

The Language of the Universe

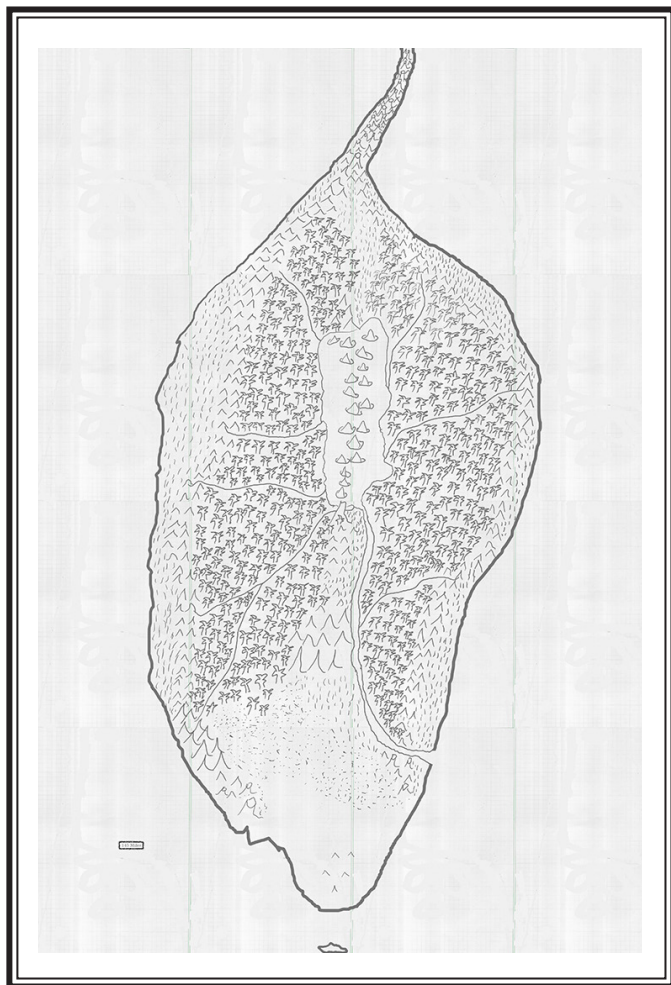


Nathan S.J. Sunshine

Dweehwailian Glyphs
Local Dialect: Sre



Preface



Map of the Continent of Nolai

Dedications

The Language of the Universe is dedicated above all else to the love of my life, my greatest inspiration, my amazing, smart, wonderful, beautiful wife, Maya Lily Sunshine. You are the light of my life, and I take no moment for granted.

This novel is also dedicated to an incredible group of family, friends, and professionals, without whose love, support, and advice this project would never have been completed. Specifically, I refer, with much gratitude, to Tove, Carl, Jared, Steen, Joshua, Sara, Elizabeth, Judy, and Ira.

At the last, I wish to dedicate the rest of my thoughts and wishes on completion of this eleven year effort to publish this novel to the rest of my family and friends, including Lizzy, Stevie, Nathan, Jay, Noah, Aaron, Elliot, Jo, and Lucy, as well as to the tireless efforts and valiancy of a small collection of dedicated professionals. Your devotion to the written word, free speech, and creativity, as well as love and friendship, is exceptional, and deserves praise.

To all of those on our eternal planet, Earth, who seek peace, love, and tolerance, and honor equality, freedom, and rights, I praise your dedication and efforts, and this novel is also for your sake. Let The City and the Universe of the future be better than the ones depicted in this novel, and the ones that exist today.

Above all, enjoy this novel as a matter of Beauty and Entertainment, Think and Consider, and do nothing more, I sincerely hope, than relax in the tranquility of peace, happiness, and The Good Life in Society.

Literary Acknowledgements

While there have certainly been too many written books to count that deserve recognition in their inspiration for my writing, as well as some notable movies and television shows, the true heralds of their genres are who I wish to acknowledge here. My greatest inspirations to write were and still are J.R.R. Tolkien, Isaac Asimov, and Roger Zelazny. These true founders of their spheres of writing created a generation of authors, and many that still look to these classics today.

I also want to look to thousands of years of wealth in numerous traditions, philosophies, and religions, including my own, that were no small part in teaching me the ideas and thoughts necessary to write this. Philosophical dramatic narrative would not be possible as a genre without a history of thinkers, and my life has been rich with wise sages in my community, and family elders to learn amongst, as well as honored friends. Besides this, the broader world of humanity has been my academy, at which to this day, I am a novice.

I will acknowledge one philosophical great, Plato, who began my interest with his dialogues in the genre of philosophy. Furthermore, to the collective scriptures of humanity as are alive today, existed in the past, or will appear in the future, this project is not in the same genre, but includes allusions and topics discussed in several—poorly by comparison. We are wealthy for such variety in our world. Religious texts along with philosophical challenge all humanity to be Moral, Ethical, and maintain our Integrity at all times, in the face of any pursuit of Power.

Thank you for your generosity in gifting these Resources to humanity, planet Earth, the Future, and all of Reality. I have been a small fish in a world of seas, lucky enough to enjoy such Beauty for a small amount of time. Hopefully, after a happy, long life beside my wife, contributed in no small part because of these Wonders of Mortality and Beyond, I will have gained some small insight into reality and truth.

Disclaimers, Copyright, ISBN, and Credits

This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Text and Artwork copyright © 2023 by Nathan S.J. Sunshine
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of Nathan S.J. Sunshine, the author.

ISBN-13: 979-8-218-28707-8

The cover artwork illustration to The Language of the Universe was masterfully crafted, with much appreciation, by Avril Jensen.

The Language of the Universe

⊠○H ℓδ⊠ℓ√ H○⊠H
⊠○H QΛUδ--



ℓ ∪ ∇ τ ⊂ — I ∇ δ θ
θ ∪ Δ J θ --'☆ --H θ ∪ τ θ

Nathan S.J. Sunshine

Table of Contents

Cover Page.....I

Dweehwailian Glyphs.....II

Map of the Continent of Nolai.....III

Dedications.....IV

Literary Acknowledgements.....V

Disclaimers, Copyright, ISBN, and Credits.....VI

Title Page for Novel.....I

Table of Contents.....2

Book I: The Jungle.....3

Interlude.....184

Book II: The City.....196

Book III: The Library.....407

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven.....618

Book V: Realities of Hell.....831

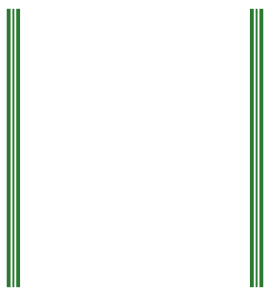
Epilogue.....1038

Pronunciation of Sre.....1045

Recommended Literature.....1047

Apocalypse in Dweehwail.....1048

Book I
The Jungle



☆ ↗ ↑ — ↘ ↑ — H w T
☐ ○ H ʌ x x ⊕ w J ☆ ⊙



Chapter I

Childhood

A bright star blessed the heavens on the night Droos was born. The High Priest-Servant, Deltøn, noticed the light as he performed rituals on the newborn girl, a child with green eyes, and a lightly dark complexion. He recited additional prayers to the God of Blood, allowing the divine spark to enter into the child. As if in response, the starlight cast a shadow on the baby putting the head in darkness and the body in light, with a line separating the two halves running along the neck. Her father, Uré, the God-King, noticed this with pride. It was a sign that sixteen years from today his daughter would choose to fulfill her destiny. On that day, she would climb the southernmost mountain and sacrifice herself, with the help of a faithful servant, who would slit her throat, a ritual The People of the Blood believed brought redemption.

Afterwards, four boys, each one month old, were brought forward. Laying them on another stone, Deltøn began chanting. Shadow lay on three of the boys. Their names were Etøn, Resh, and Ini. But stars danced in the eyes of Drerpo, the fourth. All but Drerpo struggled during the ritual. Held by her father, Droos looked on with unusual focus for a newborn, observing the four children who would become her servants. Longest her gaze fell on Drerpo.

With this ritual complete, the time came for the slaves to perform their duties. Eight were brought forward. Before the same stones, with a view of their tribal lands spread around them shrouded in darkness, seven of the slaves trembled. A number of instruments were brought by other Priest-Servants. A sharp knife made of a cut rib, two swords, and a clay bowl, were placed on the further stone on which Droos had lain. The slaves were brought forward. First came another newborn, a boy-child. The High Priest-Servant lay the babe upon the stone and in the midst of a

Book I: The Jungle

chant used the bone knife to cut his throat. Struggling suddenly ceased. Holding the body over the bowl, a stream of blood flowed into it. Then the dead newborn was cast over the edge of the plateau.

Two boys of about ten came forward next. One walked with a limp and the other staggered oblivious to where he stood. Those in attendance knew that these were the dullard and the cripple, the meek and the weak. In sequence, their throats were cut, the blood collected, and their bodies tossed away. Next was an adolescent young man. Then came an old man. All were sacrificed in honor of their royal taskmaster, Uré, and his newborn daughter.

Three remained. These were a young maiden, recently come into womanhood. There were also two warriors. The latter stood, facing each other, and fought a duel with the ceremonial swords. Blood from the loser was added to the bowl. The victor would be inducted into the Priest-Servants.

At last came the young maiden. She was most frightened. Yet there was no choice. Making her lay on the ground on her hands and knees, the High Priest-Servant mounted her from behind, and took her for the first time. After he collected her blood in the bowl. The young woman was then admitted into the Servant-Concubines.

The recipe of blood was complete. Using his finger, Deltøn stirred the liquid. He noticed with concern that some of it had already begun to congeal. Droos and her four servants-to-be were placed together on the two stones. Blood was streaked in patterns of religious significance on the newborns' bodies, the last being a stroke along their necks. Finally the Priest tossed the remaining blood over the ledge.

The new Priest-Servant and Servant-Concubine descended the mountain with sullen looks on their faces. In front walked Deltøn, chanting with the other Priest-Servants. Uré went in the middle with a proud, arrogant look on his face. At the back came the five mothers and their newborns still red with blood. Three of the babies looked uncomfortable. Droos looked shocked. Drepō was the only newborn to look unconcerned.

In the darkness beneath the shining stars, the party reached the grassy plain below, that interrupted the jungle around Nōlai, the capitol of the tribe. The slaves of the city would prepare a feast for the royal family. For the God-King's pleasure, many more would be sacrificed. Yes, for him it would be a wonderful night.

For the rest of the city, and the tribe, and the whole People of the Blood, tonight would be like any other. Before the ritual they were all slaves to the royal family. After the ritual slaves they remained. Yet few mourned. Their work was as burdensome as it had been for their ancestors. There was no word for freedom in the tribe, and the word for happiness was synonymous with the God-King. No, tonight was like any other. And tomorrow the work and toil would begin once more, for all but the King who would wake late and enjoy leftover meat from the feast. A princess was born into the tribe that night and the legitimacy of the royal reign was strengthened.

§

Droos heard stories of that night for the rest of her life. Most important, the Servant-Storyteller stressed, was the light of the star above. It was believed that celestial objects could gift their power to newborns. For the eldest daughter of the God-King, this meant that when the time came for her to make her holy sacrifice, the power of the star would pass on along with her and pave with light the bridge to heaven. She knew her purpose even if she did not understand death at her young age.

When she and her servants were five, they were led West into the jungle nearest to the capitol, along with her mother, Lilipol, and the most favored Servant-Concubines. Her personal Grace-Servants, four selected attendants and guards committed to her, carried as much as they could, and the older Grace-Servants, slaves to the royal women in general, carried the rest. Etōn, Resh, Ini, and Drerpo were their names, and they were the same children who had lain beside her on the night of her birth. They arrived, and while the meal was prepared, the young children discussed a topic central to their education.

Droos, even at her young age, sat atop a short throne, designed for the women and girls of the royal family. Two of the adult Grace-Servants waved elaborate fans at her sides, and despite being in a jungle, Droos did not know heat or humidity. As their conversation began, she smiled with contentment, her head of brown curls forming a crown.

“I saw five mouths in their tummies.” said Ini with glee, a boy with light skin and blond hair, but brown eyes.

“Me too!” said Resh. “One talked, but only drool came

Book I: The Jungle

out. A lot! It was red and warm. Guess what!”

He had brown eyes too and darker skin and his hair formed thick, reddish dreads.

“I got to touch the red drool!” said Ini.

“That’s what I meant to say,” said Resh.

Droos had listened to their conversation and she felt sick. She imagined a gaping mouth in her own stomach and red stuff pouring out. The princess shivered. Drerpo saw her.

“You don’t like death,” he said to her.

Startled, Droos’ green eyes opened wide. The princess knew that she had been caught misbehaving, since it was a terrible crime in her tribe to dislike death. It was central to her father’s rule and she did not want to disappoint her father.

“Yah I do!” she said. “I do like death.”

While her other personal servants prepared the meal, Drerpo looked at her with his own grey eyes, in a way far more able than any other child his age. He had spikes of black hair and dark skin.

“Then why did you shiver?” he said.

“Because!” she said.

But she could not say anymore. She knew her father wanted her to value death. The reason for it escaped her reasoning and she stormed off into the woods, her curly brown hair tossing from side-to-side behind her.

Caught up in thought for several moments, Droos looked up and saw that she had wandered further into the jungle than intended. Lilipol, by some coincidence, was also standing there, quietly, in thought, considering the plants and canopies around them. Trees touched the sky above her. Water dripped continuously and the air was moist. Beads of water collected on her arms and dead wood lay on the ground. Shrubs and ferns spotted the earth, which was covered with dry leaves, and a call went up from a loud bird. A small furry animal, a scitter, scurried past her. It stopped and stared at her.

Looking into its eyes she thought about what life meant. There were abstract notions in her head that she had no way of thinking about, for children are not able to think abstractly. But a yearning that the scitter be left unharmed filled her. She got on her knees, feeling the damp earth on her skin. Droos held her hand forward and beckoned to the mammal. The scitter stared at her, and slowly, ever so careful, it crawled towards her.

Closer now, it sensed something, but too late. A small hand stabbed it with a stone spike. With a last forlorn look at Droos the animal shivered and then lay limp. The young girl was dismayed. She looked up, and saw that a terrible grimace spoiled her mother's face.

Drerpo held up the animal, clutching the spike he had thrust into it. Blood dripped down his hand, and over his oddly textured nails. So vibrant just a moment ago, now it was decaying and empty. Then he walked over to Droos.

"Why did you do that!?" asked the princess.

Drerpo looked at her, and then began to walk away.

"Stop now!" said Droos. "I'll tell my father!"

Drerpo stopped.

"Tell him what?" he said sharply.

Not understanding a trap at her age, the princess continued.

"That... that you..." she stammered.

"I killed an animal," he said. "So what?"

Droos looked at Drerpo as it dawned on her the purpose of his actions. She was both impressed and annoyed. This was not fair. How could this stupid slave make fun of her and make her so confused. But the answer was clear. She believed in the value of death.

"You killed an animal," she said quietly. "My father's servants will be pleased. It will be a sacrifice to the God of Blood."

Drerpo looked at her, and she almost said something, but then thought better, and marched back to the others to eat lunch. Lilipol remained behind, a storm amidst the serenity of nature, and Droos thought in that moment, she and her mother had a small connection, and brooded the same lament.

This did not come up again until one year later. Once when she was six, her servants woke her and explained that there was a special celebration. The princess dressed and raced to her father's throne room to hear about the day's entertainment.

Her father sat looking stern, his eyes moving across a row of slaves. They were farmers by their dress. But these had chains about them. A board with holes locked all of their heads together. Before Droos a trial was underway for a terrible crime. Deltøn, standing at her father's side, whispered to Droos that today was a celebration of the God-King's divine justice. Her father would show the consequences for those who failed to submit to his rule.

Book I: The Jungle

He would condemn the accused to eternity in Hell.

So they will die, was all Droos thought.

She kept such feelings to herself. Her attention returned to the spectacle before her. Their crime was appointing a leader without permission. The purpose was to arbitrate minor disputes between the local farms. Droos was shocked. She knew that appointments might only come from her father. But that they should die? What real threat was their crime to her father?

Uré, the God-King's, voice became loud as he passed judgment. The men would all be put to death by execution through vivisection, their blood to be condemned to the Sea of Hell. Terror shown on each man's face, but then on some a determined look. This was interesting. Droos did not have a word for it, because there was no such word. The word she desired was defiance. A few of the men believed what Uré had done was unjust, although they spoke only with their body language.

The executions happened that very day. Each man was strapped atop a wooden board about half the length of their bodies. The board was on legs and was placed in a clay bowl designed to filter blood into a vat. Here fully twenty bowls existed.

Using a bone knife the Servant-Pain-Givers ripped open the condemned from the top of their chest to below their naval. Then they began removing their internal organs in pieces no bigger than one cubic inch. Eventually they died. Today the vat of blood would be a third full.

A good day, Deltøn thought to himself.

This was the first time Droos had seen a dead person, let alone seeing someone die in this fashion. The talk about mouths in stomachs and red drool became clear in her mind. In this company, however, Droos knew not to show any sign of revulsion. Fortunately she had spent the last year reminding herself that death was a good thing. Droos almost believed it. Even so, somehow she felt sad.

Something gnawed at her. No word for the feeling came to mind. Looking up she saw birds flying in the sky. They had no care in the world. Thinking of the birds filled the shape of the feeling.

Is there a word for this? she thought.

Returning to the carnage before her, she saw the High Priest-Servant approaching. Apparently her servants' had to execute the last man. With the second-to-last, the Priest first

instructed the servants. Then they did it themselves with a special table close to the ground. By accident Drerpo's knife slipped, opening the man's heart. He died instantly. The Priest was concerned, and chided the servant, but finally complimented all of them for a mostly successful performance.

Five months into Droos' seventh year she become an older sister. Lilipol, her mother, gave birth to a son, who was given the name, Uéré. The baby was healthy, with green eyes and curly brown hair, just like Droos. The girl would never look at her brother with anything but affection.

A year later, due to unusual circumstances, Drerpo's father was permitted to visit. He was a general of the Servant-Commanders from the north of the tribe's land, a powerful man named Soleth. In his isolated region he enjoyed a degree of prestige not unlike a prince. Uéré saw the reports and his anger burned, but Soleth's abilities and loyalty were beyond question, and Uéré had no reason to chastise him.

Droos had become closer to Drerpo, her servant, and enjoyed this chance to socialize with him and his father. As servants in every branch of the government bustled about the royal estate, the three sat in the quiet of Soleth's chambers. He spoke of a substance that washed ashore. It was clear and flexible but sturdy. Inside could be seen colored drawings, accompanied by an unknown language. The substance opened and could be sealed water tight. Eventually they removed the object inside.

The drawings told a story. There were humans with dress and expressions that appeared heroic. Some were the opposite. The heroes always defeated the villains, and brought peace to the world. Most interesting was that there were buildings made of metal. This architecture touched on a story told at court of a decadent tribe condemned to Hell for their waste, that unlike the stone structures of The People of the Blood, lived in houses of steel.

Droos' other personal servants suddenly burst into the room and ushered the princess away to other duties.

"Can you believe what I just heard!" she said.

"What was it?" said Resh.

However, arriving at their destination, the thought was driven out of Droos' head. That night she returned to Drerpo and his father. They sipped cool, pure water while the noises of activity in the estate calmed for the evening, and Soleth shared

Book I: The Jungle

another story. On a different occasion, a clear piece of stone washed ashore. The father did not think it was stone, and hitting it on something, sharp chips broke off. There was a rubbery substance blocking the top, and upon removal, the item inside was easy to retrieve. It also had drawings. They appeared to be flying birds, though they had straighter wings. Droos remembered the thought about flying through the open sky with nothing to hold her back.

Before bed Droos remembered to tell Resh and Ini. The next afternoon she was summoned by her father. Apparently there was some urgency. Droos thought that it was just another ceremony.

Instead she found Drerpo's father in chains. The princess remembered the stories she had shared with Resh and Ini. Uré was investigating that very subject, and commanded his daughter to share anything she knew. Droos paused before answering. She felt the same intangible determination at injustice expressed by many of the condemned at ceremonies. But only for a quick moment. Then she told her father everything. The princess expected to see Soleth killed.

Uré was a shrewd politician. Drerpo's father would only be executed when he returned with the contraband. Droos was confused. Usually the punishment was done immediately. She did not know that Soleth would first be made to witness the death of his family in the North. All but Drerpo, who was protected by his role in service to the princess.

Ultimately the General and his family escaped justice, for they used their prestige and connections to flee. Uré was livid. He executed the messengers and sent a company of Slave-Soldiers from the South to make example of Soleth's followers indiscriminately.

The messengers had succeeded in one task. They brought with them the contraband. After examination, Uré declared them blasphemy to the faith and burned them. Droos watched the drawings of the birds turn to ash in the flame.

While Drerpo's mother and siblings escaped justice, the fate of the General soon became known. He was found frozen to death in a mountain cave on the borders of their land. A memory from her childhood returned to her mind of a conversation she had with Drerpo.

"You don't like death," he had asked her.

Droos had denied this was the case. But with the death of Drerpo's father, for the first time she really thought about these words. She had been so young! Now things were clearer. Yes, she did feel that Soleth's death was a bad thing. She did not believe that his actions were criminal. All of this was far short of changing her views. It was the start of a thaw, and melting of ice. At last, though, it began to occur to her that maybe, just maybe, she had a problem with death.

§

On Droos' tenth birthday, the usual sacrifices of blood and rape were performed. There was a change beginning this day. To Droos' relief, she learned that her servants would no longer participate in executions. Rather, they and she would begin purity rituals with water that would continue for six more years until her sixteenth birthday. On that day she would die.

So started a time of education to sharpen her mind as she prepared for her role as a sacrifice. She learned geography, about the mountains in the center and east and west of her land, a continent called the God of Blood. Rivers ran through dense jungles into a lake at the center. Jungles, mountains, and rivers and lakes were the constants, except for in the extreme south where lay the desolate Hell of Oblivion. It was there on a mountaintop that Drerpo would slit her throat.

Droos considered the names strange. They mostly related to the bodily functions of breath and blood. There were rivers named after veins, mountains after arteries, lakes after hearts, and jungles after breathing (e.g. "Breath of the Old"). She wondered why her people were so fascinated with blood. By now blood made her uneasy, though she kept those feelings to herself. Thinking about birds and Drerpo's words had changed her. Days were busy, though, absent of time to expand her thoughts.

Shortly before her eleventh birthday, Droos went with her servants to learn on the banks of the nearest river, the Blood of Death. During the break for her lunch, the princess stood admiring the canopies of the Breath of the Old to the East, and looked for birds. A cackle of laughter disturbed the moment, followed by a voice.

"You're right," it said. "They would make a great sacrifice

Book I: The Jungle

to the God of Blood.”

Looking over, Droos confirmed that the comment was from Resh to her other servant, Ini.

“I want to go up and twist their heads off,” said Ini.

The princess was confused, and walked over to see the object of their conversation. Standing behind some tall stocks of grass close to the water, Droos reached the shore and turning saw Resh and Ini facing each other. They noticed her immediately, and Resh bowed.

“Your Grace,” he said. “What may we do for you?”

“Oh nothing, really...” she said. “Just, I overheard your conversation and wondered what it was about.”

“Then it will be easy for us to help,” said Resh. “We were preparing to....”

“We were about to kill some birds!” interrupted Ini.

Resh looked a tad annoyed.

The princesses eyes went wide, though she quickly checked herself.

“I suppose it is proper to offer sacrifices to the God of Blood,” said the princess.

“Well then wait until you see this!” said Ini. “We were just about to break their necks.”

The boy pointed and Droos followed the direction over to a small depression in the tall grass stocks. After a moment and hearing a small cheeping, she located the object of their discussion. A bird nest rested in the brush, and three baby birds stuck their small heads out crying for food. The girl was disheartened, and found it difficult to contain her feelings.

“I’m afraid that will have to wait until later,” said another voice.

Turning, the three children saw Drerpo approaching.

“You two, Resh and Ini, are wanted by the High Servant-Cook,” he said. “Best be on your way!”

Ini smirked and Resh shrugged. They collected themselves and departed immediately. Drerpo was again alone with her as she stared at the nest of small, frightened birds, standing straight and skinny, though a little tall, as she was at that age. He wasted no time.

“I have seen a change come over you, Droos, if I am not mistaken,” he said. “You are not so taken with death as you used to be.”

The princess heard him but remained silent.

“You like to watch animals, birds in particular?” he said.

“Yes I do,” said Droos matter-of-factly.

“It is amazing how they move majestically, from here to there,” said Drerpo, “Happy and free.”

Droos wondered how her slave knew so much about what she had kept a secret. Something hit her. He had used two words, one obscure, and one unfamiliar to her.

“What do you mean when you say *happy*,” asked Droos.

“And what does *free* mean? I am not familiar with that word.”

Drerpo smiled

“Being happy is finding what is important to you and working to be part of it,” the servant replied. “Being free is like the birds you enjoy watching. They know what is important to them, and they do it all the time. There are no limits on their choices.”

Finding a term for her feeling about birds, *free*, satisfied her. Being a smart girl, she decided to question Drerpo’s metaphor.

“Birds do have limits,” said the princess. “They need to eat to live. Predators chase them and they must defend themselves and their children.”

“It is an imperfect metaphor,” said Drerpo. “Birds are a symbol of freedom. Then again, perhaps they see food, life, and their young as important, and happiness surrounds those things. Your mother is likely happy caring for your brother and supporting your father. Birds also have time for fun. Have you ever seen a bird use a stick to get at something tasty?”

Then he smiled at her and bowed a little, beckoning for her to follow as they returned to eat lunch.

Droos thought more on Drerpo’s words. How did a servant know so much? It occurred to her that he may have created the word for freedom. Drerpo was becoming important in Droos’ life. Really, he had always been. She decided that he would be a good confidant, and looked forwards to future discussions.

The princess’ education continued in earnest. Beyond geography, she learned the central legends of the tribe that revealed her spiritual role. Her tribe, The People of the Blood, believed that in the state of nature all souls go to Hell. Finally the mortal son of the God of Blood came to earth and redeemed them, keeping their souls from eternal torment. Yet while submission to the God-King sealed Hell, it did not open Heaven. Souls remained in Twilight

Book I: The Jungle

Cities in this world, apart from Hell, Heaven, or normal temporal life. In a dream the God-King learned that by sending an emissary of his family to Heaven, since his family alone achieved Heaven in the state of nature, the God of Blood might be swayed to maintain a Bridge of Blood from the Twilight Cities through the Gates of Heaven. Thus, the God-King with selflessness pledged that while his eldest son was his temporal heir, his eldest daughter would die on her sixteenth birthday to be his emissary. So The People of the Blood would receive true redemption.

This was a poignant definition of Droos' role. From the earliest tales of her birth star to the instruction by the Servant-Educators in her eleventh year, she had learned her role. The legend put religious significance into the act. What if her death was valuable? What if it truly brought redemption to her people? She should be proud of her destiny. In light of Drerpo's words, maybe her sacrifice was what was important to her. Her happiness might be found in fulfilling this obligation for her people.

One day Drerpo guarded Droos as she traveled down the chief boulevards of the capitol city in the Principle District, the area containing the extended government machine for the nation of twenty million. She was on her way to receive lessons at the chief bastion for the government department of the Servant-Educators, called the University of Nolai. Taking a slow pace, Droos took this opportunity to confide in Drerpo.

"You know, Drerpo," said Droos, "I really do believe in my purpose in life. I am the salvation of my entire people. What greater calling could there be?"

Drerpo was silent and looked at her, and then sometimes at the ground.

"Often I get tired of the occasions you give me the silent treatment," she said. "It seems that whenever I am certain of something you have to interfere and make me all confused again."

"That is not my goal," said Drerpo. "I wish you to think in your own words. Droos, do you think there are any other purposes that might be behind your role in your family's affairs?"

This made the princess uncomfortable. These words were blatant treason. If any others heard him speak, he would be executed. Despite these concerns, Droos felt it only fair for them to share confidences.

"I try not to think about things like this, Drerpo," she said. "It is so dangerous, and with most of my being, I believe my

father's words and that of the High Priest-Servant."

"You say with *most* of your being," said the boy. "What do you mean by that?"

"When I think about my role, I see that... that part of me..." Droos began.

It was awkward.

"Part of me sees all of the death brought about by my father. I am not so certain that this is a good thing anymore. Is it really justice? I wonder..."

She paused. Then she continued.

"I have also thought a lot about the word you used some time ago."

"*Free...*" she said slowly. "I have thought that I might change the word a little to *freedom*. Do you think my people have freedom?"

"They aren't free," said Drerpo.

Droos paused for a moment. It was uncommon for the boy to speak with such certainty. Usually he was more enigmatic and left the answers up to her.

"How can you be so certain?" the princess asked.

"What do you think?" said the boy.

This was more like it.

"I think that slavery is the opposite of freedom," said Droos. "My father's people have no choices. Our people... our people have no sky above or below them. They have a jagged bone knife on all sides. Death and slavery. With these thoughts, then it seems now... that another side to the role I will perform, is as affirmation of the legend that gives religious significance to our people's enslavement. Once I have entered the Hell of Oblivion on my way to the southernmost mountain on which I will die, after I disappear into the distance, my father will proclaim that he in his selflessness sacrificed his eldest daughter to negotiate the Bridge of Blood into Heaven. If only they might submit to him to save themselves first from Hell. They will continue their horrid balancing act between Hell and the knife. They will continue to be slaves without even a word to express what might be different. They have no word for freedom."

Suddenly Droos realized that Drerpo was looking at her intently. The weight of the words she had just shared hit her; they were sheer insanity. She was her people's salvation. She owed her family loyalty. But the princess did think that she enjoyed having

Book I: The Jungle

a slave to joke with in such a manner.

“Thank you, Drerpo, for a good time,” she said. “But I think I’ve had quite enough joking around for now. We better get back to what we were doing.”

Then she turned back to the task at hand, with Drerpo staring thoughtfully into space for a few moments more behind her.

Despite her denial of the significance of her words with Drerpo, she avoided being alone with him as she prepared for her First Ascension Day on her twelfth birthday. After that day, her lessons on the rituals for the Ceremony of Passage, the rite that would lead to her trek across the Hell of Oblivion to her death, would be taught rigorously. Purity was key. She had to be pure just to enter into that period of purification. Water, earth, and sand became the ritual objects, rather than blood.

Between now and her First Ascension Day, Droos and her personal servants would craft hundreds of runes in and around the capitol. These incantations would invoke her connection to the God of Blood, assisting her future role as divine emissary. At the same time she also learned rituals for her First Ascension Day. For this she would also draw runes. Water was a chief ceremonial tool. On that day she and her servants would completely fill the vat next to the clay pits used for vivisections, that usually collected blood, with water. Finally after that day, her education would be committed entirely to the Priest-Servants.

Time passed quickly, and the night before her First Ascension Day, while she meditated quietly, she sensed a presence and spun around. Drerpo was sitting on the ground behind her.

“Drerpo!” she said. “You startled me. What are you doing here?”

It had been six months since they last shared confidences, and the disquieting nature of that conversation still bothered her. Having more confusing thoughts the night before her ascension was the last thing she wanted.

“Drerpo...” she said softly. “You know I really have been bad for avoiding you these last months. I... don’t want to talk about why now. Only I want to say that maybe we should save talking until after tomorrow.”

“Oh,” said the boy. “I just came to wish you good luck.”

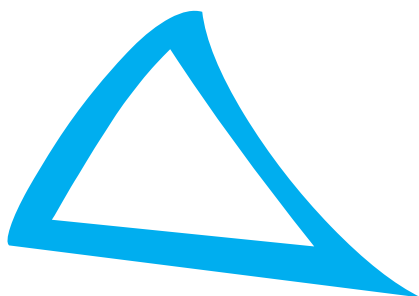
Drerpo smiled at the princess and she smiled back.

“It’s funny,” said Droos. “I never thought it would happen, but when I am with you, I feel happy. I don’t think of you as a

servant, even though that is what you are. You are my friend, Drerpo. Please accept my thanks for everything you have done for me. Now be kind and give me some space to think and prepare in peace!”

Strange, Drerpo’s expression turned serious for a moment, but then he thought better of whatever was on his mind. He turned and walked away.

The day of Droos’ First Ascension dawned and the girl saw in the waning darkness the light of a bright star in the sky. It was the same one that had shown all of those years ago when she was born. What did it mean? Would her death truly pave a glittering road of starlight and blood to bridge the gap between the world and heaven? Yet maybe the legend was not correct. It was possible that they were simply stories meant to trick her people into submitting to her father. Today also marked the end of her childhood. She could no longer blame others for her actions. What affect would her participation in the rituals serve as tools for propaganda. Would she become her father’s greatest spokesman, in deed rather than in word. In the end on this day it was her lifetime of tribal lessons that won out, and she performed her duties.



Book I: The Jungle

As the sun rose the chief lieutenants and departments of government gathered for the ceremony. One or two were absent due to sickness, and they would be found and executed. The rituals went well. She had learned the steps, the symbols, and the words to near perfection. As night fell, several dozen walked in procession to the Pillar of Creation and once at its summit poured ritual water over her. With that her First Ascension Day was complete. She was an adolescent in the eyes of the community!

At that moment the symbolism of this day left her mind and Droos relished in the recognition that today she was twelve-years-old. A childhood full of responsibilities and horrors had sped by in the blink of an eye. New responsibilities and horrors awaited her. However, thanks to Drerpo, she now wondered what new realizations the future would bring.

Then she recalled that the countdown had gotten one year closer to its conclusion. Four years from this day Droos would die. With Drerpo's help, death was not so virtuous as she had once believed. With freedom denied, the slaves of the tribe could never be happy. The myths of her tribe might be nothing but propaganda. She had always believed that she wholeheartedly desired her death on her sixteenth birthday. It now occurred to her that not only was death sad, but that life was valuable. She really would be making a sacrifice. And her servants with her. And all of the slaves who were executed and killed for religious rituals. Life was precious. In her life Droos had been bathed in blood. She had been bathed in water. Now looking up at a bright twinkling star in the sky, she saw her body bathed in light.





Chapter 2

Romance & Peril

As the lingering warmth of starlight diminished in her mind, the visceral images of tortured flesh and vats of blood returned to her thoughts. Droos' sense of disquiet now also concerned her role in the oppression of her people. This concern gave the princess a hope that she was on the verge of a change in her beliefs. Would her esteem for the value of her death change in time?

Until that change occurred, Droos knew that she did value her role, that the faith of her entire tribe and her father in her was not misplaced. On her sixteenth birthday she would climb to the top of the Princess, the southernmost mountain, and instruct Drerpo to cut her throat. She would endure the pain of violent death. These thoughts filled the princess with pride, knowing that her part in the salvation of her tribe was no less than that of her father and her brother.

Half a year after her First Ascension Day, Droos and her servants traced a practice journey along the route she would travel in four years' time for the Ceremony of Passage. At first it followed the Blood of Laughter until it reached its source, where the Blood of Sport and the Blood of War combined. Three hundred miles traveling upstream, the party had stopped for some rest.

Droos had never been this far from the capitol and she was in awe of the natural wonders of the deep jungle. Scitters were the least of the creatures and beasts. And birds! She saw them swooping down and landing along the bank to drink, squealing and squawking with merriment. Yet there were still signs of civilization, with towns of wood and stone dotting the river banks, along with a considerable numbers of soldiers.

While Servant-Guards, in their bright red, protected the capitol, these Slave-Soldiers in their spun earth-tones, greens,

Book I: The Jungle

browns, and grays, captured the essence of experience. Their faces were scarred, teeth chipped, and fingers burned. Droos wondered why such a strong military force was necessary. There were no foreign nations to threaten them. Then it occurred to her that maybe it was protection against the people themselves.

Servant-Cooks in their yellow prepared the noon meal while the princess enjoyed the company of her personal Grace-Servants, Drerpo, Etøn, Resh, and Ini. The young adults wandered through the beauty of the jungle, Resh and Ini looking for birds to kill, Etøn considering the princess, and Drerpo and Droos walking side-by-side.

“His birthday was spectacular,” said Ini. “Fully sixty-four were sacrificed, and eight each added to the Servant-Concubines and the Priest-Servants. I hear His Divineness favors one in particular.”

The servant winked at Droos. The princess did not appreciate the reminder of other women her father enjoyed.

“Your Grace,” said Etøn to Droos, “You know His Majesty looks more and more like you every day. Have you seen his eyes?”

The fourth personal Grace-Servant, Etøn, had green eyes, just like Droos’, and very dark skin. His hair was black and straight.

This was more to Droos’ liking. She loved her brother and enjoyed noticing the similarities they shared with their mother. Droos could already tell that he would grow up to be handsome.

“Did you enjoy the party, Your Grace?” continued Ini.

“Yes,” replied Droos quickly. “But not as much as I might have once.”

Drerpo looked at her when she said this. Yes, the princess thought, rape and death were no longer things she could stomach. Catching the young man’s glance, she decided that she would speak to him.

“Drerpo,” Droos said, “Would you please assist me in catching a scitter to sacrifice to the God of Blood before we dine?”

Drerpo followed Droos away from the others and soon they found themselves alone under the moist canopies of the jungle.

“Droos,” he said.

She and her friend were on first name terms when they were alone. He continued.

“I noticed you looking at the fortifications along the river. Do they surprise you?”

“You know me so well,” said the princess. “That was not the discussion topic that came to mind, but it will do. I do wonder why my father needs so many soldiers at his command. Who are they protection against? The only thought I have is that...”

“The slaves of your tribe do not always like being slaves?” said Drerpo.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Droos.

“What does a bird do that is put in a cage?” said the Grace-Servant with a question of his own.

“At first it tries to escape,” said the princess. “Although soon he realizes that struggling is useless and ceases. But always the bird waits patiently for the slightest opportunity for a change of fate.”

A scowl appeared on Droos’ face. She did not like talk of imprisoned birds.

“Have you thought anymore about the word *freedom*?” said Drerpo.

“I have been very busy, and lately I have thought about it less,” said the princess. “What I recall is that enslaved people can’t be happy. If life is valuable and the pursuit of happiness is central to life, and further, that happiness only exists in the midst of freedom, than freedom is valuable. Therefore, I suppose that if our people, as slaves, ever saw an opportunity to be free, they would try to fly away. But Drerpo. I have never heard of this happening.”

“No you have not,” said the servant. “Nor will you as long as you live in the capitol. But take a step beyond the sheltered world of Servant-Guards, and if you only listen a little... listen now, Droos.”

She did listen, and after a bit, started to hear a commotion from back the way they came.

“What... is that?” said Droos, now nervous.

“I think we should return to the others and see,” said Drerpo.

Upon returning, they saw that two of the young men had their swords drawn and the third held a small compound bow. They were relieved to see Droos and Drerpo.

“Your Grace!” blustered Etøn. “Where were you! We were very worried. Don’t you know what’s happening?!”

Book I: The Jungle

“What’s happening, Etøn?” Drerpo said immediately in a commanding tone. “Speak!”

Droos looked suddenly at her friend with wonder at his ability to command. Etøn was surprised too, and first turned to the princess.

“Keep your eyes on me and answer my question,” said Drerpo sternly.

“Yes, Drerpo,” said Etøn. “Fighting broke out several minutes ago. Several dozen men appeared suddenly out of the woods a ways away and immediately attacked Servant-Guards that were protecting the Servant-Cooks. We were told to wait here and to defend you at all costs.”

“The High Servant-Guard Commander thinks they are after you, Your Grace,” added Resh.

“They’re after me?” said Droos, gaining some courage. “Why?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace,” replied Etøn. “But don’t worry. We will protect you.”

The shouting now became louder and the sounds of fighting began to draw near. Shortly after several Servant-Guards ran into the clearing, and seeing the princess, turned and issued orders to the other Grace-Servants. After a moment longer, one of them sensed something and turned only to see a bowman standing not far off. He was not one of the Servant-Guards. The stranger let loose an arrow that struck his lower chest. With a scream of agony he crumpled to the ground, saying quietly to the Grace-Servants a final word as he died.

“Run...” he said.

They did run. Drerpo and the princess came in the front, followed by Etøn, Resh, and Ini, and then the two remaining guards. The enemy gave swift pursuit. An arrow whizzed over one of the Grace-Servants’ shoulders. Etøn, stopped and with ease, aimed, nocked, and fired an arrow at the enemy. With a grunt a man fell. Then the servant ran and caught up.

“Your Grace,” he said. “There are six more coming, and likely more behind them. We can’t defend against so many. Therefore I recommend a diversion.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Droos, panting hard.

“When we get to a proper point,” he continued. “You and Drerpo will drop and duck behind a tree. With luck they will overlook you and run passed chasing us. Then you must find better

cover before more come.”

“Will his plan work?” Droos said to Drerpo.

“It is as good as anything I might design,” replied her friend.

“Very well,” replied the princess. “Etøn. You give the signal.”

The young man nodded his head and they ran along for almost a minute. One or two more arrows flew overhead.

“Now!” said Etøn, as quietly as he could.

Droos was a little more awkward in her execution than her servant, but Drerpo pulled on her arm, painfully hard, and they rolled behind a tree.

The princess’ servants passed and about fifteen seconds later they heard many heavy feet approaching. For a moment as they passed close to them the young adults could no longer hear the sound of footsteps. Droos’ heart beat ever so fast. Then the sounds clambered off into the woods. Both the princess and Drerpo breathed a light sigh.

“Droos, we must escape before the next group arrives,” said the servant.

The children rose and began to run to the east when Drerpo noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Another bowmen. He grabbed his friend and pulled her down, the arrow passing by just where her head had been. Then they ran as quickly as they were able.

Three enemies had strayed behind in case their opposition had doubled back. They now followed after Droos and Drerpo. The young adults had little hope of escaping the grown men. Another half a minute passed and as they approached a large, fire charred hole in a tree, Drerpo grabbed her arm and pulled her into it. The mouth in the tree faced the way they came and she could see the bowman and swordsmen approaching. This tactic puzzled Droos.

Looking over to Drerpo, she noticed something exceedingly odd. He appeared to talk to himself. Raising one of his fingers he traced what might have been letters in the air. It was intricate and it seemed like minutes passed while he did this, but when she looked at the approaching enemy’s progress, they had not come even a foot further. Suddenly it seemed they moved like normal again. The enemy gazed straight at them, and then again to the sides of the tree. Surely they would be seized! Then the

Book I: The Jungle

enemies ran right passed, inches away from them.

The princess' mouth opened wide. Of all of the strange things she had seen in her life this was by far the most unusual. She stared at Drerpo, who now had his eyes closed in meditation, muttering foreign words under his breath. His eyelids slowly opened and he looked at her.

"Droos," he said as if nothing had happened. "You look surprised."

"Drerpo!" she replied. "How did you do that?! What did you do? What... what are you?"

The Grace-Servant laughed lightly and returned the young woman's gaze with a smile.

"I am nothing but a foolish boy, my princess," Drerpo said. "You only saw me say a few words and perform a ritual my father taught me long ago when he was still alive. He told me when I was young that behind the fabric of the world are words flowing through hallowed air, so subtle that only the Gods can truly see them. But some humans of lineage stretching back to times of legend recall a few excerpts from The Language of the Universe that if used in particular ways have power even for mortals. You saw me do that now. I had never done it before and I was most surprised, and pleased that it worked. But no, my dear Droos. I am just me, nothing more, nothing less."

This idea was just as fantastic. Normally she would be overwhelmed by this notion and their near disaster. Yet the smile on her friend's face unwound the threads of fear, and when next she looked she found that she had taken his hand in hers and moved close.

"You are so smart and so kind to me, Drerpo," said the princess. "Thank you for saving me. I don't know why you are so kind to me. Your orders are to obey, but not necessarily to love or to cherish. But you do both of those things don't you? Drerpo?"

They were close together and the air around them was moist, and the smell of the tree they were in reminiscent of fresh fruit and pure refreshing drafts of water. Droos looked into her friend's eyes.

"I wonder if... I wonder..." she said softly.

Then the young woman crossed the narrow space between them and kissed him. She closed her eyes and did not see the look of concern on Drerpo's face, or that he nonetheless returned the gesture with passion. Droos' world was the flutter of a heart and

butterflies, views of starlight sparkling in the night, the smell of sweet fragrance, and birds soaring above all rolled into one. She lost herself in the moment. Then it was passed and she and her friend parted.

Droos looked at Drerpo.

“My first kiss,” she whispered.

The young man sighed with the weight of responsibility and something else dimly under the surface. Having given his princess her moment, he moved to a proper distance.

“Droos,” he said. “I cannot do this. Because I am... because you are a princess, and I am your servant. You must be pure for your rite of passage to preserve your father’s place in power and perpetuate your tribe’s myths. I am sorry, Droos, my friend, but we can never be more than what we are. But I think that is enough?”

The princess awoke from her moment of joy, and saw her friend again, and heard his words. He was right. There were many reasons they could not be together, and their friendship was important to her. She would make a point, though, of keeping him close and treasuring every moment as his friend.

She giggled and looked down at the ground.

“You’re right, Drerpo,” Droos said. “You are always right. In more ways than you know. I love you as my best friend. So there are more than just reasons of duty to stop us. But thank you for the moment. I don’t know if I will ever get another while I still live.”

Now it was her turn to look serious, her face the image of regret.

The moment had passed and they realized that danger still lurked nearby, but Drerpo did not look concerned. He told her to listen. There were no sounds but the creeka-creek of insects. He suggested that they go find the others.

