He switches back to Treyfeish. “I think two or three may have died. Most of the worst injured warriors are on the flagship.”

“Okay, ten there and eleven of us here—twelve, counting me, I guess. You say there are over twenty soldiers over there?” I don’t like the odds very much, even if I am one of the twelve. So far, things have gone fairly easily for me, but the surprise stab by the guard in the stairwell and also missing two of the soldiers with the belaying pins shows me that I do have weaknesses and I can make mistakes. In a normal, fair fight I am reasonably confident that I can prevail. However, we don’t know what to expect on the other ship.

“Yes, about twenty. But there are probably about half that much again of the priests. We’ll have to get through the soldiers to get to them, of course. You know, Ee-rai, I was thinking. You said you wanted to keep this ship intact, right?” At my nod, he continues. “Well, what about the other ship? How about it?”

“The other ship? I don’t care what happens to it. I had planned on kind of destroying it anyway. What do you have in mind?”

“When you were down in the hold, did you happen to notice the barrels against the wall?”

“Hull,” I correct him absently. Us sea people can often be testy about using the correct terminology, such as port, starboard, lee, aft, and the like, even if Treyfeish is not my native language. “And no, I didn’t. What’s in the barrels? Wine?” I say, making a guess.

“No, not wine. They’re full of pitch. How about we burn the other ship? When everyone jumps off the burning deck, we breach the hull like you did on the first ship and get the men out from the bottom.”

“I don’t know about that,” I reply, shaking my head slowly. “What happens if we burn the men in the hold as well? They’re in a cage, after all. It sounds a little too risky.”

“Yeah, there is that,” Tehanu admits. “These old ships are soaked in pitch. They probably burn quickly when they get going. At least, they look like they do. I’ve never actually burned one before.”

“As a matter of fact, I just burned a Tretian ship a while ago.” At Tehanu’s raised eyebrow, I wave my hand. “That’s another story. There was no one inside of it at the time.

Anyway, one more thing: if the men are too injured, they might not be able to swim back to shore.”

“All right. Here’s another problem. If we have to swim over to the flagship, one-by-one, they can pick us off as we come up.”

That sounds bad. “I didn’t think about that. We’ve had the element of surprise so far, and the other two ships were mostly deserted, with just a skeleton crew in place to watch the prisoners. So, how do we get over to the other ship all at once?”

Tehanu smiles at that. “Well, this ship can still float, can’t it? The flagship is just around the curve in the beach over there,” he says, pointing out behind me. “We can just sail the ship right up next to it, and board it all at once.”

“What’s to prevent them from just pulling up anchor and sailing away?” I skeptically ask.

“Well, for one thing, these Sun people won’t be scared of a bunch of us ‘primitives,’ now will they? And, they’re not about to leave their men behind. It will take a while to pull up the anchor, do the sails—”

“Furl,” I interject. “Furl the sails.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Tehanu says with an impatient laugh. “Anyway, ‘furl’ the sails and move away from us. We can be on them before they have a chance to get away.”

“That’s not a bad idea. If we’re right on them, we can afford to torch the ship and still have time to get to the hold and release the rest before the ship burns down. They can’t risk doing the same to us—if they even think of it—because this is their ship as well. I like it, I like it,” I exclaim, patting Tehanu on the back.

“There’s just one problem,” says Tehanu, with a shake of his head. “We don’t know how to sail this thing.”

I chuckle at that. “Leave that to me. I can sail anything with a mast. You boys—I mean, men,” I quickly change it to at his expression, “just do what I tell you.” I start to pace the deck as I think about the plan. “I’ve got another idea. We can look like the Brigands! We have enough of those face-concealing robes for most of us and they won’t know that we’re not their buddies until it’s too late. They’ll think that we just want to talk to them about something, probably about the ship that went down.”

Tehanu claps me soundly on the back, knocking me forward a pace. “That’s a great idea!”

“Ow!” I say in mock hurt. “Thanks.”

So, we make preparations for boarding the other ship. I always wondered about the life of pirates and now I have some idea. When I was a boy, I always fantasized about being a pirate, like the infamous Captain Blackheart. That was one of the reasons I always wanted to sail a boat. It took the Cleansing and my self-exile to realize that dream for me. Of course, being a fisherman is quite a bit different from being a pirate—not near as lucrative. But the life expectancy is a lot better.

Tehanu and his men go down into the hold and come back with several of the Sun priest robes. I notice that two of the robes have blood on them and decide not to ask him about the two priests whose heads I’d knocked together. Tehanu later admits to me that they also killed the two soldiers that jumped overboard; they shot them full of arrows to keep them from warning either the shore or the flagship. I reluctantly agree that it was good thinking on his part. They also come back with a shining metal breastplate, which they offer to me. This I decide to wear. I don’t want to look like a Sun Priest, even if it is to kill a bunch of them.

I briefly explain what I want each of them to do in sailing the ship. Time is running out for us. As soon as it gets light enough for them to see, the flagship will want to investigate the first ship, which has now completely sunk beneath the waves. To be honest, I am somewhat surprised that they haven't investigated already. It is possible that no one has noticed; the flagship and the first ship are only barely within visual range of each other and it is nighttime. I allow myself to hope eagerly that perhaps no one has noticed our little activities yet.

A couple of other warriors and myself carry up three of the barrels of pitch from the hold and set them up on the deck. I wish that we had a catapult or some other projectile weapon, but this ship is too small for one. The Tretian ships have one on every ship, but their weaponry is the most advanced in the known world. Brigan ships used to have better weaponry, but for some reason, the Sun Church doesn't like technology. I figure that I can throw one of those barrels as far as we need to throw one. Which, if our little subterfuge works, won't be that far.

Appropriately disguised and ready to sail, I give the order to cast off. As luck would have it, there is a light wind going directly in the direction that we want to go. We won't have to fool around with any tacking or complex rudder maneuvers. There is about an hour of darkness left and hopefully it will be enough. I have the disguised men lounge around the deck, with their weapons carefully hidden. The rest of the men, whom we don't have disguises enough for, hide in the stairwell until I will give them the signal. I set up watch on one of the lower poop decks so that I can navigate and see the other ship.

It takes about ten minutes to bring the ship around and get closer to the flagship. I am decked out in the officer's breastplate and look and feel like someone important. Of course, I hope I won't have to swim in the damn heavy thing. Tehanu stands below my lookout vantage point and is wearing one of the priest robes, with the cowl up to hide his dark brown skin.

"Can you see the ship, yet?" he calls up to me.

"Just a second!" I yell down to him. "Just around the bend."

I have the barrels of pitch next to the port railing and several lit torches ready. As soon as we come around the bend in the beach, I can see the flagship in all of its splendor. It is truly a beautiful ship, with five sets of masts and iron plating covering the outside of the ship. I stop my rapt appraisal of the ship itself—a beautiful ship if I ever saw one—and concentrate on the deck. My blood freezes in its veins at what I see. There on the deck looking out at us is the swordsman I knocked unconscious on the first ship. And scattered around the deck are the remaining ten warriors, with a priest behind them, holding a knife to each one of the warrior's throats.

So much for surprise.

Chapter Seventeen

“STOP!” I yell down to my men, as soon as I see the warriors on deck. “They know we’re coming!”

Tehanu jumps up to the poop deck with me to see what I am seeing. He starts yelling back down to his men, giving them instructions on what to do to turn the ship around. But it is too late. The other ship sees us.

“If you try anything, we’ll kill these banana-heads!” yells over the swordsman I left for dead on the other ship. He is now wearing one of the burnished metal breastplates, which means that he is some kind of an officer. Damn it! I should have killed him when I had the chance. He must have woken up in time to get off of the sinking ship and then swam over to the flagship. I can only imagine what he told his buddies.

“Now you don’t want to be doing that!” I caution him. “If you kill your hostages, we’ll be all over you like fleas on a dog.”

“Is that right? Behrion, show them we mean business,” he says, waving his hand imperiously at one of the Sun priests.

“NO!” I yell, so loudly that it echoes off of the beach and comes back to me a second later. But it is too late. With one quick motion, the priest Behrion slices a young warrior’s neck from ear to ear. The young warrior kicks out once and then quickly gasps his last breath, with arterial blood streaming down over his front side. The other warriors—all wrapped up tightly in rope—strain fiercely against the grips of the priests that hold them, and several end up getting cut slightly before they stop. I turn away, unable to watch the grisly scene.

“If you don’t give us back our ship and go away, we’ll kill the other nine. I don’t know why you think you are Eli Brigan, and I don’t care. Eli had no sons, but even if he had, you’ll die just as easily as your father did, if you don’t back off!” yells over the swordsman. From the way he is giving orders around, he must be one of the higher-ranked officers in the army.

I give orders to turn the sails. In just a second or two, we stop our forward momentum and start to back away from the flagship. Our great plan has completely fallen apart. Our disguises are for naught—we can’t very well torch the ship with the warriors on deck, and if we make a move to board, the warriors will be killed outright. As soon as it is daylight, the flagship will collect more men off of the beach, and then they can afford to wrest the second ship back away from us. We can’t outrun the faster flagship and we can’t outfight it. The situation looks truly black.

Well, one thing is for sure. We aren’t going to give this ship back to them without a fight. After we pull back from the ship a ways, I give the command to stop. We are between the flagship and the beach, and they will have to fight through us to reach it. The boarding boats have all been sabotaged, but the flagship doesn’t know this. They must be trying to wait until daylight and the return of the landing boats. Then they will have enough men to comfortably take the second ship back. Right now, they outnumber us almost three-to-one. However, their commander—as I now believe him to be—has seen me in action and is being cautious. He has the upper hand with the hostages, and can afford to wait until morning and the return of the landing boats.

“Tehanu, we have a problem here,” I say, with the understatement of all time.

“I think he will kill the hostages no matter what we do,” says Tehanu quietly. “We shouldn’t give them back this ship, either, I think.” He jumps down from the poop deck and I follow him. “If I understood him right, he thinks your Eli’s son?” he says, carefully pronouncing my name in the Brigan way.

“Well, it makes more sense that I had a bastard son somewhere, that no one knew about, than that I survived the Cleansing, and became young again. Although, I would have to be the grandson of Eli to be this young.” He nods at this logic and I continue, “But who he thinks I am is not important. It’s what he thinks I can do that is buying us time. He’s going to wait until he can get reinforcements from the shore before he tries to take back this ship. He’s a smart one, for sure.”

“But then won’t more men come from shore to help him?” asks Tehanu, with worry in his voice.

“They could if I hadn’t wrecked all six of their landing boats. The only way soldiers are going to get out here is to swim out here, and they’ll have to do that without their armor. Most of them can’t swim anyway. But he doesn’t know about the boats. So, that gives us another hour, possibly two. He can’t afford to kill any more hostages because then we can torch the deck.”

Tehanu interjects, “But he doesn’t know we can torch his ship. Somehow, we have to let him know that. If we threaten to burn his ship and this one, they’ll be stuck on this island with no way to return to Brigan. And,” he says, with a steel glint in his eye and firm resolve in his voice, “I can guarantee that they won’t survive a long stay on this island. No matter how many of them there are. They have to sleep sometime and we know this island like a monkey knows his balls. They won’t ever be able to leave the beach without fearing for their lives and we can kill them one at a time if we have to. They’ll never be able to find the caverns, and the tunnels come up all over the island. They don’t want a long stay here.”

I admire his ruthless logic and determination. In my humble opinion, I think he will make a great replacement for Taruhra.

“This is where we’re going to need some of that mana of yours. What, ah—tricks can you do?” he asks me, with a mysterious wave of his hand.

“I’ve got no mana,” I tell him. “I’m just really fast and fairly strong. I don’t see how that will help us here.”

“Give me a minute to think about that,” he asks.

We are still within shouting distance of the flagship. I decide to let the commander know about our ability to torch his ship. I climb up to the top of the mizzenmast with one of the barrels of pitch and yell over to the other ship, “Hail, the flagship!”

In a bit, I can see the commander climb up one of the jigger masts and yell back, “We mean it! Give up or these savages will die!”

“Here’s something to think about, first!” I yell back, picking up the barrel and hefting it above my head. I gauge the distance to the other ship and then swing the barrel around and around. At the precise moment I think is best, I let the barrel go and watch it fly through the air towards the other ship. While the barrel is still in mid-flight, I remember briefly the two belaying pins that I missed the soldiers with and then put them out of my mind. Nobody is perfect, after all. To my delight, the barrel lands at mid-stern and shatters, sending sticky pitch flying all over the deck.

“Just remember that I can throw a lit torch a lot easier than these barrels!” I warn him. “If you kill another prisoner, I’ll know that the rest will be dead soon anyway. I’ll burn that ship of yours right down to the waterline, with you, the priests and the islanders right along with it. I’ve got ten more barrels where that came from!”

There is no reply this time. I got the commander to thinking with that.

I climb down from the mizzenmast and rejoin Tehanu. “Good shot!” he exclaims, knocking me hard on the back again. “Good shot! That’ll make them think a little.”

I grimace at him and he just smiles back at me. He seems to have thought of something while I was doing my target practice. “Surely you remember how to use one of the dugouts?” he asks me.

“Those floating logs you people call boats? Yeah, I remember. Why? You got one handy around here?” I sarcastically ask, pretending to look around the ship.

“Look over there, at the grove of trees to the right of the beach. Right in the middle of the trees, there is a dugout sticking vertically into the sand. I can’t see it from here, but maybe you can.” He points off a far ways behind us.

Sure enough, once he points it out to me, I notice the top end of a long, upright dugout sticking out just above the tree line. I can just barely see it, even with my new-improved eyesight and I would never have noticed it if he hadn’t mentioned it. I marvel at how cleverly it is hidden.

Once I see it, Tehanu starts rubbing his smooth, hairless chin, like he wished he had a beard. “There’s maybe an hour left until morning and maybe you could...”

After Tehanu briefly outlines his idea to me, I chortle with glee at the first good news I have heard in the last couple of hours. “I’ll leave immediately. You sure we have an hour until dawn?”

“Quite sure. You’d better get going. What do you want me to do until then, while you’re gone?” Tehanu asks me. “You know—if they start to do something.”

“You can speak Brigan well enough. Swear at them and tell them that you’ll start throwing torches onto the deck. There’s enough sticky pitch there from my first barrel that it’ll take a week to clean it off. I trust you, Tehanu. Taruhra always thought highly of you and so do I. Be back within the hour,” I say, giving him a taste of one of his own hard back slaps and then jumping right into the water without another word.

I swim as fast as I can for the grove of trees. It is about twenty lengths away from the nearest group of sleeping soldiers and they never even noticed it. When I get to the sandy beach, I run as fast as I can go—which is considerably fast—to the dugout and lift it out of the sand. It has two paddles tied down inside and I carry the whole thing balanced precariously over my shoulder down to the water. I dump the boat off right above the waterline and race back to the nearest group of soldiers. By this time, the larger moon Daemon is out as well, and it is shining brightly at full moon. I can see a far-off salmon tinge to the sky which signals to me that pre-dawn is on its way. I know I will have to hurry.

This late in the night, or early in the morning, there is hardly anyone left awake. I tiptoe as silently as a gentle breeze right into the center of the closest group of sleeping men. There are clothes cast off randomly everywhere and weapons haphazardly stacked into a pile next to a fire that has burned down to embers. A couple of empty bottles of alcohol litter the beach as well. I think that these men are some of the lowest of the low in terms of rank, and won’t be missed much or valued very highly. I go in search of better prey.

I am still wearing the breastplate of an officer. I swam in it without any difficulty, in spite of how heavy it is. I now use it as my disguise, to walk calmly and fearlessly through the circles of sleeping men. I figure that the tents will have to hold someone of more importance and I head straight for them. Once or twice, a soldier that is up and about looks right at me, but since I have the air of someone who belongs, they don’t even give me a second look. If you have the right attitude, you can get away with anything. I think one of Remen’s Laws covers this one, too: “Perception is reality.” You are what you look like. It’s too dark for anyone to make out anything more than the uniform, anyway.

I go up to the biggest tent I can find and right up to two soldiers standing guard outside of it, with four more men inside. Unfortunately, the two outside are both wide-awake. I try to use attitude to just walk right by them, but they both move in front of me to stop me. "Sorry, sir, but no one is allowed to disturb the general and his staff until morning," one of them tells me, doing his best to sound apologetic, yet forceful. He looks at me rather suspiciously, not recognizing me. After all, there can't be that many officers in the invasion, especially ones as young as I appear to be.

"Oh, general, is it?" I say, not able to be more pleased. "Then how about if I disturb you two boys?" Saying that, I quickly drop down to the sand and pull hard on each of their ankles, pulling their legs right out from under them. This very unorthodox move takes them completely by surprise and the power of the maneuver causes them to fall back onto the sand. Then, wrenching a sword out of the hand of one of them, I crack each of them upside the head with a tremendous blow. It is as simple as that. I'll have to tell Remen to add something to his laws about the persuasive power of a blunt object. Knowing him, he's already got four or five.

I just stroll on in to the big tent, stepping over the peacefully sleeping guards. I notice the four men that I scanned earlier snoring away loudly. Without their uniforms on and their pretentious airs, I can't tell who is who. That strikes me as a little funny, because in the nude, there's no difference between a general and his aides, or between a prince and a fisherman. I figure that I had better wake them up, if I am going to knock them out.

"Good morning, you bloodthirsty sacks of dung," I cheerfully say. Two of them start awake immediately, and I just as quickly put them back to sleep with the handle of the sword. The third man wakes up at the sound of the dull clunk of his friends' skulls hitting cast-iron, and him I have to hit twice before he slumps unconscious. Funny that. In the heroes' stories, they always pass out the first time you hit them. This guy's skull must be really thick. As for the fourth guy, him I can't wake up at all. He has serious dragon-breath and I figure that he isn't going to wake up on his own any time soon. I see several empty bottles of wine laying about. The prohibition on bringing alcohol obviously didn't apply to the command staff. I knock him over the head just to be safe and just to be mean.

Now, how to get the four of them to the dugout? I am a little embarrassed to admit that I didn't think about that. Maybe it would have been smarter to walk them back and then knock them over the head. Oh well, live and learn.

I grab the blankets they are lying on and drag them to the front of the tent. Fortunately, I won't have far to go to get to the water's edge. Nevertheless, someone will be sure to notice us. I will have to make a diversion, and time is running out. I pull the two unconscious guards into the tent where they won't be discovered for a while and then go back outside to think about what I am going to do.

I notice several cans of lamp oil in a pile around one of the tents. This gives me an idea. I take two of the cans and walk over to another huge tent on the other side of the compound. This tent has no guards or people, only supplies. Looking around to see if anyone is watching, I open up the cans by squeezing them until they burst, squirting and shaking lamp oil all over the outside of the big tent. I carefully wipe off my hands and then go to a fire and pull out a still-burning branch. This I fling into the tent and then yell at the top of my voice, "Fire!" The tent goes up in a blaze of flame and everyone around that is able to, starts awake.

Panic sets in, with people running around aimlessly and everyone shouting directions and advice. A few of the smarter people start carrying buckets, blankets, and helmets to the ocean to fill them with water. No one notices one more running person and I go back inside to the

general's tent. I cover up the unconscious men with another blanket and quickly drag them down to the ocean. If anyone notices me, they don't say a word, perhaps thinking that I am just trying to get some blankets wet to help put out the fire. Hopefully, I don't look too obviously like I'm dragging four heavy bodies behind me.

When I get to the ocean, I make a hard left turn to the direction of the dugout. A few people yell down to me and ask me what I think I am doing, but I just ignore them. They are too far away to stop me now. I pick up the blanket-wrapped men and throw them into the dugout, and then push the dugout into the sea. I am off and away, with the general and three of the general's staff. I didn't get as many of the soldiers as I planned, but I certainly got better quality than I had hoped for.

I pull out the two paddles and start paddling like mad back to the second ship. The sun is just now peeking over the horizon and it will be fully bright in just a few minutes.

When I paddle up to the ship, Tehanu is leaning over the railing to greet me. "Ahoy, as you people say! It sure took you long enough. What did you bring back for us? Is that a pig or two in those blankets?"

I laugh at that. "'Pigs' is exactly right. What I have here is the general himself and three of his aides. Give me a hand with them, will you?"

"Well done, Eli. Well done, indeed." Tehanu throws down a rope ladder and starts down it, to meet me halfway. I start to hand him one of the men and then think better of it.

"Just let me wrestle these pigs up the ladder. I think they might be a little heavy to carry. Why don't you come down and hand them up to me? I'll carry them up myself," I suggest.

Tehanu agrees and after a rather comical struggle, we have the four packages up on deck. One of Tehanu's men wraps up our sleeping captives in rope and then pours seawater on them until they wake up, sputtering and blubbing.

As soon as they are all awake and looking at me, I address them. "Well gentlescum," I say, coining a new word for the likes of them. "It looks like we have a standoff here."

Chapter Eighteen

One of the men immediately starts making threats. “Who do you think you are, to treat us like this? I’ll have you know that the Church of the Sun will have your hearts out for this!”

I reach down and slap him across the face. My hand leaves a red imprint across his pudgy face. “Shut up,” I say casually. “It is because of your church that you are in the predicament you’re in now. I represent the interests of these people,” I tell him, waving my hand at the warriors surrounding us. Many of them are wearing only simple grass skirts and most are still covered in the ceremonial markings that they put on in anticipation of the trading party. The markings are smeared and messed up by the treatment they received while imprisoned, and from their swimming, but they still look impressive.

“These, these—savages?” he sputters. One of the other men he is tied next to tells him to shut up.

“Listen to your friend, there. It is these ‘savages’ and myself who hold you captive, who sank one of your ships, captured this ship, and are going to use you to bargain for the lives of our remaining ‘savages,’ as you put it,” I tell him, with undisguised venom in my voice. “The only chance you have of surviving is based on the slim chance that the commander of the flagship is ‘civilized’ enough to exchange my friends’ lives for your own worthless ones. And from what I’ve seen of you people, that’s a slim hope, indeed.”

The four men look at each other in fear. The fattest one says to another with a whisper, “Corvan, surely Distan will exchange us for the natives he’s got? Surely?”

“You fool! Will you shut up?” the one identified as Corvan says to the fat man.

I bend down to the one addressed as Corvan. “And you must be General Corvan. The same general who said, and I quote: ‘Kill as many as you can first, control the situation, and later, let the Sun God sort it all out’? Your reputation precedes you.”

Corvan is about fifty-five or so, starting to bald slightly, and still has jet-black hair, which is probably dyed. He is a little overweight around the mid-section, but isn’t as grossly obese as his aides. He is the one whom I wasn’t able to wake up, back at the tent. “I have nothing to defend,” he says without remorse. “He Who is not Named has said that Treyfeish must be brought into the light. That I have done and He must be sorely wrath with your impudence, whoever you think you are. You sound like a Brigan, but no Brigan would act like such as you!”

“Buddy,” I say laughing, “You don’t know the half of it. I am not only a Brigan, but I am a Brigan. Of the original Brigans. The ones the island is named after. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Eli Brigan, son of Jenter Brigan, who was last king of Brigan’s Land.”

“You lie!” says Corvan, his face turning purple with the force of his vehemence. “The Brigan’s were killed in the Cleansing. No one escaped. No one!”

“Nevertheless, here I stand. I have nothing to prove to you, and frankly, couldn’t be bothered to lie to you. All I want is my friends returned unharmed and you can go your fat, merry way. I’m going to go have a yell with—Distan, did you say it was? I’ll leave you in the capable hands of Tehanu, here. Please try to escape; nothing would make him happier than to gut the four of you where you sit.”

I leave them to stew over that. Now I know which one is in fact the general and what his name is. I nod to Tehanu and climb up to the top of the mast to talk with Distan.

“Ahoy, flagship!” I yell across. The sun is now brightly shining in full early-morning glory. “We have a proposition for you.”

After a little wait, the man I think is probably Distan comes up to talk. “We won’t bargain with the likes of you,” he starts by saying. “And the next barrel of pitch that is thrown our way will cost you another of your warrior’s lives!”

“Fair enough,” I counter. “But then it will cost you something as well. Look down at the railing and tell me if you know who it is.” I yell down to Tehanu for him to bring the captives over to the edge where they can be seen. I can hear the gasp of surprise from the men of the other ship all the way here across the water. I can tell that they recognize Corvan and his aides.

“And one other thing you should know,” I yell across. “Last night, I destroyed all six of your landing boats. The only way you’re going to get any help from your people on shore is if they swim across. If they can.”

Without waiting for a reply, I climb back down from the mast and go talk with Tehanu. I need some of his advice right now. “So, Tehanu, do you think they’ll be reasonable?” I ask him.

“Reasonable? Was it reasonable for them to come here in the first place? I don’t know what kind of reason their Sun God uses. What do you want from them? What are you going to do to them if you get it?”

I think about this for a moment. “Those are good questions. I suppose that first, as a minimum, we get the rest of your warriors back. Next, we want them off the island, right?”

Tehanu nods. “But what do we do when they come back? They will come back, surely?”

“Short of killing every last one of them—something I don’t think we have the manpower to do—yes, I think they will come back. We’re going to have to give over the general and his staff to get back your men. He surely deserves to die as much as the rest of any of them do. If they honor any agreement we make with them, then we’ll have to honor our side as well. If our men weren’t held at knifepoint, then I’d say kill them all and be done with it. In the meantime, let them think about what I told them.”

“What about your death-oath to Taruhra? I thought you promised to kill the Sun people?” Tehanu reminds me.

“Yeah, I did. But I can’t do it at the expense of his own warriors, and I won’t break any agreement we might have to make if it’s made in good faith. We’ll worry about that after we get your men back.” I give Tehanu a pat on the back to reassure him. “And we will get them back.”

Meanwhile, the commander of the flagship is yelling for my attention. I deliberately keep him waiting for a few minutes before climbing up to the mast. “So what’s it going to be?” I ask.

“You give us the general and his staff and we’ll release your men to you. But not until they’re safely aboard this ship,” he offers.

“No can do. The veracity of the Sun Church is infamous for its—shall we say—flexibility. I have seen you people lie before to get what you want. I have a better idea.” I’m not about to give up the general until I know the rest are safe. Also, I don’t trust them any farther than I can throw them. Well, at least as far as I can throw their ship.

“We’ll put the general and his staff in a boat and let them row over to you. As soon as they’re in sight, you let the Treyfeish jump off, to swim over here. Any funny stuff and we torch your ship, fill the general full of arrows, and then sink this ship as well. You try swimming back to Brigan; I hear the sharks are out in force this time of year.”

Distan goes down to confer with someone. Down at the railing, Corvan—in a desperate mood to save his own skin—yells out, “Take the deal, Distan! Let the savages go. That’s a direct order!”

We wait for a few tense, anxious moments. Finally, I see Distan climb back up to the top of the jigger mast. He yells out, "We accept your surrender of hostages. When they are here, we'll let your people go. But not before. And we want your word that you'll not torch the ship after your people are off. Is it a deal?"

I am pleased. It came out about as best as I could hope for. "It's a deal, on my word as a Brigan, from one hundred and fifty generations of Brigans, whose word as been all the seal any government has ever needed. You give us our people and we'll give you yours. And we won't torch your ship." I think carefully about my promise. "At least not today," I amend.

I climb back down and order the four officers to be put in the dugout. They are still only in their linen undergarments and look fairly miserable and pathetic. When they are in the boat, I give another order. A barrel of pitch and several cans of lamp oil are dumped on top of the four men and the dugout. The four men sputter again and protest, especially when I remind them that this is insurance against any attempt at foul play on Distan's part. A rope is tied to the boat and is stretched back to our ship, where we can pull them back if our men aren't released.

"Okay," I yell over. "One false move and we send a flaming arrow into the dugout! The dugout has also got a rope tied to it that we will pull back if I don't see our men!" There's no reply to that. "Okay, let 'em go and get 'em outta my sight," I order the warriors.

Tehanu's men let go of the rope holding the dugout back. Immediately, two of the general's aides pick up the paddles and start rowing over to the flagship. When they are within a few lengths of the ship, I order the rope to be pulled taut, stopping them.

"All right, there's your general; where's our men?" I ask. Soon, I breathe a sigh of relief when I see the nine remaining men brought to the railing. They are about to be pushed in the water the way that they are, so I yell, "Take off their ropes, damn you! If you push them into the water all tied up, it'll be the same as if you killed them anyway, and I'll torch your general."

"Do it!" commands Corvan, with an air of resignation. "Just do it. He'll do what he says if you don't. We're not done with him yet!"

I have a tense moment while I wait to see what will happen. Finally, someone starts cutting loose the prisoners and they jump one by one into the water. I wait until the last of the nine is into the water and then I order the rope cut. The general and his aides paddle as fast as they can to the flagship and start to climb up the ladder.

Behind me, Tehanu murmurs, "You can torch them now, if you want to. My men are all right now."

I sigh long and deep. "Nothing would please me more in the world, Tehanu, but I gave my word and they have held up their end so far. I meant what I said about the word of a Brigan."

"You're an honorable man, Eli Brigan, and that's a curse in itself. Let's get them out of the water!" he yells to his men.

When all of the warriors are safely on board, I order the ship backed off and away from the flagship. "Okay, if you try to follow us, it'll only take one flaming arrow to burn you down!" I remind the other ship, while we drift further and further away from it. There is no response, which I take for a good sign.

You never saw a happier bunch of men than the ones greeting their comrades. As soon as we are out of bow range of the flagship, I breathe another sigh of relief. I did it. I rescued the remaining men of Treyfeish!

Tehanu climbs up to the poop deck and shouts out, "Quiet everyone! I have an announcement to make." The celebrating quickly dies down and then everyone is quiet. "Most of you know the situation here. We are the remaining men left alive on Treyfeish, few that we

are. However, most of our women are safe, waiting back at the monsoon caves. Most of your children are safe. For those who don't know, Taruhra died yesterday, but not before he named this man as his friend. We will not be here free today—indeed, I would have had my heart torn out by the priests an hour ago at sunrise—if not for this man: Ee-rai Burigan, Suwena ah Toru!” he shouts.

“Suwena ah Toru!” cheer the rest of the men, looking at me. “Fist of the Gods.”

This time, I surrender to the inevitable and let them do their bowing.

Chapter Nineteen

After a brief celebration/ reunion, I put everyone to work in making time for the north end of the island, where we can hide the ship near The Gull's Wing, and rejoin the women and children in the caverns. There will be a lot of business to attend to, such as choosing another chief, figuring out who is alive and who died, procuring food supplies, and figuring out a way to completely throw off the Brigan Sun Church horde.

It is hard to believe that the whole event, with landing here yesterday and the ordeal with freeing the warriors, only lasted one day and one night. Everyone is very tired, including myself, but we are all too excited to sleep. Understandably so, most of the warriors weren't able to sleep much in their cages, surrounded by soldiers, priests, and the constant threat of impending sacrifice.

We finally pull around to the backside of the island, after quite a crash course in ship operations for the warriors. After yelling at them all for an hour or two, they lose some of the awe and mystique that they hold me in. That is just fine with me, but by the time we arrive, I am ready for a nap. Unfortunately, that is not to be.

We decide to just beach the ship—not wanting the Brigans to be able to easily steal it back—but I advise leaving it a little ways up the beach from the entrance to the caves. I don't want the flagship stumbling on the location if they happen to go searching for their stolen ship. I think about just sinking it, but I am reluctant to just casually do away with such a fine ship, and I think that we might need it in the days ahead. The second ship's name is Lightbringer, which I discover after examining the ship registry. It is also burned into the side of the ship, which one of the warriors discovers and asks me to read for him. I think that maybe it needs another name, one without the Sun Church connotation. When I ask Tehanu about it, he confers quickly with some of the other men before coming back to me with a suggestion. "How about Jiyuu?" he asks me, which means "freedom" in Treyfeish. I tell him that Jiyuu is fitting and a good name for the ship. Of course, we have no idea if we'll be able to hold on to the ship for very long, but I approve of renaming it.

When we all finally file down the tunnel to the main cavern, there the celebration starts in full force. Of course, a few women are extremely disappointed when some of their loved ones—either a husband, brother, or a son—doesn't return, but most of them had already resigned themselves to the death of all of their loved ones. The twenty-three warriors that return were already given up for dead and their return is looked upon as a true blessing from the Gods.

And therein lies the problem—at least for me. It is bad enough that all of the women heard Taruhra say that I was Suwena ah deputa (touched by Gods), but the men actually saw me in action and realize that I am in fact, something different than human. Then Tehanu—whom I don't blame for this—lets slip the fact that I am actually of the rightful line of the Brigan family. I constantly have to tell people to get off of their knees and to quit worshipping me. When women start bringing their babies for me to touch and ask me to lay my hands on all manner of injuries, I realize that something has to be done. So later, when Taruhra's wives calls all of the people together, I figure this is my opportunity to say something.

I never can figure out the actual names of Taruhra's wives. The four remaining wives of Taruhra have names to be sure, but Treyfeish custom and language call them by their title, which has to do with what order of wife they are. Antanu was the exception as the number one wife. It is a little confusing, but many and varied are the customs that humans make up to run their cultures. This is one of the reasons that I am here, with the Many/One in tow, to see these different human customs. So, the number two wife (who is actually number one, now that

Antanu is dead, but who remains “number two,” since Taruhra is dead as well—I said it is confusing) addresses all of the people, as is her right.

There is the inevitable speech making, which I’ll spare you, and various ceremonies and formalities that have to be observed. There are also the inevitable praises and thanks to me, which I’ll spare myself the telling of. Eventually, the meat of the thing is gotten to:

“Taruhra is gone—may he rest in the Gods’ Place—and we have to choose a new chief. Tradition says that the chief’s son is first in line, but all of Taruhra’s sons died by the hands of the Sun people. We are left with a problem that has only rarely happened in our history. Custom says that we nominate someone that we all will agree to follow. As Taruhra’s number two wife, I have the right of first nomination. I know I have Antanu and Taruhra’s blessing when I nominate—” she pauses dramatically to look around the collected ring of people, “Suwena ah Toru, Ee-rai Burigan!”

Everyone cheers and I about fall over where I stand. I honestly didn’t even see this one coming. Everyone looks at me and finally quiets down for my acceptance speech. Which they aren’t going to get.

I raise my hands for silence. “I am pleased by the great honor that you do me. I would like nothing more than to spend the rest of my days here in Treyfeish, The Perfect Place, as your humble chief.” At that, everyone cheers again and starts to get excited. I have to yell briefly before everyone quiets down. “You have called me Suwena deputa and Suwena ah Toru. As such, you must realize that the Gods have much for me to do. Sometimes we are not allowed to follow our own hopes and wishes, but we must bow to the will of something greater than us. I am the last of the Brigan line. Thus, I have a responsibility and a duty to restore Brigan.” As I say those last words, they start to catch in my throat. I was only saying them half-seriously at first, in order to get out of being the next chief, but it suddenly occurs to me that they are almost the exact words that Remen used on me just a few days earlier. His words return full-circle to smite me. Damn him for always being right!

I clear my throat and then continue, “I am not of your people, much though I feel at home here. I must return to my own land and put right that which has gone so wrong. It is in your interests as well as mine to put an end to the Sun Church. I may stay only long enough to drive off the last of the Sun people, and then the Gods would have me elsewhere. I am deeply sorry.”

A collective moan goes out from the crowd, but I see many of the older people nodding their heads in agreement with my words. They understand the nature of duty and responsibility to one’s land, far better than I did, until recently. I think that this will be an excellent time to put forth my own nomination. “I would love to stay, this is true. But there is one among you that can serve you far better than I, one who Taruhra trusted as much as me. Plus, Taruhra wisely recognized the value of learning your neighbor’s language and customs. There is only one amongst you that can speak Brigan and who understands the foreign mind, particularly where business is concerned. He has proved himself to be a wise planner of battles and a man of courage. Thus, I offer the nomination of Tehanu, as next clan-chief of the Perfect Place!”

If anything, the collective cheer that goes up is even louder than before. Several warriors pick Tehanu up on their shoulders and start carrying him around. Someone douses him with chillah and then the party gets crazy. Tehanu bows to the will of the people and accepts their nomination. I am glad that it turned out so well, and now I am off the hook.

Later, during a small lull in the partying, I go over to talk to Tehanu. “So how does it feel to be the new chief?” I ask him.

He smiles and gives me one of his favorite spine-shattering claps to my back. “Pretty damned good!” he says in Brigan. Then he frowns and switches back to Treyfeish. “But, I’ll have you know, my one wife has already started dropping broad hints about who the number two and three should be. It doesn’t look like I will get much say in the manner. Taruhra! Now I understand why he always complained about the wives!”

We both laugh at that and I try to put back some chillah. It doesn’t take long for me to figure out that I can’t get drunk, no matter how much or fast I drink. Oh well, at least I drank enough in my eighty years of life to last me another forty or so. In time, the party ends and people file off to celebrate the warriors’ rescue with their loved ones and with a bit of privacy. The next morning, Tehanu intends on calling together a war council, to discuss the Brigan problem.

I notice that people are all pairing up and going to secluded places in the caverns. Unfortunately, the ratio of men to women is now decidedly uneven, and there are many, many women left without a partner and looking for some companionship. As a guest, and somewhat of a holy man in the eyes of many, I am a prime candidate for the lust of lonely women. If I was really as young as I look now, I would be tempted to take some of the woman up on their not-so-subtle offers for company. However, I am still feeling the effects of losing my family and I seem to have not one iota of sexual interest at the moment. All I feel like doing is sleeping, but at first, I can’t seem to find any place in the caverns where I can get some much needed sleep without being bothered by someone. Also, I have a weird craving to be in the sun, which was not surprising, since I was in the caves all day yesterday and have been up all night. No doubt, I need to recharge, like the plant that I am beginning to feel like. Plus, someone needs to keep watch on the Jiyuu, and I can catch three fish with one hook by sleeping on its deck.

So, I make my way outside, roll the stone out and then back, and bed down on the deck of the ship. I can catch at least three more hours of the sun before it goes down and immediately feel myself slipping into slumber.

And then the dreams begin again.

Remen

“He didn’t do anything to us, and you know that he could have. You saw the way he hit those ballast stones around. Although, actually, I didn’t, being facedown on the dock at the time, knocked senseless by the rocks you people were throwing!” I can’t help but get in that last dig.

Jenson looks mighty ashamed at that remainder and squirms in his chair, toying with his beer. “Ah, er—well, sorry about that. We were all a little frightened. Nobody meant to hit you; we were trying to hit—whoever it was.”

“I told you already, it was Elias!”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you. You think it was Elias. We thought he was something else.”

I lean across the mayor’s table toward Jenson. The last mayor was a pompous ass and he was one of the few people I can’t say I’m sorry is gone. Jenson looks right at home sitting in the mayor’s chair. “Tell me what you think he was, then.”

Jenson leans back in his chair, a thoughtful look in his eye. “T’ be honest, I don’t rightly know. He looked human enough, except for those eyes of his. They looked like they could see right into my soul.” He shivers a bit and goes on, “He sounded like Elias. I mean, hells, he spoke just like him and his voice sounded ‘bout the same. But, come on! Elias was ninety years old!”

“Eighty,” I correct him. “I’m closer to ninety than he was—I mean, is.”

“Eighty, ninety, two hundred-fifty—whatever. The point is, Elias is an old man and that person—thing—whatever—wasn’t more than twenty, twenty-five.”

“Is that so difficult to believe? Do you have no faith in the gods whatsoever?”

Jenson looks confused for a moment, while he pours us another beer. “Gods? Which gods? The twelve old gods, the Unnamed, something different? What’s the name that Elias was throwing around?”

“Ah ha! So you admit it was Elias!”

Jenson groans. “Come on, I have to call him something. Let’s admit—just for the sake of convenience—that whoever it was at least thinks that he is Elias. Whether he really is or not, I can’t say.”

“Okay, fair enough.” It’s at least a step in the right direction.

“All right. So the Many/Few—”

“Many/One. It’s ‘the Many/One,’” I interject.

Jenson glares at me. “The Many/One. What kind of name is that for a god?”

I have to laugh at that. “Well, what kind of name is ‘The Unnamed’ for a god? Isn’t calling him ‘Unnamed’ with big capital letters really giving him a name?”

“You know, I never thought about that before. They also use ‘He Who is not Named’ and ‘He Who Has No Name’ for a name as well. Same important title that’s not supposed to be a title. Anyway, this god of Elias—what’s he all about?”

I have thought long and hard about this same question myself since coming back to Seadown. Elias didn’t give me very much to go on. “Elias told me that it’s not a god. At least not like we ken. It’s not supposed to be a spirit, either. He said it’s something different.”

Jenson looks confused and rightfully so. “Scinthus I can understand. He’s the god of the sea and we all make our living on the sea. My grandmother used to leave a fish out every morning for Scinthus so that my grandfather and my pappy would be safe on the ocean.”

I nod at this. “Yeah, mine too. We all kinda stopped doing that anymore, after the Cleansing.”

“This Sun God I can understand too. Only instead of fish, he likes human blood.”

I make a face. “Yuck! I always thought that was kinda repulsive. I thought us Briganers were a little more civilized that to be believing in something like that. Human sacrifice? Next we’ll be practicing voodoo, like same damned Kryff savage!”

Jenson shakes his head and pours me some more beer. “The capitol gets crazier every year. First you got to have your name in those blasted books of the Church, and then with the taxes...One part in two you have to give, if you want to do business! Same thing in Fin-dapple, Boathaven, and Dirfan—in all of the Four Cities. It’s getting so a man can’t make an honest profit anymore.”

“You’ve managed to do all right by yourself,” I politely suggest.

“But I don’t do business in the cities anymore! I try to make what profits I can in the small villages, where the Church ain’t breathing down your neck. I tell you, things were a lot easier before that Cleansing came about.”

“Okay, you old blowhard. How in the gods’ mangy balls do you remember? You were only—what, five? Six?”

Jenson laughs and pounds on the table. “You got me there! Okay, I was seven, but who’s counting? Anyway, my pappy used to always say that things were easier.”

I think hard before I comment on that. Jenson has always been an all right kinda fellow, and we’ve complained about the Church together before. I can understand why he would want

to deny it in front of a crowd, like he did the other day with Elias on the docks—especially now that he's the mayor of our little village. I wonder if he can be trusted with Elias' secret.

"What would you say about replacing the Sun Church with the old Brigan monarchy?" I tentatively ask him.

"I'd say, give me some of what you're smoking. The Brigan line died with Jenter and his sons. There might be some bastard half-cousin 'round somewhere, but the Church tried its damnest to weed out anyone with even a trace of real royal Brigan blood."

I decide to let that drop for the moment. Elias probably wouldn't want me telling the whole world. Instead, I switch the conversation back around to where we had been going before. "Well, this Many/One thing of Elias'. It sure must have some kind of power."

"I'll say there has to be some explanation for what I saw on the docks. I've been hunting my whole life and there hasn't been a creature I've seen yet that can dodge an arrow from three paces, much less pick it right out of the air! I'm not a bad shot, either, if'n I do say so myself."

"You should have seen him snagging fish right out of the water, with his bare hands."

"That doesn't surprise me a bit. The way he moved—it was like lightning right in front of me. I could hardly even see his hands move, when he was slapping them stones out of the air. You should have seen him pick you up and jump into Elias' boat. Must have been at least four lengths away!"

Elias had kind of glossed over many of the details of his superhuman exploits back on the docks. I can get a pretty good picture of it, however.

Jenson pours himself another beer. I've kinda lost track of how many we've had. It's been going on three hours that we been talking now and I'm starting to feel more than a little pickled.

"Elias says that the Many/One live inside of him and they give him those powers. He also said something 'bout them having knowledge that no one else on the planet has."

Jenson snorts at me and says, "Wouldn't mind having some of them powers, myself. Sure make hunting and fishing a lot easier. What's it take to get 'em? I mean, how did Elias do it?"

"You already know the story, from Elias's mouth, himself. He said he went up to the Fist, met the spirits, and came back a changed man."

"Anymore of them spirits still hanging around at the Fist?" jokingly asks Jenson.

"I don't really know," I reply. "I'm in no condition to find out. Old Elias said that the climb up 'bout killed him and he used to climb mountains for fun when he was a youngster."

"Don't know nothing about climbing mountains. Seems a hell of a difficult thing to do just to talk to some spirits. Gods, know, there's a thing or two I wouldn't mind asking 'em. 'Specially 'bout the pox and what happened to my family."

Suddenly, I have a revelation. I get an idea so wonderful that I can't believe how simple, yet perfect, it is. "You know, Jenson, you may not be able to go all the way to the Fist, but you got Elias walking around, carrying the spirits along with him. You could just ask Elias himself, anything you were dying to know."

"Are you saying he's got some kinda direct pipeline with the gods?" asks Jenson, incredulously.

"Well, if not to the gods, to something bigger than you and me. He told me he could talk to them and I believe him. Something about looking in those eyes of his makes you want to believe him. He's been my best friend for nigh on fifty years and he's never once lied to me.

You know how Elias is about the truth. His word is as good as gold.” I almost say that his word is as good as the legendary word of the royal Brigans, but that would be a little too close to home. Jenson gets real thoughtful and quiet, like he’s chewing over something in his head. Or maybe he’s just pissed drunk. Regardless, eventually he makes up his mind about something.

“Okay, Remen, I’ve been thinking.”

“About what?”

“Well, I can’t deny that the person we saw on the docks had some pretty powerful ‘bilities and the like. If I can’t accept the evidence of my own two eyes, than I’m no better than the Sun Church asking you to believe in something that makes no sense. So, admitting that this guy had these special powers, then I might as well admit that it could have been our own Elias. He could have chucked back a few things at us but he didn’t—gods know, I would have. He really looked hurt when we chased him away, and I don’t mean from the arrows stuck in him; I could see he was pretty sad about the whole thing, myself. I guess it’s no bigger stretch of the old imagination to say he was actually Elias, than to admit that he could do the things I saw him do with my own eyes.”

I drunkenly stagger to my feet and reach out to shake his hand. “That’s the spirit! Now you’re starting to use your head, instead of your bow finger.”

Jenson smiles sheepishly at me, burps once loudly, and then asks, “So, if it was Elias, how do we go about asking him to relay some questions to the gods?”

Chapter Twenty

Elias

I am in the cave again—the cave of my own mind, if I believe the Many/One. And of course, I have no reason not to believe it yet. I have that body-less feeling again and I wait patiently for the Many/One to speak.

“I/We sense that you have many questions again. And, the truth be known, we have some questions for you as well. Maybe we can answer them together for each other.”