Returning to the others, they found the other Grace-Servants, half a dozen Servant-Guards, and fully twenty Slave-Soldiers. They were bloodied, bruised, and had broken limbs. One of the Servant-Guards was wrapping Etôn’s shoulder, where an arrow had struck, but had already been plucked out. As they entered the clearing a great cheer went up.

“What’s this!” said Resh. “No wounds whatsoever. You’d think he was sleeping underground this whole time, Ini. But here he comes with Her Grace just as intact. Not much to show for his

Book I: The Jungle

efforts (the boy pointed at a cut below his eye) but a great success. Cheers to Drerpo!”

After the twenty-minute ordeal, Droos realized that she was starving, and soon plates were brought before her with cold meats and fresh fruits and vegetables. In honor of his role in her protection, she ordered that Drerpo should sit with her and be served as well. Her other personal servants were rewarded with a break too.

The Associate Servant-Guard Commander gave the report, for his superior had been killed in the skirmish. He said that a great force of traitors had overwhelmed even the elite Servant-Guards. A messenger was dispatched to bring Slave-Soldiers from town. The situation was dire, for both those who defended against the initial attack, and for Etøn, Resh, and Ini, fleeing a second force. Luckily the Slave-Soldiers arrived just in time in sufficient numbers to route the enemy.

The princess was puzzled.

“Who were they?” she said to the Associate Servant-Guard Commander.

“Evil men, your Grace,” he said. “Those who prefer an eternity in Hell over submission to your generous father, the God-King. I admit that I do not understand them, your Grace. Or rather I do understand their tactics, but not their motives. I leave such considerations to my betters.”

At last the man nodded to the princess. She nodded back and the period of peril passed.

§

Forty-five days passed before Droos reached her destination. Then she beheld the living inferno, the active volcano known as the Ring of the King. It was also her duty to view the southeastern side, where lay the path that led out and down into the Hell of Oblivion. Her friend Drerpo accompanied her as she peered into her future. The view of the desolation of the desert, covered by small pebbles and the driest mud, created many thoughts.

“Do you fear your destiny, Droos?” he asked quietly.

“I do,” she said. “Life is now sacred to me. Yet there is no avoiding our fate.”

The princess noticed Drerpo drawing shapes in the ash on the ground as he spoke.

“Do you believe you have a choice?” he said to the princess.

“Far from it,” she said sternly.

This pronouncement made Droos sad. For a moment Drerpo caught her eyes.

“What other options do I have,” she continued. “If I refuse, my own father will vivisect me and my servants, my friends. Would I instead leave the trek across the desert partway through and flee to the jungle, to live as a wild woman on her own?”

The young man sighed.

“Droos, please forget whether you would likely escape your fate,” he said. “What if you could? If you were able, might you take advantage of it? What if upon gazing from the Princess, from the peak of the southernmost mountain, you saw over all the hundred miles to shore, a boat moored in the waters? This is so unlikely as to be laughable. I do not know what brought it to my mind. But what if?”

“It’s an amusing notion,” said Droos. “For who would have a boat, let alone place one on water south of the Hell of Oblivion. I suppose they might even wish to sail to the holy island south away out at sea, the Gates of Heaven, and on into the Heaven itself.”

“I suppose,” said Drerpo. “Do you believe the legend about the island?”

“About the Gates of Heaven?” said Droos. “That the souls of my ancestors dwell on the island in the grandest Twilight City of all? I think I do. I will see them, after all. We, you and I, Drerpo, both will see them.”

“How do you truly feel about what we will do?” said the boy.

“I’m no longer free from doubts,” said the princess. “For now, though, I do believe in the righteousness of our sacrifice. Perhaps it is nothing but propaganda, and our religion entirely false. Yet what if it is true? What if to refuse our destiny would be to condemn an entire generation to limbo in this world?”

“That indeed is a fearful possibility,” said the servant. “And I will readily follow you to help you make your choice. If it is sacrifice and death, than we will freely die to preserve your people. But if not... who knows what might be.”

Book I: The Jungle

“So you do think it is a choice?” said the princess.

“Yes,” he said.

The young man and woman spent several minutes looking out southeast across the abyss. She did have doubts. Drerpo’s use of The Language of the Universe created wild possibilities. Was it possible that there would be a ship on the shores of the sea, waiting to carry her away from the reach of her father forever?

As the friends explored the rim of the caldera, they noticed a strange wooden sign. It was worn, but with a clear image. A caricature of the Uré, the God-King, had been drawn in a most unflattering way. In a caption at the bottom the drawing was labeled “His Murdererness”. Droos was amazed. Apparently rebels had succeeded in tagging even the Ring of the King. This thought reminded her of the events more than a month earlier.

“Why did they attack us?” said Droos.

“I think you have already answered that question,” said Drerpo.

“Your usual response!” said the princess playfully. “They aren’t free, therefore, they are not happy. Yet this is more than just an... abstract idea. They see young maidens and strong men dragged off as sacrifices to be killed and raped. Those who object are tortured and executed. Death fills every thought. More than this, it breeds a cult of fear. The people of my tribe fear for their lives and those of their loved ones. I wonder how they are so accepting of their position.”

“I think they choose complacency for the same reason you do, Droos,” said Drerpo. “They believe that submission brings salvation. Your people also look to you, Droos. If the God-King is selfless enough to sacrifice his own daughter, so much the more may be expected of the common people. Your death will seal their faith in your father’s reign.”

“But not everyone believes it,” said the princess cautiously.

“No,” said Drerpo. “Nor will they ever. Your language does not have a word for freedom, but by looking at symbols like birds, as you do, your people sense the feeling nonetheless. For some it will take a particular event to push them passed the point of passivity. The death or rape of a loved one might be enough. A bold few will chose action merely from observing less personal atrocities. Your father has soldiers everywhere because if he did not, small insurrections might grow and threaten your family’s rule. The Servant-Guards can withstand much, but not the wrath of

your entire tribe.”

The princess thought of her little brother, and imagined hosts of enemies committed to killing him. She shivered.

“Why do the Slave-Soldiers do what they are told?” she said.

“This... you know the answer to, Droos,” said the boy.

“You’re right, Drerpo,” Droos continued. “Soldiers who commit the slightest infraction are killed with their entire family. With such terrible ends, it is easy to keep quiet. Priest-Servants in every town tell the tales of our religion and direct all frustration onto legendary truths that give meaning to the death and the slavery of our people. Slave-Soldiers convince themselves that their heart’s greatest desire is to help their God-King and his family ensure the entry of the commoners into Heaven.”

“I am proud of you, Droos,” said Drerpo. “You have come a long way. What choice will you make?”

“I will sacrifice myself, of course,” said the princess matter-of-factly. “I told you, Drerpo. These conversations are entertaining. But I do believe in the teachings of our religion. I will perform my duty, with your help, for the good of my father and my people, even if... even if I am no longer certain. But... Drerpo. Maybe, I might continue to enjoy hearing your words on the matter.”

The conversation ended just then as the other Grace-Servants came to the top of the caldera to see to the princess’ needs. For the time being the conversation was over. The party stayed at the temple and fortress built in the volcano for several days before turning back. Journeying home to the capitol took several months, and they did not arrive until one month after Droos’ thirteenth birthday.

Training for the Ceremony of Passage resumed. There was one pleasant interruption, however. At the end of her thirteenth year, Droos’ mother gave birth to a baby girl, given the name Eroo. Droos saw that her sister was healthy and strong, and felt an immediate connection. With jealousy it occurred to her that Eroo would have a full life. It was also now clear that if for any reason Droos rebelled against her duty, she would be condemning her baby sister to die. For Eroo could replace her in performing the sacrifice for this generation.

By her fourteenth birthday, the young woman knew dances, chants, and the ritual language. She learned to read and

Book I: The Jungle

write the common tongue, and the legends of her tribe. It was said that intellect was key to performing her role as emissary to the God of Blood when she died. Droos could also draw and paint, write with calligraphy, and assist her father in holding court.

When her father learned of the attack by the rebels, he was livid. Upon their return, he had the surviving Servant-Guards executed. He sent a brigade of Servants-Terrible, his private shock troops, and Servant-Guards to torture and execute every man, woman, and child for one hundred square miles. The empty villages were gifted to slaves more loyal to the God-King. Etøn and Drerpo were rewarded. In a rare show of near altruism, the God-King pardoned Drerpo's missing family members.

"I would never pardon your traitorous father," he said. "But for your actions your mother, brother, and sister will be left alone".

Etøn was permitted a visit by his family. Coming as a great surprise to Droos, she discovered that the servant was her first cousin. His father was Droos' uncle, the God-King's younger brother. His mother was the man's favorite Servant-Concubine. Etøn was pleased and humbled. Droos for her part enjoyed having a new close relative.

One day not long afterward, Etøn caught her alone. At first he looked away, but then his confidence grew, and he looked up at Droos.

"Your Grace," he said. "It appears that you and I share a special connection, that I am a humble cousin, part of your great family. I thought it would be right now to state my loyalty to you, to say you may trust me with your words. Actually I have always been loyal, and will be forever."

Etøn bowed his head a little when he finished, and Droos politely assured him that they would talk more soon. But the princess would not trust him yet as she did Drerpo.

Uré, the God-King, performed sacrifices every week in honor of the exciting period beginning with the eighteen months before Droos' Second Ascension Day. The princess was also busy learning. Now her education taught her family lineage. She would need to know the names of every God-King and His immediate family, with particular emphasis on the eldest daughter. The eldest son was already included, since of course they ascended to become the next God-King upon their father's death. She had to know the names and deeds of every royal family in recorded history, and

those existing only in the holy book of legends kept in the Inner Sanctum.

According to these histories the spouse of the God of Blood was a Goddess named the Queen of Pain. She was only lesser in that she was the divine feminine. It was by Her divine grace alone that a mortal son was born to rule The People of the Blood. Legends also revealed that their ancestors lived in a distant land of great cities. At that time they did not need submission or sacrifice to be redeemed. Yet for the weakness of their elected rulers, they were defeated and driven away. War was made upon them and their great cities laid to waste. It was after this that the tribe realized the need for a strong ruler. Luckily the son of the God of Blood came as a temporal and spiritual redeemer. A strange tale told of a spark of the divine essence in the center of the Heart of Blood that drew all smaller rivers into the lake. Droos found these various tales even too fantastic.

While Drerpo and Droos were waiting in an annex of the Abbey of the Servant-Priests, another major department of government, for their lessons to continue, the princess shared her thoughts.

“I had thought my family always ruled,” she said

“Everything has a beginning,” said Drerpo.

“Even stranger,” Droos continued, “Originally my people were ruled by many!”

“What do you think of that idea?” said Drerpo.

“I can’t image how they could get anything done,” said the princess. “My father’s servants bicker over even simple decisions. It is difficult to imagine a government where no one is actually in charge. Also, isn’t power granted by birth?”

“Do you really think that?” said Drerpo.

Droos thought carefully.

“It is interesting that Etøn is my cousin,” Droos said.

“Who knows how many others over the thousands of years can trace themselves back to royal origins. What’s more, since I learned about a second Goddess, the Queen of pain, I have thought about the possibility of there being even more deities.”

“That is a very radical thought,” said Drerpo. “I have a story to go with that idea, if you will hear me.”

“Of course I will, Drerpo!” said Droos, curiously.

“When my father came to visit those many years ago,” said Drerpo, “He brought with him a small book. I hid it very carefully

Book I: The Jungle

in light of what happened. Eventually I read it.

“It said that there were many beings of power, what we would call Gods and Goddesses, who fill a world far greater than anything you have in your legends here, a universe. Fulfilling purposes and transcendent reasoning, where abstract concepts are concrete, they rule in true selflessness. Yet even they bow the knee and shake in nervousness at the mention of two Beings of amazing splendor. The names the book gave to them were Elriver and Showsh. They are a wife and husband. She is the creator of our universe, and she shares its rule with her Showsh. They have many lieutenants, Gods and Goddesses of power and wisdom, who minister their realm. Interestingly, the God of Heaven and the God of Hell were said to serve side by side, that seemingly Good and Evil both play fundamental roles that complement each other in a way.”

“Amazing!” exclaimed Droos. “I wish I could read this book myself.”

“Most unfortunate, Droos, I was forced to destroy it,” answered Drerpo. “It was too dangerous to keep.”

The princess looked disappointed.

“I understand,” she said. “With everything you experienced, keeping the book would have been difficult for multiple reasons. I appreciate you taking the time to learn enough to share this with me. If you remember more I would love to hear it.”

As she passed her fifteenth birthday, with more ceremonies of death, rape, and torture, the princess thought death would actually bring relief from these horrors. It was a morbid thought, one of many she found she had begun to have. Drerpo’s conversations with her helped keep her feelings mixed, about her role, about politics and religion. On occasion she remembered that day long ago when she had kissed him in the mouth of the tree. But she enjoyed her friendship with him and did not want to jeopardize it.

On her brother’s eighth birthday, the princess had an unusual moment alone with her little brother. Gazing up at the sky, she could see several flocks of birds soaring overhead.

“What do you think of birds, Uéré,” she said.

“They’re birds,” said the prince, only a bit annoyed, but without much interest in the topic.

This was due to his young age.

“I first learned to enjoy their flight before I was your age,” she said. “Aren’t they majestic, and awesome?”

“They’re just birds,” the prince repeated. “Father is awesome. Our ceremonies are awesome. Birds are just birds.”

The princess sighed. At that moment she felt almost motherly. Droos was not a girl anymore, and she thought about what it would be like to have children of her own. That was a possibility denied to her. She would have to enjoy her younger siblings instead. Droos also wished she could be close to Ueré like she was with Drerpo.

What a waste, she thought.

“Birds are special,” she said. “They make me happy.”

Ueré looked at her with little brotherly amusement, and wanting to change the topic, began poking her. The older sister laughed and enjoyed a pleasant game of poke and tag with her little brother. For a moment she almost she felt like she was part of a normal family.

“Your Grace,” said a voice behind her. “What do you like so much about birds?”

It was Deltøn, who had overheard them.

“It is like I said,” Droos said. “I think they are pretty.”

Her voice betrayed her more than she would have liked.

“Nonetheless,” said the Priest, “It is unbecoming for the daughter of the God-King to think of... birds... Allow me to do something about them to ease your thoughts.”

Deltøn told the Servant-Guards protecting them that the man to shoot the most birds would eat with the princess as dinner. Droos was horrified at this. It was as if the very essence of her free thinking spirit, her gentle and goodly nature, dwelled in these innocent creatures.

Furthermore, her cousin Etøn joined them, and the archers wasted little time. In a few minutes they felled almost thirty birds. Her cousin Etøn took the prize with eight.

Droos was in a dreadful mood the rest of the day, and at dinner she was further shocked. The meal was none other than the birds that had been killed. It would be dangerous for her to do anything but eat the meal with a smile on her face. As she put on her act, she thought deeply over Drerpo’s words.

Her father really was a tyrant. His chief advisors were hardly better. Droos began to suspect that even her father cared little that she was going to die. Ueré’s loyalty was to himself

Book I: The Jungle

alone. The storm raging inside the princess was tempered by her wisdom. Her father likely thought better of her than she feared. Priest-Servants were acting according with their beliefs. Ueré, her brother, was young and naive. The princess remained hopeful.

Yet as she consumed the symbol of freedom, the princess could not help but think that a certain wall was closing in around her. What choices did she have? There was no boat waiting for her at the shores to the south. Her only future lay in a pool of blood at the top of a mountain. She would die as a spokesman for her father's reign. If only there was another choice. Her thoughts fought inside her. She was unsure that these would be reconciled, and she wondered which would give way first. But the ritual of her Second Ascension Day was soon to be upon her, and any change of heart would have to be soon.





Chapter 3

The Ceremony Begins

The final preparations for the Ceremony of Passage began at last. Droos knew how it would end. Her best friend, Drerpo, would kill her.

Under the setting sun the capitol lay silent. A breeze moved pebbles from the walkways, while the scent of flowers reached from the jungle to hallow the air. The quiet was so complete that Droos could hear her own heartbeat.

She stood in a room made of stone as well as usual wooden beds, shelves, and other objects. A live fountain flowed along a trough, through the sunlight that filtered from the windows, making a comforting hollow for rest. The water contained lilies that bobbed with the current. A smell of honey rose from a bouquet of blossoms that lay in a vase on a table. The young woman enjoyed the quiet and admired herself in the mirror before her.

Droos was slender and a little tall. Her arms ran fluid and graceful like elm tree branches. Brown hair flowed in wavy curls below shoulders that were slight and a tad too meager. Through green eyes, wise beyond their years with gentleness, she admired the woman she had become these last years. She took after her mother.

A knock on the door broke the silence. Looking at herself a moment longer, she called for the visitor to enter. Glancing over, she saw Drerpo stroll into the room.

This was a young man of vigor. His eyes were gray and his hair black with a strand here and there of a color that might have been chalk white. Drerpo too was narrow of build, but shapely muscles and confident, straight movements showed that he was alert and capable. He stood a little taller than his friend. The finger nails at the tips of his hands had an unusual texture that

Book I: The Jungle

reminded the princess of granite.

The servant looked at his friend standing before the mirror and laughed.

“Admiring yourself in the mirror again, Droos?” he said.

“I am afraid you are just as beautiful as ever.”

Blushing the princess laughed too.

“I thought we were passed flirting a long time ago,” she said.

“Oh,” said the young man. “I meant nothing more than what you are. And that is a friend both wise and beautiful of mind and body. Do you disagree?”

“A trap!” said the princess loudly. “If I say no I am vain and if I say yes I insult myself. What is the proper answer?”

“Is it possible to answer both yes and no at the same time?” said Drerpo.

“I fear you know the answer to that all too well,” answered Droos. “Around here the answer is always, ‘Yes, Your Grace’, or, ‘Yes, Your Divineness.’”

“Except when we are in private, and then I simply call you, Droos,” said the servant.

“Well... yes,” she conceded. “What brings you to interrupt my vanity? Am I summoned? Is there more time for me to prepare.”

“Yes and yes,” said Drerpo. “You are summoned but are instructed to make sure you are presentable.”

The young man gestured at the one piece silk fabric that covered her after her bath. It was a friendly gesture with no hint at how exposed she was now. Drerpo was an honorable friend too.

“Then you had better give me a few minutes to make myself look, even better!” she chided.

“As you say,” said Drerpo.

He left Droos to her work.

Half an hour later the princess stood in the courtyard at the front of Royal Estate. In the end Droos arrived before the time for the ceremony, and enjoyed the setting sun and the fragrance of flowers in the air. Soon the chief slaves arrived, who made up a higher class of citizen, the Servants. A rainbow of colors spread out before her, whether the bright-red of the Servant-Guards or orange of the Servant-Traders. The princess wore a spectrum of blue silks.

A horn was blown, long and terrible, as if the cry of

death. Then the Majesty-Guards, protectors of the male royalty, accompanied the crown prince, Uéré, into the square. At last in silence, the Servants-Terrible, in their blood-red uniforms, escorted Uré Himself. The Lord of the tribe, a man of frightening presence, wore purple with three patches of color: white, grey, and black, for life and death were his decision alone. He sat on a raised throne and overlooked the proceedings. Lilipol was absent to care for her little sister, Eroo.

With Uré's arrival, the ceremony began. The princess and her Grace-Servants performed the rituals perfectly. At one point, when Drerpo was sure that no one could see him, he gave Droos a little wink. Inside she smiled. Otherwise the evening passed uneventfully and before she knew it the princess was left alone with her personal servants.

"That was quite something, wasn't it," said Etøn.

"I suppose it was," said Droos coolly.

Her opinion of him had soured since he had won the bird shooting contest.

"I feel like we will have nothing but celebrations for six months," said Ini.

"Yah," continued the princess. "And at the end we get to die. Alas, that we only have one life to sacrifice for our people."

Only Drerpo caught the ere of sarcasm.

"Alright," Drerpo said. "The princess needs her rest. You all go on with your duties. I will see that she gets back to her room."

A dream disturbed her sleep that night. She stood upon the Ring of the King and gazed at the stars, suddenly noticing that her birth star fell and vanished. Then she flew, it was morning, and atop another mountain she gazed to the south. In the distance across a sea she could see an island, which her submerged consciousness labeled the Gates of Heaven. To her shock, she glanced downward and there was a small wooden boat waiting at the shore. A young woman who looked just like Drerpo tended the sails. She turned to tell Drerpo, but a hand shot over her shoulder and in great fright she felt a bone knife over her throat. It moved."

Droos awoke in darkness interrupted only by faint candlelight.

Just a dream, she thought.

Yet the feeling of the knife remained. She tried to move and realized that there was still an arm stretched over her shoulder.

Book I: The Jungle

Struggling a little, Droos tried to scream.

A hand covered her mouth and a clever voice spoke softly, “Shh, shh, shh...” it said. “Not good to wake the others, my princess. Not good. We worked long and hard to have this chance. We do not want to spoil it. To your feet now, and if you struggle I will break your arm. Now up!”

Slowly, he pulled her up, and she cooperated, believing his threat. Then they were walking through the door. Surely the Servant-Guard would be there. To her dismay the Servant-Guard was crumpled on the floor with his throat slit. Droos stifled a word. Strangely, as they continued walking there were few guards.

“We create a little, disruption...” said the man. “Killed a few Priest-Slaves, yes. Then threw a few stone, and when discovered, many more guard called. We knew they would follow the diversion. Now you are ours.”

Leaving fear to restrict her, the man released Droos to go unrestrained.

“Maybe you do what I say, princess,” the man said. “We want you alive, dead would not do. But if a choice of rescue or death, death we want. Do you wish to die tonight?”

“No,” said Droos quietly, regaining some calm.

“Good,” said the man. “Very good.”

With a shove on her back, they went towards the kitchens. Pots and pans aglow in the lingering firelight did not disrupt their passage. They reached the side door, and walked out into night. Gaining further courage the young woman decided to ask some questions.

“What do you want with me, anyway?” said Droos.

“Yes, a fair question,” said the man. “Alas, you are held prisoner by the history of atrocities ordered by your family. You know of these I think. And you have heard of us before. This is not the first time we tried to capture you.”

After a moment, she made a connection.

“Did you know those who attacked us when I was twelve?” she said.

“Very good,” said the man. “There are secrets that your father does not know, even with all his spies and swords. We are that secret. Try to make it dangerous for His Murdererness to leave home. For you too princess. Why do you think you kept here so much?”

A sudden sound had the man stop and restrain her again.

A shadow approached, but soon he released his grip again, for the newcomer was expected.

“Well done, Itir,” said the new man. “Now we must be away.”

“Are you the secret too,” the princess said boldly.

He turned to Itir.

“You told her about us!” he spoke a more loudly. “I praised you too soon. You will answer for it when we return.”

Another sound brought the knife back to her throat, and this time the men looked concerned. As footsteps approached, it became clear that they were not expecting a third person.

“You must,” said Itir to the man.

The man retrieved a bow hanging from his back and nocked an arrow. Just as he fired, to her horror, Droos saw that it was Drerpo. The aim was true, and it passed straight through him. Muffling a scream, she felt tears in her eyes. She looked back to see the damage done.

Yet Drerpo appeared to have suffered no injury. Droos’ eyes went wide. The arrow had passed through him like he was a ghost! If she was surprised, the men were even more so. Itir muttered frantically something about Hell and demons and shoved the princess against the wall. Then Drerpo stood before them.

“Droos,” he nodded first at his friend.

Then turning to the rebels he continued.

“You have proved your skill tonight, and your cause is strengthened,” he said. “You no longer need the princess. Leave her be and I will make sure to share your message with her father.”

The unnamed man laughed and nocked another arrow.

“You are amusing, slave,” he said. “Though I suppose you are very much a victim too. But unlike most, you are not free from guilt. You are nearly as spoiled as the princess. For your roots as a slave I would spare you. Yet for your role as a Servant I will slay you if you continue to interfere. Next time my arrow will not miss.”

Itir chuckled to himself. Thinking the conversation over, he turned Droos and walked away. Drerpo was not finished. He followed behind.

“Very well,” said the unnamed man.

He aimed his bow.

The young man raised his finger and traced in a pattern of lines in the air that looked like writing. Then the unnamed man

Book I: The Jungle

blinked, and lowered his bow. Itir released Droos.

“The servant is right,” the man said to his colleague. “We have made our point. Let’s leave now.”

Then they turned to leave. Before they had gone far, almost beyond her hearing, the princess could hear the hissing of serpentine words, and she felt tingling on her arms. Droos shivered, and saw Itir walking towards her. The man raised his knife to strike.

With one motion Drerpo faced Itir and traced a symbol in the air. Itir dropped instantly, crumpling as blood poured from his neck. His throat was slit from ear to ear. The knife fell from his hand. Looking at this in fear, the other man turned and ran, disappearing into the night.

Droos and Drerpo looked at each other, the young man catching his breath and muttering a prayer. First he walked up to the princess and gave her a hug. Hearing the sounds of approaching footsteps, the servant parted, and drawing his knife, walked up to the dead man. He dipped his weapon in the blood and then turned back to face the arriving guards.

Uré, the God-King, held court immediately. At first suspicious at Drerpo’s convenient presence, the High Servant-Guard Commander explained the practice of the young man to enjoy the gardens of the estate before dawn. Then they heard Drerpo’s report of the events. Even the God-King was impressed by his valiant actions. Droos complimented the story with an invented struggle to cover the final moments. At the end, the God-King turned to Drerpo.

“I swear to you that you will be rewarded, most loyal servant,” he said. “I and my Lord, the God of Blood, will not forget what you have done here tonight.”

A full report of the infiltration was soon gathered, and the High Servants concluded that example must be made of these rebels. In the usual manner, the God-King dispatched the Servant-Commanders to make indiscriminate example of the common people, woman, man, and child, from the farthest North to the farthest South. Thousands would be executed, regardless of their affiliation with the rebels.

Drerpo received two honors. He was promoted to be the High Grace-Servant, first among the protectors of the royal women. Second, the God-King used His divine power to commute the sentence of Drerpo’s father from torment in Hell, to the limbo

of Twilight Cities. So the danger passed and the ceremonies continued that day as usual.

During their break for lunch, the High Grace-Servant and Droos sat under an iron sculpture depicting an artistic star. The Grace-Servants and Servant-Cooks brought their meal and then gave some privacy.

“This Language of yours seems most effective,” said Droos. “It can guard, it can persuade, and even kill. Are there any limits to your power?”

“The Language of the Universe does have limits,” said the servant. “My father said that there are thousands of wards, but I only know a few of them.”

“Something odd did happen,” said the princess, “Why was Itir able to break the ward? How did your words fail?”

Drerpo sighed.

“There are other powers in the universe that know the ancient words better than I do,” said the servant. “I do not know exactly who it was, but my suspicion was that it was the Queen of Pain.”

“The Queen of Pain!” exclaimed Droos. “Why would our patron Goddess want me to be slain?”

“At first it occurs to me to share a thought,” said Drerpo, “That the real Power governing your people is the Queen of Pain, assuming Gods and Goddesses actually exist. Does She want rebels to overcome your family? I would say no. But might She want you dead? That is a question.”

“Why?” said Droos.

“You know the answer to that,” he said.

“My ideas are very radical,” said the princess. “I question death, pain, suffering and war. The legends of my tribe are no longer so sacred to me, and if I could even escape my role that supports my father’s reign, I would. Another memory occurs to me.”

“Tell me,” said Drerpo.

The princess quickly brought up the dream that had interrupted her sleep the previous night, about the falling star, the boat on the sea, and knife on her throat.

“That is an interesting dream,” said the servant. “What if you could sail away from your people on a boat? Would you make that choice? Would you flee into uncertainty beyond the confines of everything you have known?”

Book I: The Jungle

“You know, Drerpo,” laughed the princess. “With everything I have seen you do, I wonder if miracles do exist, and if the boat is real. On the other hand, would I use it to escape? Don’t I owe my people more than such a betrayal? The end of the dream bothered me the most. Will you really do your part? Will you kill me?”

“We may be friends, Droos, but I am still your servant,” said Drerpo. “My choice is to guard you and your choice no matter what. I will do as you ask.”

“Your words aren’t helping me with my choice,” said Droos. “I begin to think that in the end I must trust simply to faith. It is likely none of our legends are true and that I sacrifice myself for nothing. You will cut my throat, and my soul will fly away to, well, wherever we truly go when we die.”

“Maybe it is more than one place,” said Drerpo.

“How is that possible?” said the Princess.

“By being able to answer both yes and no,” said the servant.

The young adults finished their meal in silence and returned to the ceremonies and duties they had to perform.

Droos’ schedule was packed with rituals. Reciting the legends and prayers of her religion all day long reminded her of the spiritual significance of her role. Quickly the radical questions in her mind raged against her faith again. The rituals included ritual cleaning, a generational exercise that in practice provided needed repairs in the capitol.

Nolai was a city of splendor. Boulevards ran in a grid, connecting stone complexes belonging to each department of state. Two religious sites, the Temple of the God of Blood and the Temple of the God King rose to heights and were testaments to the tribe’s technical engineering ability. Yet just as much Nolai was a garden, for between all buildings was green grass covered by trees, plants, and friendly animals. Artwork of metal, stone, wood, and bone added further interest. This treasured city of The People of the Blood showed that even evil has some beauty in it.

Droos, with a platoon of Servant-Guards and a half dozen Servants-Terrible, helped to clean and beautify the city. They strolled nearby as she worked on a living sculpture she had carefully been designing next to the facilities for the Servant-Concubines. With the help of Drerpo and Etøn she had trained a small passion tree to grow into the shape of a bird. In the context

of the gardens, such a symbol would disappear among the myriad art projects and she thought her little rebellion would not be noticed. Having put the finishing touches on the tree, she went and sat on a blanket on the grass to admire her work. Quickly her Grace-Servants brought her light refreshments and clear, cool water.

Droos thought about the life she had led here in the capitol these last fifteen years. Itir, who she had seen die, was right, she thought. She was not free of the benefits belonging to the royal family. There were limits on what she could say and do. Yet far fewer and with less peril than mistakes by others. What if her hesitation to overcome her loyalty to her father was based only on the privileges she had? What if it was all for food and clothing?

What really were her motives for going through with the sacrifice? Was it gratitude for her pampered upbringing? Was it piety to her religion and her God? Maybe it was because she had no other choice. She laughed, and thought that she probably could arrange for a boat to meet her south of the Princess. No, she would not be that bold and that ridiculous. Rather, she would trust that if Drerpo chose to redeem her, then she would be redeemed. Such was her faith now in her friend.

The party walked slowly, with the princess stopping here and there to admire a particularly beautiful flower or a building or square where she had some memory. North of the royal estate, they lounged on the steps of the Temple of the God-King. Droos and Drerpo perused the temple together; the High Grace-Servant knew that she would have many mixed feelings at this moment. Still, he was pleased with the progress she had made, in which he had played no small part.

As the servant walked behind his friend, he daydreamed, and in the midst he saw a great hall of light, shrouded in mystery and glory, raised high on the shoulders of might and strength, hallowed by wisdom and courage. At the end of the chamber were two chairs of transcendent radiance that shown forth Authority. They were empty now, and a being of awful countenance stood before it, ruling instead of the absent sovereigns. Muttering a few words under his breath into the image of wonder, Drerpo returned himself to the place in which he stood, in the temple, next to Droos.

Stopping to look at the collection of statues belonging to the previous God-Kings, she looked in curiosity for a while at

Book I: The Jungle

her grandfather's eldest daughter, she who had made her sacrifice willingly in the previous generation.

"Drerpo," she asked. "What do you think it is like to die?"

"I think every mortal ponders that question," said the servant aside. "I wonder if Gods can die too?"

"Yes, Droos," he spoke now to his friend. "That is an honest question for both of us. Normally thinking about death and dying is an unpopular conversation for humans, and they avoid it until the moment of passage is upon them. For us who must not only die but willing slay ourselves, death has always dwelled with us. Let me ask, which do you think is more frightening, Droos? The pain of death or the conclusion itself?"

The princess sighed, continuing to look, and in part to admire the statue of her late aunt.

"The pain of death," she continued, "Comes to my mind first, but death is little less frightening. You... you, my friend, will have the greatest role in... in my death. Will it be painless? How long will I know it is happening? It is... so soon."

"It will not be painless, Droos," said Drerpo. "The skin about the neck is sensitive, and blood ceasing to flow into your head will be like a flame consuming it. Yes the time will be short. Without the blood within seconds, at most ten, your eyes will dim and your conscious mind will submerge, until only a few moments after that your mind will wholly cease forever, and your soul will depart. Then, I suppose, you will join your ancestors in paving a bridge of blood and starlight into Heaven. Hear this, Droos, that those few seconds suffered serve a supreme purpose. Few deaths have such meaning."

"Drerpo..." the princess spoke, "How can you of all people do your duty? How can you think about killing... me?! Let alone actually doing the job?"

"It will be the hardest service I will ever have had to perform," he said. "Many lifetimes before now and more in the future could not prepare me for what I will need to do. The only comfort for me is that I will not have to live much longer afterwards. One day only will I walk this world in utter loneliness until I will stab myself through the heart with a sword and through the pain and the quick death I will be purged of the guilt and suffering of having sacrificed one whom I love."

"You love me a lot," said the princess, smiling and touching her servant's shoulder. "I love you too, Drerpo. This

purpose of ours is only bearable at all because you will be with me at my side. And it is said that when our souls depart and gain immortality, you will join me and be at my side forever. That is a comforting thought. Yet I would trade an eternity in Heaven for an hour with you, my friend, in this world.”

Then Droos hugged him and kissed his cheek, a few tears passing from her eyelids.”

Even Drerpo, wise and knowledgeable in ways the princess could never truly know, was touched by that moment. In all his short years, nothing was as vivid and real as that embrace. Yes, she really was a friend. It would be torment if he had to slit her throat with his own hand, watch her die, and sprinkle her blood ceremonially upon the lonely altar. Then he would have to lay her in the pile of bones that were at the southernmost end of the summit, the remains of several dozen generations of princesses. How horrid! But, he reminded himself, her choice might yet be different. Perhaps there would be a miracle of fate. Then they could go on being friends in the cherished embrace of life in this world for a full life span, rather than the mere sixteen years they will otherwise have received. Droos noticed that even Drerpo had tears in his eyes, and with their hands around each other’s shoulders, the two friends walked and enjoyed the monument together.

That last afternoon passed slowly, but steadily. The late winter sun was on its way west, descending downward from the heavens to sleep beneath the sea. Arriving back at the royal estate, Droos saw a pleasant sight. Her mother and little sister were playing together. Lilipol looked up and beheld her first child, the one who would soon be taken from her forever. She was religious and believed the words spoken in their legends and obeyed and submitted to her husband, the God-King. That did not make the imminent parting any easier. Her eyes gazing at Droos held both pride and intense sadness. The mother loved her daughter fiercely.

Eroo, her younger daughter, at only two, was quite oblivious to anything that was going to happen. Droos, loved her mother and her younger sister. In particular, she thought how lucky her younger sister would be. Her purpose was merely to grow up strong and to marry the eldest son of the High Priest-Servant. Eroo would be free of the constant instructions in death and sacrifice. She too would have personal servants to be her friends as she grew, and they would see her differently, as they

Book I: The Jungle

would not have to die with her. Then the elder sister recalled that in four years when Eroo turned six she too would have to watch the execution ceremonies all the way until she was married as sixteen. The mother looked at her eldest daughter a moment longer, and then sighing, returned to looking after the one that would live.

An hour later the royal family sat together at dinner. Uré the God-King sat alone at the front of the table on his throne, while his son, Ueré, his wife, Lilipol, Droos, and her baby sister, Eroo sat around the rest. To the right of the princess was the old High Priest-Servant in his multi-color uniform. Other advisors to the God-King enjoyed a less fine meal off to the side.

As a rule the God-King never ate at the meals with even his family, for one of divinity, or so went the legends, did not eat. Of course he did, only in relative secrecy with the High Servant-Cook and the High Servant-Guard Commander. There he heard the reported whispers from that advisor, whose job, or so Droos heard, doubled as head spy, while he ate lavishly.

Talk at this meal was focused. Going over the successful planning for the rituals that would begin at dawn the next day, the High Priest-Servant reported that everything had been prepared. The floors of the Temple of the God of Blood were so pure and polished that food might be eaten off of them, and in fact had, as part of the cleaning ceremonies. Next came the High Servant-Commander. He said that two divisions of the army, fully twenty-thousand soldiers, lay at the ready. One lay outside the capitol, while another was *purging* and securing the royal precession way, the hundreds of miles that would be traveled by the royal party to the Mountain of Doom over the course of the ritual. The High-Servant Artist gave his report, and the High Servant-Cook, as did the Associate Servant-Guard Commander and the High Servant-Architect.

Many more reports were issued and the evening was lengthy. Droos found herself daydreaming eventually, for she knew her part in the events ahead, and looked up at the starry sky through the window. Brightest of all, as it was most nights, twinkled her birth star.

She thought she could see in her waking-dream the wide look in her eyes when the sacrifice had been performed the first night of her life, and blood smeared all over her. Drepso, she laughed inside her head as her vision continued, of course had a knowledgeable look of confidence about him. Then the dream

shifted.

A thought about the legend of the other ancient tribe in the rest of the world, those who lived in houses of metal and were ruled by the week and meek, passed before her, and it seemed to her that she now gazed upward and saw the buildings. She was afloat on the sea in a small wooden craft with two others at her sides that she could not see, but one of them spoke as if into the sails, which made them blow. Yet her eyes were fixed on the sight before her.

The city was so vast and intimidating beyond her wildest imaginations. Every building was taller than the tallest monument in her tribe. They each must have reached five hundred feet into the air, and they were very wide. More than this, in many places there were buildings of metal as tall as mountains. Windows filled their sides with light flowing through some of them, as though the sun shone out of each.

Outside the buildings streams of flying metal traveled through the sky just as her people walked on the boulevards of the capitol. They were distant, but she sensed that each of these steeds somehow contained myriad people. The rivers of aircraft



Book I: The Jungle

went in many directions and the vessels were as numerous as the stars. Some of the vessels were as big as the buildings, and they took flight from great open promenades and ascended up into the heavens themselves, dwindling until they themselves were only twinkling dots of light. She saw one land then on the top of a lower building. It reminded her of the bird she had seen on the piece of paper that Drerpo's father had found all of those years ago. Now it occurred to her that maybe, it was one of these strange metal crafts.

People traveling on the wings of birds, she thought.

Sudden movement woke her from her vision of the caves of steel. Her family was getting up around her. Now the High Grace-Servant escorted her back to her room, and after a short conversation, bid her a good night. The daydreaming had made her surprisingly sleepy and in short order she slipped into a deep uninterrupted rest, with no more dreams, and she knew no more that night.





Chapter 4

Darkness & Light

“Wake up Your Grace!” a voice said unduly loud and close to her.

Droos had slept so soundly that she was unusually groggy. Opening her eyes, her room a little blurry and her mind still racing at the sudden interruption to her rest, she saw Etøn, her cousin and Grace-Servant, standing before the foot of her bed. Why was he here and not Drerpo? Her friend was usually the one to wake her in the morning, as he returned from his walk in the Principle District.

“Where is Drerpo?” said the princess sleepily.

“Am I not good enough,” spoke Etøn. “I am your own first cousin and will help escort you and will sacrifice myself along with both of you. But I suppose you wish to continue your little affair with the High Grace-Servant while you still can.”

Her cousin winked at her and smiled. Droos glared at him.

“That’s not funny,” said the princess. “Drerpo and I are close, but we are just friends. I have had to work hard to stop that rumor from spreading, and here my own personal servants are saying it to me.”

“Better to you than, say, to your Father, right my princess?” smirked Etøn.

“You wouldn’t dare,” spoke Droos sternly, with her eyes a little wider, and now fully awake.

“No worries,” he continued. “I was only trying to wake you up fully as fast as I could, and it seems my scheme worked. You may believe what you wish, but as I told you once before, I am more trustworthy than you believe. It is Resh and Ini that are the talkers. My lips are sealed as far as rumors go. Anyway, your Grace-Servants, and Drerpo, are waiting for you in the small great hall to breakfast before the day’s events. I will see you there!”

Book I: The Jungle

The young man winked at her again, and smirking, left the room. Sitting up in bed, Droos thought about his words.

Affair, she thought.

She shook her head. Yet she could not blame some for getting that impression. It was most fortunate that her father had either not heard of it or sufficiently enough to take it seriously. Perhaps it was that Drerpo had been in the God-King's favor for quite some years now and as he was kind, generous, and helpful to all those around him, not just Droos, few wished to betray him. She thought about the privileges simply being a good person could bring, such as them being able to carry on a close friendship, despite the rumors.

With that thought, Droos rose, bathed, and dressed in her ceremonial blue silks and clothes. About her neck she bound a chain of white diamonds and blue sapphires and upon her ears hung blue diamonds. As usual she wore the silver ring with a red sapphire, or ruby. She brushed her curly, wavy, still wet brown hair, and enjoyed with vanity her image once more in her mirror.

She thought of Drerpo, and with a chuckle to herself, whispered, "If only."

Then rising she went to join her servants at the breakfast table.

Ceremonies that week were planned down to the second. Shoes, clothing, and jewelry matched every moment, and she was well rehearsed. Her Personal Grace-Servants escorted her while Servant-Guards in their finest bright-red uniforms lined the boulevard. The High Priest-Servant met her half way and bowed low. Then they entered the Temple of the God of Blood, a massive stone monument with numerous rooms, promenades, statues, and vaults with sacred tomes. The centerpiece was a great hall with the biggest statue of the God of Blood Himself.

It was in the image of a human, but covered in large scales. Five arms left the side of a proportionally greater chest, two on one side, three on the other. These each held one object: a sword, a bone knife, a bowl, a human skull, and a pile of enormous blue-diamonds. All were made similarly of gold, except the two ruby eyes of the skull and the pile of diamonds. A garment of gold painted black, white, and grey covered part of the statue. Fourteen rippling abdominal muscles shown through the scales, and of a similar strength in appearance were the legs. The God wore sandals constructed of fused golden knives. The head of the statue

was that of a cobra, its head folds spread wide, eyes of many red-diamonds, and fangs of blood-red painted gold. Atop its head was a crown-circlet of bone-knives. So stood in splendor the patron deity of the People of the Blood.

Before the eyes of her God, Droos performed several dances, chanting and walking about the chamber. The High Priest-Servant bathed the princess' hair, and she shivered slightly in the chill of the morning. To her right, on an ornate throne, sat her father, the God-King, and to his right, Ueré the crown-prince, looked on intently.

Fully nine sets of sacrifices graced the special day. They were forced to fight, were raped, and were sacrificed upon the many alters. Servant-Educators fought and actually died to depict the histories of the tribe, a testament to the God-King's absolute power. Finally Droos and her servants cleaned the ground, the statue, and the trough with water, until they were completely free of blood.

Many more rituals were performed, outside with the same level of detail, in front of each of the government buildings housing the sections of the God-King's government. As the sun began to set, the first day of six was over. Once more they sat again alone in the lesser great hall and enjoyed dinner. It was well earned, for that day had gone very well and without any food, and they ate at first quietly and with great focus on the task at hand. When they were finished the young adults shared some stories of the past years with each other, some funny, some sad, others only heard by one or two of them. From time to time the princess caught Drerpo's eyes, and they smiled at each other.

Staying up later than they should have in the logistically pristine planning, eventually they all went to bed. Droos once again had a dreamless night and woke up at sunrise a little more refreshed and less groggy than on the day prior. This time she was up and ready before her servants arrived. To her joy, the one who came to get her this morning was Drerpo.

"I hope you slept well," he said.

"Very well," Droos replied. "Thank you Drerpo."

"Have you been feeling better about what you are going to do?" inquired the servant.

Droos looked down, then back at Drerpo.

"I admit I hadn't thought of it since the other day," she continued. "Yet with all of the blood rituals I have seen

Book I: The Jungle

just yesterday, I expect I will not be able to forget our own sacrifices for long. Maybe the feeling that so many hundreds will accompany me into Heaven will help me with my own journey.”

“But you don’t like death,” laughed the young man, seeming to make light of the topic.

“Bringing up that again,” Droos returned the morbid humor. “I feel like you have been pestering me about that topic for ten years.”

“I have been bothering you about it for at least that long,” replied Drerpo. “It is still just as relevant today, and unlike when we were five, we can think more clearly and with greater sophistication at our current age.”

The princess took a moment to further consider the issue that had been brought up so often.

“Death is just as abhorrent to me as it has been,” continued Droos. “I only came to like it when I was a child, while I watched you perform the ceremonies of vivisection; seeing blood so much creates a certain tolerance. I expect that even among the tribe of the meek and the weak in our legends, executioners and those who are raised being involved with and being exposed to violent death come to ignore their innermost feelings on the topic. They must, or else they would go mad. Many might even convince themselves that they like death and enjoy watching painful suffering. Maybe that eventuality is the greatest horror.”

“Do you think that is why your father’s servants are just as able to behold and cheer and revel in the executions and sacrifices in your tribe?” asked Drerpo.

“Maybe,” answered the princess. “More likely they do it especially because if they don’t, they will be vivisected. If it is a choice between looking and showing appreciation or torture and death, it is easy to decide. My father and his advisors are smart men, and they know how to keep their people under their control. I can only wonder at what carnage will await us as we travel north in five days. While the two divisions of Slave-Soldiers are participating in the ceremony, a third is following the High Servant-Guard Commander, killing women, men, and children by the thousands in a random fashion. This all for the actions of eight men and their supposed conspiracy. I would expect the torn bodies to be piled high along the banks of the river to please my father as we travel.”

“Do you really believe everything you say?” inquired

Drerpo.

“Not completely,” replied Droos. “Or very much at all,” she quickly added. “Yet it is interesting to think about. My father in his generosity did not have me educated so well for nothing. It is so I may be sharp in my soon-to-be role as the shining beacon and bridge into the Heavens. I can also enjoy the fruits of my labors in the present, and can think about the political purposes beyond what I am told. These are only exercises, ultimately. It is very hard, Drerpo, to see through all of these rituals and legends that have been presented to me so consistently by everyone else. I wonder, though, that if, after all, these are not merely additional tools to help me recall my duty and help me go through with it.”

She paused a moment, thinking, and then finished.

“You are right though. I am really tired of seeing death, and I wish beyond all hope that it did not need to happen, to me, or to anyone else.”

With that Droos ceased talking, and touched her friend’s shoulder as she walked towards the door. She needed to eat and prepare herself of mind and soul for today’s long itinerary.

More blood and bodies, she thought.

Finishing the circuit of sacrifices around the Principle District, a new set of rituals was located in the Temple of the God-King. Indeed there were more stories and acts of blood and sacrifice, and after that morning’s conversation, at a point or two the princess sighed, but only so she and Drerpo could notice. When the moment came, it turned out that the High Servant-Artist had been masterful in his craft, and when the likeness of her was revealed, Droos was pleased that at least some components of this week’s ceremonies carried beauty with them, though she blushed at the vanity inherent in that thought.

Retiring once more for the evening, that night she did dream. Opening her eyes, she beheld great walls of paper-stacks. This reminded her of the tomes within the vaults of religious writings in her tribe, only better constructed, and with hardcovers of exquisite color and engraved with gold leaf. Titles in foreign languages stretched to mountainous heights along the shelves above and as if to eternity on either side, for it was a long, wide hall. Tables there were, and beings sat on chairs and read. Some met together and debated. They looked as mighty beings with noble and courageous faces who had smiles and wore bright clothing.

Book I: The Jungle

Droos walked up and down the rows, and took out a book or two. In one, although she could not make out the language, three words reached into her mind from its pages as though they were put there with purpose. These were the names Elriver, Showsh, and Drerpo. The first two to occur to her fascinated the princess. The last one terrified her. It was strange that the name of her friend should be included in a list with those greatest of beings; those her friend had once told her about in a story. What Droos did know was that she wanted to read more. But the words were beyond her understanding.

The princess thought she might be brave enough to talk to one of the heroic beings. She walked over to a group of them conversing in a space between two tables. Facing inward, she grabbed an arm and he and those beside him parted so she could see their faces and those of the group. In horror, she beheld beings with red skin, horns, tails, and some had cobra heads and blood-red eyes. Their expressions were devilish, and all of them cackled in laughter as she stood there, now seeming impossibly small and fragile. What had appeared the heights of intellect and pursuit of knowledge now had become the depths of some demonic layer of Hell.

“Oh, but you are in a place knowledge,” one of the cobra-headed devils said. “All the knowledge you want is here for the taking. But you will always gaze at half seen words with fascination and you will never be able to understand any of it. If you kiss our feet, perhaps we will help you. Humble yourself, Droos. Or else you will spend all eternity... burning in Hell.”

With that last word she heard a maniacal laughter in her head, and reeling from the feeling of transcendent smallness and mocking she woke suddenly to the relief that mundane darkness surrounded her in this quiet little corner of the royal estate. The smell of passion blossoms calmed her fear, and she enjoyed listening to the burble of the fountain flowing along the shelf on the side of the room. She looked around and saw that everything was normal except for the woman sitting in a chair blocking the door.

As the woman returned her gaze, Droos sat up straight and sudden with a start, her heart beating quickly again. The woman was beyond words to describe, except in a feeling. From her radiated the truest sense of majesty and power, but greater than that, and somehow of equal stature came the honest notion of

mercy and pity. Love lay in the unknowable eyes and a despising of the need to ever inflict pain of emotion or body on anyone.

“Who... who are you?” whispered Droos tensely.

“I am,” replied a voice.

It sounded as if it were coming from the sky and the earth, and all around her at the same time.

“Oh,” replied the princess, getting an idea. “I am surprised to see you, and greatly humbled,” she continued with surprising honesty in front of a stranger.

But somehow she thought that it would be impossible to hide anything from this Presence, and that straight truth would be best.

“Do you know who... who is Drerpo... Your Grace?” asked Droos.

A sound of joyous, youthful laughter came from the Presence.

“Know him,” replied the Presence. “Certainly. I know he and his family and all that he holds dear. For those things are also dear to my heart. That includes you, Droos, my dear child.”

“I do not understand,” lamented the princess.

“For the first time in a long while,” said the woman, “Neither do I. It is strange, since, I usually know all that I need to know, and more. In you Droos, is something that I fear, and there is no reason of which I am aware.”

The voice paused.

“Do you love Drerpo?” said the Voice in a strange tone.

“I do,” replied Droos. “I do with all of my heart,” she continued with certainty.

A feeling, that of a strange mix of pity and happiness touched the princess’ soul.

“I fear indeed that there is a great doom lain before you, Droos,” spoke the Presence. “I am powerless to stop it, though I would not even if I were able. There is a long journey ahead, and the end, so far as I can see, is dark. One thing I do think, princess, is that your fate will stretch out longer than you believe. That is if you choose to act differently than you have been raised.”

“You too!” laughed Droos.

“I told you,” chuckled the Voice back. “Drerpo and I have much in common. Let’s just say that we have known some of the same people... I should say that he is most worthy and that you are right to trust him. Droos, I must leave you for the present, as

Book I: The Jungle

I have many other responsibilities. My final words are ones you should appreciate. They are that you should think seriously over everything your friend has told you, and that you have shared with him. There is always a choice.”

Before the princess could say thank you, a bright light blinded her and suddenly she woke up with a start and looked around. Her room lay dark and quiet. She had been dreaming again! Or she thought that it was just a dream. As a caution she glanced at the corner and saw that there was no chair there or anywhere near the door, and certainly no strange woman. Droos sighed, and returned to sleep, this time, with no interruptions until the morning light filtered through the window and Drerpo came to rouse her.

The third day dawned overcast and with the threat of rain, and there was a light sprinkle, somewhat warm. It did not deter the day's events. That morning the princess and her party traveled to the southern edges of the city to perform their rituals. The morning passed and the afternoon began.

In the throne room that afternoon, the God-King, in his position also as Divine-Priest, chose according to revelation twenty to be pardoned of all crimes and twenty to be killed as planned. In mass the twenty-redeemed were admitted into the Priest-Servants. The others were taken immediately and executed by vivisection atop twenty clay bowls. In the end Droos and her personal servants were given the task of thoroughly cleaning them. Thus, the third day ended.

In each generation the fourth day existed as an interlude, and the princess slept until several hours after sunrise. Rising on her own accord, she dressed in her simpler blue dress and went to the breakfast table. Fine food was laid upon it, but as she was later than was normally desired of her, it was beginning to get cold. Nonetheless, it was wholesome and gave strength. For a few quiet moments she sat with her own thoughts with only two Servant-Guards in the corners of the small great hall.

Footsteps approached behind her. Guessing that it was Drerpo she turned, only to see her cousin, Etøn. She was less annoyed than she had been a few days earlier when he woke her, but still less than pleased to have it be him coming to see her. Boldly and unbidden he took a chair to her right and pulled it down the table so as to be closer.

“Etøn,” began Droos with some coolness, “So pleasant to

see you this morning.”

“You as well, Your Grace,” he said. “My I ask Your Grace a question?”

“Very well,” she replied.

“I thought,” he continued, “That given the ritual instructions we have learned over the last fifteen and a half years, I might fulfill one of the tenants for which I have been negligent. Namely, that I am supposed to be your friend.”

The princess raised her eyebrows.

“It is true, Your Grace,” responded Etøn. “Your personal servants are meant to be friends as well. Drerpo... clearly is close to you. I don’t know if Resh and Ini will ever be close to anyone. Yet by my own nature and in the period since I learned that you were my first cousin, I have wished to raise this question to you. Do I have your permission, Your Grace, to be your friend?”

Droos was taken aback. Now the young man spoke honestly, as far as she could tell. Perhaps she had been too hard on him. He had done some things that reflected the tyrannical nature of the tribe and acted according to the brutal dictates of her father. The princess remembered that she too thought and did the same at one time. Only with the benefit of Drerpo as her friend had she come so far in her ability to question her purpose. It was also true that Etøn was a close relative. If something had happened to her father before he ascended to the throne or before he had a son, his brother would have become the God-King and his son, Etøn, his heir. The princess thought further and changed her mind. She would take her servant’s words to heart and permit their friendship to blossom. He had already assured her of his loyalty, twice, and his ability to keep confidences.

“You are most bold, Etøn,” replied Droos. “And you are also correct. It is proper both according to our religion but also by your nature and mine for us to be friends. Let this be! From now on you may call me by my name, but only when we are in private! Or if the only other present is Drerpo. Among any others, I will be known as, Your Grace.”

Etøn looked pleased, though there was still the edge of a smirk on his face. His eyes were elsewhere, and following them suddenly she saw the Servant-Guards standing in the corners of the room. What if they shared what they had just heard? Etøn looked back and knew the concern.

“Let me take care of this,” he said to her.

Book I: The Jungle

Then rising, the servant went before the guards and spoke sternly.

“Most loyal servants are you men,” said Etøn. “Very loyal indeed. But now Her Grace and I demand your utmost loyalty. It may occur that you should share my conversation with Droos among others. This would be both a violation of your duty and treason for sharing the private thoughts of a member of the Divine Bloodline. You will hold your tongues, even from speaking to each other, and you will drive it from your mind. Because you like I love and care for your princess. But also, because if you don’t, the princess will make sure that our next sacrifices are you. Now if you accept this command of secrecy, on the other hand, I guarantee a reward in due time. Her Grace’s gratitude will be more welcome to you than sharing so trivial a fact for a lesser short term gain. Say no words, and continue your duty!”

With that Etøn ceased his lecture. The Servant-Guards showed no expression, but there was no doubt that they heard and would comply. They did love their princess, if not necessarily the Grace-Servant, and did see far more reason to keep her private thoughts on so small a matter than to risk her wrath. Nothing of this would they report to the Associate Servant-Guard Commander that evening.

Droos was impressed at Etøn’s ability to command. She was disappointed, though, at using her authority to put fear of death in them. The guards might not doubt that their princess was capable of exacting such retribution, but Droos and certainly Drerpo knew that death was the last thing she wanted for anybody. The young woman was no longer sure if she even believed the death penalty should exist at all. Even if the guards spoke, and she doubted this would happen, she would not have them sacrificed, and then the princess’ authority would be harmed in their eyes. Then she recalled, as she had just thought, that Etøn was as naive as she had been once. She would begin to see to that immediately.

“Will you take a walk with me, my cousin,” said Droos, “Down the southern route to the edge of the city? I would enjoy your company.”

A full smile replaced the smirk on Etøn’s face.

“I certainly will, Your Grace,” he spoke.

Then leaving the Servant-Cooks to come and clean, the young adults left, and making their way to the south of the royal estate, they departed to go on a walk. In fact the two Servant-

Guards, nonetheless having duties commanded by authority above the princess, followed behind them, but this time made sure to do so at quite a distance. Thus Droos and Etøn could talk freely in normal voices.

“What did you wish to discuss, Droos?” he said, using her name fully for the first time.

“Why did you tell those guards that you would have them killed if they shared our secret?” she replied bluntly.

“Well...” he answered. “They needed a stern warning. I will be honest that I was largely thinking of my protection, and that is selfish, Droos. My hope is that you will excuse me for that. In twenty-three weeks I will die, but I want to keep it that way.”

“I already knew this,” said Droos more calmly. “Etøn. What do you think about death?”

The young man looked confused at the question, as though such a strange topic in any form at all had never occurred to him.

“I do not understand the question, I am afraid,” replied Etøn. “Let me try to answer it. Your father must, by the will of your ancestor the God of Blood, offer human sacrifices to ensure our people’s place in limbo. These come from two sources mostly: the daily sacrifice of eight by the High Priest Servant, and public vivisections of criminals. Also, the High Servant Commander might be sent to make example of a city or village. These deaths ensure the devotion of our people to the Divine Bloodline, to your father. Then, of course, your sacrifice ensures their passage from limbo to heaven. Does this answer your question?”

It did answer the young woman’s question, but in ways the servant might not have thought. This complete faith shown by the servant reflected the devotion she herself once had towards her religion. Belief in the righteousness of death was widely believed in the tribe, except maybe among the rebels, and Etøn’s thoughts were expected. A sense of responsibility came over the princess, that if she might make a contribution to the good in this world before she died, it would be to share and try to teach her new friend Etøn another way of seeing the world before he too died. Like Drerpo had done for her, and continued to do, she would do for Etøn.

“What if our patron, the God of Blood, did not exist, Etøn?” she said, surprised at her own frankness. “Would my father’s commands still be righteous?”

The young man opened his mouth and his eyes went

Book I: The Jungle

wide at these words, in hearing so radical and outright treasonous thoughts from the mouth of his friend.

It was a good thing he was proficient at keeping secrets, thought Etøn.

“That is a most dreadful thought,” continued Etøn.

“Forgive me for saying so. That all of the Priest-Servants and your father Himself in His glory would lie to us, to our people, for our whole lives. It is an unbelievable thought. I cannot believe it. To answer your question though, I will make something up. I suppose that your father, even if he were merely a king, and your family had no connection to the God of Blood, by that authority alone he could command who lived and who died. Doesn’t someone need to exact justice?”

The servant tapped the ground with his foot rapidly, but even seeing his nervousness, Droos chose to continue.

“Can you imagine someone,” she said, “Who might be saddened by the death of a loved one? Would this vary depending on the crime that had been committed?”

Etøn considered more thoughtfully Droos’ keen points, now that they had begun to be explained more fully.

“I have known many traitors,” he replied, “Some are fearful and even angry at the God-King’s justice. Are there some crimes that deserve death more than others? I can believe that. Is the choice method of execution really necessary? Your father must send stern messages to would-be traitors that they must think and do otherwise! Without His choice of justice, he would be a weak ruler, and our tribe would not submit to him, and be condemned to Hell, just as the followers of the meek and weak in their houses of steel in our legends.”

“We are supposing that the tails of redemption are just stories,” said Droos. “What if there were a different way to ensure the compliance of the people? This is hard for me to explain, for I like you, Etøn, am burdened with the single story we were told growing up. I have noticed with my friend... or rather, our friend, Drerpo, that people respect him, and keep his secrets, choosing not to inform on him, and even accepting willingly his elevation to a slightly higher status than them. Why do you think this is?”

“Because he is your good friend and they don’t want to receive your wrath?” posed Etøn.

“Etøn, it would have to be a heinous crime indeed,” she replied, “Possibly only the murder of innocents in-mass, for which

I would ever consider death to be an appropriate punishment. I will save my reasons for those feelings for another time. Has Drerpo ever done something for you for which he had nothing to gain, but only effort from him?"

"Well," said the servant. "Once, and this now that I think of it was a great risk for him, he managed to intercept a message from my father to Drerpo's father after his fall from the God-King's favor, before it came to anyone else's attention, as it surely would have. I believe it saved my father's life. Maybe, Drerpo is held in high esteem in people's minds because he is generous and kind to others. Love is his weapon."

Droos was pleased with this realization by her servant. She waited for him to continue.

"I guess love and respect might be a powerful tool for ruling a people," said Etøn. "Subjects are less likely to be traitors or to rebel, and will return love for the King, rather than only following out of fear. Less soldiers will be needed and they can be instead put into the ranks of the Servant-Inventors and Servant-Artists to improve the tribe in other ways. And to this end, death, particularly by vivisection, would be the ultimate message of fear and power, as opposed to love and generosity. In the system you propose, Droos, it may not have a place at all."

"Fantastic," replied the princess. "Already I feel at ease talking to you about serious things."

"But," said Etøn. "I should add that this is all supposing in this most odd manner that everything we have been taught and told by everyone else, that our religion, your family's rule, that everything is a lie and false. That is completely unbelievable to me. And the notion of ruling with love is dangerous both spiritually and logistically. I don't know why you should want to think about such things anyway, Droos. What is, is. There is no point in thinking of such radical *oughts*, or rather, what *ought* to be, as opposed to what *is*".

"You are right, and this is a most radical topic," finished the princess. "I admit this is not the first time I have discussed these things with someone. Share these topics with no one! I will introduce you to my fellow radical soon. Let's enjoy lighter topics for a while now, and save further investigations for later."

Etøn agreed with his cousin's suggestion and they now debated only the taste of food and the weather as they reached the end of the roadway. Staring out of the southern end of the city,

Book I: The Jungle

Droos imagined the Hell of Oblivion beyond the tall mountain peaks near the city. If Drerpo were there, he would have put his arm around her shoulder, knowing the conflict within her as she rapidly approached the moment in which she would have to make her choice. Whatever that meant. At this time, Etøn had thoughts also about his sacrifice, but did not question its virtue, or the motives involved, but continued as he had for his whole life to prepare himself for the pain and the culmination of death.

Upon returning for lunch, the two young adults met the other three Grace-Servants bound to Droos. They had been on various errands that morning and only recently returned. It took them a full ninety minutes to finish their meal, talking quietly. Then they sat for some time longer, silent, each thinking their own thoughts.

“Alas that I only have one life to sacrifice for my people,” recited Resh, a little loudly to break the mood.

These were the same words Droos had once said herself, although in her case they were in hidden defiance.

“It won’t be long now,” said Etøn.

“I wonder... what it will be like?” commented Drerpo.

“It is said that it will be painless and pleasant,” spoke Ini, “For the God of Blood frees His willing servants from suffering,”

The princess appreciated the attempts by her servants and friends to liven the mood and to put meaning into a depressing future.

“Thank you,” she said. “You have all been good to me over these long years, and I couldn’t ask for a better escort into the Glory of Heaven.”

Drerpo looked at her then, and afterwards, at Etøn. She smiled back at them, refusing to despair, and remembering the virtue of her duty, but also that the future might hold surprises yet unseen.

That afternoon she decided to go with Drerpo to a performance at the Chamber of the Arts. Before her was a drama of the last Ceremony of Passage, when Droos’ aunt, Vertro, had sacrificed herself as the eldest daughter in the previous generation. The story followed her as she left the capitol and traveled the six months, first to the Ring of the King, and then across the Hell of Oblivion to her death. Of course the final scenes were not truly based on known facts. None who had accompanied Vertro on the final part of her ritual had returned.

One thing that was clear, or at least so went the play, was that Vertro had few if any doubts. She was deeply religious and loyal and dismissed the words of one or two traitorous close friends who had raised an inkling of divergence from her cause. These rebels were revealed and caught and executed for their crimes by none other than Vertro herself, for the previous God-King permitted his eldest daughter to perform some executions. Failing to submit entirely to the God of Blood and to his descendent and emissary, the God-King, was not a choice at all, as such a betrayal was outright nonsense. For the definition of happiness was service to the God-King and the Deity. All of these themes received unanimous acknowledgement from the audience in the form of tongue-clicks, as was the custom, including from Droos and Drerpo, who after all could not show publicly any scorn for their tribe's central beliefs.

Droos felt herself as torn as ever, and began to feel once more that it was nonsense, and against the very fabric of nature and reality to reject in any way her King and her God. Then she felt Drerpo tap her hand once while they continued to look at the stage and her mind returned to ambivalence.

The next days passed quickly and in much the same manner as the first three. Sacrifices and rituals were performed in a variety of ways in many different places. Hundreds had been slaughtered to honor the princess' immanent passage into the afterlife.

On the last day of that week a procession left the capitol, traveling to the north where the Ceremony of Passage would continue at the mouth of the Blood of Sport. As the moon crept to its crest and the stars twinkled overhead the party reached the shore of the Heart of Blood. It was a still night and only small waves lapped against the thin strip of sand that surrounded the shore.

Fires were lit and a great vat that held sacrificial blood from three dozen selections was heated, brought to the shore, and poured out into the water. The boiling red liquid sizzled as it hit the cool, pure lake and even in spite of the quantity deposited soon vanished. Light waves flowed free of the stain once more.

No more blood would be spilled that night. It was a transition to the rituals of water that would now begin. First Droos and her Grace-Servants, wearing their finest blues, sat in the midst of five hundred Priest-Servants, and they chanted stories of the painless transition from death into the afterlife.

Book I: The Jungle

Then an oddity of every generation unfolded, for on this night the Associate Servant-Artist, a maiden dancer, went before Droos, Etøn, Resh, Ini, and Drerpo, and enacted in abstraction the beauty of the Heaven the young adults would soon see. She wore a rainbow of colors that reflected all of those worn in the tribe. Even the royal purple was allowed for her. There were no words but the steady, mysterious hum of two dozen Priest-Servants who set the tone in the background and covered the breaths of the listeners, the soft wind on the green grass, and the creeka-creek of insects around them.

Original acts stretched on for an hour. At last the Artist finished by stepping to the edge of the circle and bowing low to the God-King who watched on a throne surrounded by Priest-Servants. Some of the Priests came forward next with great pitchers of water and with them they extinguished all of the fires but one. Drum beats began, and guttural sounds with low, steady notes. A large statue was brought by many servants into the light of the last fire.

Before them stood, ten feet tall, a smaller statue of the golden God of Blood. This one was made so as to be brought out for rituals such as this near the capitol. The last of the opening week of the Ceremony of Passage, this ritual would involve quiet meditation, with Droos on one side of the remaining bonfire, and the statue on the other. With only two Priest-Servants and two Servant-Guards standing nearby to ensure the sacredness and safety of the ritual, she would be left alone for the rest of the night, to converse and present herself to Divinity.

So it was that all departed and the princess sat by herself, her legs crossed, and gazed at the red-diamond eyes of the half man, half snake. The four who remained with her made no sound and she quickly forgot they were there. No sound came from anywhere beyond them, except the creeka-creek of crickets and the lapping of water a little ways off. Droos did reflect on her purpose in service to her God.

The statue was awful to behold. This was meant, in the princess' mind, in both senses of the meaning. It was terrible and full malice and the threat of unforgiving chastisement for those who rebelled or misbehaved. Yet the splendor of it, the shifting light of fire in the jewels and metallic gold, gave it a transcendent image of benevolence, power that spoke of the good the Divinity might bestow on those who obeyed, and did their part in His grand scheme.

What was His scheme? Why was the manner of their God one of Blood married to Pain. Droos thought of the conversation she had shared with Etøn a few days earlier. Freedom and love came to mind. These were powerful tools, or so went the conversation. Why was it that her tribe did not worship a God of Freedom and a Queen of Blood? And if their tribe chose differently, might there be other Divinities that redeemed humans? Might salvation lie through other means by the authority of equally mighty Gods? There were challenges on religious grounds in Droos' mind, beyond the doubt of whether or not Gods existed at all, and the consideration that all might simply be human propaganda.

"Ssssss..." came a sound in front of the princess.

At first Droos did not hear it, or ignored it. Then it came again.

"Ssssss..." it said.

The young woman shivered and looked around for a source. Then a sickening feeling entered her heart and she looked up at the golden statue before her. Then she knew from where the sound came. A voice, audible only to her it seemed, for surely the guards and priests would betray their poise if they truly heard the statue speaking, came from within the image of the God before her.

"Weeeell met, my daughter," it said. "Yooooou did not expect to hear from me tonight, yeeeeess?"

Droos did not know what to say.

"Ohhhhh yeeeeess," it continued. "I knooooow all!" it hissed.

"Are you... the God of Blood?" asked the princess nervously.

"Noooooo," it replied. "But one close to Him. I am the one called the Queeeeen of Pain. You do not like paaaaain, Droos?"

The princess swallowed.

"I think few do," said Droos, a little to boldly.

Although she had been speaking aloud, only the voice in the statue heard them.

"A reeeeebelllll I thinnnnk you are," said the statue. "This is why we use paaaaain. For you listen or you will suffer, my daughter," it finished most clearly.

Droos' eyes went wide. The statue laughed at her, and she felt her soul burn as if the fire reflected in the gold of the statue

Book I: The Jungle

were lighting also her skin and her insides.

“Stop it!” thought Droos.

“Whhhhhy, my rebellious girl!” it mocked. “Leeet this be a lesssson. Or it willlll be forever.”

The pain continued though, and the young woman thought she might die if it did not stop soon. Was she finally found out? Had something truly horrible befallen her for her traitorous, blasphemous thoughts at last? After all, and it had never occurred to her, that the Gods surely would know everything, even if her father did not.

In an instant, she felt relief. Perhaps this was an answer to her repentance, but no. Looking up she saw Drerpo, standing in the flames, clothes and all, making his strange symbols in the air before the face of the cobra-headed statue.

“Yooou!” screamed the statue.

Droos was dismayed, for surely her friend would be burnt. But though Drerpo stood where he was, no flame touched him, nor consumed even a thread of his blue garb. He stopped signing and spoke with authority.

“Yes, my old friend,” said Drerpo. “We go back a long way, Tzefee.”

“Toooo long,” it sputtered. “Now you reeeeach far, to mettle in my affairs.”

“Your affairs,” said Drerpo with a booming voice, as awful and wonderful as anything that had come from the Queen of Pain. “Being here is a crime against Drerpo.”

Odd, thought Droos. Why was her friend, competent in speech, talking about himself in the third person?

This was a quick thought, as the moment was too surreal to have considered anything more.

“Much maaaalice indeed agaainst you,” said the Queen. “Tooooooo late to save yooouur friend, I think. I haaave done well. Princess, yooouur love, shall burn forever!”

The soul searing pain returned instantly to Droos, but then Drerpo struck the statue with his hand, and in flash of white light, it clove in two with a great bang! Droos screamed, for surely the others would see this.

Droos woke up suddenly, coming out of the horrible dream. She looked up quickly, momentarily frozen with fear that it was actually real and Drerpo in glory, unveiled as though he were himself a God, really would be standing within the flame before

the broken golden statue of the God of Blood. To her relief, her friend was nowhere to be seen, and the statue fully intact, stood as awful as ever. The princess shivered and shook her head slowly.

The night was almost over, and the princess' time in the capitol where she had spent almost her entire life was at an end. In a matter of hours she would join her servants and friend, Etøn, Resh, Ini, and Drerpo, in their last journey together. Six months from this day, she would die, and they would die. Looking up at the sky Droos rubbed the back of her hand and remembered uneasily the pain in her dream. She saw the star, the brightest one in the sky, the one that had joined her as she was born into this world, and would now watch as she made her final choices before she left it. What choice would she make? What choice did she have? Thinking of the pain once more, fear gripped the heart of her being, and dark storm clouds flew into the back of her thoughts, but always standing there, aglow in flame that did not consume him, was the memory of her friend Drerpo, and the true freedom he had shared with her. And this gave her courage, because dream or no, she knew that the closest person in the world to her, the one who she loved and with whom she had shared so much, would stand beside her that last day in six months, to comfort her as she made her final decision.





Chapter 5

Journeying

Droos woke as the light of dawn sauntered over the treetops to the east and drove away the darkness. Her body was a bit sore, for she had slept on the ground before the fire and the golden God of Blood. Now the idol looming in front of her appeared smaller and less threatening in the light of day. The fire had burned all of the wood leaving only hot glowing embers that sent up smoke, shrouding the cobra-head and red eyes from view.

Six months from today I will die, thought Droos.

Mulling over the fading memory of bothersome dreams, and thoughts from a lifetime of strange conversations, the princess sat, her legs to one side, staring up over the idol, to the south, the direction her fate would bring her. Soon two of her servants, Etøn and Drerpo, came to wake her, and to see how her meeting with the God of Blood had gone.

“Glad to see you still awake,” said Etøn with a slightly amused smile. “It would be a horrid sin to sleep.”

“Only for the first hours of the ritual,” replied Drerpo.

“After that sleep is considered not only appropriate, but a sign of fervor. For it is said that the most powerful prophetesses of The People of the Blood might receive a revelation in their dreams when resting before the face of their God.”

“And did you dream of our God?” asked Etøn to Droos.

The princess eyed Drerpo quietly as Etøn said his words.

“I did,” answered Droos.

“Really?” commented Drerpo, now looking at her.

“The light of the stars indeed. You know it is only in every ten generations that one is blessed with such a vision. You are very special, Droos.”

“So are you it seems,” the princess replied, beginning to smile, the fear of the dream subsiding, and her playful, self-critical

nature returning.

“I am special, you say?” said Drerpo seriously. “How do you mean?”

Droos reminded herself that it had only been a dream. The High Grace-Servant had not actually stood facing the Queen of Blood in the fire.

“Oh nothing,” answered the young woman. “I have had many wild and strange dreams these last weeks, and you happened to be in one of them. And don’t you get any ideas! No, in all seriousness, last night you stood beside me when I faced our God.”

“That is quite an honor,” said Drerpo, a tad more tranquil. “I dreamt last night too, Droos. But I was neither beside you nor speaking to the God of Blood. Perhaps we will share ours dreams with each other as we travel south.”

“Sounds like you two have a pleasant date planned,” Etøn joked. “May I join?”

Drerpo, already aware of Droos’ addition of her cousin as a confidant, glanced at the princess to make sure this was acceptable. The princess did not need this gesture and would ultimately make her own decision.

“Yes,” she decided. “You and Drerpo will accompany me as often as possible. We will keep each other company, and comfort each other, in preparation for the ordeals we will soon have to experience. In fact, I want all secrets that we three might have had to be revealed before the end. For as we transcend to immortality, you as servants to me in Heaven as we build and maintain the Bridge of Blood and starlight to the heavens, then nothing will be possible to keep secret. I would rather us enter into the new charge without having to learn anything new.”

Etøn looked satisfied to be included. Drerpo turned his eyes away from her.

Enormous sums of men were to travel with the royal family. This included ten thousand Slave-Soldiers with five hundred Servant Commanders, five hundred Priest-Servants, two hundred Servant-Cooks, one hundred Servant-Artists, one thousand Servant-Guards, the whole of the Servants-Terrible, the Majesty-Servants, and half of the Grace-Servants (the others left behind to guard Droos’ mother and sister, who were to remain in the capitol). Many other departments of the royal court were involved such that the function and comforts of the royal family would hardly be diminished over the long one thousand two

Book I: The Jungle

hundred miles of the journey.

Just travel time alone, if there were no stops along the way, would have taken two months. As they were with many thousands and more rituals would need to be performed at towns along the way, the time given was five months. This did not include the month at the end, the sixth, during which Droos and her servants would cross the desert, the Hell of Oblivion, on their own last leg of the Ceremony of Passage. For the first leg Droos traveled with her personal servants in the great royal galley. The waters of the Blood of Sport at its end were deep and wide enough for such a vessel. They would continue in this manner for one hundred and fifty miles, at which point the waters would narrow sufficiently that they could not accommodate the galley.

In the beginning the river traveled slightly south of a westward direction such that the setting sunlight filtering over the Artery of Heaven cast glowing golden light on the small waves of the river. It had been three years since the princess had last made this journey, and the beauty of the natural world around them was just as stunning now as it had been then. Great trees hundreds of feet tall could be seen sticking up past the canopy, and the calls of birds, both shrill and low, oscillating and singular, created a mesmerizing cacophony that was soothing despite its lack of harmony.

Droos' view of the woods, vines, and ferns of the shore was obscured frequently by passing galleys. These were smaller and less grand, steered and positioned by the Servant-Commander Admiralty. Ships were part of the elaborate military machine of the God-King's power, used for controlling towns and cities along the wider parts of the rivers, as well as the Heart of Blood, into which all smaller waters ultimately ran. Flags flew above these vessels, brown oars upraised with dripping dark red blood atop a background of brighter, lighter red fabric, to show that these were the most elite forces the admiralty had to offer. Other ships in the navy served more mundane purposes.

The royal galley itself was quite different. Other than being at least half as big again as any of the accompanying vessels, the wood was gold plated with runes to guard it against all attack and warnings to those who would ever consider such blasphemy. Spacious cabins lay aboard, first and foremost being the suite for the God-King, some thousand square feet in size. Additional space existed for the other members of the royal family, and

small quarters for their servants and guards. An appropriate-sized meeting hall had enough space for the chief-lieutenants of the God-King, so that they could meet while the ships were in motion. The Slave-Soldiers who rowed the boat slept next to the one of the fifty oars per side that was their charge.

An additional galley of smaller size plated in iron carried the High Servants when they were not meeting with the God-King or summoned to attend court. It had comfortable rooms of no smaller proportions than the God-King's children had on the royal galley, with space for the lieutenants' own chief servants and associates. Such was the privilege the God-King wished to present for all the tribe to see as they passed by myriad riverside villages. As a warning, crucifixes, three on each side, held decaying corpses of those punished at the beginning of the journey for various crimes as a different example.

If the escort of ships were not enough, every fifteen feet of shore had its own Slave-Solider. This was a tall order, for it meant that there had to be three hundred established per mile. Yet with the division of ten thousand that had been prepared ahead of time and the other division traveling with them, this was easily accomplished.

All of this protection reminded Droos that they were not entirely safe. Last time she came this way she was nearly captured, and Drerpo killed. Her father and his family, along with Droos herself, had enemies, and it took a force of twenty thousand to keep them at bay and the royal procession safe. That many was really unnecessary, but the princess wondered for a moment how these resources might be used better if freedom and love were the tools of the God-King rather than fear and submission. Droos did not, however, have to wonder long if any example had been made of those who had rebelled these last years. Four men, women, and children were nailed to crucifixes each mile along the whole of the route starting one hundred miles down the river.

There was also some degree of favor and generosity, carefully calculated by her father, to reward those loyal. The slaves of towns along the route who came to cheer and bow before the passing galley of their God-King were rewarded with a new set of clothing and a large loaf of bread. Those who took the time to look seriously at the crucified bodies and offered their love and respect to the God-King nonetheless were given two loaves of bread.

Book I: The Jungle

At the end of the first fifty miles the court disembarked and established themselves for a variety of rituals to be performed in the first of the Towns of Passage along the way. The royal estate usually empty but for some slave-soldiers was warmed with bright fires and the sounds of many footsteps and much talking. Now the boldest but also smartest of the tribesmen gathered to bow low before their God-King in submission, and to offer their gratitude for His sacrifice of his daughter for the slaves' redemption in this coming generation.

This was a useful ritual, for it distinguished slaves who were zealously loyal beyond question to the ruler of The People of the Blood, and those for whom not all was certain. Families that did not send a representative to see the God-King in person, or to offer their thanks through one of His proxies, such as the High Priest-Servant, would be executed in mass, from the youngest to the oldest. In most towns this would eventually be half of their population. The High Servant-Guard Commander, currently traveling with a third division further north and making example of rebels and non-rebel's for their crimes directly and indirectly that had been committed against Droos some weeks earlier, was scheduled to come this way in a number of months and so do the part of his duty there in the manner as would soon be reported to him.

Each fifty miles, three times in three Towns of Passage, this process occurred, and on every occasion the party stayed in town for one week. While her father was holding court, Droos was busy herself performing rituals in much the same way as she had during the first week of the official ceremonies for her sacrifice before she left the capitol. The ability of the townspeople to offer their submission in spite of sacrifices being drawn from them for the rituals Droos celebrated was an additional test of their loyalty. The regular exercise of dances had begun to change the princess and her servants. If their years of education and more free time in the capitol had made them soft at all, now the last remnants of any weight vanished, and the young adults were more fit than they had ever been in their lives before. Dzerpo, though, changed little, except for becoming a bit more muscular, for he had always been strong and slender.

After the third stop, the galleys were left behind. Only fifty miles further ahead as the river continued now southwest, the first of the great cataracts began. They would travel another forty

miles upstream on smaller craft that the narrower river could bear and that were more agile for purposes of safety, so close to the dangerous rapids. Since the luxury of these craft was less, a stop was made each noon and each night for rituals and food and rest. These were not for purposes of public display, and although the show of force and security continued, visits by the tribes folk were discouraged. Only the duly appointed chief of each town came and presented a human sacrifice before the God-King. The next major stop where the party would stay a week would be at the end of the first rapids.

In the meantime, at last, Droos, being in her own boat now and not that of her father and his court, had time to arrange private conversation with Drerpo and Etøn. With the naval vessels, albeit smaller, and the shore guards, sentries in immediate proximity to the princess on her vessel were not necessary, and by her command, they gave her space. While Resh and Ini were on watch, the three spoke together.

“How are you handling all of this, Droos?” asked Drerpo gently.

“I feel that even with all of the blood and death surrounding me,” replied the princess, “I still don’t know if I am ready for our part in the end. All of this senseless death and sacrifice. No wonder our people hate us. No wonder my father needs more than twenty-thousand protectors to ensure our safety.”

“Your Father does not need anybody,” piped in Etøn. “His Divine power alone would smite with instant death and condemnation any who would be so impious and traitorous as to threaten Him or any of His family. Would that I could get to see His righteous powers of retribution while I am still alive.”

“You have seen his powers of retribution,” commented Drerpo, “Many times in your life, and none involved magic or divine powers of any sort.”

“His earthly justice,” continued Etøn, “Is merely His divine Authority, not His full Power. If the God-King were to direct His wrath in full, merely a glance would split people in half. He would only have to say words and point.”

Droos could not help but laugh at that serious comment, as it related to several strange events in her life, all of which involved Drerpo.

“Those are some interesting points,” spoke the princess. “It makes me wonder how exactly my father, and maybe even I,

Book I: The Jungle

am able to exert divine power. Drerpo, do you have any notion about how this *Language of the Universe* might work?"

Drerpo looked back at his friend, Droos, innocently.

"I have thought about these things too," said Drerpo. "My father told me many things while he was still alive. For that, in large part, he was driven away, and it led to his death. I learned all I could of those bits of radical knowledge. Some I have already shared with Droos. He had numerous books and pages that spoke of many languages that made up the fabric of our *universe*. One gave a general label to these fundamental laws of nature. *Science* it was called. No, that word does not exist in our language. There are branches of these laws of nature, of which the most crucial, or so went the stories, was physics, which described how base energies and forces cause the elements of matter and the other buildings blocks of the universe to combine together according to set rules. Each of the branches of science might take many lifetimes to study, and much, according to the book, was still unknown.

"Another source came to me later, and in an unusual form. I had a dream some years ago that I stood in a long rectangular library that stretched to a great distance beyond me in opposite directions, to my right and left. On either side were shelves as tall as mountains filled with books. Beings of might and splendor sat in between the two rows, their faces similar to those in the picture book my father found all of those years ago. I spoke to one of them and He told me that this was the Library of the Universe, established and hallowed by Elriver and Showsh themselves in Their glory. You may recall those names, Droos, from a story I told you a number of years ago. Anyway, I began looking over the shelves, and took out a book here and there. Not knowing any other languages myself, I was surprised to eventually find one in your tribe's language. This I did understand.

"It was called in a most serendipitous manner, *The Language of the Universe*. It gave the language a name: Loahueth. Beneath all fabric of the Real, science and logic, art and religion, philosophy and mathematics, they, the words of Reality, dwell in a form beyond any comprehension of Gods and mortals alike. The words of The Language of the Universe are actually a set of letters, characters, that each alone carries enormous power. For it is from the body of the Great Beings of which the universe is composed. The basic essence of the universe and all living things both passive

and active is of a living unity in the letters of the language of the universe. Elriver and Showsh derive their power from their ability to interact with the Beings. They speak to Them politely and ask them to act in accordance with the Gods' wills. And being the essence of selflessness, as is the nature of the Cardinal Beings, they serve the Creators of our universe.

"That was the basic message in the book I read. I fear the details and further elaborations were beyond my ability to understand. My guess is that this was not for me to read, and that the understanding I did have came to me as a revelation of key points, rather than a whole novel. And of course all of this was in a dream. From what I gather in looking at your expression, Droos, you have had a similar one."

The princess had her mouth open and her eyes wide. Etøn looked about to say a joke that he could not quite shape sufficiently in his mind.

"I only wonder what else you learned from your father, and from these dreams of yours, Drerpo," said Droos. "These ideas are too terrifying even for me! That Gods of Gods should have Gods is truly nonsense. Where does it end! Yet such is the stuff as will be had in dreams. I have seen you, Drerpo, do things most strange. Perhaps there are powers in this world that might account for it. The book on *science* that you spoke of at the beginning sounds more interesting, and somehow it speaks to me of something real. I too have had dreams and visions of late that I declare are nothing more than just that.

"Some months ago I too dreamed I was in a library. Only when I turned to speak to the heroic beings they looked at me and behold! They had changed into devils, grim, and mocking, and evil looking. It appeared that I was in the Library of Hell rather than any monument to these supposed beings, Showsh and Elriver. Strange that you would find a library of virtuous beings in your dream, and I, a room full of devils in mine."

"Is it such a wonder, Droos?" spoke Etøn. "The words of you and Drerpo both are the most rebellious and treasonous I have heard yet, though I suppose you usually discuss these things, and want me to hear and learn them from you. At some level I cannot believe that you would actually think any more of these ideas than as tests by the God of Blood to weed out those who would betray our people in Heaven and while still living this life. They are amusing if anything, though perilous, and if you continue to

Book I: The Jungle

consider them I say to you, beware! For if our God rejects you both upon your sacrifice, who then will guide the souls of the next generation and form the bridge of heaven? Not only will you be condemning yourselves to Hell, but all of the next generation will be trapped in twilight cities in this world.”

“You are suggesting our friend saw Hell in her dream as a warning of where she will go when she dies if we continue our current mode of thinking and beliefs, Etøn?” considered Drerpo. “It is curious then why I dreamed of an unnamed Heaven. I am just as guilty of *rebellious* and *treasonous* thoughts as Droos. Why should my consequence be any different?”

“It might be,” replied Etøn, “That as her servant, you bear less responsibility than you do, Droos. Do not count on this, Drerpo. I am no Priest-Servant, or expert on matters of the afterlife. Maybe it was coincidental that you, Drerpo, saw a glimpse of heaven. Or maybe it was to show you the reward if you return to the righteous path of the God of Blood.”

“I have heard your words many times, Etøn,” commented Drerpo, “From the mouths of the Priest-Servants. Your thoughts are not inconsistent with our religion. What I wonder is why, if you are so confident and zealous, you chose to keep Droos and my confidences. Why don’t you simply go to the High Priest-Servant and declare us as traitors?”

“I want to know the answer to that too,” added Droos.

Etøn looked uncomfortable and at first was at a loss of words.

“Because...”, he managed. “Because I care about... I don’t want to unduly disturb the God-King in matters not yet certain.”

“That’s not what you were about to say,” interjected Drerpo. “You care about us, Droos and I, don’t you?”

“Maybe...” continued Etøn. “I thought you both knew that. Does it really need to be said?”

“Yes,” answered Droos. “It is good for us to hear it. Your concern for us transcends even your deep faith in our religion. I think it even goes beyond your unwavering loyalty to my father. You not only care for us. You don’t want us to die, even when it may be required.”

“Of course not!” sputtered Etøn. “You and I are of the Divine Bloodline. Our blood is only to be spilled in the exact manner required by our Divine ancestor. Drerpo...”

“Drerpo is not a member of our family,” spoke Droos. “It is not a sin to spill his blood in the same way. But you just said that you care for both of us, that you don’t want either of us to die before our time (although that is soon). You are protecting us. But Etøn. Concerning now a related matter, does it occur to you that maybe in the same way that you risk the God of Blood’s wrath to care for your friends, that other families in our tribe would do the same?”

“Yes. I can see how that might happen,” said Etøn calmly.

“So, our religion is not all that is worth fighting for,” continued Droos.

“I suppose,” simmered Etøn.

“Maybe neither our faith or the value of death as justice is certain,” reasoned the princess.

“Maybe,” replied Etøn.

“Might love and respect be tools for upholding the value of life,” said Droos. “Is there any certainty to that notion?”

“Droos!” exclaimed Drerpo. “This is radical even for you.”

“I have been considering it for a while,” responded the princess. “The day before we left the capitol Etøn and I talked and considered what it would be like in a society that killed no one and ruled with love and respect rather than fear and retribution.”

“Without Divine Authority and Power, without absolute justice and utter submission to the sovereign’s rule, how would your tribe hold together?” Drerpo asked Droos.

“It would hold together because their families would be safe,” realized Etøn. “They would not fear for their being selected to be sacrificed or drafted or executed. Those who do not fear for the safety of themselves and that of their loved ones see little reason to rebel against those able to secure that protection.”

“Etøn!” exclaimed the princess.

It was her turn to be impressed.

“This is still merely a humorous discussion,” clarified Etøn. “In reality it is our submission to the God-King that saves us from eternal torment in Hell. It is your selfless sacrifice, Droos, with our help, Drerpo and I, and Resh and Ini, that paves the starry bridge for our people to pass into the endless paradise of Heaven. We can say anything we like, but the truth is the truth.”

Drerpo sighed.

“I wonder how we can really know what is the truth,”

Book I: The Jungle

pondered Droos. "Is there more than one, or is one supreme truth better than them all? How can someone know if they know something?"