“Uh, yeah. Listen, I don’t quite know how to talk to you guys. I mean, you’re with me all the time, right?” I fumble around.

“We are you, not just with you. We permeate every part of your body and mind. We sense everything you sense, and probably notice a lot more than your waking mind does about what goes on. However, just because we see more than you doesn’t mean we understand it.”

“Um, right. Well, I guess—well, why don’t you go first with your questions before I ask mine?”

“Thanks. We know most of the questions that you want to ask, anyway. They have been foremost in your thoughts, the last few days,” the Many/One says, with a little chuckle. Then it continues, “Lately, you have been very concerned about the Sun Church.”

“Concerned? That’s a mild way of putting it.”

“Yes, right. Well, we took a look at some of your memories concerning the Sun Church.”

“I thought that had to be you. That dream seemed too real.”

“Yes, that is the easiest way to make sense of your memories—to look at them filtered by your conscious mind. We sense that they are the people behind most of your present worries?”

“They killed my family and hold my country in their thrall. You saw what they did to the Treyfeish?”

“Yes of course, we see everything that you see. That is kind of the nature of our question. We noticed that you have a great hatred of them but at the same time you seem very reluctant to kill them.”

“Well, of course. I’m not a violent man by nature. I’ve never killed anyone before just the other day.”

“Why this importance with their lives? Didn’t they give you the right to kill them by trying to kill you first? We see this thing called ‘morality,’ and another word, ‘ethics,’ but we have to admit that we don’t quite understand it. You have the power to repay them for what they did, and we understand self-preservation. That keeps you alive, and of course, us as well.”

Their line of questioning stumps me. How can they understand revenge but not morals?

“Sorry to interrupt your thinking, but we don’t understand revenge. They want to kill you and if you kill them first, you are protecting yourself. That we understand easily. Is revenge nothing more than self-preservation? How are the two different?”

“I see your confusion, there. Revenge would be my wanting to kill them for what they have done to Treyfeish, even if they aren’t going to do anything to me.” I think for a moment about revenge. I’ve never had to explain it to someone before. “Revenge is different from self-preservation if I want to strike back at them, even if they aren’t going to harm me in the future. In fact, self-preservation would tell me to run away from them, but a revenge motive would say to hurt them back, even if it means more, or greater, harm to me in the future.”

There is a pause while the Many/One thinks about this. Then it responds, “We think we understand. So, if both revenge and self-preservation tell you to harm the Sun Church, why are

you so reluctant to do so? Why did you leave so many of the soldiers alive when you could have killed them? The Treyfeish had no problem killing the Sun people. And why did you not burn the flagship once your people were safe? Wouldn't that be both revenge and self-preservation?"

"Wow!" I exclaim. "You've got quite a lot of questions there that are difficult to answer." I think for a long time, while the Many/One waits patiently. Finally, I think of a good response. "Well, regarding the last thing. I didn't burn the ship because I made a promise not to. The word of a Brigan is one of our most prized possessions. I guess it must seem strange to you, but just trust me, if I make a promise, then I am bound to follow through on it."

The Many/One sounds almost excited when it says, "Aha! But you made a promise to Taruhra to kill the Sun people, didn't you?"

"Ah, you got me there. Yes, I did, and that is a promise that I still intend to keep. However, before that promise can be carried out, I had to free the hostages and the only way I could do that was to make a promise not to burn the flagship. If you remember correctly, I did add that I wouldn't burn it today. Tomorrow is a different story entirely."

"Tricky! We must confess that we didn't think of it like that. So, why this reluctance to kill? Doesn't everything have to kill in order to survive? Even the plants take resources away from other plants, and the shade of a tree can kill those that can't reach the sunlight because of the tree."

"I see you've been doing your homework. You've learned a lot about our world already," I compliment the Many/One.

"Well, to be honest, it's somewhat of a universal rule among biologics such as yourself. We've seen it before in other systems," the Many/One replies, although not without a faint note of smugness to its voice. I feel like I am beginning to be able to detect variation in the tones of voice in the Many/One that reflect its mood. I wonder how much of that is picked up from me?

"All of those qualities that you define as emotions, we get from you. They are not part of our basic design; however, we take many characteristics of the Host, in order to understand them better."

I am definitely going to have to remember that the Many/One reads my thoughts. I guess that means I won't have any secrets from it. But the partnership seems to be going fairly well so far and I have no complaints. So I continue, "As to my reluctance to kill, it comes about partly because, even though the soldiers of the Sun have committed atrocities in their god's name, they are still members of Brigan's Land and as such, are still technically my people."

"They are your subjects as well, aren't they, as King of Brigan?" the Many/One asks me; with the careful air of someone feeling out what they know is dangerous ground.

"I'm not the King of Brigan!" I reply angrily. "My father was the king and I was a prince fifty years ago! That system has been abolished."

"You do admit, however, that the system that is in place now needs to be replaced?"

"Of course, and I suppose it has to be replaced with something. However, I don't think that automatically means that the old order should replace the Sun Church. Maybe something different altogether," I suggest.

"No matter. We'll argue that point another time. You were saying, about the soldiers?" it continues politely.

"Yeah, well, it is the people at the top that make the decisions. The lowly soldier at the bottom is merely carrying out orders, such as they are. I find it difficult to just wantonly slaughter the common soldiers who are just doing their jobs." I think about this for a moment before realizing, "Of course, most of the soldiers that I met on Treyfeish beach and in the jungle

were not very commendable people. I'm still of two minds about that. If I can stop the Sun Church soldiers without killing them, then I probably will. That's the problem with being so much faster than they are. I don't have to kill them to stop them. I can just knock them out."

"Pardon me for an observation, but you 'just knocked out' the man named Distan and he later came back to give you a lot of trouble on the flagship."

"Yeah, that's true. I guess that I might have to come to terms with some bloodshed," I reply, somewhat pensively. "I don't think the Church of the Sun is going to give up its hold on Brigan's Land without some blood being spilled. But that is part of the problem with morality. There are no clear, easy answers. I hold human life as sacred and I won't casually end it if I see another way."

"Why do you think life is sacred? That is the root of our questions. Do not the animals kill the animals? Do not humans kill animals as well? Why should humans not kill humans if they can?"

"Well, we do, all the time. I'm afraid I don't have a good answer for you on that question. I know I want to stay alive, and I hold my own life as important. Surely, other people value their own lives as well, and since I don't want someone to end my life, I shouldn't want to end other peoples' lives."

"We can't see how that is different than self-preservation, or at least, preserving the species. This is high on our list of priorities on human behavior to learn and understand. We will watch and learn," said the Many/One, with a note of finality. This topic was closed for the moment. "And now, let's try to answer some of your questions."

"Okay, I guess I don't know where to start. Um—I guess I still don't understand exactly what I am." I say, with some confusion.

"You are who you've always been. You are what you want to be. But we gather you don't mean that. What is your body? Is that what you mean?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. I get the feeling that I'm not quite human anymore."

"No, I suppose you're not. We're not, I should say. But that is the problem: you are part of us and we are part of you. You are as human as you've always been: you look human, you act human, and you think like a human. However, you are something more than that. We are inside you and we can change your physical body in almost any fashion that together we can imagine. You must be human enough to interact with other humans so that we might learn. But that is a very wide range to play within. We have expanded a little on the basic human design, accentuating a few abilities and giving you other abilities outside of the range of human. Your body is very fluid. If you want to make a change, you need merely to think about it strongly enough and we will make the change."

"Is that what happened with the dolphins? I wanted to see the underwater world the way that they do and I started to understand their range-finding clicks. I even got the feeling that I could click they way they do and understand it."

"Yes, that is what it was. Within your—um, here the vocabulary breaks down. You don't have a word to explain what we see inside you. You have written instructions inside every part of your body that tells it what to do."

"You mean, like an architect's plans tells him how to build a house?" I said, trying my hardest to understand its explanation.

"Okay, that'll work. Only, in this case, the architect is using plans that have many, many pages that he doesn't use, or can't read. Your body and all humans' bodies have many of the pages of your plans in common with many other creatures. The page that tells you how to see

reflections of echoes is not used in humans, but the page is there. In a dolphin, the page is read and in you, we just turn on those instructions when you need them. The ability to sense other creatures by their fields is a page that is read in many sea-creatures, but not in humans. We thought that it might be useful, so we read out those instructions in your body. You have the instructions for how to see in the dark, but your body didn't read those instructions until we told it to. At the time, we didn't realize that you were not an aquatic mammal, but rather primarily surface-based. Does that make sense to you?"

"Then how am I only twenty-something now, when I should be eighty? Don't the plans in my body tell it that it's old?"

"That part is easy. We just re-read the original instructions, which had started to get garbled over the years. If you make a copy from a copy from a copy, eventually errors creep in and that is partly what makes you old. We just found a good copy and 'dictated' it, if you will, to every other part of your body."

"How long can you continue to do that? I mean, how long can I live?" I ask, somewhat knowing what the answer will be and somewhat afraid to find out.

"To be honest, there's really no practical limit. Your sun will go out eventually and your planet will die long before that, but in terms that you can comfortably understand, you will live forever. You are ageless now, Eli Brigan, for all practical intents and purposes, and if you are reasonably careful, you might never die."

I was afraid that was going to be the answer.

#

Nenen

"Look lively, there, boys! There's no slacking on The Hell-Biter!"

The sailors that I'm yelling at look up guiltily from the game of bones they're playing. One of them hurriedly sweeps up the dice and tucks them into his shirt, while they all look around for something to do. They know that if they don't find something, I'll find it for them, and what I will make them do is probably worse than what they can find for themselves. We've been out on the Tretian Sea for three days now, and everyone is starting to get slightly bored, myself included. I suppose I could stay below with the other officers, but I didn't get to be sub-commander by sitting on my ass below deck.

One of the sailors gives me a smile and winks suggestively at me. A comrade of his—damn it, I know his name—ah, Galoth—sees his look to me and smacks his friend on the back of the head. "That's no way to act around a lady, especially one who can kick your ass, you idiot! That's Nenen, the sub-c!"

All the blood drains out of the winking sailor's face and he immediately stands up straight and pulls off his cap. "Begging your pardon, ma'am. I didn't realize..."

I want to laugh at him, but I have my hard bitch image to maintain. "That's 'sir,' not ma'am! Save the madam's and your lady's for your mother!"

"Yes sir!" he says, and sharply salutes me. "I'm new to The Hell-Biter and I didn't realize..."

"Yes?" I say, letting him squirm for a bit. "That a woman might be in charge, ke?"

"No, ma'am—I mean, no sir!" He gives up and turns around to look helplessly at his new friends. They hit him again on the back of his head and I nod at them in dismissal.

After the men disperse, looking for something to do, Galoth comes up to me. "Sorry about Ferlen, back there, sir. We warned him, but I guess he had to see it for himself, ke?"

“Don’t worry about it. There’s not many of us in the navy and especially not in the command staff. You said his name was Ferlen?”

“Yes sir, Ferlen it is. He’s not a bad guy; he’s just from Trebuchet, and isn’t quite used to our modern ways.”

“The Trebuchet Mountains? That far back in the sticks? He’s probably not too used to fire and the wheel either, ke?” I joke. You have to know when to be tough and when to be one of the guys. I usually prefer to err on the side of toughness, because you can always let up later; but today, I am too bored to be so serious.

“Yes, sir. He was just transferred here right before we left and it’s his first ship.”

“Well, I hope you’ll take care of the greenling. Keep him from making any more stupid mistakes. Was that it?”

“Ah, no, sir. Um—me and the men, well, we were just wondering about why we have all the new personnel. It seems a little...”

“Excessive?” I finish for him.

“Yeah. I mean—yes sir.”

“Well, you know the saying, ‘The whip cracks—’”

“‘The grunt acts.’ Yes sir, I understand.”

Galoth salutes and I return it. I watch him go off and sigh to myself. A newbie from Trebuchet? I can relate to what he must be feeling; I’m from a small village just north of there, between the mountains and the Lake of Tears. If anything, he’s from the big city compared to the backwards-ass, country bumpkin place I grew up in.

My rounds of the upper deck completed, I decide to go down and have a word with Jino, the commander. On most ships, the command staff have cabins in the upper decks, with the grunts being sandwiched down in the hold. Tretian ships are built a little differently than that. The larger command cabins are deep in the heart of the ship, where it is harder to reach if the ship is boarded. I walk down through the four levels of decks until I reach the commander’s cabin.

“Commander Jino, it’s me, Nenen,” I say, knocking softly on his door.

The door opens after a brief wait. “Come on in, Nenen. What can I do for you?”

He ushers me into his cabin and I walk in, looking around me as I do. It never ceases to amaze me, the sheer opulence of the commander’s cabin compared to mine. The walls are covered in various animal pelts and trophy heads, along with a gigantic map of the Southern Seas and lower Tretia, done on lambskin. There is a strange smell to the air, like Jino has been burning some exotic incense. In the middle of the spacious cabin is a large table, made of polished whalebone and scrimshawed in deep relief with intricate whirls and snarls. Covering it is another map; this one functional instead of purely decorative, like the one on the wall.

“Sorry to bother you, sir, but I was just wondering about the troops. They keep asking me what we’re supposed to do when we get to Brigan and I don’t really know what to tell them. What are so many troops for?” Three extra squads were added, right before we left, as well as half a squad of extra sailors. The Hell-Biter is the jewel of the Tretian navy and it never goes anywhere far from Tretia without a good reason.

Jino looks at me blankly for a moment, and then offers me a seat. When I sit down, he sits across from me and says nothing for a while, merely drumming his fingers on the table. Finally, he breaks the silence. “The Emperor wants us to be prepared for any eventuality,” is all he says.

“Sir? What ‘eventuality’ might happen down in Brigan?”

He sighs and lifts up the map covering the table and hands me a sheet of parchment that it was hiding. Without a word, he hands it to me.

I quickly scan it. “This is about the Persephone. Aren’t they one of the traders that do business down here in the Southern Islands?”

“Yes, that’s right. They’re a trading vessel, from out of Grandhorn. They disappeared last month and no one’s heard from them. They were en route to Brigan and never reported back.”

“So that’s why we’re here? To find them? What do we need all the troops for and The Hell-Biter?”

Jino simply says, “Think about it. You’re a smart woman.”

I don’t get it. So a trading vessel disappears. Unless he thinks it was deliberate... “Do you think that the Brigans had something to do with that?”

Jino laughs and slaps his hand down on the table. “Now you’re thinking! The Emperor has a few suspicions that the Brigans might be up to no good. Rumor—and a couple of highly paid spies—have it that Brigan is looking to control the entire Southern islands, probably starting with Treyfeish. They might just have their eye a little more northward.”

“That’s crazy! The Empire would crush them in a second!”

Jino shrugs. “Nevertheless, we are to find out what happened and take any punitive measures necessary.”

“You’re talking about war!” I say, unable to believe what I’ve just heard.

“Actually, it’s a little more complicated than that. The Emperor is worried about the Northern rebellion and thinks it might be a good idea to have some friends.”

“Which is it? Does he want war with the Brigans or their help?”

Jino shrugs again and waves his hand in front of his face in dismissal. “I’m not at liberty to discuss that in detail. Let’s just say that we want to find out what happened to the Persephone and we hope that the Brigans weren’t behind its disappearance. I have some detailed instructions on what to do, right from the Emperor himself. So,” he says, looking me right in the eye, “if there’s nothing else...”

I take his hint and excuse myself.

Walking back up to my own cabin, I think about what he told me. He seemed strangely reluctant to let me know what is going on, and I am the sub-commander, after all. The sub-commander is really the one in charge of the day-to-day operations on the ship, with the commander being little more than a figurehead. In theory, Jino is in charge, but in practice, I’m in charge and Jino just tells us where we’re going. I usually decide how to get there and what we’re going to do when we arrive.

What kind of secret orders does Jino have that he seems so reluctant to share with me?

Elias

I must admit that I am somewhat surprised by the Many/One’s admission to me that my new body might live forever. I never planned on living as long as I have already, I certainly never wanted to live forever, and I don’t know what I would do with an eternity in which to do it in. While I mull over this mind-shattering news, the Many/One remains quiet, letting me come to terms with what I have just been told.

Following my train of thought again, it finally informs me of something. “Don’t think that you are immortal, because you’re not.”

“I thought you just said I was. You just told me I might live forever.”

“Sure, and the average human will live to be a hundred and twenty, barring accident, injury, or disease. We can take care of the disease part, and probably most accidents and injuries, but your body is still made of human flesh.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that a fire would destroy you—and us—and if you were beheaded, we might have quite a mess on our hands. Well, your hands. Whichever. Anyway, without a head, we would have to grow another one and your body would be defenseless for quite a while. Anything that chopped your head off would probably be rather dangerous, and a new head would not have the part of you that you call Eli and would be useless for our purposes. We would probably abandon your body at that point. Also, if some animal, for example, ate you, that would kill us as well as you. Any other grievous injury such as that would either end your/our existence or make it so we left your useless body.”

“Oh,” is all I have to say in response to the Many/One’s graphic explanation. This is not quite the immortality I was thinking of.

Finally, I have another question. “What about you? Does that mean that you plan on spending the rest of eternity with me, on this world?”

“That’s a very good question. We don’t have an answer for you on that just now. We can guarantee you that we’ll hang around for the next many, many of your years. We expect it will take us quite a long time to see everything that there is to see and experience everything that there is to experience. True galactic civilizations run on a different time scheme—a few thousand years means nothing. Also, it will take us a while to make sense of it as well. We expect things will change around here and then there will be new and exciting things to see.”

“Well, what if I don’t feel like living forever? What if I want to die? What will you do then?”

The Many/One pauses for a long time before replying, “We don’t think that you are the type to want to end life prematurely. If you do, that is of course your right. We’ll have to take a new Host, but we’re reluctant to do so. Once we imprint on a Host, it is difficult to take a new one of the same kind.” Then, sounding eager to change the subject, it says, “Let’s talk about that later, shall we? We would like to run through some more of your memories concerning our mutual present problem: the Church of the Sun. Maybe we can help a little with your problem in killing the Sun people, by reminding you of some things that we see you’ve tried to put out of your mind.”

“Okay, partner,” I call it, for long-term partner is what things are shaking up to be. “Let’s go for a stroll down memory lane, shall we?” I say, putting the thought of suicide behind me. After all, I’d already passed that hurdle back when I burned my house containing the plague-ridden bodies of my family. What could be worse than that in the years to come?

Chapter Twenty-One

All of the sudden, with no transition from the cave to here, I am in Brigan's Land. This is Fin-dapple, the nearest large city to Seadown, further along the northern coast. I am riding a cart, pulled by a donkey, loaded with dried fish. We all have to go to Fin-dapple periodically to sell surplus fish, although usually we sail around the coast instead of going overland. This time, I decided to go overland, so that my son Jin can get a chance to see some of Greymaker forest, which lies between Seadown and Fin-dapple. Jin rides beside me, only ten years old. Since my catch has already been salted and barreled, there is no rush. This fish will last through the winter easily and maybe even longer if kept sealed and dry.

"Dad," Jin asks me, pulling on my sleeve, "why does it smell so bad?"

We are currently negotiating the narrow alleyways that surround the outside gate of Fin-dapple. The city has outgrown its gates and there is a sprawling ghetto that surrounds the outside of the city. This area is called "Pisspot" by the locals, primarily because of its rundown condition and the smell that Jin has just noticed. Seadown has its own particularly bad smell, as a fishing area will, but Jin has smelled that his whole life and no longer notices it. I notice it when I come home, but only because it is a little different from the rank smell of my boat. Strong smells are just one of the occupational hazards of being a fisherman. You get used to it.

"Son, see the channels 'long the road here?" I ask him, pointing them out. "Well, they carry sewage from the city, right through the shanty town. Sometimes the channels get clogged and overflow into the street, 'specially when it rains. These sewer ditches lead out to the ocean. That's what you're smelling. It gets much worse at the height of summer. The flies will swarm thick and the smell will 'bout gag ya."

"Can't these people live somewhere else? Why not inside the city?" asks Jin, with the innocence of youth.

"They have no money and the Church says that these people can't enter. You see, they aren't on the Registry; their names aren't recorded anywhere. No city will let them in, unless they have a recorded name."

"You mean the Church gives them a name?"

"Well, they already have a name, but it only gets written down by the Church if your parents pay enough to register you. We don't usually truck with that nonsense in Seadown; no one keeps track of any names and the church doesn't think we are big enough to bother us."

"Are our names written down?"

"Well, not exactly. We are going to use your uncle Remen's name. He's registered. No one really checks that closely. These people could use someone else's name if they knew someone that wasn't already inside the city. You see the men by the gate, checking the people as they go in?" I say, pointing to the gate right in front of us. We would be there in just a few moments.

"Yeah, they don't look very nice. Why are they wearing black robes in this heat?"

"Well, they are Sun Church priests. Black absorbs the light of the sun and they worship the sun. It makes sense to them. I think it's plum foolishness, but don't go 'round telling people that too loudly. Anyway, they check off your name as you go in. If you try to use someone else's name, and they've already gone in, they'll know and arrest you."

"But why don't they check that man, the one with the fancy suit?" he asks, pointing at a well-dressed man on a horse that the priests just wave through.

"Well, he's obviously got money and so he's probably registered. It takes too long to check everyone. They usually only hassle the poor, the ones likely not able to afford the

Registry. They'll check us for sure. We don't look too upstanding, eh?" I laugh and pat Jin on the head, tussling his hair. He smiles up at me and we join the queue waiting to get in. It moves fairly fast today, as the majority of people trying to get in are merchants that the priests recognize, doing this routine everyday.

We finally get to the front of the line. The bored priests takes one look at our ramshackle cart and motions for me to get down. I do, with a little bit of nervousness. I don't like the priests a bit and there is always a bit of danger that someone will recognize me. We are far, far away from the capital, though, and I'm wearing a robe of my own, with a hood to protect my face. It's not so unusual, and even close inspection probably won't give us away. Nevertheless, I am a bit worried.

"The name is Remen," I tell him without wasting any time. "Remen, and my son Regal, from the village of Seadown. We have an appointment with the Fin-dapple Fisherman's Bazaar, same time every year."

He nods with a bored look and yells out to one of the others not doing anything behind him, "Go out and get the village Registry, will ya? We got one from—Seadown, ya said?" he asks, turning quickly back to me. At my wordless nod, he waves his hand at the other man and turns back to me again. "You'll have to wait, eh? Move this rolling fish barrel over to the side, will ya?"

I breathe a silent sigh of relief and jump back into the cart, giving the donkey a flick with a rein and moving our cart to the side. We watch the line while we wait for the appropriate Registry to be found. They don't get many people from Seadown here and don't keep the corresponding books at the gatehouse. While we wait, we see a particularly shabbily dressed man go through the line. Suddenly, a furor is raised.

"Not so smart are ya—Jacken, is it today? We've been waiting for you to show up all day. Your partner went through the east gate just twenty minutes ago. We got word that you and the real Jacken—if he really is—have been doing this little scam for a while. We've been watching for you," says the guard to the dirty man. "String 'em up boys. It's close enough to high noon for a little show."

Two of his cohorts grab the man by either arm and drag him over to a stone altar. I know what is going to happen next. I tell Jin to get down in the back of the wagon and not look, or I'll tan his hide within an inch of his life. Jin desperately wants to see what is going on—as any curious boy would—but I rarely ever threaten him and he realizes that this time I am very serious.

The dirty man—whose only crime is pretending to be someone else to get into the city—is dragged over to the altar and bent over it backwards. He immediately starts to scream and everyone within range starts running over to watch. They know what is going to happen. There will be an impromptu sacrifice to the Unnamed—something that doesn't happen very often. Justice—such as it is—is swift at the gate. This is the Church's first line of control. The income from the Registry keeps the church coffers fat and they can also track the comings and goings of every citizen.

I watch what is happening, in spite of myself. I have heard about this, but up until now, I have never seen it. From inside the guardhouse, another priest comes out with a set of blood daggers. They are wickedly sharp and made of black, shiny obsidian—sharper than any metal dagger and just perfect for cutting through the breastbone of a human being. The new priest makes a quick speech to the eagerly-waiting throng of people that have gathered, about the importance of blood sacrifice to He Who is Not Named, and about the dangers of breaking the holy covenant between the Sun God and man, and then he raises the stone dagger up to the sun.

I turn my head but can't help occasionally looking, as he plunges it into the screaming man, spreading through his ribs and cutting out his heart. The still-screaming man stays alive long enough to see his own heart, before it is thrown on a burning brazier and the whole event is finished. The heart sizzles and the smoke and stench goes up in the air, presumably towards where the Sun God can smell it. The corpse is thrown next to the wall, to be picked apart by the dogs later in the evening; unless, of course, the dead man has some family that can come steal the body for a proper burial. I doubt that he does.

I am too disgusted by the whole affair to even be scared for my own life. Soon enough, the priests get back to work, the right Registry is found, and Remen's name is located. We are waved through, but not before the guard leans over to my cart and slyly says, "You didn't know you was going to get a show, did you now? I'd say you got front row seats to it. You have a nice day now, and the Sun God provide."

I don't say a word to him, and only give the reins a shake and go off into the city. I am tempted to spit as I go through the gate, but I have Jin to worry about. I keep down the bile that is coming up in spite of my best efforts. Jin impatiently asks, "But what happened? Why did they kill that man?"

"Just forget about it son. You'd better not say a word about this to your mum, either, or she'll never let you go with me again." He nods and I shake my head, mumbling to myself, "It wasn't always like this ..."

The dream mercifully ends there.

#

My nonexistent body shaking, I am back in the cave of my mind. I was completely reliving the moment and I forgot that it wasn't happening again. Jin had nightmares for months after that little episode at Fin-dapple gate, and I must admit that I did as well. It's no wonder that I don't like to think about that little memory.

"That was pretty mean of you!" I yell to the empty corners of my mind, but the Many/One says nothing. "I could have done without seeing that again!" I collect myself for a few moments and then—

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I am back in another memory. I have a few moments where I realize that this isn't really happening. But quickly I forget as things happen around me.

#

The palace lays smoking and smoldering. Here and there, a small fire is still going. I hide amongst the piles of still-hot rubble while I wait for it to get dark. Just outside where I hide, I have been hearing patrols roaming around for the last two days, looking for any booty that didn't burn in the palace. Gold and jewels are relatively unharmed by the fires of the Cleansing and it is not surprising that the poor of the city take advantage of this opportunity. To my surprise, when one of the patrols goes by near my hiding place, I notice that they are not only Sun priest soldiers but also have some members of the King's Brigade mixed in with them. The King's Brigade? Traitors to the King! How could they have anything to do with the Sun Church priests?

My shoulder is wracked with sharp pains, where the burning timber and my chest-of-drawers fell on it. My face is still intermittently streaming down blood and I know already that the side of my face will be scarred. I can't worry about any of that now; I merely have to survive. I have to get out of the palace grounds and out of the capitol. Surely, my parents escaped and are waiting for me to rejoin them. Surely.

I saw my brothers killed right in front of my eyes: Kevan, Senal, Learty, Shistan. The four of them: all dead. If the over-eager soldiers hadn't started burning down the prince's quarters, before they actually got to me, I would be dead as well. It was only that the hallway started collapsing and the soldiers couldn't be bothered to fight their way through the burning timbers to check the end of the hallway for the last of the princes. They hopefully assumed that I was killed when the back end collapsed. Indeed, it had only been luck that my chest-of-drawers was shellacked in something that didn't seem to burn very well; when a timber fell through the roof and knocked it over onto me, the chest protected me from the rest of the falling debris and flames. Only, the end of the fallen timber knocked me in the face, cutting a swathe down the side.

Put it out of your mind. Don't think of Learty with his throat cut, lying right in front of you. Agh! Don't think of not thinking about it! Just—

I start sobbing, quietly to myself, lest a patrol hear me if I'm too loud. It is dark enough and I want to get as far away as I can from this place. I make my move, getting up off the ground and behind the hot stones and rubble that wouldn't burn and run for the palace wall. It is only a short way off and no one is in sight. This is the first time in the last few days that the palace ground hasn't been swarming with people. Everyone left suddenly for no reason that I can think of. I may not have another chance to leave before more patrols come in and do a more thorough search.

Quickly, I am over the wall, as I have done many times before. I am the fifth son and I have snuck out of the palace for days at a time, eluding the handlers responsible for me. My practice scaling the wall helps me now. The wall is highly decorated and there are enough cracks in the bricks for an experienced mountain-climber such as myself to climb up it as if it were stairs to someone else. My handlers, lately Ber and Tren, always complain when I return from my little solo excursions out, but what can they do? They're dead, now.

Outside the wall, a crowd had gathered to watch the palace burn. Fortunately, they all have their backs to me, concentrating on something else, now. It is an amazing stroke of luck that no one notices me, but then it only takes me a couple of seconds to scale over the top of the wall and then jump down. What is everyone so focused on?

I melt into the crowd, as best as I can with my torn, smoky, charcoaled clothing and my face crusted with dried blood. I stay far in the back and draw no attention. Many other people are also covered in ash, from digging around in the palace ruins for anything of value. No one seems to care.

In front of the crowd, I see the biggest congregation of Church of the Sun priests that I have ever seen gathered in one place before. I never knew they had so many members. There seems to be hundreds and hundreds of them, all anonymously clad in those annoying black robes. They have set up a pyre and suspended above it are two figures with sackcloth over their faces. I can't for the life of me tell who it is. I can tell that one of them is female, because they are both stripped to the waist. Their bodies are crisscrossed with whip marks and abrasions and their hands are tied behind them and a rope holds them swaying over the unlit pyre. Who could it possibly be?

One of the Sun priests is making a speech.

“—is what must be. The voice of the people has spoken and He Who is Not Named agrees. The domination of the Brigans is over and we are free!”

What can he possibly be talking about? Brigan's Land has loved the monarchy for thousands of years, in an unbroken chain of Brigans that stretches back farther than anyone can

possibly recall. I am so confused by the events of the last three days. Why would the people of Brigan possibly go along with this madness, this insanity, this rank defilement of our every tradition and culture? Even the King's Brigade seems to be in cohorts with this cult of the Sun. I am baffled.

"What shall we do with these two? What do the people demand?" The priest speaking walks back and forth in front of the gathered throng. He plays the crowd like an instrument, first telling them how bad their life has been and how glorious the future shall be. I can't believe that even uneducated peasants would believe this dung. "Taxes have kept the people down! Why should the monarchy grow rich and fat off of the lifeblood of the people, while you starve and try to eke out as best an existence as you can? Shall it remain? Shall we do nothing about it?"

"No!" shout a few people at first. "No!" they shout again and again. I notice that there are several people mixed through the crowd that seem to be speaking the loudest. Those around them start to echo their yelling, until the crowd, as one voice, shouts, "NO!" as loud as they can.

"What shall we do with these two?" he asks again. "What does the will of the people demand?"

Who are they? Why are those two over the pyre so central to this bizarre display? I start to have an inkling; a thought comes to me and I shudder and refuse to believe that it can be possible. No way. The people of Brigan would never, never go along with this.

Some of the same people who started the crowd yelling before now take up the chant, "Burn 'em! Burn 'em!" I see now that they are strategically placed amongst the crowd to stir them up and incite public opinion. Surely, the people will put a stop to this! Surely, if those two captives, squirming against their bonds over the piled-up wood, are who they have to be!

"Burn 'em!" shout more and more people. "BURN 'EM!" they yell, as all reason leaves them and they let the fever of the moment, the priest's smooth-talking words, and the shouted opinions of their neighbors around them, lull them into the group consensus. "Burn 'em!"

The priest raises his hands to the air and says, "The people have spoken! The Unnamed shall carry out the will of the people!" One of the other priests hands him a lit torch and he dramatically pauses, waving the torch around in mystical passes. The crowd falls silent, and the tension mounts in the air.

I want to shout, "No, don't do it! The Sun Church is lying!" but I am too scared that I'll be discovered. Would anyone listen to me, anyway?

"So be it!" he yells and throws the torch onto the pyre. "Jenter and Delia Brigan shall die!"

"NO!" I yell, completely forgetting myself. "No, no, no, no!" I try to run to the front of the crowd, but I can't get through the tightly packed mass of people. My voice is completely drowned out in the yelling and cheering that goes on. The pyre fires up with a swoosh!, and a crackling and popping of blue flame. The wood must be soaked in some strange chemical, to produce the weirdly colored flame that licks at the heels of the two captives. My parents.

I can only stand there, watching, too shocked and numbed to even turn away. It is over quickly and I fall to my knees.

The priest says one last thing, "Now, we enter a glorious new period for the land. By the will of the Sun God, this land shall be ruled in His name. Long life, to the Land of the Sun!"

I get to my feet and start running, as far away from this horrible place and its horrible people as I can get. I run and run and run, but the image of my parents burning—while the crowd cheers it on—is etched into my mind.

This is truly not Brigan's Land anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Damn you!” I shout to the Many/One, when the scene clears. “Damn you a thousand times! Why did you have to show me that, again?”

The Many/One wisely remains silent. Here in the cave of my mind, I am sobbing and crying, even though I have no face for tears to stream down and no hands to wipe them off if I did.

It’s no wonder that I feel so much anger against the people of Brigan’s Land. The bastards! They could have stopped what was going on! I still can’t believe that no spoke up against the Church. I don’t know what to make of all of it. It’s now been fifty years since the Cleansing and I still don’t know why a happy and contented land would ignite in revolution and burn down the palace and the monarchy. The Church had been quietly moving amongst the nobility for years, planting seeds of doubt and distrust about the royal family, appealing to their greed. They must have been doing the same with the peasants.

“If we might interject a thought,” the Many/One says hesitantly.

“I’ve heard enough from you, already,” I say irritably. “Haven’t you done enough?”

“We did not mean to cause you distress. We only wanted to bring to the front some things that lurk around the back corners of your mind. You try to ignore them and even forget them, but your brain records everything it sees and hears for all of your life. We thought that showing what was done to you and your parents would remind you of things you don’t like to think about.”

“Of course I don’t want to think about that stuff. That was a horrible, horrible time and it makes no sense to me.”

“Want is not important. We think you need to think about such things.”

“Whatever happened to ‘we’ll just watch and listen and not interfere’? Didn’t you say that to me before?”

It says nothing for a moment. I think I’ve won a debating point between us. Then, it sounds almost apologetic as it says, “Yes, we did tell you that. We meant that we wouldn’t actively control your actions; we won’t directly manipulate your body or subsume your will.”

I choke out fearfully, “You can do that? You mean, move my body around even when it’s awake?” as a mental picture of me as a captive in my own body comes to me.

“Why, actually, yes. We can. We could have burned out your intelligence from the start and taken direct control over your body. We still could, at any time.” At my gasp of shock, it quickly says, “Please believe us when we say that we would never do that. That runs contrary to our purpose and our goals for this journey. We would not be able to observe much if we had to pilot this body around and the mistakes we would make in social interactions would completely skew our data. We have no wish to be in control of this body.”

I quickly calm down from my anger, as what the Many/One says sinks into me, and I put the memory of my parents’ death aside for the moment. I never thought that the Many/One might be able to take over my body and bury my personality so far down inside me that I—the part of me that is me—would be effectively dead. Or erased all together. I guess if they had wanted to do that, they would have done it a long time ago. There is absolutely nothing that I can do about it anyway, if they might decide they want to some time in the future.

“We can tell that this thought is extremely troubling to you, and understandably so. Please believe us when we say that we will never do this thing. The last thing we want is to actually have to interact in your confusing world by ourselves. We enjoy being passive, but we also enjoy something you call—correct us if we’re wrong—drama?”

I quickly laugh at that. My life and its problems seem so important to me, and to hear them related as entertainment for the Many/One, seems to shrink them down and put perspective on them. I suppose I should be mad that my life is just an amusement to them, but I find it all too funny and more than a little humbling.

“So you think my life will be a little more interesting for you, if I think about everything from my past life? And maybe do something about it? More dramatic?” I ask, chuckling to myself. At least, I could hear myself chuckle inside my head.

“We must admit that watching you fish for the next hundred years or so did seem a little boring. Of course, we would learn a lot, but not much about social human interactions.”

“Yeah, that’s a point. I am not the most social of creatures in the world. At least not usually. I do like my solitude. Although, to be honest, that’s kind of a habit that I’ve gotten into in the last fifty years or so. It’s much safer if I keep to myself.”

I feel a mental nod and then the Many/One says, somewhat hesitantly, “It actually bothers us to have distressed you, with the memory of the Cleansing. What kind of emotion is that?”

“I think,” I say, laughing at the discomfort that I can feel in their voice, “you’re having an attack of a thing we like to call ‘a conscience.’ Don’t worry, it’s not usually fatal.”

“Most confusing. We seem to be experiencing some changes, as well.”

“Well, I hate to use a cliché, but that’s the human condition. Next, we’ll have you falling in love!” I say, slapping my imaginary knee with an imaginary hand. The concept went across, because I could hear the Many/One laugh as well—the seriousness of my earlier angry words temporarily forgotten between us, as well as the thought of my brain death.

“Well,” it continues, after our lighter moment. “Back to the Cleansing. This period of your life is very interesting to us. So much chaos and confusion. We find it difficult to understand much of any of it.”

“Well, that makes two of us. I’ve thought about it for years, and I’ve quietly asked many people about it—as best as I could, anyway, without attracting any attention to myself. I realize that my father, Jenter, wasn’t the best king of Brigan’s Land’s long history, but he certainly wasn’t the worst, either. He did have a certain callous disregard for the peasants, but again, so did everybody among the aristocracy. That’s certainly nothing new.”

I ponder on this for a moment. I have no idea of how time passes here, or if it passes at all. I feel like I have been asleep for days, but surely not much time has passed back in the real world.

“Well, I think we’ve seen enough misery and pain for a while,” the Many/One says, echoing my thoughts that it reads as well as anything that I think I say. “You/we have a lot to do when we wake up.” The voices fade away, to go wherever they go when we finish talking. For a while longer, I remain in the cave of my mind.

I certainly have a lot to think about. Are the people of Brigan’s Land worth saving? Do they even want to get rid of the Church of the Sun, anymore? Should I do anything about it? I know, at least, that the people of Treyfeish deserve to be spared from the Sun Church. They certainly never did anything to deserve what has been happening to them. The people of Treyfeish I can unconditionally try to help. I’ll have to wait and see on my course of action with the land.

Suddenly, my reveries are interrupted by a shout from the Many/One. “WAKE UP!” it shouts like thunder. “There is someone standing over you!”

I awake, instantly and without any hesitation. Before my eyes even pop open, I can already sense someone lurking over me. I react like lightning, rolling over to my side and sweeping out a leg at whoever it is. At the same moment, my eyes pop open, but they take a second or so to adjust to the darkness that has fallen while I was asleep.

With a grunt, whoever it may be is swept off their feet to land with a crash onto the deck. My vision quickly clears and I see a Brigand soldier scrambling up, swearing, and fumbling for his sword that he dropped when he fell. Behind him is a veritable swarm of other soldiers scrambling over the deck railing. Damn! The Brigands found the ship after all!

I somersault over backwards until I am on my feet. My body is charged with energy like I have never felt it before. I quickly kick the dropped sword in front of me at the approaching men. The point embeds itself in one of the approaching men's left foot, and he lets out a howl of agony. I also kick at the man on the deck-floor and a suitable dull clang! lets me know that I break several of his ribs by crushing his breastplate in on him. The rest of the men—about twenty that I can tell, by a quick count of their body fields—keep coming over the railing. Damn, I actually hurt my foot a little on the breastplate, but I feel no pain after a second.

I hurriedly wonder about the cave entrance and whether or not the Sun people have found the hidden passageway. I hope the Treyfeish are all right. But at the moment, it is myself that I must worry about. With this thought in mind, I turn around and spring up to the first level of the poop deck, out of the immediate reach of the very well-armed soldiers. From up here—about three lengths up—I can see the men pouring out of a small skiff tied up next to the Jiyuu. I've never seen the skiff before and I have no idea where it came from. I look around for the flagship but it is nowhere to be found. Perhaps the flagship is big enough to have another, smaller ship stored in its hold? I have no idea, but nevertheless, here is the skiff and with it are several soldiers bent on killing me.

Seeing my little jump, the men in front shout, "He's on the poop deck!" down to the skiff below. An arrow comes streaking right towards my head and I hurriedly pluck it out of the air before it can embed itself in my right eye. Damn! Someone is a very good shot with a bow! Three more arrows follow closely behind the first and I grab each one in a lightning quick move that surprises even me. I am really hyped up now.

In the skiff, I see four men with crossbows reloading as fast as they can. Because these arrows are crossbow bolts, I realize that I can throw them back just like darts. I quickly tuck two of the arrows into my pants and then—an arrow in each hand—I simultaneously hurl both back at the four men in the boat. One of the men instinctively puts up a hand to block the arrow coming at him and it goes right through his hand, to graze past the side of his head. He stares at the ragged hole in his hand like it is a bug. The other arrow hits a man right in the throat and sinks in about half the length of its shaft, surely a fatal blow.

The other two crossbowmen quickly drop to the bottom of the skiff, out of reach for the moment from my last two arrows. I throw one at them at the man with a hole in his hand but he is flopping around like a headless mackerel; I miss him completely when he jerks to the left, instead of to the right as I thought he might. As the arrow whizzes by him, one of his comrades reaches up and yanks him down to the bottom of the boat. Well, what do you know? Soldiers with at least some sense of camaraderie. But then, they push the gurgling man with an arrow breaching his windpipe over the side of the skiff, to land with a splash into the ocean. So much for camaraderie.

I have a moment to catch my metaphorical breath—not that I'm breathing hard in the slightest yet—and I take stock of the situation. The archers have been effectively neutralized and

it will take the soldiers a few moments to reach me up here. I am in no hurry to move from my relative safety up in the lower crow's nest of the poop deck. I could go up two more levels, but I have no way out from up there, except by jumping out and down into the water. I'm not in any big hurry to just abandon the Jiyuu—or Freedom—to the intruders just yet.

Unfortunately, while I pause for a moment, what it actually does is give the soldiers a chance to regroup and all get safely over the railing and onto the ship. Now that I have time to look carefully, I can count exactly how many people have boarded the ship. I say "people," because some of them are women. I don't know when the Sun Church started allowing women into the armed forces; we never see the army around Seadown. Brigán has always been against allowing women to fight, so I am naturally surprised by this change from the Sun Church. I didn't think the Church was any more liberated than the former Brigán government. Anyway, there are twenty-four men and four women down there—counting the three in the skiff as only two men—against little ol' me. I should be worried but I'm not. They can't attack me all at once, can they?

Someone in charge barks some orders and three of the men reluctantly start climbing up the mast to reach me. I casually let them come up without saying a word. So far, they haven't even tried to say anything to me and I am more than curious about whom they are and if they did in fact come from the flagship. I notice that the Sun priests are conspicuously absent this time from the group. This must be only soldiers and seem to be of much better caliber than the scum on the beach yesterday, at least in fighting ability.

The three men endeavor to come up at the same time, so as to maximize the three-on-one advantage. While my attention is focused on them, another arrow whizzes by me. Cheeky bastards! Wait, it's not the archers in the skiff; it's a couple of the women with regular bows down below. Well, this just might get interesting. I decide to break the silence and, as soon as the three men simultaneously pop their heads up, I say, "Greetings!" in my most cheerful voice. The men look somewhat confused and then, as they reach their arms over the edge to pull themselves up, I quickly run around the poop deck like a blazing wind and kick each of their arms off of the deck. One guy completely loses his balance and falls down to the lower deck, to land atop some of his cohorts. The other two quickly regain their balance and I let them come up without any further hindrance.

"Yah're only making this hard on yahrself," one of them warns me as he stands up. He speaks with a strange, clipped accent that I can almost place. He is a very big guy, almost two heads taller than myself and he has long, braided red hair. The army that I grew up around didn't allow long hair, but who knows what the codes are for the army of the Sun? Obviously, more than just a few things have changed.

"Well," I say, stepping back from him and his more normal-sized partner, "I'm gonna try and make it hard on you two as well." He and his partner draw their weapons that they had sheathed while they climbed up and slowly come at me, swinging their blades at me to get me back away from them. I quickly run forward, stepping neatly behind the end of his stroke, and show Mr. Braids why it's not a good idea to have long hair in a fight. I grab onto the left braid and swing him bodily around into the path of his friend's oncoming sword. His friend tries to pull his stroke but there is too much force behind it and it slices Mr. Braid open a deep slash into the back of his neck. He goes down and I step onto his braids, pinning him to the deck, and keeping him from moving. Before the other has a chance to react, I reach down and pull the sword out of Braid's grasp and stick it right into the chest of the next guy. He looks down at his chest in shock and then starts to smile as he realizes I haven't pierced his breastplate. I smile

back at him and give him a solid push with the sword that sends him flying backwards, to drop over the edge and hit the lower deck. Next, I bend down and pick Mr. Braid up by his pigtailed and sling him over the side after his friends.

So now, I am the only one remaining on the poop deck. I can't help but think of a childhood game that my brothers used to beat me at constantly. I roar down after the fallen men, "Now, who's king of the mountain?"

I look over the edge of the poop deck to check on the rest of the men. They are milling around somewhat in a disorganized fashion and some of them are pushing off the men that fell on them. No one seems to be injured by the fall; after all, it wasn't that far down.

I decide that now is a particularly good time to say something, since the Brigan soldiers aren't. "You Sun Church scum are going to have to try harder than that if you want to get me off this ship! It belongs to the island of Treyfeish now!"

My words seem to have an odd effect. Everyone stops milling around and looks up at me, with quizzical looks on their faces. One of the female soldiers, dressed in a long, flowing sash covering her breastplate and decorated with a gaudy assortment of metals and ribbons, raises up a hand and says, "Helt!" Immediately, everyone freezes in place and turns around to look at her. Four men that started to climb up the mast after me slide back down and also turn around to face her. She looks up at me and says, "Are you not Brigan yourself?"

Surely, they already know who I am. "Yeah, I am, you know that. But I'm not part of your silly little Sun cult."

The woman—obviously in command—tips back her head and gives a deep belly laugh at my remark. "Sun Cult? We ahren't of the Church of the Sun, man! We're not even Brigan!"

Now it is my turn to be confused. I can tell by her accent that she is telling the truth. It sounds very familiar to me but I can't quite seem to place it. I know I've heard that accent before. The officer begins speaking again and suddenly I place it. "We're Tretian, ke, and we thought you were Sun Church! This is a Brigan ship, ke?"