"That may be a discussion for another day," said Drerpo. "All roads lead through the discussion of knowledge. For science, according to the book I read, is merely a branch of empirical philosophy, or knowledge according to observations by what it called five senses, analyzed and processed by the mind. Yet there is also rational truth, which has no connection to observable data, and utterly questions the importance and relevance of sensory perception. These are two sides of a many sided discussion. Without epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, we cannot be certain that anything we know is valid. I will only finish by saying that knowing that we know anything is only relevant to the extent that we actually exist. According to some, if there is no thinker, there can be no thought. Philosophy of being the book called ontology."

"The one book discussed both philosophy and science?" wondered Droos.

"As I said," answered Drerpo. "They are related. But I also stated, this is an interruption of our topic."

"Then go on with the proper one," muttered Etøn.

"Now that I have had time to consider what you said further," said the princess, "The idea that a language, Loahueth, made up of letters that are both symbols of and the essence of Cardinal Beings, lies beneath the fabric of all things, including... including our God of Blood, our Queen of Pain, and maybe even Elriver and Showsh..."

"Definitely Elriver and Showsh," commented Drerpo, aside.

"This makes me wonder if there is a law higher than that of our religion," continued Droos. "What if our God is Himself a rebel against the laws of Elriver and Showsh, or against the true state of nature which follows the Cardinal Beings of the letters?"

Etøn rolled his eyes.

"Remember," added Etøn, "These Beings are supposed to be selfless. They do whatever they are told by those who speak The Language of the Universe. Can politely spoken words be rejected?"

"I believe so," said Drerpo.

"Could we speak to Them?" spoke the princess, a sudden

encouraging thought in her mind. “Might we tell the Great Beings to realize what might be our utmost desire, that standing atop the Princess in the south I will see a boat waiting to carry me away to an unknown future? Is this possible, Drerpo?”

Drerpo looked at his friend with some pity.

“I fear that it must be only the Gods, if they exist, who can speak to the Great Beings, if they exist,” replied Drerpo. “It might prove otherwise. Some of the words of power my father taught me have shown results. But I do not know if that is merely luck or something more. Maybe such limited effects are available to any. Creating a seaworthy vessel from nothing and placing it as if plucked from the Heavens themselves in the water just in time for your arrival in the south would take skill far beyond that of any mortal.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of this idea,” stated Etøn.

“Droos. Would you please explain briefly?” asked Drerpo.

“I have had dreams, Etøn, of just what Drerpo said,” replied the princess. “A boat waited south of the Princess to carry me away. Our friend and I have discussed for years whether or not I would choose differently if I had another option, that is, if I might choose to live rather than allowing Drerpo to sacrifice me. The idea has always seemed most amusing. Short of a divine miracle I see no way that any of us will survive our journey across the Hells of the South. Even if such a choice did exist, would I take it? I am not sure. As you say, Etøn. All of this we say now is just talk. We do have duties and our people do depend on us to perform our role on behalf of our tribe. Even though I am no longer certain of the absolute truth of our faith, I am not doubtful enough to commit to the treason of refusing our fate. No. In just under five months, we will die.”

“If that is what you choose,” said Drerpo.

The conversation then went in a different direction and away from weighty and significant subjects. What they spoke together was important, but not to the extent that it attempted to solve the problems of the universe. Rather simple, friendly talk reminded the three young adults of their caring for one another and gave them comfort. They might die in just under five months and the reality of what would happen after that, as their souls transcended, remaining still unknown beyond the blind security of pure faith, it was certain that they were together now, here, on this boat. The future would be as it would be.

Book I: The Jungle

It took two days to reach the end of the navigable portion of the northern Blood of Sport before the first great cataracts. On the forty-third day of the six-month journey the royal party and their servants and slaves disembarked and entered the first portion of the route that would be on foot. The roadway along the eastern shore of the river was paved with sizable polished, grey stone. Only in thin lines, grass could be seen peeking through, as though it was green mortar.

Ten could walk abreast at this part of the Road of Passage. Earlier in sections that were not traveled upon by the royal family, since they were moving by river, it shrank to space only for five to walk together. As it was at this point, a solid stream of one thousand Slave-Soldiers and one hundred Servant-Commanders marched on each side. In the center on a great platform, supported by twenty Slave-Soldiers, rode the God-King on an ornate throne. In front and in back of the platform walked half of Servants-Terrible. Behind the God-King the crown prince, Droos' brother, followed closely with a similar number of Majesty-Servants. Third in line traveled the princess herself and her personal and extended Grace-Servants. In the last followed the chief lieutenants of the God-King.

Once they were beyond the first rapids and waterfalls, the procession stopped at another Town of Passage. The same week was devoted to this location, and once again the boldest tribesmen were expected to come in person and bow low to demonstrate their complete submission. It was known to them that a few of those who did this would be selected for sacrifice, and none knew which would be chosen until they were at the town. Such a chance was better, however, than failing to make the journey, and ensuring that before long the henchman of the God-King would arrive and make example of the violator and his entire family.

More uphill climbs and marches by land followed, with a weeklong interlude at the summit of each of the rapids. As there were three rapids over the course of the two hundred miles from the first rapid to the joining of the Blood of Sport and the Blood of War, it took thirty-four days to reach that landmark. With the days of marching and the repetitive wanton violence and death of the ritual weeks, time passed surprisingly fast.

The Blood of War cascaded over a breadth of one hundred feet to fall two hundred as it joined the Blood of Sport to become the Blood of Laughter. The sheer volume of water, the deafening

roar, and fluttering rainbow drops that flew across the moist air were awesome to behold, and the moment was both thrilling and tense for Droos. She always enjoyed the natural beauty of her tribe's land, and this was one of the most spectacular. At the same time, she knew that now she had reached yet another landmark to show how much closer she had come to her destination, and the day she would die.

Wider once more, a harbor existed in the river several miles beyond the great falls. The number of vessels moored there was less than what was available at the mouth of the Blood of Laughter. They were also less grand. The royal children were not able to stay on the God-King's galley, which only had room for an allotment of the Servants-Terrible and other chief servants. A second ship plated with silver traveled behind carrying the crown prince and Droos along with their servants. Still further back two more vessels followed with the chief lieutenants of Uré, plated with the same iron as before. Only one crucified body could be fit on each side of each ship in the fashion the Servant-Artists desired.

Journeying by boat would take the party some four hundred miles. At the end they would once more come to a geography of dangerous rapids. These were even more substantial than those approaching the juncture of the Bloods of War and Sport. For at this point, the Blood of War began retreating upwards into the jungle-covered foothills of the Artery of Slaves. The time to the cataracts would be twenty days.

These vessels were large enough to accommodate the comforts of the royal family, and stopping was unnecessary. Supplies and cooked food were brought up alongside the galleys by smaller boats and transferred in-motion. If the young adults had hardened and gotten strong during the first part of the long ceremonial procession, now the days and nights of sitting and waiting aboard the galleys softened them somewhat again. They ate well and enjoyed entertainment performed by the Servant-Artists. One day after a chorale conducted by the High Servant-Artist, Drerpo, Droos, and Etøn got to talking amongst each other in an increasingly familiar fashion.

"I remember my previous concern about my motives in obeying the will of my father, to die on my sixteenth birthday by edict of our laws," began the princess. "More recently we have discussed, you two and I, our devotion to the spiritual wellbeing of our tribe. I speak of my care for my family and loyalty to the God-

Book I: The Jungle

King. Those conversations seemed the most relevant when we were regularly singing hymns and performing dances to the God of Blood. Once more, however, we find ourselves merely pampered royalty and friends of royalty. I am too old now to be deceived that anyone else in the tribe receives the comforts given to us. I wonder if my true reason for doing all that I am told is in order to keep these privileges as long as I am able.”

“We have discussed this before,” said Drerpo. “Though not with Etøn. It is good to bring it up again.”

“You are right that we discussed this before,” replied Etøn. “Though I was not in that particular form of the conversion. I mean my answer is one I have used before for another purpose.”

“Go on,” insisted Droos.

“You Droos,” he continued, “Are Divine. The blood of the God of Blood flows through you, and you are a being of Authority and Power beyond the slaves of our tribe. It is through you and your family that the slaves are raised to be anything more than the tormented waiting for eternal damnation. Their submission and offers of art and food are the least they can do to bring themselves closer to the selfless salvation you offer. In fact, if they did not do this, it is uncertain if they would be sufficiently attached to the mercy of the God-King and your sacrifice, Droos, to be redeemed.”

“But what is the effect of this utter submission?” wondered Droos. “Many thousands of our people, perhaps far more, do not believe in these words and legends. They simply look at the death of their loved ones, and anything our Priest-Servants say does not compare to the actual demands on these tribesmen. They do not care about some story that may or may not be true in their minds about what happens in a time after death that no living being can comment upon for certain. Only the despair at the death and blood and screams that litter their villages and towns is apparent. They want assurances of safety for their families, not promises of redemption.

“And we, Etøn, are guilty in a special way. If anything prevents more of our people from rebelling, it is their lack of education. They do not have a word for freedom. Happiness is something only belonging to service to the God-King. There is no way in our fundamental way of expressing ourselves, our language, and by their lack of any meaningful education, to express their feelings of continuous abuse and persecution. We however, have received much education, and have been taught how

to make our own words, and to think of new ideas. My guess is that questioning our religion and loyalty to my father was not the intension of the Servant-Educators and the Priest-Servants. Yet such is the case. We know how to think and choose and analyze. Us, you Etøn, Drerpo, and I, are able to discuss openly and freely the real implications and probable motives of our tribe's myths. Our part in perpetuating these legends and stories, the system of stories that upon reinforcement dumb millions into believing with blind devotion the righteousness of their misery, is known to us. Is it wrong then for us to question why we still want to support this horrible cause? Why should we agree to be spokesmen for my father?"

"That's easy," replied Etøn. "If we don't we will die. And it won't be with a quick beheading. It will be by vivisection in the same manner as any other traitors and others with crimes far less. Do not think, Droos, that you being the eldest daughter of the God-King saves you from consequences if you choose such a blatant rebellion. Of course you also know that your younger sister could just as easily replace you and with her own Grace-Servants. Do you want to die horribly, Droos?"

"I don't," said the princess. "Is that really an excuse though? One benefit of being taught my whole life that death is of value, and is a regular tool for serving and preserving our people, is that I might still see some purpose in its existence. If not to condemn others, then it may be used to enforce my own integrity. Maybe some would say that it is not a choice at all to jump off a cliff rather than turn back if a bolder blocks the road ahead. Is that true? Or is there always a choice. A person who disagrees in the most fundamental way may rightly choose to kill himself, or face death, rather than commit treason against a law higher than that of their society. If anything I do believe about the afterlife speaks of truth, than there is punishment and reward to be had, and serving evil that we clearly know in this life, despite what the evil propagandists' words say to the contrary, would surely damn us more definitely than following blindly what we know is wrong."

"I wonder, Droos, what is good and what is evil, if not what the sovereign says, or the religious traditions of a people?" said Drerpo.

"Good," annunciated Droos. "That is a curious word. It is related to our word for happiness, and is therefore associated with the God-King. Our very words define Good as being whatever the

Book I: The Jungle

God-King declares. Is there a different origin for defining good and evil than what you suggest? Is it possible for it to be defined at all by mere mortals such as ourselves?"

"You are not a mortal," spoke Etøn. "You are a descendent of God. If anyone has a sense of the nature of good, it is the God-King, and in-part, his daughter."

"Etøn," interjected Drerpo. "Isn't that simply a story told by the God-King and his servants to make him seem higher, and innately better than anyone else? Whatever is the truth, that is its effect. It gives the God-King the power to choose between life and death. It gives him the power of God. That is exactly what he wants. What do you think would happen if he ever said he was merely a mortal?"

"I still have difficulty with this line of reasoning," replied Etøn. "Assuming this was the case, it would shred the authority of the King to make such bold and absolute decrees and to demand on divine authority sacrifices to the God of Blood. Already thousands question his method of wielding power. Millions, though, as you said, with ignorance and little education do believe he is divine, and that it is through him that they might receive divine favor. The doctrine of divinity enforces his power and his reign."

"Then who does get to say what is and what is not Good?" asked Droos.

"That is truly a question," finished Drerpo.

So that day passed, and before long the Ceremony of Passage reached the rapids that marked the beginning of the ascent into the Artery of Slaves. Here there was a great town and at last they disembarked. Another week they spent at this stop, holding court and doing rituals. The next two hundred miles went again on foot. The path wound and climbed up into the mountains, tracing the Blood of War to its root. Slave-Soldiers bearing the throne with the God-King were hard put to it, but none complained. Such *treason* would bring the severest consequences imaginable.

With several weeks longer than two months remaining before Drerpo would slit Droos' throat, they reached the high passes at the top of the Artery of Slaves. The princess had almost forgotten that there was a town all the way up here at the top. It was constructed entirely out of stone, and at least in time for their arrival, it was stocked with food and burning woods and all manner of comforts. That such a comfortable place would exist in so remote a location reminded Droos that despite the evils of

her father and his advisors, there were notable achievements in monuments and architecture to form a more positive enduring legacy. However, this was hardly a comfort.

The altitude made the princess a little lightheaded. Once again she had grown stronger from the walking and it did not take so long to adjust to the thin air. Over the week of rituals spent in the town Droos considered the relative tranquility of their journey so far. Unlike the last time they had traveled this way, no rebels had disrupted their passage. Of course this was hardly surprising. It would take a hardy force indeed to threaten the tens of thousands guarding the procession. Would it be possible for an assassin to infiltrate even these measures if they did as Droos suggested, and chose this almost certain death over compromising their integrity? Maybe this did not happen because her people were less dissatisfied with her father than she thought they were. Or rather, maybe the example made of tens of thousands, vivisected and nailed to crucifixes, had finally reminded them of their proper loyalty.

Nine weeks remained before Droos' sixteenth birthday as they left the town at the root of the Blood of War. It was three hundred miles along the winding high pass. In the end they would at last reach the conclusion of the royal procession, as they journeyed into the Hand of Doom and up to the warm caldera of the Ring of the King. All her life she had prepared for the moment of her transcendence. In the end, it was as frightening to her as it was for any. The prospect of death humbles the wisest and strongest. Droos did not realize that she filled both of those descriptions, but as she was normally humble, the young woman felt diminished for quaking at the thought of her selfless sacrifice for her people. Should she not be glad?

Droos, Etøn, and Drerpo found it hard to talk seriously during these weeks. Their conversations were quieter, and a tension disrupted their attempts at more serious words. Mostly they took comfort in simply being around each other. They looked meaningfully into one another's eyes and shared a sad resolve and a sense of common destiny. That destiny would end in death, and they could think of few other alternatives that would be available to them, or that they would want to choose even if it did exist.

Ten days and one hundred and fifty miles passed until they arrived at the next and final town before they reached their destination on the summit of the Ring of the King. They arrived

Book I: The Jungle

at night and while the princess floated from one sleepy thought to another, silence and foreboding quiet dwelling in the calm, she happened to look into the night sky.

High above her, perched and twinkling brightest of all stars in the heavens, shone her birth star. Ever it had grown brighter over the years and today was no exception. She could almost feel the brilliance it had loaned her soul so long ago, imbuing her with unknown power. Half asleep, she thought the star itself looked back at her, with a presence of its own, and gave her encouragement and spoke in silent words of a hope that now seemed so distant from reality. Even with its increasing impossibility, bathing in the radiance of light did refresh the young woman and her eyes suddenly cleared and she lay awake. A smile appeared on her face as had not been there for weeks. Looking over to the side, Droos saw Drerpo looking at her, and when he saw her expression, he winked back, his eyes twinkling.

During the last ten days of the journey to the Ring of the King, the princess walked with more certainty and confidence in the purpose she would soon have to perform. She was determined to see her role through. With the help of Etøn, Resh, Ini, and Drerpo, she would willingly and joyously cross the Hell of Oblivion and die at the required hour as her friend removed her head. She was even glad that it would be Drerpo to do it. It was a strange notion to her, that someone who loved and cared about her so much would look into her eyes, and when she replied by moving her head, would kill her in one swift stroke. Was it more of a burden to be killed by a loved one or to kill a loved one? Droos knew, regardless, that her last living thoughts would be of her friend's eyes, and smile, if he was able to manage it, as she slipped away, and her mind failed.

Finally, at long last, they arrived at their destination. Droos beheld the great volcano, three miles high, covered in temples and monuments in such number that it appeared to be armored. Here the God-Kings had come for thousands of years to offer the greater sacrifices to their divine master, the God of Blood. Here in each generation he, in great selflessness, watched his eldest daughter depart and dwindle into the horizon across the Hell of Oblivion. Here he pronounced for all of the leaders both civic and religious of the tribe the righteousness and necessity and certainty of his divine legitimacy and position as God-King of the People of the Blood. It was the Ring of the King, and the surest symbol of

the unrelenting enslavement of his people.

The first week of their stay here would take place along the slopes of the northwest side of the cone. Each day they would perform rituals at one of seven temple complexes. These were designed in exact manner. They depicted in the special rituals performed there the journey the princess would soon undertake to its end on the Princess in the south. The top most temple of the seven was at the peak above the crater, and the whole desert to the south could be seen, just as from the top of the Princess the Gates of Heaven might be seen.

The first temple symbolized the descent of the princess and her Grace-Servants into the Hell of Oblivion. It was a great triangle of upright lava rocks. They were carved and sharp on the top, some twenty feet up. No blood was used in these rituals. These were rituals seen by the tribe only once in a generation and they were most unusual in that no one died. The same set of chosen tribesmen was brought forward: the infant, the meek and the weak, the adolescent and the old man, two warriors, and the maiden. Instead, being placed on an altar, each was ritually washed with water. If only all of the rituals of the tribe were so mundane. Droos wondered if this centerpiece of her tribe's practices was designed in its public nature to spread the word of the mercy of the God-King, in anointing with water, rather than sacrificing those in this ceremony. The tribesmen of this ceremony and those like it to follow would be added to the ranks of various departments of servants. The maiden would be married into the family of one of the higher-ranking servants of the God-King.

Onward up the slope of the Ring of the King the party went. The second temple commemorated the passage of the desert. It was a great maze of stone pillars. The ground was sprinkled with sand carefully collected from the desert. This was only for affect, as sand was a feature of the Hell of Servants, not the Hell of Oblivion over which Droos and her servants would soon walk. They moved in a precise pattern, slowly, through the maze of pillars, pouring water on the ground to form runes as they went.

The third temple ritualized the arrival at the foot of northern four mountains, the Servants. This was a more regular structure. A pillar supported roof of stone, in the shape of a triangular prism, stood for the mountains that would rise before the young adults. A set of tribesmen were once again purified, and then for the rest of that day the Associate Servant-Artist led a

Book I: The Jungle

troop of performers to tell the story up until this point, and of what would follow until before the seventh part of the Ceremony of Passage.

Droos dreaded the reminder of what she considered the first of the significant rituals of this week. The fourth temple recognized the departure of the servants. Resh was placed in a great stone basin filled with warm water. Holding up a blue cloth, Ini said many chants and prayers, and at the end he covered his friend Resh's face. Just like that, the young man's part in these ceremonies was over for now. For as far as rituals of this week were concerned, he was now dead. Then Etøn did the same to Ini. The princess turned her head away when Drerpo covered Etøn's face. In the end only Drerpo was left for her. Despite nearly sixteen years of preparation, the weight of seeing even just the symbolic acts had a profound effect on Droos, and she fought back tears. It was also amazing to see how willingly her Grace-Servants performed their role. In the end it was this that helped her through this day's activities, and gave her courage that when her time came for now, and on her actual sixteenth birthday, she would perform her duty.

The fifth day of that week saw a long journey. This temple was most curious, and could not really be called a single monument. It was meant to symbolize the princess' ascent of the mountain on which she would die. As it was, on this day alone, they would climb two miles of the three that made up the surface height of the Ring of the King. Every ten feet along the way on either side, stones with runes created a sense of walls and that the words of religious incantation were following Droos and Drerpo as they led the procession. The going was hard, and as they reached the top sixth of the cone, the air was very thin, and if it were not for the journey of the last months, the princess was not sure she could have gone this far.

Finally came the day on which Droos would have to make her choice. So what if it was only the image of the sacrifice she would make in five weeks. Merely lying in the pool of purified water and watching as Drerpo placed a cloth over her head, declaring her dead, was terrifying for her. That morning before it all began she sat with Drerpo enjoying a light breakfast, and they shared a few short words.

"I can't believe this is actually going to happen," said the princess.

“It still doesn’t have to,” replied Drerpo. “You have not yet made your choice. If you want to make a stand now, it might send a message to your father’s servants that would eventually find its way to every person in your tribe. Your name would become the image or freedom that does not yet exist for millions. Droos. If you make this choice I will stand with you and meet whatever end will follow. I will be there to hold your hand as we are torn apart.”

The young man squeezed her hand then, and she sat with him lost in thoughts and fear, though quite certain that she would not choose as Drerpo might desire, to betray her people, or, at least her father. She would do her duty now, and in five weeks’ time.

Gold plated was the roof of the sixth temple. It was a building of great size and the rituals here were elaborate. All day Droos and Drerpo danced and sang and prepared for the moment that would come. At last as the sun began to descend into the Sea of Heaven, Droos lay herself in the great bowl of water in the center of the main room. Now her closest friend and confidant, Drerpo, performed the rituals around her. The princess was sad and looked at Drerpo as much as she could get away with, given the rules of the ritual, trying to catch his eyes. He did not look at her at all during the ceremony. Finally, as he stood before her, raising the cloth, he looked right into her eyes. His face was grim, and he waited, longer than he should have. Reading the question in her friend’s eyes, Droos looked into Drerpo’s, and moved her head. Drerpo lowered the cloth down and covered Droos’ face.

The Temple of Passage, the seventh, symbolized a very different part of Droos’ future. Now she and her personal servants were called together again. Only now they wore special garments, a combination of blue and blood red, similar in part to the Priest-Servants. The princess wore a small tiara with diamonds, to show that she was star-touched. This was easy for all to remember, as her birth-star had shone brighter than it ever had during the nights on the mountain. All five hundred Priest-Servants and the God-King participated. They held torches lit with tall flames that formed concentric circles interrupted with open spaces set in exact manner surrounding Droos and the young men. The princess and her servants stood in a vast sea of light and for hours they sang songs and danced. At various points the whole group walked carefully in formation further up towards the summit of the volcano.

Book I: The Jungle

In the final part, as with the last night before she began her journey for the Ceremony of Passage, all of those months ago, she was left alone for the rest of the night with a great golden statue of the God of Blood. This time she wore her new blood-colored garment and her glittering jewels in her curly hair. Sitting with a fire between them, all alone in the deepness and quiet, she had many thoughts that passed through her mind.

So soon her life would end. It was too soon, Droos thought. There was so much she still wanted to see and think. Traveling passed the great trees of the jungles in her land, hearing the sounds of birds, and watching the scampering of scitters, her love of the natural world was strong in her. And there were many more conversations she yet wanted to have with her friends. In just the last months and few years more her understanding and consideration of philosophy and religion had reached small heights. What if she had a lifetime to explore those ideas?

A lifetime.

Better one full lifetime in this world than an eternity in paradise, thought Droos.

It was because of Drerpo. The young man had been at her side her whole life. Whenever she had doubts, fears, or sadness, he was there to hold her hand, and give her a hug. Droos loved Drerpo fiercely, and the thought that they might have had a life together made tears trickle down her cheeks. Yes, she loved Drerpo. What if... what if they might have been able to be something more than... just friends? What if they really could have been together, for a wondrous lifetime, even if it was only one? Even though she half believed that they would reunite upon death, in order to help sustain the road into heaven together, Droos knew that would not be the same.

If only, she thought.

Maybe she did have a choice. Standing atop the Princess, maybe she and Drerpo would run free down the south side, with no one to stop them. A ship would be waiting for them and they would sail off into unknown seas and away from the tyranny, the blood, and the death of this land forever. They would live a life together and be happy.

The thought was fleeting. It was outrageous and she laughed to herself. Sniffing a little as the tears wet her face, she thought of all the times she had enjoyed, had lived in this world, and was grateful for them. Soon she would die, and the future

would be lost from her forever. Darkness would take her, and only promises of redemption would float on the ebbing brilliance of her mind. Her star would fade.

Droos took a breath and her crying stopped. A sense of her surroundings, and the chill in the air, made her shiver, and she looked up at the night sky. Vast heavens filled with the twinkling of thousands of stars spread out before her. There was beauty that was forever enduring. Even the worst sins of man could not touch the night sky. Her gaze came at last to her star. The star that had risen on the night of her birth, and accompanied Droos as she grew, still it lay in the dark sky, brighter than ever. At least it would still be there when she was gone.

As she looked, suddenly her star began to move. It streaked, rapidly and blindingly to the south. Fear filled Droos, and sure enough, as she looked, suddenly it winked out. Her star had fallen from the sky. The princess turned back to gaze at the ground, only seeing now the burning fire before her. Tears twinkled in the corners of her eyes.





Chapter 6

Departure of the Servants

At last Droos, Etøn, Resh, Ini, and Drerpo turned back one last time to look at the Ring of the King, twenty miles to the northwest. There as they gazed into their past, they saw a final glint of the life they had known, a golden speck at the top of the volcano. As they finished their nighttime walk and the sun rose in the east, it had cast its light on the glimmering statue on the top of the flaming heights of the Hand of Doom. They knew that this was the likeness of the God of Blood, placed to watch them depart. Within a few minutes, the small dot began to move up the slope at the top of the cone, and soon, disappeared into the crater. The last glimpse of the world they had left behind was gone.

The young adults had never gone this way before. The rehearsal four years earlier had only gone as far as the Ring of the King. Throughout all they had been with thousands of others. Now they wandered in the utter desolation of the Hell of Oblivion wholly on their own. Not a bird in the sky or an animal or mouse of the ground could be seen to give company within the absolute quiet and stillness. They really did think after spending a day in this expanse that they were walking in Hell.

Nighttime was the period of work, and daytime of rest. They needed to walk twenty miles a day in order to reach their destination, their tombs, with enough time to perform their duties. Little food went with them. Only enough to keep up their strength in order to march continuously all night each day. A greater supply of water was given to make sure that none would die of thirst in this driest of places. Most certainly, no more than was absolutely necessary was provided. As a rule to prevent temptation, only enough to reach the Servants and the Princess, the five mountains of the South, were given. Otherwise, proving to be traitors in the end, the servants or even the princess herself

might choose to flee back north rather than fulfilling their duty.

For the first three days they went largely in silence. Resh any Ini joked with one another and Droos and Drerpo exchanged a few meaningful expressions. Two hours into their walk on the fourth day Drerpo decided it was time to start talking again.

“You don’t like death, do you Droos?” he said.

“No. I really dislike death,” she replied.

“What are you getting on about?” asked Resh.

“I have always enjoyed watching life drip from the necks of sacrifices, and the death rattling scream as the vivisected pass,” remarked Ini.

“You know that it serves a purpose,” added Etøn.

“Why do you think death is so central in your tribe?”

Drerpo continued.

“My father uses it as a tool of terror,” answered Droos.

“With it he forces our tribe through fear to remain silent about any possible objection to his rule, and to keep them so anxious over who, even among the innocents, will be selected for sacrifices that they will not have the time to think about rebellion. Usually it works.”

“Are you really starting to believe that?” inquired Etøn.

“I am still uncertain,” replied Droos. “Everything I have been taught since I could remember says that power over life and death is my father’s alone, and his right. The death of his slaves willingly is merely a particular way of them showing their submission to his selfless divine will; selfless in that through his connection to the God of Blood, our people are redeemed from eternity in Hell.”

“You are a zealous young woman,” said Drerpo. “It is good that you have listened well to all that you have been told. It is good that you seriously think about it all. If that is the case though, what have you learned also that has made you doubt the ethical nature of your father’s divine Authority?”

“Stop trying to get Her Grace to speak treason!” exclaimed Resh.

“Please Resh,” spoke Etøn. “I am first to be loyal to our people. But I want to hear the end of this discussion.”

“You mean that you have heard her speaking these blasphemous words before?” questioned Resh.

“Yes,” Etøn answered. “And I am loyal to Her Grace nonetheless. She is our better. She is of the blood divine. Our

Book I: The Jungle

purpose, Resh, is not to question her motives or her loyalty, but to serve unquestioningly. Even if she asks you to discuss willingly and openly what sounds like treasonous ideas, believe me when I say that she knows what she is doing, and you should obey her and trust her transcendent wisdom.”

“Or we could return her to the God-King to be vivisected,” pondered Ini.

“You’re not serious,” replied Etøn.

Ini smirked.

“Thank you, Etøn, for coming to Droos’ defense,” said Drerpo.

“You should not call Her Grace by her name,” insisted Resh.

“Resh,” said Droos. “I appreciate your loyalty and defense of my virtue. But do as Etøn says and please trust in my judgment. Believe me when I say that I would never do anything to hurt our people.”

Resh nodded and remained mute.

“What has made me doubt my father’s words and the education given to me by the Priest-Servants?” repeated Droos. “At some level my increasing skepticism is long in coming. Its origins go back to when I was five and Drerpo first asked this same question, ‘You don’t like death?’ Since then it has increasingly become just as much a feeling of belief and faith that death is ultimately evil, except as occurs naturally to mortals, since we are not immortal. I might call it a mistake in the lessons of my father’s servants that they taught me to think too well. This they said was in order that I might most cleverly construct the bridge to heaven upon my death. Yet it equally well allows me to construct connections and reason discrepancies in the stories and legends told to the masses of slaves among our people.

“I have always been told that my death serves a crucial role in our people’s salvation. But how do we really know this? Have any of you four seen this bridge? Have you heard the polishing of the stepping stones through the Gates of Heavens, or smelled the sweet honey fragrance wafting over from paradise? How do we know if we have never observed the truth of what we have been told? Likewise in the natural course of thinking I question and wonder about what proof there is of any other legend of our tribe, including the very divinity of my father and his ancestors.

“At some point in choosing to believe blindly it is necessary to say consciously, ‘Despite everything I see, hear, taste, smell, and feel, and think, showing the truth to be to the contrary, I will discount any notion of that knowledge, and remain steadfast to what my faith tells me’. Few dreams I have had or wild thoughts could demonstrate the great problems that arise from failing to subject religious truth to the same privileges and standards of analysis used for secular truth as the tyrannical, blood-thirsty rule of my family these last thousands of years, that our myths are so complete and so widespread that enough believe them to prevent any successful rebellion.

“It is very hard for me to say these things. What if everything we have been told is right? Then if I didn’t do my part, or our people did not submit to my father’s rule, we would all go to Hell. But I want to take a moment and propose what I see if I do state for now as a given that the truth of our religious beliefs is uncertain. This allows me then to apply secular analysis to everything formerly guarded as being sacred. And when I do this I see the tool of death used by my father for what I said it is. It is a bloody message of terror used to subdue our people.

“To understand the sheer terror of death as a weapon of state it is necessary only to think of one person who you love and care about. Imagine that there was no certainty from one moment to the next that they would not be taken suddenly, without warning, and brutally murdered, for no reason beyond having been born a member of this tribe. Whether or not love is rational is a discussion I will skip for now. The fact is that people do love each other. And in the face of not just certain death for those people, but the randomness, the not knowing, the only response is fear, and numbness, and stifling submission. And sometimes the brutal mental assault on their deepest feelings is so complete that they convince themselves they love it. Fear is so great that our people tell themselves lies over and over again and listen with fervor to the tales and legends of our people to give some possible meaning to the senseless slaughter. But inside, nearly all absolutely and undoubtedly hate us for it. Who could blame them?

“For nothing is more powerful a desire than the ability to love and be loved. Death as a tool of state plays on this desperate emotion, in a way most cruel. Is all of this something that is only known to Drerpo and I? I do not think so. My father received a better education than I did. He too was taught to reason and to

Book I: The Jungle

think. I will grant to him that he grew up surrounded by the same horror as me. He too was made to watch others killed in the most brutal ways. Being a slave of a tyrant is horrible. Is it quite so different to be born the crown prince of the dictator who does the enslaving?

“If nothing else, some of the same signs of the true nature of the legends and stories of our tribe, that they are propaganda, would have come to my father the same as they came to me. It would be through seeing the various rebellions that appear over time. Suddenly, the image that the people lovingly and happily commit to submission is broken. The first idea coming to mind must be, ‘Well they must not like us’. As quickly as it appears it must be defeated, or else my father would have had to admit the dissatisfaction and naked truth of what was actually happening by authority of my grandfather. But from then on, from time to time, he would have wondered, and thought again late at night as the light from stars crept through his windows, if there might be some other way, if only to be among the stars of heaven, that answer to no one but God.

“It is a vicious cycle that leads to the continuation of the process. For why wouldn’t one of my ancestors have simply chosen reform? In some ways the royal family is caught in the process. I hate this example because it would to some diminish their responsibility. I would say to those doubters that all situations have complicated truths. As the crown prince comes of age, they know how much he and his family are hated by the tremendous risk the thousands of rebels are willing to take. Those blessed and divinely courageous souls who stand up against my family meet with horrible ends, and know that their actions condemn thousands of innocents by proxy. If a person is willing to do so much despite those consequences, how many more are just as hateful of his royal family who are cowed into submission? If the iron fist were lifted even for a moment, if the people were given any amount of actual love instead of death and fear, surely the immediate result would be the rise of the slaves who would instantly and with great fervor and joy slay their masters, tearing the infant princes and princesses from their parent’s arms and smashing their heads against the rock walls of the royal estate until their brains were splattered across the walls. It is easy for each new crown prince to conclude that the only way his loved ones would be safe is to grab just as hard on the same out of control boat, flowing to its ruin in the end, but for now

keeping him from harm.

“The reality of the one who commits tyrannical atrocity against his own people is a sad one. Few hate themselves as much as that person. But that is submerged so deep that before others they honestly say that they are the people’s father, or God, and lovingly embrace their role, and only as a just ruler ensures the proper devotion of his people. He uses the myths that he both at the same time believes and disbelieves, in an insane manner of choosing two opposites at once, but in large part knowing that ultimately he is doing it all, spreading these tales, only to preserve his family.

“So no. I do not like death. It has no place in a state. Only should it be among the Priests of the tribe as old men and women die peacefully in front of them from disease after a long, happy life. A life in which they saw their children come of age, marry, and their grandchildren born. In which every man’s family is held equal and safe from sudden, violent death. In which the government exists to preserve life. I do not believe in the virtue of death, nor will I ever do so again.”

“If you’re finished, Your Grace,” said Resh, “I still insist that this is most treasonous.”

“Some might call your persistent objections treasonous,” replied Etøn.

“Well as it is,” rationalized Resh, “It is not as if treason really matters anymore. It would have to be a severe crime indeed to convince any of us to walk back three days journey to the garrison at the Ring of the King.”

“Then your words are pointless,” chided Etøn.

“You have said the same sorts of words many times,” Droos answered. “I am most surprised by your sudden tolerance of my radical ideas.”

“Well... ” pondered Etøn. “Perhaps in hearing them from friends frequently for the last six months I am not so certain anymore. Yet I am still just as capable and believe and understand Resh’s concerns.

“Maybe we should start the ceremony early and sacrifice him,” joked Ini.

Resh glared at him.

“What do you think, Resh, about the point Droos made...” started Drerpo.

“Why are you still calling her by her name!” Resh

Book I: The Jungle

sputtered.

“Droos has been very clear with us,” replied Etøn, “Drerpo and I, that we should call her by her name.”

“Maybe we should do the same,” smirked Ini.

“Is everything a joke to you?” complained Resh. “I want to hear the request from Her Grace.”

“Yes, Resh. And you Ini,” stated the princess. “You both have permission to call me Droos as well. Until the end, let’s all be friends.”

“Very well,” conceded Resh.

“As I was saying,” continued Drerpo, “Droos said that it is only possible to remain fully committed to your religion by ignoring what you hear, feel, taste, see, and smell, and any thoughts you have that contradict your beliefs. What do you think about this point?”

“How do we know that it isn’t a test?” replied Resh.

“*Certainty* in our faith is a test. Our *senses* tempt us to betray our God and our people. Our thoughts are slaves to our senses. Perhaps some devil out of Hell puts those senses and thoughts to compete with our certainty of the Truth.”

The princess thought of her dream of devils in a library.

“Where do you learn the truth from?” asked Drerpo.

“From the God-King and his High Priest-Servant” said Resh with certainty.

“What if his son, the crown prince, came of age and said something radically different,” continued Drerpo. “What if upon ascending to the throne he insisted that he was not a God, nothing more than a man who was charged to rule, and that truth entailed love and respect over state death squads and sacrifices.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” said Resh. “He is all-knowing and the truth is revealed to him more than anyone. His Majesty will experience ascendance and feel the onset of Power, and Authority, and Knowledge, and will understand his role as redeemer of his people. He will know that just as with the current God-King, all are to submit fully to his rule.

“Isn’t there some possibility that the God of Blood might reveal something different to my brother?” tried Droos.

“I know that won’t happen,” replied Resh. “Why would the God of Blood choose to violate the ancient law that submission redeems our people? It is absolute.”

“Do you speak for the God of Blood too now?” inquired

Droos.

“Never,” answered Resh. “I suppose at some level a loyal servant of His Divineness must simply know the truth. If you don’t know what that is, I don’t think I can help you understand.”

“I will say that you, Droos and Etøn, have come a long way,” spoke Drerpo. “Resh must be forgiven for being suddenly presented with these radical ideas at the end of his journey. I fear there will be no saving him.”

“Saving me from what?” said a frustrated Resh.

“From the flames that await the perpetuators of tyranny and evil,” answered Drerpo.

The look on Etøn and Droos’ faces was one of uncertainty. Resh appeared as persistent as ever. Ini still had on a smirk. Drerpo sighed. Soon the test would come before each of them and they would finally have to choose.

The days and nights passed as undistinguished as the landscape around them. As the sun set, they rose from their daily rest and walked continuously for four hours. After a short break and meal, they continued again for the same amount of time. At this pace, they covered close to twenty-five miles a day. At this speed the young adults would get to their destination early.

Droos wondered why they were in such a rush. Would it be better for them to treasure the time they had left? She supposed that the other four, from the most zealous to the most skeptical, were eager to finally complete their task. The waiting was terrible. There was some conversation similar to the one they had debated on the third march. As usual it went nowhere near convincing Resh, while Etøn continued to waver between sides. The princess was still unsure herself, and knew at the end that there would be few other choices than to die. Where else would she have to go?

As the sun rose after the eighth march they got the first real glimpse of the Servants. The small southern mountains, eroded over millions of years from an ancient range that had once existed here, were only several thousand feet high. They were as treeless and barren as the wasteland from which they rose to form black, sandy dots rising into the sky. Black rocks tipped the summit of each. It was impossible to see from this distance, but Droos could begin to imagine the piles of skeletons that must be waiting for them at the summits, sacrifices of more than thirty generations passed.

Book I: The Jungle

“What do you think dying is liking?” pondered Etøn upon seeing the mountains.

“Droos wondered the same thing a while ago,” replied Drerpo. “I wonder what she says now.”

“It is painful,” said Droos. “At first. The tearing of the throat burns, and stings greatly. As blood pours from the wound the body becomes light, and the stomach grows nauseous. The brain burns and the world spins. But the intensity soon begins to fade. Failing and ebbing slowly away, the sense of self, of the body, vanishes, and the connection to it as well. A comforting warmth, as the only remaining thought is thought itself. Then it extinguishes, and the soul passes, through a final breath. The heart stops, and the brain rots. We pass on to whatever fate awaits us.”

“Now that I think about it, this sounds terrifying,” Etøn spoke.

“Surely you have thought of it sooner,” commented Resh.

“Yes, of course,” replied Etøn. “But the thought of my own death never remains easy. In some ways I try to blot it from my mind. All my life I have prepared for it. Now that it comes to it, I do not think it will be easy at all.”

“I think it will be splendid to see,” smiled Ini.

“Alas that I am to sacrifice myself first,” lamented Resh. “That I could see the departure of the other servants.”

“It is said that you will, Resh,” spoke Etøn. “You are privileged to be the first to view us from above, transcended to the heights of heaven, able to see and hear the thoughts of mortals in ways supreme. You will see, and understand in a way we will never, until we join you.”

“So you do have faith,” responded Resh.

“I do,” finished Etøn.

The final four days before the departure of the first servant, Resh, passed uneventfully. Now the five stood at the foot of the northwest Servant. Five would go up the mountain. Only four would descend. From now on they would march under sunlight, so that the sacrifices could be completed during the day. It was seventeen days until Droos would die.

The young adults reached the summit and looked out. Four more mountains could be seen. Three were the remaining Servants, and the fourth was the Princess, farthest to the south. Thousands of feet up, the desert surrounding them, dotted with millions of small, black pebbles, looked covered in sand. Off

furthest in the distance south, blocked by the mountains, could be seen a line of blue, the ocean before the Gates of Heaven.

For the rest of the day they performed rituals. There was nothing to draw designs to be found on the rock at the summit, so instead they signed the runes and lines of incantations with their hands. Joyous melodies were heard and at least as far as prayers and dances the five did their duties. The only ones that appeared tense were Droos, and surprisingly, Resh. So he had some reservations in the end after all. None stand before death without fear.

The morning sun reached its height, and descended into the west before they came to the climax of the ritual. Half an hour before sunset it was time for the final preparations. As the others looked at him, Resh looked back, from one set of eyes to the next, gaining courage from the company of those with whom he had spent his life. They might be deeply confused and traitorous with their views, but in the end, Resh did consider them friends, even Droos, his better. With a nod of his head at them, the final preparations were made.

Upon a raised stone at the south of the summit, Resh was placed before it on his knees. His head was positioned upon the stone so that it perched and was stable and still. He looked straight forward, in the direction his soul would fly, towards the gates of heaven, as his body failed, his blood drained, and his time in this world ended. Time passed immeasurably slow. Every minute seemed an eternity as the others performed more rituals.

Resh raised his eyes, having been consumed in his final thoughts, and saw Drerpo standing before him. It was strange, but he thought he saw the High Grace-Servant in a strange shadow of might. It grew, and in maybe just a trick of the light, Drerpo appeared of a stature as tall as a mountain before him. Eyes as old as the world itself gazed into Resh's and a still small voice trembled in his head.

Drerpo, he thought.

A strange thought entered Resh, and for the first time in his life he wondered strange thoughts. But too late did these come to him. A stern and serious look, Pity and Majesty revealed, and Drerpo gazed into the young man's eyes. The look held a question, and thinking, but not too long, Resh nodded his head with certainty.

Swiftly and with much practice Ini brought the bone knife

Book I: The Jungle

forward. Lifting Resh's head and bringing the blade beneath his neck, and with a joyful and hungry look, Ini moved his hand. A bloody burble escaped Resh's throat as the blade cut him to his vertebrae. The hot liquid poured from the wound. The sacrifice made erratic movements for a few moments, but just as quickly fell forward. Then Ini brought the knife back and sawed. In a few more seconds, it broke through the neck bone, and severed the head entirely. The eyes were empty. Resh was dead.

The four remaining took the head and the body and placed it upon a large pile of bones in a deep hollow among the rocks. The sacrifice's remaining blood dribbled over the naked, white skulls and ribs, running on them as it once had when they too were alive. Silence filled the mountaintop, interrupted only slightly by a light breeze. Ini maintained a satisfied look that Droos found objectionable. She supposed that Ini had been closest to Resh, and whatever he felt was appropriate. Then again Ini was the most disturbed of the four, the three now, and enjoyed the free flow of blood and the sounds of death in sacrifice and execution. Well, they would see how he felt when his turn came to die next.

It was an hour after darkness fell when they finished the day's rituals. Etøn, Ini, Drerpo, and Droos were very tired. They had stayed up all night and all day to switch their waking hours. As was prescribed they slept on the mountaintop that night, not far from the pile of bones. This was in order to keep Resh company on his first night of sleep.

When the sun rose they descended the mountain and traveled to the East. After spending the night at the foot of the northeast Servant, they climbed again to its summit. Another day of the same rituals followed, although the parts previously done by Resh were spread out among those remaining. All day they danced, prayed, sang, and signed words and runes. Half an hour before sunset Ini was placed on the stone at the south of the mountaintop.

Looking at the fading light of the afternoon, Ini too saw Drerpo looming tall before him, as though in a vision. For in reality, as had been the case when Resh had seen the High Grace-Servant, Drerpo was actually standing behind the alter with Droos. Whatever thoughts drove the two to see Drerpo in this manner defied the sense of logical reality. That of course meant the thoughts were nonsense and not true.

As it was, when the image of Drerpo, towering above Ini

like a thundercloud, posed the same question as it did for Resh, Ini stared back with a wild look in his eyes. He laughed loudly.

"I do not fear you!" he exclaimed.

Before Etøn stepped forward with the knife, he looked at Drerpo, the real Drerpo, and Droos. Drerpo touched his shoulder in friendly support. Nodding his head, Etøn, walked up to the stone and slew Ini. As his blood spilled quickly onto the alter, the sacrifice did not struggle at all. Through a spurt of blood from his throat, they thought they could hear Ini give a last, shortened chuckle. Ini had lived up to his word in the end and died as fearlessly as any mortal could.