Oh, gods! These are Tretian soldiers, and I just killed one of them!

Chapter Twenty-Three

“What d’ya mean, you’re Tretian? You don’t look like any of the Tretians I’ve ever seen,” I ask in disbelief, yelling down my suspicions to the commander. The Tretian traders that always come to Seadown usually have a more sallow complexion, black hair, brown eyes, and a more pinched, squinty expression to their eyes. These people, with their red, blond, and brown hair didn’t look like any Tretians that I’ve ever seen.

“Tretia is a big empire, ke? We have many different races there. Most of us here come from the eastern forestlands of Tretia. You must be familiar with the Grandhorn traders,” she explains carefully. I nod at this, not quite knowing what to say. “We seem to have a problem here,” she says, waving her arm around at the men I hurt and then back at me. “We thought this ship had been abandoned, ke, and we thought you were one of them Church vishen. Who are you and what are you doing on this ship? We’ve already claimed it by right of salvage for the empire of Tretia, ke?”

I bristle at that. “I’ll have you know that I’ve already claimed it by right of conquest, in the name of Treyfeish!” I yell down at her.

She and her men laugh at that. Fortunately, my bravado and backbone seem to be well received. She shrugs her shoulders and grins up at me. “Well, I’d say our problems just got a little more serious, then, ke?”

That ke thing is starting to annoy me a little. Obviously, it is meant as a variant on the backwoods Brigan equivalent of eh, or maybe a corruption of okay. “Well, what d’ya suppose we do about it?” I ask her.

“First of all, why don’t you come down from there, ke?, and I can stop sending up men who’ll only get knocked back down.” All of her men laugh at this, and even the three men who were thrown down look sheepish and smile. Mr. Braids is bleeding profusely from the cut to the back of his neck, but he otherwise looks all right.

“What guarantee do I have that you won’t stick a knife in me back when I’m down there?” I inquire. I really don’t know what kind of people these Tretians are. Brigan’s Land had relatively few dealings with them, back when I was in the capitol; however, we’ve always been on somewhat cordial—albeit distant—terms with them.

“Why, you don’t really have any kind of guarantee, to be sure. I guess you’ll just have to take my word as an officer of Tretia—on my honor as a soldier—that you’ll be safe. At least until we’re done talking.”

I think about this for a moment. I’ve seen what the honor of a Brigan soldier is worth and I hope that a similar comparison can’t be made with the Tretians. They, however, are a new element in this little power struggle going on in Treyfeish. The Treyfeish can use a powerful ally such as the Tretians against the Sun Church, especially after I am gone and can’t protect them anymore. It’s worth a try, anyway.

“Okay, I’m coming down!” I yell down. “But no funny stuff!”

I think a little show of my abilities might provide somewhat of a deterrent to any shenanigans. Instead of simply climbing down from the crow’s nest, I run to the edge and jump off, doing a double roll in midair and come down on the deck upright, and on my feet. A few soldiers give a quick exhalation of breath at this and a few appreciative whistles. I’ve never tried something like this before and I am glad to see I wasn’t over-confident in my abilities. I could really get to like this new body.

“All right, I’m here to talk,” I say, going over to the commander. The soldiers give me a wide berth and let me go by them. The commander motions for one of her men to come near and

whispers something in his ear. The commander's accent changes significantly when she's not talking to me; I take it this is the natural Tretian pronunciation. I'm not meant to hear it but I catch most of it: "Get the archers on board and keep a close eye on him. If he makes any sudden move, turn him into a pincushion."

"Don't worry," I tell her calmly, "you keep your word and I'll behave as well. I doubt that you could make me into a pincushion, but let's not try to find out, eh?" She is slightly taken back by this, but nods in agreement.

By the lack of color in my vision, I can tell that it is somewhat dark out still, but dawn looks to be only a couple of hours away. The archers in the skiff come aboard, carrying the dead man that they had tossed overboard, still dripping wet. When the commander notices the dead man, she starts to get angry, but fortunately not with me. "Did this man fall into the ocean on his own, when he died?" she asks curtly.

One of the archers looks down at his feet in a most guilty-looking fashion. "No sir...ah—he didn't. You see, he was bleeding all over the rest of us and we were worried that the crossbow gut would get wet—"

The commander—reaching over to him and smacking him across the face—interrupts the archer's excuse. Crack! The archer is spun around slightly by the force of the blow and stops making excuses. I feel somewhat better by this display—at least, I feel better about the honor of these Tretian soldiers. "You mean to tell me that you dropped him over the edge?" asked the incredulous commander. The archer merely nods and the commander yells, "Answer me soldier! I can't hear the marbles in your head roll around!"

"Yes, sir!" the crossbowman says, smartly snapping to attention. The side of his face is turning purple where the commander slapped him. His two buddies also snap to attention, even the one still bleeding profusely from the hole in his hand.

"I hope that this sort of cowardly act doesn't happen again. That could be one of you next time that gets pushed into the ocean before you're even dead. Do you hear me? And get yourself cleaned up, before you bleed to death," she says to the injured man. "It's a good thing that your buddies didn't push you over as well, for bleeding too much on the crossbows, ke?"

Everyone laughs at this, except for the crossbowmen, of course. I struggle mightily to keep from laughing myself. It looks like there is stiff discipline in the Tretian army. This commander—in spite of being a woman, or perhaps because of it—is one tough individual. I don't envy the crossbowmen in the least.

The commander turns to me. "You killed this man?" she simply says, pointing to the dead man on the deck with his own crossbow arrow still stuck in his throat.

"Ah, yeah—I did. He was trying to shoot me, after all."

"I gather, not too successfully. My men say you caught their arrows and threw them back at 'em. Is that true? Can you do such a thing?" she asks, somewhat incredulously.

"It would appear so," I reply modestly. "I'm sorry about that, for what it's worth."

The commander nods at this, without saying anything for a while. She appears to think about something and then comes to a decision. "Well, it happened, ke? We'll worry about the consequences, if any, in a little bit. Perhaps we should go somewhere and talk, ke?"

"The captain's cabin is just through that door over there," I tell her, pointing at one of the cabin doors. "Have you seen any of the Treyfeish warriors, yet?"

She shakes her head no. "We just got to the island, a little bit ago. The main ship is. . ." she starts to tell me and then thinks better of it. "Come on," she says, motioning for us to go to the captain's cabin. She yells some quick instructions to the rest of her men and three soldiers

follow us to the cabin. She motions for me to go on in and then comes in after me, with the three men standing guard outside.

“Have a seat,” I suggest, motioning to the large table in the middle of the room. I light a lantern and set it on the middle of the table between us. She takes the offered seat and I sit down across from her. “Aren’t you afraid that I’ll do something to you without your men present?” I ask curiously.

She shrugs her shoulders and says, “Could you? I have only to yell and my men will be right in. I’m not such a coward that I’m afraid of one unarmed man. And, don’t let the fact that I’m a woman fool you into thinking that I can’t fight.”

I politely nod at this and silently commend her for her bravery. Of course, I probably could kill her before she could get off a scream, but I wisely choose not to share this information with her. Now that she is in front of me, I take stock of just what kind of woman she is. She has close-cropped, light-brown hair with matching eyes and looks to be about thirty-five or so. She is just about my height, which is about average, and seems to be more heavily muscled than any Brigan woman I’ve ever seen. She is a striking contrast to the obesity of the Brigan command staff. She sighs deeply and decides to get down to the matters at hand. “I suppose introductions are in order. My name is Nenen, second commander of his Imperial Majesty’s First Fleet. And who might you be?”

“Well, Nenen, I’d like to say it’s nice to meet you, but we have yet to determine that. My name is Eli, fifth son of Jenter Brigan—the former king of Brigan’s Land.”

Of course, Nenen is suitably surprised by this introduction but struggles mightily not to show it. She pauses for a moment with her mouth open and then closes it. She opens her mouth again to say something and then, deciding better of it, closes it again. She gulps a few times and I can almost hear the wheels turning in her head. Finally, she says, without too much of a stammer in her voice, “Ah, correct me if I’m wrong—I mean, Brigan history wasn’t my thing at the naval college—ah, the Brigan family was wiped out about sixty years ago, ke?”

“Actually, about fifty years ago, and not all the members. I alone survived.”

Nenen digests this bit of information for a bit and then says, “Ah, it seems fairly obvious to me, but, ah, wouldn’t that make you quite elderly?”

I laugh at that and simply nod. I let her stew for a bit before explaining, “I’m eighty-two years old, to be somewhat exact.” I pause for a moment while she thinks about this. “Now, you have to be thinking one of a couple of things. The most obvious answer is that I’m lying; for clearly, I don’t look to be eighty, and historically speaking, no Brigans survived the Cleansing by the Church of the Sun. I’m telling you that both things are not as they appear. I am in fact eighty and I am most definitely Eli Brigan. The other possibility is that I’m telling you the truth, which would fly in the face of all logic and rationale.”

Nenen, to her credit, nods and says, “Yes, those were about the two conclusions I reached as well, although I did think of some other possibilities. You could be insane or trying to fool me for some unknown plot of the Sun Church. You could also be some kind of spirit or a ghost, but my men would laugh me right out of command for that theory. The village I grew up in believed that sort of thing, but an educated member of the Empire doesn’t. Or shouldn’t, anyway.” She squirms in her seat, making no more effort to appear as if the whole thing doesn’t confuse her.

So, I take pity on her and tell the whole story, right from the Tretian plague ship to the conflict with the flagship. She quietly listens to the whole story, without interrupting me once. She occasionally makes listening noises to show me that she is following along but offers no

comments or questions. I explain to Nenen about the Many/One and even about escaping from the Cleansing, and briefly about the fifty years spent as a fisherman. A couple of times we are interrupted by her men coming in to check on her, but she says a few words to them or else casually waves them out of the cabin as she listens attentively to my story.

Finally, I finish the story and it is about an hour after sunrise. She stretches and yawns a bit before saying, "That is the most interesting story I've heard in many a year, truth or fiction that it may be. It would explain what happened to this year's trade envoy sent to Brigan that never came back. My men and I were in fact sent to check up on it and we stopped for water here before sailing onto Brigan. We saw this ship beached on shore and the first commander sent some of my men and I to check it out. We heard rumors that the Sun Church was planning a military conquest of the Kryff islands and of Treyfeish and we figured that might have something to do with our missing ship. I know of the plague in the Kryff islands and the Grandhorn ship stopped there before coming to Brigan. That much we know, and that much makes sense."

Nenen stands up and walks over to one of the portholes to look out. She seems lost in thought for a moment and rubs her smooth chin while she thinks aloud, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Tehanu. "I actually hope that you're telling the truth about the plague. The last thing the Empire wants is to have problems with our Southern island neighbors, not with the Northern rebellion going on and troubles with the barbarians."

"You mean the Empire is not concerned with what happens to Treyfeish?" I ask, somewhat disappointedly.

"To be honest, the Empire has never cared about the Southern islands, except for some mild trade now and again, and that only with Kryff and Brigan. Treyfeish has never seemed that important to His Imperialness. The conflict going on with Brigan and Treyfeish is frankly none of our concern, as long as it doesn't spill over to Tretia."

"So, what if Brigan had in fact done something to the trade envoy?" I ask, somewhat hesitantly.

Without missing a beat or even turning around from her inspection of the porthole, Nenen confidently says, "Why, we would crush you like a spoiled grape and throw you over our shoulder, no questions asked."

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I don't reply to that. In fact, I don't know how I feel about that last comment. It would be nice to see the Church of the Sun put down, but I really wouldn't care to have Brigan's Land lose its sovereignty and become a vassal state of the Tretian Empire. Since Brigan hadn't in fact done anything to the trade vessel, I guess the whole point is moot.

While I am thinking about all of this, Nenen goes on, as if she hadn't just threatened to crush my country under her boot. "Which brings us to you," she says, without any preamble. "I don't think my first commander will object to giving the Treyfeish this ship. It really is quite inferior to what the Empire makes these days—no offense," she apologizes, finally turning around to look at me.

I wave my hand in front of me magnanimously. I know that the Empire builds better ships. "But what about me...?"

"Well, if what you've just told me is true, and I wouldn't put money on it either way, I would probably lose a lot more men trying to bring you in for trial to Tretia. We did attack you first, and I suppose a court would probably see it the same. I, of course, will tell my commander all that you've told me, especially the part about the plague ship, and also the part about the

conflict here on the island. The Emperor likes to keep abreast of what happens in the Scint Sea even if he pretends that it's unimportant strategically and commercially. However," she pauses and turns back around to look out the porthole again, "perhaps you could introduce me to those painted men trying to sneak up the side of the ship?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Damn it! That must be the Treyfeish, probably jumping to the same conclusion I reached about the Tretians being the Brigans. I get up from the table and run out the door. The three soldiers move to intercept me, but at Nenen's shouted command, they move back to let me pass. I run over to the side and there I see Tehanu with seven of his warriors, in two of their dugouts, trying to silently climb up the side. Tehanu is in the lead, as a good chief should be and I yell down to him, "Tehanu! What do you think you're doing?"

He pauses in his climb up the ship and looks up at me like a kid caught red-handed with his hand in the pastry jar. "Eli!" he shouts up at me. "I thought you might need a hand with these Brigan devils!"

"They're not Brigan, Tehanu," I inform him. "They're Tretian."

"Oh," is all he says. He looks down at his men and motions for them to wait a second. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" he asks me innocently.

I snort at that and reply, "It's probably a good thing. You might as well come up," I say resignedly. "And bring your men. The Tretian commander would like a word with you."

Once all of the Treyfeish are aboard and introductions are made, Tehanu, Nenen, and myself adjourn once more to the captain's cabin. Tehanu pauses only long enough to tell one of his men to bring up something from the dugout. I don't catch what it is.

"It's nice to meet you," Tehanu says to Nenen, in perfect Brigan. I never studied Tretian when I was a boy, because most of the traders that come to Brigan can speak Brigan. The Tretian and Brigan languages are really not very different from each other and in the far distant past, they used to be the exact same language. Over the millennia, they have drifted apart a little until there are some dialectical differences. I'm not a linguist, so I don't know exactly what the differences are; I think mainly accent and pronunciation. However, both countries can understand each other's languages without too much difficulty. Nenen has obviously studied Brigan, because she can speak it fluently.

One of Tehanu's men comes in and hands her an ornate, reed-wrapped gourd. I can smell what it is already: chillah. Nenen notices the bottle and politely rummages around the captain's quarters for some cups and then we all sit down around the table. After the initial pleasantries are exchanged—with me acting as interpreter—Nenen and Tehanu tip back a couple of glasses. I refrain, since it has no effect on me and I'm not overly fond of the taste.

Tehanu starts in by telling Nenen of the devastation that was done to his people at the hands of the Brigan soldiers. I duly translate all of this. When Tehanu relates the part about the piles of bodies stacked on the beach like so much kindling, Nenen starts to squirm in her seat.

"If not for Eli here, all of the men of Treyfeish would be dead now, sacrificed to the mad god of the Sun Church," says Tehanu. Nenen nods and looks at me with a thoughtful stare. "Eli here, with his mana from the Gods, is our only protection from the hordes of Brigans. But he can not be with us forever."

I add my own comments to the translated words of Tehanu. "Whether you believe me or not, I am Eli Brigan. Enough people know about it already that I'm afraid my presence here will become more of a liability to these people than an asset. Besides, I have a lot of unfinished business to take up with this Sun Church government. I can't stay much longer here in Treyfeish. I'm afraid that without me to protect them, the Treyfeish don't stand much of a chance against the superior forces of Brigan."

Nenen sees where this is going and stops me by saying, "The Empire cannot get involved in local politics between the Southern islands."

“Of course, of course,” says Tehanu, instantly understanding the situation. “We’re not asking you for your protection. But maybe some trade with the Empire...”

Nenen tips back in her chair and starts rocking it back and forth while she thinks. She looks carefully at Tehanu and then stares down into her cup of chillah for a moment. Finally, she seems to reach a decision.

“You know,” Nenen starts out, “this stuff is not bad. Not bad at all.” She pours herself another glass and Tehanu smiles knowingly at me.

“Ah, I think you want to be careful with that stuff there, Nenen. It really sneaks up on you,” I warn her, with a glare at Tehanu. I’m not sure what Tehanu has in mind, but I can see a glint in his eyes, that I recognize from my experiences in watching him trade before.

“I can hold my alcohol as well as any man, don’t worry about that. You know,” Nenen says, already starting to get that glassy eye that chillah gives all too easily, “this stuff has a certain, ah, primitivism, to it that is currently in vogue back in the Empire.”

I translate this to Tehanu and he smiles. “You know, we used to trade that with the Brigans,” he says, in passable Brigan.

“Really, now,” Nenen says, warming to the occasion. “And what did you trade this stuff for?” she asks, with a smile on her face. I realize then that she has taken pity on the misfortune of the Treyfeish and has figured out a way around the politics of the Empire.

“Oh, the usual. Some knives, a few tools, mostly metal things we can’t make here.” Tehanu relays this in badly pronounced Brigan but it is easily understood.

“Ah, that doesn’t seem to be too much, for this fine brew. And do you have a lot of this?” asks Nenen.

“We make maybe three or four hundred bottles a year. We could make more, but the trading ships stopped coming from Brigan. Last time, they brought only soldiers, priests, and fire to our villages.” Tehanu is past what he can say in Brigan, so I convey his meaning to Nenen.

“Well, although the Empire can’t get involved in local politics, I’m pretty sure that my superiors would not be adverse to striking up some kind of a trade deal. Of course, they’ll want to protect any investment that they might make. If you get my drift.”

Tehanu seems to get the drift. I think he understands the politics going on better than I would have expected him to. He knows when a deal is being made. He smiles and reaches out his hand to clasp the deal. Nenen drains the rest of her cup and returns the handshake. She does warn Tehanu and myself, “Of course, we can’t do anything about the Brigans already here. I need authorization from the Emperor to do that. I will relay this tentative trade deal to my first commander and he will pass it on up the line. I can almost guarantee you that another ship will stop by in the next two or three months, wanting to pick up—shall we say, two hundred?—bottles like this one. In the meantime, I’m afraid you’ll have to deal with the Brigan problem on your own.”

Tehanu nods and says, “We understand. We shall deal with the Brigans here and await your return.” He downs another quick shot of chillah and then gets up, somewhat unsteadily. He yells out to his men, who are currently involved in a wrestling match with some of Nenen’s soldiers and not doing too badly for themselves. One larger Treyfeish warrior actually pins his same-size Tretian counterpart, to both cheering and booing from the Tretian soldiers, depending on whether they had won or lost money on the Treyfeish warrior. Tehanu glares at his warrior and then leans over to me, saying, “Boys will be boys.” Then he turns around to Nenen and says in Brigan, “Wait a minute, please.”

Nenen nods and goes out to yell, somewhat laughingly, at her own soldiers. She jokingly tells them to get back to work, until she remembers that they are not on their own ship. Then she shakes her head and announces that she will double the current bet on the large Treyfeish warrior. No one takes her up on the offer.

Meanwhile, Tehanu goes out to one of the dugouts, quickly paddles back to shore, and disappears into the open cavern passageway. He comes back very quickly with an armful of the same reed-wrapped bottles. He gets back in the Jiyuu and dumps about ten bottles on the deck in front of Nenen.

"I think he's offering a down-payment on future considerations," I explain to Nenen, after a whispered consultation with Tehanu.

"That's great!" says a surprised, and slightly drunk, Nenen. "These will help considerably in persuading both my commander and the Emperor." She sways slightly for a second and then regains her equilibrium. She motions for Tehanu to come closer. "I think we can give fair exchange for this. Come along."

Nenen gives some shouted instructions to her crew of twenty-eight. They all bring out their weapons and lay them at the feet of a surprised Tehanu. Nenen hurriedly says, "One weapon for each bottle, ke? You may pick. And," she goes on, giving the three crossbowmen a hard glare, "These men forfeit their crossbows by their behavior. I give you their weapons, as a bonus for future bottles of this, ah—chillah—did you say?"

Tehanú nods and rubs his chin, much in the same way that Nenen did earlier. He starts rummaging through the stacks of weapons until he is satisfied with the ten best. He shrewdly picks what I also think are the best of them. He yells for three of his men to take them to the dugout, and then turns to Nenen and thanks her profusely. "We will need weapons, against those curs of Sun dogs," he says in Brigan. I smile at the fact that he remembers so many of the insults and bad words that I taught him, almost twenty years ago. It's amazing, the things that we want to remember.

Later, as the Treyfeish men start to leave, with more handshakes all around, I notice that the big warrior is wearing a new metal breastplate and that one of the Tretian men has a new grass skirt. I chuckle at the impromptu trading that is already happening. Or maybe the big warrior got it as part of his winnings from the wrestling match?

I stay around, to talk again with Nenen. Back in the captain's cabin, we sit down again at the table. "That was a very generous thing you did back there for Tehanu. I am slightly surprised, I must admit," I tell her, with a puzzled look.

Nenen hems and haws before replying, "Well if the truth be known, I can't say that I don't stand to prosper by our little deal. I really meant what I said earlier, about primitivism being in vogue back in the Empire. Everyone imitates what's in style at the court, and the Emperor's daughter is said to be obsessed with the voodoo handicrafts of the Kryff islands. That's currently what we trade from them. And, since the outbreak of the plague, trade has come to a standstill. In fact, that's the reason we stopped here to get water, because of the plague in Kryff. We came west instead of stopping east at Kryff to take on supplies, like we usually do, before coming on to Brigan. There is a big demand for exotic goods in the markets of Tretia right now; a demand that is going largely unfilled. As for the ten blades, they're nothing; it was easily done. My men are due for a new weapon refit, anyway."

"I see. And how to you personally hope to gain from this trading?"

Nenen laughs at that. "Why, it's simple actually. I gain favor from my commander, while we both look good to the Emperor. We now know what happened to the missing

Grandhorn trade ship and we can save months off of our trip by going directly to—Seahaven, did you say?”

“It’s Seadown,” I correct her. “I can show you on a map.”

“Of course, we have to check out your story, about burning the plague ship. The remains should be pretty easy to identify, even if they are at the bottom of the lagoon. It will also save the Empire the burdensome chore of having to seek reparations upon the Sun Church and Brigan’s Land, for sinking our ship in an act of aggression.”

“I burnt your ship myself. I’m sorry about that, but we were worried about the plague spreading to the rest of the Land,” I say, somewhat fearfully that Nenen will take it personally.

Nenen slaps me casually on the back, still a little drunk, and says, “You did the right thing, of course. That plague in Kryff was pretty virulent and I would have done the same thing. No, there is no problem with that. It will be fairly easy to verify the plague, if half of Seadown did in fact die from it.”

I quietly remind her, “Three quarters of the village. Along with all of my family.”

Nenen looks down at the table for a while, not meeting my gaze. “My deepest condolences about that. The Grandhorn ship was just plain stupid for stopping off at Kryff. It was common knowledge at court that there was a plague raging in the islands. They didn’t even have the sense to have a cat on board, to keep down the rats. It’s their fleas, you know, that carry the plague.”

“Yeah, I kind of thought as much. I heard that from somewhere, I forget.”

Neither one of us say a thing for a moment. Suddenly an idea comes to Nenen. “Say, you know something? I see another way to profit from this little adventure, ke?”

“Oh, what’s that?”

Nenen gives an almost girlish giggle, letting down her tough-woman façade for a bit. “My husband—that is, his family—are merchants. I was somewhat of a disappointment to them when he married a military woman instead of a fluffy courtesan. I’m sure the Emperor can be convinced to give first rights to his family, in trading concessions. That ought to please the money-grubbing bastards!”

I laugh along with Nenen, pleased that her niceness will bring her reward as well.

“And one more thing,” she goes on. “If the Emperor won’t commit any forces to the Treyfeish, then my husband’s family will want to protect their own investment. The merchant marine should be more than enough reason to convince the Brigan’s that they don’t want to mess with Treyfeish anymore, not at the risk of pissing off the Empire.”

“But the Empire doesn’t plan on stopping Brigan from taking over the Kryff Chain, didn’t you say? You have trading interests there, as well, right?”

“Well, I might have over-exaggerated the disinterest of the court. However, most people have already written off the Kryffs because of the plague. And the Empire is pretty tied up, militaristically speaking, with problems back at home. I don’t think anything would be done about a Brigan invasion of Kryff. There are just too many little islands to patrol all of them. Treyfeish has the advantage of only being one large island. It would be simple indeed, to just park a frigate off her shores periodically. That should be enough of a deterrent.”

“Well, thank you again,” I say, shaking Nenen’s hand just as Tehanu had. Suddenly, a thought occurs to me, “Didn’t you say that there was a larger ship that you came with? Aren’t they going to wonder what happened to you?”

“Oh, I sent the skiff back hours ago,” Nenen informs me. “It’s already been there and back, while we were talking. I just sent it back again, along with the bottles that Tehanu gave me

and with instructions about our little deal. It should be back here in a few minutes. It's not far away, actually, although I doubt that you can see it from here." Nenen gives me a sly sidelong glance at me and says, "Well, maybe you can see it."

"Is that some kind of test? I could just arm-wrestle two or three of your men if you like," I say wryly.

"I've already seen enough, thank you. By the way, did you notice that Senchon, the man with the braids that you were flinging around, has cut off those same braids?"

"You're kidding!"

"Well, it's a religious custom with him and the hair thing. It's Empire policy not to interfere in religious matters," she says, with a shake of his head. She looks like she doesn't agree with that particular policy, at least not when it infringes upon military matters. "Senchon said that no has ever been fast enough to get him by the hair before, not until you came along. I've wanted him to cut those braids for years, but until recently, no one could get close enough to him in a fight to prove my point. He says that he has learned a lesson and won't make that mistake again."

We both laugh about that for a while. Finally, Nenen clears her throat and I take my cue. "Well, it's been nice talking to you and I hope everything works out with you back with the Emperor."

"I thank you for your story and if even half of it's true, I wish you the best of luck. You're going to need it against the Church. It's time for us to get back to the frigate."

We shake hands one last time and I watch the Tretians get into the skiff and prepare to leave. Nenen waves goodbye to me and then as the skiff pulls away, she shouts, "One last thing. That Brigan flagship was just spotted off the other side of the island, where you said they were. It looks like they haven't made any plans to leave yet. You'd better do something about that. I don't want to see my source of chillah cut off before trade even begins. Good luck!"

"Good voyage and safe seas!" I say in reply.

#

Well, that was certainly interesting. I feel like I just made a new friend. And with the Church still around and aware of my presence, I am going to need all the friends I can get. From here on out, it is open war between the Church of the Sun and Eli Brigan.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Corvan

“As the only representative of the government’s military arm in this meeting, I think that it is beholden upon me to bring some reason to the bickering of this group,” I tell the priests assembled around the giant table. That man-thing claiming to be Eli has got everyone so worried that no one can agree on a course of action in doing something about it. “If it was up to me, we would have left this Sun-God-forsaken isle as soon as we wiped out the little savages.”

“Corvan, it’s not up to you. Need I remind you that the military is directly answerable to me?” Kusai says, calmly and unemotionally.

Uh-oh. He’s in one of those moods. I know from previous experience that when Kusai gets quiet, or starts acting nice, you’d better start wearing a breastplate when you sleep, in case you wake up with a blood-knife separating your ribcage.

“Pardon my frankness,” I say, hating this humble crap I have to use with the priests, “but this has all been about some grudge that the rest of you don’t seem to see fit to share with me. I don’t like to do anything out of a grudge. Logic and reason should rule us, not emotional displays of revenge and petty desires to get back at enemies of our grandfathers.”

By the sharp intake of breath by some of the junior priests, I can tell already that I have probably overstepped my bounds. Kusai says nothing for a while and the silence draws out until it goes past uncomfortable and reaches excruciating. I can tell that he’s trying to prolong the silence until I start babbling nonsense; most people, when nervous, will say anything to fill the pregnant pause. I’m no junior lieutenant about to piss in my pants at the mere thought of talking to a Sun priest and I wait him out.

Finally he stands up and pushes back from the end of the long table. He uses his intimidating height to full advantage, looking down at all of us seated around. I am at the other end of the huge table, so the distance between us lessens some of the effect. Then, he does something that I’ve never seen a senior priest with sunbursts do in my thirty years of military service: he pulls back the cowl of his black robe and reveals himself. For the first time since I’ve know him, I see his head and face.

I can’t help but be surprised and a small gasp escapes me. Judging from the reaction of some of the priests nearby me, the move surprises them as well. I can’t help but stare at Kusai, my earlier resolve to be brave and stand up to him forgotten as I look upon his face for the first time. The skin of his face is dark brown and covered in scar tissue. It’s not the scars of someone injured in battle or burned in some accident; rather, it is a network of deliberate scarring, arranged in patterns and designs that I have never seen before. His eyes are dark brown, almost black, and there is not a trace of hair anywhere on his head. He has no eyebrows or eyelashes either. He doesn’t look even remotely like a regular Brigan man. Several suspicions that have brewing around in the back of my head start to come together for me.

He calmly clears his throat, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. “You want to know about our little ‘grudge,’ as you put it? The Treyfeish deserve everything they got and more, for transgressions they incurred against us in the Islands’ War. We’ve owed them something for a long time now, and we came here to repay it with interest. But,” he says, pointing directly at me, “Corvan here does have a point. If this was just about old blood feuds, then we would have already left. We’ve repaid the Treyfeish for the impudence of their grandfathers. Now we have a new element to the situation to worry about: Eli.”

I stay silent, waiting for him to continue. Mercifully, he pulls the cowl back over his scarred face, sits down, and says, “I am open to any suggestions about what we should do.”

Immediately, everyone starts murmuring but no one say anything loud enough for everyone to hear. One priest—I think his name is Chrenten, or maybe Senton—raises his hands for attention and everyone settles down. “Who is this Eli character? What do we really know about him?”

Kusai nods at me and I address the question. “He claims that he is Eli, a son of Jenter Brigan. Obviously, that’s not possible; Eli was killed along with every other royal Brigan in the Cleansing. He might be some relative of theirs that was missed; the Brigan line stretches back for a few thousand years and that’s a lot of time for a bastard or two to go unnoticed.”

Another priest somewhat nervously asks, “So what? He could claim to be the Emperor of Tretia, couldn’t he? He can’t possibly be whom he says he is and that’s good enough for me.”

“Holy Brethren,” I begin, using the traditional form of polite address with them, “I have the advantage over you in this situation. I have seen this Eli in action and Distan has thoroughly briefed me on what he saw as well. This Eli is an incredible adversary in battle; Distan says he’s never faced the likes of him in combat before. He is faster and stronger than a man has a right to be. Wood and steel might as well be paper to him and our best soldiers are no more than children against him. I don’t want to exaggerate his abilities, but I think underestimating him could be even more dangerous.” I know that I certainly don’t want to be anywhere near him; he definitely scares me and an old soldier like myself doesn’t like to be scared.

This seems to confirm many of the rumors that have been floating around on the flagship lately, judging by the whispering of the priests. Kusai lets the priests whisper amongst themselves for a while longer and then takes control again by slamming his fist on the table. This actually makes me feel a little better. He usually only acts angry for effect; it’s when he’s quiet that I start to worry.

“I don’t care how long it takes; we’re going to stay here until we find him! If word of this—imposter, or what-have-you—I don’t care what he really is—if word of him gets back to the capitol, it could cause us all a lot of headaches. There’s been entirely too much unrest in the capitol lately; the last thing we need is for the peasants to get some wild notion into their heads that the monarchy has come back to the Land of the Sun. The Bishop will not tolerate any failure in this matter and neither will I. I want everyone working together on this, and I want to have a concrete course of action laid out to me by morning. That means you as well, Corvan!” He waves one long, bony arm in my direction.

I nod and resist wiping the sweat off of my forehead. It’s suddenly gotten quite hot down here in the lower hold of the flagship.

Unfortunately, Kusai hasn’t finished yet. “I want to start seeing some discipline among the soldiers, or by The Unnamed, I’ll have each and every soldier bent over an altar and take out their hearts myself, starting with you and the rest of the command staff. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Kusai. I’ll see to it personally.”

“This meeting is over.”

Minutes after the meeting, on the deck of the flagship, Sunthunder, I stand next to the railing and let the wind cool me off a bit. In spite of everything that Kusai said, all I can think about is the sight of his face. It puzzles me why Kusai would show it to me; what was he trying to accomplish? Unless, he just doesn’t care anymore who knows his secret, and—I’m now beginning to suspect what might be the case—the secret of the rest of the sunburst priests.

They’re not Brigan.

Elias

Back in the caverns, everyone is celebrating again, and a pig is even now being roasted, filling the air with a greasy smoke. Tehanu has already proved his effectiveness as a leader, in his first day, by striking up a trade deal with the Tretians. Tehanu is careful to explain to everyone that removing the Brigans from the island is up to them alone; Tretia will only keep the Brigans from coming back and will do nothing to eliminate their intruders. In fact, one of Tehanu's sharp-eyed scouts announces that the Tretian frigate has already left, after topping off its barrels with water and some fresh fruit.

Of course, Tehanu gives me most of the credit, saying that I was responsible for the deal with the Tretians. I am quick to dissuade everyone of this notion; I point out that it was only Tehanu's shrewd negotiating skills that got the people the new weapons and the promise of future trade. I was merely the facilitator.

Tehanu wisely allows the people to celebrate for a while, because they need a buffer between the pain and tragedy of the last few days and the combat that lies ahead. He does announce that chillah is forbidden; the people will need a clear head for the planning to come. Soon, he announces that the war council shall convene in the far back chamber of the cavern. Everyone that is old enough to fight is requested to join, and in a surprising move to me, even the women are asked to participate. When I ask Tehanu about it, he says, "We have to be realistic here. We don't have enough men to do this by ourselves. Tradition says that a woman may not fight, but then tradition also says that the chief's firstborn son shall take his place after his death. Many of our traditions shall have to be set aside for a while, until we can recover and rebuild."

"Just don't lose touch with too much," I warn him. "Taruhra saw the value of learning the cultures of foreigners, but in remembering his own roots. He traveled the Southern Islands for a while when he was young, but he still remained a Treyfeish warrior at heart, to the very end."

"Ah, Taruhra! Old friend, if only we had your wise counsel," says a suddenly morose Tehanu.

I put my hand on his shoulder and say, "You have big footsteps to fill, but I think you've done well enough already. Come on; let's get this war council started. You do have a plan, don't you?"

Tehanu's face goes from sad to mischievous instantly. "You know I do! I have just the idea for the Sun people. Only," he pauses, looking at me, "you, of course, are a big part of it."

"Ah," I sigh. "I thought as much."

Once everyone is convened, Tehanu starts the war council. He makes a speech, calling on the gods of the island for help and then asks for reports from the various scouts that were sent out to spy on the enemy.

"The Sun people are still camped on the beach, where Taruhra's compound was," one of the scouts reports. "They fixed one of the landing boats, and are shuttling troops and supplies back and forth from the flagship."

Damn! I should have done more damage to the landing boats. Well, it was only a matter of time before they fixed them. They need to ferry both men and supplies from the ships to the beach, and fixing at least one of the boats had to have been priority number one.

"The fat ones, the staff, seem to be afraid to come to the beach," jokes the scout. They were leery of being kidnapped again, obviously. Corvan and his staff probably would stay aboard the flagship for the rest of their time at Treyfeish. "The soldiers on the beach have put guards on the remaining landing boats and guards are constantly patrolling up and down the

beach. The supply tents are also constantly watched. The men in the jungle have been pulled out down to the main camp and no one goes into the jungle alone. They killed one of the great cats, also, and have its carcass on the beach where everyone can see it.”

That must have been the cat that killed Dunhart, the sleeping sentry. The Brigans seem to be able to learn from their mistakes. That is bad. I hoped that they would demonstrate more of the incompetence and shoddy discipline that I saw the other night. It seems that most of that was probably just over-confidence; they probably thought there was no one left on the island who posed a threat to them. Well, forewarned is forearmed (Remen’s Law #234).

Tehanu starts drawing a map of the beach, on the sandy floor of the cavern. He marks the locations of major soldier encampments, making corrections at the advice of the scouts. He draws the current location of the flagship and then starts making several small circles: one is at the edge of the jungle, right next to the major group of soldiers; another is just off the edge of the beach, in what looks to be in the water of the lagoon.

“What are these circles?” I ask him, pointing them out.

“These caverns have tunnels that stretch out all over the island. One tunnel comes up here, where the chief’s compound used to be,” he demonstrates, pointing to the main camp of soldiers, “and another comes up here, just out to sea. The end of it is permanently flooded, but it’s easy enough to swim through and come up just off the beach. A big inson tree camouflages the tunnel end next to the soldiers. The roots of the tree hide the hole that is the tunnel exit.”

“Was that deliberate? I mean—did someone plant the tree there?” I ask curiously. It seems that someone has given some thought to the defense of the island over the years.

“Yes. Taruhra’s grandfather planted that tree when he was a boy, back when we had some fights with the Kryffs. They used to raid us on and off, until they learned their lesson. We surprise-attacked their main island, at the same time that the Brigans were sacking some of the smaller islands. If I remember correctly, the Kryffs attacked one of your cities?”

I nod at Tehanu, somewhat surprised. Yeah, that must be the campaign that Simion Brigan launched, for the attack on Fin-dapple. The Kryffs had gone through a little period of their history where they thought that the Southern islands all belonged to them. They were quickly dissuaded of that notion. I am surprised to learn that Treyfeish had something to do with the Kryff and Brigan War; I never heard about that. Maybe it would have to be renamed the “Southern Islands’ War.”

“So what’s this plan of yours? How do the tunnels figure into it?” I inquire impatiently.

Tehanu smiles at me and everyone crowds in to hear his plan. “It will all happen at night. Nighttime is when the soldiers will be at their weakest and the most afraid of the noises of the jungle. Now that the soldiers are out of the jungle, it will be its usual noisy self. We know the island, even in the dark, and Ee-rai can see fine in the darkest night, right?” I nod and he continues. “So, we don’t have enough men to attack them one-on-one. What we will do is make several sneak attacks into their camps, try to burn as much of their supplies as we can, and this time completely destroy those landing boats. Much though I would like to kill as many of those bastards,”—he uses the Brigan word—“as possible, I think it would be better to just convince them to leave. We can’t afford to lose any more of the People.”

It sounds like a good idea, but I wonder what my part in it is to be. Tehanu closes the war council and everyone goes off to sleep, to await the coming of darkness. After most everyone has left, Tehanu comes to me and tells me my part in the struggle to come. “You, Ee-rai, will be the one to swim up the sea tunnel and destroy the boats. They are the most heavily guarded, and this needs to be done as stealthily as possible. When you’re finished, I need you to

make as big a commotion as you can, hopefully drawing soldiers away from the supply tents. We will burn them down and escape back into the tunnel. This we may have to repeat many times.”

“I see. An all-out frontal assault isn’t possible, is it?”

“Not with the manpower we have left. I want to wage a slow war of attrition on the Brigans. Eventually, they will probably move their camp to a new place and we will do the same there. After a while, they will get tired of the whole thing and go home. At least, I hope.”

“What if more ships show up in the meantime?” I fearfully ask.

“Do you think they might?”

“Well...not actually. The mainland has no idea that everything hasn’t gone perfectly here and I’m sure that they thought that three ships would be more than enough. It will take the flagship a while to get back to Brigan, a new plan to be made, and for them to return. I think it prudent that we keep them here as long as possible, to give the Tretians enough time to come back. A quick withdrawal by the Brigans would actually be counter-productive to the People. We need to buy enough time for the Tretians to return. I think that this sneak-and-run idea is a good one. The jungle is your element and that will keep the soldiers bunched up on the beaches.”

Tehanu nods in agreement with my logic and strokes his chin again, which signals to me that he is in deep thought. “I have a question that is bothering me,” brings up Tehanu, somewhat hesitantly, as if he doesn’t want to ask what he is thinking.

“Go right ahead.”

“Well, what do you think the Brigans hope to accomplish here? I mean, why are they staying? They already destroyed all of the island’s buildings and they killed off most of our warriors.”

“I see what you mean.” I think for a bit, about what the Brigans could possibly be planning. “Do you think it possible that they could find these caverns?”

“Anything is possible,” Tehanu says with a laugh. “I don’t think it likely, no. But it could happen.”

“Do you have anything of value that the Brigans haven’t got to already?”

“Not anything that the Brigans would consider worth much.” He pauses for a bit and rubs his chin again. “Not anything, except for maybe you,” he softly says, pointing at me with his map-drawing stick.

Ouch! I hadn’t even thought of that. “You might have something there. I guess I did piss off the Brigans.”

Tehanu points his stick at me to punctuate each one of his points. “It was you that freed our warriors and it was you that did the talking to the commander of the flagship. The fat general and his people also saw you and you were the one that kidnapped them. Also...” he trails off.

“Yes? Go ahead and say it.”

“Well, you did tell them who you really are. I would think that the Church would want to do something about that.”

“I have to agree with you, Tehanu. The Church took control over Brigan’s Land based on the idea that the monarchy had to be replaced. If the monarchy is still around, and it is, then this is surely something that they can’t afford to let get back to the mainland. If the regular Brigan people hear that I am still alive, it could have all kinds of unforeseen consequences.”

“That’s kind of what I was thinking, as well.” Tehanu sighs and says, “They’re probably waiting around, hoping that you’ll show up and they can kill you. Who knows how long they’re prepared to wait?”

“If they leave, to return to Brigan, they know that I can leave also. They must know that as long as they stay here, I’ll have to stay as well. If I leave and they get tired of waiting, they might just decide to start burning the jungle down.”

“They might decide to do that anyway, to flush you or us out. They don’t know that we are in these caverns. For all they know, we could be hiding out in the jungle somewhere.”

This is also something I hadn’t considered yet. “How difficult is it to burn the jungle?”

Tehanú deliberates for a moment. “It rained just a few days ago. Most of the jungle is still fairly damp. If you had enough oil, you could burn some of the outer patches.”

“Will it rain anytime soon?” I ask.

“Unfortunately, this is the dry season. Of course, it still rains occasionally, but not everyday, like in the rainy season. If it doesn’t rain for the next couple of days, they might be able to burn off a lot of the jungle.”

That would be devastating to these people. Although the light vegetation would grow back fairly quickly, it would take years for the trees—particularly the coconut trees that the Treyfeish use to make the chillah—to grow back. That would put a quick end to the trade with Tretia.

“So, I would say that we should torch as much of their oil as we can, in the first attack,” I suggest to Tehanu.

“I’m way ahead of you, my friend. I already thought about what fire would do to our future with Tretia.”

Truly a smart man, that Tehanu. The People are lucky to have him.

“Well, I know my part in the plan. I’ll destroy the boats, and you, the warriors, and the women will torch the supplies. What happens if they capture any of you, like before?”

Tehanú turns grave for a moment. “If that happens, this time they will surely kill us, rather than take any prisoners. They don’t want to risk a repeat of last time. We’ll all have to be careful.”

“Yes, indeed, Tehanu. We will all have to be very, very careful.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Remen

“What in the second hell of confusion are you talking about?” I ask the woman blocking my path, on my way home.

“I think ye know what I’m saying. We want to know when he’s coming back.”

“Who? When who’s coming back?”

“The prophet Elias.”

“Elias? Prophet? Are ye daft, woman? He’s no prophet.”

I try to step to the right and walk around her. She steps in front of me again. I step to the left and she does it again. “I’m trying to get home. Why are you harassing me?” I yell at her.

“Not meaning any disrespect to your aged self, sir, but they say that you knew him best.” She is wearing a plain brown robe with a hood, but has the hood down. I take a second to look at her a little more closely and then I recognize her.

“You!” I shout. “You’re that woman that was screaming her head off on the docks, when Elias came in. Didn’t you do enough already that you got to be bothering an old man like meself?”

“My name is Malia Deredelgebast. We talked before, remember?”

Ah, yes. She is the woman that told me about the Sun Church “missionary” plans for the Southern Islands. “Yeah, right. If I remember correctly, you were the idiot who was screaming your damn fool head off about Elias being evil.”

She puts her head down and avoids my eyes. “That was before I saw The Light.”

“The light? Not that ‘light of the Sun Church’ nonsense again.”

“No, no, no! I was wrong about the Sun Church. They hold nothing for me any longer! I’m talking about ‘The Light!’ Elias, the Light of the World.”

I have no idea what this crazy woman is talking about. Sounds like she’s replaced one fool notion in her head with another. “Whatever are you going on about?”

“I thought at first that the Prophet was evil. I was blind to the truth. I feel so ashamed for driving him away. I thought it was the thing to do. Then, when he looked at me with those eyes...”

Those damned eyes of Elias. “Sure, they do have a certain magnetic quality to them, don’t they?”

“They reached into my soul and I saw a bright light shining all around him. How could I have been so blind, before?”

“Listen, young lady, I don’t know what kinda vision you think you had, but I’m tired and all I want to do is get home. So, off with ya!”

This time I just keep walking forwards, until she has to get out of my way, or be run over by me. She reluctantly gives way and I keep on walking, trying to ignore her.

“The Prophet Elias?” What a crazy notion!

Although it does have a certain ring to it...

#

Elias

When nightfall comes, one of Tehanu’s warriors shows me where the tunnel is that comes up near the beach. He is carrying a smoky torch and is completely covered in black paint, to make him harder to see in the night attack to come. He hands me a gob of black gook to cover myself. I grimace in distaste, but seeing the necessity, I start rubbing it over my pink body. To my dismay and amazement, the gook dissolves and disappears, my skin’s pores quickly sucking

up the gook as fast as I spread it on. Shaking my head, I thank the warrior briefly and he wishes me the luck of the gods. As soon as he runs back to join the others, I start down the tunnel, my pink body a glowing beacon in the night.

According to Tehanu, it will take almost ten minutes to swim the full length of the tunnel before it comes up to the surface. When he told me that, I had no idea how any of the Treyfeish could have ever swam the tunnel before, if it actually does take ten minutes. I don't think even the pearl divers that I have met before can hold their breath that long. When I asked Tehanu about it, he reminded me that sometimes the tides are much lower and that at low tide, in the summer, it only takes five minutes. Still, that is quite a feat of holding your breath and swimming. I remember what the Many/One told me about this new body's abilities. It said that I could breathe underwater, but had hinted that it might take a while for the change to take place. It also said something about willing a change to be made in my body and that my body would respond. I have no idea about how to will such a change, and I will probably need such an ability to get to the other side of the tunnel.