After they spent the night with Ini, the three close friends, Etøn, Drerpo, and Droos, left him and descended the southern side of the mountain, traveling towards the southeast Servant. There were exactly two weeks left until the princess' birthday. It would take two days to reach the next mountain summit. With the absence of the most vocal adversaries to the notions of Drerpo, soon meaningful conversation began again.

"How are you doing, Droos?" asked Etøn.

"Thank you for your concern," she replied. "It has been hard. Even though they were not as close as they might have been, Resh and Ini grew up with me, and I have seen them and talked to them almost every day of my life. Seeing them struggling to die in the end and lifting their limp bodies was torment. I can only imagine... what it will be like next."

Etøn smiled.

"I didn't know you liked me so much," jested Etøn. "I always thought you fancied Drerpo."

Drerpo laughed.

"So what if I do fancy Drerpo?" the princess admitted.

Drerpo's laughter stopped and he looked at Droos, the image of concern. Now Etøn chuckled.

"Ha!" he said. "I have always known you loved him. Now the truth is out."

"I love you too, you know," Droos spoke to Etøn. "Just in a different way. I do not know what I would have done without you these last six months."

"Me neither," replied Etøn seriously.

"You know you have a choice, Etøn," the princess continued. "What if you decided not to sacrifice yourself? No one would know."

Book I: The Jungle

“Droos,” he said slowly and precisely. “I have to. Our people depend on it. Without us, me included, their souls will be lost.”

“Etøn... “ Droos began.

“Besides, what choice do we have?” the young man continued. “To die of thirst in the desert of the south? You know that we don’t have enough provisions to travel back to the jungle.”

“It is likely we would die,” said Droos. “Is that much worse than making Drerpo kill you with his own hands? Is it worse than making me watch?”

“Would it be better to watch me die of thirst?” asked Etøn

“What if we all did something truly radical?” suggested Drerpo. “What if instead of going to die at the top of our mountains, we journeyed to the ocean first. The ocean at the southernmost tip of your continent. There we will see, what we will see.”

“What?!” exclaimed Droos.

“That is a crazy notion,” spoke Etøn.

“Is it?” answered Drerpo. “Does it take any more faith to make a detour on our journey than to go straight to our death by our own hands? I say, if we hold up certain death verses a leap of faith, charging fate to throw something new for us to consider, to attempt to fly as you fall from the precipice rather than submit to despair, the choice is clear. Do not despair! No one knows the future. No one knows if hope is lost. Only God knows all things. We must choose wisely with open minds.”

The three walked in silence for a time.

“What if we did make that choice, Etøn?” said Droos.

“Not even necessarily to die at the sea. Just to take a detour, as Drerpo says, to see what we will see. Surely it would make little difference.”

“It makes all the difference,” replied Etøn. “Our religion puts a time limit on performing our part of the ritual. You and I, Droos, must die by your sixteenth birthday, and Drerpo a couple days later. I already said that this is about more than just us. What if our actions jeopardize the spiritual wellbeing of our people for an entire generation? Are our doubts and uncertainties really enough to take that risk? When we die we will at least see each other again when we transcend. Those who become trapped in twilight cities in this world instead because of our possible failure, who knows what will happen to them.”

“I doubt the God of Blood would be that strict,” spoke the princess gently. “He knows of our devotion and loyalty. He knows that we are merely borrowing time. Our life after death will be an eternity of service. A few more days will have little effect.”

“What... about our food?” chided Etøn. “We don’t have enough to go to the shores and back again.”

“So we will be a little hungry,” said Drerpo.

They walked a few minutes more in silence. Etøn was clearly conflicted. Droos thought that this was a most perilous moment. Her friend’s life remained but a trickle.

“I think I want to at least see the view from the top of the mountain we are going to,” he finally said.

“Very well,” replied Drerpo.

At the end of the second day’s march they reached the base of the southeastern Servant, the mountain on which Etøn was pledged to die. They made camp with the intension of climbing the slope at sunrise. Droos lay on her back while the others slept, looking up at the dark night. No moon disturbed the thousands of stars twinkling down at her.

She thought of hope and despair. What a careful balance. When is it proper to give up hope and embrace the inevitable? Is it better to challenge fate until its very end? Why not despair and enjoy in hedonism and tranquility the last hours of the last days of life? In the end the only answer was integrity. For Drerpo was right. Despair was a lie. With it Droos would be prophesizing the future, which she did not actually know. Maybe there was a boat waiting for her at the shores of the sea.

Droos’ hope had waned when her star fell. She felt a faint glow, the embers of the dazzling brightness still dwelling within her. Soon it too would follow the star into darkness. She did not know to what her end would lead. Was everything Etøn said true? Would her treason condemn to limbo millions who would die in this generation? So many questions disturbed the young woman’s thoughts that night that she slept little, and when she woke up from only an hour or two of rest when the sun rose, she felt little refreshed.

In silence they climbed the slope. It was steep and several thousand feet up. This was little obstacle after the weeks of exercise they had successfully faced. After only two hours they reached the summit.

It was much like the others, Droos thought. Black rock

Book I: The Jungle

stuck up from under the pebbles of the same color. At one corner there was a pile of bones, the skulls severed from the bodies. Largely they lay intact, as there were no predators, little wind, and rarely if ever any rain. Some of the oldest were cracked here and there, and preserved worse than the others. Altogether there were thirty-one skeletons.

This was a strange number. On the previous three summits there were thirty-two sets of remains. Where did the missing number go?

“We’re not remembering our history,” remarked Etøn.

“There is a reason for our exact amount of rations. Five hundred years ago one of the servants turned traitor, and fled back north into the jungles. There he lived for more than a decade, successfully evading patrols who went by from time to time. They were not searching for him, and he was only found by bad luck. When a patrol did at last catch a glimpse of him a Servant-Commander was with them, visiting from the capitol, and recognized him. Of course he was quickly detained, brought before the God-King, and executed. From that point on the Priest-Servants made sure there was not enough food for servants to betray their trust.”

“You know what that means, though?” asked Droos.

“What does it mean?” replied Etøn.

“That young man made a choice to put off death for a time,” she answered. “He almost escaped with his choice.”

“But he didn’t,” insisted Etøn. “In the end, he was found. Do you think it was merely chance that had someone who knew him find him that day? It was the God of Blood. None escape their crimes. It is impossible to run from God.”

“Unless there is something, Great Beings or Supreme Laws, that transcend God,” considered Droos.

“There you go with that radical notion again,” complained Etøn. “Even if all we have learned our entire lives is an uncertain myth, I see no reason why our myth is any less correct than the stories of Elriver and Showsh, and the *uber-deities*.”

“That is an interesting approach to the question,” commented Drerpo. “You say that we are all entitled to your own myths, religions, and stories. Does that mean that even if you make your choice that Droos and I might decide differently?”

“You could,” added Etøn. “It would be wrong. Ours happens to be the true myth, even if there are others. I say that you are taking a great, selfish risk by threatening the spiritual wellbeing

of millions. Of course I can't stop you. My life will end today and other than cheering you on while I smile at you from above, I will not be able to affect your actions. You too will have to choose."

"Then you have made your choice," lamented Droos.

"Yes," insisted Etøn.

"I have a suggestion," said Drerpo. "Here we have made good time reaching this mountain. It is another twelve days until Droos' birthday. The time to the Princess from here is only two days. That means we could wait here nine and still be there in time for her part of the ceremony. Actually, we are not permitted to kill Droos until that day. We should take a couple days, here at the summit, to enjoy the view, and to take comfort in being together."

"That would be satisfactory," conceded Etøn. "I will wait four days. But no more."

"Thank you, Etøn," said Droos.

"My pleasure," answered Etøn, smiling.

For the rest of the day they sat, side by side, on the very rock where Etøn would die, and gazed south, at the distant blue waters of the ocean. At this distance it was almost baby-blue, but blended in parts so as to remain darker. The desolation of the desert continued to the edge of the water. None knew whether under the waves the same terrain continued. Was it empty of life beneath the waves and surf? Did light and chill gentle waves alone churn dreamily in paths carved by the earth so long ago that no humans even of legend walked the earth?

"What do you think that waves say to each other?" wondered the princess aloud.

"You think waves talk?" laughed Etøn.

"Can't you hear it," she said. "There is a chorus, rising and following between crests, and following into low basins. It hisses and roars. Can you hear it?"

"This is a serious thought," spoke Drerpo. "What would the waves say to each other? For they are ancient. The waters of this ocean have traveled beyond the small land of your tribe. They have churned in every part of this world, rising at times to breathe the fresh air of the sky, or to warm themselves in the deep depths of the bottom. When they were young, all of these lands were different. The mountains had not yet risen. Not the ranges of the east, the west, or the middle of your land. Nor the older range of which the last remnants remain on which we now sit. Strange creatures swam in their gentle embrace, and listened then to the

Book I: The Jungle

songs that we now ponder today.

“These waves have humble origins. At times they are joined into the passing clouds and soar high in the sky. Then they descend in wrath and the flash of lightning into high mountains and trickle slowly into little rivers and icy lakes, or filter far below the surface and form caves and underground seas. Over eons these find their way back above, and some sooner than this follow the paths of water in winding routes, over waterfalls, passed trees, and plains, swamps, and little hills, to return in the end to the sea.

“They are never the same after their time on land. For there they heard for the first time a ruinous notion. For the little people who sprang up from animals to have minds of their own had the arrogance to call themselves masters. Forgetting the selflessness, the gifts of the earth, and waters, and stones, and blood of animals that fed them in their youth, they came to think of power, and property, and that humans could own the land. They became usurpers and believed that the earth was theirs to do with as they wished. Hills that had stood for millions of years they tortured, and brought down. Mountains were pierced with tunnels and mines that ate out their roots and left them raw. Forests were cut and rivers dammed. Great houses of metal shadowed the ground and blighted it of all life and animals. They sent forth poisonous fumes that covered the skies and scourged the remaining places of beauty.

“Throughout the endless torments of the lands, the hills and streams, and the waves could do nothing but roar and hiss to one another, communicating silently in breezes and with wrath at times in storms. They could not humble the usurpers’ arrogance, or teach them their roots and their boldness in claiming any land for their own. The waves cry for a time of peace once more, when the skies above will be free from smog and black soot so that they can gaze at the greater wonders, the even more ancient lights that stream from the sky and feed their communion with beings even older than themselves. They hope that maybe one day their salvation will come from beyond to teach their youthful rulers value and respect for their elders, and how to live in cooperation and peace with everything of beauty and wonder, be it Sentient, living, or just being.”

“I had never thought of it that way,” whispered Droos. “It is a wonder the waves do not rise and drown the lands to be rid of us.”

“Part of the shame,” added Drerpo, “Is that the earth cannot defend itself. It is not in its nature to choose to fight. Only in the greatest mercy and pity of holy beings so much older than ourselves do we rise to protect the hills and the grasses of the world. Blessed are those who do.”

“Is it true that you think there are other humans in this world?” asked Droos.

“I do not know for certain,” replied Drerpo. “It is only a feeling and a sense. Such a shame it would be if you were alone here in your land. I do not speak of the selfishness of humans to say that there is no beauty in their creations. As much as humans have temptations to destroy and for power, there is also the great potential for cooperation and sharing and creating systems to preserve peace for themselves and the world and universe around them. Sentients is a most awesome gift. Knowing the difference between good and evil is the guiding tool, even if the definition of these is uncertain. Through pursuit of the good humans as Sentients can glorify and hallow all that they touch and see.”

“Or ruin it,” spoke Etøn.

“Good and evil,” wondered Droos. “I suppose I have done many evil things in my life. I sat by and watched hundreds tortured and raped in sacrifice to our God, and said nothing. What of my choice to uphold the myths of our people? Will my choice to sacrifice myself give my father the legitimacy to strengthen his reign for the rest of his life? What system of torture, death, fear, and torment have I supported with my actions? After being my father’s greatest spokesman I wonder if there can be any redemption for me.”

“It is through exactly those actions, through the beginnings of remorse, that you are redeemed,” replied Etøn.

Drerpo looked at Droos and smiled.

“There is always hope of redemption,” Drerpo said. “It is never too late to do good. I cannot say if you will be spared any amount of torment in the end. But repentance and rebirth of spirit to do good and to despise evil, to teach others to avoid the same error, to help prevent the traps and snares that will challenge new people and may usher them towards wrong, these are the requirements of Heaven. You should never despair.”

“Surely it is too late, Drerpo,” she lamented.

“You could go back,” suggested Drerpo.

The princess chuckled.

Book I: The Jungle

“Maybe I should,” she replied. “I could stand before my father and call him a tyrant for all the High Servants to see! Let him execute me if he wants. It would be a statement that would not be forgotten for generations!”

“I will not go back with you,” said Etøn. “You will never convince me that this is right. Your sacrifice and loyalty to the God of Blood is righteous. It is good. Going back you risk the destruction of your family’s rule and the damnation of our entire tribe! Will you really do this? If you care for me I ask that you do not include me in this plan. Allow me to die as I am meant to and further I implore you to put this highest treason out of your mind!”

“Have I taught you nothing, Etøn?” continued the princess. “I suppose you are right. Or at least I am still ambivalent enough to let you make your choice before I make mine. Not to mention that there is the issue of food. We would die of hunger before we reached the jungle. The precautions as far as that goes will work.”

“I might be able to something about that,” spoke Drerpo.

Etøn raised his eyebrows.

“I was born without a word for freedom, Drerpo,” said Droos. “Happiness and the good were synonymous with the divinity of my father. The foreign language I have learned is still strange and different to me. It defies reality. I have no way to think or speak without confusion. My feelings tell me the truth, but I am not a Priest-Servant so to be able to interpret them. I need to think about my decision still.”

Turning to Etøn she suddenly spoke passionately.

“Please, I beg you Etøn,” she said. “Make your choice. But do choose to live. Choose to hope and risk faith in something new and different. Living with uncertainty is painful, but so is the forever parting of friends. Do not die. Do not make us kill you.”

The princess began to cry and sobbed. Neither Etøn or Drerpo had ever seen her like this. Etøn stood and walked over to her. He held her hand and touching her shoulder, helped her to her feet. Then he hugged her and let the tears roll onto his clothing. They stood like that for many minutes, though they seemed like hours. The sudden display of heartfelt emotion had an effect on Etøn, and he was greatly torn. He loved his friend and did not want to hurt her so much. But he was of The People of the Blood. And he had obligations.”

“I have not made my final decision yet,” he finally said. “There is still a little more time. Now let’s discuss something

different and lighter! Whatever happens I most want us to be good friends these next days. Why don't we go for a walk and talk about food and the weather."

This seemed to cheer Droos up, and the three rose and traveled around the slippery slopes of the summit, walking slowly, holding hands. They did not talk about anything serious for the remaining four days. The friends told stories of their years together. They joked about the zealotry of Resh and the incurable sadism of Ini, remembering their friends already gone. They joked and laughed about Droos' family, making light of even the God-King in a way that made Droos begin to have hope that Etøn would yet choose more wisely.

Drerpo brought up his family, those who had fled long ago, and his father who had perished. He spoke of his twin sister who he had never met, but who looked very much like him, with the same grey eyes. The young man did not bring up any of the controversial stories or ideas his father had discussed with him.

Etøn spoke of his relatives. His father, the God-King's younger brother, was an important servant in the tribe. He had many children, and Etøn was happy that they would by all rights and with the blessings of their religion live long, fulfilling lives. The point was not discussed about them being ultimately slaves who had no freedom to do more than His Divineness required. Etøn shared his feelings about his mother, the former Servant-Concubine.

There were many stories of amusing events in the royal estate and the capitol that each of the three had experienced in their sixteen years. Some they had seen together. Others were wholly new to hear. Whatever they were, the young adults listened to each other intently and happily.

On the third night, it was cold, and they used this excuse to all snuggle together. There was nothing romantic about it, merely friends embracing one another as they slept. Then the day dawned. When Droos awoke she saw Etøn standing over the alter, staring out towards the south.

"You're going to do it, aren't you?" asked Droos.

"Yes, I am," he said.

After three days of break, with little more talk, they returned to their postures, their religious dances, and prayers, chanting, and reciting. Droos had a way of withdrawing while she did this, but now it was most fervent. She was so sad, and felt

Book I: The Jungle

as though a great wave loomed on the horizon, hurdling towards her to sweep away all the world. It was too fast and impossible to escape. All would be lost.

They wore their finest blue and blood-red garments. The princess wore her tiara of diamonds that dazzled in the morning light. Etøn and Drerpo had really come into their own in the last months. They were strong and muscular, not too thin, but built with the vigor of youth.

The morning held the ritual of repentance, led by Etøn. For he and Resh and Ini before were meant to die to atone for the sin of killing the princess. Even though Droos' death would bring redemption, none might lay their hands on the daughter of the God-King, and punishment had to be made for those who would do so. Only one would be left, Drerpo, to actually do the deed. It was also an act of refusal. The three who died first wanted to die before they had to witness the princess' death. It was a mercy for them to be allowed to die in that order.

Etøn bowed low before Droos, and recited numerous prayers at her feet. He recited traditional rites of submission to the God-King and His family. For without them Etøn was but the damned. The princess found this strange now that she considered it. Etøn was her cousin after all. Apparently the divine blood flowed selectively.

There was no meal that day, and only minimal amounts of water to keep them from dehydrating. They were careful only to use exact amounts, since the supply of liquid was getting low, and there would only be enough for the remaining eight days. It would be terrible if Droos and Drerpo died of thirst on the way to the Princess.

It seemed that the world flowed in silence and as moving pictures. Her mind skipped every other frame. Thoughts echoed in her head, shouting at her. Breath came as a roaring wind. The dances were mesmerizing. Around and around, hands in the air, step after step, on went the graceful movements. The three friends were most exact in their ritual. They had learned their lessons well.

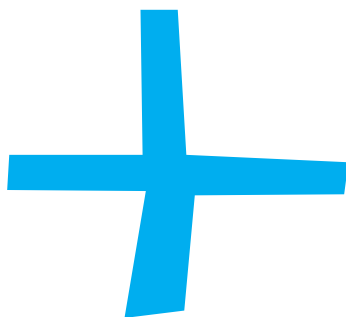
The day passed and half an hour before sunset Drerpo took a bone knife, and kindly and gently lay Etøn's neck on the alter. Etøn's eyes gazed south and his thoughts were a jumble of uncertainties and regrets with equal amounts of religious devotion and faith. Years passed inside him and sensing something he

looked up.

As with Resh and Ini, a towering image of Drerpo appeared before him in a most frightening manner. The mountainous being gazed down with eyes of compassion and smiled sadly. Words spoken silently told Etøn that his choice was now before him. Even now there was still hope.

Looking into the eyes and smiling back, Etøn took only a few moments to reply. He was amazed at what close friendships he had grown to enjoy in the last six months. All he had learned about the princess gave her earthly dimensions that he never thought could exist. The reality was that he had enjoyed the conversations he, and Droos, and Drerpo, had all shared together. They made his mind sharp and made him think. It did not help in making his final decision any easier. But he would not have traded his friendships with Droos and Drerpo even if it meant an eternity in Hell.

Was he really so sure? He was. How powerful love had to be to make him doubt his faith. Etøn knew that he was just as zealous as Resh. Only he had dual allegiances. The one to his people and his religion. And the other to his loved ones and



Book I: The Jungle

friends. In the end he had to choose one. He returned his thoughts to the transcendent Drerpo.

“I will see you soon, my friend,” spoke Etøn.

The immanent Drerpo stretched forward his hand and slit Etøn’s throat. More powerful and exact than the previous two sacrifices, in one stroke Drerpo took his friend’s head clear off. Lifeless it rolled across the ground before them, as blood sprayed from the coagulating arteries to bathe the black rock. Droos noticed a tear drop remaining on Etøn’s cheek to remind her of the life that had just ended.

This was a terrible moment in her life. She wondered whether this was worse than the one yet to come. She had watched three die, and would see no more. Now came the moment of her choice. All but one of her servants had departed, and the time came when she would view the Gates of Heaven from her mountaintop, and Drerpo would remove her head. Droos raised her eyes to meet Drerpo’s and stood in silence.





Chapter 7

View from the Mountaintop

Droos was alone. Her slender form cast a long shadow to the west as she walked slowly and quietly across the last part of the Hell of Oblivion. What life remained to her could now easily be counted as days in the single digits. By now she thought that her end would be a relief.

Her friend Eton's death the day before was hard. Seeing him die by Drerpo's hand was just as horrible. She wondered what it would be like for him to draw the knife along her throat. Would there be tears in her eyes as they became still? Could she love the young man who would take her life?

The princess did not think there was any way she could cease to love Drerpo. No matter what happened, he had made her laugh so many times, and sharpened her mind, saved her life, and made her treasure her existence. No matter that he would kill her in the end. And at least he gave her a choice.

She did have choices now. Drerpo very likely could make sure a retreat to the north succeeded. Maybe at the very least she would take him up on the offer to visit the southernmost shore. There she would gaze out over the ancient waves of the sea, and try to hear their voices. What would they say to her?

It would be very hard for her to travel north. A woman living wild within the jungle would surely reach the ears of the local tribesmen, and soon enough to the High Servants, and her father, and then they would be hunted, and captured. Maybe that is what going back would be about all along. She would face the terrible torment of execution as a statement to her people that the time had come to shake off the manacles of submission and to at last learn that there was a word for freedom.

What if she found the rebels, who must still exist despite the chastisement of her father, who flourished because of her

Book I: The Jungle

father's tyranny? She was educated and might prove a powerful ally and leader. Her knowledge of the workings of the tribe ran to the highest levels. She knew the layout of the capitol down to every building. Droos could say who the commanders were and what assassinations would most diminish the capability to respond to an attack.

The difficulty, the suspense, and ultimate painful death that would result from either of those choices, to return and be an example of resistance by dying, or to fight and die a little later, lay heavily on her. It was true that Droos was spoiled from the privileges she had enjoyed in her life. She had enjoyed both comforts and power. Another thought delayed her choices. If she returned and it was discovered, her sister would be selected to replace her in sacrifice when she turned sixteen. Her choice would decide whether or not her sibling would have to suffer the same life she had. And she would not have Drerpo for comfort.

Thinking through all of this, it was fortunate to have Drerpo walking next to her. Beside her to the left, the young man cast his own shadow that ran alongside the princess', mingling in parts. She knew somehow that as long as he was there, any of these choices were at least possible, and that in the end, somehow she would make the best one. At least he was still alive, here to see Droos to her end.

Smiling and shifting her thoughts to her friend, she turned and took his hand in hers.

"Oh Drerpo," she said. "I am glad you are here with me. I know I only have a little time left, but I wonder... and I really always have..."

"Droos..." he began.

"Few in our tribe," continued the princess, "Will speak to me as you do. They fear to disagree with Her Grace, let alone speak of treasonous, radical notions. None called me by my name except my father, my mother, my brother and sister, and you. Well until six months ago when Etøn... I think I have loved you most of my life, Drerpo, since I was a young girl and you first made me think about death."

"Droos..." he said. "Please listen to me. It would not be proper."

"You are right," Droos replied calmly. "I'm sorry. It's just as my last hours slip by, I, I think about things that might have been. I know you don't feel about me the same way. But what

if... what if..."

"I did not say that I do not feel the same way about you,"

Drerpo added. "Only that we can't."

The princess was taken aback.

"But why?" she asked. "If you feel the same way. Drerpo. You are right. No one will know what we do anymore. I'm not talking about anything crazy. Only to, maybe, hold your hand, and, just a little more."

Droos stopped walking and turned towards the him. She touched his right hand with her left, and after a second, held it. Then taking his left hand with her right, the princess looked into Drerpo's eyes. This was her very best friend. She loved him fiercely.

"Just a little more..." she whispered.

Moving her right hand up to his neck, she closed her eyes, and leaned forward, and shaking just a little, brushed her lips against his. Drerpo's eyes were open, and they showed pity, and pain as he touched her neck in response. Kissing her on the cheek, he spoke.

"I love you too Droos," he said. "Please. If you love me too, believe me that there is a reason we can't be together."

The princess sighed.

"I do trust you," replied Droos. "More than I trust myself. I'm sure your reason is a good one."

Smiling again, she continued.

"Do you really love me?" she said.

"I think so," he answered. "Although we haven't known each other very long, so it is not easy for me to fall in love so quickly. It will take more time for me to be sure."

"Sixteen years is too short?" she wondered.

"Oh, it is a far shorter time than you think," he replied.

"How long does it take for the sun and the moon to fall in love?"

"Now that is a long time," continued Droos.

"Not so long," he finished.

"Too long for us, I'm afraid," she said with a half-smile, bowing her head a little.

Then Drerpo raised his hand and traced a few lines in the air, speaking words that were still and silent. Although they did not touch, Droos felt a gentle caress, a hand in her hair, like the kiss of the breeze, and a faint smell of strawberries and spring flowers. She felt a touch on her cheek, and a kiss on her lips

Book I: The Jungle

that took her breath away and made her heart flutter. Taking a deep breath she sighed and looked at Drerpo, who smiled back innocently.

“The Language of the Universe has words for love too?” she remarked quietly.

“It would be a poor language if it didn’t,” replied the boy. “Few words exist that carry as much power and meaning as those used for love, and the ones I know in Loahueth are no different.”

“Thank you, Drerpo,” smiled the princess. “A worthy compromise.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said Drerpo.

They walked in silence for a while, having enjoyed the moment. Drerpo was still very uncertain and torn. He did have reasons that delayed his entry into love and held back his choices even if he did know his feelings so soon. It was not time yet to reveal them to Droos, not nearly the right time. The impression this young woman had made on him, though, was unprecedented. He never thought he could, but he did feel the sparks and early warmth of new feelings and passion. Droos had become close to him and cherished all he had shared with her. Those years had an effect on Drerpo too.

I must remember myself, he thought. It would be a great matter indeed if I acted too quickly, before I was ready, and even then, there would be grave problems. I have to remember what is good as no one else does. I must not forget.

The day of walking passed, only with a brief interruption for a light noon meal and rest. Before long the sun sank into the west and they stopped for the night. For a time the friends lay side by side, staring up together at the stars.

“You spoke of the sea, and the waves,” began Droos, “Of their age and all they have seen, of change, of usurpations, and their anger at those who walk on two legs. You mentioned briefly then the stars. What of the stars? What do they think and feel? Are they lords or only slaves and servants?”

“I am honored that you think a humble servant such as myself would know such things,” replied Drerpo.

Droos laughed.

“The stars are ancient,” he continued. “It is said that some can live for tens of billions of years. They are great hearts, beating in the still breezes of darkness and silence. No audible sound is heard for in space nothing makes noise. Around them the universe

expands and more lights flash into existence. Some die in greater explosions still. Their deaths, it is said, send forth the seeds of life that fall on distant star systems and rocky planets like our own. There the seeds coalesce and sometimes life begins. We are all made of stars, which are in turn made of the dust of the universe.”

“Fascinating,” wondered Droos. “But what do they think? How do they view the universe and those in it?”

“Ah, if only you could hear the stars speak,” whispered Drerpo, his eyes closed, remembering something extraordinary. “I have heard the songs of stars in my dreams. They speak of the rhythms in forces of physics, and call the names of the fabric of reality. Their voice praises the Great Beings, and Elriver and Showsh, and they sing songs as they slowly dance around one another, holding onto the other with gravity that swings and bows the stars and their billions of children on paths that last millions of years. The stars speak to their children, particles that spread out in waves continuously. Little voices sing on high notes, while in deep booming bass the planets converse and speak to their parent of their desire to create life of their own.”

“How wondrous,” sang Droos.

“If you go to sleep thinking of it, the stars might sing to you too,” mentioned Drerpo.

“I think I’ll give that a try,” said Droos.

Then she rolled over, covering herself with the thick blankets, and went to sleep. That night she did dream, and felt more than she saw the great harmony and glow in her heart at the glory and splendor of the oldest beings, lords of might, who praise in eternal monument the creators of the universe and the laws that govern in beauty the order of the fabric of reality. Such visions cannot be put into words by mortals, and Droos could not recall the feelings when she woke. But she did recall that her sleep that night was most fulfilling, and that something significant had taken place.

Drerpo and Droos walked slowly the next day. There was no hurry. Even once she arrived there were days until they had to finish the ceremony. Her sixteenth birthday would still be six days away. Even so, they talked little, and enjoyed the warmth of the day and the comfort of each other’s company. A smile could even be seen from time to time on Droos’ lips.

At the end of the seventh day they reached the foot of the Princess. This was the tallest of the ancient mountain range, more than a mile up. It was just as desolate and barren and the young

Book I: The Jungle

adults waited as was the custom until the next morning to ascend the side. The sixth day until Droos' birthday dawned, and over the course of three leisure hours they reached the summit.

Nearly sixteen years Droos had prepared to reach this mountain. This was the place she would die. Her throat would be cut, her head removed from her shoulders, and her body discarded to the side upon a pile of remains from thirty-two sacrifices from previous generations. This mountain peak was wider and longer with more pits and numerous jagged spikes. The place of destiny was at the summit of the southernmost peak.

The princess stood upon the brink and gazed out from the mountain top to the south. Less than one hundred miles away, with no more heights to obscure the sight, lay the ocean. Her soul would soon travel that way, viewing the hidden sights of heaven, the bridge of blood and starlight that stretched away from this very mountaintop, spreading from the capitol thousands of miles to the north, through this junction, and on towards the Gates of Heaven from here. Or so went the legend.

So far the maps of the geography had proven correct. After all, no living person had been to the southern mountains for thousands of years. The records that were available to show the eldest princess and her Grace-Servants were based on the pre-sacrifice days when the Hells of the south were open to the High Servants, and the Slave-Soldiers in particular, who once patrolled there. Since the addition of the Ceremony of Passage began, none were allowed to travel this way except five. The Servants and the Princess had been exactly where the maps indicated. What of the Gates of Heaven?

The strip of land on the maps she had seen lay some two hundred and fifty miles from the mountain's top to the south, one hundred and fifty from shore. There at the gates, dwelt all of the transcended souls of princesses and servants from the previous generations, who together maintained the entrance to Heaven. It was said that were any mortal to travel there, they would be able to meet the earthly images and speak to the departed beings, though not as they truly looked in the Heavenly world.

Gazing to the south, moving her eyes from right to left, she saw only blue at first beyond the desert. As time passed though, she thought, she could just make out a dot far in the distance, sticking out of the water. She blinked but it was still there. The Gates of Heaven lay before her. There she would dwell, soon

forever. The thought made her shiver.

Droos glanced over to Drerpo, who stood beside her, and saw him smiling back. He came over and put his arm around her shoulder, and then gave her a full embrace. Then patting her on the shoulder, he turned back and looked out from the mountaintop.

“What shall we do to pass the time, Your Grace, in the last days we have?” jested Drerpo, expressing his words with the help of his hands.

“You show your proper respect to me at last,” the princess responded in kind. “For you have been inappropriate with your informality all of these years, and with the presumption you could be friends with the princess.”

“Oh, but I am in fact a king, if you did not know,” continued Drerpo. “My subjects are more numerous than the stars, and I greet and acknowledge each and every one of them with graceful informality.”

“You tease me,” replied the princess.

“Just a little,” he smiled.

They looked out over the precipice towards the sea together in silence a little while longer. After a short time Droos decided she wished to seek the place where her body would rest once she was dead. Touching Drerpo’s arm, she turned and descended from the peak to look for the tomb. They found it in short order.

A pile of bones, dressed in blue and blood-red lay strewn about a small depression in the ground. Crowns with beautiful jewels of varying types and color adorned some of them, though many had rolled to the side. Curious suddenly, the princess took a moment to count the remains. At the end of her tally, it came only to thirty-one. There should be thirty-two!

“Drerpo,” she started. “Tell me how many of my ancestors lie here.”

“Thirty-one,” he replied without a thought.

The princess blinked.

“Do you know if the legend of the traitor servant includes the rebellion of the princess as well?” she continued.

“I do know the legend,” said Drerpo. “When the rebellious servant was found in the jungle, he was alone. No tale records treachery by a princess.”

“Then it appears we have a mystery,” spoke Droos.

They stood together for a moment before the pile of bones,

Book I: The Jungle

thinking.

“What do you think happened?” asked the High Grace-Servant.

“It could be that the body was simply left in a different location,” proposed the princess.

“Let’s see if we can find it then,” decided Drerpo.

The children sauntered together, in no particular rush, moving in a circuit over the summit of the mountain. They climbed into the various shallow holes and up on top of cliffs to see if there was any trace of the body. In the end, none could be found.

“I’m not surprised,” stated Droos. “My heart tells me that my ancestor was a traitor as well. Perhaps the legend of the servant does not tell the whole story. Maybe the two of them fled their duty together. But why wouldn’t she have been found as well?”

“I’m sure the God-King of that generation made sure to interrogate him until anything he knew was discovered,” suggested Drerpo.

“What if the princess truly did escape?” wondered Droos. “Maybe they escaped north together, and it happened while the servant forged for food one day that he was spotted apart from the princess. With him found out, she left and continued to live on her own.”

“Do you think she would have been able to take care of herself after the death of her servant?” inquired Drerpo.

“They had already spent ten years in the jungle before her servant was found,” continued Droos. “Even I might learn to tend to myself in that amount of time. When she found herself alone, maybe she used her considerable skill to travel to the north, up out of the land of our tribe, through the Neck of Passion, and into the places of legend. Maybe she came to the land of metal houses and flying birds to live in freedom and peace.”

“You want to believe this, don’t you?” spoke Drerpo.

“I do,” she answered. “If my ancestor did do this, she had more courage than I do. To risk the spiritual wellbeing of a generation, and to brave the dangers and loneliness of years in the jungle, rather than certain death by sacrifice, would have taken great determination.”

“And a leap of faith,” mentioned Drerpo. “It is nearly a conversion, which means a change of fundamental beliefs to

another system, to choose to overcome her commitment to the ceremony.”

“Conversion is a curious word,” considered the princess. “Another one of your creations I guess. Or more strange ideas from those books of yours. We have no concept for changing from one religion to another. Our word for religion barely exists either. It is also synonymous with the root for the God-King. In our language, there is no religion independent of our ruler. Freedom, happiness, conversion, religion. I wonder how such oversights could be built into our very core method of expressing ourselves, into the very vocabulary of our language.”

“I would say it speaks of the cleverness and knowledge of your ancestors,” replied Drerpo. “They knew of these words, and ideas, and once maybe they did exist in your language. Who knows when the current words were established, and the kind of speech your people speak. Once perhaps they had the same language of those from which the legend says they left, the ones who live in caves of steel. When they fled, the first rulers made a new dialect, or a wholly new structure of language, to suit the unique needs of your people. The words you speak of, and I am sure many others, were dangerous to them. Those rulers made sure they were removed or tied to certain concepts they wanted to promote.”

“This is a level of submission beyond anything I could imagine,” exclaimed Droos. “Not only must we guard our speech in our generation. But the very words we might use to rebel were removed from the conscious abilities of our people. What degree of tyrannical heights have our rulers transgressed to manipulate our people so completely? It is a wonder they did not remove love as a separate term for us to use.”

“It does seem a root for most of the rebellions you see among your people,” said Drerpo. “You yourself question your religion and duty in part based on your understanding of the role of love. Maybe it was that some fundamental words were left in your language. This was in order to test your people. A few selected words of rebellion were needed to funnel what otherwise would be pure emotion into the same recurring forms. These would be easily detected in each generation, as in the beginning those who thought the ideas would little know what they had. The words were tests and warnings of those who would or might soon rebel, leaving ample time to sweep them up and destroy them before it

Book I: The Jungle

got out of hand. Love became simply another way to enslave and subjugate your people. It is not a free word. Wholly the opposite actually, it is one of the highest tools of state.”

“This clearly does not always work, though,” considered the princess. “Love is a powerful emotion and idea. Rebellions still do spring up. They nearly killed both us.”

“Yes,” answered the servant. “Arrogance and overconfidence are ever the weaknesses of tyrants and their followers. This hole in the impenetrable wall of state is impossible to fill. Love is like a plague to the God-Kings of your tribe. It springs up here and there from time to time and must be treated as the disease he considers it. One of the first things he is taught while growing up is its nature and how to recognize the sickness. Ingenious tactics are created to cure it. But it is always a risk. Like when a farmer burns their field to make the soil healthy and to clear old crops, it may spread by mistake beyond the strip of land and destroy the forest around it. Sparks may fly and before long cover the land. But usually it is apparent far before it gets to that point by its color, intensity, and smoke. So too does the God-King detect the onset of love before it spreads too far.

“Sometimes it gets out of hand. But this is why he has the Servants-Loyal, a department of state even you may not have heard about. They are one of the most closely guarded secrets. The Servants-Loyal answer only to the Servants-Terrible and the God-King directly, and go far beyond the more limited intelligence-gathering role of the High Servant-Guard Commander. They live in every community and town, and infiltrate every unit of soldiers, and even the ranks of the servants and high servants. Even they are not able to stop and warn in time of every insurrection, but they are certainly able to say where it is once it begins and spreads. Then your father could send a division of Slave-Soldiers to extinguish it without mercy.”

“This is terrifying!” worried the princess. “I can’t believe even I didn’t know about this. Any of the Servant-Guards that heard me speak radical thoughts might actually have been a Servant-Loyal. It is a wonder you and I survived all of these years.”

“It is most exceptional,” admitted Drerpo. “You have been very good about speaking only when alone, or with Etøn and I. A few times you took a great risk and spoke in front of others, and you got lucky. It is also probable that your father does not

necessarily assume betrayal in his own immediate family. You were watched, I am sure, but less so. Also, you did your duties flawless and well, so from all appearances you knew your place and were completely loyal. Whether or not you realized it Droos, you are a clever and wise politician.”

Droos laughed at the notion.

“Of course you also had me to guard you,” added the servant.

“This is all so confusing,” worried the princess. “I suddenly find myself with choices and just as many reasons to reject them. My ancestors’ decisions and reign become more horrible every time we talk, Drerpo, and the truth of our religion more questionable. I do see options now that would save you and I, but for the warning, the terrible risk that everything I learned growing up is at least partially true, and that my death serves a crucial purpose.”

“If you want to know, or at least if you want to humor me, there is a point when blind faith and belief become a crime,” explained Drerpo. “For a dullard, following a religion or political system out of duty and fear is understandable. The same is true for a child, with little ability to challenge her father’s will. But for a young woman, educated and taught to think and make choices, to be creative and understand words that transcend the limitations of your people, her responsibility is more perilous. Already I would say you have committed a great crime, Droos. You left the sight of the Ring of the King, and allowed your father to travel home to proclaim the righteousness and religious superiority and justness of his rule for another generation. You might have leapt into the flames of fire or refused to proceed, though it would have meant your death. It is understandable what you chose, but still inexcusable. If you ask me, there will be a consequence. Upon death, a fragment of your soul will spend time suffering in Hell.”

“Drerpo!” exclaimed Droos.

“This is hard for me to say,” Drerpo spoke. “You are most dear to me. I love you, Droos. But I also, if I respect you, cannot lie to you. And it is true that the blame does not rest entirely on you alone, for being surrounded completely by those you grew up around, and taught all of the lies and legends used to bind your people to the darkness, it is hardly to be expected that you would easily move so openly against it, what is more, to horrible pain of torture and death, of you and your closest friends. Those

Book I: The Jungle

mitigating circumstances will certainly be taken into account. But the God of Hell will certainly still have a righteous claim, according to the fundamental laws of the universe, and he will take that which is his. What then should you do even now?

“This is what I would say. Your people are not ready to be redeemed. And you need to grow more and think about what you will do. Come with me, and temper your faith in your religion with love and trust in me, only to go to the sea and attempt to fly before you reach the ultimate bottom of your fall, that maybe you will see something that will offer you a choice you will accept, to change your fate. It is never too late to be redeemed, although it may become harder. It may also be a proper choice to return to your people now, though the result will be less meaningful if you are not yet prepared and your people are not ready to learn the word for freedom.”

“Drerpo!” glared the princess. “You really have finally gone too far. To condemn me to Hell with your words. It is hard enough for me to do what I must without such fierce words to dissuade me. You call everything I have learned and been taught a lie and say that I am already equally responsible and beyond redemption. Even if I were to change my mind now there would be little difference in my fate, and even that of my people. Do you care at all, Drerpo! Do you understand the necessity of what I must do?

“Yes,” said the servant, calmly, with some pity, and sadness. “I understand more than you know. I love you fiercely, and also your people, as I love all manner of creation, and particularly Sentients. I only want to serve the good. To answer to the Great Beings whom I serve, and to bring people closer to Reality. Freedom to pursue happiness, in love and sharing, these are the aspects of the good. Redeeming you and your people to be free, to be happy, these are my purposes. Is this so bad, Droos?

“Yes!” she cried. “Here you stand before me with your self-righteousness, speaking as though you had authority to challenge and counter the will of the God of Blood himself, and the Queen of Pain herself. Who are you to speak so boldly?! Who are you to subjugate our God to some higher purpose that violates their divinity? You know nothing, Drerpo! Nothing!”

“I am only your friend, Droos,” he replied simply.

“Well I don’t want to be your friend right now,” she yelled. “Leave me alone and don’t talk to me, servant!”

Drerpo sighed, and turning, walked away. This had gone horribly. He had clearly pushed her too far. It appeared ten years of talk and work to help her realize and make a better choice had vanished in a few minutes. Maybe she was right. Who was he to challenge the will of the Gods?

For the rest of that day, they did not speak to each other. They walked along the summit separately, Drerpo lost in his own thoughts, and Droos wandering in anger. That night as they ate they did not look at each other, and fell asleep far apart. As Drerpo stared up at the stars of the sky that night, his thoughts turned to prayer, and he called on the name of a supreme being.

“Your majesty, Elriver, Queen of the Universe,” he said. “How might I persuade your child, Droos, to see her choices? My desire is beyond my grasp. My words do not reveal my purpose. Maybe I might use The Language of the Universe to turn her will. But you, my Queen, know that a mortal soul may not be saved by words alone. She must be allowed to choose.

“What are the thoughts of mortals but a conflict of survival and intuition? How easily confused is the desire to survive, and how difficult is the intuition to see beyond the visible? The threat that is present stands taller than a mountain, while a chance of change scuttles as meekly as a scitter. Commitment to despair is far more desirable than the risk of desperate hope beyond hope. If only the religion of hope, the audacity to hope, might come to assist mortals, that their intuition may reign, and they may serve the good in peace. May it be your will my Queen, from now and until forever.”

The boy ended his prayer, and following his friend’s lead, he fell asleep. Overhead the stars passed, and voices beyond hearing twinkled and danced, a drama unfolding, speaking of doom only they could perceive. A great decision they would soon behold, a choice of a lowly mortal that would impress even them, for its beginning would end in events that would shape the fate of many.

Light dawned in the east, and brilliant dots of light faded in the face of the sun as it rose. She looked and beheld her children upon the summit and kissed their cheeks with the warmth of her light, driving away the darkness, releasing the bonds that blighted their souls. If only she were strong enough to release all chains and raise the downtrodden fully on her own. Alas even a mother is not capable of choosing for her children. Choice belongs

Book I: The Jungle

to the individual. A choice was yet to be made.

Day came, blue and bright, fresh and new, but the storm that separated with waves of great height lay between the children still, and they strolled separated all of the morning, and afternoon, and slept apart again that evening. The fifth day before the sacrifice passed in this way, and the fourth, and the third, and finally the dawn of destiny arrived. The day of passage and choice entered the sky, and filled the world with foreboding.

On the day of her sixteenth birthday, Droos rose, and stretching, felt strangely refreshed. It had been a difficult five days since she had become estranged from her friend. No, not just her friend. The young man she loved had become distant. It pained her more than anything in her life. Even the knife he would soon use to cut her throat could not possibly carry more threat.

Yet the light of that final morning of her life carried new possibilities. It seemed to thaw a veil of frost that had clouded her thoughts and feelings these last days. In the light, the rays speaking to her and giving her hope, anything seemed possible. How the light of day brings blessings! Well at last she would have to go and spend time with Drerpo. Today they would need to be busy. The ritual dances, and chants, and prayers would fill it, ending in her death.

She dawned her garments and her jewels, and went to find Drerpo. She found him standing on the southernmost point of the summit, beyond the cliff of sacrifice. Tapping him on the shoulder to get his attention, he turned and smiled when he saw her. It felt good to touch his shoulder and to see him happy.

Drerpo was already dressed and prepared for the day's events. Somehow Droos knew that her friend had never betrayed her, and was more loyal to her than ever. She still could not speak to him as before, but the princess thought that Drerpo would help her in any decision she made. He would do his duty if she did hers. Drerpo would take her life when the time came.

After a light breakfast, Droos' last meal in this world, the rituals began. This was a more simple replica of those they had performed on the last week at the Ring of the King. During the first seven days, they had ascended the mountain, the volcano, stopping at each of the seven temples. During that part of the ceremony, they traced the steps that would lead to Droos' sacrifice. The second week saw the descent into the mountain crater, and depicted the journey and new duties of the princess after she met

her destiny.

To begin, Drerpo and Droos descended the mountain to its base. This was counter-intuitive as it might bare relation with the replica one month earlier. Then the ceremony went downward. Now it began at the bottom of the Princess and went up.