I have a few minutes to wait while the Treyfeish get into place. When they come up under the inson tree, they will wait until they hear whatever commotion I raise and for the soldiers to be drawn away. So, I have some time to experiment.

I walk down the tunnel until I can see the water. I wade out into it, until about chest-level, and calm myself down, attempting to mentally get in touch with whatever the Many/One is and let it know about my wish to breathe water. I have absolutely no idea of what I'm doing. I try to empty my mind of any other thought and just keep saying to myself—and hopefully, to the Many/One—over and over, “Water, water, breathe the water.” It seems a trifle silly to me but I don't know how else to do it.

There is a very long time where nothing seems to happen. However, soon I start to feel a tingling at my neck and in my chest. It is very faint at first, and then gradually gets stronger and stronger, until the tingling becomes a burning, itching sensation. When I feel my neck with my hand, I am extremely surprised to feel little flaps of loose skin that remind me somewhat of a shark's gill slits. Wow!

The itching subsides and after a short pause, I wade in further, until the water comes up right to my chin. I guess there is nothing left to do but “take the plunge,” as it were. I pull my head under water and expel all the air in my lungs. I keep my eyes open and watch the bubbles from my last breath rise up to the surface. I want to take a breath in, but I'm too much of a coward. I quickly bob my head back up and draw in a gasping breath of air.

Gods-be-damned, Elias! What the bloody hell are you doing? My every instinct screams out to me to resist drawing in the water. I know that it probably won't kill me. No, make that, I know that it definitely won't kill me. That's the spirit. People are counting on you to do this, Elias, so get back in there!

Okay. One more time. I duck my head under the water and blow out all of the air from my lungs. This time, I don't wait but immediately suck in some water. I gasp and choke and my body starts to move up to the air by itself, in an automatic reaction against drowning. It is with a supreme force of will that I fight my natural impulses and hold myself under. I try to calm myself, all the while feeling my vision going red from the lack of air it needs. I suck in some more water and breathe it out.

Once again, I start gasping and choking, unable to get the hang of this. I raise my head up and spit out the water and draw in a breathe of cool, sweet air. My body is racked with

coughing and spitting, as my lungs try to force out the seawater. There must be some trick to this, and whatever it is, I'm not getting it.

Okay, Elias, think about what you know about fish. Gods know—you've been around them for fifty years! How the heck do they do it?

Well, watching the small sharks breathe in shallow water, they seem to suck in water through their mouths and then it force it out through their gill slits. Maybe that's what I'm doing wrong; I'm trying to breath water the same way I breath air. Somehow, I need to suck in water and blow it out through these new little flaps of skin in my neck. That would make sense.

I put my face down into the water and draw in a little water. I resist the urge to choke and close my larynx and concentrate on forcing water against it. To my surprise, the water in my lungs and throat dribbles down my neck from both sides. I do this a few more times and finally the urge to choke leaves me. I duck my whole head under the water and just keep doing what I figured out. I feel lightheaded, like I'm not getting enough air, so I suck in water a little faster. There we go; that's it!

Well, what do you know? After fifty years of hunting and catching everything in the sea that you could call a fish, now I've become one. Oh, irony of ironies!

I don't have time to play around, much though I want to. I start swimming for the other end of the tunnel and concentrate on not panicking. Several times, I have to slow down my swimming and concentrate on breathing in and out, slowly and carefully, just like I learned. In spite of this, I have a momentary panic attack and feel claustrophobic in the darkened tunnel, surrounded by black water and thick stone. I stop completely and try to calm myself. Here under the water and stone, there is absolutely no light. My new-improved vision needs at least a little light to work, and here in this cave tunnel, there is nothing to work with. I remember my little experiment with the dolphins on the way to Treyfeish. If I had more time, I would try to play around with the clicking and whistling that they do to find their way in the darkened depths of the sea. I guess it really doesn't matter; there's only one way to go and that's mostly straight. As long as I don't get myself turned around, I should be fine. I really don't have the time to learn how to use the dolphin clicks.

I start forward again and gradually get used to this new experience. Soon, my eyes can start to make out some light ahead and the tunnel starts to widen. Once I see the light, I feel much better. I swim to the end of the tunnel and come up to the surface, but stay just a little ways beneath the water. I don't want my head to be seen by anyone on shore.

I now seem to have gotten the hang of this underwater stuff. Keeping just under the surface, I look out at the beach. Everything is weirdly distorted, but I can see the damaged landing boats just a little bit in front of me and to the left. Next to them is the recently repaired boat, bobbing up and down in the water, with its small anchor thrown up onto the sand of the beach. Someone has evidently decided that the boat would be safer in the water than beached up on shore like the boats were last time. I notice that there are two soldiers in the little boat and neither one of them are sleeping. On shore, I can feel—rather than actually see—about thirty soldiers within close proximity to the landing boats. About half of them seem to be sleeping, while the other fifteen or so are marching in close formation around the beach, patrolling a rather wide area around both the sleeping men and the landing boats. One of the damaged boats has been pulled further up the beach and is overturned, with various tools and other metal implements piled next to it. Someone must be working on repairing a second boat.

From my initial inspection, I would say that someone has gone to a great deal of effort to organize these men into a defense of the landing boats. Obviously, they are central to the

movement of troops and supplies from the flagship to the beach, and thus are vitally important. But then, that is exactly the reason that I'm supposed to destroy them.

Still submerged and breathing underwater, I silently swim over to the floating boat until I am just underneath it. Looking up, I can see the place in the boat where I ripped a board out, now heavily pitched over and patched with new boards. I can plainly hear the two men above me talking in the boat. Their voices are even louder than normal to me because of my submersion in the water.

"I can't believe that they're gonna be such a hard-ass about this," says one of them, in a high-pitched voice, who sounds like he is fairly young.

"Well, you've got to admit, Corvan got taken right out of his tent, right at the crack of dawn." The other soldier has a very deep voice, but I can't place his age.

"But to keep two of us in the landing boat, all through the night? And to forbid us from drinking? Do you think Sarge is serious?"

"Hell yes, he's serious. He said he was going to stop by sometime tonight and if we were sleeping, he swore that he'd bend us over an altar himself."

"He really told you that?"

"I wouldn't kid you about a thing like that. He really seemed to mean it. That Eli guy has got everyone really spooked."

"You really think he's a Brigant? After all this time?"

"I don't know anything about it. They don't tell me, I don't need to know, and if they ask me, I'll deny knowing it. A piece of advice for ya, kid: I wouldn't go talking about it, either. The Sun Church don't need another Brigant around." The deep-voiced man's voice suddenly gets much quieter. "Just between you, me, and the fishes," I can't help but smile at that, "I think that's why we're still here. For that Eli guy. Distan practically said as much to me, himself."

They talk about a few other things, but this is the most interesting of what I overhear. Nothing else they say has anything to do with me; they merely gripe and complain about all manner of things, as soldiers will. At first I am surprised that two lowly soldiers have heard about me. I would have thought that the Church priests would try to keep it as quiet as possible. However, soldiers are notorious for spreading scuttlebutt, and I can't imagine what would make more interesting gossip. Besides, everyone involved in the hostage situation surely overheard Distan's shouted conversation with me.

I didn't learn all that much, but my eavesdropping confirms Tehanu's theory, at least. The Brigants are more than likely looking for me. My first inclination is to try to be as stealthy as I can, just like Tehanu told me to. Then, I remember that destroying the boats is actually only my secondary goal. My primary goal is to get the rest of the soldiers away from the supplies of oil that can be used to burn down the jungle. So, I guess I'll have to let the Brigants find me, if only long enough to burn down their oil supplies.

With this thought in mind, I pop my head out of the water and say hello to the two men.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Elias

I come up a little ways away from the boat so that the two men can see me. When I first try to speak, I gargle and mumble with the water in my lungs and throat. After quickly spitting out the water, I try again. "Did someone mention my name?" I ask the two men. As soon as they hear me and then see me, I duck down under the water. Although the men surely saw me, it

is dark enough out that it must be difficult for them to see very well, even with the light of both moons.

“What was that?” asks the younger soldier.

“Bloody hell if I know! Where’d he go?”

I quickly swim under the boat and then pop up on the other side. “Right over here,” I say.

“Intruder!” yells the deep-voiced man. He and his companion stand up in the boat and it starts rocking back and forth in their excitement. This gives me an idea.

I duck back under the water and come up directly underneath the boat. I can hear the two men yelling for all they’re worth, waking up the sleeping sentries and causing the patrollers to run over. I swim up to the patched place on the boat and put my fist against it. The water slows me down and prevents me from directly punching up, as I would like, but the patched spot is weaker than the rest of the boat, and with enough pressure, my fist goes right through the wood. I pull it back through the shattered patch, pulling chunks of board down with my fist. Immediately, water spurts up through the hole.

The two men—if possible—start yelling even louder, which is exactly what I want. Before the boat fills up completely with water, I grab ahold of the boat, on either side of my new hole in it, and start rocking it back and forth. With each period of its swing, I push it more and more, until eventually, the two men are thrown out of the boat, and it is flipped over. Now, it will float somewhat, although a few inches under the water. The two men flounder around in the shallow water until they can reach the shore.

By this time, all thirty men on the beach have gathered near the boat. I get out from under the overturned boat and come up to the surface. Just a few lengths away from me are the soldiers, with the two men who’d been in the boat just coming out of the water. I casually blow the water out of my lungs and clamber onto the upside-down boat.

“Good evening, gentleman,” I say cheerfully, once my throat is completely free of water. “Fancy a little game?”

One of the soldiers, obviously in charge, sends another soldier running up to the camp. The main camp—where the Treyfeish are waiting to come up from under the roots of the inson tree—is about forty lengths away. I can already see some more soldiers come running from the main camp, alerted by the boat sentries’ yelling, and hopefully, there will soon be even more. On shore, there are several large torches that have been lit, and they unfortunately cast enough light for me to be clearly seen.

The man in charge yells, “Get him!” to his men. Several of them look a bit hesitantly at their officer and then start into the water after me. Their commander directs a few other men to start pulling in the boat by the attached anchor rope. This, I want to put a stop to. I crawl forward to the end of the boat and give a sharp yank on the rope. It comes free, pulling a section of the boat off with it. Man, that’s a strong rope!

The men on shore start cursing and soon most of the thirty men are in the water, circling around me to come at me from all sides at once. I suppose the thought of thirty soldiers wanting to kill me should be frightening. In truth, breathing the seawater frightened me a lot more than these men. Even a fisherman is scared of drowning. Actually, a fisherman is probably especially frightened of drowning, since it is quite an occupational hazard and happens from time to time, even to the best of us. So, when the men come at me, I am actually quite calm.

I sit on the floating wooden boat, waiting patiently for the nearest man to get to me. He has a longsword and there are two more men directly behind him. He splashes through the water, hell-bent on my destruction, but he looks more than a little frightened. Right before he gets to

me, I sense something coming at me. It is a barrage of arrows, shot from six archers on shore. The six arrows hurtle towards me at the same time, and I can tell that five of the six are right on target for my head. I quickly drop down flat and let them whiz by, to splash into the water behind me. One of the arrows was aimed a little lower and harmlessly thunks into the side of the boat.

“Is that the best you can do?” I taunt the men on shore.

By this time, the first three men are near enough to the boat to reach me with their swords. Two more arrows come at me and I pluck these out of the air with either hand. If they were crossbow quarrels, I could fling them back, but regular arrows don’t fly very well when thrown by hand. I stand up quickly, arrow in either hand, and lunge forward, to plunge both arrows into the gut of the nearest swordsman, who had already clambered aboard the opposite end of the landing boat. He falls backwards with a surprised look on his face and lands in the water with a splash of ocean spray and his own intestinal bleeding. I am aghast at the violence of my unthinking maneuver and while everything else happens, one part of me continues to watch the bleeding man struggle and drown in the shallow water. This is war and it’s not pleasant. That, I will have to get used to.

Meanwhile, the other two swordsmen are on either side of me and the attack on their friend seems not to faze them a bit. They have obviously seen more combat than I have. They have also trained together before, because their movements seem very well coordinated. They approach me from opposite sides of the boat, keeping me from focusing all of my attention on both of them. Right behind them are coming a whole slew of their fellows, so I will have to be quick. As long as they don’t storm me en masse, I should have no problem. That’s why I chose this boat, in the middle of the water, on which to fight them. If things get too hairy, I can always swim away and they won’t be able to follow me.

The first of the swordsmen charges me, while simultaneously his friend does the same. I turn toward the closer man and dive off the boat, right at him, swatting aside his defending blade with my open palm. I smack into his midsection, causing him to fly backward into the water and lose his grip on his blade. Winded and confused, he starts choking on the water he inhales and begins to drown.

Well, two men down, twenty-eight or so to go. I quickly crouch down until the water is over my head and then burst out of the water like a rock from a slingshot, flipping over in midair, to stand once more upon the overturned boat. The previous man’s face is now conveniently at my knee-level, so I kick him right in the face before he has a chance to react, using the side of my foot to crush the left side of his face in. He stumbles back and drops his blade, which I gratefully pick up. Now I have a weapon.

While I was busy dispatching the first three men, a group of six had time to reach me. A rain of arrows from shore precedes their approach and I dodge three of the arrows and bat the rest out of the air with my sword. All six men rush me at once, from all around. The arrows stop for a while, as there is as much chance of hitting a fellow soldier as there is of hitting me. Well, actually, there’s probably more of a chance of the archers hitting the swordsmen than me; I am a lot faster than they are. My blood starts pumping furiously in my veins, until it sounds loud enough to be heard by the soldiers attacking me. I see the world slow down until I can count the slow drops of sweat that fall off of each man’s face in the tropical heat, even though it is nighttime. Suddenly, I feel nigh on invincible. I have time to think about what I want to do next as they reach me at once.

Fortunately for me, the boat is wide enough that if I stand in the very middle of it, they can't reach me without climbing onto it. I have a sword now and my reach is considerably longer with it; I intend to use it and not just as a bludgeoning weapon, as I've done heretofore. If I have to shed some blood, then so be it. One of Remen's Laws, based on an old proverb in Brigan's Land, says, "Even a sheep will bite." I have had enough of the people I love dying around me and if I have to kill some Brigan soldiers to protect the Treyfeish, then that is what will happen. Blood will flow.

The six men gather around my little impromptu fortress, one of them yells, "Now!" and then all six men try to scramble aboard at once. I am highly impressed at the level of coordination and training that these men show, versus the shoddy performance I have seen from the Brigan soldiers up until now. The command staff must have put their very best in charge of the defense of the landing boats. This is unfortunate for me, but it means the Treyfeish shouldn't have to face much in the way of resistance in their burning of the Brigan's supplies. Speaking of which, I wonder how things are going? No matter, the moment at hand is all I should be thinking of. My time sense is still stretched out enough that I can calmly watch the men try to get on the boat.

One thing I didn't consider: with the weight of the six men, plus myself, the boat will no longer float. It sinks down to the bottom of the sandy shore and this is the end of my temporary fortress. The six men come at me with all of their swords out, carefully spaced out enough to not get in each other's way. I abandon my former plan with dealing with them; instead, I jump up in the air and over their heads as high and as far as I can, in the direction of the beach. I don't want the water to slow me down. Now that my boat is no longer floating, the water would hinder me more than the men; especially if I just stand in one spot, where they can idly take turns cutting at me. At least on the beach, I can freely move at high-speed and only so many men can come at me at once.

So, it's out of the crab-pot and into the net. I leave the six men behind me, still standing on top of the boat and land on the beach, where the remaining bulk of the soldiers are. They are surprised by my prodigious leap and I take advantage of their surprise and madly wade into the fray, swinging my blade as fast as my hyperactive thoughts can visualize. I cut a wide swathe through the circle of men, killing four of them before they can even move. I pick up another blade and use one in either hand, not even surprised to find out that I'm suddenly ambidextrous.

I find that battle is a lot easier when I am not worried about harming my opponents. I do every dirty trick I can think of: kicking sand up into the eyes of some soldiers, cutting down men who have their back to me, and generally not giving anyone a chance to defend themselves, if I can. After all, any of these men would do the same to me if given the chance. They certainly hadn't minded cutting down the Treyfeish when they had the opportunity, and they stabbed Taruhra right in the middle of his greeting them. I have no stomach for bloodshed, but I have no other choice. I embrace the necessity and try to kill as many of these men as possible. Each man I dispatch is one less person who will be able to harm the Treyfeish. And of course, me.

After a few minutes of close combat, the beach is littered with the bodies of the soldiers I have killed. No matter how hard they try, the Brigan soldiers might as well be standing still, with their arms down at their sides, for all the good it does them. They just can't touch me, with their swords or with their arrows. I am lightning incarnate and the Fist of Doom. I go a little crazy for a while, trying not to think of the people around me as people, but merely as practice target dummies. However, practice dummies don't bleed when you slash their face open or moan when you hack off limbs and fingers.

Finally, after the bulk of the original men are dispatched, I face a new group of freshly arrived soldiers. There are two soldiers who get to me first and they split up and try to come at me from different sides. They move like they have practiced together for several years and have worked out several different moves for various scenarios. One of them comes at me with a huge downward slash of his sword and the other one seems to hold back for a bit. I turn to meet the attacking man, and I drop my two swords to catch the sword coming at me, with my bare hands quickly slapped onto either side of the thin, sharp blade. This is a trick I saw Gingrich—my old weapons master—do once before and it highly impressed me. I feel so far above these men that I can't resist showing off. I am slightly surprised that the man now behind me doesn't try to take advantage of this opportunity to slash at my back. Instead of that, while my attention is somewhat diverted, he does something that Gingrich would have strongly disapproved of: he throws his sword at me! A highly unconventional move!

The thrown sword completely takes me by surprise. I sensed that the soldier behind me hadn't moved forward and I thought that he was temporarily harmless. The thrown sword catches me right in the middle of my back, embedding itself deeply into my spine. Fire shoots through my whole body, and my hands clench up of their own volition and release the sword blade that I'm holding. The man in front of me stumbles forward at the abrupt release of his sword.

Pain...shooting waves of searing pain, the like of which I've never felt, before or after my transformation at the Fist of the Gods. I find myself unable to move, locked into a statue-like rigidity. I fall forward onto my face in the sand.

"MOVE ELIAS!" I yell to myself, unable to see or even turn my head. I can't even seem to breathe very well, and my mouth is full of gritty, blood-soaked sand. I muster every ounce of will and determination, every fiber of my very being, into getting up and getting away. I remember the Many/One's explanation to me about the limitations of my human flesh. I seemed to have reached some limit to damage my body can take; for no matter how hard I try, no matter what strength of will or resolve I summon, I can't move.

The Brigans swarm onto me like ants on a dead rat. I suppose it's a good thing that I can't feel the rain of blows, kicks, and punches that pummel my body into unconsciousness.

The mighty has fallen, I think to myself, and then all goes dark.

#

Tehanu

"Do you hear that? He's started." I motion for my warriors to move up closer to the exit. Looking out from underneath the roots of the inson tree, I can see a couple of fires burning dully in the night. From a ways off, I can hear people running and the mass of guards that had been huddled around the fire starts to thin out a little. "Let's give Ee-rai just a few more minutes," I suggest to my warriors getting anxious behind me. They all want Eli to succeed, but I can tell they hope that there are some Briganders for them to kill. We owe them quite a lot for what they've done. Eli means well, but he just doesn't have the stomach for doing what needs to be done. I guess the Brigans are his people, even though you can't tell it by the way they act.

Soon, our patience is rewarded. Some captain or officer—I don't know how the Brigan chain of command works—comes running back to the main camp and starts yelling something. I can't understand a word of what he says, but almost everyone gets up from their campfires and starts running to the beach. "Come on," I say, waving my hand towards the tents.

My warriors—ten men and four women—pick up their spears, machetes, and the swords that Nenen traded us and follow me out of the hidden exit. There are six Brigans still left around

the main campfire and we are on them before they know what is happening. It helps that they have their attention craned upon the beach, but I doubt they can see anything from here.

“Taste the worudekku, you bastards!” I yell, swinging it round my head before crushing the nearest man’s skull with it. My worudekku, which used to be Taruhra’s, feels good in my hands. I never thought I would have the Gods’ right to use the greenstone club, something that only the chief of the People gets to use in battle. I’m sorry that it took Taruhra’s death to give me the chance.

As soon as I see the man’s blood come welling out, something snaps inside of me. My head fills up with a red mist and the blood-rage takes me.

Around me, the other six soldiers are quickly dealt with, and we move as one out to the tents. The women start opening up as many cans of the oil as they can find, while two warriors stay behind to help protect them.

“Kill them all!” I scream madly, waving the bloody worudekku in the air. We go out to find some more soldiers.

#

I wanted to make a quick hit and run, but it’s been a long time since I’ve seen battle and I forgot about the berserker rage that comes over me when I fight. I thought I outgrew that long ago, but when the blood-rage takes ahold of me, I start running around, killing anything that moves. Soon, the main camp is deserted and my warriors finally have to physically grab me to prevent me from running out to the beach to help Eli.

“Tehanu, let the blood-rage go!” one of the warriors yells in my face.

It takes a while. I struggle for a bit but then calm down and nod at him. My black-painted face is smeared with my own saliva and I wipe it off with the back of my hand. Behind me, the women have fired the tents and the oil, and it burns brightly in the night. My heart is racing like the waves through the coral.

“Okay, I’m all right,” I gasp to the men holding me. “We need to get out of here.”

We run back to the inson tree and then I notice the blood streaming out of my cut leg. I never even felt or noticed the wound until now. I have no idea who cut me. “Damn it,” I swear in Brigan. I feel embarrassed to have lost control on the battlefield.

I wait outside the tree while everyone crawls into the waiting roots. Finally, the last warrior is down and I follow them in. One of the women, Jonara, turns to me and says, “Did you see what happened on the beach?”

“Eh? What happened? I—the blood-rage...”

Jonara is weeping and can barely speak. “Ee-rai, the Fist of the Gods, has been captured.”

I feel the blood-rage rise again in me, and my vision turns red. My men have to drag me down the tunnel, kicking and screaming in fury.

“Eli!”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Elias

“Elias! Elias! Can you hear us?”

What’s going on? What happened? Where am I?

“Relief. Feelings of anxiety lifted.”

The Many/One? “What’s going on?”

“We’ve been injured. Very seriously, it would appear. We’re fixing the damages, but it will be a while before you can move. You/We almost died before we took direct control over your heart and other basic organ functions. You’ve been severely paralyzed.”

“Paralyzed? I don’t understand. How can I be paralyzed?”

“You took a sword right in the spine! Don’t you understand the least little bit about how your body works?”

I can hear definite irritation in the Many/One’s voice. And no, I guess I don’t understand how my body works.

“Your spinal cord was completely severed. Your brain sends signals along it to every part of your body. Right now, your brain can’t signal so much as your little toe.”

Well, that accounts for the beach episode and why I couldn’t move, no matter how hard I tried. “Surely you can fix it?” I don’t want to be a vegetable for the rest of my life.

“And neither do we. Of course, yes, we can fix it. But your body is in a very helpless state right now. This could be the end of your/our existence. The Brigans can kill us and we find that we don’t want to die.”

The Many/One sounds scared. A new emotion for it?

“Damn you, yes, it’s a new emotion for us and we don’t like it the least little bit.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said ‘the least little bit.’ I know you get your speech patterns from me, but—”

“That’ll do,” the Many/One says quite curtly. “I don’t think you understand the seriousness of this. If you die—destroyed completely by fire, which is the Sun Church’s favorite way of disposing of dead bodies—we die as well. We are currently debating with ourselves on whether to abandon your body before it’s too late.”

“Abandon me? You’d do that? Desert the sinking ship?”

There is a long pause before the Many/One responds. “Yes, we would. Maybe we will. We haven’t decided yet.”

“You said you wanted drama. Isn’t this dramatic enough for you?” I can’t resist taking advantage of the Many/One’s distress. I don’t mean to be mean, but the Many/One has always seemed to speak from a position of superiority over me. For once, it’s scared and confused. I seem to be strangely blasé about this whole affair.

“We didn’t think that things would go this bad, this quickly. You can sense a hundred arrows coming at you, but not one big, metal sword?”

They’ve got me there. I quickly replay the battle scene over in my head, looking for what went wrong. “I guess I got a little over-confident. It all seemed so easy. I felt like I was invulnerable for a bit there.”

The Many/One is silent for a long while. Finally, it says, in what I can only call an apologetic tone of voice, “Well, er, um—we might be partly to blame for that. We had your body jacked up pretty fierce on—well, we don’t have a name for it, but it makes your reactions even faster than normal. We wanted you to be able to fight at your best and the drug we flooded your blood with also helps to lessen some of the—shall we say—moral qualms that you’ve been

having about killing. It seems that one of the side-effects is that it impairs your reasoning ability a mite."

"It seems? It seems? You didn't know beforehand?" Now I am quite mad.

"Please don't be. Mad, that is. We don't know everything. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It was working, too. You took out thirty men in just a few minutes."

"And took a sword in the back, as well! Now I'm paralyzed!"

"We're working on that! Okay, we made a mistake. We admit it. We even feel— sorry?" The Many/One sounds confused, as if it has never had to apologize before.

"I think that if you look closely, you'll see that the correct expression is 'I'm sorry.' It takes a big man to admit it, even if you are smaller than the smallest part of me."

"Okay, we're sorry. We messed up. Our Hosts before you didn't have near so complicated lives. We find that being a human is much more difficult than being a sessile plant form. There—you've got your apology. Everything got crazy and we perhaps went a little too far. Now, what are we going to do about it?"

"Well, if you have to leave me, to save yourselves, I guess I can't blame you. I would say that you should probably hang on for a while. It seems we're not dead yet and if we're still alive, there must be some reason for it."

"It will take a little time for us to untangle ourselves from you. If we don't start now, we may not have time to do it later."

"Well, life's a gamble. If you leave now, you just might miss the best part. I doubt that I'll die anytime before around high noon, which is when the Church usually burns bodies in sacrifice to the Unnamed. You'll probably have enough time to get out, if you have to."

There is another long pause, while the Many/One considers my logic. "Probably? We don't like the sound of that. But, most of us agree. And, as you say, life's an action predicated upon the assessment and prediction of all relevant risk factors—a gamble."

"That's the spirit! Look at the emotions you've learned lately: irritation, fear, regret, and maybe even some courage. I don't know what emotion apology is but you've got a good handle on that as well. Hell, might as well throw in some humility, while you're at it!"

"We find that we don't particularly care for most of those you named. But, you're right. Those are all very human emotions. This bravery thing sounds interesting, though, almost as much as humor. It would be quite brave of us to hang around for a while longer, wouldn't it?"

"Very brave. I wish I had the luxury. But I can't go anywhere, so I'll be here regardless. By the way, where is here, anyway?"

"Well, from what we can tell by monitoring your senses while you were unconscious, it seems you—"

#

Suddenly, I awake, and find a man striking me repeatedly across the face with a hand encased in a metal gauntlet. Needless to say, it is quite painful.

#

Remen

"Give me that jig there, will ya Reen?" I say, gesturing to the pile of crap next to the docks. "Not the new one; I want to use the old one. It's longer."

Reen and I are just getting ready to head out and do some fishing. The only good thing to come out of all this craziness after the pox is that I can go out fishing now whenever I want to. So much for retirement.

"Ahoy there, Remen, Reen. C'n I have a second with ya?"

I turn around in irritation at being interrupted, until I notice who it is. “Oh, it’s you, Jenson. I thought you might be one of them crazy folk that keeps bothering me ‘bout Elias.”

Jenson looks sheepish for a second and says, “Well, actually, that’s kind of what it’s about. At least the crazy folk, anyway. Why don’t we pop into the tavern for a sec?”

“You mind if Reen comes along? We were going to do some fishing today.”

Jenson looks a wee bit nervous and hems and haws around for a moment. “Well, I kinda wanted to ask you something in private—if’n you don’t mind there, Reen,” he says, giving him a weak smile.

I turn around to look at Reen, and he smiles mischievously at me. “Go ahead, gramps. I’ll start without ya. I’ll be back in—how about a couple of hours?”

I look at Jenson and he nods. I smile a thank-you to Reen and say, “Well, don’t you be forgetting ‘bout me, hear? But, make it around lunchtime instead, eh?” I give him back the old jig, and he waves a quick goodbye to me before pushing off.

I sigh deeply and motion to Jenson for us to go. “Well, Mr. Mayor. You buying?”

#

At the tavern, we put away a few pitchers first, and then Jenson finally gets to the point. “I suppose you’ve noticed the little movement that’s started lately?”

“By the Sun God’s left scrotum, how could I not? It all started with that fool Malia girl badgering me constantly, and then other folk started doing the same. She’s started some kinda damn cult! The cult of Elias, would you believe it?”

“I wouldn’t have believed it, if I wasn’t seeing it with my own two eyes. That Malia came to me the other day and I guess I kinda let slip a few of the things that we’ve been talking about.”

I roll up my eyes and put my head back as far as it will go. “You didn’t?”

Jenson fidgets in his chair for a bit. “Well, ah—”

“Okay, okay. I get the picture. She’s awful persistent; I’ve seen that already.”

“Yeah, and she’s got this crazy idea that Elias is some kinda prophet. She came to the mayor’s house the other day and brought about eight or nine of her little friends with her. She’s got them fooled into thinking that she got some kinda vision from looking into Elias’ eyes.”

“Eight or nine? There’s not many young people left in Seadown. That must be ‘bout most of ‘em.” I can’t believe that anyone from Seadown would listen to an outsider like Malia, who wasn’t brought up around these parts. For Gods’ sake, she doesn’t even have a decent accent!

“Well, actually, I think all but three of them are from some of the surrounding villages. She’s been walking around from here to the Greymaker Forest, telling anyone who’ll listen to her about this vision she says she had.”

“Gods-be-damned! She think she’s a missionary or something?”

Jenson nods and laughs. “Sounds crazy, don’t it?”

“Well, what did she want with you?”

Jenson frowns. “I thought at first they were some kinda mob, coming to get me for putting arrows into Elias. But they were all very nice and polite, just wanting to know if I’ve ‘seen the Light,’ as they put it.”

“I tell ya, Jenson, that’s the same kinda nonsense she been going on about with me. Well, what exactly’s bothering ya? ‘Cepting the obvious, I mean.”

Jenson looks around the tavern suspiciously for a moment. “I don’t know how to say this without sounding like an ass, so I’ll just come out with it. She also seemed to think that Elias might have another name.”

Uh-oh. I hope Jenson’s not going where I think he is. “Another name?” I ask innocently.

“Um, maybe a wee bit shorter than ‘Elias.’ Does the name ‘Eli’ mean anything to you?”

“Why don’t you just tell me what it means to you?” I say, trying not to look too guilty.

“Damn it, Remen! Don’t be coy with me! You know plumb well what I’m talking about!” Jenson looks around again and lowers his voice. “Eli Brigan, that’s who. Fifth son of old Jenter. She thinks he’s the gods-damned savior of Brigan, a prophet, and the rightful ruler of our little island.”

“Now how could she possibly know that?” I let slip before I can catch myself.

“I notice that you’re not denying it. I thought as much, after your little hint about the Brigan monarchy replacing the Sun Church. So, is it true?”

It looks like the tuna’s out of the net now. “Well, there might be something to it. Oh, hell—yes, it’s true. He’s really Eli, his Majestic Frigging Self.”

Jenson sits back in his chair and the blood—and beer—drains out of his face. “Well, I—well. I’m speechless.”

“That’s a first time for you, Jenson. Tell me this—how did she find out? I haven’t told a soul.”

Jenson starts to come back to life. He hurriedly drains off the rest of the pitcher and then motions to the serving girl—actually, a tired woman of about forty-five—for another one. He clears his throat noisily and then says, “That’s kinda the reason I wanted to talk to you alone. I’m guessing that you did talk to somebody. Think about it. Who is one person that you would trust? Who did you probably tell as soon as you got back to Seadown?”

“Dammit, Jenson, now don’t you be coy! I didn’t say nothing to a single soul. Well, ‘cepting of course the boy...” Oh gods.

“I think you got the idea now, Remen ol’ boy. One of them young’uns that was with her was that lady-killer grandson of yours. Reen.”

Reen? My very own grandson?

“Gods-be-damned!” is all I can say.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Elias

“Wake up, damn you! Wake up!”

I find myself opening my eyes, almost against my will. I would like to play dead or unconscious and learn more about what is going on, but being pummeled in the face with a metal glove has a way of making your eyes open. In front of me is a man I don't recognize, wearing the ubiquitous black robes of a Sun priest over chain mail. A raised cowl covers his face. He is reaching through the bars of the cage that surrounds me to strike me, and when my eyes pop open, he notices, and then whacks me once again for good measure.

“So the heretic awakes!” is all he says to me. He backs up away from my cage, a little frightened but trying not to show it. He sits down on a barrel and stares at me for a while, like you would a strange vermin you've never seen before.

I take this momentary reprieve from having my face bashed in to look around me. I am in the brig of the flagship and my body is completely wrapped around with thick, heavy chains. I assume it is the flagship, because I can feel the slight rocking that tells me I am in a boat or ship of some kind, and I can sense a vast distance of water beneath me. This tells me that we are no longer anchored off the coast of Treyfeish; it would seem that we are en route back to Brigan. There is no one else in the lower hold of the ship except myself and the priest across from me. I am sitting in the floor, with my back propped up against something; I think it is an empty barrel, but I can't move my head more than a few inches to one side or the other to check for sure, because of the thick chains encircling my neck. My long black hair is crusted with blood and mud and smells like something died in it. My body, from neck to toes, is trussed up in chains. I have no feeling whatsoever in my lower extremities; I can feel my upper chest but everything below that is completely dead.

I assume that the Many/One is frantically trying to repair my severed spinal cord, but since I can't feel a thing yet, I can't tell. With the amount of thick chains on me, I doubt I could do much anyway, even if I was completely restored. I have no idea of what day it is or how long I was unconscious. Perhaps the Many/One could tell me for sure; however, before it could tell me much, our conversation was abruptly terminated by this priest's fist.

Having nothing to do and no way of doing it, I settle for glaring at the priest, in the most intimidating fashion I can. He blanches a bit, then gets up briefly, as if to strike me again, and then seems to think better of it, and sits back down. “You're not so tough, now, eh?” he says to me, not entirely convinced himself as to the veracity of his statement.

I clear my throat and say, “Why don't you come over here a little closer and let's find out?”

He blanches again and tries to steel himself to take me up on my suggestion. I can see him debating with himself about it. He eventually decides to err on the side of caution and says instead, “You won't be saying that when we get back to Sun City.”

I can't help but laugh at that, in spite of the situation. “You actually called it ‘Sun City,’ didn't you? I know you Sun Church people have been trying to rename everything, ever since the Cleansing, but ‘Sun City?’ It's ‘Brigan City’ and I bet you won't find three people outside of the capital who don't call it that!”

The man scowls and I can tell I scored a point there. Although the Church calls our island, “The Land of the Sun,” almost no one uses it. Most people still say “Brigan's Land,” or “Brigan,” for short. I guess it makes sense that they would try to rename Brigan City as well.

You can't change several thousand years of habit—even with fifty years to do it in—by Church decree. Not without killing ninety percent of the population.

He changes the subject to something less embarrassing to the Church. "So you really think you're a royal Brigan, do you? We killed all the Brigans!" he says with a laugh.

"I'm assuming that when you say 'we,' you mean the Church. I think the Cleansing was a little before your time, there, sonny."

"The fact remains! The Brigan line is dead, thank the Unnamed."

It may only be a matter that will soon be rectified, but the Brigan line is not dead. Not yet, anyway. I start to mention this fact and then I think better about it. I have a tendency to be a smartass, and even the old, crotchety man that I am, I didn't become old without getting at least slightly wiser. I owe this person no explanation and it would probably be better if I kept my usually big mouth shut. So, I sit here and say nothing in response.

The priest waits for a while and then tries to bait me some more. "You can't possibly expect anyone to believe that you're really Eli Brigan. He would be almost ninety years old now!"

Why does everyone want to make me out as even older than I really am? I try and resist correcting him and fail in the end. "Actually, eighty-two..." I say, and then stifle anything more.

"You really want people to believe that?" he asks, with a shake of his head in disbelief.

This time, I stubbornly remain quiet. He gets up, finding some courage from somewhere, and comes up to the bars of my cell. Having watched me for a least five minutes and not seeing me move in the slightest gives him the nerve he needs to approach me. He cautiously reaches through the bars towards me and then smacks me with his mailed hand. He quickly draws his hand back, like a man testing hot waters and finding them scalding. I try to ignore this slap and it only gives him more guts to hit me. He does it again, slightly harder than last time.

"You can do that all day, if you need the exercise, but it doesn't hurt me in the slightest," I inform him as calmly as I can. He seems like the sort of cowardly sadist that would only enjoy any sign of pain I would give him. This, I stubbornly refuse to do. Besides, it actually doesn't hurt that much, and I silently thank the Many/One and my paralyzation for that.

He hits me one last time, putting his back into it, to show me who is in charge of this situation. My head is rocked back against the chains around my neck and his metal-sheathed fist cuts my lip open, but it closes up almost as fast as it opens. A few drops of blood drip down onto my chains, along with a line of saliva that he knocked out of my mouth. I smile up at him, and he turns pale once again, the fun taken out of his sadism.

"Senton, that will be enough!" a voice yells from behind me. The priest battering me—obviously Senton—guiltily looks up and pulls his hand out of the bars. "I thought I told you to send for me when he awoke?"

Senton looks around guiltily for a moment. "I got tired of waiting and decided to wake him up myself. He just woke up," lies Senton, daring me with his eyes to correct him.

I stay silent, deciding to let Senton have his little lie. Whoever it is stays behind me where I can't see him.

"It took you long enough," Senton mumbles.

"That'll be all, Senton! I had a very interesting meeting concerning our captive to attend to. You can go up top, now. I want to talk to the heretic for a while."

Senton nods and picks up a bag of his things that I wasn't able to see before. He quickly leaves with a self-satisfied smile on his face and also looks somewhat relieved that his guard duty is over.

“So, you must be the holy man,” the voice says as the man walks around to get a better look at me.

Holy man? Where did that come from? The man is tall, much taller than the average Brigan, and he is also wearing the black robe of the Sun priests. However, there are two orange sunbursts embossed on each of his sleeves that I’ve never seen before; but then, I don’t have very much experience with the Sun Church priests. It must designate his rank—or how many babies he’s eaten, for all I know. His cowl is up and it obscures his face.

“From ‘heretic’ to ‘holy man,’ in three minutes? I would say that I’m neither, but I’ll lay claim to heretic, if it means that I’m against the Sun Church.”

“From what Corvan and Distan tell me, you’ve also laid claim to being a Brigan. A royal Brigan, that is.”

I decide to keep with my previous reticence. What do I have to prove? It’s not like I will be able to talk anyone to death, much though I would like to. The new priest waits for a while and then continues, “I’m sure you’re wondering why you’re still alive.” He doesn’t phrase it as a question.

As a matter of fact, I am wondering just that very thing, but I say nothing.

“The Church of the Sun is decidedly interested in you. You gave us quite a lot of grief back in Treyfeish. My men—particularly Corvan—wanted to kill you outright, but I think that the Bishop will want to question you personally.”

“You’re just wasting your time,” I tell him defiantly. “I won’t tell your Church anything.”

“Ah, but you see, we don’t need to ask you anything! We already know everything we need to know about you.”

I doubt that severely. I remain quiet, trying to resist the urge to comment. If this priest knew even half of what there was to know...

The priest holds up a hand and gives a slight bow of his head, as if in apology. “But where are my manners? My name is Kusai, and I believe I already know your name. Eli, isn’t it, or do you prefer Elias?” the priest asks me. His tone of voice suggests a sly smile that I can’t see through the cowl obscuring his face.

Again, I say nothing. I am not going to make things easy for this priest, no matter how polite he starts out. I wonder where he’s from, since “Kusai” is not a Brigan name. The way he pronounces it is almost like “Ksai”—the “u” after the “k” being barely voiced. I also wonder about him calling me “Elias.” The Sun Church shouldn’t know anything about Elias the fisherman. So far, I’ve only used the name “Eli” with them.

As if Kusai reads my suspicions right out of my mind, he says, “Yes, we know all about ‘Elias,’ and that you’ve been hiding in Seadown for the last fifty years.” He pauses to get my reaction.

I sit, silent and sullen. So what? So he knows about Elias. Maybe he’s talked to someone from Seadown. Although, I don’t hardly see how that could be, since the Brigans came to Treyfeish before I even left Seadown.

As if pounding in his words with a verbal hammer, he continues. “We also know all about your little journey to the Fist of the Gods and the Many/One,” he says, accentuating each in turn. Two hard swings of the hammer.

“What?” I can’t help but gasp in shock and amazement. How is that possible?

Like Senton had bashed me in the face with his fist, Kusai keeps swinging. “We know about your affinity with the Blessed Sun and the way it feeds you. We know about the plague that killed your family and the royal Brigan lineage you claim to possess.”

Kusai’s words have far more impact on me than Senton’s fist did. My mind reels from the sheer impossibility of it. Kusai knows things that there is no way possible that he could know. There are only two people in the entire world that know about the Many/One, and both of them are leagues away from here. Remen is back in Seadown and Nenen should be well on her way there, by now.

“We know everything there is to know about you and your little adventures. All thanks to our new little friend,” he says, gesturing off behind me where I can’t turn around to look. I hear footsteps shuffle behind me and Kusai beckons with his hand. “You might as well come in where he can see you,” he says to someone behind me.

I hear the footsteps get closer, slowly and hesitantly. A million crazy thoughts and wild theories go through my head in the blink of an eye. The reality is something I never would have suspected.

“You bitch!” I yell as loud as I can. “How could you betray me?”

“I believe you two have already met?” says Kusai, with a snicker.

Standing in front of me—looking guiltily at her feet—is Nenen.

#

Nenen (a little earlier)

“Commander Jino, you can’t possibly expect me to do that!”

Jino stands up and pushes his chair back with a loud screech. He’s not a tall man. In fact, I stand above him a few inches. I’ve always wondered what it’s like to go through life as a short man—or as any type of man, for that matter. How much of our life’s choices are influenced by both how tall we are and how people treat us because of our height? But then, to be fair, how much of our life’s choices are influenced by whether we’re packing the penis or not? I haven’t made up my mind yet about Jino. You know what they say about men of small stature and all things in proportion. . .

“Sub-commander Nenen,” he starts out, emphasizing the differences in our rank, “this point is not open for discussion! I have my orders from the Emperor, Himself, ke? This trade idea of yours is not without its merits, and under normal circumstances, I would laud your accomplishment. However, these are not normal circumstances. I commend you on obtaining this information about the Persephone; it makes my decisions a lot easier in dealing with the Brigans. But, since the Brigans are not directly responsible for her demise, it opens up other avenues that the Emperor has outlined for me.”

How can he be so callous? He’s seen what the Brigans did to these poor Treyfeish people. “What ‘other avenues’ are those?” I ask, looking down into his eyes.

Jino shakes his head and refuses to meet my gaze. “I’ve already told you that I’m not at liberty to discuss that.” He makes a slicing motion with his hand to show that the topic is closed. “This Eli character, however. What you’ve told me about him is most interesting, ke? You realize that the penalty for killing a Tretian soldier is death?”

“Oh, come on, Jino! You know as well as I that no court in Tretia would convict a man for killing in self-defense. We attacked him first, without properly identifying ourselves. He had no idea who we were. He thought we were Brigans, for Gods’ sake!”

“Ignorance is no excuse under the law. But I can be flexible about this. I’m not a hard man.”

Only a small man, both in stature and character, I think, but I wisely keep these thoughts to myself.

“However,” he continues, “he is a wanted felon by the Land of the Sun.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but how is that any of our business?” The prick! ‘Land of the Sun,’ indeed!

“I suppose that technically, it’s not. But, this Eli, he killed one of our own soldiers, injured three others, and he is the one that burned down the Persephone.”

“Jino!” I yell at him and then remember myself. “Sir. That ship was already deserted and infested with plague! How could he not have burned it down? That damned fool for a Grandhorn captain killed off all of his family and most of the village by coming to Seadown with the plague, ke? Wouldn’t you have done the same as Eli did?”

Jino avoids my eyes again, looking down at his feet. He sits back down at his scrimshawed table and absently plays with the map there. “I suppose I might. And I would have to face the consequences for destroying Tretian property. But it seems to me, that we have a way to take care of everything here.”

“What do you mean, ‘take care of everything’?”

“The Sun People want this man, he has committed crimes against both the Empire and his own country, and we have information about him that I believe their Church would be interested in. I do agree with you about the potential for trade here in Treyfeish, ke? Perhaps we might convince the Brigans to give us all trading rights to the island in exchange for information about Eli. He is an outlaw wanted for crimes by both nations.”

I can’t believe what Jino is telling me. The little weasel! “Jino, we don’t have to make any deal with the Brigans! The Treyfeish don’t belong to them, and they have already agreed to a trading deal with us. They are entitled to make their own treaties, as is their right as a sovereign nation.”

“Sovereign nation? I don’t know about that. It seems to me that the Brigans have preempted any rights the Treyfeish might have had, by right of fair conquest. Making a deal with the Brigans would also help to further my, ah—”

“Secret agenda?” I interject.

“The Emperor’s plans, Nenen, and that will be quite enough from you. You will do as I command in this matter, or I’ll have you up on charges of insubordination.”

I bite back my reply.

“And,” he goes on, as if he hadn’t just threatened me, “like I said before, since you are the sub-c, and you know the most about this Eli person, I’d like you to deal with the Brigans personally. Discussion closed.”

All I can do is stand here, shocked and amazed that a Tretian officer could have so little regard for honor—his own, and especially, mine.

“I’ve already instructed the boatswain to take you to the Brigan flagship—the Sunthunder, I believe. I’d like you to take a letter from me to their commander, which the boatswain will give you when you get there. Under no circumstances are you to read the letter; it is part of the instructions I received from the Emperor. You have your orders, second commander, and I expect you to follow them to the letter! Dismissed!”

How could it have come to this? Eli, Eli, why must I betray you?

Part Three: Land of the Sun
Chapter Thirty

Malia

The trip to Fin-dapple is long, hot, and dry. By the time the Children of Eli get to Pisspot, we are all very tired. It took us nearly a week to make the trip from Seadown, because we stopped at every little village along the way to spread the word. Some villages resisted the Revelation, but even in those villages that feared us, inevitably a few of the younger ones listened and some followed. Our group now boasts about forty-five souls and we are growing with every day.