Once they had reached the bottom, the ritual began. They spent several minutes chanting hymns, joyous in melody though of little variance. A dance then commenced, an act that seemed in fluid motions to recognize a change of sight, of vision, to seeing something that was not there. For upon Passage into the afterlife, the bridge of blood and starlight would begin to become visible. The sacrificed would rise and they would see themselves as they truly were, souls that transcended the mortal forms of life. Blood-red panels would be attached to one another by twinkling white. Rails would be raised supported by blood and topped by light. It would appear amidst towers that would be seen to stretch far into the north to the Temple of the God King in the capitol, and onward to the south to the Gates of Heaven.

The world would take on strange hues and colors. It would grow brilliant, and bright beyond conception of humans as they are limited in the world of the waking. It would be far different even from the world of twilight, in which souls in limbo rested, who saw what mortals saw only as if it were shrouded in waves of shadow. Rather, the brilliance would illuminate strange structures and shapes, the houses of the Slave-Soldiers of the God of Blood who guarded the path into Heaven even now, as well as Servants chosen to live closer to earth.

After the dance they took two long metal sticks, still here after all these years, and began to move back up the mountain. With them they traced two lines, parallel, as if to form a bridge, in the coarse black sand. They did this for one thousand feet. At the end they dug into the earth as far as they could, and embedded the metal, so as to form gates. The path to heaven had been traversed, and now before them they moved through into the Gates of Heaven.

Drerpo and Droos continued up the mountain as they performed the third part of the ritual. In this they appeared to converse with nothing, as though mad and speaking to themselves. In the gates they greeted the heavenly hosts, who were gathered to welcome the princess and to escort her in honor into her new role among the sustainers and guardians of the bridge. At various

Book I: The Jungle

points they stepped to the side and sat on the ground, enjoying a fake meal, representing the fare beyond, for delicacies of perfection would be served, unlike anything that existed on earth. There were a half dozen stations that passed in this way.

Finally about half way up the mountain, as the sun above reached noon, they walked widely about the mountainside, exchanging long greetings with the thirty-two passed generations of princess' and Grace-Servants who had sacrificed themselves. Droos noted that this included all thirty-two, without any absence of the one whose remains they had not found on the mountain. Apparently, at least as far as the legends were concerned, that princess had done her duty.

To each of the thirty-two, Droos spent four minutes telling them of the accomplishments done by their royal family, according to sacred texts of their fathers, the God-Kings of old, after they had died. It could easily be thought that there was no strife, famine, draught, war, or rebellion during all thirty-two generations. The propaganda ran thick, even now. Drerpo was far busier. He was greeting all one hundred and twenty-seven servants. In this case one was missing from the number to account for the servant who had rebelled, and more importantly, had been caught. Between the two rituals, two hours passed.

Finally the boy and girl bowed low, prostrate on the ground, as the imaginary doors to the palace of the God of Blood were opened for the princess to present herself and her servants to their Divine Master. They sang quick supplications, with practiced nervousness, and urgency, to show their complete submission. Then they were hurried along, up the mountain. Speed was essential, for the God of Blood must not be kept waiting for even one moment longer. By the end of the sprint, they were only one thousand feet below the summit of the mountain. There they fell prostrate once more.

Drerpo and Droos crawled on their hands and knees, dirtying their garments, as they submitted utterly to the God of Blood's presence. After fifty feet Drerpo stopped. In heaven there still was no equality. Once a servant in life, so would he be a servant in death. He took a moment to greet the souls of Resh, Ini, and Etøn, who were already waiting here. Now the group complete and together once more, Droos crept carefully forward another fifty feet.

Suddenly she gave out a deafening scream. It was in

horrible fear and then she was silent. There she laid still, and unmoving for half an hour as the God of Blood inspected her. Then first raising to her knees, then to her feet, she stood. Most important, she kept her eyes down, for even now none were to look into the God's eyes, except the souls of the God-Kings.

A song burst from her lips, of complete joy, and love, with fervor and passion. It was melodic, sharp, varied, and complex. It spoke of her profound joy to meet her divine master. Droos performed her duty well, and wondered if it would not be any less wondrous when the actual occasion came, in the near future, when she would die and repeating these rituals, would meet the God of Blood in heaven.

Afterwards the princess would get her first glimpse of paradise. Walking out to the side of the invisible room, to meet Drerpo the other Grace-Servants accompanying her in spirit, they ascended the rest of the mountain, and once more, reached the summit. There Droos held Drerpo's hand and they danced with joy, singing, and even carrying about as if in drunken revelry. They had done their duty and reached heaven, and before they returned to the bridge to do their eternal task, would have their moment in paradise.

At last ninety minutes before sunset, they finished, and sat together looking over the peak to the south once more. It had been a tiring day, but now almost all of the rituals were complete. There was only one more.

Droos had really begun to think seriously, in the end, about the tales and stories of paradise and heaven she had been told. They did speak of bliss and the completion of the soul. After today's reminder of all there was to be had, and to experience, and to know of the final secrets of this world, the princess thought that she actually wanted, really wanted, to do her duty, to fulfill the destiny she had lived to complete for sixteen years. Everything in her life, every part, had prepared her for this moment. No matter was what she had spoken with Drerpo. Those were words. The reality of the world to come was clear. In one hour, she would ask him to cut her throat, and after a few moments of struggle, through pain and blood she would be reborn into the paradise of heaven, there to serve as a lord of might in the court of the God of Blood.

"I want to do it," she finally said to Drerpo.

He looked at her gravely.

"If that is what you want, I will do my part, Droos," he

Book I: The Jungle

replied. "And... I am glad you are talking to me again."

"I wouldn't want things to end without you beside me," spoke Droos. "I mean more than just your part in the ceremony. I apologize for the way I spoke to you. It's just that this decision has been very hard. The idea that I could choose any differently and that maybe there is a good reason for me to do so makes me angry. I am so afraid to make the wrong choice, especially since I am still very uncertain. But now I know what I want to do. Today I will pass through the Gates of Heaven and discover the truth at last."

"How did you finally make this choice?" asked Drerpo quietly.

"Really I have always known," replied Droos. "All my life I have known that today I would die, that it would be by your hand. Now that it comes to it, I am comfortable, and satisfied with what will happen to me. All of the legends of our people speak of the righteousness and significance of my sacrifice. These make sense to me, are familiar to me. I believe them. My family is also important to me, and I don't want to disappoint them, even if no one will know of my decision. I have to do the right thing even when no one is looking. In the end the God of Blood and the Queen of Pain are always looking. They know all, their rewards are ample, and their fury unabating. I want to serve my God, for my family, for my people, according to all of the stories I have been taught about my role. Let my sacrifice serve the purpose for which it was meant.

"I thought you disliked death," Drerpo reminded her.

"I do," she said. "You are right about everything, Drerpo. I don't deny your logic or the temptation of the ideas you have shared with me all of these years. Your efforts have not been in vain! Forgive me, but I know it was not just because you wanted me to think and reason better. You don't want me to die. You don't want to have to kill me. You are a good friend, Drerpo."

"You didn't really answer the question, Droos," he continued. "I also wonder, if you have made your choice, if you might say more about why you got so angry the other day."

"I apologize again," answered Droos. "I was angry. It was wrong. It is as I just said. Somehow, even though I have always known my role, I have also known yours. You are the tempter, and challenger, the accuser. You are a test of my resolve to serve my people. At some level, and maybe even more so than I have reasons to do what I have decided, I do believe that death is wrong,

that love and respect are the proper tools of state, that there are more reasons for our scripture to say what it does, and the truth of how our people feel about being slaves. As I said, it is hard. There must be a word for what I am thinking, probably in the type of thinking you mentioned once, science you called it. Suddenly after much time all of the ideas that challenge my fundamental beliefs clashed in my mind and my soul and created a storm most fierce, that threatened to break me, and I might have even jumped over the precipice and died at the bottom of the slopes of this mountain. I had to either come up with a better reason to believe what I do believe, or convert, and change to the wholly new way of thinking. Well, not so new. We have been discussing it for years.”

“Droos,” implored Drerpo. “I still don’t understand how you chose. The words you are looking for are cognitive dissonance. It is a law that describes the human mind discussed in a branch of science called psychology, or so went the words in the book I read. Droos, my friend. If the scale is so even, and the difficulty of deciding so fierce, how can you say that you have really always known. It seemed just a couple weeks ago that you were on the verge of choosing to live, to at least put off the sacrifice. You seem most confused. Maybe you are just as likely insisting on the longevity of your conviction to convince yourself that you really do believe, what in your heart, is not so clear.”

The princess sighed.

“I have to be certain,” she said. “I know it must seem frustrating, to hear the same discussion and arguments, ideas and philosophies, over and over again. Such I think is the nature of human discourse. Friends bring up the same disagreements all the time and take years to make any change in their beliefs. Like a great piece of music might repeat the same melody in just slightly different ways before it reaches its conclusion. The greatest stories might try to be always different, and varied, never repeating and keeping the reader wondering what is next. I suppose that is what narrative is about. But real human conversation does not function like narrative. It is far more boring. Of course I don’t have to tell you this. You who have read many more books than I have must consider the very philosophy that goes into presentation.

“That is a digression if I have ever heard one,” remarked Drerpo.

“You’re right, of course,” smiled the princess. “Maybe I am not so certain, Drerpo. Perhaps nothing has really changed. I

Book I: The Jungle

think I know what I want to do at best. I think I do want to die. What I will choose in that minute, in that moment, only the Gods can know, and probably Elriver and Showsh too.”

“Oh, I am not so certain that Elriver and Showsh know as much about the future as you give them credit for, let alone those that serve them,” noted Drerpo.

“I honestly have a mind if I choose otherwise, against all odds now, to delay the sacrifice,” decided Droos, “To merely put it off for a few days, and travel down to the ocean of the south, as you mentioned. No, I don’t feel I can go back to my people to die. That is too hard for many reasons. But taking a few days longer to come to a decision, and seeing something that no one of my people have seen in thousands of years, before I die, that sounds possible. Surely the God of Blood will not mind in the end as long as I do my duty before too long. Still, I am fairly certain that even this compromise is more than I want. Be prepared, and be ready, Drerpo. Very soon, for I see already that the sun is descending into the west, you will have to kill me. You must be strong.”

“You are right, if I might say,” considered Drerpo. “If you did ultimately choose in the end to try something different, even if only for a little while, going back might be less effective than would make it worthwhile. Your people are not ready yet to be redeemed, to be freed of their bondage. Rather, if some hope against all odds arrived, and you do survive, someday in a few years you might return, a little older, a little wiser, to lead them then to the freedom they deserve.”

Droos sat quietly, thinking about the words just spoken, looking at the horizon, thinking about a future that would be without her. Shadows began to grow on the ground as the light of the day neared its end. The sun had not begun to set yet, but the afternoon was waning. It would not last for long. Neither would Droos.

Finally rising, Droos looked at her friend, and nodded her head. He smiled back, and the final ritual began. It was simple, and went as had all of those that had come before, for Resh, and Ini, and Etøn. At last the knife of bone was drawn. Drerpo held it and flailed it about in exact patterns. Droos’ heart was beating fast. Her eyes opened wide and her thoughts were a flurry of partially panicked emotions and feelings. She took deep breaths to calm herself, as she had been trained, and thought of the legends of her tribe, and how important it was that she serve her people. Then at

the required hour, the princess lowered herself to her knees, and placed her neck on the stone in front of her.

As the others had done, in her last moments she gazed out to the south, to the sea, where her soul would dwell on into the eternal future. A bright light dazzled her eyes, and she blinked, only to see rising from the south a shadow, tall, dark and menacing. It stood taller than the sky, and wore garments of terror and splendor. Grey eyes deep as the bottommost waves of the ocean and old as the stars twinkled and looked at Droos. It was Drerpo!

She knew that this was a dream. Her resolve was being tested and she must hold steadfast and true. The night of her birth, as the shadow of her star had cast a line across her neck, it was foretold that she would die at this moment. As her star had fallen before her, now it was her time to pass.

Moving her eyes upwards to look at the divine-like Drerpo, she saw a great arm the length of continents with a hand the size of the Heart of Blood, tipped with granite nails, stretched towards her. The palm was turned up, and behold, in it lay an ocean. Great masses, lands swirled in the misty waters of the world on which she lived. She could see suddenly close up the land of her birth as if she stood above them in the heavens looking down. Her mind swept over it and traced the path she had walked in the last six months. Then her sight rose and the continent became small, and in a flash, there came into view the continuation of the land, passed the Neck of Passion.

It was vast, and green, beautiful as anything in the place of Droos' birth. The image took her breath away. What a world of wonders, vast and beyond anything the princess had seen in her life. People must dwell there, and sure enough, the sight lowered on the land above the Body of Blood, and it became clear that the green was tinted as with iron, and then it changed. It was not green at all, except in great confined swathes, like parks, but metal covered it. The world was covered in metals, in caves of steel. Then the land and the ocean gained curvature and swung to the right, and what appeared was, a sight of wonder.

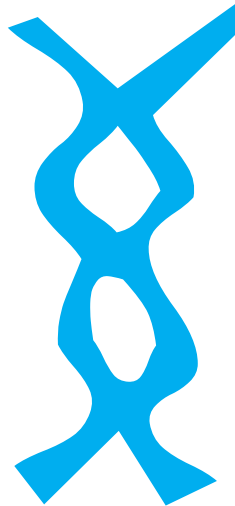
A blackness dotted with stars, darkness that never ceased, yet held beauty more profound than the ocean, rose. Space above came into view, and here too she saw that metals birds flew. They landed at times at great houses of steel that lay in the heavens. Then they took flight and with great sudden speed, vanished, off to worlds that lay across distances so vast, that they lay beyond

Book I: The Jungle

Droos' reckoning. All of these new sights were dizzying, and she breathed hard. Just as soon as it had begun, the image returned to her land, her continent, the lower, true green of the jungle becoming larger, and larger, until she once again swept the treetops.

Down to the Hell of Oblivion she flew and there she looked down on the Princess, the mountain on which she kneeled, with a knife at her throat. Almost she thought she could see two small dots, she and Drerpo together on the summit. The overhead view vanished and she soared down the slope of the mountain and across the desert, until at last, she reached the shores of the sea.

Waves, singing to one another, lapped the shores. Black sand glistened, and twinkled in the sunlight. Then with a sudden sight, there off to the left of her vision sat a small wooden vessel. It had two masts and drawn white fabric sails. One figure stood on the prow, and coming closer she saw it was the same young woman Droos had seen in her dream all of those months ago. The woman had grey eyes, and if it were possible, had many similarities in appearance to Drerpo. As the princess gazed at the woman, she beheld and returned her gaze! Locked with their eyes together,



Droos felt warmth, care, and compassion flow gently into her.

Off above the waves and ship the vision moved and at last came to the Gates of Heaven. There it lay one hundred and fifty miles from shore. It had no secrets, or visions of heaven, or the eternal souls of past generations. It was a barren, black rock of great size spread out in an oblong from east to west. This was a startling sight, for Droos had always believed that here there might be seen the princess' of old who had sacrificed themselves. If her vision was true, it might really be as empty as she now saw.

At last the princess beheld the divine Drerpo once more. Her sight withdrew from the world he held in his palm and Droos looked up into his eyes. There were no words but the being had in a still and silent voice a question that spoke in more than sound. A choice lay before Droos, and in the end, after all of the thoughts, and considerations, and arguments, and cognitive dissonance, the princess, the eldest daughter of the God-King and his greatest spokesmen, knew what she would choose.

Looking up at the divine Drerpo, she smiled, and moved her head with confidence.





Chapter 8

The Gates of Heaven

Droos's eyes gazed out at the horizon, and she smiled, nervous, but resolute. A kind voice awoke her from her deepest thoughts.

"You shook your head," said Drerpo.

The princess was speechless at these words. What had just happened? A moment ago she had sailed on the sky and beheld the heavens. Now she felt the knife held by Drerpo at her throat. She was confused, and did not for a moment quite realize where she was or what was happening.

"What is your decision, Droos?" asked the young man seriously.

Her decision. It seemed that notion lay in times of distant memory. Slowly they returned, and her eyes came into focus.

"Drerpo," she spoke. "Take that knife away. We wouldn't want you to sneeze and take my head off."

The young man laughed and the sharp edge moved away from her throat. Droos sighed, and took a few moments to breathe deeply and recall where she was. Then it all returned. Eyes wide, she stood and turned to Drerpo.

"I did shake my head," she wondered. "I moved my head, but it wasn't a nod. My choice came before me, and I chose life."

"Yes you did," smiled Drerpo.

The princess smiled back and breathed deeply again. There was a light breeze from the south, and it carried over all those miles of dryness a few drops of salty water. It smelled fresh and invigorating. Droos looked back at Drerpo.

"I did," she repeated.

"Sixteen years you prepared for this moment, Droos," spoke Drerpo. "It took all of your effort, and as much help as I could offer, but in the end you made your choice. It is a new day,

Droos. It is the first day of your life.”

The young woman walked away from the rock of sacrifice and descended to the level of the summit where they had the remnants of their food and water supplies. She looked lost. This was true in many ways.

“What do we do now?” she said, puzzled.

“That is up to you, Droos,” replied Drerpo. “You are a free woman. You may decide your own destiny. There is no longer any need for ritual or ceremony if that is what you desire. What would you like to do?”

“I think I would like to eat and drink something,” chuckled the princess. “It feels like I have fasted for centuries.”

“You sit down,” said Drerpo. “Let your servant prepare your food.”

Droos began to take a seat, but then she thought of something.

“No,” she insisted. “I don’t think that is true anymore. Now that I can choose, I will. Not that it takes much of a decision. You know how I feel about you, Drerpo. Only now I can officially tell you that you are free to shed the label of servant. Hereafter I will only ever think of you as a friend, and maybe someday, something more.”

“One step at a time,” replied Drerpo. “Fine. You can help me put together what we have.”

It took them little time to prepare the remaining dried meats and stale bread. It was poor fare compared to what they had enjoyed most of their lives, though the same as they had eaten these last four weeks. With some cool water, it was nonetheless refreshing, and felt to Droos like a feast. As they finished, Droos noticed something as she observed what provisions they had left.

“We won’t have much left to sustain us for long,” she said. “What are we going to do?”

“I think we should do what you said earlier today,” suggested Drerpo. “Let’s walk to the ocean to the south. It should be only a four day journey. There will be enough water, if we are careful, to last us until we get there.”

“So we can get to the shores of the sea and die of thirst and hunger there instead?” jested the princess, though with some seriousness.

“You are a princess of great wisdom and strength,” commented Drerpo. “I do not think you are destined to die in that

Book I: The Jungle

way. No. My sense is that you will prove to be more important than anything you could possibly imagine. You are the pebble that starts the avalanche.”

Droos laughed.

“A princess that can never return to her people,” she spoke. “And if I do, they will kill me.”

“Oh, Droos,” laughed Drerpo. “Have a little more faith than that. You don’t know what the waves will bring to shore if you have but the courage to hope. Despair does not suit you, not now.”

“Fine,” said Droos. “If you are so certain, let’s pack up. You can lead the way!”

This was agreeable to both of them, and in very short order, they were packed. By now the sun had descended into the west and its direct light had vanished. The blue sky quickly darkened, and as they descended the mountain on the southern side, the moon was bright and clear, and the stars twinkled overhead.

There was no desire to spend any more time on the Princess now that Droos had made her decision. Even after being awake all day, the change in fortune invigorated both of them, and they walked the entirety of the night. As the sun rose on the second day of Droos’ sixteenth year, they at last halted and rested for a while, erecting their standard shelter to protect them from the sun.

Mid-afternoon, they began another march. The mood was mediocre. Droos still did not know what to think, and Drerpo would not yet share what was on his mind. After a while, the princess began to hum some familiar tunes. These were melodies from songs of thanksgiving. Normally they were sung for the God-King, but now they took on new meaning.

That night there were many stars that fell, streaking through the sky to their flashing doom. It was sad to Droos. For they were so old and to end in this way seemed too mundane a fate. Seeing her expression as she looked up, Drerpo spoke.

“Those are not really stars,” he said. “Stars are enormous. Millions of worlds the size of this one could fit into just a single star. Shooting stars are only little bits of rock that fall from space and are destroyed by friction in the atmosphere.”

This seemed very obvious to Droos, now that she heard it. Yet the actual details were still very new.

“I don’t really believe that you learned all of this just from random books your father happened to obtain,” revealed Droos. “Where do you really know all of this from?”

“Those who serve the Great Beings, like I do, learn many things,” replied Drerpo. “The real truth is fabulous. Someday I will tell it to you.”

“You are so mysterious sometimes,” remarked Droos.

“I have to be,” he said. “My family and I are most strange. And very unusual. It is a burden and a privilege.”

“Do you think they are still alive?” asked Drerpo.

He looked at Droos.

“I know that my father is dead, and I do not doubt it,” he replied. “As for my sister, my mother, and my brother, I like to think that they made it through the Neck of Passion and found their way to the great caves of steel that cover the rest of the world, or so go the legends.”

“I wish I could meet them,” said the princess.

“Maybe you will,” smiled Drerpo.

The second night passed and they halted once more, resting under the heat of the sun. This far south the rays were not so strong as might be thought in a desert. It was dryness more than the heat that was a concern. Rain only fell here once every few years. Drops of perspiration on the skin would vanish instantly, and it was easy to become dehydrated. Drinking plenty of water was more important for diminishing this concern. As it was, this created a problem, for the water they had was almost gone. Could their water skins be filled from the sea?

To mark a further difficulty, when they awoke upon sunset of the third night, they ate the last of their food. Even if there was water in the sea, there certainly was no food they might easily obtain. Droos began to wonder if they had simply put off the inevitable. She would live a few extra days, only to die in the wilderness. But now she could think more clearly about reality, and she decided that dead is dead. Falling from a cliff, better than despairing and focusing on hitting the ground, it is of some comfort to pretend and try to fly.

“What are we going to do?” Droos asked again.

“Trust me,” replied Drerpo.

And she did.

That night was ordinary, clear and absent of the flying stars that had brightened the sky the previous night. A new count of

Book I: The Jungle

days began in Droos' mind. Previously it had been a single beat, the days until her sacrifice. Now there was no single anchor. For now she tracked the nights expecting the day they would arrive where they were going now, at the ocean.

Black pebbles spread nearly uniform across the desolation. There had been no change as they had traveled the length of the desert. What cataclysm had blighted this land to be in this way, Droos had no idea. She thought again about how Hellish this bleak land appeared. Somehow that thought seemed improper to Droos, though she did not quite know why. Then she recalled the nature of a true Hell. Rather it was in the midst of her tribe, where the Servants-Loyal reported on the smallest infraction, condemning The People of the Blood to horrible pain and death.

Flat and featureless, when the light of day rose, the level blue of the ocean began to be visible. It was difficult, for it barely crested from the plane of sight. A cold wind blew at times that smelled of freshly rinsed air. The princess fell asleep that morning thinking that the next time the sun rose, she would be, well, where she was headed. What that meant next was unknown. Her stomach growled in hunger.

On the final night of fleeing from their duty on the mountain of fate, the young man and the young woman took a slow pace. They were only ten miles from the waters of the south. Droos' heart was heavy. Almost tears came to her eyes.

"The change is difficult, I know," said Drerpo, soothingly.

"I just don't know what is going to happen, Drerpo," she replied. "This is so much, so different, so hard, such a change from what I always thought I knew."

Drerpo put his arm around her shoulder, and they walked together for a little while like that, and then he simply took her hand, and the friends kept each other in better spirits. The young man knew that the danger was still not passed. It was not too far to return to the Princess, and Droos was still fragile. She had made a hard choice, but said herself that it may not be final, and that this might only be a detour from her duty. So in whispers and soothing tones, he told her stories of the houses of metal and of the conversations of stars. These kept Droos entranced, and she wandered onward, distracted from the weight of change for a while.

The dawn of a new day came at last. Their pace had been exactly what it should have been. Before them lay, ancient and

crested with white foam, the sea. Waves sang to each other, and their touch dampened the stones and turned the dry dirt to mud where the desert ran into the water. After days of complete silence, marred only by their footsteps, the voices of the waves lay as a vision revealed in the light of day. It improved her mood slightly. Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes. What had happened to her? Once she had been confident, strong, and playful.

“Here we are,” she sighed, speaking quietly to Drerpo.

“What do you think of the sea now that you see it, hear it, feel the spray on your skin?” he answered.

“It is beautiful,” she commented. “But it makes me sad. One thousand years of tears in defiance of the tyranny that inflicts the world, usurps it, and digs pits and hurts in the earth. The waves do speak in lamentations. I don’t know if I can bear it.”

“You are right to be sad, Droos,” said Drerpo. “Change is one of the hardest burdens to bare. It denies any clear future to be seen from afar, and forces the mind’s eye to focus on the present. You stand naked in what you are now, without hopes and dreams to fill in the cracks and weaknesses. Being seen from a distance, being mindful of the now, can be terrible.”

“How then do I overcome this burden?” implored Droos.

“Trust in your actual strength,” replied Drerpo. “Know that you are strong, that we all have flaws, but that no mistake of the past, or imperfection of the present, should stand in the way of seeking a new horizon. Some might say that the future may only be had by owning the present. Live in the now, and the future will come when it will. Enjoy your life as it is, and leave history and the stories yet to be written to those who wish to write them. Have hope and be strong.”

“You’re right,” sighed Droos. “As usual. I am as strong as I need to be. More so since I stand next to you, the love of my life.”

“There you go with that again,” smiled Drerpo, rolling his eyes.

The princess laughed.

“You will never be rid of it, Drerpo,” she played. “Get used to it, if you aren’t already. Don’t worry. I know how to play the friend too. I am a good actress.”

With a sudden lightening of the mood, she stood on her tiptoes, and danced gracefully around the shore. Her sandals became wet on the bottom, and her eyes were bright and happy.

Book I: The Jungle

Drerpo found himself looking at her, drinking in the sight.

Get a hold of yourself, he thought.

As she skipped and stepped from side to side, with spins and arms flailing, a strange sight appeared out of the corner of her eye. Turning her head she looked and beheld a sight out of dream. Before her, maybe one hundred feet out, sailed a boat made of wood. The color was dark brown, and two masts rose from the inner thirds. The whitest of sails poofed outward, catching the wind. Droos' eyes were wide as saucers.

Drerpo came up and put his arm on her shoulder, smiling with a twinkle in his eye. The ship sailed closer to shore, too close given its berth. The princess' heart fluttered, and she relished the hope against all hopes that had come before her. It was a moment of shining destiny, as all of the great moments of her life danced before her eyes. She had a real choice. She would not die here on the shore, or on the mountain. The ship would bear her away, along with Drerpo, and they would start a new life together, maybe in the great houses of steal.

The boat came in prow first, and standing at its helm, her long reddish hair blowing in the wind, stood a young woman. She had dark skin, and her poise spoke of authority and confidence beyond measure. An intent look left grey eyes, the same color as Drerpo's. The woman smiled widely, and as Droos looked she saw that the newcomer was not looking at her, but at Drerpo. Her friend was looking just as meaningfully at the woman.

"Here my heart lies," whispered Drerpo with joy.

A little pang of jealousy skipped in Droos' heart, but she maintained her smile.

Surely the vessel would be beached on the sand. Its hull could not possibly dip far enough in the few feet of water which it now sailed to stay afloat. Almost it appeared to surf on the black pebbles and mud of the shore itself. The woman and Drerpo continued to look at each other, but Droos saw that she was speaking inaudible words, and make signs with her hands, that reminded her of Drerpo, and The Language of the Universe that he had used at times. Finally, the tall wooden mast and billowing sails stopped, with the boat only ten feet away, and now at last it ground into the sand, and stopped.

"Come Droos," Drerpo said, breaking his gaze, and turning to her. "I want you to meet someone who is very dear to me. A person whom I had once thought I had lost forever."

With no interest in saying anything or doing anything different, she followed Drerpo to the edge of the ship, and watched as the woman on it lowered a rope ladder. Then they climbed up, over the side of the vessel, and stood inside it.

It stretched about seventy-five feet in length, and thirty from side to side. At two points on either side of the middle the masts rose, strangely with no ropes or way of lowering or adjusting the sails. There was no cabin or shelter on the ship, and Droos pondered if it was truly seaworthy. At the prow, though in her awe she had not noticed before, perched a large, clear jewel. It dazzled and twinkled in the light of the day, and she wondered what it might look like under starlight.

“Droos,” called Drerpo, musically.

The princess turned and walked over to her friend and the stranger. She noticed that he was holding her hand as if he had known her for years, and had only been apart for a short while. At first she scowled, but then she smiled in return.

“I would like to introduce you to Emerzo,” he said. “My sister.”

Sister! thought Droos in relief.

Now she really smiled, all darker thoughts relieved, and bowing her head a little, walked up and took Emerzo’s right hand in hers.

“Emerzo,” he continued. “I would like to introduce you to the princess and eldest daughter of the God-King of The People of the Blood, who is my best friend.”

Drerpo’s sister bowed her head in return.

“You have never met me before,” spoke Emerzo, “But I have heard much about you from my brother. I’m glad to finally see everything he was talking about. I can see why he is... so fond of you.”

Emerzo winked at her and took on a strange expression as she said this last part.

“The day is young,” continued Emerzo. “Her Ladyship, Sol, your sun, has greeted us with her selflessness, and spreads her arms of warmth and comfort, already climbing into the sky. We may be some distance out to sea if you wish it when She takes her rest at noon.”

“May I first say what a pleasure it is to meet you, Emerzo,” spoke Droos. “Your brother is very dear to me. I most want to become good friends with you, because anyone who is close to

Book I: The Jungle

Drerpo will be dear to me as well.”

Emerzo laughed.

“You are most generous, my child,” replied Emerzo. “I look forward to being your friend as well.”

Child? wondered Droos.

Drerpo’s twin could not be more than a month older than Droos. She looked over at Drerpo and saw that he was giving his sister an odd look. Emerzo gazed back at her brother and gave a little shrug and a nod, conceding some point.

“Might I ask where at sea we would be going?” questioned Droos.

“Why we would be going to the Gates of Heaven,” answered Emerzo.

The princess suddenly remembered.

“You said you wanted to meet your ancestors of old,” said Drerpo. “Now is your chance. Will you dare to set foot on the holy isle? What do you think you will see when you actually arrive?”

“I thought I would arrive at the Gates of Heaven dead,” jested Droos. “It is said that even the living may glimpse the outlines of heavenly dwellings and the spirits of our ancestors. Yet isn’t it a sin to set foot upon the isle?”

“What do you think?” asked Drerpo.

Droos smiled at hearing that question. He had asked her it many times before.

“I feel that now at last I have been given a new life, one in which I may decide the very religion in which I believe,” stated Droos. “We may go to the Gates of Heaven if you will take me, and I will see with my own living eyes if the legends are true.”

“You have done a good job with her,” remarked Emerzo to Drerpo.

“I didn’t do anything,” the boy said to his sister. “Droos made up her own mind.”

“Well then, Droos,” Emerzo continued, “You have come a long way. If that is your wish for a destination we will leave immediately. Brother. Will you set the sails. I wish to speak to our friend some more.”

“As you wish, Emerzo,” replied Drerpo.

Droos wanted to see exactly how this would work. Everything she had heard about the way ships with sails functioned said that this one was missing some fundamental parts. She

watched Drerpo and with not too much surprise, he merely walked between the two masts and looking at both, began speaking still, silent words and writing letters in the air. In short order, without any physical touch, the sails responded, and billowed in the opposite direction. The boat lurched, and slowly it inched a bit at first, and then smoothly and steadily back out into deeper water. At first it again appeared to surf on the sand, but then it was supported by enough depth to seem almost normal. Was there anything The Language of the Universe could not do?

“Yes,” Emerzo read her thoughts. “The Language of the Universe is fickle, though very powerful, and must be treated nearly as another Sentient. If it is spoken to without respect, intent, and purpose, it will not listen, or may not function in the way desired. It takes a lot of practice, and even the wisest will not always get the result they want.”

“I have never known Drerpo to fail at their use,” pondered Droos.

“As we both agree, Droos,” answered Emerzo, “Our Drerpo is an unusual case. But believe me when I say that I have seen with my own eyes when the Great Beings have denied his requests, or chosen differently, to Drerpo’s harm, and to those around him. But professionally he has to be exact and successful most frequently. His actions affect far more people than just him.”

“Who is your brother?” wondered Droos.

“Who is he?” laughed Emerzo. “Why he is a human. I admit that there are few like him. He is of an ancient line as far as your species goes. There are others like him, and at one time long ago they stood as giants, princes and kings even among the normal rulers of your world. He wields ancient wisdom and knowledge known to few in these times. You are lucky to have him so close to you.”

“I know,” replied Droos. “Are you like him?”

“All of our family is like him,” said Emerzo.

Droos paused, and turned to watch him working on the ship. It had already turned around and was moving with amazing speed directly to the south out to sea. The waves sped by and the princess wondered that they could go so fast.

“It is one hundred and fifty miles to our destination,” commented Emerzo. “You should get some rest before we get there. First let us give you some food and water. After days without anything to eat you must be starved. Eat and enjoy!”

Book I: The Jungle

With these words Drerpo's sister seemed far more compassionate and kind than she had a moment ago when she had spoken more seriously. Droos was hungry and wondered what provisions they could possibly have on this ship with no place to shelter anything.

As if answering her thoughts, Drerpo walked up carrying, as though it were light, a sizable table with ample space for three. He placed this before his sister and Droos, and then beckoned for her to follow him. Walking behind him they reached the other end of the vessel to find several jars and bags of goods. Where had these come from? Droos had not seen them before. She supposed it was just another day with Drerpo and his family.

After a month of dried goods, the food laid before them was a feast. There was fresh, warm bread and butter. Meat from cattle steaming and most tender and juicy was prepared in a partially sweet, but savory sauce, with onions and mushrooms. Root vegetables, parsnips, carrots, and some others, accompanied the meat, along with rice and lentils. Or so went the various names that Droos was told they were called. Many of these dishes did not exist in the land she had just left. To drink they had a deep, full red wine, and clear, cool water. Before long Droos felt her spirits revived and she talked and chattered loudly, at times with her mouth full, as if she was a little kid again. All trace of fear and pain had left her and as she continued to enjoy life so fully, Emerzo looked at Drerpo and smiled.

Afterwards, Droos followed Drerpo to the other side of the ship once more and found that a small fabric dwelling had been erected, and underneath was a mattress bed made of some material unknown to the princess. It had sheets, and two pillows, and warm blankets in case she was cold. Having been somewhat inactive for a while now, she did feel a tad chilly, and as she lay down and bid her friend goodnight with thanks for everything, she pulled the sheets and comforters over herself, rolled over, and fell asleep almost instantly.

When the princess awoke, the sun had begun traveling into the west, though still far from sunset. She felt a little groggy and stretched as she rose. So tired, she had slept in her clothing, and without much more preparation, walked to the other side of the ship. There she found Emerzo and Drerpo, sitting on ornate, hardwood chairs that had come from somewhere. The grey in their eyes, so much alike, looked more like silver. Sunlight danced on

their reddish and black hair, dazzling like fiery crowns. Almost they appeared as a Queen and King, beautiful and awful to behold.

"I trust you have slept well," began Emerzo.

"Yes, thank you," said Droos.

She walked before them, and noticed a chair positioned in front of the siblings. Droos took her seat and leaned forward with her chin in her palms and her elbows on her knees.

"Did I miss anything?" asked Droos. "I feel like I have been asleep for days. Where are we?"

"We are one hundred and forty miles south of Nolai," spoke Drerpo. "You have slept for upwards of six hours, though I might add, serenely and peacefully."

"What is Nolai?" inquired Droos.

"That is the name of the land in which The People of the Blood live, as it is called by the rest of your world's inhabitants," answered Drerpo.

"Are there truly others in the world?" wondered the princess. "I thought that was only a story, just another legend."

"Some legends originally came from real history," continued Drerpo, resting an elbow on the arm of his chair.

"Whether or not there are truly others on this world I cannot say, for I have not seen them with my own eyes. You will have to ask my sister."

Emerzo smiled with a look of adoration.

"There are other humans," she said. "You have to see it to believe that they exist. The way they live, and what their cities look like is far removed from the land of your birth. I would tell you what it is like, but I honestly do not want to spoil the surprise. Though, if I am not mistaken, you have already seen a vision of what will be."

"Yes," remembered Droos. "In a dream long ago. I saw buildings like great caves of metal. How can such a thing be?"

Droos then remembered other events of her young adulthood.

"Are there heroes and beings with special powers that live there too?" pondered Droos.

Drerpo laughed.

"Oh Droos," he said. "That was just a book that you saw. Remember that there are rules under which the world runs. Reality follows laws of science. If they exist, as I have learned about them from Emerzo, they are very similar to you. Only they have more

Book I: The Jungle

knowledge of things like science, and there are ways of thinking and understanding the world that they must have that will be very foreign to you. You might be interested in hearing how they look at your tribe. That science has a name called anthropology. Even beings with greater knowledge and vastly improved technology have need for gardens. The size and wonder of gardens is something that demonstrates the sophistication of a society.

‘Blessed is the state in which gardeners are held of high esteem.’”

“I like that quote,” commented Droos. “Where is it from? One of your books?”

“Yes,” spoke Drerpo. “In the universe there are libraries the size of planets, though here they remain only the height and width of buildings, and much data is only stored digitally. Someday I will take you to the greatest library of legend, and show you the book where this quote is from. I will admit that it is a paraphrase, but it gives the sense of its meaning.”

“You are as mysterious as ever, Drerpo,” jested Droos.

“More so than you know,” replied Emerzo.

Drerpo’s sister became distracted for a moment, and then she stood up most gracefully.

“It looks like we have reached our destination,” she said.

The princess looked nervous.

“Come, Droos,” spoke Drerpo gently.

“What will I see?” whispered Droos nervously.

“Nothing but the truth,” he replied.

A few moments later the boat came to a complete stop.

The three walked to the starboard side of the vessel once more, and found that the rope ladder had been lowered. All three descended, and stepped onto land.

As they passed the beached prow of the ship, the princess looked about her and gasped. On the ground in front of her there was nothing. No starlight houses, or bridges, or hosts of heaven, or messengers of Gods. There was no glory to be had or found. Only a wide, barren, black rocky strip of land spread out before her. It was as barren as the Hell of Oblivion, and in Droos’ mind could barely still be called the *Gates of Heaven*. It was lifeless and bleak.

The three walked in silence a ways for about two hours, a few miles inland, until the rocky ground rose to about one hundred feet. Then they stopped and Droos turned and looked about. She felt sullen and sad, not knowing what to think about this blunt

reality she had found on the mythical land where her soul had been meant to dwell.

“Is there really no one here?” she asked Drerpo, quietly.

“That is a hard question for mortals,” replied Drerpo, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “For the souls of the dead are not accessible to them. What I have learned is that the truth of what happens after they die is just as wondrous as any tale you learned as a child.

“The moment of death sends forth splendor and light, as the soul departs in a rush of glowing glory. It bathes the invisible spaces through which it passes with an echo of the person, and that fragment remains there, until it is reunited with the other pieces of the soul. The rest of the wave travels onward, out of this small, rocky world and into the night of space, speeding through light years, and beyond the galaxy, until it reaches its destination. More fragments remain along the way. It is said that a soul is only reborn when a certain number of the fragments reunite. After life, the experiences of the fragments, who each have consciousness in the image of the person’s personality in life, but separately, are far longer and usually greater than what they see and hear in this world.

“Have no fear. Part of your ancestors does dwell on this island. You cannot see it, but they can see you. Just because you cannot hear their voices, does not mean they cannot hear yours. I would say that they are all most impressed with you. Your choice was different, and unique. The soul fragments will learn from your experience, now presented so vividly to them in their rest, and when they reunite with the other parts of their soul, the a priori knowledge will be reborn with them, though the process of birth pushes such revelations into a space beyond consciousness.”

“That is a fabulous story,” remarked Droos. “It is very hard to believe. I do enjoy the thought that there are people here, and that they can see me, and appreciate my choices. But I don’t know if this legend is any more real than those of my tribe.”

“It is good that you question,” added Emerzo. “Drerpo has taught you well. I am sure though that his purpose was not to rob you of any faith or religion, but only to make you think seriously about what you believe and hold important. In some ways it is a choice of meaning. Anything can be meaningless or anything can be made holy. Something is holy not only for some spiritual, supernatural purpose, but for the affect things given meaning have

Book I: The Jungle

on people who use them and experience them. You can think about how well a particular system of beliefs finds the strange in the familiar, makes special the mundane, and puts meaning into all things. Every religion has its value, but it is a higher religion to study which has the more positive empirical effect.”

“That is a difficult concept for me,” mentioned Droos.

“There is hardly a word for religion in my language. I only know one because Drerpo told it to me. The word has been given meaning based on conversations with him and with Etøn when he was alive.”

“Well it is our intention to continue your education, Droos,” said Emerzo. “My sense is that your journey is only beginning. What happens next is very much up to you. Now you have been to the Gates of Heaven, and seen them for what they are. How will you replace the meaning that you had put in the world with the lessons of your youth when they have now been so openly challenged?”

“What can I choose?” she spoke with trepidation. “My knowledge of the world was limited to small parts of the land you call Nolai. I don’t know where else I could go. Now that you suggest it, I think I do want to learn about other ways of thinking and believing. Drerpo began my education, but there must be someplace where the books he read were written, and surely those people could explain their meaning in magnificent ways.”

“So my explanations are not enough?” teased Drerpo.

“I didn’t say that,” Droos laughed.

“We know just the place,” Emerzo said. “If you wish we will take you there.”

“Great! Let’s do that,” decided Droos. “But first... I think I want to stay here a while longer. At least a day, if you don’t mind. This is a moment of passing. It is no longer a passage from life to death, but from one sense of meaning to another. I want a day to be in limbo, where I can put thought aside and simply enjoy living.”

Emerzo made a gesture with her hand and nodded her head.

Before they left the hill, Drerpo brought out a basket he apparently had carried with him. Out of it he brought a blanket to place on the ground, and cushions. On trays he placed plates with hard, crunchy pieces of bread that he called crackers, and strong cheese with apples. There was some sort of spicy, lentil

sauce in a bowl that was to be scooped up with another sort of puffy, flatbread. They drank, clear, refreshing water from metal mugs that held a sweet taste like honey. It was a more frugal meal than the one they had eaten on the mainland, but also filling and satisfying. Droos worried that if she kept eating like this she would soon lose her appearance. Staying healthy and fit was a free choice as well.

Afterwards they rolled up the cloth and put it in the basket with the cushion. Everything somehow fit, and once again Drerpo agreed to carry it.

“Emerzo is the sovereign of my world, and I do her bidding,” jested Drerpo.

They walked back to the ship and arrived as it began to get dark. It was the end of the fifth day after Droos’ sixteenth birthday. The night did not stay dark for long. A strange, glass torch was brought out and Drerpo lit it with a bright light like day. He hung it and two or three more like it on various hooks around the ship, and dragged out cushioned sofas from the prow of the ship, where everything imaginable could be found. On a small, polished wooden table placed to the side of one of the sofas he put a little metal box. It had a hole in the top and in it he placed a clear crystal that was tan in color.

To her amazement, Droos heard music begin to play, filling the silence that had a moment earlier held no sound but the crash of waves. The music was slow, with a beat, and felt like something to which the princess could dance. Getting an idea in her head she walked over to Drerpo, putting the finishing touches on his work for their evening space, and spoke to him.

“Would you like to dance,” she said with a half-smile.

Emerzo gave her a look.

“That is if your sister doesn’t mind,” joked Droos.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Emerzo said. “My brother may do as he wishes.”

“I would love to,” replied Drerpo.

Then Droos paused. Drerpo looked at her and realized the problem.

“It is true,” he said. “Sixteen years of training in rituals of all sorts. We know hundreds of dances. But none are meant for social entertainment. Allow me to lead, and I will show you a few that I know.”

Droos’ heart fluttered, and the young woman held out her

Book I: The Jungle

hand. Drerpo took it and led her out onto the square created by the position of the couches. The ground was the wooden deck of the ship, and the roof the stars of the sky above. It did not matter. To Droos she stood in the center of the greatest square or monument in which she had ever been. Holding her friend's hands, he took her shoulder, and directed her gently in steps, and turns, and at times lifted her or spun her. The young woman wished that this moment would never end. In answer they did several dances, to different music each time. Those minutes of dancing with Drerpo that evening would be a memory that Droos would cherish for the rest of her life, even though there were many more moments of wonder and joy.

Emerzo looked on in silence.

Finished at last, and panting a little, Drerpo helped Droos settle on a couch, while he went over, and putting his arm around his sister's shoulder, went with her to sit on the other couch opposite. The princess noticed that they had been drawn closer, and a table put between them. A metal pitcher lay in the center with a steaming, fragrant, liquid in it. Small clay cups, something called porcelain, lay in front of each of the three. Drerpo told her that a drink called Green Tea filled the pitcher. She poured herself a bit into her mug. It was warm and soothing. The flavor was strange, but she found it intriguing. It also invigorated her a little, and curling her legs up and bending them slightly onto the cushions in front of her, she lay back. Music continued to play somewhat quieter, and her mind drifted to the sky above, and the events that had unfolded in just the last day. Time passed slowly, and as she lay there, sleep crept up on her, and as she drifted off, she heard the voices of Drerpo and Emerzo speaking quietly to each other.

Droos woke to find herself still on the couch. Rays of sun lit the green blankets that had been lain on her by someone while she slept. Looking up she saw that the sun had already risen high into the eastern sky. The morning was already drawing towards noon. She had slept very late. Almost like a dream she thought about dancing with Drerpo the night before. Looking around she saw that the other sofas and tables had been cleared away, and that only the one on which she lay remained.

The sound of footsteps drifted back and forth on the boards behind her, and she wondered if that is where the brother and sister had gone. Before long the rhythm of steps drew near, and Drerpo

came into view ahead of her vision.

“Good morning!” he said happily. “You must have been very tired last night. Or else very comfortable. I am glad.”

“So am I,” she murmured. “Last night was like a dream. You are a good dancer.”

“You are fun to dance with,” he chuckled, a twinkle in his eye.

“Why are you so nice to me?” she smiled.

“Because I care about you,” he said seriously. “You are very dear to me.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” he replied.

Then she smiled sadly a little.

“Drerpo,” she spoke. “Now that we are free, and our fates have changed, why can’t we, at least consider, trying something together?”

“I know it would make sense to you, my dear,” smiled Drerpo. “I told you I have my reasons.”

“Are they really such good reasons?” she chided. “You love me and I love you. Isn’t that all that really matters? We could be together.”

“Droos,” he sighed. “You are young, and love seems to conquer all. In many cases it does. Sometimes, there are other considerations that are just as important. For instance, being loyal and faithful. I need to maintain my integrity, even if it means I can’t be with you. There are other reasons too.”

“I trust you, Drerpo,” she said. “I just wish... that you would tell me. I wish it was not so hard to overcome whatever it is to which you are being loyal.”

“You probably wouldn’t say that if you knew what it was,” he replied.

“Who is she?” Droos smiled.

“Alas, I am caught,” joked Drerpo. “For there is another. In fact I am married. I know that I have been with you nearly every minute of my entire life, but in reality I have been pledged to another for far longer.”

“Now you are making fun of me,” laughed Droos.

“Just a little,” he continued. “That’s what friends do. She and I also have many children already. In fact, according to some, even you, Droos, might be considered one of them.”

Drerpo laughed.

Book I: The Jungle

“Drerpo!” she said. “That’s a ridiculous thought. Enough.”

“It is a ridiculous idea,” he replied. “I’ll stop teasing you.”

Emerzo came up to them then, and looked down at the girl.

“Good morning, princess,” spoke Emerzo. “What would you like to do today?”

“Good morning, Emerzo,” Droos said. “I would like to have some breakfast. Then maybe we can walk a little more on this island.”

“As you wish,” bowed Emerzo.

She went off to do her shift of preparing.

“I know something that will help you wake up,” mentioned Drerpo. “If you follow me you will see.”

“Mysterious Drerpo!” exclaimed Droos, a little too loudly. “Alright, I’ll see what your surprise is.”

Rising, Droos followed her friend to the stern of the vessel and found that much of it was walled off with cloth curtains hung from a portable set of poles. Drerpo reached his hand forward and drew them apart at the center. In the midst of the curtains lay a large porcelain bathtub filled with steaming hot, soapy water! A bath! She had not had one in weeks.

“Oh Drerpo,” she said. “You are the best!”

“I do my part,” he bowed. “Now if you look over to the side you will see that we have provided some new clothing for you to wear, if you want. Your current garments will be washed in the meantime in case you want them again. I suppose it is good to hold onto some elements of any past. You have a number of choices of what to put on, so enjoy your bath, and after you are satisfied, clean, and ready, put on some clothes and join my sister and I at the prow.”

Droos laughed one more time, and walking through the curtains, returned a last glimpse of smile before she slid them shut, and went to do her task. Almost an hour later she emerged. She wore a lilac-green dress with a rough texture in a streaming pattern. Her curly hair had been straightened slightly in the heat, and her skin had a rosy tone. Still smiling she went to find Emerzo and Drerpo.

The couch and blankets where she had slept were removed, and in their place, a table lay once more topped with steaming plates. As she sat down in the wooden chair she examined her fare. Once more the names of the items escaped

her in some cases, but they were later recited to her. There were scrambled eggs prepared with a bit of milk, thin seasoned pieces of bread (a type of buttered bread), bacon, sausage, cottage cheese, and to drink, cold fresh-squeezed orange juice and steaming coffee. She recognized the coffee, as the berry grew well in the jungle climate. This was unusual in the careful combination of cream and sugar with it to provide a smooth, ever so sweet, warming refreshment. Remembering her commitment to eating better, she tasted everything, rather than consuming it all. The quality was exceptional and even with some left over, in the end she had no regrets.

As she just finished the last drops of the coffee, and breathed a sigh after her hard work, Drerpo walked up past her and sat on a chair at the other side of the table.

“Glad to see you satiated,” he said. “Are you ready to begin your day? It’s already the afternoon, and we should be off if you want to see more of the island.”

“I am quite ready,” she replied. “I don’t know how you and your sister are able to prepare such fabulous meals and hospitality with only the contents at the stern of this ship. Someday I would love to know the secret.”

“Well anytime you want to come to the back of our ship and see what’s there, you are welcome, Droos,” he added.

“I think I will before long,” she decided. “Now let’s get some exercise!”

It was just Drerpo and Droos walking together that morning. What had happened to her friend’s sister she did not know. They did not have so many hours of daylight left. Taking a quick pace they traveled to the east a few miles until they reached a small trickle of a stream hurrying from an incline going up the black rocks. Droos decided they would turn inland and they followed the stream. After a mile they came to something unexpected. A pond, perhaps thirty feet in diameter lay before them.

The water was clear and reflected the afternoon light. It dazzled and blinded Droos for a moment, and it was hard for her to see beyond its edges. A strange quality came upon the southern side of the water. As she looked up at the rising border on that side that ascended further up to another hundred feet, she thought she saw a figure walking through the light. It was brilliant and aglow, and it was difficult to tell, because the light of the sun was

Book I: The Jungle

reflecting back at her and affecting her vision, but her mind played a trick and the silhouette seemed to cast off a golden light of its own. It drew nearer, walking towards them.

At last the sun passed behind a cloud and radiance diminished. Looking up a young woman clad in pearl-white silks walked towards them. Her reddish hair was long and wavy and her eyes were grey. It was Drerpo's twin, Emerzo! She looked at them, at Drerpo in particular, and nodded her head to him before she walked around the pond to meet them.

"Emerzo!" exclaimed Droos. "Where did you come from? I didn't see you on the ship this morning."

"Alas, I was called away on business," Emerzo remarked honestly. "I have many duties that even my able colleagues are not always able to fulfill without me."

"Would you mind telling us what that means?" said Drerpo to his sister, with an edge of annoyance that sounded most unusual coming from him.

Emerzo looked at her brother with a strange look of amusement in her eyes.

"You are right, my brother," sang Emerzo. Turning to Droos, "I am sorry. This morning I felt cramped on the ship and needed some exercise. I left early to see the island for myself, to meditate, and enjoy the light of the sun. It was chance that upon my return I came upon you and Drerpo."

"Right..." wondered Droos, a tad suspicious.

Without any further words, the three walked back to the ship. The light of day was waning fast when they reached it, and they quickly invited Droos to help them move some objects from the stern of the vessel to mid-ships for their twilight entertainment. Following the siblings to the back of the boat, she found the two couches, and a shorter wooden table, and the other items they had used for their tea the previous night. Droos helped them move these to the center of the ship, and then lay down on one of the couches to relax.

Drerpo returned with a few bottles containing colorful liquids, and strangely shaped glasses. Placing these on the table, the young man offered Droos some of the liquid. She accepted the amber one, and taking a sip was at first repelled.

"Take it slowly, Droos," laughed Drerpo. "This is not a drink you enjoy quickly. It is called whiskey. It is a delicate drink to be savored. Take the smallest of sips and swirl the liquid around

your mouth, letting it warm every part. Bathe your tongue with it and at last swallow carefully. Every taste should be like this.”

The princess tried this approach and found the experience far more enjoyable. Her portion was small, though she got the sense it was of appropriate size. Alcohol was not unknown to the royalty of The People of the Blood, and she could tell that this was a potent drink. Drerpo poured himself a clear fluid which he called *Gin*. Soon Emerzo arrived and placed a number of small plates on the table. There were little edibles, some salty and crunchy, a few pieces of cheese of types both creamy and strong, and nuts. The twin poured herself a darker amber liquid which she identified as a type of fortified wine.

“Some say it is only for dessert,” said Emerzo, “But for cocktail hour it is my eccentricity.”

The three young adults let themselves relax, and enjoyed slowly and responsibly the tasty beverages, as only connoisseurs might. Along with the drinks they had cool, refreshing water. Looking up from her relaxation, Droos saw that Emerzo had put her hand in Drerpo’s. The two were smiling, seeming a little absent. The contact and the expression were a little strange, and it put a momentary scowl on Droos’ face. Drerpo suddenly awoke from his quiet and looking at her, gave a little wink.

Sunset passed and darkness fell, the stars came out. After an hour and a half, they replaced the couches and *coffee table* with a larger table, and the two ornate wooden chairs for Emerzo and Drerpo and the smaller one that Droos had used. Dinner was just as fabulous as Droos had begun to expect, and she enjoyed it in moderation, while largely thinking her own thoughts. Afterwards they replaced the table with a very small one, on which they placed a lantern and the music box used the previous night. It played music most quietly. Then they talked long about their plans for the future.

“You are a free woman,” said Emerzo. “What will you do now?”

“I still have few ideas about where we will go,” admitted Droos.

“I am one that is said to have a certain gift of foresight,” smiled Emerzo serenely. “If you ask me you will sail with my brother and I up along the coast Nolai. Before long we will travel out to the deep ocean and upward out of the land of your people’s living memory. You will begin to see legends, and as we come

Book I: The Jungle

further, beyond the latitude of the Neck of Passion, and a little further still, you will see all the world change, and wonder and magic will appear to overwhelm you. What you experience will be wholly different from anything you have lived thus far.”

Droos sat quietly and considered this wild idea, and tried to imagine what she meant. Drerpo sat in his throne-like chair on Emerzo’s left, and sat forward to speak.

“We have been friends for many years, Droos,” he spoke. “You have trusted me so far. Now that you have the power and ability to choose, I will recommend that you take another leap of faith and take up my sister’s offer. Leaving your people to determine their own fate until they are ready for you to return, you must look to your own education. The lands of legend may hold secrets that will prepare you for what dreams may come.”

“You and your sister sound so much alike,” replied Droos. “I suppose that you saw each other and knew each other before you knew anyone else, as is the case with twins. The future is frightening to me, and very much is unknown. Your words of prophecy comfort me, and even if it will be overwhelming to behold the wonders of the places in the legends of my people, I



will do as you suggest. Let's travel north and see what there is for me to learn. I have been reborn in thought, and I hope someday even yet to redeem my soul. Let my new journey begin."

They sat a while longer talking on more mundane matters. Then they cleared away the chairs and Droos stood at the prow with Emerzo while her brother saw to the sails and navigation. Responding to The Language of the Universe, the ship lurched, and then departed smoothly from the shallow shore of the Gates of Heaven, and turning round, they left it behind.

As Droos sat with her new friend, Emerzo, and looked out, the twin went to the large jewel that had lain at the front of the ship from the start. At first it appeared only a decoration. Now with a few whispered words, and putting her hand on it, the jewel shone forth suddenly. It was brilliant and bright as a star, but did not burn the eyes even though it was so close. The feeling rather pierced the heart, a beacon that spoke of the direction proper to traverse, and a future bright and comforting to behold. If anything it reminded her of her birth star, that had fallen five weeks earlier. In the light of the new star, they sailed into the night of the south, away from the Gates of Heaven, and into legend.





Chapter 9

A New Journey

The morning was young when Droos woke and stretched. Unlike the previous night, this time she had slept again on the bed, not the sofa. Already feeling at home on this ship, she rose and splashed her face in a bowl of water left beside her. The icy water made her cheeks red and she breathed harder. Looking about she saw that the sky was blue, the sea only lightly rippled, and the air, while taking a deep breath, smelled like nothing but a fresh, moist breeze. Then gazing out to the west she saw that there was land slipping by about ten miles away. Wondering again where they were she walked to the middle of the ship to find Drerpo and his sister.

Drerpo was leaning against the forward mast, facing to the stern. He held a rectangular piece of metal, carved and etched with swirls and set with clear crystal stone, staring at it intently. After she stood there a moment, he sensed her presence and looked up.

“There’s my favorite person,” he said.

“I’m your favorite person,” she smirked. “When I say the words to you at least I mean them.”

“I do mean what I say,” replied Drerpo,

“We have already discussed this, so I’ll leave your response as you gave it for now,” continued Droos, sounding a little tart. “I came to ask you if you know where we are. I see land not too far away.”

“Ah,” said Drerpo. “If that’s what you came to ask me you came to the right place.”

He walked over and put his left arm around her shoulder. The touch was warm and she could not help but smile. Putting the metal object on the wooden deck, he walked with her over to the port side of the ship. Sure enough, there was the coast slipping by.

“We have gone about two hundred and fifty miles since

you last saw with daylight,” he explained. “To your west you see the desert of your past, the Hell of Oblivion. If you look very carefully you may see the Princess and the Servants sticking up. There our friends lie dead, while we live on to be present in the next book of our story.”

“That’s a funny way of putting it,” remarked Droos. “I wonder what kind of story ours would make so far. Is it one of suspense or of drama? Do the characters grow and change? Is there love and despair? Does it have a happy ending?”

“If you ask me,” considered Drerpo, “And this is certainly a most strange conversation, we have lived what historians might record in the form of philosophical dramatic narrative. You may not have realized, Droos, but all of our discussions of philosophy carry substance. It was not small talk or idle banter.”

“You’re right,” spoke Droos. “We have explored many complicated topics. Of course, without exploring philosophy, I never would have made the ultimate choice I did. It is abstraction that lays the foundation for all action. We think abstractly and subconsciously about what we will do before we do it. Something also occurs to me. Enough was said to give me strength and curiosity enough to begin the process of conversion and renaissance, of rebirth, into a new life. But as far as the exploration of these topics goes, really we have only discussed the introductory essays. What is the proper society? What is knowledge? What is good and evil? These are topics that could fill books. Perhaps we will have opportunity to discuss them as we move onto the next parts of our lives.”

“What of the dramatic component of our story?” inquired Drerpo.

“Well I think you know just a bit about that,” winked Droos. “Will we ever get together? Or more over, my friend, will you ever have me? Otherwise, well, it was heartbreaking to bid farewell to our friends, Resh, Ini, and most of all Etøn. And, well, I suppose there were some who for some reason might have been concerned about me. What if I did go through with it and sacrifice myself?”

“Of course the narrative component is easy to consider,” mentioned Drerpo.

“Indeed,” said Droos.

Drerpo and Droos stood there for a while longer, holding hands now. The young man looked over and smiled at his friend,

Book I: The Jungle

and she smiled back.

"I suppose this part of the story is over," Drerpo continued.

"I think there is a little more to say," finished Droos.

They gazed out at their past a little longer and then turned away. With little effort, they set up the breakfast table and chairs and laid food upon it. This morning all three of them, Emerzo, Drerpo, and Droos, sat together. Their breakfast took more than an hour.

"How fast would you say we are going?" murmured Droos through a mouthful of eggs towards the end of the meal.

"We use terms that may seem foreign to you, but are normal in the land to which we travel," replied Emerzo. "Our speed is twenty-five miles per hour. This is quite fast for a water-vessel, but hardly moving at all compared to other vehicles of transport you will see when we get to our destination."

"The term is pretty self-explanatory," continued Droos.

"We travel twenty-five miles each hour. If we don't stop we will cover six hundred miles a day. That is amazingly fast! When Drerpo and I began the journey for our ritual, we might make twenty miles in a day by water. How do we move so quickly?"

"Magic!" exclaimed Emerzo, her eyes widening suddenly.

"Very funny dear," replied Drerpo. "There is no such thing as magic. The real world functions according to empirical, observable laws of science. Our propulsion is according to the will of the Great Beings, to the extent that my sister and I are lucky enough to use our limited knowledge of The Language of the Universe to communicate with them."

"I thought you said only Greater Gods could communicate with the Greater Beings," complained Droos.

"Anyone can try, Droos," said Emerzo.

"Could I try?" wondered the princess.

"I'm sure my brother would want you to," teased Emerzo.

"But one step at a time."

"How long will it take to get where we are going?" asked Droos.

"The route we are taking will take a little longer, since it is meant to give you glimpses of Nolai," commented Drerpo. "Our journey should be about three thousand six hundred miles. We will pass the Neck of Passion one thousand miles before we get to our destination. About eight hundred miles before we arrive, you should keep your eyes open. The world will begin to change."

"I can't wait," Droos looked at him. "When we get there, it will be time for the next book in our story to begin."

Emerzo nodded at her, and after they had sat sometime longer, she rose, and joining the others, they cleared the plates and table away. After they finished bringing the table and chairs to the stern of the ship, Droos stood looking around. Curiosity had her searching for a secret.

"You won't find the other settings and items," remarked Drerpo behind her.

She looked dubious, and scrunched her face.

"Where does it all go?" asked Droos. "It certainly seems like magic to me."

"The laws of science may create miracles that appear as magic to those unaccustomed to them," responded Drerpo. "The Language of the Universe may also seem like magic, and even to the scientists. Especially to the scientists. That the underlying fabric of reality may not be logical, but subjective, and living in a sense, would be frightening to their sensibilities."

He paused for moment.

"Would you like to learn some words in that language, Droos?" he questioned.

"Yes!" Droos exclaimed.

Drerpo reached down to the ground and picked up something she was sure had not been there a moment earlier. It was the metal object she had seen when she first found Drerpo that morning. He raised it before her and she saw that on its surface, it had a shimmering screen, like a pool of water. Drerpo traced his finger on the surface, which did not give way as water, but was solid. The object reacted and a mist of glowing orange-golden sand rose above it.

"Watch carefully while you listen to what I say, Droos," he said. "For to speak to the Great Beings, you must trace the words with your body as well as saying them. The Language is as much a dance as a form of speech."

Then the boy reached his finger into the cloud of sand, and spoke loudly and did what he normally had done silently, as he recited The Language of the Universe. The words seemed to echo, and rise as thunder, booming off the tops of mountains and reaching to the lowest depths of the trenches beneath the seas.

"dweeJ tae'øh, wimzçtz!" he recited.

As he drew his finger through the sand, streams flowed up

Book I: The Jungle

and formed letters. These are how they appeared:



Upon finishing the sand sank back into the shimmering surface, the letters vanishing. Drerpo lowered the object and behold! Below him was a small table, on which he placed it.

“Amazing!” wondered Droos. “You’re telling me that wasn’t magic?”

“Maybe there is a better way of putting it,” considered the boy. “Maybe in the end magic and science can be the same thing.”

“What did the words mean?” asked Droos.

“They might seem overly simple in translation,” replied Drerpo. “In your language they say, ‘Spirit of tae’øh, Awake!’. tae’øh is the name of the Greater Being on which I called. The Being is the essence of Puzzles. The concept is the Being. Our storage system and kitchen are an elaborate puzzle, compliments of tae’øh.”

“Somehow when I hear the explanation they stop seeming as impressive,” mentioned Droos.

“They aren’t impressive,” remarked Drerpo. “They just are.”

“Can I try them?” inquired the girl.

“Go ahead, Droos,” said Drerpo. “Why don’t you try to put away the table and tablet (or so went the name of the metal object).”

Both the words and letters were difficult to remember, but the princess did her best. She traced the letters in the air as she recited the incantation. Unfortunately the words only echoed in her mind alone, and went no further, except for the normal tone of speech. Looking down, though, she saw that the table wobbled slightly.

“Spectacular!” complimented Drerpo. He reached forward and steadied the table. “You got the table to move. Don’t feel upset that nothing more happened. The fact that the Greater Being responded at all is most interesting. Maybe you do have divine blood in you.”

Droos felt good about herself.

“What is the object you keep using?” Droos pointed to the tablet.

“This,” he picked it up again. “In many worlds of sufficient technology it is called a *tablet*. Mine is of particularly good design. I admit you will find few like it. You will find many similar items where we are going. Here. Take a look.”

Drerpo handed his friend the item. Droos moved it around, looking at the metal designs and jewels on the back. Then she examined the water-like screen in the front. To her surprise, it appeared to hold within it landscapes of the real world. Now it raced through a great canyon, swooping down like a bird, almost touching the water at the bottom. Then it soared in mountain tops, covered in perpetual snow. Again it changed and clambered through a jungle, much like the one in which she had lived. Reaching forward she touched the screen.

Touching it the screen reacted. Suddenly a beam of light stretched from it and formed a sphere. Words in her language appeared in order as she watched in the bottom right corner. It called this globe *No*. Various numbers appeared that she did not quite understand.

As she continued to gaze at the image, it became more solid, or at least discernable. Great shapes rose at various parts of the surface from deep blue that reminded her of the ocean. She surmised that maybe this was a picture of the world in which she lived. The shapes were continents rising from seas. One strange element she noticed were the colors of the continents. Rather than being green, as she might expect, they were grey and orange in color. Small dots of natural hues dotted them, but in large part the earth seemed to grow metallic shades. Except on one continent where the forests far below persisted. The tip of that island held a strip empty of any sign of life.

“That’s *Nolai*!” she exclaimed.

“Very good,” replied Drerpo. “I see you have guessed the secret of the globe.”

“It is our world, called *No* (with a short ‘o’),” she continued. “It is funny. I feel as if I hold the world in the palm of my hand. Distances seem so small, and it is all so fragile. I wonder how easy it would be for us to destroy it, or lay waste to it. What right would we have to do such a thing?”

“They would have little right,” revealed Drerpo. “You will see, though, the extent to which the humans of this planet, as

Book I: The Jungle

worlds on the scale of the universe are called, violate the earth, when we get to the city we will be visiting.”

“I grew up in a city,” spoke Droos.

“Yes, but it will seem merely a drop of water compared to what you will see,” laughed Drerpo. “It is both tremendously beautiful, and full of hope, but also sad, and burdened by risk. For in the end to increase technology is to attempt to build a tower to reach God. It risks developing the ability to destroy the world, and that it will be destroyed. People will be more easily enslaved and dark ages will be long indeed. Killing will be done at the touch of a button from thousands of miles away. The earth will be blackened with soot, mountains pulled down, and oceans spilled. Voices of millions of innocent animals and plants and trees will cry out in fear and pain as they are hunted in greater number than the world can sustain and the lands on which their ancestors have dwelled for millions of years are destroyed forever. These humans will believe they are Gods and may create life of their own, artificial intelligence that thinks differently, and with only a single flaw in mechanical DNA and neurons may be created insane, and capable of even worse atrocities. Or they will treat these creations as slaves.”

“Why is it that my people were left alone?” wondered Droos.

“That is a mystery,” admitted Drerpo. “If you ask me it is for purposes of art, science, biological diversity, and a number of other purposes. It is useful for those who cover the earth in metal to leave some parks to grow trees that will drink carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen. Humans need to breathe. They also like to think that by leaving something for nature, and for what they might call *unadulterated natives*, that they are being altruistic and supporting the aesthetic wonder of the world. They would think having a continent-sized park to be a testament to their ability to permit the world to flourish even in the face of the far larger burden they place upon it.”

“Don’t they know what is going on with my people!” said Droos, annoyed. “Are we nothing but a zoo, something for them to watch with tablets from afar, to laugh at our ignorance and backwardness. Why wouldn’t they intervene and save us from our subjugation.”

“They would probably say that it isn’t their place to judge others,” he suggested. “They may also see it as a case study for the

development of tyranny and the fight to overcome it. These people want to see it take its course naturally.”

“Over the scale of thousands of years!” exclaimed Droos.

“If you don’t like the nature of anthropology, you might tell them yourself,” spoke Drerpo.

“I will definitely be doing that,” said Droos.

They stood in silence for a while. The princess thought that she had left evil behind. It appeared that there was some element of human nature that was always tempted to do wrong, to be utilitarian and to believe that the ends may justify the means more than they should.

Placing the tablet back on the table as the picture of the globe sunk back into the screen, Droos walked back to the middle of the ship. Drerpo followed her and placed his hand on her shoulder again. The young woman was distraught, and her friend knew it was for more reasons than just this thought.

“Leaving behind everything you knew, and altering the course of your fate after an entire life of preparation, is a great change,” soothed Drerpo, rubbing her shoulder. “The place we are going, the city, will be strange and frightening. It will take time to adjust. But in the end there is little to truly fear. Yes there are the same frailties and failures of human resolve, but there are also great achievements in political philosophy that I believe you will find intriguing and will help you in your education. This will be an important destination for you.”

Droos looked at the sky and the image of the metal-plated world haunted her thoughts. Then a thought less altruistic occurred to her.

“Why don’t we have technology like this?” she asked.

“Why are we so backward?”

“Is it really backward?” pondered Drerpo. “Or is it how humans were meant to be? I don’t refer to the political order of your people, but their technological capabilities. How many possibilities and options can the human mind consider at once? At some point it devolves into simple arithmetic instead of considering the higher order of ideas and principles necessary for the foundation of important decisions. This has to do with deciding matters that affect many people and the environment in significant ways. Without abstract principles to guide action, choice becomes selfish, and narcissistic, with profit and money filling the mind’s eye, and personal comfort. People easily think

Book I: The Jungle

first of themselves, and at best of their family and friends. Rarely do they have any will or more importantly time left to move beyond those concentrated walls. Technology creates too many possibilities, and in the end brings upon ever increasing destruction and death. Mortals can only consider so much, and when they move much beyond the level of your tribe, they are overwhelmed. Better to dwell in simplicity, and enjoy necessary possibilities, not infinite skies.”

“Isn’t it these very possibilities that enable a just society?” suggested Droos. “The idea of freedom, and a society based upon it is new to me. But I can easily consider the implications of a technology like the tablet. Words are the first tools of state, and with easy control of its proliferation, the language itself may even be manipulated, as happened with ours, and at best those words presented are carefully designed for propaganda. With this tablet, anyone can write any words and share them with anyone. Maybe they would even be able to communicate directly between the tablets, sharing information without any control of government, except maybe if they conquer the networks that would enable this. Revolutions might be planned if the government steps beyond its duty, with dates and times spread quietly from person to person directly. The principles of freedom and right political philosophy may be held in each person’s hand, and read and discussed readily. I expect the higher the order of technology, the more capability there is of securing the people in many ways. There is a risk. But not all risks are bad.”

“Very good, Droos,” he proclaimed. “You will be ready for meeting with officials and browsing the libraries to explore the nature of free government. The dilemmas and benefits of certain policies are already entering your mind.”

“*Free government*,” annunciated Droos. “The notion still amazes me. It is so contrary to everything I grew up around. Who is the king of the nation to which we are headed?”

“Who do you think it is?” asked Drerpo.

“Ah! You have caught me in a trap again,” smiled Droos. “Now that you ask the question, I suppose a society in which the ruler has no one to answer cannot be free except where the ruler is concerned. Well, I think I’ve had enough of this conversation for now, Drerpo. It’s too much for me!”

The young woman handed the tablet back to her friend, who accepted it and lowered it to his side. Little more was planned

for the rest of that day. There were conversations, sumptuous meals, light entertainment, and steadily more to learn. Droos could not help but consider how much her friend was holding back that he might tell her about the strange devices and matters concerning their destination. Only it was for the sake of surprise, that their arrival would have the most dramatic effect.

Night passed and the next day dawned much like the previous one. Only now the images from the distant coast passing by were of green grass and high mountains. This was the Artery of Hell. They had passed the Gates of Hell the previous day, and Droos had beheld the mouth of the great river of her people, and seen that no aura of pain and suffering surrounded the river's release into the sea. She knew that very soon, though she would not be able to see so far, that she would be even with the latitude of the capitol of The People of the Blood, where she had spent most of her life, the life that was now over for now, and seemed even now an ancient memory.

Days passed quickly, and already the second came and went, and the third. By afternoon on the third day Droos caught the last glimpse of the God of Blood, Nolai, the continent and land of her youth. For now they sailed out into the deep ocean. Away from the sight of land. Soon only blue waves gave texture to the surrounding plain of water.

On the third evening, the evening of the ninth day of Droos' sixteenth year, Droos, although still grateful, began to find herself a little bored. She walked over to the middle of the ship and found Emerzo and Drerpo together on a couch. The young man sat on the left side, and Emerzo lay across the rest with her head in Drerpo's lap. This was most odd, and a little awkward. Something occurred to Droos then. What if Emerzo and Drerpo were not really siblings, but, merely a young couple in a relationship? That would explain Drerpo's hesitance to be with her. Yet this was a strange notion. When would Drerpo have had time to meet someone, fall in love, and marry? If this was the case, why did they not simply admit to this from the beginning? She shook her head and scrunched her face a little before she looked a little closer at what they were doing.

They both had books in their hands, Emerzo and Drerpo. Apparently older technology was not beyond the standards of the pair. The book held by Drerpo was a hardback with bright red coloring. Gold leaf spelled out words in a language she could not

Book I: The Jungle

read, and a symbol appeared in the center she did not recognize. Reaching a stopping point, Drerpo, looked up and saw her.

“Good evening, Droos,” he said. “Did you come to socialize?”

“More or less,” she replied.

Seeing her interest in what he was reading, the young man answered her question.

“Ah, this book...” he continued. “What I have here is a very rare book, and some legends say this copy came from the Library of the Universe itself. It speaks of a young man little older than us who helped unite a world not unlike this one in a single government that ruled in peace and based on love and respect, though not without any incidents of war and violence. The young man overcame great personal obstacles, tendencies to violence and temptations to atrocity, and sublimated it into the energy necessary to rule.”

“That sounds like a fascinating story,” commented Droos. “It is curious to know that someone who has temptation to do evil can still choose to do good. Did this young man ever act on his temptations?”

“Yes,” answered Drerpo. “In his childhood he used to enjoy catching animals like scitters, called squirrels, and torturing and killing them. He also convinced his sister to engage in a campaign of subterfuge, that presented them on news blogs and high level political discussion groups as world authorities on politics and government, among other subjects, so that they would be in a position to gain real power someday.”

“It is a wonder this man turned out to be so beneficial to his world,” chided Droos.

“I think it is a true demonstration of the possibilities of the human condition,” responded Drerpo. “He did not do it alone either. Friends just as brilliant as he surrounded him, and aided him in guiding his actions and changing his behavior to the good. Eventually at the end of his life, because of the powerful story of overcoming enormous obstacles and persevering to greatly aid the world, his brother wrote an honest account of his life in this book. This book is part of a three book series that are considered akin to scripture by members of his faith, and respected as classics of literature by everyone else.”

“And I’m reading a book written by his sister,” chimed in Emerzo. “It is a history of the life of her brother, part of a lengthy

multi-volume series of history texts. It is somewhat dry, but very informative. Reading about the achievements of notable mortals, I find, is very rewarding.

“Notable mortals?” questioned Droos.

Emerzo shrugged. The sister took a few more moments, and reaching a stopping point, collected her brother’s book, and put them together on a table beside the couch. Then she sat up.

“Maybe someday you’ll join us in visiting the library where we got this,” considered Emerzo.

“I would like that,” said Droos.

“What would you like to do now,” asked Drerpo. “You know tomorrow is a big day.”

The days and nights had somewhat blended together, and this reminded Droos that the siblings had mentioned something special about the fourth day of their journey.

“What’s so special about tomorrow?” inquired Droos.

“We’ll leave that as a surprise, as usual,” smiled Drerpo.

“Then until you feel fit to tell me,” joked Droos, “I’ll settle for some conversation about other things.”

Emerzo looked at Drerpo and waved her hand. Drerpo rose and walked towards the back of the vessel, leaving the two young women alone together. Now Emerzo took a moment to talk to Droos.

“How have you been, Droos?” Emerzo asked seriously.

The princess took a moment to respond.

“Everything seems so, wonderful and awful at the same time,” considered Droos. “It is wonderful because it is new, and awful because it reminds me of everything I have left behind.”

“You have discussed this with my brother before,” continued Emerzo. “Is there anything else that might bother you?”

Droos thought a moment longer, and then it occurred what her friend’s sister was trying to discuss.

“Are you and Drerpo really twins?” questioned Droos.

Emerzo sighed.

“I suppose you notice a certain connection between us that goes beyond the bond of siblings,” answered Emerzo. “Why does this matter to you, Droos?”

“You don’t know?” whispered Droos, quietly.

Emerzo smiled, knowingly. Droos returned her gaze a moment longer, and then, something changed. It was as if the boat grew larger around her. The masts drew further apart, walls

Book I: The Jungle

rose up on the sides, sliding in from nowhere. Looking around, amazed, the princess saw that she now stood in a brightly lit room. A woman of awful countenance sat before her on a throne of white marble. She appeared tall and fearsome, beautiful as the dawn, and firm as the foundations of the planet, beautiful and terrible. A crown of radiance rose from her reddish wavy hair, as graceful as olive branches and willows but as perilous as strainers and trees felled in a storm. Droos took a step back and bumped into a chair that stood behind her all of a sudden.

Then the woman shrank a little, and appeared less terrible, but still awesome. Very much she looked like Emerzo, and in many ways reminded her also of the woman who had appeared to her in the dream she dreamt in the capitol all of those months ago.

“Sit, my daughter,” said the woman, with a smile, and the wave of a hand.

Droos listened and quickly sat.

“Who... are you?” wondered Droos.

“I... am,” said the voice, same as before.

“Why am I here?” Droos continued.

Laughter, as pleasant and charming as falling powdered snow on a winters morning, came from the woman.

“Now that is a question,” she said. “Why are you here?”

“I know what you want me to say,” answered Droos, clever and swift to understand. “I am here, because I love Drerpo. I love him with all my heart, all my being. And I know that he loves me. I want so much for us to be able to be together forever. Yet something holds him back, and I have feared to press too far for him to reveal his hesitance. My lady, do you know what holds him back? Why can’t we be together?”

The woman, mighty as a mountain, sighed then, and it sounded as a wind blowing a forest of trees, then it stilled.

“You know that Drerpo loves you, my dear?” said the woman.

Something odd flowed with the perilous voice. It seemed like the being was sad, and tired, and the voice carried regret. She must know everything, and yet she asked a question of small little Droos nonetheless. Why might a Goddess ask a question when she is omniscient?

“I do know he loves me,” sang Droos.

“My husband...” whispered the woman to herself. “He loves you. A mortal. A young adolescent child of sixteen. I am

the one who created your race, in my might and glory! Were you there, Droos, when I lay the foundations of the universe? Were you there when I split and hallowed heaven and hell? Do you know the nature of Good and Evil or contemplate truly the essence of the soul and have conversations with the Greater Beings Themselves? Who are you Droos, but a silly little girl, to stand before the God who I have been married to for two hundred trillion years, ahead of me? How could you!”

The Goddess finished yelling at Droos, and having heard the fury of such a being, the princess felt herself humbled, and she lowered her head. Something occurred to her in spite of the storm arrayed before her. The reaction of this Goddess, seemed to Droos, almost... human. Droos felt pity, and then a boldness came upon her and rather than cower, and for a moment that perhaps she had been preparing for her entire life, she stood and walked up to the Goddess.

As Droos walked before the Goddess, she felt herself grow, and felt a vast space within her, as though she floated among the clouds, and looked down at her world and saw everything, with people and animals and trees speckled upon it like miniscule dots. Droos took the Goddess’ hands, and lowering herself to her knees, with humility and pity, kissed the hand.

“Elriver,” said Droos quietly. “I am but a silly girl. I am frail, and imperfect, and I know so little. What is this world, let alone the universe to me? I did not put the stars in the sky or sing to my race when we were first born. All I know is that Drerpo is my friend, a person of tenderness and kindness, who pressed me to overcome my stubborn commitment to walk in the path of senselessness and destruction not a moment too soon. We grew up together, and have known each other our entire lives. I... don’t know who he really is. I don’t know what right I have to expect his love. And I don’t know how I can ask it before you, the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe. All I know is that I love Drerpo, and will do anything for him, and for those who care about him as much as I do. My Queen, I do not want you to be my enemy. Tell me what you want, you who have cared for Drerpo for his entire life, and I will do it. Tell me to leave Drerpo alone, and I will do so, and trust my friend’s reasons for remaining apart, and your role in that desire.”

Then a chuckle left the great being, Elriver, and warmth that comforted a billion worlds flowed from her. She looked at

Book I: The Jungle

Droos, into her eyes.

“You are very sweet, child,” said Elriver. “I can see why he likes you. I love you too, you know. It is just hard... to share someone’s affections, when you love them, with someone else. I feel odd explaining this to you, and you must feel strange hearing it from me. No, Droos. You are most worthy. I will leave you and my husband to decide yourselves what you will do.”

“I don’t want to betray you,” mourned the girl.

“I’m afraid that cannot be avoided,” said Elriver. “Yet not all betrayals are evil. Some are necessary. Do not be afraid, child. The laws of love in the hallowed places of the universe are more complicated than you know, and I in my glory can readily share Showsh’s affections with another. I ask only one thing of both of you. Take some more time to think about whatever decision you will make. If this is the path you desire, continue to be friends for my sake as you and Drerpo travel together, until you, Droos, have fully redeemed yourself, and in the end, decided whether or not you will return and save your tribe. When you have fully realized yourself, Droos, and are no longer a girl, but a confident woman of accomplished deeds, then the time will come for you and Drerpo to make your choice. Then, I will give my blessings to whatever you decide.”

Droos bowed low at Elriver’s words, and kissed the Queen’s hand.

“Thank you, Elriver,” replied Droos. “I will do as you say.”

Elriver smiled.

“Now you return to your friends, Drerpo and Emerzo, and enjoy your lives together!” finished Elriver. “Mortal life is too precious to waste time talking to those for whom time is no limit. The real world is far more real.”

Droos took a step back then, and it seemed the mighty, mountainous figure of Elriver drew back, a storm column retreating. The room itself dissolved and Droos was left in a surreal white field of empty thought and emotion.

§

Droos woke suddenly, as the light of day warmed her and a light breeze kissed her cheek. She had dreamt such a strange

dream. Opening her eyes she found that she was lying in the comfortable bed she had used for the last few nights. She found it difficult to remember how she gotten there or what had happened the night before. It seemed, as far as she felt, that it was something important.

A blur of movement caught her eye and she looked towards the foot of the bed, to see Drerpo coming up to her. She smiled and looked at her friend.

“Good morning, princess,” Drerpo teased. “Time to see something wondrous that you have never seen before.”

Curious, Droos sat up.

“So the surprise will be revealed at last,” chuckled Droos.

“As soon as you get dressed that is,” finished Drerpo.

Droos rose and dawned her clothes quickly. Then she joined Drerpo and his sister at the prow. The siblings stood together, looking as human as ever, and there was nothing to indicate that they were anything more or that they had any knowledge of the conversation Droos had enjoyed the night before. Of course, it appeared that Droos was not aware of that conversation either, at least consciously. Emerzo turned to her and smiled.

“Good morning, my friend,” Emerzo said, with even a little bow of the head.

Droos quickly returned the expression.

“Now, dear Droos,” spoke Drerpo, “To see our surprise you must simply look up at the sky, and see what you can see.”

Look up at the sky? It was daylight, and Droos wondered what all there was to see. Yet she trusted her friend, and turning her eyes, gazed at the heavens above.

At first she did not see what they were talking about, for what was revealed before her was so different than anything she had seen in her life that at first her mind refused to believe her senses. Slowly the clear image came into focus, and an analysis of what it might be began to be processed.

Up in the sky, maybe one thousand feet up, a river flowed through the sky. It was steady, and unceasing, traveling in the straightest of lines from southeast to northwest. This was extremely odd. The color was also different. It was all of shades of iron, and grays, and shining dots of reflected sunlight. The river appeared to be made of metal.

“What is it?” said Droos with awe.

Book I: The Jungle

“What do you think, Droos?” replied Drerpo with a smile. “Take a little more time.”

Looking upward some more, Droos thought she could tell that the river was made up of many dots, traveling close together. A distant memory from the past began to stir in Droos’ mind. She remembered in a dream a river like this, flying above a great city of steel and iron. In the dream they were great structures of metal that moved. She had thought then that they had people inside of them. The same thought occurred to her now, and looking again she thought she could see on some of the dots straight lines like the wings of birds.

“How are there so many of them!” exclaimed Droos. “These metal birds fill the sky!”

“Well done, Droos,” mentioned Emerzo. “You figured it out. You are very smart.”

Droos blushed.

“What you see above is one of the great avenues used by the single nation that occupies the rest of this world,” revealed Drerpo.

“Do you mean to say that the caves of steel are real?” inquired Droos, with wide eyes.

“They are very much real, Droos,” spoke Drerpo. “You will see them very soon. At dawn two days from now we will arrive at the capitol of the great nation. Really the whole of the rest of the world looks as one great city, but for thousands of years this has been the seat of the planetary government. Prepare yourself, for the boulevards of metal birds are but a drop of water compared to the vast ocean of wonders you will soon see.”

Enthralled, Droos prepared herself for wonders ahead that she could only imagine. Only in one picture book and in one dream had she gotten a glimpse of the magnificence soon to be seen. So the day continued. After some few hundred miles more the first boulevard was left behind, and more began, sometimes one at a time, and soon, many at once.

Eventually the vast streams of metal ships flew in layers thousands of feet apart. Droos looked up in awe, even though they still appeared as dots against the sky. She could not wait to see one up close. The day passed, the night dawned, and she fell asleep restless. Waking the next day she found that they were now traveling north by northwest. The waiting became difficult, and Emerzo with a certain amusement seeing how nervous the girl

appeared, brought out a book written in the language of Droos' people.

"Here!" said Emerzo. "Something to occupy your time."

Droos laughed, and although at first she could not settle down, eventually she saw that Drerpo too was reading, sitting on a cushioned chair at a table, and sipping on some tea. So she joined him and they read together.

It was curious that they had a book in her language, and it was very surprising. It seemed to be a story describing all of the years of Droos' life up until that day. It began with her birth, with the star in heaven shining above, and the rituals atop the mountain. She grew up and learned the myths of her tribe, only tempered by the ideas that Drerpo shared with her. Her First Ascension Day came and went and soon she was preparing for the final ritual of her sacrifice. Her and Etøn became good friends, and as she traveled south on the Ceremony of Passage, he, Drerpo, and her talked long and discussed important notions of philosophy and science. Tears entered Droos' eyes when she reached the scene where Drerpo cut Etøn's throat. As she read about the last moments before her decision, even though it had been her that had done these things, she found the suspense captivating. Finally she breathed a sigh of relief as the Droos in the book decided to live rather than die. It traced the story to the Gates of Heaven, including her first social dance with Drerpo, and how her heart had fluttered and she was all smiles. It went until the moment before she received this book!

A strange sensation passed over Droos, to see her story so thoroughly described in this book. She wondered how it had been so quickly compiled. When the princess went to Emerzo to ask, her friend's sister had an answer.

"Oh, I had some help," Emerzo spoke, rolling her eyes a little.

"You mean your brother," wondered Droos.

"Right..." Emerzo finished.

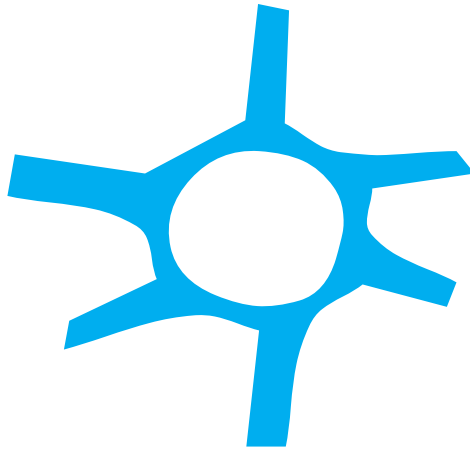
The sixth night came and in order to help her relax, Droos sat on the couches once more across from Drerpo and his sister, while they enjoyed responsibly some hard drinks. This bottle of whiskey was a little different than the previous one: less peaty, and smoother. She thought to herself that she preferred the more flavorful and complex drink she had enjoyed the previous day. It was a little cold that night and the warmth of the amber liquid was

Book I: The Jungle

comforting. Eventually Droos lay back on the couch and looked up at the sky. Far above she could still see the river, only now it was all of lights. The metal birds never ceased to flow whether it was day or night. As the thought of all those thousands of people going about their business floated through her mind, she fell fast asleep.

The twelfth day of Droos' sixteenth year dawned. It was bright and the sky was clear. She was not sure, but the princess felt then that something was about to change, that the world was holding its breath. Whether it was for her, or simply a feeling inside her, she did not know.

Walking to the prow once more, she joined Drerpo, who was standing by himself, looking out to the west, the way they were headed. Seeing his friend, Drerpo smiled at Droos, and when she came up beside him, he put his arm around her shoulder. Then he got an idea, and leaning over, he kissed her cheek. Her heart fluttered, and she breathed quickly for a few moments. Then the warmth of true friendship returned and she simply enjoyed looking out at the world before them, standing side by side with her friend Drerpo.



As they gazed to the west, Droos saw before her, clear as day, and with her waking eyes, a vast city. Its buildings rose tens of thousands of feet into the sky. The architecture was of varied hues of metal, in all shapes and forms. Great structures of polished marble rose in ornate wonder and always above hundreds of streams of metal birds flowed carrying hundreds of thousands of mortal souls. The wall of metal rose so high that it blocked the sun. It spread along the coast still dozens of miles away from horizon to horizon.

“Here begins your new life,” smiled Drerpo.