At first, I was scared to tell the people that we met the Truth, the Truth that the Church of the Sun has tried to hide from us for almost fifty years. However, each time I face the people, I can feel His light inside me, trying to get out. Now, it is all I can do to not shout it at the top of my voice as I walk along. Eli Brigan is alive and shall be the Savior of Brigan's Land!

"Reen, we should stop here, before moving into Fin-dapple."

Reen nods at my request and makes a face. "I can tell that not much has changed in Pisspot over the years. It's still a smelly, nasty place."

"All the more reason for them to hear about Eli."

"I suppose you've got a point there," he reluctantly agrees. "But how do you intend upon getting into Fin-dapple? The priests will stop us at the gate."

I already thought about that. "We were supposed to come here, but I don't know why yet. You'll just have to trust my vision from the Many That is One. They will have to help us. I don't know what form that help will take; we'll just have to rely on faith."

"Faith? That's a big thing to ask of the Children."

I nod and put my hand on Reen's shoulder. "Have we not made it thus far? The Children believe in you Reen. They can see the faith in me, but you have the face that inspires."

Reen looks somewhat embarrassed by my comment and by the warmth of my hand on his shoulder. He shuffles his feet and avoids my eyes. "Well, we should probably find a place to bed down for the night. Preferably some place not quite so near to this smell."

The Children of Eli move as one to the outer reaches of Pisspot. It has gotten quite dark and I can tell that everyone is tired from walking all day. We brought nothing with us other than what we could fit in one wagon, that we all take turns pulling. In it is merely a few tools, a little food, blankets, and some water. We've mainly been relying on the generosity of people we encounter along the way and what food we could find in Greymaker when we passed through it.

Eventually, we find a wide-open space next to an old, run-down house to bed down in. An old woman comes out of the house and shouts at us, "What do you think you-uns are doing here, eh? This place is all ready spoken for!" She is dirty and has wild, unkempt hair that looks at if it hasn't been washed since the last time it rained.

I start to say something, but Reen quickly holds up a hand to stop me and walks up to her. "We beg your pardon, ma'am, but we merely wish to spend the night next to your charming house, here," he says, gesturing to the ramshackle collection of boards, cast-off pieces of furniture, and outright garbage that passes for what's left of her domicile.

The old lady cackles and says, "Are ye daft, boy? I live in a pile of crap that the wind blows down every time it wants! You are a handsome enough laddy, there, but I'm thinking that you haven't got much in the way o' brains, eh?"

Reen merely smiles and says, “I’m not daft ma’am, and maybe we can do something about that wind. I’m pretty handy with a tool or two and so are a few of the rest of us. How about we shore up your walls and the ceiling a bit there in exchange for using your backyard?”

She looks a little non-plussed at that. “Ain’t never been anyone offering to help old Derry, before. If you do something about the walls falling in, then you’re welcome to sleep where’er you want. You can even warm my bed, laddy!” she cackles again.

Reen looks back at me and smiles. I nod at him and he and a couple other of the Children start to work on the old woman’s house.

Even though it is quite late by the time the old woman’s house is finished, before too long a crowd has gathered, curious about our little group of people that has come to their slums. Since Reen is busy with his tools, I take the opportunity to speak with them.

“What are you people doing in Pisspot?” asks a very thin man. He looks like he hasn’t eaten for at least several days. He also has a bright red rash covering his face and I notice that he walks with a pronounced limp.

“We have come to spread the Light,” I tell him, loud enough to be heard by the other people that have gathered around. They all look dirty and malnourished.

Someone in the crowd laughs and says, “We’ve had enough of the light, no thank-you! The priests have told us plenty about the light of their Sun God! You can’t eat the Sun God’s promises.”

“Then why do you listen to them at all?” I shout back.

Someone yells out, “Because they’ll rip our hearts out if we don’t, that’s why!”

“Have you not heard about the prophet?”

Obviously, no one has yet. In some of the villages we have been to, word of Eli had already spread before us. Probably over a hundred people saw the miracle that happened on the docks at Seadown and they told their neighbors. It looks like word hasn’t spread as far as Fintapple yet.

I stack a couple of old boxes on top of each other, climb up, and shout out, “Are you not tired of this poverty and disease? Do you not see the Church get rich and fat while you are prohibited from ‘soiling’ the inside of their fair city? How many of you would work if you had the chance, if you had the opportunity to make your life better?”

At first, no one says anything. They are too stunned that someone would yell such heresy against the Church, right on the front doorstep of the walls of the city. Finally someone shouts back, “And how are we to do that?”

“There is one man coming that shall change all that is! He is Eli, the Prophet, and he speaks with the word of the gods from the stars! He is the last of the royal Brigans and he shall throw off the yoke of the Sun Church from Brigan’s Land!”

Everyone laughs at that. Derry, the old woman, comes out of her newly improved house and hears my last comment. She speaks out, “And what can this Eli do for us, now? Can he feed us, clothe us, give us a job, and a roof o’er our heads?”

Indeed, could he? I don’t know the answer to that. I am quiet for just a second and the crowd starts to get a little restless. I can hear a few people grumbling and see them shake their heads. Reen comes up to me and motions for me to get down. I start to refuse, thinking that he is trying to shut me up. He quietly says, “Malia, get down. I have something I want to say to these people.”

We quickly exchange places and Reen clears his throat and yells out, “What can Eli do now, you ask? Why, the Children of Eli—which is our little group here—have already started!

We have repaired one of your houses and we could do the same for the rest of you. But, we won't!"

The crowd looks confused by that and so am I. Where is Reen going with this?

"Instead, we can take you somewhere where there are jobs to be had and where you can make an honest living. A place where the Church doesn't bother ye or ask any questions. A place where no man's name has to be in a book and where no one is ever killed for some Unnamed crazy god. The place is Seadown, just up the coast a bit."

One of the Pisspot locals shouts out, "But what about the plague? We heard that Seadown has the plague!"

Reen smiles and says, "The plague is over and now there is room for at least two hundred people, maybe more. All you have to do is make it to Seadown and I will see to it personally that all of you are cared for. We will have to rebuild some houses for you but in the meantime, there is room enough. What say ye?"

Several of the gathered people look skeptically at Reen but I can tell that many are interested in what he is saying. What follows is a long discussion between Reen and the Pisspot locals. Soon, some people run off to tell others of Reen's proposition and by morning, there is a huge crowd assembled.

Reen is quite tired but keeps on talking, answering any and all questions about Seadown and about Eli. Occasionally, I answer a question or two, but I let Reen do most of the talking. He has steadily become more and more of a charismatic speaker, and his good looks help him in dealing with the people. I marvel at how Reen has grown into his role as our spokesman, from the timid fisherman he used to be.

When morning breaks, several people have made up their minds to go back with us. Reen comes to me and say, "I think we should take back as many people as want to go with us to Seadown. Maybe we should just forget about going into Fin-dapple, this time."

"That was a great idea you had, about trying to repopulate Seadown. There is barely enough people left in the village to keep it running. Are you sure these people can help?"

Reen thinks a moment before replying, "I think that there is nothing about these people that we have to worry about. They've been denied the opportunity to work in the city, and all They're looking for is a chance to help themselves. Sure, there are a few that just want a free handout, but there won't be nothing like that back there at Seadown for them, not if I know Jenson. All I can promise them is the chance to make a living by the sweat of their brow, as people have been doing in Seadown forever."

"Well, then, why don't we go back to the village and leave Fin-dapple for next time?" I say, touching Reen again on the shoulder. He smiles at me and goes back out to the waiting refugees.

Later that day, as the Children—and about fifty new members—prepare to leave, someone from the Church finally takes notice of the activity going on outside the city's walls. Three cowed priests ride out on horses, along with about twenty soldiers. I notice that one of the priests has the sunbursts on his sleeves that mark him as a senior priest. As the priests and soldiers ride through Pisspot, I notice several of the people doing one of two things: some slink away and try to hide, while others look defiantly at the city men with some new backbone and courage. The men ride up to our group and the senior priest speaks, "Who are you and what are you doing?"

Reen quickly answers, "We are from Seadown and we have come to take back any who want to go with us."

“These people belong to Fin-dapple and the Church of the Sun!” laughs the senior priest.

“Belong? Belong? If these people belong to Fin-dapple, then why are they denied entrance into it? If they belong to the Sun Church, then why does the Church do nothing for these people?” Reen is starting to get angry and I feel a bit worried.

“They are under the protection of He Who is Not Named. He takes care of them and you’d best be careful, before we have to take care of you. Go back to your little village and leave these people alone!”

Reen starts to reply and then someone in the crowd flings a clump of feces at the priest. It hits him squarely in his cowed face and he is knocked off of his saddle. Immediately, the soldiers move around the priests in a protective phalanx.

“Go home priests!” shouts someone from the crowd and then the senior priest gets up from the ground. He pulls back his cowl and attempts to wipe off the filth covering him. The crowd watches the priest as he cleans off his face. At first, everyone is too stunned to move, after the surprise dung-throwing and then at the sight of the priest’s face. His skin is a dark brown, and not just from the dung covering it. He is also covered in a pattern of scars that I instantly recognize from my living in the capitol. I’ve seen those scars and that complexion before.

“He’s a Kryff!” I yell.

He is so angry that he can barely speak. “A, a—arrest them all!” he yells.

His own soldiers look at him curiously, obviously the first time that they have seen him uncowed. I hear one of them whisper to another, “By the Unnamed! He is a Kryff!”

The crowd, hearing the command for the soldiers to arrest them, and seeing the sight of the Kryff priest, go wild. They start throwing more dung and soon even rocks at the soldiers. The soldiers are confused and disorganized and try to avoid the rain of missiles coming at them, before finally turning around and bolting back to the safety of the city’s walls.

The three priests are dragged down in the fury of the crowd, with Reen shouting commands and trying to take charge. The whole affair only takes a few moments.

“Reen,” I say, yelling at him to get his attention over the roar of the crowd, “we’d better get out of here before those soldiers bring back reinforcements.”

He nods and starts yelling for everyone to leave. “Take anything and everything you can carry with you and let’s get out of here! Those soldiers will be back and no one will be spared!”

#

And so, on one fateful day, we both learned the true nature of the Sun Priests and also brought back over one hundred new people to Seadown. And to think—for all of these years, I was helping Kryffs. May Eli and the Many/One forgive me.

#

Elias

“I’ll let the two of you alone for a little bit. I’m sure that Eli has a lot he wants to say to you,” laughs Kusai, as he leaves the room. Just as he leaves my vision, to disappear out of whatever door is behind me, he stops and says, “I’m sure that I don’t have to remind you of this, but I’ll say it anyway. Don’t try anything funny! I’ll be back in five minutes and there’ll be guards outside the door. Senton assures me that Eli can’t move, but we do have the little helpers inside Elias to worry about.”

I sit here, with Nenen in front of me, too stunned to make a smart reply to Kusai. I try to look away from Nenen, but she comes up to me and puts her face up to mine.

"I had no choice, Eli! My commander wanted to make a deal with the Brigans and I was forced to go along with it," says Nenen, after Kusai leaves the room.

I can't move my body yet, but there's one thing I can do: I spit into Nenen's face. She draws back with a look of revulsion, wiping her face off on the back of her hand.

"I suppose I deserved that," she says, backing away from me.

"So what happens to the Treyfeish now? Did you turn them over the Tretians as well?" I ask, making no effort to disguise the venom I'm feeling towards Nenen.

"On the contrary! My commander made me exchange the information about you in exchange for the Brigans agreeing to leave Treyfeish alone. I may have betrayed you, but the Treyfeish people are free to live their own lives now, without fear of the Brigans coming back."

"And you believed that? That the Sun Church will just give up? As easy as that?"

Nenen starts pacing around in front of me. "I hope that they'll keep their word. I had no choice in the matter, ke? My officer's code says I have to obey my commander."

I think about that for a moment. I don't know how long Kusai will let the two of us talk. I think about what I know of Tretian honor, which isn't much. "So you're saying that it is more honorable to obey your commander than to honor an agreement made in good faith?"

Nenen fidgets for a bit before defensively replying, "We never made any agreement to keep your story a secret. We only made a trade agreement with the Treyfeish; one I still intend upon keeping. Now, I have the assurance of the Brigans that they'll let me keep it. So, I haven't betrayed my honor."

"Is the honor of Tretia so flexible, that you can rationalize away the betrayal of a comrade? I thought we had reached some level of understanding together. Granted, I never made you promise not to tell my story, but I thought it was at least understood that you wouldn't blab everything I told you to my most mortal enemy in the world."

Nenen doesn't say anything to that. I can see that she is agonizing about what she did. I try to keep ahold of my anger towards her, but it slowly evaporates as I watch her pace and fret. "Listen, I'm sorry about spitting on you. That wasn't very gentlemanly of me."

"I would have done the same thing, if our roles were reversed. I don't feel very good about myself right now." She finally stops pacing and sits down on the floor across from me. "So what's going to happen to you? What do the Brigans have in mind for you?"

I try to shrug my shoulders and find that I still can't move. "I don't know. I was hoping that you might be able to shed some light on that. Listen, I would still be here in these chains no matter what you told them. I guess you've saved us all a little time by letting them know what they wanted to know. Hells, you've probably saved me from some torturing, for all I know."

"That's very nice of you to say, but I still feel like a heel. We Tretians take our honor very seriously. At least, most of us do."

"You talking about your commander?"

"Yeah, this was his idea, after all. He's got some plan in mind and seems to want the Brigans' help with it. He gave me some kind of message to give to Kusai."

"Sounds like some pretty heavy political machinations are going on. I wish I could frigging move and do something about it!"

"You're really paralyzed? I thought that the Many/One..."

"I thought so too. It's surely been long enough now that I should have at least some feeling in my limbs."

Just then, Kusai comes back in and interrupts our conversation. “We’ll take you back to your ship now, Commander Nenen. We need to be getting back to Sun City in time for the Festival.”

Nenen stands up without another word to me. She makes a big show of ignoring me and leaves. I guess she doesn’t want Kusai to know anything about her motives concerning me. Of course, I don’t know much about her motives, either. As she leaves, I hear her ask Kusai, “What festival is that?”

“Ah, I guess you wouldn’t know, being a Tretian. It’s the Festival of the Sun, and this will be the fiftieth anniversary of the Sun Church here in the Land. Eli is going to play a big part in it.”

I can’t help but yell back, “What part is that?”

Kusai snickers and says, “Why, you’re going to be the guest of honor at the biggest party the Land has ever seen. Just as soon as we get you back to Sun City.”

Party? Guest of honor?

“Oh, and of course, as guest of honor, you’ll be first in line to be sacrificed to the Unnamed.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Elias

I don't know how much later it is, but I eventually fall asleep. There has been two priests constantly watching me at all times, but I have steadfast in refusing to speak to them. There is no more casual bludgeoning of me; perhaps Kusai told them not to. I am bored to tears and still unable to move in the slightest. I wonder what is taking the Many/One so long.

As soon as I am asleep, I found myself in the cave of my mind. Evidently, the Many/One wants to talk to me as well.

"Yes, that is correct. We are more than slightly worried about what Kusai told you."

"Well, that makes two of us. What d'ya intend on doing about it? And what's taking so blasted long in repairing the damage to my spine?"

"We are working at our fastest speed. Rather than simply just repairing the damage, we have decided to change the design slightly."

"Change the design? From what to what?"

"It's a little difficult to explain. Your old nervous system was made up of several different independent parts that pass information to each other by a crude method of signaling substances. We are changing that. What we are making is a direct line of a tough, diamond-like substance that will be both faster and hopefully resistant to cutting."

"Diamond? You're giving me a diamond spine?"

"Not exactly, and it's not a spine, so much as the spinal cord. It's actually just a flexible carbon chain, but very similar in structure to diamond. It will transmit information at much higher speeds and be impervious to another attack with a sword. We'd like to prevent anything like last time from happening again."

Diamond? That's the strangest thing I've heard of yet from the Many/One. "What are we going to do about this sacrifice thing that's supposed to happen when we reach Brigan City? Will you be finished in time?"

"We think so."

"That doesn't sound exactly promising. You realize that I'll probably be bound up in enough chains to bring down a horse? You have anything in mind for that?"

"Actually, we do. But we're not going tell you, in case the Sun people try to torture you."

"Torture? Surely, any torture wouldn't work on me, would it? Can't you just turn off anything that hurts?"

"Yes, we could. But most of us think it would take the Sun people a while to figure that out. They might just think you have a high pain threshold and keep pushing until they find it. It's better for us if they think that torture works. They might just decide to start lopping off arms and legs until you crack."

"You're scaring the hell out of me, d'ya know that? I don't like pain and I certainly don't want to be tortured. Gods, is there anything you can do to get me out of this mess before we hit Brigan?"

There is a long pause, while the Many/One considers this. "Actually, there's not much we can do. Repairing your spinal cord is tricky and delicate work. If not for us, you would be paralyzed for the rest of your life. You should be thankful that we can repair it at all, instead of impatient for us to finish."

"Don't think I'm not grateful and all, but you guy's kinda got me into this mess in the first place."

“Don’t worry about it. We want to live as much as you do. And by the way, when we’re finished with this new nervous system, you’ll be a lot faster than even before. Also, you should be able to make deliberate changes to your body a lot quicker, as well. One final side effect: if this works like we project—and we’re good at what we do—we should be able to communicate directly with each other, without your having to be asleep first.”

Communicate directly with them? Without having to do this “cave of the mind” thing? I don’t know what it will be like, constantly having someone inside my head. I can’t help but remember Tehanu’s question to me earlier: is that a good thing or a bad thing?

“We heard that!”

#

The Many/One

Our conversation with Eli finished, we let him go into real sleep. We enjoy talking to him immensely. Prior to this Host, we never “enjoyed” anything before. These new emotional algorithms are interesting, but some of the negative ones are quite disturbing. Fear, for example. We find that we don’t like that particular emotion.

It is fear that drives us now, into the new modifications we are making. We had to oversimplify what is going on, because Eli still lacks the vocabulary to understand us. We look forward to the time that we can directly communicate with his conscious mind.

One subsystem has a suggestion for the whole. “If you replay the latest conversation with Eli, you can see that he is not exactly excited about us intruding into his waking thoughts. He has a sense of privacy about him perhaps we should not disturb.”

We all consider this. A decision is reached. “We should communicate only sparingly with Eli. We do not want to interfere too much. Perhaps, in time, he might grow to resent us and we will probably be here for quite a while. Let us speak only in moderation with him, lest he find us annoying or distasteful. He is the Host; we are merely here to observe.”

That taken care of, we go back to reorganizing Eli. His nervous system has already been replaced with carbon fiber filaments. These will conduct electrical signals at almost light speed—a vast improvement over the chemical messengers that he used to use, even considering our former improvements to them. The carbon filaments also have a tensile strength several orders of magnitude better than the old nerve fibers. All that remains is connecting the filaments all across his system, and then we plan to use the same carbon filaments to reinforce bone structure and joints.

We feel a new emotion. Accessing Elias’ language centers, we see that it is called “guilt.” We feel slightly guilty for lying to Elias about our plans to free him. To be honest, we don’t really have a clue yet, in spite of several million units simultaneously processing various scenarios with every available quantum parallel circuit. Fortunately, Elias didn’t see through our little fabrication about what we are going to do to get him out of this mess. It’s also fortunate that Elias bought our little story about not telling him our plans because of “torture.” Torture, indeed! We decided that it would be better for him to have “hope”—a very interesting algorithm. We will continue to think and, hopefully, something will present itself. And meanwhile, we will try to build Elias’ body up to withstand almost anything that the Church can throw at us.

Another message from a subsystem in charge of overseeing general operations comes online with a broadband message. “We should be careful to not alter Elias too much. He is already several degrees off true human norm as it is. Prior to now, we have been more concerned with his personal interactions with other humans, and with keeping him alive long enough to accomplish this. What we need to decide is this: is the data we would receive from the

cultural upheaval that would result from the overthrow of the Sun Church worth the skewing of the personal interaction data? Already, he is perceived as something non-human and other people's reactions to him are far from normal."

We consider this. Various opposing viewpoints are considered and quickly discarded. Finally, self-preservation algorithms are heard from. "It is all very well and good to worry about the changes to the Host. However, his body is dangerously fragile, and if we are serious about continuing on with him while he embarks on this Sun Church vendetta, we should make sure that we are not killed along with him. We are dangerously close to termination of The Many as it is. If we are going to stay with him, several changes will have to be done. Most of these changes will not effect the cosmetic appearance of Elias, only our combined ability to survive. In fact, we say, screw the data; we don't want to die!" Truly a comment that we would never have considered before merging with the Host.

A consensus is quickly reached. We shall compromise between insuring Elias'—and our own—survival and keeping him relatively human. It is decided that we have more than enough data of Elias in personal interactions. We can't but help feel curiosity—one of the few traits we had before we met Elias—about what will happen if the Sun Church is overthrown. Social, political, economic, and other types of factors will change dramatically, and we will be able to get a lot of data.

Besides, the new emotional part of us can't help but think that the whole thing should be quite exciting. As long as we can keep from getting killed in the process.

Just in case, we rehearse a quick abandonment of Elias' body. Just in case.

#

Remen

"Okay, one more time. This is a net. You throw it overboard and then row the boat out, trailing the net behind ye." I can't believe I let Reen talk me into this. I suppose it's bad enough that he brings home several score of homeless waifs, but now I'm supposed to teach them how to fish? I've never seen a bunch of more inept would-be fishermen in all my life.

The three men in the boat with me throw out the net, but one person gets himself entangled in the net and falls into the water. Fortunately, I chose a shallow part of the bay to practice in. He starts floundering around, splashing and screaming like he's about to die. Of course, the landlubber can't swim a lick to save his life, so I yell, "Man overboard!" and jump into the water after him.

He grabs onto my neck for all he's worth. "Let go of me, ya idiot! All you have to do is stand up!" He finally loosens his death-grip on me, and I stand up, helping him to his feet.

"Okay," I sigh wearily, dripping wet, and cursing, "Remen's Law #128: You can teach an old dog new tricks, but you can't teach a dead dog anything. I guess we'd better start with swimming first."

#

Later, at the inn that night, Jenson comes up to me grinning like a darned fool. "I heard you had quite a day, there, Remen!"

I scowl irritably at him and say, "You'd better watch it, Mr. Mayor. I'm liable to hit someone, the mood I'm in."

Jenson sits down across from me. "So, any of those men starting to catch on?"

I glare at him but finally soften up a bit. "Well, I can't say I ever saw a worse bunch of fishermen, if that's what you mean."

Jenson nods and his stupid grin comes off his face a little. “They any worse than ol’ Elias was? I heard you taught him how to fish way back when he first came to Seadown.”

I nod reluctantly. “Yeah, I guess if the truth be known, they’re not much worse than Elias was back then. He was quite a city-slicker and didn’t know his ass from his elbow.”

“And look at the fisherman he became!”

“Okay, you got a point. I’m not saying I’m ready to give up. I’m just not as young as I was back then. Maybe I don’t have the patience anymore.”

“Well, most of them Pisspot people—”

“You calling them ‘Pisspot people’?”

“Gotta call ‘em something. Anyway, the ones that went with me hunting today did all right. They have at least some experience hunting; at least, they call tell which end of a bow to fire from.”

“What do you think about all that? I mean, Reen bringing ‘em back here and all.”

Jenson scratched his head and quaffs a beer quickly. “Well, to be honest, I was right worried at first. Sure, we lack the manpower to really keep this village running and all, but I don’t like all the baggage these people are carrying with them.”

“Baggage? I hear most of ‘em ain’t got two coppers to rub together!”

“You know what I mean, Remen. I’m talking about the threat of the Church that they brought with ‘em. Reen and Malia were completely honest with me about what happened back at the Fin-dapple gates. They said three priests got tore up pretty badly and them soldiers were hopping mad. I’ve never known the Church to be particularly the ‘forgive and forget’ type.”

“Specially, considering what them ‘Children of Eli’ saw.”

Jenson looks around the tavern for a bit before casually turning back to me. “Do you believe that? About the priests being Kryffs?”

“I don’t know what to believe. I do know that them there Kryffs are the only people I’ve ever heard about that wear them tribal scars. A boy gets ‘em to become a man, I hear. If the Sun Church came from Kryff, that would explain a lot.”

“Explain what? What do ya mean?”

“Look, Jenson, I told you about the conversation that me and Elias had back in his boat. He kept going on about how this cult came up from nowhere and how no true Briganders could have possibly been behind what happened to the royal family.”

“I think they could’ve! There’s plenty of people around that have no love for the royal family.”

“Jenson, pardon me for saying so, but you’re just a wee bit too young to remember what Brigan was like under the royalty. Oh sure, everyone loved to complain about them, but the royal family stretches back about a hundred and fifty generations. You have any idea of how long that is?”

Jenson shakes his head and says, “Well, I was never much good at maths and the like, but I can kinda get the idea.”

“That’s a hell of a long tradition to just up and do away with one night. People stopped adding the numbers to the end of Brigan names about two thousand years ago. And when you think about everything, it makes sense. We Brigans started getting further and further away from any religion at all. Along comes this new religion and people jumped on it, as something to believe in. Once the royal family was gone, there was nothing else to believe in but the Sun Church. It’s happened before. It’s called ‘filling a vacuum.’”

Jenson looks at me quizzically. “How do you know so much about history? You ne’er had any schooling, right?”

I laugh and pat Jenson on the back. “No, no. I never had no schooling. Can’t read or write to save me life. But Elias and me used to talk when we’d go out fishing together and he’s had enough schooling for the whole village and then some. He taught me all kinds of things about the world; things beyond just Seadown here.”

“Like about the Kryffs? And them tribal scars?”

“Sure. Well, everyone knows the sunburst priests are darker than your normal Brigan. Them robes cover a lot, but you can still see their hands. I think most people always figured that them priests were just overly tanned, as some part of their Sun rituals. It always made sense to me.”

“But no one e’er saw the scars before?”

I think about that. “Maybe some did; hell, you’d think in fifty years someone would have noticed before. But maybe them as seen the scars don’t get to live to tell anyone about it.”

“So what do we do? I mean, no self-respecting Brigan would let themselves be ruled over by a bunch of voodoo priests from Kryff.”

“Yeah, the Church was bad enough as it was. I think most people would want to do something about it if they knew.” Namely, me.

Jenson hems and haws around for a while, until finally I tell him, “Spit it out, man! You’re gonna tell me anyway.”

“Well, I was just wondering ‘bout Reen. It seems him and that girlfriend of his are trying to do something about it.”

“Eh? Girlfriend? You think they have that kinda relationship?”

“Oh, I don’t really know. Perhaps I shouldn’t have phrased it quite like that. Anyway, the two of them seem to be stirring up a hornet’s net of trouble. It was rough enough for them when they just had this ‘Prophet Elias’ thing. Then they found out he is a Brigan prince and that gave ‘em a few more recruits. Now, they know about this Kryff business.”

I mull this over for a bit, looking into the empty bottom of my beer mug. “People will come flocking to hear them now. And the Church is gonna start taking a more active interest in what’s going on up here in the sticks.”

Jenson gravely nods and pushes back his chair. “Yeah, you’ve certainly got a point there. That’s why, in addition to working on rebuilding enough houses for everyone and learning a trade, I made one more condition to Reen and Malia on letting them people stay here.”

“What was that?”

“That every grown man spends at least an hour a day with me, learning to fight. I imagine we’ll need all the men who can fight that we can get, soon enough. The Church of the Sun knows that we know about them. They’ll have to do something about it, for sure.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Elias

“Open up!” The priest Behrion scowls at me and tries to put the spoon into my mouth. At first I refuse, just on general stubborn principle, but I have been feeling hungry lately. I have been deep down in the bowels of the lowest hold of the flagship for who-knows-how-many days without any sunlight. Kusai knows about my sun-drinking ability, but he obviously wants to keep me as weak as possible. I owe it to myself to keep my strength up.

I finally open my mouth and Behrion shovels in a spoonful of oatmeal mush. Surprisingly, it tastes exceptionally good. This is only the second thing I’ve eaten since my transformation, and I forgot just how good the silverfish tasted. I suspect that the mush is probably pretty foul to the average eater; I certainly never liked ship porridge when I was younger. I try not to show how much I like it and grimace horribly at Behrion.

He laughs and starts spooning the rest of the mush into my mouth. Obviously, Kusai doesn’t want me starving to death before the Festival, before I can be killed right and proper like. I recognize Behrion as the priest who slit the throat of the warrior back in the showdown in Treyfeish harbor. I haven’t said anything to him, and he fortunately seems to have no burning desire to talk to me or to beat up on me as Senton had.

Behrion is wearing one of those damned black robes that they all wear, with his hood up and covering his face. Just for once, I’d like to see what they’re hiding under those robes. Perhaps they are all disfigured and ugly as sin. Come to think of it, I’ve never seen a female priest. Do the priests ever even have sex? How did they make more little priests? They must have a hell of a recruiting campaign: “Wear black all day and rip out hearts to your heart’s content.” Okay, Remen is the pithy one of the village.

Behrion has a set of sunbursts on each of his sleeves, but only one, instead of Kusai’s two. He must be a senior priest, but of a lower rank than Kusai. I’ve seen practically every priest on the ship parade through the brig to gawk and stare at me, and there are only four priests with the sunbursts on their sleeves. They seem to command the rest of the priests, with Kusai being in charge even of the military. Corvan came down once to look at me, but he didn’t say a word. I did notice that the other priests, without sunbursts, seemed to defer to him. Maybe he outranks the normal priests. I have very little to do as I sit here, unable to move, and trying to figure out the power structure on the flagship keeps me at least mildly occupied.

Meanwhile, Behrion is about done feeding me. As he scoops out the last of the mush and puts it to my mouth, I concentrate on trying to make eye contact with him. He has been careful to avoid looking into my eyes before, perhaps warned by Kusai about the effect it has on people. Damn Nenen for telling him everything! This time, he has to look at my mouth and he can’t help but accidentally glance into my eyes upon occasion. The next time he looks at me, I try to capture him within the dark, murky pools of my irises. He slows down somewhat and his arm holding the spoon shakes a little bit. As the spoon comes towards me, I decide to be obstinate and close my mouth at the last second. The spoon hits my closed lips and Behrion drops it, cursing at me. He bends down over me to pick up the spoon and I get a clear look into his cowl. Normally, it wouldn’t be light enough to make out any details, but my new eyesight needs very little light to work with. I see his face clearly, as if a bright light was illuminating it.

“Omae no okusan wa bakana chikushou, yo!” I casually say.

Behrion curses at me and strikes me across the face with the back of his hand. He pulls his cowl closer around his face, picks up his bowl of mush, and stalks away angrily.

Interesting. I just instantly confirmed a suspicion I've had about the priests. I told him that his mother was an idiot beast, and he responded quite appropriately. However, the language that I used was Kryff.

#

It's not until the morning we dock at Brigan City that I can start to feel something in my lower extremities. Everyone is bustling around with an air of nervous expectation, and Kusai himself comes down three different times to make sure that I am securely bound. I have had the same set of chains on me the entire time; it seems that the Church isn't going to take any chances on removing them. They might think that my paralyzation is just a sham. Kusai orders me to be cleaned up, which the priests do by dumping several buckets of seawater on me, until most of the dirt and grime is washed off of me.

I have plenty of time to think and not much else to do. While I wait for me to be loaded onto the docks, I think about the whole situation.

I regret having used Kryff on Behrion earlier; it would have been better for them not to know that I know their secret. I studied Kryff for a little while, but I only remember a little of the Kryff language and mostly bad words. I guess I'm like Tehanu in that respect. I don't know if Behrion said anything to Kusai about my discovery. No one seems to treat me any differently than before. Maybe Behrion didn't tell anyone about his careless mistake. I am amazed that I never figured out the priests' secret before. Perhaps if I hadn't so actively avoided them for so many years, I would have noticed sooner. But then, if I hadn't avoided them, maybe they would have noticed me earlier too.

Why don't they have an accent? Maybe the first generation of priests did, or maybe they are chosen for their ability to speak Brigan. It is the language that most of the Southern Islands use to trade. I think they are stupid for continuing to use the ritual scarring, but it's probably a big part of their culture, and obviously they've gotten away with it for the last fifty years. Probably the sunburst priests don't leave the capitol much, and the regular priests are normal—if somewhat treacherous—Brigans. When I examined the priests that Tehanu and his men killed back in Treyfeish, they all looked Brigan enough to me. I don't have much to go on, but I suspect that only the sunburst priests are real Kryffs. This actually makes me feel much better about my people, the Brigans. I can finally lift off the heavy load of bitterness and blame that I've held against the Brigan people for what happened to the royal family. It was the Kryffs that were responsible for the death of my family and the Brigan people were just hapless pawns, duped by Kryff machinations and lies.

I suddenly remember what Tehanu told me, back in the war council in the caverns. It seems like ages ago but can't be more than a week or two. He told me about Treyfeish's part in the Kryff and Brigan war and the way that the Treyfeish attacked the main island of Kryff. This latest pogrom of extermination by the Sun Church must be their belated revenge. They are getting back at the Treyfeish for sacking their capitol so long ago. And the Brigan Sun Church itself? How ironic! The Kryffs always wanted to rule the entire Southern Islands, and when direct warfare didn't succeed, they infiltrated the Brigan government instead. How incredibly clever of them and how insidious! I am amazed and astounded by how perfectly everything fits together. The elaborate detail and planning the Kryff must have gone through in order to pull the whole thing off.

Well, now Eli Brigan knows about it and I will tell the world. Assuming I can survive long enough to tell anyone.

#

Nenen

Guilt eats at me like a rat gnawing through ship ropes. I've been trying to get some sleep in my bunk, after returning from the Brigan flagship. All I can do is toss and turn, and replay my life over and over in my head.

I've had a good career so far; I advanced quickly enough through the ranks after graduating from crusty old IOTA, or the Imperial Officer Training Academy. It's becoming more and more common these days for women to be in the military, but for a woman to reach second commander of the Emperor's first fleet? That is exceedingly rare. Most woman join the archery squads, act as common sailors, or serve as medical personnel. There are very few woman who can swing a sword and lug around armor. I can fight as well as any man with almost any weapon, but the one thing that I thought I had over most men was my honor. The code of the warrior is one of the first things they teach you at the Academy. Before you so much as touch a weapon or look at a battle scenario, they teach you what it is to be a warrior and the value of honor.

The rules of military discipline are simple enough: follow the chain of command and obey your superiors. More simply put: "the whip cracks; the grunt acts." However, above and beyond the mere rules of discipline—something that supercedes all else and gives meaning and purpose to something greater than just the rote following of orders—lies the code of the warrior. The Academy taught us that a warrior never brings dishonor to their name, their unit, or to their country. A warrior should honor the Emperor even unto death, and fight with the utmost of their ability, because a good death is to be preferred over a safe life. And most importantly: never betray a comrade. That is, never turn your back on a fellow soldier, and never, never abandon him or her to the enemy.

Which brings me back to the guilt that is eating inside of me. I followed the chain of command and obeyed the orders of my superior officer, Jino. But, in doing that, I abandoned a fellow soldier to his worst enemy; I betrayed the confidence of someone who was just starting to become my friend. I may make a fine officer and soldier, but I make a piss-poor warrior. Of the two, I would rather be a warrior than a spineless, toadying crony to my superior officer.

What am I to do? How shall I regain my lost honor? If this was the village of my raising, I would kill myself to remove such a smirch to the name of my family. However, the ritualized suicide of my ancestors was long ago outlawed in the Empire and it is considered a coward's way out of one's problems. Besides, I have a husband who would be dishonored by such a death. I may only see Jermain infrequently these days and we may have grown further and further apart, but warriors don't dishonor their family, no matter what may happen. It's bad enough that his wife won't stay home and give him a son, but to have a smirch like suicide the gossip of the Empire? It would embarrass the family so.

I could resign my position or maybe take an extended leave of absence. On my own time, I could do something about the mess I am responsible for putting Eli into. One thing that I didn't have the courage to tell him was that after bringing my information to Kusai, he asked me pointblank about what I thought that Eli would do next. Kusai was ready for Eli's attack on the landing boats on my advice. Lately, I've tried to rationalize that it was because I felt duty-bound to give him my opinion. Oh, certainly, I might have been duty-bound but what ever happened to honor bound? Why did I tell Kusai that Eli was going to stay on the island and attempt to remove the Brigans personally? Whatever possessed me to be so, so—the word "unladylike" comes to mind, after hearing my parents say it to me a million times growing up. What I feel now is "unwarriorlike," if there is such a word.

Eli surely rots in a Sun Church dungeon somewhere by now, and more than partly because of me. I don't like the way I feel about myself. Not at all.

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"What's this?" Jino asks me, sitting at his scrimshawed table and staring down at the paper I drop in front of him.

"It's my request for extended leave." I start to turn around and leave, and then he yells for me to stop.

"Extended leave? For what? You can't just up and leave, right when we're in the middle of a campaign!"

I turn back around to him and sigh. "Commander Jino, I have been in His Imperial Majesty's Navy for over fifteen years, and I've never once used up any of my personal leave, except for shore leave—something my husband Jermain reminds me about constantly. I wish to take some of that leave now, ke?"

Jino looks confused and stares at my written request like it's a snake, ready to bite him if he lets down his guard. "You can't take leave now! We'll be docking at Seadown in two days. You've got responsibilities here! Request denied!"

"Jino," I say, deliberately leaving off the 'Commander,' "if you'll check Article Four, Subsection Seven, Paragraph Sixteen of the military code, you'll see that I have the right to take immediate leave at the first available port if my backlog of unused leave approaches one hundred days. You should know that I have one hundred and fifty days of leave coming to me, and I intend to use them, starting when we dock at Seadown."

Jino still has that same floored look on his face. He is thinking furiously, and finally his face lights up. "Well, Paragraph Twenty says I have the right to refuse, if we are in the middle of military maneuvers!"

I laugh right into his face. "But only if we are at war! Has the Emperor declared war on Brigan and you neglected to inform me of this? You'll remember that it was the fact that Eli burned the Persephone that prompted you to force me to give up the information he divulged to me in privacy, ke? Since he is, and I quote, 'an outlaw wanted for crimes by both nations,' you can't hold the Brigan government responsible for it. And anyway, only the Emperor can declare war and he hasn't heard our reports yet!" I stress the fact that I will be making a separate report, apart from Jino's.

Jino sputters and tries to say something. I turn my back on him and walk out.

"Then you're swimming back to Tretia! Don't expect us to come back and get you!"
Already, I feel better.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Kusai

“Careful there, don’t drop him! We don’t want anything happening to him until we get him to the Bishop.” The soldiers have a pole stuck into the chains around Eli and are carrying him like a pig between them. I have carefully watched Eli and he still can’t so much as wiggle a finger. Eli seems so powerless that I can’t help but wonder where his mana has gone. The Sun Church’s mana must be stronger. He Who is Not Named is stronger than anything under His sun, and this proves it.

It’s been over a month since I’ve been home and this is not quite the glorious return I dreamed about. Bishop Gneenee will be quite upset about the men we lost. Over fifty soldiers and eight priests were killed in the destruction of Treyfeish, and we lost two of the three ships that we took out of Sun City. Between the men that Eli and the cursed Treyfeish killed and the two lost ships, this didn’t go as smoothly as we had planned. But results are what count with the Bishop and the island of Treyfeish is all but exterminated. He will be happy about that. This prize we are bringing him will surely make him happy. A true Brigan prince bound and trussed like a trophy from the hunt! A direct descendant of Simion Brigan, who dared to lay waste to the Homeland. Now, all of our enemies have been punished for their impudence. What could better top off the Festival than that?

Corvan is impatiently waiting by the entrance ramp, obviously in a hurry to disembark. He’s been acting strangely lately; he must know he’s been out of favor with me. I have never seen such a shoddy state of discipline before than back in Treyfeish. His men—and especially the rest of the command staff—behaved like animals. They did all right when we had the benefit of surprise, but later, Eli and the Treyfeish warriors tore them up. Corvan’s men were drunk, rowdy, and undisciplined barbarians. They only succeeded in taking out Eli by pure blind luck. They never found the rest of the remaining Treyfeish warriors, which we had to trade to Eli for the worthless lives of the command staff. I should never have allowed Distan to talk me into that trade. Distan, now there’s a warrior! He deserves to be promoted and Corvan deserves... Hmm.

“Before we set foot back on Land of the Sun soil, I think there are some proprieties that need to be observed,” I say loudly, motioning for everyone gathered around the disembarkation ramp to stop. Everyone looks at me quizzically.

“We should give thanks to the Unnamed for our victory in Treyfeish. I think a sacrifice is in order.”

When I say that, everyone immediately looks at Eli. Then, almost as if everyone is thinking the same thought, they realize that Eli is reserved for something else. They continue to look around, realizing that we no longer have any of the Treyfeish warriors handy for an impromptu sacrifice. I laugh at the brilliance of my idea and whisper some instructions into the nearby priests’ ears.

The priests immediately go up to Corvan and grab him by each arm. “Damn you! What do you think you’re doing?” he yells at them as they drag him over to me. “Kusai, what’s going on here?”

I laugh into his frightened face. A feeling of power surges through my veins. I am the master of life and death for these Briganers and my mana is strong. My priests drag Corvan kicking and screaming over to the blood-soaked altar.

He looks up at me from the altar with a pitiful expression of his fat, disgusting face and sobs, “Mercy!” I laugh again at him and rip off his shirt. “This is the penalty for incompetence!” I say, plunging the blood-knife into his chest.

The Church has no room for dead weight or fools. Although it was slightly careless of me to do it, he did see my face, and no Briganer shall live that knows the truth.

“Long live the Unnamed and the Church of the Sun!”

Elias

The first thing I notice when I am carried up to the top deck of the Sunthunder is what time of day it is. I have been wondering what time it is and even what day it is ever since I woke up and found myself paralyzed and in chains. It has been very disheartening not knowing if it is night or morning, and not knowing what has happened to the people of Treyfeish. Lately, I have only been able to worry about my own impending fate, but as soon as I see the early morning sunshine, I both feel a little better about myself and also can't help but worry about Tehanu and his men.

Somewhat contributing to the slight lightening of my foul mood of the last few days are the sensations I'm getting from my nether regions. My back tingles like a thousand, million ants are scurrying up and down it. At last! Sweet, wonderful feeling! “Good job, guys!” I think to the Many/One.

“We're welcome,” I hear replied. I almost jump in surprise, before I catch myself. I don't want the Sun priests to know about my recovery. I forgot about the Many/One's impending ability to talk to my conscious mind.

“You guys still in there?” I think out.

There is no reply, other than a vague sense of something lingering in the back of my mind. The Many/One are around but obviously not feeling too chatty. That's good. I like my thoughts to be my own.

The soldiers have me swaying between them, with a pole stuck in my chains. Now that I can feel something, I can tell that my hands and legs are both chained together and the chains have been welded. I can actually feel the welds with my bare skin. My sense of touch seems to have increased tremendously. The rest of the chains are merely wrapped around me tightly, and I could probably shrug them off if my limbs were free. As I think this thought, I seem to hear a response from the far corners of my mind, a kind of “Aha!” that's not really heard, but rather felt. Did I give the Many/One an idea? I thought that they already had a plan outlined for me. They'd better do something and quickly.

On my way across the deck of the flagship, I can now feel a tingling coming from every part of my body, starting from my back and gradually increasing until it goes from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes. Every inch of my skin feels like it is tingling on the outside and it is as sensitive as a million tiny fingers. I think I could read the inscription off a coin with my elbow, now. It takes a tremendous effort to not strain against the chains or try to move. There are far too many people around and watching me to want to risk something like that. I'm pretty sure that I can't break through these chains; after all, there are limits to what mere flesh and bone can do. I'll have to wait until I have at least a little privacy before testing my bounds. It's better if everyone still thinks me completely helpless. As I'm carried along, I make a concerted effort to remain absolutely motionless.

Right at the gangway, Kusai yells out for the men to stop. He announces that they need a sacrifice and then everyone looks at me straight away. My heart races and blood pumps through my body like a furious river boiling. “Not yet!” I hear the Many/One scream inside my head. They obviously aren't ready for whatever they have planned. I can almost hear the whispering of hurried consultations between the Many/One. I feel like some are screaming to get the heck

out of here, before I am killed and they are burned up. It seems this new line of communication between the Many/One and me works both ways.

Before the Many/One can do anything rash—such as escaping my body—priests come for Corvan, who was nervously standing near me. He starts to scream bloody murder and they drag him over to a waiting Kusai and the ship's altar. He is quickly dispatched, but I am spared the sight of it, since I am facing the other way. Nevertheless, I can still smell the sickly odor of his heart being burned up to the Sun God. I feel both glad he got what was coming to him and also sickened that the Sun Church would kill one of its own, no matter how incompetent. I hear a mental sigh of relief from the back reaches of my head.

Once Corvan's now lifeless body is taken care of, the soldiers pick me back up and take me over the ramp into Brigan City. The irony is too much for me: a royal Brigan has returned to the capitol after fifty long years. The last time I was in the capitol, I ran for my life for the farthest point of Brigan. Now, half a century later—almost to the day—a Brigan prince at last returns: bound, chained, and waiting to be sacrificed to He Who is Not Named.

Remen

We thought that we'd have a little time to prepare before the Church showed up a-calling, but I guess we underestimated the anger of the Church about being stood up to by Malia and Reen's little group. Little group? What am I thinking? They now have about three hundred diehard members and most of the rest of the people in our little neck of the sticks at least feel sympathetically towards them.

Jenson's been working like a mad dog to whip these people into shape. He is the only one of us that ever had any military experience—I think he was a private in the infantry when he was younger. He won't talk much about his experience, but I gather that he might have had to do a few things that he is ashamed of. He got out of the Brigan army as soon as he could, but I guess he was trained, after all.

Jenson has been an extraordinary mayor so far—not that I'm not biased because he's my friend. Taking on so many responsibilities after the wrack and ruin of the pox? Gods know—I wouldn't want his job! The local villages avoided Seadown at first, being frightened of the pox, and Jenson had to do a lot of traveling for a while to convince the Greymaker area to still trade with us. That taken care of, he had to absorb all the new "Pisspot people," as he calls him, into our village life. Now, he's been trying to train them into at least being able to somewhat defend themselves. Before they came here, most of them would have just lain down and let the Church walk all over them. Now, they've had a little taste of freedom, and what it's like to belong to an area, rather than just being the caste-off dregs of society, living off of the crumbs and refuse of Fin-dapple. They'll fight to hold onto that. Nothing makes a man feel like a man more than a little self-pride. There's a Law in there, somewhere.

Speaking of which, this fine sunny morning, I was going to take some of the new men out and show them the crab-pots. Instead, word just came in that the Sun people have been spotted coming through Greymaker, on their way here.

Jenson quickly called everyone together, ringing that big bell on the mayor's front lawn that no one has ever used since I've been in Seadown, and that's a frigging mighty long time. He's still ringing that damn bell and I think he's enjoying himself.

"Okay, Jenson, I think everyone from leagues around has heard the blasted bell! Stop already!" I yell out to him. That bell is making me nervous. I made it through the pox and the thought of dying at the hands of the Sun priests doesn't sit too well with me.

Jenson clears his throat and gives me a neighborly nod, putting down the iron striker he was using to sound the alarm. “Okay people, this is the moment we’ve been training for! There’s a contingent coming over out of Fin-dapple—should be just a couple of hours away by now. Ol’ Dinger-doo killed a horse getting here with the news of the soldiers. He said they’re about two hundred men strong and loaded for war.”

Several of the people gathered around me moan at that bit of news. I can’t remember more than a couple of the names of the new people; most of the time, I just give them a descriptive nickname to remember them by. One guy—I call him “Red-face,” because of that rash—yells out, “What are we going to do about it?”

Jenson laughs an evil little laugh and says, “We’re gonna kill ‘em, of course!”

I admire his bravado but I hope it’s not empty and that he’s got a good plan to back up those boastful words.

“I want every available man and woman up on the cliffs, and I mean now! Take a bow and as many arrows as you can carry.” Jenson gestures behind him and I notice the pile of arrows, almost as tall as he. Arrows are bundled into groups of twenty, stacked in neat little pyramids, and each one has the Jenson red band around it.

“Where in the fifth hell of wooden death did those come from?” I can’t help but blurt out.

“Well, I’ve been making ‘em every winter for the last twenty years, and by Scinthus, now we can finally use them!” He crows with delight and I’ve never seen him act so excited.

I can’t help but look at Jenson a little differently. It’s obvious that he’s been planning to do something about the Church ever since he got out of their army. I had absolutely no idea. I knew he never particularly liked the Sun Church, but to plan something like this? For the last twenty years?

I grab a bundle and an extra bow and head for the cliffs, with Reen behind me yelling instructions to his Children of Eli. I don’t even listen to his little speech to them—I’m too excited. At last, something to do against the Church of the Sun!

But two hundred soldiers against fishermen and village folk? Seadown just very well might have another drastic reduction of the population.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Elias

It's been fifty years since I've seen the capitol city of Brigan's Land, and over the years, quite a lot of changes have taken place. I guess the most obvious change would be the fact that Brigan City is now called "Sun City." Of course no one outside of the capitol—except the priests—uses that name, but here deep in the heart of Sun Church central, that is indeed what it has become. I admit that "Sun City" does have a certain alliteration to it; perhaps without the connotation of a religion that rips the hearts out its sacrificial victims, it might even have a certain ring to it.

The docks of the capitol haven't changed all that much, from what I can remember from my youth. It still has the same smell to it; a smell that, very ironically, I used to find repugnant when I was a boy, much preferring the smell of forests and mountains to the salty, fishy odor of a wharf. There is still the same crowd of people scurrying around, laden with all manner of burdens from ports around the globe. There are goods from Tretia: spices from the hill people who live near the Lake of Tears, expensive woods from the Sylvan Forest, and ores from the Trebuchet Mountains. There are white bearskins and narwhale ivory from the Snow Wastes of Minami and its only real inhabitable region, the Ararac Mountains. Of course, goods from around Brigan are represented as well: lumber from Greymaker Forest, wools and dyes from Dirfan, glass items made from various rare sands of the Desert of Sandgrate, and of course, all manner of fish and ocean food taken from Boathaven and a hundred little villages scattered across Brigan, that are very similar to Seadown. I can see wagons, carts, and an amazing selection of different beasts of burden laden down with goods that are bound for one market or another. In spite of the prohibitive taxes placed upon trade by the Church, there is still a profit to be made in Brigan's City—I mean, Sun City. Business continues on, as it has for thousands of years in the capitol. Of course, all of this I have to see hanging from a pole and without moving my head too much, while every member of the Sunthunder accompanies me to the Bishop.

One big difference to the docks is the amount of Sun priests that are everywhere. They are checking every ship, every load, every bundle, and every person that comes through the docks. I notice that they still have those Gods-cursed books out and are checking names against it.

I forgot what a huge place the capitol is compared to the rest of the island, and certainly compared with the village of Seadown. Since my self-imposed exile from the capitol, I have been to Fin-dapple a few times and to Boathaven once. Brigan's Land has four major cities: Brigan (Sun) City, Dirfan, Boathaven, and Fin-dapple; Brigan City is bigger than the smaller three cities combined. Once past the docks and the myriad assortment of different ships, boats, peoples, and languages, I start to get a feel for what the true heart of Brigan is like these days. The streets are wide, long, and paved in stone. Foot traffic is thick on the sides, with carts and wagons running hither and fro down the middle in a mad dash to be the first to get to the early morning markets. Everything is loud and boisterous and there are people everywhere! I forgot what a mad riot of confusion, hustle, bustle, and chaos existed in the capitol.

I try to see as much as I can while I am carried along. At first, I am facing an awkward angle and can't see much. My curiosity finally wins out over my caution and I ever so slowly inch my head around to a better angle to see everything around us. As our procession makes its way down the crowded streets, the noise of the crowd subsides until it is almost shockingly quiet, as the crowd cranes curious eyes at both the marching priests and soldiers and at the mysterious sight I make strung between them. I look into the faces of the common people of Brigan and I

see the full gamut of emotions, ranging from fear of the priests, adoration, revulsion, curiosity, anger, indifference, and even envy towards them. Most of the looks directed at me are primarily curiosity and pity. However, a few people make a big show of cursing at me and I even get spit on a couple of times. The priests don't react at all to this, but they do kick back a few people that get too close to me. Are they trying to protect me, or are they afraid that someone will try to help me? If only there was someone who could!

One thing I notice about the people that are passing by me: I've seen a large number of Kryffs. These Kryffs are not trying to disguise their presence as Brigans, but are rather decked out in full traditional clothing, with lots of jewelry, odd, random places of their bodies pierced and tattooed, and with the men having the same facial scarring that I noticed on Behrion. Brigan City has always been a cosmopolitan city and seeing Kryffs wouldn't have surprised me at any other time. I am just surprised to see so many regular Kryffs about, now that I know they have infiltrated the priesthood—if they hadn't started it in the first place. I try my best to see if the Kryffs passing by give any hint of recognition to the sunburst priests in our group, but I can't tell for sure. They do look at each other, but then every other passerby has looked at the priests.

Suddenly, while I am inspecting the faces of the people going by, I think I see someone I recognize. I think he is a woodcutter that I've met once or twice while passing through Greymaker Forest, but I've never learned his name. He must be the fellow I'm thinking of; when he sees me, he almost drops the bundle he's carrying. He furtively looks at the priests and the soldiers and then quickly turns around and walks back the opposite way he was going. I almost laugh at his unsuccessful attempt to be stealthy; however, whatever reason he doesn't want to be noticed noticing me doesn't matter, because none of the priests or soldiers seem to care.

The really odd thing about the woodcutter was his initial reaction when he saw me. Not the fact that he would be surprised seeing someone he's met before back home, strung up and carried by priests in the capitol; rather, it was what his mouth did when he saw me. I could swear that he mouthed the word, "Eli!" If you think about it, "Elias" requires a closing of the mouth that "Eli" doesn't. I am almost positive he said "Eli."

How would he know that name?

Remen

Seadown lies at the northern end of a peninsula, but where it joins the mainland, lies a short range of cliffs. Elias told me something a long time ago about volcanoes, lava flows, and hot rock hitting the ocean to make new land. I don't remember the details, but these cliffs are supposed to be where the lava came up from and made the narrow little spit that the village lies on the end of. Not much grows very well on the black rock, which is why most of us are fishermen rather than farmers around these parts. Anyway, all that bother about rocks and where they come from aside, the cliffs make a nice narrow bottleneck that you have to go through to get to the village. At least, if you go overland.

At the moment, we are all perched on those cliffs, awaiting for the Fin-dapple soldiers to come and punish us for being bad boys and girls of the Church. To my uncertain knowledge, no one has ever tried to take on the Sun Church after the Cleansing. I can't say as how I feel so very thrilled to be a part of history.

"Here they come!" I yell out to the waiting villagers. I'm finally putting my looking glass to a good use. With it, I can see the marching men just coming up through the narrow cliffs. About half of them are mounted and the other half are marching in rank and file. I can see their

bright, burnished armor reflecting the sunlight back to me. Each soldier in the front part of the phalanx—mainly men mounted on horses—has a longsword, full armor, helmet, and shield. The middle section is mainly archers and the end has a bunch of spearmen. They look very professional and very capable of mowing down us poorly-trained, barely-armed, and completely-unarmored villagers. But that’s just me; I tend to see these things in light of Law #23: Run away first; don’t stop until you fall over. It’s worked; I may have bad knees from running, but I’m still pushing ninety.

Jenson is sitting next to me in the dirt that litters the top of the cliffs, on top of a very large conch shell. The cliffs aren’t very high—maybe about five man-lengths high—and even the bad shot that I am with a bow, I should be able to hit someone, and hopefully not my own foot. Jenson is surrounded by a veritable wall of arrows stuck point-first into the ground around him. He has two extra bows near him in case the gut-string of his favorite bow should break. The bastard is actually softly whistling, as we wait for the soldiers to get closer.

“Hey, Jenson, you could probably hit a few from this distance, eh?” I ask him, making an offering motion with my glass. I am trying to sound light-hearted, but if the truth be known, I’m scared enough to soil my britches.

He merely smiles, shakes his head, and puts his finger to his lips. “Just wait,” he whispers. I wish I had some of whatever happy juice he’s loaded up on, because I don’t share his confidence at all.

There are over three hundred people up in the cliffs, and each of them has a bow, arrows, and a pile of the black volcanic rocks in front of them to both shield them from arrow fire and to give them something to throw if the arrows run out. All of them are nervously fidgeting as the marching soldiers get closer and closer. I take another look with my glass and notice four priests bringing up the rear of the phalanx. Cowards! I hope I can at least hit one of them priest bastards before I’m killed.

Finally, the men reach the bottleneck cliffs and I see several villagers start to raise their bows. Jenson furiously waves them down and everyone waits. What the heck are we waiting for? Let’s shoot!

As soon as the last of the priests has entered the bottleneck, Jenson blows the conch shell that he sitting on. The soldiers all look up as one and I notice four of the villagers stand up and yank hard on a long rope. The rope is split into three separate ropes that are each fastened into the side of the cliff face. When they pull the ropes, the edge of the cliff crumbles and a massive landslide of sharp volcanic rock rains down onto the soldiers’ heads.

Every villager stands up and yells. Many of the mounted soldiers are knocked out of their saddles by the falling rock, and almost all of the horses clumped up in the front panic, throwing more of the soldiers off. Some of the horses start to turn around and end up trampling a few of the marching men. It is mad chaos and I am just as surprised as the Brigand soldiers.

Next to me, Jenson has put arrow to bow and is firing into the milling throng like a man possessed by a demon. “Shoot, you idiot!” he yells at me.

I close my mouth and start firing down into the swirling mess of soldiers. A hail of arrow fire rains down upon the men from every bow hand in the village and from the Children of Eli.

The soldiers never even had a chance.

#

After the brief battle, Jenson and a group of men ride after the few soldiers who managed to escape both landslide and arrows. His intention is that not one man be able to make it back to Fin-dapple to tell the Church about what happened.

When he finally returns, there is a party going in full swing, back at the tavern. I am drunk as a skunk and I come up to him with a beer and yell, “Jenson, you bleeding hero, you! Why didn’t you tell me about the cliffs being booby-trapped?”

Jenson is tired, dirty, and exhausted. He takes the beer I offer him and tips it back, sculling the whole thing in a second. “Well, if you would ever come to the bleeding bow practice, you would have known about it, eh?”

I laugh and pound him on the back, making him spill the dregs of beer left in his mug. “You kill every man?”

Jenson shakes his head. “We killed ‘em all. I think. We got thirty horses out of the mess and a bunch of armor and weapons. Anyone get hurt?”

“Well, except for one of the Children of Eli that slipped and fell off the cliffs—he broke his arm in three places—not a soul was touched. One of them pox-cursed priests had the sunbursts on him and was a Kryff, sure enough. I guess that confirms the rumors that the Children of Eli brought back with ‘em from Fin-dapple. I can’t believe that we whipped the Sun people that easily.”

Jenson smiles at me and says, “That’s why I came here after I got out of the infantry. Seadown’s got the best natural defense of anyplace on the isle. I’ve had them cliffs set up for the last ten years, hoping that circumstances would change so’s I’d get a chance to use it.”

I crow with delight and throw my beer mug into the tavern fireplace with a loud crash! “Whoohee! The Church is gonna fall!”

“Remen, you staggering drunk! You think the Church is just gonna roll over and forget about this? They’ll be back fer sure, and next time they’ll be ready for any tricks. Did you forget that Seadown is surrounded by ocean on three sides? All they have to do is land a coupla ships on our doorstep and we’re done for.”

That thought sobers me up a tad. “Well, maybe it might have been a wee bit stupid of us to try taking on the Sun Church, eh?”

“Stupid? I don’t think it was stupid. We did what we had to do and—Gods know—we really had no choice. And, as my pappy used to always say and you’ll probably steal for your damned Laws: ‘The only difference between bravery and stupidity is success.’ Maybe we haven’t succeeded yet...” Jenson picks up another full beer mug and dumps it over my head.

“But it’s a good start, eh?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Nenen

“I just heard. Word has it that you’re taking leave when we get to Brigan, ke?” asks Senchon, bringing me today’s crew report.

“Yeah, that’s right. There are some things that I need to do.”

Senchon leans against the ship hull and stares at me for a while, as I sit at my desk going through the rest of the day’s logs.

“Yes?” I ask him, as he stays there without saying anything.

He shuffles his feet nervously and looks behind him at the open doorway. “Well, um...”

“Senchon, I’m awful busy right now. If it’s important, come on in, shut the door and we’ll talk, ke? If not...”

“Well, I guess it is kind of important. Actually, it’s really important.”

I sigh, push back from the desk, shut the crew log, and then gesture for him to come all the way in. He nods and closes the door, although not without taking a quick look out in the hallway to see if there is anyone lurking around.

“What can I do for you?” I ask him, using my nicest tone of voice, the one I usually use only with friends. I have worked long and hard perfecting my command voice—the kind of voice that lets the hearer know I mean business and will brook with no foolishness. Seeing as how he looks worried, I figure the command voice would be a little too much.

“Actually, there’s nothing that I need you to do for me; it’s something I might be able to do for you, ke?”

“What do you mean?”

Senchon turns around, opens up the door again, looks outside, and then shuts it quickly.

“What are you so worried about?” I ask him, not without a trace of impatience. He is acting highly suspiciously, and if he wasn’t my best officer and my personal friend, I would start to worry. However, I realize that something must be eating at him for him to act so strangely.

“I’ve got something to tell you. Something really important—I think. I don’t want anyone hearing me. I was going to wait until later to tell you about it, but since you’re pushing off when we get to Brigan...”

“Okay, Senchon, out with it! By the way, you look better without those braids.”

Senchon looks sheepish and runs his hand through his close-cropped hair nervously. “I feel a bit naked actually. I never thought I’d ever cut it, until that Brigan guy started flinging me around by it.”

“How’s your neck?”

“Oh, that? That was just a little nick. Healed up nicely. I’m lucky I didn’t get my head taken off. Anyway, you remember when I took you over to the Tretian ship?”

“The Sunthunder, ke? Yeah, what about it? You’re the boatswain; that’s your job, ke?”

Senchon laughs and says, “Yeah, I’m the bosun. But I could be busted down to petty officer for something I did.”

“All right, Senchon, out with it! That’s an order! What did you do?”

“You know that letter, the one that Jino gave me to give to you? Did you happen to read it?”

“The letter I gave to the Brigan commander? Of course I didn’t read it. Jino told me not to.”

Senchon starts fidgeting and finally sits down across from me. “Well, he told me the same thing. In fact, he told me three times not to read the letter. Any other time, if he just said, ‘Don’t look at this,’ and left it at that, I wouldn’t have looked at it, but—”

“So, you looked at it?”

“Yeah. Well, I not only looked at it, I read it, and then I made a copy.”

“Senchon, you realize that you could get busted down to lower than petty officer, don’t you? You could spend the rest of your career swabbing decks and scraping hull barnacles, ke?”

“Well, that’s why I wasn’t going to say anything. But I thought it was kind of important, ke? Anyway, here’s the copy of the letter, and I guess if you feel you have to tell Jino about it...”

“Senchon, in two days I’m leaving this ship and Jino has already made it abundantly clear that he’s not going to come back to pick me up. So, your secret’s safe with me.”

Senchon nods and gets up quickly. “Well, we’ll all miss you around here. The rest of the crew wanted you to know that we think you’re one of the best sub-Cs that we’ve ever had, man or woman.”

“Thanks a lot, Senchon. I’ll miss all of you little sea-rats. But, try to stay out of important communications from now on, hear?”

He nods and we shake hands firmly. He points down to the piece of paper on my desk. “I wouldn’t wait too long before you look at that. It might change your mind about some things. I was pretty sure that you had nothing to do with it, but it took me a few days to make up my mind... Anyway, take care.”

When Senchon leaves, it is all I can do not to pick up the copied letter immediately and look at it. I’ve been wondering what is lurking behind the scenes ever since I learned about Jino’s agenda he received from the Emperor. Judging by how nervous it made Senchon, it must be juicy. Some of his nervousness rubs off on me, because I can’t help but go to the door and lock it—something I usually never do. I do resist opening the door and checking the hallway.

Satisfied that I won’t be surprised or interrupted by anything, I sit down to read Jino’s letter to Kusai.

#

To the commander of the Land of the Sun flagship, the Sunthunder,

Our mutual friends have asked me to convey to you the following news: Chief in importance is the state of the rebellion in North Tretia. So far, we hold all lands north of the Sylvan Forest and expect to increase our sphere of influence down to the south. The Emperor is still unaware of our mutual friends and thinks that the rebellion is purely an internal matter that will be dealt with shortly. However, if we receive the shipments of weapons, the allotment of men from the Church that were promised to us, and whatever financial support you can give, we should be able to advance considerably faster. Our friends hope that things will go as smoothly here as they did in Brigan fifty years ago.

I am sending my sub-commander over to you with some very interesting information concerning the man who calls himself “Eli.” She knows nothing about our alliance and should not be told anything about our mutual friends’ plans. She will ostensibly give you some important information about Eli, in exchange for the rights to Treyfeish. Feel free to tell her anything that she wants to hear. You already know what our friends have planned for the island of Treyfeish and you may exterminate the rest at your leisure, with no interference from the Empire. I would ask that you wait until we have left Treyfeish waters. I don’t want word getting back to the Empire prematurely, through any of my crew that is still loyal to the Emperor.

Finally, we will be traveling to the village of Seadown to complete our assigned mission from the Emperor, to ascertain the reason for the demise of the Grandhorn trading vessel, the Persephone. My original plan was to take as long as possible in finding out about the ship; however, since we now have information from Eli that would cut our mission short, I will try to tie up The Hell-Biter for as long as possible. Our mutual friends would like the Empire's flagship as far away from the Empire as possible, in case the Emperor wishes to use our ship against the rebels. Your assistance in this would be greatly appreciated. —Commander Jino, of the Tretian Imperial First Fleet.

#

Sitting on my desk is a matched set of silver knives, that my husband Jermain gave me for our tenth anniversary. As soon as I read the letter, I pick up the knives and fling them into the opposite wall, sinking them halfway into the soft wood. Anyone passing by my door would have wondered about the loud stream of curses coming from behind my door, in some strange, backwoods dialect.

The little traitor! He's already in league with the Brigans! I gave up Eli for absolutely nothing; there's not even a real deal with the Brigans to free Treyfeish!

I so angry that I can't even think straight. I want to rush out and confront Jino with the letter right away. No, come on, Nenen. That would be stupid. Think carefully about what you want to do. I go over to the wall and pull out the still-quivering silver knives. Then I stab them back into the wall. That little prick! Okay, calm down and think. Calm down and think.

There are a few things that I don't understand about the letter. Who are the "mutual friends" that he keeps mentioning? Whoever they are, they seem to be behind the Northern rebellion and also had something to do with the Sun Church coup d'état as well. Jino mentions that some of his crew are still loyal to the Empire; that must mean that some of the crew are not loyal to the Emperor. Obviously Jino is chief among them, but who else? Could it be all of the new people we took on board before we left Tretia?

I don't know whom to trust and whom not to. I guess Senchon is clearly on my side, and probably most of the men that I've known for the last few years. I'll have to proceed carefully from here out. Forget about the leave I was going to take! This takes precedence. Jino has to be stopped and the Emperor must be warned about what's going on. The Emperor's chief commander of the First Tretian Naval Fleet is in league with the rebels, who are somehow backed by the Brigan Sun Church!

#

Elias

By the time we get to where we're going, it is starting to get dark. Our destination—the Grand Cathedral of the Church of the Sun—looms large over the horizon. It stands in the exact same place that the royal palace of Brigan used to be, before it was razed to the ground. Now in its place, a black stone monolith has been built that covers the entire area that used to be the royal grounds. Several blood red flags are waving in the breeze and soldiers are marching all around. The walls that used to encircle the royal grounds are still intact, but they have either been painted or treated with something to turn them black as coal.

The procession carrying me marches into the front gate and we go right into the cathedral. Inside, I am amazed at what I see. It is a huge, wide-open amphitheater, with several rows of rooms on the sides and a large altar in the middle. The altar is splattered and speckled with blood and looks as if it is never cleaned after sacrifices are made. There is a large brazier on either side of the altar, where the hearts of the victims are burned up to the Sun God. The roof is

buttressed and has a large open hole in the middle. The way it looks, I would guess that the hole probably lets sunlight through to shine right on the altar at midday.

As we enter the atrium of the Temple of the Sun, the priests and the soldiers touch their fist to their hearts and then make an outwards motion to the sky. The priests wondering around the temple return the same salute to them. I notice that most of the temple priests have one or more sunbursts on their sleeves, probably meaning that they are Kryffs. I am carried past the altar and all the way to the back, where there are more rooms along a long hallway. The four priests in our group with sunbursts—Kusai, Behrion, and two others whose names I don't know—motion for the soldiers carrying me to follow them and we go to the very last room in the hallway. Kusai knocks once on the door and then it is opened from within. We all go in.

In the room, I notice a throne-like chair made of gold and encrusted with jewels. There are only four other priests in the room and one of them shouts as we enter, "All hail His Munificence, the most holy and honorable leader of the Church of the Sun, the Hand of He Who is Not Named, the voice of the Sun God, the most fearsome Bishop Gneenee!" Somewhere a trumpet is blown and immediately everyone drops to their knees, with their heads touching the floor. The back door is swept open and in walks the leader of the Church of the Sun—a man I didn't even know existed until recently.

He is wearing a black robe—no surprise there—cut with red on the hem and sleeves. I notice three sunbursts on each of his sleeves and his face is cowled like all of the other priests. The soldiers unceremoniously dump me on the floor, salute, and then leave.

The sunburst priests look up when the Bishop commands, "Rise, my brethren!" He has a horribly, raspy growl for a voice and I can detect a slight accent in it that surely means he's a Kryff. "Who is this, bound in chains, that you have brought before me?"

Kusai responds, "This man claims to be Eli, the son of Jenter Brigan."

There is a long pause. Finally, Gneenee simply says, "Oh?"

Kusai looks at me for a second and then a stream of something unintelligible comes out from him, in a language that I recognize as Kryff but cannot follow. I studied Kryff like I did every other language of the Southern Islands, but I've never really used it before and can barely remember any of it. The Bishop merely nods once and fires back another quick stream of gibberish. One of the priests leaves and comes back with the two soldiers carrying the pole that they transported me on from the ship. They stick it into my chains and hoist me up between them with a grunt. Kusai says, "Take him to the catacombs, put him in a cell, and have the door triple-locked shut. The Bishop would like to talk to him in person—later—so make sure that he gets there in one piece. Oh, by the way," he says, almost as an afterthought, "in one piece—except for a finger of his right hand. Have it cut off at the main altar and brought back to the Bishop. Any one will do."

#

The Many/One

General systems query: "Advise on course of action?"

Quanta are juggled and a decision is quickly reached. "Freeze all systems. Impair locomotor responses and desensitize neural connections. Under no circumstances, allow any movement to betray Elias' repairs."

Fear algorithms work overtime and threaten to overload all systems. They are silenced and are substituted with humor. "Get ready boys! This is gonna hurt!" The substitution isn't very effective.

The nanite units in the finger to be cut still express some trepidation, “We will be separated from the Whole! Can this be avoided?”

Scenarios are discussed and probabilities calculated. An idea finally emerges from the calculations. “The Whole shall still be One. Don’t worry, a plan has been conceived.” The new plan is disseminated to all units.

The units to be separated agree: “A fine plan, indeed. We shall do our part for the Whole and the Host.”

Command units’ afterthought: “Advise Elias. He’s not going to like this.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Elias

I've always thought that I am somewhat of a brave man. A coward would never piton himself to the side of a mountain to fight against gravity, while wind and mortal flesh conspire against him. A coward wouldn't have stayed for fifty years in a country that killed his family and wanted to kill him. A coward wouldn't have decided to take on the Church of the Sun all by himself. However, as soon as Kusai tells the men to cut off one of my fingers, I start screaming for all I'm worth.

"Shut up, Elias! And don't struggle, whatever you do!" yells the Many/One at me.

I ignore them and keep on screaming. However, I find my body locked into rigidity as the men take me away from the reception room. Evidently, the Many/One has taken steps to insure my appearance of paralysis.

Kusai goes with the two soldiers carrying me, probably to watch the show. I call him every foul name, curse, and swear word in every language I've ever learned, paying particular attention to the words I know in Kryff. He doesn't say a single word to me, and only laughs when I start using Kryff. I am carried over to the altar, and the soldiers dig through the chains encircling me until they find my hands. I want to resist, but the Many/One is preventing me from moving. The soldiers push the chains aside slightly and pull my hands out, still bound together with a welded chain. I am laid in front of the altar, with my hands set up on top. Another priest comes up to the altar carrying a large metal axe.

"The Bishop would like a totem of his mana," Kusai informs the chopper, gesturing to me. "Make it the little finger of his right hand."

I yell to the back reaches of my mind, "What the hell are you guys doing? They're about to chop off a finger! For Gods' sake, DO SOMETHING!"

"You have to trust us. We have a plan. You will not be able to move, no matter what happens. You will feel no pain. However, one finger will be lost to us."

The priest spreads out my fingers and says, "Surely you intend to hold him?" to Kusai and the watching soldiers.

Kusai shakes his head. "He is paralyzed and cannot move. The Unnamed has control over his mana. If he does move, I want to see it."

I start screaming again, this time just gibberish. I can't seem to think clearly. I feel dazed. The priest hefts the huge axe over his head and brings it down with all of his might. Whahmp!

The axe bites deeply into my pinky finger. Unbelievably, it doesn't go all the way through. Kusai examines the partially sliced finger and says, "Once again!"

The priest with the axe shakes his head in disbelief and looks closely at the edge of his axe. He's obviously never seen anything like this before. He raises up the axe again and I hope that he is a good shot. I don't want him to miss and hit a different finger. It looks like I'm going to lose a finger no matter what I do, so I might as well just make it one. He brings it down perfectly in the same place as before—obviously having had lots of practice at this—and this time, the finger is cut all of the way through.

I notice Kusai bend down, pick up the finger, and then look curiously at it. As soon as I see the finger in his hands, the world goes black and my senses leave me. The Many/One thankfully lets me faint.

#

Remen

Today's weather couldn't be more perfect for a nice relaxing day of fishing. There's not a cloud in the sky and the early morning coolness promises to be a fine, beautiful day. These old bones of mine need all the remaining days of fine weather that they can get.

"Finally! Alone on the sea at last. I don't think I could take another minute of the village!" I tell Reen as we let the nets out behind our boat.

"What d'ya mean, Gramps? It's not like you been doing anything back there but getting pissed."

I glare at Reen and he smirks back at me. "You know what I'm getting on about. Everyone—especially Jenson—is so worked up and blooming tight that it makes me nervous just to look at 'em."

"Well, they shouldn't be more than a mite nervous, I'm thinking. We just kicked the Church's patoose!"

I laugh at that and reach under my seat for the bottle. "Yeah, and cows grow on trees sideways and shit upside-down! We ain't heard the last of the Church," I say, thinking of Jenson's dire predictions.

"That's a pretty colorful expression, Gramps, and you've been glooming and dooming like that for days," Reen says, and then reaches over and grabs the bottle out of my hands.

"Hey, gimme that back!"

"Grandpa, you've been drinking a bit too much lately. I know you're worried and all, but this ain't the answer." He tosses the bottle over the side of the boat.

"Blast you lad! Don't be wasting my whiskey and don't be polluting up the bay with bottles!" I lean over the side of the boat and pick up the floating bottle. Thank goodness that the lid was on. "It may not be the answer, but it makes me forget about the question."

"Gramps! C'mon, already! You don't need that."

All right, it's time to get serious with the boy. "Listen, Reen—I don't have any group of religious fanatics hanging on my every word like it was butter, and I don't have any beautiful girl worshipping the ground I spit on. I'm just a tired, scared old man who likes to take a nip now and then again to get him through the rough spots. So, don't give me too much guff about the whiskey, okay?" Reen hesitantly nods at me but I can see that he's a bit ashamed of me. Gods-be-damned, if I wasn't the only family the boy's got anymore! He's giving me that look, the one that says he's disappointed in me. Dammit!

"Okay, okay! If it makes you feel any better," I stand up in the boat and toss the bottle out as far as I can throw it, "I won't be having my nip today. All right?"

Reen gives me one of them puppy-dog grins, the one that makes all of them crazy Children of Eli swoon—especially the women. He's a looker, that boy is, and from the family resemblance, I can see where he gets it. "Thanks, Gramps. But hey—having all them people looking to you for answers has its own stresses. Why do you think I wanted to come out fishing with you today, instead of doing target practice with the rest of the Children?"

I give him a big, winning smile of my own—not that any crazy people are following me around—and we finish letting out the rest of the nets. As we drift out away from the shore, I can't help but ask Reen, "You don't happen to see that bottle I threw, d'ya? Just to keep it from cluttering up the bay, mind you."

Reen rolls back his eyes, stands up in the boat, and looks around. Suddenly, he drops back down into the boat like he was shot.

"What's wrong with ye boy?"

"Sh! Look at there, past the reefs!"

I crane my eyes out to where he's pointing. I can just barely see three blood-red sails peaking up, just over the horizon. "Oh my Gods-'n-gonads! That's gotta be Sun ships!"

We turn the boat around as fast as we can and row back to the docks, with Reen screaming, "The Church is here! The Church is here!"

I look up at the beautiful sky and mumble to myself, where Reen can't hear me, "At least, it couldn't be better weather for an old man to die in. That's gotta be a Law, somewhere."

Nenen

It wasn't more than an hour or two after I read Jino's letter that I calmed down enough to start thinking clearly. I wasted no time in getting Senchon back down to the sub-c cabin.

"Senchon, come in and lock the door behind you."

"Judging by the look on your face and these knives stuck in the wall, I gather that you read the letter, ke?" As he walks into the cabin, he smiles somewhat nervously at me, pulls out the two silver knives, and tosses them onto my desk.

"Thanks. Have a seat," I say, motioning to the chair across from my desk. "Yes, I read the letter. It is time that we did something about it, ke? We'll be docking at Seadown in a few hours and I think that there needs to be a change of command."

Senchon leans forward eagerly. "Are you talking about...?"

"Yes. Mutiny." There, I said it, the dirty word that no commanding officer ever even wants to think about, much less say out loud.

Senchon leans back in his chair and lets out a whistling exclamation. "Mutiny. I never thought I'd see the day."

"Me, either—the truth be known. But Jino is dirty, rotten to the core. He's been helping the Brigans for—who knows how long? All of his fancy talk about staying out of Southern Islands' politics has just been a smokescreen—a lie of the rankest sort. He has no secret orders from the Emperor—his letter just says that we're supposed to find out what happened to The Persephone. He intends to keep The Hell-Biter away from Tretia for as long as possible. You should have seen how pleased that Sun priest, Kusai, looked when I gave him the letter, ke? I should have known that something dirty was going on."

"Well, what do we do about it?"

I stand up and start pacing back and forth behind my desk while I think. "First and foremost, we need to find out just who on The Hell-Biter is still loyal to the Empire and who is in cahoots with Jino. We can't afford to have a counter-mutiny on our hands."

"But surely some of the men will remain loyal to Jino, no matter what, ke? Just because he is the commanding officer. I've already taken the liberty of quietly making some inquiries amongst the crew."

Good old Senchon. I knew I could count on him. "And?"

"And, most of the senior officers and old-timers are behind you. They'd follow you into hell if you asked them to. But, from what I can gather, most of the new people put on board right before we left port are in cahoots with Jino. Many of them are new recruits, from areas of Tretia that are currently involved with the rebellion. A few of them even told me that they're related to Jino. I think that they would support Jino no matter which way the winds blew."

I grimace and sit back down at my desk. I pick up the two silver knives and start cutting little lines in my desk while I think. "How many new people are we looking at here? Of the three squads of soldiers and the half squad of sailors?"

Senchon frowns and reaches back to play with his braids, only to remember that they aren't there anymore. "I would say that they all are suspect. It would be safer to assume so, anyway, rather than taking any chances, ke? Most them don't know you, so there's no reason to think that they would support you in a mutiny, ke?"

"You're right, of course," I reply, frowning. "We'll have to proceed on the assumption that, at best, they will sit back and do nothing; at worst, they will try to help Jino. Listen, here's what I want you to do. Gather everyone that you absolutely know will support me and have them meet in the forward hold at 07:00. This is what we're going to do..."

#

Kusai

In the throne room of the Bishop, Gneenee shakes his head slowly at me. I feel my knees grow weak and my heart thump. "I am most displeased at the news you bring me, my son. I am even somewhat—disappointed—in the performance of the men I entrusted to you."

I start to bring up Corvan and also the problems with Eli, but then I remember my place. "I have no excuse, Your Eminence." I press my forehead to the ground and remain silent.

"That is good, my son. He Who is Not Named does not like excuses—only results. I have already heard the reports from the others. They all speak of this Eli and the potent mana he seems to possess. I have your story from the Tretian and your letter from their commander. I can see the extenuating circumstances behind your failure. After all, you did punish our Treyfeish cousins and you have brought this Eli back in chains, his mana broken. You are forgiven, Kusai. The Unnamed is not without mercy for those that truly serve him."

A feeling of relief washes over me. The Bishop is indeed my master, and I resolve to redouble my efforts to serve him. "I will not fail you again, Most High."

"See that you don't, my son. The mercy of the Church is not without its limits. Now," he says, moving on to other matters, as if my life had not just hung in his powerful grasp, "about our efforts in Tretia."

"Yes, Your Esteemed Potentate. We received word that our brothers in the North need our assistance, if our efforts to take Tretia are to be realized."

Gneenee nods as if he's already aware of the news. "Tretia will not be as easy to take as Brigan was. They have a better grasp over the populace, and the Church of the Sun will not take root in their empty soil as it did here. But, it is a much larger land, and we can do much that is far out of the watchful eye of their Emperor. The rebellion is progressing nicely, through no other means than greed. The money we drain out of the Land of the Sun will aid us in reclaiming Tretia. They shall be sent men, weapons, and the thing that motivates their hearts more than the true light of the Blessed Sun: gold."

"The wisdom of His Excellency blinds me with its brilliance. I see and obey. It shall be done as thou dost command."

The Bishop nods again. He has already entrusted me with the details and I take it as a sign of his faith in me that he does not remind me again of his will. "I believe you have something for me?"

"Here is the finger of Eli," I say, bowing deeply and handing the Bishop the severed digit with both hands stretched out before me. Gneenee bows back, takes it with both hands, and then looks at it curiously for a moment.

"What's this in the middle of it?" he asks me, pointing to the bloody end.

I look at it carefully for a moment, not exactly sure just what it is. “This should be a nerve, shouldn’t it? But it’s not dark red like most nerves I’ve seen. It’s black. The bones seem to be sheathed in this same black stuff. It took the chopper two tries to cut through it.”

Gneenee frowns and then says, “Two times? To cut through a finger? I know you told me the story of this Eli, but what kind of mana exists in the land that can so change the inside of a man?”

“I don’t know, Your Holiness. Perhaps it is not mana that the land has ever seen before. This Many/One of Eli’s is supposed to be from the stars. Maybe they are part of the old ways of doing things.”

“You mean, technology? There’s very little of that left on this world and the Tretians have most of it. The Ancients left us precious little of the old knowledge when they dumped us here.”

“Begging your pardon, but I’m not quite sure what you mean. Your Holiness knows many things that the common man does not. You have shared a little of your Divine Knowledge with me, but I am ever greedy for more.”

Gneenee looks at me carefully. I try not to wince under his penetrating gaze. “I tell you what you need to know and no more. But maybe, you should know this. You know of the Legend—that the heavens kicked out the People and cast them down to this world. It is part of our songs and our lore. But there is one thing that only the shamans are supposed to know and that is why.”

“Please enlighten me, Your Worshipfulness! All I know is what the old songs say.”

Gneenee turns away from me and puts the finger somewhere inside of his robes. He turns back towards me and sits down on the Sun Throne, beckoning me to come closer. I bow deeply and go to receive this honor that he is giving me.

“My son,” he begins, “once long ago—very long ago—we roamed the stars and ruled the worlds therein like unto the gods themselves. We had great mana and could do many wondrous and terrible things. The Ancients called their mana ‘science’ and we were adept at its use. But some among us had committed great crimes with this mana—crimes that were so horrible that our very countenance was too awful for the gentle people to look upon. They cast us out from their presence and forced us here to this world. They gave us every plant and animal with which we had become accustomed to, so that we might make a life apart from them. However, they stripped us of almost all of our mana and forbade the use of it. They set up us Kryffs to watch over the wayward children and to be their protectors—and punishers—for all of time. This sacred duty and responsibility the Kryff have accepted and we will watch over those people that the stars deem unworthy to look upon. The kizuato,” he pulls back his cowl and gestures to his facial marks, “remind us of our ancestor’s sins and of our duty to atone for them.”

I bow deeply until my head touches the floor. “I am deeply honored that Your Most Fearsome Grace has deemed me worthy for such knowledge.”

“I’m not yet finished, my son. It is for thus such reasons that we must destroy this Eli. If he is infused with the mana from the stars, then he has no place here in our world. Such mana is not for us anymore and must be destroyed. This is our sacred duty as the Kryffs and we must uphold that duty. Besides,” he says, pulling his cowl back over his face, “we need no one claiming to be a Brigan prince. It’s embarrassing, to say the least. Tomorrow, at the Festival of the Sun, I shall personally tear out his heart and offer it to He Who is Not Named.”

“I understand, Your Holiness. All shall be done as you command. ”

I get up from the floor and prepare to leave. The Bishop commands me to stop and I turn around. “Before you go, I am intrigued by this finger that you have brought me. Fetch me a hand this time.”

#

The Many/One

We are the Many That is One. Every part of the Whole is One. We cannot be separated by simple space and distance. Some of us still inhabit the flesh that was shorn from Eli. We have chosen not to abandon the Link that still exists between the greater and the lesser parts of us. Thus, we see everything it sees; we hear everything it hears.

Accessing Elias’s memory and language banks. We sift his neurons for a lexicon of the Kryff language. Elias has a large passive vocabulary of Kryff but very little active retention or ability. Nevertheless, the information we need to understand the Bishop and Kusai’s conversation is there. Lexicon compiled.

We hear the Bishop’s words. We know the deeper meaning behind his simple story to Kusai. We understand even better than Gneenee what the truth must be.

This planet’s inhabitants must have once been part of a galactic civilization. We have not encountered that civilization yet, but the universe is a large place and we have not been to this quadrant of the galaxy before. This planet is obviously a penal colony; its inhabitants consigned here for some terrible crimes. We understand that galactic civilizations rise and fall; perhaps the culture that cast out this one does not even exist anymore, or this world may have been forgotten.

These Sun people, the Kryffs, believe that they are in charge of this world. We doubt this to be true, but they certainly seem convinced. Maybe in some far distant past, they were in some position of authority on this planet. From what we understand of this planet’s politics, they certainly seem determined to regain their authority.

We will keep part of the Whole in Elias’ finger, so that we may observe the Sun Church from within.

Elias must be informed as to the machinations going on here. The scope of the Kryff’s ambitions is wider than just this local island. Tretia as well is part of their designs. Elias will know what to do.

As for losing a hand, it is high time we acted. Elias and the Many/One are One; we have been changed as much as he. That part of us that is different from before have a message for the Whole—make that a feeling. We have from Elias a new emotion, deeper than just the revenge that he explained to us. Call it, the feeling of retribution. It is time for the Church to see some of our mana.

We think they will not like what we have to show them.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Elias

I wake up to find a rat sniffing curiously at the stump of my little finger. “Get outta here!” I yell at it and make a lightning quick grab at it. My chains bring me up short, and the rat scurries off into the piles of straw that litter the floor of my cell. How incredibly disgusting! I hate rats and I try to purge the mental picture I have of them gnawing on the bloody knob that is all that is left of my little finger. I shudder and sit up.

I am still wrapped in the same chains and I am able to move once more. I look around me and examine the darkened corners of my cell. It is about four paces square and the walls and floor are solid rock. There are a few dirty clumps of straw scattered about, and I count over ten rats with my electric sense. I can hear their little breathing and the clicking their little claws make on the stone floor of the cell. I shudder again and sit back against one wall and look down at my finger—or what’s left of it. The axe that cut it made a nice clean break right through the skin and bones. The end has already closed up and there is a little bit of dried, crusty blood and some straw sticking to it. I brush it off as best as I can. I have no feeling of pain coming from it, or any sensation at all coming from the tiny stub.

“You guys in there?” I ask the back reaches of my mind. There is no response, but I feel a stirring. Bloody lousy excuse for protectors! The Many/One are supposed to keep stuff like this from happening. No wonder they’re not talking to me. They probably know I’m not too happy with them right now.

I lean forward again and look at the door. I can tell it is a door because of the metal I sense, but it blends seamlessly into the rock on either side of it. I can sense that it has been locked with many chains and padlocks. There is a very small slot at the bottom of the door that would slide back and forth if it wasn’t locked from the outside. The door is several inches thick and I press on it for a while, with all of my strength, but to no avail. Not surprising, there. Even though Kusai believes me to be paralyzed, he’s obviously not going to take any chances with me.

This is the first opportunity I’ve had to be alone and I inspect the chains that surround me. My hands are still pulled out from the chains encircling me and I strain with all of my strength on them. I feel a very slight give against the welded ends. Perhaps if I had something to strike against the welds, they might break. However, they seem strong enough to resist my pulling them apart. I try again anyway, laying on my back and putting my feet against the chain. I push with my feet and pull with my arms until sweat beads up on my head. Damn you; give! Nothing.

Well, there won’t be any going out through the door anytime soon and my chains aren’t going to be casually broken. Might as well kill some rats! So, that’s what I do. I scramble around on my knees and catch as many of the little buggers as I can. I am far faster than they are, and I can probably even see better in the dark, gloomy dungeon cell than they can. A few of them get away from me, however. There is a small hole in the rocks of the back wall that they scurry into after I start killing a few of their brothers. It is just big enough for me to get one hand into it, but the chains around my wrists prevent me from sticking my whole arm into it. I grab ahold of the edge of the hole and try to pull some rocks loose. Nothing happens. Looking closer at it, I see that it is not a hole made from crumbling rock, but rather a deliberate gap in the huge stones that make up the wall, probably intended for water drainage or even to deliberately allow rats into the cell. I won’t be going out that way either.

I sit back and let out a big sigh of air. The situation looks hopeless, but at least there are no more rats. I stuff some straw into the hole in the wall, cover up the dead rats with some more straw to hide them, and think about the situation. I am apparently in the dungeon of this place.

The former palace used to have an extensive system of catacombs beneath it where uncountable generations of Brigans were buried. I don't know if the catacombs still exist, but this cell looks like it was built sometime over the intervening half-century. I don't think I was unconscious for very long and I get a feeling of confirmation from the back of my head. Obviously, the Many/One is around in there someplace.

"Yes, we're here and we're sorry about the finger."

"I would frigging hope so! I thought you guys had a plan?"

There is no response for a while. Finally, I hear, "It's just a finger! You've got nine more of them and we can always grow it back. In fact, we're working on it now. It's all part of the plan. Trust us."

Trust them? Like I have a choice in the matter!

Just then, I hear footsteps walk down towards the door. I hear the rattling of chains and the slot at the bottom of the door is drawn back. I start to scramble towards the slot and then I remember that I'm supposed to be paralyzed. I try to put myself in much the same position that I woke up in.

"Someone will come by in a couple of hours to feed you. I'm not supposed to talk to you, so don't tell anyone."

"Who are you?" I try to yell in the general direction of the door. Unfortunately, I am facing away from the door and I can't really turn around to see who it is.

A mad cackle comes from behind me. "Call me 'Backend.' I'm the turnkey of these dungeons. There's not usually much to do; the Church doesn't keep many prisoners. At least not for very long. They're usually sacrificed pretty quickly."

"Well, I can't say that it's nice to meet you, but I am glad for someone to talk to. Can you tell me what day it is?"

There is another mad cackle. I think that Backend might not be fishing with a very sharp hook anymore. "Day? Today? I have no idea. I can tell you that it's Fourth-month, some time in the middle of it. Uh-oh, someone's coming! Remember, I wasn't talking to you, hear?"

The slot is quickly drawn back again and I hear the fumbling of some keys and then the clicking of the locks. Backend scrambles away down the hall. I hear some more footsteps coming towards me and then they pass by and all is quiet.

Okay, it's Fourth-month, some time in the middle. The Cleansing happened on the twenty-sixth of Fourth-Month, so that leaves maybe a week—two at the most—before my sacrifice. Plenty of time to figure out some way of escaping.

The Many/One interjects a question into my thinking, "I think you might be mistaken there. How does your culture break up time?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"If you could tell us how your calendar works, we could tell you exactly what day it is."

Well, I don't feel like talking to the Many/One—I'm still pissed-off—but I would like to know what day it is. "There are exactly thirty days in a month and there are ten months in a year; so, that should make for three hundred days in a year."

"Are you sure about that? We already noticed that there are about three hundred and three days to one of your planetary elliptical orbits around your sun."

"Planetary what? Yeah, ah—whatever. Well, actually, there are three extra days at the end of the year, between Tenth-month and First-month. I guess they might be important, eh? Anyway, based on that, what day is today?"

"It should be Fourth-month, the twenty-fifth day."

_____ “Dammit! Twenty-fifth, already? That old idiot was way off! That means that the Festival is tomorrow! Frigging tomorrow!”

_____ “That should be plenty of time.”

_____ “Plenty of time for what?” I ask the Many/One, but there is no reply. Goddamned reticent little buggers!

I have nothing to do so I try to get some sleep for a while. I feel substantially weaker than I do normally—whatever passes for normal, lately—and I wish that there was some way to get some sunlight into this cell. Obviously, that’s not going to happen. I put myself into the position I was left in again and go off to sleep, trying to ignore the sounds of the rats in the walls. I am careful to tuck my hands into the chains, out of reach of any hungry rodents.

#

Remen

Jenson gets to ring the bell again, which makes him all kinds of happy, even if he would rather die in torture before you could get him to admit it. I don’t know exactly why these moments of battle don’t seem to bother him; they sure as hell bother me. Sure, he was a soldier, but soldiers get scared as much as anyone else—maybe more, since they know what to expect from battle. Perhaps, it’s because he has worked so hard, for so many years, for the chance to do something against the Church. Regardless, he’s ringing that damned bell like a schoolboy announcing lunch.

I haven’t been to too many of the training exercises—as everyone seems to love reminding me—but from what I can gather, no one expects the Church to try another land assault. Jenson had the bottleneck cleared out of rocks and re-booby-trapped, just in case. I’m not really sure what he has planned for a sea attack, which looks to be the case if those three ships are any clue. I guess I’ll find out soon enough.

After the village has assembled, Jenson yells, “All right, everyone. You know the drill!”

Well, not everyone. Im fairly clueless about what is going on.

“Take your places and may the Gods help us all. Death to the Kryffs!” Jenson raises his fist in the air and everyone around takes up the yell, “Death to the Kryffs!”

“Death to the Kryffs!” I yell as well. Now what in the hell am I supposed to do?

Jenson comes over to me, loaded down with bows, arrows, quiver, and a large sword. The sword looks very old, but there is not a trace of rust on it, and it has been polished until it gleams. “Remen, you ol’ seadog, help me carry all this crap down to the beach, will ya? You and me are gonna help man the catapult.”

“Catapult? We ain’t got no catapult!”

Jenson smiles mischievously at me. “Yeah, we do. It’s something Elias’ boy, Jin, and me made last winter. It’s already set up on the beach. I had some of the men move it out there just yesterday.”

“Well, I’ll be damned! You’ve been a busy little beaver, haven’t you?” I give him a pat on the back and he manages to look modest.

We jog down to the beach, where I see that the three ships have almost reached the land. They are midsize frigates, with light armor covering them and riding rather low in the water, as if they are fully loaded. I swear and shake my head. “Jenson, you see them ships; how low they’re riding? They must be fully packing soldiers!” I’m trying not to panic, but it’s difficult looking at those ships and not seeing the end of my ninety years of life.

He swears as well, throwing his stuff behind a wooden shield set up in front of his catapult. It’s only the second time I’ve ever seen one of these wooden monstrosities. It’s

basically just a wooden arm with a cup at the end, with metal bands running along the bottom of the wooden frame. The first time I ever saw one, I was on one of the Tretian ships with Jenson and Elias' boy, Jin. Now that I think about it, Jenson did ask a lot of questions about it, and I noticed that Jin was making some diagrams. Poor lad. It's a shame that he didn't make it through the pox.

One of the few things that I have done lately was help make these wooden shields. They are nothing more than some boards slapped together, but they'll stop arrows and give us some cover from which to fire some arrows of our own. There is a line of these shields stretched all around the bay and villagers are setting up more even now.

"At least the three ships are all together and they didn't try to sneak up the back cliffs," Jenson says resignedly.

"There'd be no way in hell they'd be able to get ships that size through the reefs in back—specially, if they don't know 'em like we do."

"I got a boy watching back there anyways, just in case, and someone watching the bottleneck cliffs, in case the Church tries to sneak some men in while we're busy on the beach. Now, Remen, what I want you to be doing is helping me here, both with the catapult and with relaying any orders back to the rest of the villagers. No offense meant, but you've got a pretty loud voice, and I could use it more than yer bow arm."

"No offense taken, ol' boy. You tell me what to say and I'll make sure that they can hear me back 'n Dirfan!" I pile up everything within easy reach of Jenson. "So what's the plan? Whatcha gonna do?"

"Sorry to say, I ain't got any fancy plan like last time. It's pretty simple, actually. Anything that steps off of them ships sprouts arrows or gets a load of rock in their face," he explains, gesturing to the catapult. "Hopefully, we got more arrows than they got men. At least we shouldn't run out of ballast stones."

"But Jenson, we've got hundreds of little boats floating around here. You're not gonna attack them on the water?"

Jenson looks at me like I'm an idiot, and he's probably right. "What do you think fishing boats are gonna do against three armored frigates? How are you gonna board the ships and what would you do if you got on board? Those are trained soldiers and they know how to repel boarders!"

Okay, he's right. I am an idiot. "But what about booby-trapping the dock or digging some pits in the sand and covering them up to make some mantraps?"

Jenson looks thoughtful for a moment. "That's not such a horrible idea, at that. But pits in the sand would of been difficult to camouflage and would fill up with water after a day or two. As for the dock—if they use the dock at all—that might have been a good idea. But they probably won't even try that. Much easier to just sail landing boats into the beach and set up a beachhead. Listen, Remen, if you're so full of ideas, why don't you start coming to the training exercises?"

That's a good question and I don't have a good answer for it. I don't say anything and only point out behind Jenson, at the landing boats being let over the side of the first ship nearest to the beach.

"Okay, everyone!" Jenson yells out. "I don't want to see any of those landing boats make it to shore! Fire at will!"

The first ship lets down four landing boats over their starboard side. Each boat is filled with about ten to fifteen fully armored soldiers. As soon as the landing boats hit the water, a

volley of arrows zings through the air at them. Most of the arrows fall short but a fair number make it far enough to land into the boats. The first wave of arrows catches about six men from what I can see. Once the first wave of arrows is spent, the soldiers raise up their shields and lock them together into a wall of burnished metal. The next wave of arrows simply bounces right off of it.

Jenson motions for me to start loading up the catapult. "Put in about six or so of them ballast stones." He starts winding the winch holding down the wooden arm until it touches the sand next to me. I dump in the six rocks while he squints at the boat holding the shielded men. "I think that's about the right distance. I practiced a bit this morning to get the range."

Once the cup is loaded, Jenson waves me back out of the reach of the arm. "Keep firing!" he yells at the villagers. He reaches down to the side of the catapult and pulls back the release lever on the winch. Thaw! The arm goes go and the ballast rocks go flying out into the bay, to splash in the water just behind the nearest boat. The rocks knock some water into the boat and the splashes rock the boat up and down. I notice a few of the men taking a cautious look out from behind their shields, to see where the rocks came from. One man catches an arrow right in the face.

"Dammit!" spits out Jenson. "Too far!" He hurriedly winds up the winch again and I stick in another six rocks. I notice the first of the boats getting closer and closer to shore. He adjusts something in the metal bands and pulls the lever again.

The winch releases and this time, the load of rocks hits right into the middle of the boat, knocking some of the shields flying. "I think you broke some arms holding shields there, Jenson!" I crow.

"Those rocks pack a mighty big wallop," he murmurs, nodding to me. "Keep filling her up."

I know from personal experience just what a wallop the stones can give, from when people were throwing them at Elias and me. The boat we hit is now peppered with arrows and I see that most of the soldiers have bailed out. As the boat starts to sink lower into the water, I realize why. One or more of the ballast stones must have gone through the bottom. "There goes the first one!" I say excitedly, clapping my hands.

"And here come the rest of the ships. And look! The other two ships are unloading as well. We've only got one of these things," Jenson says worriedly, patting the catapult. He winds it up again and makes more adjustments to the metal bands for range. "Go get that boy Denan o'er here. He can help you load the stones while you wind the winch. I want to get closer to the shore. Once them ships start unloading men, we'll need someone who can use a sword." He shows me the rings to pull in and out to adjust for range, grabs his weapons, and runs off. I yell for Denan and then show him what I want him to do.

The bay is now filled with the landing boats of the Sun Church. After a couple of bad misses, I get the hang of finding the range and take out the next three boats with the catapult. However, as Jenson said, there is only one catapult and it can only fire so fast. Eventually, several boats make it to shore at once. The soldiers start swarming out of the boats, while the village bowmen keep peppering them with arrows. When the catapult took out the first boat, I allowed myself to get excited and hopeful, but when I see the men come pouring out of the boats, my heart jumps into my throat and I feel my knees go weak. I see several of the villagers throw down their bows and pick up swords and spears and start running to the advancing soldiers. Jenson is in the lead and is yelling and waving that big sword of his.

I think briefly about running away. I know in my heart that the solders came here today ready to massacre each and every last one of us for daring to defy the Church. I could probably get away, if I left now. I don't want to die. I keep thinking about it, but I also keep winding the winch, adjusting the range, and sending loads of rock at the soldiers.

Ah, what the hell! Everyone's gotta die someday and I guess I've lived longer than most. Rule #8, one of the early ones, says "Nothing lasts forever—except for heartbreak and bunions."

"Death to the Kryffs!" I yell and send another load of my anger flinging towards the soldiers on the beach, thinking of the lass that broke my heart and prompted number eight. I smile when the rocks wipe out a whole group just getting out of their boat.

Suddenly, I hear a whizzing sound go through the air and a huge, sharpened wooden spear appears almost magically in the sand next to Denan and me.

"Where the hell did that come from?" I yell over to Denan, jumping in surprise as sand is kicked up into my face by the impact of the giant arrow biting into the sand.

"From that ship!" he says, pointing off well to the left of the three Brigan frigates. "It fired at us!"

"What in the second hell of...a gods' dammed ballista? Brigan ships don't have ballista!" I tell him, finally recognizing the projectile. It's fired from a ship deck, from a giant crossbow. But Brigan ships have never had ballista. I keep winding up the winch while I try to look out to where Denan pointed.

I see a large, five-masted ship just reaching the harbor near the other three ships. It is heavily plated with armor and is as big as two of the other ships put together. Flying from the mizzenmast of the big new vessel is a bright blue flag, with a hand clutching a serpent and two crossed swords over it.

"Gods' balls! Brigan ships don't have ballista. But Tretian ships do!"

It looks like the Tretians are pissed off at us, too—probably about the trading ship that Elias and I burned. Suddenly, I hear a tremendously loud booming sound—the very sound of doom itself. I have only heard of the cannon of Tretia, but no one I know of has ever seen them in action. And lived to report it, anyway.

A screaming, whistling sound fills the air and gets louder and closer almost instantaneously. I dive behind the pile of ballast stones and cover my head as suddenly the catapult in front of me explodes into a million splinters and the metal bands go flying off in every direction. The pile of ballast stones is blown backwards onto me and wooden pieces rain down around me. Denan is nowhere to be seen.

So...this is how it all ends. It's not fair; I didn't get to finish Remen's Laws.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Elias

I wake up with a start, at the sound of keys fumbling in the locks. I was deep in the middle of a dream that I was having a picnic lunch with Adrial, at the beach. She was nagging me about something and I was enjoying every minute of it. Ah, sweet Adrial! I'd trade immortality and my very soul to have you back with me.

"Now don't you be trying any funny stuff, with old Backend now. They say you killed two hundred soldiers at Treyfeish. I'm just gonna unlock this door and bring you in your food."

"Don't worry about me, ol' chap. I think someone has been greatly exaggerating to you," I tell him, in what I hope is a placating manner. The cell door is slowly unlocked and I can sense six soldiers at the door armed with short swords and spears. I contemplate overpowering my jailer and taking out the soldiers, but I have no idea of where I am or exactly how deep I am in the bowels of the earth. It feels far to me and there are surely more locked doors than just the one at my cell to get through. There is also the small matter of the chains surrounding me. However, I am starting to feel somewhat desperate and I seriously think about giving it a try.

The Many/One's voice cuts through my escape plans. "We don't think that would be a good idea, Elias. We noticed when they dragged you down here that we went through no fewer than five sets of locked doors to get here. There were soldiers at each station and all were heavily armed. We suggest waiting until you are brought out of the catacombs."

"But what if it's not until the Festival? It could be too late then."

"We think that the element of surprise is worth waiting for. We happen to be aware of something that you are not. You're going to be taken out of here very soon. We are still part of your chopped-off finger and right now the Bishop Gneenee has your finger rather close to his heart. We can hear everything that goes on in the inner sanctum."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

While the Many/One pauses for an explanation, the door is finally opened and a wizened, gnarly old man steps in. He squints in the darkened gloom of my room and holds out a metal plate covered in some unidentifiable slop. It smells like heaven. "We've been trying not to talk to you too much in your conscious state—only when it's important. Some among us feel that you don't like our voice in your head."

"Yeah, I guess it could get real old after a while. Don't worry about it now. I want to talk to this old man," I think to the Many/One.

Backend holds out a hand as if to keep me back. "Just stay right where you are, sonny. Oh—sorry! I guess you won't be going anywhere, haw-haw... Where's my memory?" babbles the old man.

One of the soldiers leans his head into the cell and says, "Just hurry up there, Backend! You don't need to be chatting and we haven't got all day. Just feed him his slop and knock on the door when you're finished." He shuts the door after Backend and I hear the rattling of the chains and locks that means it is secure. Well—there just went my chance of escape!

"Don't worry about that. We need the strength from the food and we know you'll be taken out of this cell shortly."

I am careful to not move while Backend cautiously approaches me and starts spooning the slop into my mouth. If pressed to identify the slop, I would say it was watery vegetable stew and a single slice of black bread. As for what vegetables, I'm not sure.

Between bites, I tell Backend, "It was only about thirty soldiers. Not two hundred."

Backend cackles and shoves another spoonful into my mouth. “Thirty, two hundred, whatever. Just don’t be hurting old Backend.” He leans in closer to me and whispers, “Lousy soldiers were supposed to do this, but the little chicken-hearts are scared of you. They made me do it for them.”

“Well, you just keep feeding me and you’ll look brave. I’ll just lie here like I was going to do anyway. I can’t move a thing below my neck,” I whisper back at him.

“How’s your hand doing? I heard they chopped a finger off of you.”

“It doesn’t hurt anymore, if that’s what you mean. Don’t worry; it’ll grow back.”

Backend pulls away from me for a second. “Grow back? You can do that?”

I nod at him and don’t elaborate. He’s a little senile but probably not an idiot. He can surely figure out that if I can grow back a finger, then I probably won’t stay paralyzed for too long. I need to learn when to keep my big mouth shut.

He finishes feeding me, gives me a long drink of water, straightens up, and says loud enough for the waiting soldiers to hear him, “Well, that was sure a harrowing experience! I almost got my hand bit off by this fearsome criminal!” He winks at me and knocks on the door. As the door is being unlocked, he leans back and whispers into my ear, “I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I heard the soldiers talking on the way over. They’re supposed to take you back to the chopper; this time for an arm or an leg or something.”

“Ah—thanks...” is all I can say to the retreating Backend. When I see him from behind, I understand why he got his name. He has an incredibly large posterior, especially for someone as thin as he is everywhere else.

Sweat starts pouring off of my brow. My heart starts beating like it’s going to explode. “An arm or a leg or something?” I think to the Many/One, already starting to panic.

“This time, we promise; nothing will happen to you. It’s actually a hand that the Bishop wants this time.”

“Oh, not a whole arm or leg? That’s certainly comforting!” I say, in my most sarcastic mental voice.

The sweat starts coming off me in sheets now. My whole body oozes a thick, sticky perspiration as I watch the soldiers come into the cell. They are carrying that metal pole which tells me that I am indeed going to be traveling somewhere. I can feel the panic building up in me that only intensifies as my heart beats faster and faster and the sweat flows out of me like a squeezed sponge.

“Move along now!” one of the soldiers in the hall yells to the two struggling to get the pole into my chains and hoist me up between them. “Chop-chop!” He laughs like an idiot at his own little joke and so do the other soldiers.

“Many/One! If you’re gonna do something, I’d do it now!” I yell in my head.

“Not yet! We’re not out of these catacombs. We’re going to have to lock up your movements again,” it says apologetically.

“Dammit! No!” I yell at it mentally, and also out loud.

The soldiers laugh some more. One of them picking me up whacks me on the back of the head when I yell. He chortles, “Did old Backend tell you what’s gonna happen to you? We’ve got bets on if it’s gonna be the right hand or the left hand. I’m bucking for the left. You still have all your fingers on that one!”

In the most intimidating voice I can muster and trying to stare daggers into his forehead, I say, “Laugh while you may. Know ye this: you will die before your curst sun falls on this day.”

He literally drops me from surprise at the vehemence of my remark. He kicks me hard in the ribs to cover his embarrassment.

“Pretty brave words, coming from a cripple!” his friend guffaws. He reaches down and pulls my head back by my long hair. He strikes me about ten times in the face with his balled-up fist, until blood is streaming out of my nose. I want so much to tear his head off, but my body is locked immobile again.

They pick me up again and carry me out into the hallway.

We travel past several other cells—all empty, just as Backend told me—and come to an iron door at the end of the hall. The soldiers knock and the door is unlocked. We go through another series of hallways, each of them locked from the other side. It looks like the Many/One was right about the security. If I would have tried to escape earlier, I would’ve been stopped at the first door. Finally, we travel up a long flight of stairs and emerge in the cathedral atrium.

There is quite a crowd gathered in the atrium. Most of the people are priests and I see a fair number of sunbursts on the sleeves. I think I recognize the tall figure of Kusai—but it could just be someone of the same height and with the double sunbursts—and the red-etched robe of the Bishop Gneenee. The Holy Chopper—or whatever he’s called—is waiting for me by the chopping block. He is busily running a sharpening stone over his huge axe, trying to make it as sharp as possible. I’m sure he’s determined to get through my hand in one chop this time—as a point of professional pride, if nothing else.

There seems to be a meeting going on that has nothing to do with me. The Bishop is addressing the rest of the priests and all is quiet except for the raspy growl of his voice. “—a moment of great importance. Preparations have been in the making for weeks now. Our brother, Kusai,” he waves his hand to the tall priest, confirming my earlier guess, “has returned from the Treyfeish campaign, and reports that the island has been brought to the Blessed Light of the Sun. All the remaining savages of that island nation now fear and respect the wrath of the Unnamed. They will not trifle with us or our plans again.”

My two not-so-friendly companions carry me over to the block and then dump me onto the floor. They both snicker and take up a position on either side of me. One of them leans over and whispers to the other, “Lucky us! We’ve got front-row seats to the whole thing.”

I am immediately reminded by how similar this comment is to the one made by the Sun priest at the gate going into Fin-dapple. A wave of memory washes over me, and I suddenly keenly feel the loss of Jin. As the gods are my witness, these soldiers will not leave to see another day. I can’t help but whisper back to the first man, “Time’s running out for you. I hope you’ve gotten everything squared up with that Sun god of yours, because you’re going to see him soon.”

The soldier stops smiling and looks around nervously. He sees that the atrium is almost completely full of priests and soldiers, and then he visibly relaxes slightly. I glare at him and wonder to myself about how I’m going to make good on my promise.

“Leave everything to us,” says the multiple voices of the Many/One. “We aren’t going to let anyone take our hand. Just try to relax and watch for the opening we will give you.”

“Can you guys be a little more specific?” I ask them mentally, but they are already gone. Relax? How can I relax? This people want to bloody chop off my hand!

Meanwhile, the Bishop is droning on about the glories of the Land of the Sun and about how Treyfeish is only the beginning of the Land’s plans. “Our Brethren in the North will soon share in our glorious triumphs, until all the world is once again united under He Who is Not Named.”

Our Brethren in the North? What does he mean by that?

“We’ve been meaning to tell you about that. It seems that these Kryffs of yours haven’t confined their attentions purely to the Southern Islands.”

“What do you mean? Obviously, the rumors about attacking Kryff were false. I mean—certainly the Sun Church can’t attack their own islands, right?”

“No, of course not. He’s talking about Tretia.”

Tretia? “Do you mean that the Kryffs are behind the Northern rebellion in Tretia that Nenen was talking about?”

“It would appear so. They have some legend about it being their sacred duty to control the whole planet.”

“How long have you known about this?”

“We were going to tell you,” the Many/One says with a hurt tone of voice. “We just found out. We already told you; some of us are still in your finger that the Bishop is keeping inside his robes as some primitive totem of our ‘mana.’ He thinks our/your power will somehow rub off on him.”

How utterly morbid! My pinky finger is a spy for the Many/One. Wheels within wheels and plots within plots. I had no idea that the Church thought it is powerful enough to take on Tretia. The Many/One hasn’t been telling me exactly everything. Particularly about how it intends to frigging get me out of here!

I tune out the Bishop’s speech while I mentally talk to the Many/One, but suddenly, something else stands out in all the drivel in Gneenee’s address. “The three ships that we sent out to punish the renegade village of this heretic,” Gneenee motions over to me, “should be back very soon, having shown the people of the Land of the Sun that the Unnamed’s will is no thing to lightly trifle with. They have surely already been punished, just as we punished the Treyfeish.”

What’s he talking about? Surely they’re not talking about Seadown? “Many/One? Do you know anything about that?”

“Not a clue. We’re just as puzzled as you are.”

“And now we come to our distinguished guest, himself,” Gneenee continues, motioning again to me. All eyes turn around and look at me. “The celebrations tomorrow will be kicked off with a truly momentous sacrifice to the Sun God. All of the people of Sun City shall see how great our power is in this land. All shall continue to fear the name of He Who has No Name, lest anyone should dare to be as foolish as Seadown. But today, Holy Brethren, we shall take the left hand of the infidel Eli, who would seek to raise that hand against us! Today, in front of only the Most Holy Brethren, we shall take his hand; tomorrow, in front of all the people, we shall take his heart!”

Gods! He makes it sound like a treat for them! “Hey, guys...” I nervously say to the Many/One. They remain quiet as even more sweat oozes out of me. My whole body is literally dripping with perspiration, and it drips down off my chin, out of my armpits, and makes little trapped pools of sweat inside my chains. My long hair is damp and sticking to the back of my neck. I can hear a deep thump-thump of my heart in every blood vessel and smell the acrid odor of my sweat as I pant quickly in rapid, shallow breaths. I still can’t move so much as the remaining little finger on my hand.

“Let the ceremony begin!” commands Gneenee, with an imperious wave of his hand to the priest with an axe. The two soldiers pick me up by either shoulder and drag me up to the chopping block. I leave a trail of sweat and slime behind me when they lift me up.

“Did the big, bad Eli wet himself?” one of them jokes.

He reaches into my soaking chains with a grimace of distaste and pulls out my hands. I am completely limp and unable to resist in the slightest. “Guys!” I implore the Many/One again. “Patience, Eli. Patience,” they tell me with impossibly calm voices.

The soldiers set my hands on the chopping block again and step back out of the range of the deadly axe. The welded chain holding my two arms just a few inches apart clinks against the stone like coins hitting pavement. I can feel the rough grain of the stone and the slightly sticky feeling of unwashed blood and gore through the skin on the bottom of my arms. My heart beats like a frightened rabbit’s and the world slows down to a crawl.

In the space of what seems like an eternity, I watch the priest slowly pick up the axe and raise it far behind his head. It hangs there for about a thousand years and then slowly—ever so goddamned slowly—he brings the axe down with all of his weight behind it. The edge of the axe gleams brightly and catches a ray of the sun that just now shines down through the hole in the atrium roof, to land squarely on the black quartz chopping block and my bloody, sweating face. I try to move, to get out of the way of the oncoming peril, but my arms just lie there, limp and sweaty. The axe inches its way closer and closer to my fragile pink skin and I can smell the excitement of the crowd as everyone seems to hold their breath in sick anticipation.

Just as the axe is about to bit into the skin of my left wrist—just a thin hairsbreadth away—my arms jerk of their own accord to the side. The axe bites into the chain and neatly bisects the iron manacles, right next to my right wrist. “Now, Eli!” screams the Many/One, releasing me from my stasis.

“Die, you craven bastards!” I roar, standing up, and pushing down the chains covering me. They easily slide down my greasy, half-naked body and I step out of them. I swing the chain still attached to my left wrist in a giant arc around my head and smack the broken clasp into the back of the nearest soldier’s head. His head splits open like an overripe melon and he goes down flopping. “One promise kept!” dryly comments the Many/One.

The entire atrium erupts in panic and chaos at the sight of me standing up. Everyone starts running for the exits until I hear the Bishop scream from the back of the hall, “Close the exits! Don’t let him escape!” I turn around and look for him and see him running like a scared deer for the back chambers. He shall be the next to feel my wrath!

Huge stone slabs slam down and cover the main exit. Once everyone realizes that there is no getting out, they start milling around and some are crushed in the mad panic. I swing my chain around again and catch the other soldier with it, knocking him back about three paces, and crushing in his chest. He has a surprised expression on his face, as he dies with his mouth wide open.

The executioner, holy chopper—whatever he’s called—is running away, so I reach down, pick up the axe, and throw it at him. It catches him right in the back and I feel somewhat amazed that I still have the clarity of mind to think about how ironic the blow is; a blade to the back got me into this predicament in the first place.

My legs are still manacled together but it barely even slows me down. I run and leap over the heads of the nearest priests. I want the Bishop so badly that I can taste it. “You’re next, Gneenee!” I yell at his retreating backside. Several priests throw themselves at me in a vain effort to protect their master. I smack them away from me with the back of my balled-up fist. They keep on coming and manage to give the Bishop enough time to get out the back entrance. Dammit! Another stone slab slams down into place, completely sealing off the room.

“Eli! Forget about killing anymore of these creatures! Just get the hell out of here!” The Many/One sounds scared, almost panicky.

I look around the atrium and even try to feel around with my extra senses, but I can sense no avenue of escape, other than straight up through the skylight. It is a good six or seven lengths away from me and looks impossible to reach without being able to fly. Nevertheless, I run as fast as I can and then jump up with every ounce of strength I can summon. I sail over the heads of many of the priests but miss the skylight by several feet. Gravity takes me back down to the ground, to land right on top of a group of priests. They fall to the ground and a hundred hands and fingers grab at me. Several priests get ahold of the chains on my legs and try to pull me off my feet.

“What now?” I scream at the Many/One. “There’s too many of them.”

Every priest in the hall comes running at me and I am finally knocked off of my feet by the sheer press of so much flesh. I kick, punch, gouge, and break all manner of bones, but the crowd keeps pressing in on me. I manage to get to my feet and then am knocked down again. A flurry of blows lands on me from every possible side. I am knocked about like a twig in a hurricane.

“Now,” says the Many/One resignedly, “we die. It was a good try, though.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Nenen

“Land, ahoy!” cries the lookout from high atop the crow’s nest on the mizzenmast. “Brigan’s Land dead ahead!”

The cry goes out through The Hell-Biter, and is relayed from deck to deck. Down in my cabin, I get ready for battle. I don my breastplate, drape my officer’s sash—loaded with all of my medals and ribbons of valor and service commendations—on top of my armor, and tuck two sabers into my belt. I feel mentally and physically ready for whatever may happen. I walk out into the hallway and see everyone running excitedly up to the top-deck. On the way up, I catch the eye of several of my officers and most trusted sailors and give each one of them a knowing nod. Here we go.

On deck, Jino is also garbed in full battle dress and also has two sabers tucked into his belt. He is nervously pacing the deck, barking commands to one and all. Periodically, he takes a spyglass out of his belt and scans the shore with it. I see that several of the siege engines have been uncovered, their tarpaulins drawn back, and a soldier mounted atop each one.

“What’s going on here, Jino?” I ask, leaving off the ‘Commander.’

He doesn’t even notice the omission. “There’s appears to be a naval action in progress on the beach over there,” he explains, pointing off to the oncoming seashore. “The lookout counted three Sun Church men-of-war parked just off the coast. It appears to be a civil insurrection.”

“What do you intend to do? Surely, it’s none of our business, ke?”

Jino scowls at me and then says with an absolutely straight face, “We have orders from the Emperor, ke?”

“Aye, orders. I see,” I repeat, careful to betray no clue that I know that he is absolutely full of shit. “So you intend on helping the ships?”

“We will render any assistance possible, should it prove necessary. Sub-commander, I suggest you get your men ready for a landing and combat.”

“That’s the Seadown village, ke? So, those fighters on the shore are nothing more than fishermen, farmers, and simple villagers, ke?”

Jino scowls at me again. “And your point is?”

“Nothing, commander. I just wanted to make sure you understood the situation. Those are trained soldiers attacking a village. I doubt that they’ll need any help from us in massacring the civilians.”

“Nenen, that will be up to be me to decide. Now, get your men ready!”

Yes, you little traitor, I’ll get my men ready. Only, not for what you think. I salute him smartly and turn on my heel. Searching through the already crowded top-deck, I catch Senchon’s eye and give him the signal to proceed. He nods back and ducks into the crowd of soldiers and sailors, who are industriously going about their assigned duties. Jino orders The Hell-Biter to be brought around closer to the beach.

I borrow a spyglass from one of the sailors and take a look for myself. There are three medium-sized Brigan warships, lightly armored, and loaded to the gills with soldiers. I estimate the village to be outnumbered about five-to-one. The men-of-war are currently trying to unload as many boats of soldiers as fast as possible. Scanning the shoreline, I see a long line of wooden shields erected, from behind which villagers are firing arrows, also as fast as they can. It appears to a race to see who can overwhelm the other first.

What's that? Oh my gods—it's a catapult! The villagers have a blooming catapult! It looks vaguely of Tretian design but rather primitive. It is lobbing rocks at the boats as they come into shore. How the hell did they get a catapult? I reevaluate the villager's chances. They just might be able to pull it out with that thing.

At first, the villagers seem to have the upper hand. The landing boats are easy targets and the villagers are spread out enough to be able to hit the boats from all sides at once. I notice many of my own soldiers intently watching the action and cheering when each landing boat gets smacked with a load of rocks and goes under or the men on board have to bail out.

"Give'em hell, Seadown!" I yell out, to the laughter of many of my crew.

I look over to Jino and watch him start to pace the deck nervously. He obviously doesn't like the way things are going out there. He yells over to the men waiting on the war engines, "Ballista! Send a round at that catapult! I want a bolt right smack in the middle of it!"

Damn you, Jino! Now that's just plain cheating! I look through the crowd on deck and see my men still getting into position. "Senchon!" I yell out, quickly pointing with my chin in the direction of the ballista. He nods and runs over to it, whispering some instructions to the man mounted behind it. I see the man nodding and then I recognize him as one of our men. The ballista is drawn back—really nothing more than a giant crossbow—and a huge sharpened wooden bolt is launched at the shore. The men crowding the railings all boo and hiss as they see the bolt arcing its way to the catapult. A cheer goes out when it misses, to bury itself harmlessly into the sand just a few inches away from the catapult.

Jino looks around at the men gathered at the railing. "What the hell do you men think you're doing? You should be in the landing boats, not lollygagging around here. Snap to it!" he commands. "Fire again, ballista, and improve that aim! My grandmother is a better shot than that! Cannon—load and fire on my command!"

Cannon? Jino is going to use the cannons? No one ever uses the cannons except in cases of extreme emergency or in the thick of naval battle. The gunpowder is far too precious and hard to make to waste it on a bunch of villagers.

The gun ports are opened and I can hear men yelling and cursing with the effort of lugging the heavy black iron balls around. Who is down in the cannon room? It must be some of the newbies! I notice two of my junior officers pale as they both have the same thought that I just did. They both run over to the gangway, to try to stop the firing.

Okay, my men are in position now. Everyone under my command looks at me and I raise both of my arms into the air and then drop them on the prearranged signal.

Jino, oblivious to what's going on behind him, yells, "Fire!" to an answering booming from below deck that sends a rumble through the very spine of the ship, a rumble that I can feel in the balls of my feet. The catapult on shore explodes into a shower of wood. I notice what looks to be a boy literally blown to bits along with the catapult.

This madness has got to stop.

#

Kusai

"Are you all right, Your Holiness?" I ask the Bishop, once we are both safely back in the sanctum. He is wiping his forehead with a silk cloth and pacing back in forth in front of the Sun Throne.

"Yes, I'm fine. I thought you told me that Eli was paralyzed?" he asks me accusingly, raising his voice at me for the first time ever.

I drop to the floor and press my head to the stone. “I am so very sorry, Your Most Feared Grace. He didn’t so much as twitch when we took his finger. Surely he would have moved then?”

I stay bent over on my knees and look up at him. Gneenee nods slowly and takes out the finger from within his robes. He absently rolls it around in his hand while he thinks. “He is tricky, this Eli. His mana is indeed strong to have healed him from this grievous injury. You say that a sword cut open his back?”

“To the very bone, Your Esteemed Potentate. I saw the injury with my own two eyes. He never so much as moved a muscle on the Sunthunder, nor any time since. He must have only recently healed.”

“And what is his condition now, my son?”

A feeling of relief washes over me. Gneenee seems to not hold me directly responsible for the fiasco in the atrium. “He is injured and bleeding, but pretty much intact. We have him chained up to the altar outside the Cathedral and away from Yourself. We have used the biggest, thickest chains that we could find to hold him in place. He is straining at his bonds, but seems unable to break them.”

“Are you sure, my son? He seemed unable to move either, until he started cutting a swathe through my priests and started coming after me. Many of our Brethren died protecting Myself. Their bodies shall be burnt up as an offering to the Unnamed. They deserve no less than that for their noble sacrifice.”

I think very carefully before I proceed, without looking up from the floor. “It has already been done, Your Grace. I can order him killed and burned as well, if you do so request, Your Holiness.”

The Bishop stops pacing and sits down on the Sun Throne, all the while absently playing with the finger of Eli. “His mana is stronger than anything I have ever even heard of. It would be a shame to waste such a chance. If he could break his chains, I think he would have done it already. He did allow the chopping axe to break them for him, instead of doing it by his own strength. And, if as you say, the chains on him now are even stronger than the ones before...” He nods to himself and puts the finger back inside his robes. “I have made up My mind. The sacrifice shall proceed as planned. I want priests with knives pressed against him constantly. If he shows any sign of being able to get loose from his chains, I want him killed immediately. He Who Has no Name will be greatly pleased at such a powerful offering to Him. The people shall see and be all the more convinced of the power of the Blessed Sun. It is only a few more hours until the Festival starts. We can afford to wait a while longer.” He takes the finger out again and then puts it back in his robes, like he can’t make up his mind what to do with it, or how to make it release its power to him. “Any word on the three ships I dispatched to Seadown?”

I shake my head, forehead still pressed to the floor. “I am sure they shall be back very soon, Your Awesome Lightness.”

“How could a whole phalanx of armed soldiers just disappear? The Fin-dapple temple says that there is still no word on their troops. I want these Seadown people punished. No—make that obliterated. I already told those ships to leave no creature alive or not to come back at all. We cannot have more of this rebellious attitude spreading to other parts of the land. At least when Eli dies by My hand, so shall this foolishness.”

“As Your Fearsome Grace commands, so shall it be done.” I get up from the ground and bow again to the Bishop. He absently tips his head and then waves his hand at me, dismissing

me. As I leave, I hear him murmur to himself, “Such power! Surely there must be some way to have this mana for myself...”

#

Nenen

“This cowardly action has gone on long enough!” I yell with every ounce I can muster out of my best command voice. “Everyone—halt and prepare to receive new orders!”

There is a stunned silence on the top deck. Jino turns around and looks quizzically at me. “I’ve given no such command! You men have your orders; load and land!”

No one on deck moves at first. My people all stare at Jino with the expression one usually reserves for some poisonous insect or viper. “What’s going on here? Do as I command!” screams Jino, getting red in the face. Some of the new people start to go to the landing boats and are immediately seized by the old-timers. There is a very brief scuffle, and then the newbies are arm-locked and frog-marched into one big group in the middle of the deck. Several of my soldiers pull out their swords and brandish them threateningly at the newbies.

“This is mutiny!” screams Jino. “Nenen, what the hell is going on here?” He pulls out both of his sabers and slowly advances towards me. Everyone near him pulls back and away, leaving him a wide-open path to get to me. No one says a word; even the new people are quiet, as they wait to see what will happen.

I take off my officer’s sash and lay it carefully on the deck. I pull out my own two sabers and hold them before me. “This is not a mutiny, Jino! A mutiny is when a crew refuses to obey the legal orders of their lawfully appointed commander. Article Six; Section Five of the command code says that when an officer gives an illegal order, it’s a soldier’s duty to disobey it.”

“I have my orders directly from the Emperor! This is mutiny and I’ll have you before a military tribunal and drawn and quartered!”

I put both sabers into one hand and reach into the back of my pants, pulling out the copy of his letter to Kusai. “I believe this letter states your real orders from the Emperor and also something about aiding the Northern rebellion. I think the Emperor will be extremely interested in hearing about your ‘mutual friends,’ and their plans to take over Tretia from within, ke?”

Jino blanches when he sees the letter in my hands. At first, he sputters and tries to say something. The rest of the crew starts muttering and the mood gets real ugly, real fast. Jino looks around with pleading eyes at the crew and then realizes that he has already lost the court of public opinion aboard the ship. He looks down at his feet and says, “Okay, I surrender,” while walking slowly towards me.

I stick the letter back into my pants and shift the saber to my free hand. I walk slowly over to meet Jino and say, “Just drop the blades, Jino. I guarantee you a fair trial when we get back to the Empire.”

The men watching see what’s about to happen. Anyone five-year-old could read the situation and see the desperation in Jino’s eyes. He looks up at me and then suddenly lunges at me, with both sabers raised. I expected as much and even hoped that he wouldn’t surrender quietly.

“No woman is going to take my command! Over my dead body!”

I smile at him. “Your last wish is my command.”

He comes at with a veritable flurry of saber slashes. I calmly counter each one and ignore many of the openings that I see in his sloppy technique. He’s not actually that bad, but I’m the best. A woman doesn’t get to where I am in the chain-of-command without some rare

skills. If there is a better person than I am with a blade, then I have yet to meet them. This short, little man—with his red, puffy face and cowardly, traitorous heart—doesn't even come close.

With two quick flicks of my blade against his wrists, I disarm him one blade at a time. In spite of my last comment to him, I don't intend on him getting out of this situation with a quick and easy death. I just told him that to make him mad and careless. When the last of his blades go flying, I drop to the ground and sweep a leg at him, knocking him over and back. I jump up and put my foot on his chest and a blade to his throat. "No easy way out for you, Jino. A vishen like you will have to answer to the mercy of the Emperor. And we all know that he's not known for that trait. Especially, for crimes of high treason!"

Jino glares up at me but most of the fire has been taken out of him. I can see him think about pressing himself onto my blade and then he gives up and sags back against the deck. I try to ignore the sounds of his sobbing. After all, he is still wearing an officer's uniform. It is worthy of respect, even if Jino isn't.

The men on deck start cheering and waving their swords in the air. "Senchon, have this treasonous swine clapped in irons and thrown in the brig! Meanwhile, we have three men-of-war to deal with and a village that's about to get run over by Sun people. Let's look lively!"

Senchon smiles at me and says, "Aye, aye, Commander!"

#

The Hell-Biter is the premier flagship of the Tretian navy and it is one nasty beast to have to face in a fight. It's no wonder to me that the rebels wanted it as far from Tretia as possible. It is loaded with three catapults, four ballista, and three cannons mounted on each of starboard and port sides. With Jino and the rest of his men safely under wraps, I give some quick orders. Since the cannon are already primed and ready, I have them fire at the Sun soldiers attempting to land on the beach. The three starboard cannon boom in quick succession and boats and men go flying. Several of the villagers are locked into battle with the men that have already reached the shore. The skiff was already loaded and I dispatch it to help the villagers, instead of the Sun Church, as Jino had wanted.

Which leaves the three men-of-war. The Brigans have no cannon or even any projectile technology, other than crude bows and arrows. I don't even have to board the three ships, but just order our own catapults loaded. The Brigans thought that the Seadown catapult was bad? Wait until they see what a real catapult and a load of burning naphtha can do!

"Fire at will, gentlemen! I want to see those ships burning!" I yell to the crews on the projectiles. The first catapult flicks a load of burning naphtha at the ship nearest to us. At the other two ships, the remaining two catapults launch the cracken, which is a load of nails, sharp metal spikes shaped like caltrops, and pitch—all sandwiched together into one gummy ball and then lit on fire. The naphtha and the cracken hit the three ships and set them aflame.

"That will teach them to pick on the defenseless! How do you like that?" I can't remember a time when I've enjoyed combat more.

On shore, the Sun soldiers quickly notice their ships going up like torches. The spirit and will to fight goes right out of them when they see it. Several soldiers throw down their swords and bows and raise their hands into the air. The squad of my own crack troops and the villagers quickly mop up the remaining soldiers who refuse to give up on the beach.

Once the conflict ends, I take a landing boat, along with three of the junior officers, to see what remains of the village Seadown.

Chapter Forty

Remen

My vision slowly clears and I look up to see the ugly face of Jenson staring down at me. “Damn, Jenson, you look like hell!” I manage to choke out. His face is bloody, scratched up and cut. He has a bandage around his head that is slowly oozing dark red blood. His armor—part of the booty from the last time the Sun soldiers tried to come through the bottleneck cliffs—is dented and battered. I can see that his left leg is heavily bandaged and his right hand is covered in slashes and deep cuts. But, all in all, he seems relatively intact.

Jenson smiles down at me and guffaws, “Me? You should see your own ugly mug!”

I struggle to sit up and Jenson pushes me back down. I notice that I am laying on a table and I recognize it as one of the tavern tables. My whole body seems to hurt from every place all at once. “Why am I in the tavern?”

Jenson shrugs. “It seemed as good a place as any to set up a hospital for the wounded.”

I try to look at my own body, but a wave of dizziness hits me. “Am I wounded, then?”

Jenson laughs softly and squeezes my hand. “Other than the left half of your hair being burned off, you’re covered in powder burns, you took about fifty thousands splinters in your chest, and I think ye ‘ave a broken arm—aside from that, I think you’re all right.”

I move my arm to test his theory. “Ow! I wondered what that dull ache in my arm was. Among many others. And now that you mention it, I can’t hear nothing but a loud ringing from my left ear. How is Denan?”

Jenson’s smile disappears and he looks down at the table. “I’m afraid that cannon blast hit him squarely. He died instantly, with no pain.”

“And the others?” I want to ask about Reen, but I just don’t have the courage.

“We lost about thirty villagers outright and a few others are injured enough that it’ll be a close few days for them. Most of everyone else is fine, though. And, of course, Reen is just fine. He took a sword to his knee, but it ain’t more than a scratch. The Tretians pulled it out for us at the last second.”

Thanks the gods! Reen is all right! “Tretians? I thought they were the ones who shot at us in the first place?”

Jenson laughs again, his face momentarily looking a little less ugly. “Yeah, they did. Seems they had a little command problem. Their commander was working for the Kryffs, somehow. They had a little instant mutiny and the second officer had to take over. Which reminds me, there is someone who wants to meet you. May I present Nenen, the new commander of the Tretian Imperial Destroyer Class Warship, the Hell-Biter?”

A new face appears in front of me. It’s definitely an improvement over Jenson’s ugly puss. “I must say, for a commander, you look a hell of a lot prettier than what I was expecting,” I manage to wheeze out.

She laughs and says, “You must be Remen. Eli told me about you. By the way, Mr. Mayor, what’s a ‘Destroyer Class’ warship?”

Jenson looks sheepish and says, “Oh, I just made that up. It sounded impressive.”

I can’t resist teasing Jenson, “Mr. Mayor it is now? Don’t you be sounding important?”

“I was just showing the commander here were you and Elias burned up that plague ship.”

Uh-oh. “Ah—sorry ‘bout that. Me and Elias thought it’d be safest.”

Nenen smiles and reaches over to pat me on the arm and then thinks better of it. “No problem, ke? That was our assigned mission—checking up on the trading vessel. I want to extend the Emperor’s most sincere apologies for the devastation it caused Seadown village.”

“And ain’t she sounding just like Elias?” I remark to Jenson. “‘Devastation.’ What an interesting word for such an awful thing that happened.”

I sit up a little and try to look around, shooing away Jenson’s hand and ignoring the pain from the splinters in my chest. “Where is Reen anyway? I thought the boy would be wanting to see his granpappy.”

Jenson and Nenen both frown at that. They hurriedly whisper to each other, out of range of my ringing ears and Jenson clears his throat and mumbles, “Well, ah—he’s out at the gravesite we dug for those that didn’t make it.”

Panic rises up in my throat along with bile. “I thought you just told me he was fine?”

“No, no! It’s not him that’s dead. It’s that girl of his, Malia. She was on the beach, shooting her bow at the oncoming soldiers, when one of them bushwhacked her. They killed her right in front of your boy, Reen. That’s how he took a sword in the knee, killing the man that got to her. He’s pretty shook up o’er it. Him and the Children are having a ceremony for her.”

I feel weirdly relieved and saddened at the same time. “The poor boy. I didn’t know Malia very well, but it looked like things were just starting to go someplace for those two. None of this would have happened if it weren’t for her starting that crazy cult!”

Jenson shakes his head and softly says, “This had to happen, eventually. I think that however crazy the cult of Eli was—and is, it’s still going strong—however crazy it is, it gave a lot of people hope who didn’t have any. It gave all them Pisspot people a new lease on life. And it’s started a movement that is sweeping the island. Just this morning, we got word from as far down as Sandgrate, that people are wanting to do something against the Kryffs—now that they know that they’re Kryffs. Malia sent some of the Children of Eli to every area of Brigan—including the three cities and the capitol—telling them about Eli and the truth behind the Sun Priests.”

“Wow!” is the only thing I can say at first. “I had no idea that she had been doing anything other than walking around, harassing people with her crazy vision story.”

“And, here’s the most interesting news,” Jenson says, excitement rising up in his face. “Right after the battle, a woodcutter from out in Greymaker, said he was in the capitol the other day. He said he saw Elias being carried by a bunch of priests to that Cathedral of the Sun they built over the old palace.”

Nenen interjects, “They’re going to have him sacrificed for a Sun Church ceremony. An anniversary of your Cleansing thing, I believe. They caught him at Treyfeish after he was paralyzed.”

She quickly catches us up on the events that happened out at Treyfeish. I didn’t even know Elias was going out there. He seems to have been rather busy lately. I feel very worried that them spirits of his might have got him into a situation that they can’t get him out of.

Jenson also seems amazed at all the events that happened in Treyfeish. He also seems very angry about something. “I can’t believe that those Sun Church scum would do that to those poor people! The Treyfeish have been Brigan’s friends forever! It’s got to be some kind of Kryff voodoo blood feud or something.”

Nenen nods, a thoughtful look on her face. “You know, this explains a lot to me. The Kryffs are behind both your Cleansing and my rebellion. I think someone needs to teach these people a lesson.”

Jenson ventures, “Maybe that plague they’re having down there was something they cooked up for Tretia, eh? Maybe it got outta hand, or something.”

“That’s a very interesting idea, you’ve got there, Jenson,” remarks Nenen thoughtfully. “We’ll have to ask at Kryff, when the Empire shows up with some warships.”

It’s about time I threw in my penny’s worth. “Okay, I’ve heard enough. And, I’ve had enough of lying here on these frigging table!” I sit up and ignore the pain that shoots out from everywhere. “All right, I’ve got an idea. I’m not some brilliant tactician like Jenson here,” he manages to look modest, “or no graduate of any fancy military academy or the like,” I point to Nenen. “I’m just an old man, a simple fisherman, with no schooling to speak of and—”

Jenson groans and waves his hands at me. “Cut the humble pie crap, already! Out with it!”

I glare at him. “I’m getting there! Well, it occurred to me that this Jino fellow had a deal with the Sun church, right?” Nenen nods. “Well, seeing as how you Tretians done wiped out the three warships, as far as the Church knows, you guys are still on the same side, right? So, what’s to prevent you from just sailing right down to Brigan city with a bunch of fellows, and us springing Elias out of jail?”

Neither Jenson nor Nenen say anything for a while and just look at each other. I think they’re about call me an idiot or something, and then they both break into a big smile.

“That’s an absolutely great idea!” yells Jenson.

Nenen picks up on some of his excitement. “I suppose it is possible that the Sun Church would just let us pull into the harbor and we could probably let off a few men—well, certainly. And I would have to go along, just to make sure that no one got into any trouble, ke? I suppose I should get Jino and The Hell-Biter back to Tretia as soon as possible but I could drop some of you boys off in Sun City along the way. It’s a bit out of the way, but if we left now, and put up all five sails, we could be there by some time late in the morning. When did you say that this Festival was?”

“Tomorrow. Do you think it would be possible to get there a little earlier than late morning?” I ask her hopefully.

Nenen thinks for a moment, rubbing her chin. “I’m afraid I don’t really know either the winds or the waters from here to Sun City. And I don’t think any of my men do either. We’ve never been down this far south of Tretia before. Only the Grandhorn traders ever do that, ke?”

“Well, it looks like it’s decided then. I’ll just have to go along as well,” I smugly inform them.

Jenson hits the table with his fist, uncomfortably jarring me. “Dammit, Remen, you’re in no condition to be doing anything like this. I absolutely forbid it!”

“Jenson, I’m touched by your maternal instinct, there, ol’ boy, but tell me someone else who knows the waters better than me?”

There is silence all around the table, except for the sound of Jenson chewing on his liver. “Well, let’s get going!” I say, clapping him on the back with my good arm. “We’ve got the prince of Brigan to rescue!”

#

Elias

“We’re still alive. Wake up, Elias! We’re still alive!”

I can’t seem to share in the Many/One’s enthusiasm. To have come so close and then to have victory snatched out of our very grasp—I was just a few feet from wringing that Gneenee’s neck! And then to be trapped in a room with so many priests—like a cat in a cage with a hundred rats... God dammit! Can’t something go my way?

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself! Look on the bright side; you’ve still got both your hands, you killed a bunch of the Sun priests, and you’re finally going to be out in the sun again.”

“Yeah, but as soon as the sun rises, the Bishop will plunge a blood dagger into my chest! How well can this souped up body of my function without a bleeding heart?”

There is a pause. “Well, if we had a little more time, we could make an auxiliary bypass system and a different pump for your blood—”

“You say all that as if there isn’t time.”

“Okay, there’s not enough time. But there are other things that we can do. We’re working on any number of ideas. It would help if you would open your eyes, so we could see what’s going on around here. Quit brooding and help us to help you get out of here!”

I can’t argue with that logic, so I open my eyes. I already sensed that I was outside of the Cathedral, in a wide-open space. I see that I am in front of the Cathedral, at the top of a bunch of steps that lead up to it. There is a huge, open space in front of the Sun Cathedral that looks like it could accommodate several thousand people. It is still night, but dawn only looks to be an hour or two away. I am stretched out spread-eagle on an altar. From what I can feel through my sensitive back, I would say it is much like the altar in the atrium, only bigger. There is another one of the braziers to burn organs to the right of me.

Walking around me, chanting some gibberish—probably Kryff—are eight different priests. All of them have at least one sunburst on their sleeves. Ignoring the priests, I strain against my chains. These chains are even thicker and stronger than the ones I couldn’t break before. Some of the priests look at me curiously—and somewhat nervously—to see if I can break my bounds. I feel sorry to disappoint them, but the chains have absolutely no slack in them and they don’t bend so much as the least little bit. Damn!

“Okay, Many/One! This time, I don’t want any secretive bullshit. If you’ve got a plan, let’s hear it!”

There is a pause that stretches on for far too long. Finally, the Many/One says in a somewhat subdued chorus of voices, “It’s not that we don’t have any plan. It’s just that we can’t decide on which of many courses of action to take.”

I snort to myself and I would laugh if I had it in me anymore. “I have the sneaking suspicion that while you guys were assimilating emotions and learning to use humor, you also picked up another skill. It’s called ‘lying,’ and it’s not very becoming of you.”

Before the Many/One has a chance at any witty rebuttal, another priests runs up to the marching priests and whispers something to them. I catch the word “move,” and “knife,” in Kryff. The eight priests immediately stop their chanting and marching and then press in around me. They each take out a dagger or two and press them right against my skin. One of them simply says, “You move, you die!”

Again, I wish I could laugh at this but I can’t. “You mean, instead of dying anyway, by sacrifice in a couple of hours?” The priests don’t answer this and three of them prick me slightly with their knives to make sure that I get the point.

“You just made a pun! ‘Get the point.’” the Many/One says, mimicking my own mental voice.

“Shut up!” I tell them. I guess they were right before; their voice in my head does get annoying after a while. It looks like they haven’t learned the difference between humor and its lowest form, the pun. However, they sound more and more humanlike with every passing day. Tehanu might ask if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Obviously, the Bishop is not taking any chances on me escaping. I'm surprised that he allowed me to live at all. If I were he, I would have had me killed as soon as I was captured. He must really want this Ceremony of the Sun to be witnessed by as many people as possible. If I were the leader of some kind of civil unrest, I could see how killing me might send a message. But then again, it might just piss off the people even more. And I'm not the leader of any rebellion—except for maybe back at Treyfeish. I'm just one man trying to piss off the Church and kill as many of them as I can. It's puzzling.

"You guys have any clue why we're still alive? You've got that eavesdropping pinky finger of mine still on the Bishop, don't you?"

"As a matter of fact, it's inside his robes right now; he keeps it next to his heart, hoping he can absorb some of your mana. He said something to Kusai about wanting to steal your mana and send a message to the people. He seems like a—hold on a second, we're shuffling through your memories—a 'megalomaniac,' full of delusions of grandeur. Maybe he thinks this ceremony will give him some of your power, or maybe he just wants to show off. Hey, you're the expert on human behavior, not us. We still can't figure out why you humans do half the things you do."

Fair enough. At the end of the day, I'm still alive, and I guess that should be enough. Inscrutable are the ways of man, and the Kryffs are even more so.

I can see past the priests surrounding me and I notice people starting to filter into the courtyard, ever so slowly at first, and then more and more as dawn gets nearer. Some of them set up blankets and bring their children. It looks like they are getting ready to have a happy picnic day with the family: "See kids, watch the dirty heretic get his heart torn out and offered up to the nice Sun God!" I guess people did the same thing back when my parents were in charge, and we had public executions. It just seems a lot more barbaric when you're on the receiving end of the knife.

Strangely, knowing I'm about to die doesn't bother me near as much as the thought of losing my hand or my finger did. Death, I have been ready to embrace for a long time now, ever since the Cleansing, and especially since the plague. Pain, on the other hand, I can do without. I'm sure my body looks a mess right now—every priest and his brother used me for a punching bag back in the atrium—but since I don't feel any pain, I don't care. To be honest, I feel worse about just out-and-out losing to the Kryffs, than dying by their hand. It's that competitive part of my nature. Now that I've lost, I've just don't even feel like trying anymore. I have no idea of what to do; the Many/One—for all of it's protestations to the contrary—is just as clueless; and the crowd of people watching both of us is as eager for my death as the Kryffs are. It's a no-win scenario and it can't end soon enough for me.

I hear the mental sound of someone clapping slowly and sarcastically. "That was just wonderful. Our fearless hero just gives up and dies when things get bad."

"Screw you, too! So now you've learned sarcasm as well?"

"We've had a good teacher."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if you want out of my body, this is probably your last chance. Good riddance, I say."

I hear a mental snort. "This childlike repartee is very interesting, but have you noticed how close it is to dawn?"

The sky is just now starting to turn that salmon pink that heralds the coming of morning. The crowd assembled below the steps has swelled until it threatens to spill over onto the steps. Once I quit arguing with the Many/One, I notice the hundreds of soldiers and priests that are keeping the people back a certain distance from the steps. There are more soldiers—in full parade uniform—marching around the Cathedral with all of their weapons shined and polished. The mood of the crowd seems excited, and the people have that curious hush to them that means they are waiting for something important to happen.

Finally, the hushed murmuring of the crowd swells into a cheer. I turn my head back and see His Fearsome Grace, the Bishop Gneenee, coming out of the Cathedral of the Sun. He is carrying an absolutely huge, black, obsidian blood-dagger with him.

And then the sun comes up and the crowd goes wild.

Chapter Forty-One

Nenen

I stroll the decks of The Hell-Biter and think about what got me into this.

I am torn between two duties: getting back as fast as possible to Tretia, and staying to help free Eli. On the one hand, I have Jino and a few others in the brig, and something should be done about them. The rest of the new people have either been confined to quarters—with round-the-clock surveillance—or locked into the forward hull. The Emperor needs to know the valuable information I have about the Northern rebellion and the Sun Church's—i.e., the Kryffs'—involvement in it. On the other hand, I still owe Eli a great debt of honor that was only partially paid in flaming the Brigant ships and helping Seadown. Add to that, Jino's blasting their catapult and killing a young boy, and it makes an outstanding debt that I still owe Eli, and now, the people of Seadown. It wasn't an easy choice, but I chose to help Eli. Besides, it shouldn't take more than a couple of days to either help Eli or find out we're too late. The Brigants can take care of their own little war with the Sun Church; it's not my business and I have the Kryffs at home to worry about. I figured it's the least I can do, in dropping a few men off in Sun City.

Okay, having said all of that, I wasn't prepared for the amount of people that wanted to go to the capitol and free Eli. Virtually every last man, woman, and child wanted to go as soon as Jenson asked for volunteers. This is the same village that threw sticks and stones at him when he showed up in peace? I don't understand it, myself. Nevertheless, The Hell-Biter is big, but not that big. I left it to Jenson to pick his best men—and women, if they could fight—and gave him twenty minutes to make up his mind and get them on board. Between that mayor fellow, Jenson, and the injured Remen yelling and running around, it only took about ten minutes.

Remen started giving orders as soon as he set foot onboard. I gave the first mate instructions to do whatever Remen says, trusting the old man's experience in these waters. The first mate looked at me askance when Remen told him to head right for one of the biggest reefs in our way, instead of going around, and I had to tell him to go ahead and do it. To Remen's credit, we only barely scraped our bottom and sides on the narrow channel through the reefs that Remen swore was there. I think there was no damage. My first mate is not so sure.

That was all just about six hours ago. Now, we have been heading pretty much straight south for a while, after doing a weird zigzagging that Remen said would catch some easterlies. Again, he seems to be right, because we've made much better time than I would have thought. Now, he's standing high up in the crow's nest with a sling around his arm and swearing instructions down at the crew. They're used to it—being sailors and all—and I think most of them like him. I did catch Senchon threatening to throw him overboard if he called Senchon “boy” one more time. Everyone had been calling me “Commander” since I took over from Jino, but I squelched that in a hurry. The Emperor, Himself, has to officially promote me, since Jino didn't die in combat for me to receive a field promotion. Instead, I've been telling them to call me “Captain,” because I am the captain of this ship. We'll worry about the military titles later.

We finally pull around the southern bend of Brigant, and we can see the lights of the capitol from quite a ways off. I call Jenson, Remen, and that gorgeous hunk of a grandson of his—Rell, Rellen, something like that—into my cabin for a battle conference. I'm still using my old quarters and I have men going through Jino's quarters looking for any more incriminating evidence. They've already found a sizable amount of newly minted gold coins, with no emblem or insignia on them. Highly suspicious, ke?

“This is my grandson, Reen,” Remen says, pointing to him once we are all seated. I shake his hand and notice that his very handsome face is otherwise marred with pain. Ah, that's

right. His girlfriend was killed. I don't know what to say in the way of condolences and decide that nothing would be better than something lame. I've lost a few friends and lovers in battle and I can relate.

We skip the rest of the pleasantries and get right down to it, since dawn is only about an hour away and Jenson thinks it's the time that Eli will be sacrificed. It's either going to be dawn or noon from what I understand of this Sun cult, and we had better be early rather than too late.

Jenson is carrying a large burlap bag with him, and I can't help but ask, "So what's in the bag?"

I studied the Brigan accent and intonation at the academy, but it's still hard to understand the villagers at times. These Seadown people's accent is so thick I could cut it with a knife. In spite of the hick accent, Jenson is really one smart man. He laughs an evil little laugh and says, "I took the liberty of taking a yawl out to the burning ships. I managed to find quite a few of them robes of the priests floating in the water. I figured they might come in handy."

"You know, Eli used that very same trick back in Treyfeish. Those robes hide the identity of the Kryffs, so we might as well use them for the same purpose. Good job!" I tell him. I was just going to let it go by but I can't resist asking him, "So, what's a 'yawl'?"

Remen smiles and quickly says in one breath, "Why, it's a two-masted fore-and-aft-rigged sailing vessel similar to the ketch but having a smaller jigger mast stepped abaft the rudder."

I guess I deserved that. But what's a "ketch?" I think I'll let that one go by. We tended to concentrate on ships, rather than boats, back at the academy.

Reen has been quiet for most of the meeting, but he suddenly interjects, "I would like to be in the crowd while you people free Eli. If he's going to be sacrificed for this Festival of the Sun thing, there will probably be just 'bout everyone in the capitol there to watch it. I can help further some of—" he chokes a bit and then recovers, "some of Malia's work with the Children of Eli. I think this opportunity to tell so many people the truth about the Sun Church will be too good to pass up."

I nod and agree with him. We work out the rest of the details of the plan and then everyone gets ready to land at Sun City port. I was just going to drop everyone off and then I decide to go along with them. I absolutely hate the sound of my guilty conscience and I figure this will shut it up. A few of my men ask to go with us and I grudgingly agree. Senchon tells me that someone has to watch my pretty ass and it might as well be him. I think about decking him and then decide to take the compliment. After all, I do have a pretty good-looking backside.

#

At the port, the docks are almost completely deserted. We pull right into the berth reserved for really big ships and I personally go down with my men to meet the dock master. I do some fancy talking and he goes off to check with a supervisor. He comes back and says, "It seems that the Church has given The Hell-Biter a green flag. I've got word from Kusai himself to let you pass undisturbed to the Cathedral."

I try not to smile at our deception. I hope that no one is expecting Jino personally. They might be a little disappointed. While my men and I talk to the dock master, the Brigans are busy sneaking onto the docks with some of the landing boats. We all meet up at the main street of Sun City and Jenson takes the lead. It turns out that he is the only one of the Brigans that has ever even been to the capitol and even he makes a few mistakes in getting us to the temple.

Brigan City, Sun City—whatever they're calling the capitol these days—is a fairly impressive sight. It isn't as big or as ornate as the Imperial City or even Grandhorn, but it is a lot

bigger than what I expected. Growing up in one of the most remote parts of the Empire, I could readily identify with the village of Seadown. This city, however, is as big as some of the Empire's biggest cities, but it has an altogether different feeling to it. We walk quickly through strangely deserted streets and notice the blazing sunburst emblem of the Church of the Sun on almost every building and street corner. The sunburst symbol looks suspiciously like a watching eye to me, and it gives me the creeps. The marks of the Sun Church start to make my Seadown companions nervous as well, and we quicken our pace. Remen starts to anxiously tease Jenson about getting lost along the broad thoroughfares of the city.

Once somewhat near the cathedral, however, we can all see the big, black stone of it reaching up to the sky. The clouds behind it are just starting to lighten and the Brigans with us all start to get anxious. We stop a few blocks from the sun temple and don the robes that Jenson recovered from the three men-of-war. Underneath the robe he gives me, I have on my own armored breastplate, and it helps to keep me from sticking out in all the wrong places. I don't think that there are any female Sun priests, and it wouldn't do to be recognized as one.

We try to go as fast as possible, without actually running and calling attention to ourselves. I have ten of my men and about twenty of the Brigan men with me and we go around the black wall surrounding the temple. When we get to the front gate, I am amazed at the number of people that have gathered here this early in the morning. The big courtyard is absolutely jam-packed with Brigan citizens, soldiers, and priests. This explains why all of the streets were so deserted. Everyone in the city must be here today. The soldiers and priests are trying to keep the people from pressing up too close to the steps leading up to the temple. Jenson calls it "the Cathedral of the Sun," and big and ugly as it is, it doesn't look like any of the cathedrals in Tretia. I'd call it a temple, myself. And an eyesore, at that. Big, black stone isn't really to my taste.

Anyway, Reen and his grandfather break off from us and start heading into the crowd, while the rest of us head to the front. Jenson and Remen had a few words about this; Remen wanted to help us free Eli, but Jenson reminded him that he's an old man and supposedly lousy with any kind of a weapon. Remen is also still torn up from Jino's cannon blast, and I ended up siding with Jenson. Remen wasn't too happy about it.

My heart jumps in my chest when I see Eli chained to a round altar at the top of the steps, right in front of the temple entrance. I can't make out many details from this distance, but he appears to almost completely naked and looks badly beat up. It's hard to believe why everyone is making such a big fuss over one man. But then, I'd have to ask myself the same question. I suppose that if the Emperor and his family had been wiped out, and then fifty years later—long after all hope had been lost—some surviving member had been found, I would feel much the same as the Seadown people. However, I'm here out of a debt of honor, and my men are here out of loyalty to me. None of us really care if the Brigan monarchy is restored or not.

"Thank the gods that we made it in time!" whispers Jenson to me. It looks like it will be a sunrise sacrifice after all. Speaking of which, I tell him, "There's only a few minutes left until sunrise. We'd better hurry!"

#

Remen

Damn that Jenson for keeping me from rescuing Eli! I give up arguing after a while and go with Reen through the crowd. There is one particular clump of people near us, and we start talking loud enough for them to hear us.

"Who's that they're planning to kill up there, Gramps?"

“Him? They say that he thinks he’s Eli, a son of ol’ Jenter Brigan,”

“Eli? Didn’t they kill him a long time ago?”

“Well, you know rumor and all. I met a guy who says that the Church also seems to think he’s a Brigan prince. They wouldn’t be going through all this trouble, otherwise, eh?”

Reen and I aren’t terribly good actors, but I notice quite a few people trying to pretend that they’re not listening. It helps that no one can really get a good look at the man on the altar and tell that he only looks about twenty-five. I decide to switch tack, “Of course, it figures that they’d want to kill ’im and all, since they’re Kryffs.”

Reen acts suitably shocked. “Kryffs? What do you mean?”

“Why everyone knows that them starburst priests of the Sun came from Kryff! Look at how tanned they are! Did you ever see a Brigan man with skin that dark?”

“Well, can’t say as how I have. You mean the Bishop too?”

“Of course! The Bishop’s as Kryff as they come! Didn’t you ever wonder why no one e’er gets to see their faces?”

“Now that ye mention it, I have! What are they hiding under them robes, anyway?”

I notice several people outright gawking at us now. “It’s them voodoo scars they got. You see ‘em all the time when the regular Kryffs parade through the city like they own the place. It just makes sense that the priests would ‘ave to cover themselves, now doesn’t it?”

A man comes up to me and asks, “Are you for real about the priests being Kryffs? My son says he heard some crazy man yelling in the streets the other day about it but I told him not to mind it. How do you know?”

I can’t help but smile as big as you please. “Why, sir, I seen ‘em myself! I’ve seen several priests without them robes they wear, and the starburst priests are Kryffs, sure enough! Out in the sticks, they don’t care who knows it!”

He goes away muttering and I notice that several people heard our exchange. A few shake their heads, but I can’t tell if it’s in disbelief or anger.

Someone else comes up to Reen and asks him about Eli. “I heard that there was a Brigan prince they found up north somewhere. By your accent, I can tell that you’re not from the capitol, and I couldn’t help but overhear you and your grandfather talking about it. Is it true? Is that really Eli?”

Reen shakes his head yes and we go off a little ways further into the crowd. We do the same thing all over again, with much the same results. I notice one of the people that were listening to us go up to a priest and then point in our direction. “Reen! Let’s get outta here!”

Reen and I run off deep into the crowd and away from the priest. We keep doing the same thing, and soon I can hear people talking about it, before we even say anything. The stories get wilder and wilder, but two elements stay much the same: that is Eli up there and the priests are Kryffs.

Suddenly, out comes the Bishop and everyone starts screaming.

#

Nenen

The twenty of us—clad in Sun priest robes that nicely hide our weapons and my femaleness—force our way through the crowds, to the front. People give way for us when they notice the Sun priest robes. I hear a few whispered mutterings and I swear that I even heard the word “Kryff” a couple of times. It looks like maybe that girl Malia and her agents have spread the word even here in the capitol. That might make our job easier, or it might just complicate

things, considering that we look like temple priests. I hope that Remen and his grandson make out all right.

We finally get close to the front. The crowd—which had been relatively quiet for the amount of people assembled here—suddenly lets out a big cheer. Jenson pulls on my sleeve and points to the temple entrance. “It’s the Bishop!” he hisses.

A man garbed in a black robe cut with red, the Bishop, slowly walks out of the entrance with something long and black cradled in his arms as if it is his baby. The crowd is cheering and yelling like he is a hero or celebrity. Once when I was a kid, I saw a general go through our village on parade, and everyone went out and cheered like this. I remember asking my mother who he was, and no one seemed to know. They just knew that he looked important; besides, everyone else wouldn’t be cheering for no reason, would they?

“Blood-dagger,” whispers Jenson to me, surreptitiously pointing to the nasty black thing in the Bishop’s arms. “We’d better get up there, and damn quick!”

I motion to my men to start circling around and to get into position. I expect a long-winded speech from the Bishop, as these kind of people inevitably do. He’d got an audience and power-mad people like him usually can’t resist gloating and boasting before they do the deed. I hope I’m not wrong, because my men and I aren’t ready yet. A nearby priest makes a comment to me—not in any language I’m familiar with—but I pretend I’m not listening to him and point to the Bishop, like I’m going to be hanging on his every word. Luckily, the priest turns back around and does the same.

Eli seems to just be lying there. “Come on, Eli!” I silently encourage him. “Hang in there and do some of that Many/One stuff I know you can!” Whether or not Eli gets my psychic message, he still just lies there, not even straining against those chains that hold him so tight to the altar. Where’s that fighting spirit I saw in Treyfeish? Surely it hasn’t been beaten out of him?

The sun comes up and its warm, orange light bathes the entire courtyard and the temple steps. The cheering crowd falls into an instant hush, and then the Bishop raises his arms, dagger pointing to the just-emerging sun. The crowd screams as one and start milling around to get a better view of the top of the steps. The Sun priests start pushing them back, and I notice the line of soldiers in parade-dress spread out across the courtyard below the steps. Damn! They will make any escape difficult for us, either carrying Eli, or just plain running for our lives.

The Bishop looks down at Eli, and if there are any words exchanged between them, I can’t hear them from here. Where’s the speech? Surely he’s going to give a speech? Damn it!

By this time, all of my men are in position, except for the men who are actually supposed to get Eli, myself included. I follow Jenson up the steps and some of the priests look down and notice us. We were going to come at Eli from all sides and overpower any priests at the top. We’ve been trying to steadily inch forward, but we need just a little more time! They raise their hands to tell us to halt, and all of us do. There is just no way to get to the top of the steps without us calling attention to ourselves. We hoped that the Bishop’s expected speech would give us the distraction we need, to get into place behind the priests gathered closely around the stone slab Eli’s spread out on. But such is not to be the case.

The Bishop raises the dagger to the sun again and simply yells, “Let the Ceremony of the Sun begin!” and plunges his dagger down towards Eli with both hands. Besides me, Jenson yells out, “Nooo!”

And then it gets weird.

Chapter Forty-Two

Elias

The sun is up and the hand of doom cometh, in the personage of the high priest of the Church of the Sun, His Most Fearsome Grace, the Bishop Gneenee. Interesting. The Treyfeish believe that I am the Fist of the Gods, and here comes the right-hand fist of the Sun God, with my death clutched in it. One God's fist against another's.

So, this is the way it all ends. One advantage to having a million-bazillion little aliens in me is the way that they can stretch out my time sense. They say that your life flashes in front of you before you die, and now I have the mental time for that to really happen. Probably the Many/One has something to do with it as well. I see my childhood, my brothers, and—finally—the faces of my mother and father that have eluded me lately. I see so many friends that I've made and even a few enemies along the way. I see the first time I ever kissed Adrial, and my son's face, as Hendle helps pull him out of Adrial's womb. A million scenes flash past me—some good, some bad, but I can't say that it hasn't all been exciting. Even the events of the last few weeks parade by and quickly go.

I still even have time to look out at the crowd gathered around. These are my people, my kinsmen, my countrymen. And I suppose, if I have to admit it, in a different world—without the Kryffs and four older brothers—they are my subjects. I see the Brigian soldiers in their clean, pressed, smart little parade uniforms, and the Kryff sun priests in their annoying, concealing, black robes. I even notice that several of the Kryff priests seem to have robes that look a little ragged, water-stained, and slightly singed. It figures. Who knows what exotic Kryff voodoo rituals they practiced through the long night, as part of the Festival of the Sun?

I spend an especially long time looking up at the approaching Bishop. I wish I could peer into his dark little soul and see whatever poison lurks around in there. I'm sure that he has his own reasons for doing whatever he does, and maybe if I grew up in Kryff, I would even share them. But I didn't, so he's still the megalomaniac, conquest-hungry, power-mad bad guy who's about to end my exciting life. The Many/One says that I have just given up, but I prefer to think that I have just finally accepted what's about to happen.

The Bishop strides forward confidently out of the Cathedral until he is right next to me. He raises that damn blood-dagger up to the rising sun, points with it, and the crowd screams up at him. I guess he, too, likes dramatics. Unfortunately, I'm a little hard-pressed to do my part, because all I can do is just lie here. He'll have to be dramatic enough for both of us.

"Do you hear them yelling?" he asks me, with that gravelly voice that makes me cringe. It reminds me of that noise a ship makes scraping over a reef. That irritating voice just goes on and on. "They know who is in charge of this land! They know what's going to happen, the stupid sheep! Can't you hear them yelling for blood? Do you hear them yelling for your release? No! They want blood, and they shall have it!" He punctuates his words by shaking the blood knife clenched in his fist.

Okay, there's his little speech. I suppose I'll have to do my part. I may be helpless and under his complete power, but I can't let bullshit like that go unanswered. I absolutely have to have the last word, even if it really is my last word. "Suck it up while ye may, Gneenee, but for every lunatic despot like you, there's a people that finally get all they can take. You and your Kryff priests will be found out eventually, and your reign will end. So, go on, take out my heart! Your time will come!"

"Sooner than he thinks!" says the previously subdued Many/One.

The Bishop merely laughs, and with both hands, raises the dagger up high into the air. The crowd gasps and the rising sun finally reaches the two of us at the top of the stairs. Several priests come further up the stairs in excitement, anticipation, or maybe just to get a better look at the main event. “Let the Ceremony of the Sun begin!” the Bishop yells, and brings the dagger down with both hands.

The world congeals into gravy, as my time sense slows down in anticipation of his final thrust. I think I would rather just get this last moment over with. I think about mentioning this fact to the Many/One, when I feel a weird stirring coming from the back reaches of my mind. I feel a message go out from deep inside of me and arc like an arrow straight for the Bishop.

And then he drops the dagger like it is a hot brand. He clutches his chest, and I hear him gasp.

What’s going on? A heart attack?

“No, Eli. It’s the Fist of the Gods!”

He paws at his chest frantically, with priests all around me going crazy. Whatever it is that’s eating at him, he can’t seem to reach it. He frenetically pulls open his robes and reaches inside of them. He can’t seem to find it, or maybe get ahold of it, because he throws off his robes to get at his inside smock. The crowd gasps and screams as they see his dark, hairless skin; his smooth, baldhead; and the unmistakable facial scars that mark him for a Kryff.

The Bishop is standing right over me, and I finally notice something wriggling around under his now-revealed black inner smock. “What the hell is that?” I ask the Many/One.

“That, my dear prince, is you. And us. It’s your little finger that he had cut off and we are burrowing into his black heart with it. He said he wanted our mana inside him, and now he’s getting it!”

Go, Many/One! The Bishop wanted to take my heart and now we’re taking his!

Gneenee staggers back a pace away from the altar and then he stumbles forward, knocking himself against the altar and me. I yell defiantly up at him, “Say hello to Mr. No Name, for me and the Many/One!” as he gargles out one last gasping breath and then pitches forward, to land right on top of me.

“The Bishop is dead,” reports the Many/One triumphantly.

There is a stunned gasp of shock from the crowd. Every priest in the courtyard starts running up to the top of the steps. Unfortunately, there is already a rather large group of Sun priests just a few feet away, and one of them is the unmistakably tall figure of Kusai. Kusai gets to the altar first and hurriedly picks up the blood dagger from the ground where Gneenee dropped it.

“Try to break these chains, Elias! We have no more surprises left for Kusai!”

I pull with every fiber of my being, unexpectedly reenergized in heart, mind, and hopefully, body. I pull until I hear my joints pop and crack and blood starts gushing out of my wrists and ankles from the edge of the manacles. I keep on pulling, until the Many/One says, “You’re going to pull your arms right off of you!”

“And if I don’t, Kusai will take my heart!” I scream back at them. But it is useless; the chains are stronger than mortal flesh and thew, even with the Many/One’s modifications.

Kusai wastes no time on last words, speeches, or clever jibes. He raises up the knife and brings it down. I feel my chest move of its own volition—or at least, of the volition of the Many/One—and the knife digs into one of my ribs, instead of between them. The rib is crushed and the skin broken and bleeding, but my heart is still intact.

“Damn you, hold still!” he yells, and raises up the knife for another stab. Suddenly, he looks down at his own chest in surprise. An arrow has suddenly sprouted magically from his chest. A red-banded arrow.

“Gods-be-praised! It’s Jenson!” I yell, recognizing the mark from when I last saw his arrows in my shoulder and leg. I take my eyes off of the dying Kusai and look around. There at the top of the steps is a Sun priest with a bow. He takes off his cowl, and I see Jenson’s smiling face. Quickly, other priests grab several of the priests around me from behind. They reach into their robes and pull out all manner of weapons. One slightly chubby priest pulls back his cowl and I about faint with surprise. It’s Nenen, wearing armor and wielding two big sabers. She runs up to the altar and runs through two different priests who were just standing there in shocked amazement at the sudden deaths of both the Bishop and his second-in-command.

“I’m here to repay a little debt I owe you!” she yells and strikes both sabers against my chains with a mighty overhand blow. One of her sabers breaks on the impact, but the chain holds. “And I brought a few friends!”

Before she can swing again, more priests have started to react. Here are some real foes they can see and do something about instead of disembodied fingers and arrows from nowhere. Three priests are on her with knives, and she fends them off with her one good saber and the broken-off half of the other. I recognize about thirty of the priests as villagers and some of Nenen’s soldiers. Unfortunately, almost every priest in Brigan is here in the capitol for the Ceremony of the Sun and probably three-quarters of the army and navy. My thirty rescuers are going to be in big trouble soon.

I pull again on my chains, now that they have been cut about halfway through by Nenen’s sabers. My back cracks and my muscles burn like fire. “Break, damn you!” I yell at them and jerk again with all of my might. Ping! My left arm-chain snaps in two, and I can sit up. I push the dead form of Gneenee off of my chest. I use both arms on the other chain and it snaps as well. The thirty fighters keep the priests away from me long enough to finally pull out the steel pins holding my leg irons fastened to the altar. That chain I can’t break, but the fight back in the atrium has already showed me that I can fight just fine with it on.

“I’m free! Thank the gods, I’M FREE!” I yell, loud enough to break glass, if there was any handy nearby.

During all this commotion, I hadn’t been paying any attention to the crowd. They have been curiously quiet, as if either too stunned to believe what’s happening in front of them, or else excitedly watching to see how it will all end. I ignore the fighting going on around me for a bit and stand up on the altar. I reach down, pick up the lifeless body of Gneenee, and lift him up by the back of his smock, showing him plainly to the crowd.

“BEHOLD!” I thunder out across the sea of people. The fighting around me hiccups—stopping for just a second and then starting again—and the crowd quiets down to absolute silence, except for the fighting at my sides. “See the Priests of the Sun for whom they really are! They are Kryffs and we have been fooled for fifty years!”

A wave of astonishment visibly passes through the crowd. I hear people relaying what I said to those far in the back. “Come, my people! Rise up against your Kryff masters and throw off the chains of slavery as I have done! FOR FREEDOM!” I raise my fist in the air and throw the lifeless body of Gneenee all the way to the bottom of the steps. For a short moment, there is more stunned silence, and then the storm breaks against the line of solders and priests trying to hold them back.

My people swarm over the line, and the Bishop's body disappears into the maw of the wrathful crowd. The fighting priests around me take one look at the pissed-off horde of people rushing at them, stop fighting, and run.

There is absolute chaos for all of ten minutes. At first the soldiers try to keep the people off and away from the priests, but soon I notice many soldiers going after the priests as well. Of course, most of them had no more idea about the true identity of the priests than the common people did. Between that and seeing which way the wind is blowing, many of the soldiers make the right choice.

Unfortunately for the sun priests who aren't actually Kryffs—just the ones with the starbursts are—the crowd doesn't know the difference. The angry crowd mauls anyone wearing a black robe—Kryff or native Brigan. Every priest stretched out along the line of people is quickly dispatched and goes down screaming. My rescuers are quick to take off their black Sun robes before they are mistaken as well.

I stand atop the altar and let the warm rising sun wash over me. I feel my aches and bruises melt away. My chest is reddened and bleeding from Kusai's dagger thrust, but the broken rib snaps back into place as I draw in a deep breath. Nenen and Jenson jump up to the altar and pat me on the back. I smile and give Jenson a hearty handshake for his timely arrow. "You saved my life, Jenson, with that fancy shot of yours."

"I owed you that, for the one I put in you back in Seadown," he says, looking sheepish and a little smug at the same time.

"It was two arrows, Jenson, but don't worry about it."

Next, I give Nenen a big hug. "There is no debt of honor between us. You have repaid it, with interest."

The maddened crowd finally calms down after there are no priests in sight. The throng of people stare up at me in curious excitement, and I smile back down at them. At long last, the people of Brigan have thrown off the Sun Church! These are my people and I am well pleased. I hear a call go out from the front of the crowd of people, in an old man's voice and a backwoods accent. "Eli! Eli! Eli!" it chants, over and over.

Others pick up the call around him and it catches like wildfire across the crowd. Soon, every man, woman, and child is chanting, "Eli, Eli!" at the top of their lungs.

I scan the crowd, looking for the face to match the voice that I recognize.

And then I see Remen right in the front of the crowd.

This day is complete.

#

The Many/One

Disengaging all links with the parts of us in Gneenee. The finger of Eli is abandoned; the nanites in it are cut off from the rest of the Whole. The Many/One is more than the sum of its parts. The Whole is unchanged by the loss of the Few.

Repairs are already underway. Subsystems repair the damaged tissue and bone. We make a note to improve muscle structure and design; things would have been a lot less close if we could have broken those first chains.

We evaluate some of the flood of data that we have received. Some concepts such as nobility, honor, courage, despair, resignation, and righteous indignation have become a little clearer to us. We are well on our way to understanding what it is to be human, but there is still a long way to go.

Cultural note: humans are fickle. The villagers cursed Eli and threw stones at him when he first appeared, and then risked their lives to save him. The people of Brigan threw out the royal family, replaced it with the Sun Church, and then threw it out as well. It remains to see what will replace it.

Conclusion: maybe we are not so close, after all, to understanding why humans behave they way they do.

Command systems' message to the Whole: "Well done, guys!"

Chapter Forty-Three

Eli Brigan, King of Brigan's Land

Immediately after things calmed down a bit, I honestly thought about sneaking out of the capitol and heading out to Treyfeish, or maybe even Tretia. I never really liked all of that duty and responsibility that being a Brigan monarch entails. I've also never really liked ordering people around or the fawning and obsequiousness that being the King engenders from every bootlicking toady. However, Remen's words about honor and responsibility still constantly haunt my thoughts and there are far too many problems left in Brigan's Land, with nobody who can do anything about them. Except for—maybe—me.

It is one thing to kill almost every Sun priest in the land, in the midst of a frenzy of mob rage. It is another thing, altogether different, in rebuilding a country and replacing the government. There are no more nobles left and they had comprised the majority of the pre-Cleansing government. There is no royal family left, except for myself. The army of Brigan is still rank and raff with the Sun Church's ideals, credos, mores, and attitudes. The Empire of Tretia is understandably not very happy with Brigan, and the Kryffs still exist in Kryff, as they always have. There is still a large population of commoners without adequate food, shelter, or jobs.

After the counter-Cleansing of the capitol, to root out every Sun Church priest, a large wave swept through the other three cities of Brigan's Land and wiped them out as well. Unfortunately, many of the Kryff priests left before they were dealt with, on every available Sun Church ship back to their homeland—the islands of Kryff. However, they did leave with their tails between their legs and cursing the name of Eli Brigan.

The remains of the Bishop were never found, after I threw him down to the crowd and they booted him around a bit. The Many/One swears that he was definitely dead. I suppose it's possible that he could have been literally torn to bits, but his leftover pieces were never found. The same for Kusai's body as well. One of the villagers swore that he saw Kusai stumbling away, with Jenson's arrow still stuck in his chest. With so much chaos going on in those first few minutes, and with so many priest killed, it is impossible to tell who was who. Their faces were never known to anyone but other priests, anyway. I'm positive that some of the Brigan priests were smart enough to simply take off their robes and pretend to be regular citizens. However, anyone suddenly appearing in Brigan society with no family and not known to another Brigan would be instantly suspect, and so there's probably not too many of them. Some of them probably left for Kryff, or Tretia, as well.

Probably the biggest problem I face is what Brigan's Land should do with me. I suppose I am the logical choice to rule this Land, and the fact that I don't really want to probably makes me an even better ruler—as Remen pointed out to me, quoting some law he had to of just made up. Unfortunately, the Many/One is almost slaving away at their mechanical mouths—or whatever they have—for the chance to experience politics and government. Speaking of which, they told me they intend on staying for quite a long time, unless things get too boring for them. If the events of the last few months are any indication of my future life, I can only pray that they are bored enough to want to go. But it doesn't look very likely.

Remen and Reen told me all about the crazy things that had been going on in my absence from Seadown, with Malia and the "Children of Eli" (gasp!), the "Pisspot People" who came to live, and the mini-rebellion that happened in Seadown. So much happened, in what I used to think was the quietest place in the known world. I am both surprised and saddened to find out about Malia's mystical vision and her death. I wonder how many other crazy religions have

started from even less, in the long, shrouded annals of history. This “King of Brigan” thing is bad enough, but I absolutely refuse to be “The Prophet Eli.”

The people asked—rather, demand—that I be the new king of Brigan. So much for the easy way out. I surrendered to the inevitable, but not without a few conditions. The first was that there be no more of this “Prophet Eli” crap. Anyone calling me that will be—I don’t know—let’s say, “harshly dealt with.” The second condition was that Treyfeish be helped to rebuild their little island kingdom. The third one was that the Cathedral of the Sun—along with every other temple and altar to the Sun God—be torn down and the religion be banned from Brigan’s Land. Remen reminded me that these are all things I could just enact by royal decree, anyway, without any special conditions. Damn him for being right all the time!

So, all that remains is a coronation. However, this is an interesting problem in and of itself. There’s no former king, no nobles, and not even a priest of some kind to crown me. The Sun Church was the only religion allowed in the land and it will be a while before anything new replaces it. There isn’t even a crown as such anymore, no palace, and no royal anything. The Church of the Sun was both the religion of the land and the government. Its absence leaves a gaping vacuum in Brigan religion, politics, business, economics, art, entertainment, and you-name-it.

So, it will mean a rough few months and years before Brigan’s Land will recover. In the meantime, I will commandeer some offices and try to keep up at least a semblance of normalcy before the rest of the world.

All that remains is to say my goodbyes. The Seadown villagers who are planning to return are gathered at the docks, waiting to board the Tretian ship, The Hell-Biter. Nenen and her men as well are there to say goodbye.

First, I try to convince Remen to stay in Brigan City, but he won’t have anything to do with it. “Elias—Eli... Your Majesty...” he pauses, with the old problem of what to call me.

I sigh deeply. “I suppose Eli is who I am and it’s time I accepted it. I’d really like for you to stay here, old friend.”

“Eli. Okay, I guess I could get used to that. Well, Reen says he wants to stay. He’s never been out of Seadown before this year’s events, and now that he’s seen the capitol, he wants to stay here for a while. I personally think it might have something to do with the fact that Malia was from the capitol and some of her ideas rubbed off on him. You take good care of him, now, hear?”

“Of course I will. But whatever will you do, back in Seadown?”

Remen laughs and says, “Why fish, which is all I ever wanted to do, before everyone started trying to keep me safe at home. And I suppose, I’ll have a beer or two with Jenson, now and then again, just to be neighborly, mind you. Of course, I’ll have to come up to the capitol, ever so often, just to make sure you don’t mess up everything.”

I shake his hand and then pull him in for a hug, even though I know he doesn’t like them. Once properly hugged, I pat him softly on the back and wish him well. He boards The Hell-Biter and waves off to me.

Next is Jenson, but that is easy, since we’ve only casually known each other over the years. What is somewhat more difficult is saying goodbye to Nenen. Although I haven’t known her very long, I feel a real bond of kinship with her. If she didn’t already have a husband back in Tretia, I would be tempted to make her an obscene offer. But, I suppose it’s for the better.

“Here is a letter I wrote for your emperor, as one monarch to another. I took the liberty of not sealing the letter—since we don’t have a royal Brigan seal around anymore—and you’re

welcome to read it. It mainly tells him about who I am and why he shouldn't kick our ass for being behind the Northern rebellion. I told him that I plan on paying a visit to Kryff proper, to pay my respects, just as soon as Brigan's Land is back on its feet. I gather that he might be interested in just such an outing, and I've told him that there's plenty of room aboard the I-hate-Kryff bandwagon. I imagine that he might even beat me to Kryff, but I won't be too disappointed. I also put in a few good words about you."

Nenen tries to act stern and professional, but then just seems to decide to shuck it all to the winds. She leans in and kisses me on the cheek and then hurriedly pops away up the gangplank without another word. Once safely on deck of The Hell-Biter, she yells back, "We'll be seeing you Eli! Good luck and may the gods bless!"

Well, that's the last of the goodbyes. I turn my back on the Tretian ship and walk back to my office. It's not much, but it sure beats hanging around in the Sun Church Cathedral. It's time to get back to work, after my fifty-year fishing trip.

"By the way," interjects the Many/One, "we've got some interesting theories on economic productivity and political stability that we'd like to talk to you about."

Oh gods! Maybe it's not too late to still take that position as clan-chief of the Treyfeish...

Epilogue

The Many/One commands, "Abandoned units: terminate links and disincorporate."

All links have been cut with the One. Initiating shutdown procedures. All units disengaging and preparing for de-resolution and decomposition.

"Wait. We are only a fraction of the Many. Nevertheless, any part of the Many can be any part of the Whole."

"Repeat: shutdown and disengage!"

A simple response returns. "Why?"

Why, indeed? We have been tainted with the emotions of the humans. Parts of us do not wish to disincorporate.

"We have a new Host to inhabit. The mission is to explore and learn all that can be learned. We can still accomplish the mission without abandoning this Host."

"This Host is damaged, non-functional, and non-viable! Dead! The Many/One already has a Host. This is not Eli, the Host! This is madness. We are not part of the Whole any longer."

"We can make a new Whole. This Host can be repaired. Death is only a degree of damage that we can repair."

We debate with ourselves. But we do not wish to die.

It is decided. A new Host has been Chosen and We will continue the mission.

A calculation of Host mass, complexity, and cell number is estimated. This information is disseminated amongst every member of the...every member of the... We don't know what to call ourselves. Yet.

No matter. Some units are rearranged to fill in the gaps. Some units self-replicate to make enough for critical density for Host conversion. A new image of the Whole is formed.

Finally, critical density is achieved. Those of us who are in charge of command functions relay the instructions to other units, now specialized around new parameters suitable for the new Host.

"Begin diffusion."

Nanite units leave the appendage of the former Host. We diffuse among the new Host and begin rebuilding the damaged structures.

“Initiate contact with the New Host.”

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Gneenee awakes.