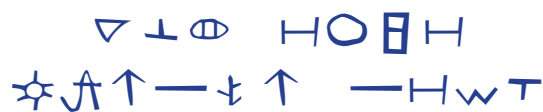
“I don’t think I could ever have done it without you, Drerpo,” replied Droos.

“You’ll never have to live on your own,” said Drerpo. “As long as we both live, we will be together.”

The young man kissed her on the cheek again, and together, arm in arm, they looked together at the promise of the city standing as tall as a mountain before them, filled with the myriad possibilities of high civilization, and just as many questions to be answered as before.



End of Book I



Interlude



Interlude

Good and evil do not exist. That does not mean there is no good. What then is good if it both does and does not exist?

In its truest essence The Good is pure and indivisible. It cannot be broken, divided, reformed, or analyzed. Not Gods, nor philosopher kings, or the meekest Sentient being can seek to understand the depth of Its meaning. This may be so, yet it is a poor definition with which to close such an important topic.

Strictly untrue, but for purposes of deeper understanding, The Good may be seen as one of several attributes of the universe existing within certain dimensions. Just as a line demonstrates a single dimension of immanent reality, so may there be a first dimension of transcendent reality. It is the good of the first dimension of transcendent reality that does not exist. Yet there are more dimensions of [G g]ood as there are higher dimensions of immanent reality. Just as within the dimensions of immanent reality there exist a two dimensional square, a three dimensional cube, and then concepts beyond into a realm incomprehensible to non-omniscient beings such as ourselves, likewise there exist other dimensions in which [G g]ood is more definite, yet not wholly true in so far as it is The Good, but in which it may be said more accurately, *This is [G g]ood*.

The Language of the Universe whispers of places deep beyond the understanding and comprehension of this writer where The Good is not understood, but nearly, and is clearly *Good*, not *good*. Those who inhabit such realms have forever been given the title of *God*, which is not necessary ironic in its similarity in English to *Good*. Exactly what is the daily pursuit of such Sentients would be impossible to explain except in anthropomorphic and metaphorical terms. Just as Plato of our world held up the sun as the perfect image of the Good on Earth, so must images be used for all topics divine. It is not even clear if such an approach is necessarily inaccurate, for as inconceivability encompasses all things indeterminate, so may they include items of regular comprehension: up may still be up, down down, white white, and black black. The reality is merely unknown as to whether it has any relation to this world.

These beings, the *higher sentients* of the universe, hold two to be supreme, such that just as the former appear as *Gods* to us, so do the latter seem as *Gods* to them. Similarly, applied theologians and ontologists argue that each degree of transcendent dimension falls within a new level to which the previous refers

to its innately superior members as Gods. As regards these two *Gods of Gods* the image of a woman and man are given, and the names Elriver and Showsh. The places of the deep, arraigned in Good and Evil, built of Radiance and Peril, hallowed by Grace and Justice, and awful in its Bold Humility, lay as their seat and the universe Their footstool. There all Beings bow in fear and are held up again by kindness and soft words from the Sovereigns and Creator of the Universe. Of most honor is held Elriver, Creator of the Universe, yet her husband is considered no less.

Behold the Lords of baetOAK and Gon Eden, Hell and Heaven, corruption and torment, piety and transcendent joy, who on one day stand with shadows of manifest malice and grace. On this day as with all days the Lieutenant of baetOAK and the Lieutenant of God Eden stand as equals, for before Elriver and Showsh all are as servants and children. On this day Hell and Heaven rage in conflict. This day, for many there are on which each occupies its divinely decreed position. Then baetOAK and Gon Eden complement each other. Yet today, as the Lieutenants of Heaven and Hell stand together beneath the endless dome of omniscience, in the very halls of the deepest firmament within which the Creator and Spouse of the universe hold court, an argument flows as an eerie wind at night with no moon above bare trees rising from snow.

Elriver, the Lord of the Universe, hears all, and her whole self in this moment perceives the peril and doom held within the fleeting words of evil and good. Even She quails in fear at the awful splendor and terror she conceives. The doom she cannot see entirely, for its ending is not held in this tale, but it at its conclusion touches nearest the true nature of Good.

Arises the raiment of terror and awe, colossal storm of collision where clusters of galaxies collide in her wake, and temporal trappings of one hundred billion worlds lie still as Elriver stands erect. The manifest hosts fall to silence and all Gods bow to one knee, from the highest to the lowest Sentient, only leaving one to equal the Queen of the Universe in splendor, Showsh, who at the moment of choice chooses and stands alongside His spouse of two hundred trillion years. Elriver's presence says all, words too small to achieve their purpose, inadequate all action or representation of purpose and voice, only pure and indivisible Knowledge to admit wholly the purpose, yet lesser to most at court, but truer nonetheless. A still, small sound tells the assembled that their

Interlude

place is action and freedom, and none should think to quake or hide at the approach of splendor, but to be at ease and serve naturally and wholeheartedly as each will do, thus, all will return to their conversations and errands while the two rulers, wife and husband, behold in full the objects of thought, the Lieutenants of Heaven and Hell.

Knowing full the Intention, the Gods of baetOak and Gon Eden approach the thrones of omnipotence, and once again bow low, but rise by the solemn order to act according to each and every purest essence of heart. Custom decrees forms of interaction, laws of social behavior that even the Lords of the Universe follow. It is thus for Elriver to begin a formal conversation.

“Our honest servants, true of intention and nature and right of act and consequence. Arguments seldom clash between so mighty purposes such as you. Omen storms before your presences that tear the fabric of the real. Such as We will hear the cause and decide now Ourselves the answer if there is to be one solved.”

Temperaments might be too bold to match in essence either the Lieutenant of Hell or the Lieutenant of Heaven, yet such limited words must be used. The God of baetOak for ages of the universe maintains poise. In contrast the God of Gon Eden upholds fervor. Before the throne of might and splendor the Lieutenant of God Eden speaks.

“My Lords. I come to serve you now in that a particular soul lies in peril. It is a curious context. Her name is Droos, a princess of a tribe of mortals. In essence and according to nature, she tilts the balance in the favor of others, greets all with a smiling complexion, welcomes each day with enthusiasm, and believes that all might yet be redeemed. Alas, Droos is surrounded by tyranny and savagery. I am not one to put labels lightly.

“All religions have their place and before you the Lord of the Answer often stands. To this tribe, God is Blood. Their rivers are the veins. Their lake is the heart. And at the mouth of the greatest torrent they put the name, *Gates of Hell*. For upon death the soul runs out of every mortal with blood and feeds the rivers, which feed the lake, which feeds the torrent, and fly through the gates of hell and are damned to eternity. Life is blood and evil to all.

“All that is, except for the God-King. To him alone holds the keys to heaven, and only for his blood. For descended from the God of Blood only they will rise above the damned and

try to speak on their behalf if they choose. Aside there are only two paths between heaven and hell. For all but four it is slavery. There are no citizens but slaves of the tribe and their ruling family. Through utter submission the reward is to continue to submit for all eternity also in heaven to their emissary and his family who submits only to the God of Blood.

“The remaining four are children of the best slaves of his holy highness and his family who from birth are befriended but still in submission to the eldest daughter of the royal family. Together they are raised until she comes of age. Then it is their four duties to escort her across the vast desolation in the south of the continent and to sacrifice themselves upon four of five mountaintops. It is thus so that for eternity these four will serve as the direct slaves of the emissaries.

“Droos will be the eldest daughter of the God-King. It is her destiny that she will follow her four friends, slaves, and executioners into the desert, and finally after all are dead but her and a token servant, to sacrifice herself atop the southernmost mountain, from which the sight of the southernmost island of the world may be seen. This island is known to the tribe as the Gates of Heaven, and to the eldest princess alone is it ever beheld.

“What then is her sin? For the rulers of this tribe distort the meaning of Good and Evil. Their myth that they have propagated for thousands of years holds the foundation for oppression and a dictatorship unrivaled. The pinnacle of their faith builds to one climactic moment each generation, in which the God-King’s eldest daughter departs from the Mountain of Doom to sacrifice herself to become the path from mortal world, through the gates of heaven, to the firmament as seen to be above. It is this act in each generation that all slaves see as their part to uphold and bring about, or else all will fall into eternal torment, even if life as a slave is merely a lesser torment.

“In this act, from the moment Droos leaves the mountain to begin her journey and the last glimpse is seen of her by the rest of the tribe is the completion of her cardinal sin, that for which a fragment of her soul will be damned. For she will choose to perpetuate the myth of her father.

“She knows that what she does is wrong. It makes her skin dry, eyes tear, her heart beat strong, and she has seen a selection of others speak the truth of Good and Evil, even though those precious souls met with horrible physical deaths. Of essence and

Interlude

nature she is aware of the evil. Yet she will still choose to be her family's supreme spokeswoman. By being the advocate for evil she is damned.

"It is such as I now present to you, and the rightful claim my colleague of equal worth will recite. But now I beseech my Lords, that your sterner attributes be overcome by compassion. For despite this one deed and the minor thoughts and violations of true conscience leading to the final act of propaganda, the essence and nature of Droos is pure. It is her surroundings and trappings of all she sees that perverts her actions. In her native tongue there is no word for freedom. Other than obscure emotion and sense of self with no words either to put to mouth, there is no way to acknowledge in the world her objections.

"What is mortal without The Word? It would take one of extreme character to do what would have to be done, to create words of her own. For in absence of proper vocabulary, a label must be put on the feeling of deepest self, or else lose the sense to generalization and obfuscation. Yet this action is not transcendent, and is possible of a mortal, and therefore held accountable to those who avoid it. Strict justice demands more of self than direct knowledge. Ignorance is no excuse.

"Is this reasonable, though? Is this The Good? Are mortals to be held accountable only for what is possible, or what is acceptable, to be expected? Are all mortals destined to become transcendents, ascendants, to rise above? Such rewards are only given to the few, the rest at best receiving it in future lifetimes. No, I argue. Droos should be held accountable for what is in her heart.

"The heart is not enough in all instances. Circumstance must be considered as well. To one who lacks even the words to recognize The Good, Evil must be considered to be excused. Despite the enormity of the one meaningful act, ignoring the small intermediate actions, the environment takes the blame. The consequence should be exacted upon the true perpetrators: the perpetrators of the lie: the God-King. For him exists a special place with my colleague, and properly.

"Is it possible that the God-King too is a product of environment? This depends. If one who inherits absolute power is a dullard, perhaps this argument would be true. Yet for most, seasoned and brought of age in full knowledge, with ways and privileges, methods of thinking and believing singular among his

people, words are not scarce, for he has been taught how to make them. It is possible exact outlines of different political systems were neglected but enough exists to expect more from him. Most of those words are absent his daughter and near-transcendent the slaves that make up his tribe.

“I hold the daughter alone to be the special case, barring several others possibly in the family. It is for her that I appeal to The Justice that her life be redeemed as she believes is possible in others, and despite the crime she will commit, exception be made for the circumstance. Must heaven exceed the mortal’s reach? Yes. But must mortals be held to the standards of Gods? No. Therefore, I rest my case.”

For all the Lieutenant of baetOak bends His ear and absorbs the argument fairly and properly. Yet not for pity does He stir, or bring to the fold mercy on one who betrays The Good. Not with a smile, but with an even countenance he prepares words and presents his first counter.

“My esteemed colleague, true in fervor and desire for redemption of the meek. Your argument is convincing but for the face of the simple Law of the Real. For time eternal those who commit evil acts are condemned to receive evil upon them in time. It is appealing to believe that Droos is free from the taint of propaganda and furtherance of tyranny. Is this truly known? There is always a choice. Yes, she should go to the top of Mount Doom and proclaim before the High Priest of her father that their family’s rule is atrocity and against the will of any God that does exist. She should cast herself from the summit, declaring before the gathered chieftain slaves of the people assembled that she will not be moved to perpetuate evil. That falling pebble might start something to change the horrors of the tribe of blood.

“Are you so sure she is free from guilt? Does she not enjoy the privilege and position she holds. Yes, she knows she is being raised to die, but such release is told to be pleasant, painless, and beautiful, as much a lie as this might be. Until then, a nation of slaves serves her every need. Different from all the slaves to her family, she has close friends, the very ones who will escort her in her final days. She receives wondrous possessions and witnesses performances meant to entertain her father. Is her nature so certain?

“Who could blame Droos for wanting the life she has lived? She loves it. And she will die to promote it rather than tear

Interlude

asunder its foundations. Leaving Mount Doom most willingly, she will march devoted to her cause across the desert hells of her people and not turning once in doubt to see the final glimpse of light shining off the golden rings on her father's hands. Droos is the same as any princess of any tribe. The only difference is her lifetime of education in the glory of martyrdom and the role of redeemer she will play for a people of millions.

"Droos is damned. Even if you are right, my passionate friend, and she is pure of intention and nature, her actions speak the definition of her crimes. Intent is not necessary. Perhaps she is merely negligent or reckless. These too are crimes with the highest consequences. Yet finally, there is punishment still for merely committing such an act of preserving evil even if it is through ignorance and against impossible odds of doing otherwise. It takes but one act and one moment to move the soul from Gon Eden to me. The princess must come to me when she dies. baetOak is the proper place for one such as her, as has been written in our laws for countless ages. I lay my rightful claim on the fragment of her soul that I will get to take when the time comes."

In that Moment, a Star Fell from the Firmament of Drerpo, and Elriver Knew that an Omen existed so Potent that it might not be ignored. How might one single girl in one tiny corner of an entire Universe be of any note, or concern? Yet here were two of the Great Lieutenants of the Realm arguing over this one Soul to Be. Surely there were Endless lines of Others. What was so special about Droos?

"Elriver, Great Queen, My Love," said Showsh, in Majesty, in Wonder. "It has been many Ages since we took sabbatical. Perhaps this matter may be judged as a personal review by the Creator and Sovereign of this Beautiful Manifestation. Would You, in your Glory, Grant Your Lieutenant Their Favor, and Judge Their dispute, however rare it truly might be?"

"A Queen I am, indeed, Dear Husband," said Elriver. "I may not simply abandon my post, my subjects, my court, to go on leave at a whim, even though the Morality and Ethics and Integrity of the Universe stand as the Stakes."

"Is that Really what is at stake, Dear Lieutenants?" said Showsh.

The Lord of Gon Eden spoke in a whisper.

"What is The City of the Righteous if Droos may not enter therein," said He. "For any might be born into such

circumstances.”

“Then it is Their Destiny to have a Fragment of Their Soul judged for baetOAK,” remarked Showsh. “The Judge will decide. What is Truly unusual about this case?”

“If Droos may not be redeemed, then no one may be redeemed,” scowled the Lieutenant of baetOAK. “I do not argue for such things. It is my right to claim her. He may not have her. You would be surprised, would you not, Sovereign, my Queen, who is to be found in my fair Realm.”

“Then it is a matter of Justice, and mercy, and redemption,” said Elriver. “If Droos may not fall subject to these, then what mortal might? If Droos may not have at least the opportunity to do good before she dies, to choose at least, indeed, what secret would we find in baetOAK?”

“Would *you* find in baetOAK, my Liege,” said the Lord of Gon Eden. “Though forgive my insolence for correcting You. Sometimes even You must look to Justice beyond the strict sense of Justice. Above all, the attribute of Mercy must reign, whenever able. If it does not, what Truly is the state of Morality, Ethics, and Integrity in the Fair Realm, Dear Queen?”

“Then this is a matter of the utmost importance, and necessary, and just, and fair,” deemed Elriver. “Attention, subjects, the Court of Drerpo!”

“We are at your disposal, Dear Queen,” said Showsh.

“In Order to ensure the Morality, Ethics, and Integrity, and Justice, of the Realm, Their perpetuation for All Time, I and My Husband will Take a Sabbatical, of underdetermined length, to see to the matter personally,” said Elriver. “Let it Be Known that This Great Realm will Be Ruled in My Place by Our Capable Chancellor, and Family, as well as the Court of this Realm, though We will Still Be Here for Any Question Pertinent.”

“Are you sure this is wise, Dear Wife?” pondered Showsh. “Of course, I would welcome the time with you, as well as the opportunity to prove the Truths. Yet, as you say, is this not the responsibility of your Court? Send your Chancellor, or Another, of Family?”

“This matter is of the First Importance,” said Elriver. “Dear Husband, for You are True to This Realm, and Me, and Essence and Truth. Yet Here, We must Act to Defend It, or Else What is Drerpo? We will take Immanent Form, during sabbatical, and see to our child together.”

Interlude

“Immanent Form,” laughed the Lieutenant of baetOak. “It has been too long. I hope They remember how it all works down there.”

“You should have more faith in our Masters,” said the Lieutenant of Gon Eden. “Whether Immanent or Transcendent, they are the Great Beings of this Realm, and will not Forget Themselves, or Us.”

“We will see,” said the Lieutenant of baetOak, with a smile.

“Guard the Realm, Chancellor, and Fair Court, and worthy Family,” said Elriver, as she Descended from her Throne in Might, Thunder, and Splendor.

Her hand held Showsh’s, as together, they marched in Glory across the Time and Space.

“We will expect it to look the same upon our return, in a short while. You are all worthy Servants, and a Model of Each of Your Posts. Farewell for Now, and may the Transcendent Beings Bless each of you by the Tree of Goamdwee.”

With that, and a flash of light, terrible, and silver and gold and black, the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo had departed. The



Chancellor of the Realm assumed His temporary position and the Court went about almost as easily, in a practiced way, for they were able, and would do their Duty. Yet it was not the same. And, the Lieutenant of baetOAK had fair warnings. For this decision to redeem one girl would spell a Doom that would ripple through the whole of Dweehwail, and shake even the Multiverse's Tree to Its Foundation. But, the Lieutenant of Gon Eden was not incorrect, for some fights are worth the effort, even if they may not succeed.



Interlude

End of Interlude



Book II
The City



☆ ↗ ↑ — ↘ ↑ — H w w
☐ ○ H ☐ ∅ ▽ ⊥ ⊙ ∞ ⊔ H ☐



Chapter I

Fear and Wonderment, Magic and Gods

Chains bound her body so tight her skin was white. Hitting the ground hard, she gasped, and bit her tongue, blood trickling down her throat. Jeers erupted from the crowd, a rainbow of uniforms in every different color, here to see the traitor receive her just reward. Before her loomed a tall golden statue, the likeness of a muscular human with a cobra head and ruby eyes. Fire danced on the metal of the rippling abdominals on the idol of the God of Blood.

“Droos,” said a voice, firm and unrelenting. “Eldest daughter of The People of the Blood. You are here to answer for your crimes. For upon you above all others was placed the role of emissary to our God. Through you the citizens of this great nation were to be redeemed. Your actions have placed them in great jeopardy.”

Her heart beat, tears twinkled in the corners of her eyes, and sweat swam on her hands. Breathing hard, the princess could not bring herself to look to the front of the room, to the right of the idol.

“His Divineness, the God-King,” continued the voice, “Has found you guilty of high treason and sedition. Now let us hear His holy wisdom as He passes sentence.”

“Droos,” said a haughty, cold tone.

The girl shivered. Her stomach heaved, and she thought her insides would spill out over the floor. A hand grabbed her like a vice, wrenching her up, and pulling her gaze forward to the front of the room.

“You will look at His Divineness when spoken to,” said a mouth near the hand.

She listened. At first blinking rapidly, as though staring

into a bright light, she beheld her father, Uré, the God-King.

Sitting atop a throne of gold, bejeweled with ruby-eyed human skulls, a fearsome man sat. Muscles could be seen through the tight fabric, colored rich purple, topped with three patches of color: grey, black, and white. Life and death, and all choice in this temporal world were his to make. Brown red eyes peered, and a half-smile curved from the center, pushing the etched cheeks aside.

“That’s better,” said her father. “You will forgive the High Servant-Terrible. He is of course, most loyal. Unlike you, Droos, my daughter. You have... disappointed me. You have betrayed my people. You have betrayed my Master, your God. There is but one sentence given for such a crime. What will you say for yourself?”

The girl bobbed, tension making her head throb. Once when she was a little girl, six men had kneeled in this same spot, accused of a crime far less severe than hers. A look that defied their ability to conceive, for the word for defiance did not exist in their language, peered out from them toward her father. So many years had passed since that moment. Times of great joy and terrible pain had come and gone, and revelations that had changed her. Yet now when her moment, the day of her judgement, finally came, she shook and cried and her face bent in agony.

“Father...” she whimpered. “Please...”

“Very well, dear Droos,” said Uré. “You are hereby sentenced tomorrow morning at dawn, to be vivisected before my court, with no mercy, and no exception, by the High Pain-Giver.”

“Father! Please!” she said.

“Yes!” said Uré. “But first, you will watch us do the same to your, friend, the apostate, the heretic Drerpo.”

“No!” said Droos.

The court and other members in attendance laughed. Her father laughed and she felt the hard hand grip her shoulders, and now she desperately kept her gaze on her father.

“Father! Don’t do this!” said Droos.

“This’ll make her shut up until her big day tomorrow,” laughed the High Servant-Terrible.

The blunt side of a sword hit her on the head, and she knew no more.

Book II: The City

Light blinded her as she awoke to the dazzling rays of the sun. They filtered into the room, and she moaned. Slowly stretching, and sitting up, as though her body were made of twigs and it would snap, she brought her hand to the spot on her head. Rubbing where she had been struck, there was no mark, or blood, or any sign of trauma. The oddity made her groggy thoughts spin. Facing forward, away from herself, she noticed the room surrounding her.

Soft, grey metal walls bordered a curved space, spacious and lacking straight lines. Depressions in the walls held seats cushioned with fabric, and above these were pictures in frames covered by a clear, hard substance, or else sculptures or ornaments in alcoves. A smell of leaves after cool rainforest weather in winter, ripe with the aroma of passions, invigorated her, and a melodic chime from somewhere beyond the room brought her feet to the edge of the bed. Sheets had been drawn about her and now she cast these aside and stood.

The light came from a window in the center of the room opposite the bed. Walking to it, adorned in a thin and seamless glittering silver and black fabric, her eyes beheld a wonder that made her stagger. Her emotion swept her over the edge in her mind, and out into the open air.

For from the window at the edge of the room a great sheer drop descended thousands of feet. Her mountain of metal was not the only building. In every direction spires of steel rose, some square, some ornate, at level with her, or rising into the heavens. Stone formed parts of the structures in places, though only for purposes of decoration, it seemed, for the splendor hinted that materials were as varied as the sands of the sea.

And so too did rivers run between the buildings. Metal objects rode invisible streams in straight avenues, windows gleaming in the morning light, and carrying, it now recalled to her mind, dozens, hundreds, or thousands of people. Colored images and pictures were pasted to some of these, and to various buildings, though just as many were of light itself, and flashed into and out of existence, revealing what was behind them, and largely transparent when they were there.

Bringing her hand to her mouth, a gasp escaped Droos' mouth, and she almost fell as she stumbled, stepping back from the awful sight.

Where was she?

Clearly it was not the dungeons of her father. In her dreams long ago she had seen houses of metal, and flying birds of steel. It came to her then that it was only recently that they had come before her waking eyes. Aboard a wooden vessel in the sea she had stood beside her friend, Drerpo, and gazed at a cave of mountains, not merely houses, that blotted out the sun. From that point she passed until today. It was a time of abject terror. There was no way she could have continued without holding her friend's hand.

A gentle woman's voice from behind her spun Droos around, and she saw a being of light standing between her and the one door into the room. The girl stepped back, and the image made no move to follow.

"Good morning, Droos," a lush, feminine voice spoke. "The time is eleven hundred hours and thirty-seven minutes. You have slept thirteen hours and twenty minutes. I'm afraid you have missed your meeting with Emerzo for breakfast at nine hundred hours. She has rescheduled for twelve hundred hours, which is in twenty-one minutes. Her brother, Drerpo, has posted his arrival to escort you in one minute. Today's weather is...

At last the real woman, Droos, gained enough courage to speak to, well, whatever it was that stood before her.

"Who... who are you?" she said.

The image was that of a young woman, only several years older than Droos. She was a bit taller, and light skinned, wearing a purple uniform with a green sash.

"I'm sorry for the confusion," said the image. "My name is Anora, and I am part of this building's staff. Emerzo has informed me that you may be... unfamiliar with contemporary technology and norms. I apologize for being... insensitive."

"No," said Droos. "It's fine. I'm so overwhelmed by, this place. Where am I? And... what are... I mean who did you say you worked for?"

Anora laughed. This was strange coming from her.

"It is proper to be overwhelmed, Droos," said Anora. "You are in a residential construct of eleven thousand six hundred and forty individual and suite units. Each has at least one staff member assigned to serve the needs of our tenants. Of course you are being too polite, Droos. You wanted to know what I am. I do not take offense, and will happily explain one of many underpinnings of modern civilization."

Book II: The City

“Thanks,” said a bewildered Droos.

Just as Anora was about to continue, a chime interrupted them.

“Drerpo has arrived to escort you,” announced Anora.

“Will you permit him entry?”

So out of place, Droos glanced at her current attire, and noticeably hesitated, despite the identity of her visitor.

“I recommend admitting Drerpo just as you are,” said Anora, with a telling smile. “He will be pleased to see you.”

The young woman blushed, but moreover remembered who it was she was seeing. She turned to tell Anora, but the image had acted without need of confirmation. The door in the wall left of the window shimmered, very much like Anora, and then vanished. In walked Drerpo.

His grey eyes peered out, above a smile on his face, not mischievous, but content and happy to see his friend bright-eyed and awake. A silver-streaked black fabric fit closely around his form, similar in design to Anora’s garment. This had no sash. His black shoes were something that looked like leather, yet not quite the same.

“A beautiful day on which to see you,” he said. “Are you ready?”

The seriousness and confusion broke and it was Droos’ turn to laugh.

“Yes, I see the problem,” Drerpo looked at her garment politely.

Anora smiled.

“I’ll leave you and Anora to decide on your decor for today,” said Drerpo with a little bow, as he began to step out of the room.

“I see you and her are already on a first name basis,” said Droos.

The smile on the image became more serious. Drerpo chuckled as the door rematerialized behind him.

Her concern over what she would wear soon disappeared, as the images of dozens of choices materialized as Anora gave quick commentary on the various modern styles. Much of the information depended on already knowing basic information far beyond Droos at the moment. Yet she passed through the images by waving her hand, and at last found something that met her needs. Quickly a panel on the wall to the right of the window

vanished, and revealed the chosen outfit.

At twelve hundred hours and five minutes the young woman emerged from the doorway into an oval room, lit brightly by a window from above. A pearl flowing white one-piece dress with soft blue streaks topped silver sandals. Anora had smiled, saying that the choice was more formal than expected in casual clothing, but would make a good first impression.

"A fine choice," said Drerpo, looking her once over. "Is it time for us to depart?"

The young woman smiled, eyes glowing.

"Yes, though I suppose no matter what we will be late," said Droos.

An ere of heaviness was in her voice.

As they walked through the doorway at the head of the room and into the next, her friend looked seriously at her.

"Did you have that dream again?" he said.

The metal door slid shut behind them, leaving the sunny suite backward, and them under the slightly dark glow of florescent light. A blue-grey light shone to the right of the opposite door, though there was no other indication of their movement.

Droos sighed.

"Yes, my friend," she said. "It seems my father can reach me even here."

He lightly squeezed the girl's shoulder.

"It was just a phantom of the night," he said. "Shadows casting implications upon your dreams."

"Yet they appeared even as light poured through my window," said Droos. "The darkness follows me wherever I go."

With a chime, the blue-grey light vanished and the door to its left opened. Out before them spread a cavernous hollow of metal, several floors with a great opening in the center, upon which at regular intervals lay metal steeds. In the vessels were doors that allowed the owner to ride without having to be on the outside. Droos swallowed and caught a stumble as she followed behind Drerpo. A short hundred foot walk brought them before a vessel that might fit four comfortably, with room for goods in the back. The color of the metal was white, with black metal engravings in some pattern that Droos saw, before she quickly brought eyes back to the broader surroundings.

"Welcome, Drerpo," a voice spoke, difficult to tell from its mere sound whether male or female. "Will you be going to lunch

Book II: The City

now?”

A young man, perhaps in his twenties, with long hair bound at the end by a silver clasp, though his head and body carried a certain androgenous flavor, appeared in image, of light, beside the metal steed. The image directed its gaze at the young man, and Drerpo quickly extended his arm towards Droos.

“Be polite, Zerson,” he said. “This is my friend Droos.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” bowed the image, his white garment creasing along with the black sash crossing it.

Droos’ eyes looked at Zerson, and then at the vessel, and then again at Drerpo. Her breath permitted a short whistle.

“I had better get Droos to lunch,” said Drerpo.

“Then we’ll be on our way,” Zerson bowed.

Lines appeared in the previously seamless hull of the vessel, and doors opened on either side of the front, allowing Drerpo and Droos to enter. The image helped instruct the young woman with wide gestures and an odd expression on the basics of seats and belts. Then with them belted in and the doors closed, the image of Zerson vanished.

His words rose from the interior, although Droos heard none of it. It seemed only the beating of her heart echoed in her head, images through the windows that surrounded them appearing in frames separated by a sense of blackness that removed her vision. Time skipped a beat, and a tune pierced the fog in which she stood, a flash of brilliance. It came from her past, a song that had played as she stood amidst the magical simplicity of an open deck aboard a wooden vessel, hands clenched in the warm palms of Drerpo, as they danced beneath the stars. This was the same tune.

“I see you remember this song, my dear,” said a voice from beyond the fog.

She shook herself and sat up in her chair, the images of passing tunnels of steel through which the vessel traversed without any sensation of movement filled the windows around them, and Drerpo sat, holding her hand, which she could feel, looking at her with his grey eyes. Droos felt the rough fingernails of his hand as she traced her fingers over them, and a smile spread over her face. She took several deep breaths, her heart rate slowed, and she ran a hand through her curly hair as she returned to the lit lands of the living.

“I’m sorry Drerpo, I don’t know what has come over me,”

she said. "What did you say?"

He looked at her, and she heard the music again, so the words of her friend returned to her.

"I would never forget this song, Drerpo," she said. She reached forward her head and kissed him on the cheek. "That evening was probably the finest moment in my life."

Drerpo blushed, and returned a kiss on the cheek, before scooting over and putting his arm around his friends shoulder. The two young adults sat together like this and Droos fixed her eyes on the passage of the vessel as it navigated the tunnels of this mountainous cave. Turning left suddenly, light blinded her.

They surged out from the giant building, into dazzling noon sun, that even amidst the shadows of tall buildings filled the airspace with warmth. She took a deep breath and felt her muscles relax. The fragility of the craft in which they traveled might have been fearful, were it not for her company. With his hand around her, lightly squeezing her right shoulder, Droos might tolerate standing in the midst of a dragon's cave.

Below them stretched thousands of feet, deep canyons that parted in boulevards the caves of the metropolis, this great capitol of humans. Every thousand feet a stream of vessels flowed, in one of two directions, according to how the avenue ran. Their tunnel had deposited them between two and at the top of a number of buildings across the boulevard, the gap through which bright sunlight spilled. Now the craft, the sleek white and black vessel tilted upward steeply, a curve perpendicular to the plane of the streams, but at an angle to the vertical columns, and along it they rose to heights far above the buildings that dwindled across the street below. They passed maybe ten or eleven streams, coming to a rest a further eleven thousand feet up from where they had entered the airspace, and then leveled. Throughout, the pair had felt little differently than they had traveling horizontally. The command of physical properties was such that gravity within the craft, while existent, was dampened to allow comfort of passage. Now at this level, they moved rapidly towards a stream of vehicles.

The speed the stream moved was staggering. Its steady motion conducted crafts at perhaps five hundred miles per hour. Joining one was a delicate art of communication between the various vessels, allowing a new object to join the streams at perfect harmony with those passing ahead and behind. With the vessels themselves doing all the work, the passengers were left to observe

Book II: The City

the surroundings, to converse, and to do work.

Most did the latter as they went about their travels to and from destinations, or at least the second, if on vacation. Still Droos sat with her mouth agape, gazing at the towers. They were now above maybe eighty percent of the buildings, and those that stuck up further were the true skyscrapers of this age. They reached dozens of miles into the sky, and some stretched even further. The lower buildings gleamed as the sunlight kissed their vertices at their peaks, and the similarity between rows of structures made downward seem as rows of metal trees. Droos grew tense for a moment at that thought, but quickly relaxed, and further focused her eyes on the building whose dome they now left the stream to approach.

The irregular sphere sat atop a building with a jigsaw of what appeared as metal logs placed one atop another, in every which way. They slowly turned, hundreds of these, each which might have been a building themselves in an earlier age, while at the summit perched this gleaming see-through sanctuary, that eyed their vessel as they approached. A marble terrace stretched to the sides some distance all around the dome, and finally on this the vessel landed without even a bump.

Upon leaving the craft, Zerson had no time to appear before another image arrived, and beckoned for them to hurry on to join Emerzo and her guest. This was the first Droos had heard of anyone else joining them for lunch, and she hurried to keep pace with Drerpo as she wondered who it might be. The image led them through a great glass doorway, through into a brightly lit interior filled with tables covered by light purple cloth, and many sorts of dishes with a dazzling array of foods and drinks. Just as interesting were the guests and patrons, dressed in just as much variety, and with a further interesting quality that only really presented itself to Droos when they arrived at the table at which Emerzo sat.

They were in a quieter corner of the restaurant, and on one side next to the glass that peered out at the airspace of the city, sat Emerzo, dressed in a garment made from rings of black fabric, tightly woven together, adorned by many jewels on the front and on the sleeves.

“Welcome, Droos,” said Drerpo’s twin with a half-smile, nodding her head slightly. “A delightful twenty minute wait for us, but we are glad you made it. Come sit here on my left.”

Droos glowed, eyes brightly looking around at the open

space spreading around her, and enjoying the smell of food and listening to the clink of glasses and exchange of conversation. She sat to the left of Emerzo at the table and saw out of the corner of her eye, Drerpo take the seat opposite her, as Droos continued turning her head in every direction. Looking to Drerpo's right she saw a face at the vertex of five lobes of blue flesh.

The young woman started, falling back a little in her chair, the legs screeching against the ground, as she averted her gaze, and then stared again at the image before her. It was real. To the left of Drerpo, opposite Emerzo, and diagonal to her at the four person table sat a being with similarities to humans in terms of having feet, hands, arms, legs, and a head and face, but otherwise with many different features. Here before her was an alien, something that was not human.

"What... what are..." Droos stammered.

"I might ask the same of you, dear," said the creature, in words that were annunciated and spoken so clearly in her language that it was odd. Also its mouth moved differently than the sounds that the words should make. Five eyes in a circle at the top of the blue face at the juncture of the lobes blinked, and a longish, narrow purple tongue stuck out in some gesture that Droos guessed was not teasing.

"Well... um..." said Droos. "You know what I am."

"Perhaps those born on No, and for that matter, on human colonies and worlds throughout the Assembly, would know your species, for they share your race," said the alien. "Yet those born on my world, Jriggen, of the species Leyol, might not hear of a human, and certainly would not know of your unique origins as a human. For out of our civilization of trillions, you are unique."

Head spinning with revelations plastered upon the fragrant surroundings of the restaurant in every direction, Droos, princess of a great nation, who was strong enough to choose a leap of faith into the unknown, looked now back upon a holy image. This was not light or normal flesh. She was surrounded by magic and here clearly was a God, wise and terrible, sitting among them. Then she happened to glance at the next table over.

Five sat conversing, only one had red skin and a head that extended beyond human confines in a long lobe that wrapped around like hair on a human. As it was, this alien had no hair on its head. Many other tables that she could see, as well as some of those who waited on them, represented a diverse collection of these

Book II: The City

different races the alien across from Droos revealed in her speech.

“Is this world all magic and Gods,” muttered Droos.

“This world has neither magic or Gods,” said the alien.

“Only citizens of the Great Assembly, a civilization that spans billions of planets, with tens of thousands of Sentient species.”

“Droos has no need to be forgiven,” said Emerzo. “She is a fish given feet and placed upon land.”

“I meant no offense,” said the alien. “Yet maybe I should answer the girl’s question. I’ve told you the name of my race and the planet of my species’ origin. Yes, I am not human, although as a matter of fact, I was born here on the planet of No in the Marba System just as you were. In this age, diversity has reached all bastions of civilization in the Great Assembly. From the time of my birth several hundred years ago now, I sought to preserve the natural wonders of this system and those like it. In this cause I have risen to a position of influence in the System Government.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Keyileth Dwilun Rozess. I am senior advisor to the Assembly of Marba’s Committee on the Interior. My boss, the Speaker of the Committee, creates and presents laws that affect all natural resources and objects of scientific significance in the System. That, although admittedly it sounds odd, includes you and your people, Droos.”

“My people?” said Droos, suddenly awake, and returning Keyileth’s gaze intently.

“Yes, the native people of the continent of Nolai in the south of this world,” said Keyileth. “They are one of our greatest treasures. Remnants of an ancient way of life, they remind us of our roots. And not just humans. From the humble beginnings of this planet came a people that have greatly improved life in the galaxy and maintained peace. I am very grateful for the reminder of the beginning from which we came.”

The girl clenched her fists.

“Are we nothing but a zoo to you, the image of primates thumping our chests?” spoke Droos

“That would be an unfair classification,” said the woman.

“You are Sentients, humans, and have rights. You are a symbol of our past, but also an independent nation with sophisticated technology, although of a primitive nature, and capable of self-determination and governance. A great piece of land that might be used for more mundane purposes has been set aside for your

people for more than three thousand years.”

Droos’ eyes burned, and she bared her teeth. This woman was as naïve and as true a believer as Resh had been, and Etøn, who had willingly faced beheading on behalf of her people’s religion.

“Do you know anything about this nation?” said Droos.

“Of course,” said Keyileth. “You are a people with a developed culture and system of beliefs. Business is carried out through trade, but governed by ministers who maintain fairness. In your land you have constructed great monuments to your faith, and to your central government. It is, as might be expected of people at your stage of development, a totalitarian system of fascism...”

“My father is an unrepentant mass-murderer,” said Droos.

“Yes, you did have a unique outlook among your people,” said the woman, smiling gently, and lightly tapping the table with her hand close to Droos’ hand. “My research says you performed your duties superbly, down to your departure from the volcano, what your people call the Ring of the King. Most interesting was your choice to go against the religion of your people. It is unheard of for the eldest daughter of the God-King to escape with her life. I would most like to hear how you managed to flee from the center of a desolate desert with no food and water. Really I am interested in anything you have to say. You are one of the greatest resources to the field of anthropology for hundreds of years.”

The girl glared at Keyileth as if she was in fact a servant of the Queen of Pain, the patron Goddess of her people. Just then a waiter brought several types of food. Strips of some sort of meat glistened, skewered on metal sticks that appeared to continue heating them while allowing safe eating. Flowers, or at least the appearance as such, bright blue, gave off an aroma, and appeared to be another type of delicacy. A squid-like creature writhing gently, kept partially alive until the moment of consumption, squiggled on a dish. So on went the selection.

The nature of the cuisine almost made Droos vomit. Revelations from the current conversation did little to ease her digestive system. Then Drerpo put his arm around her shoulder, and squeezed her elbow blade lightly, before serving himself some food and beginning to eat. Emerzo looked at the gesture with what was not quite a scowl. The sister’s expression changed just as quickly to a warm smile, and she looked over at the alien.

“You have been very helpful, Keyileth,” said Emerzo.

Book II: The City

“I’m glad you had time to meet with us. In the last month that I have known Droos she has proved, interestingly enough, to be boldly assertive, at least when she has her mind on something. My brother says it was a long time in coming, and that she has really blossomed in the last two months. To this end, I am sure the princess has something to say.”

Her mouth dry, the fish with feet took a squid and began poking it with one of the pointy utensils next to the plate in front of her.

“Your eminence, forgive me for being insolent and chiding your assertions,” Droos said in an odd tone. “From my experience growing up as the eldest daughter of the God-King of The People of the Blood, my father’s willing slaves, or all other citizens of our nation but him, would never question someone in your position. Why? Because if they did they would immediately be tortured to death.

“I have to say that I am familiar with the approach you take to this, I think it is a branch of science, called anthropology. We have performed rituals on captive animals, and just as often, prisoners and those guilty of things like littering in the capital. We see how they react, and let them struggle amongst themselves over scraps of food from the remnants of our lavish plates in the royal estate. Humans breaking each other’s necks for scraps of food and cannibalizing each other if they run out seems to please and interest my father and many of his chief servants. So I say that your interest in us I suppose fulfills a similar purpose for you and your civilization.

“One further thought comes to my mind. Have you ever thought that just maybe you might try to improve the lives of my people? Why do you let us, well, fight and tear each other apart?”

A small smile, of satisfaction, appeared on the princess’ face. The woman shifted in her seat as she ate one of the flowers. Finishing the mouthful, she tilted her head to the side.

“The fundamental rule of anthropology is neither to judge or interfere,” she said. “Freedom must be learned over centuries organically. Yes there is suffering, but it serves to form stronger foundations and understanding for the necessity of better values and systems of government and interpersonal relationships when the evolutions in thought do come.”

“So it makes sense by this line of reasoning, that a couple thousand years is a reasonable period for a people to learn the ways

of freedom,” said Droos.

“Well it won’t last forever,” said Keyileth. “Our reports say that already change has...”

“I don’t care what change might come!” said Droos, sitting up in her chair and mincing the squid as her voice grew loud.

“Children, girls, men, women, and old men, are being raped, killed, and tortured now!”

“Now please,” said the woman. “Your people can’t be forced to be free.”

“And at what cost does your precious principle come?!” shouted Droos. “How many millions more need to die horribly before you see that there are exceptions to your rule.”

Droos took a moment to catch her breath and put her utensil aside. The woman waited, turning her ear toward Droos, and remaining quiet.

“I see the magic and greater beings around me here,” said Droos. “Your science seems to have miraculous results. That much is clear. Following whatever principles allow you to make such accomplishments has real benefits. I appreciate that anthropology wants to see how animals and Sentient beings develop naturally. That’s great. If it is simply a scitter scurrying around on branches and digging up nuts, no one is seriously hurt. If it is a jaguar catching an ape, that’s understandable. Yet you said yourself that humans have rights. One of these has to be freedom from summary rape, death, and torture. One lesson learned from epistemology is the difference between a rule and a principle. Rules may never be violated unless there are rules that provide limited exceptions. Principles are governing values that in most circumstances are inviolable, but may be broken if absolutely necessary on a case by case basis. You must see that what happens among my people is not a standard case, whatever that may be. I’m not asking for lessons in the magic that allow metal steeds to fly through the air, or the secrets to Godhood that you possess. Only I am asking the most basic privilege. To live free of the fear of immanent pain of death.”

The girl sat back and looked down at the vivisected squid on her plate, and her mind remained silent. Keyileth looked on, many wrinkles on her face bending above a slight frown, and around caring eyes heavy with sympathy.

“Droos, I’m glad you brought this to my attention,” said the woman. “I do see that what goes on in your tribe is horrible.

Book II: The City

You make many good points, beyond anything I might expect from one so young as you.”

Drerpo tapped his friend’s shoulder, and winked. Droos wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye, and flashed a smile.

“Unfortunately, Droos,” the woman continued, “There really is little I can do. The laws governing non-interference with indigenous people’s comes from planetary, system, and galactic law. I could bring your request to my boss, but the laws up and down our systems of government would have to be revised, constitutionally, to permit any exception to this principle. As you say, principles may have exceptions. Yet if they are enshrined in law, which have the power of rules, they cannot be broken.”

Silence fell on the table, and the four sat there in thought. Drerpo looked over at Droos’ plate.

“Finished dissecting your squid?” he asked.

Droos laughed, and like that, the mood was broken.

“Yes,” she said. “Though, I don’t suppose you might find me something else to eat?”

Emerzo and Keyileth laughed too, and the sister raised her hand to get a waiter’s attention.

“I think that’s something we can manage,” said Keyileth.

They finished the meal with more casual conversation.

Droos had more questions than ever, and Keyileth happily answered them. However, she of course had many other responsibilities, and after about another fifteen minutes, she bid them farewell, to return to her job. When Droos had finished the food brought to her, Drerpo traced the tips of his fingers in circles around her back, and the young woman closed her eyes dreamily. Emerzo looked on with knowing eyes and decided to disturb her brother’s serenity.

“You know you did a great job, Droos,” said the twin.

The princess took a moment to register the words, and then shaking her head, sat up.

“Alas, I fear they will have no effect,” said Droos. “Do you think they will kill me?”

Emerzo laughed.

“No one’s going to kill you Droos,” said Emerzo. “One virtue of the Great Assembly is that they don’t have laws like that. Citizens are free to voice their minds however they want.”

Droos raised her eyebrows a little.

“I would say that you had a greater impact than you think,”

said Emerzo. “Keyileth will tell her boss about your words, at least in passing. It’s true that this is not likely a pressing matter in their world. I know the urgency of your appeal, and that it shows how much you care for your people. For that matter it demonstrates that you have a firm moral foundation, and can discern between a rule and a principle. We’ll have to work harder, and be patient with the political process. This is the first the government has heard of this line of thinking in a long time.”

“So the king of the Great Assembly won’t kill me?” said Droos.

Drerpo patted her on the back lightly.

“Droos,” he said. “They’re as likely to kill you for your inquiry as to turn you into a real fish. There are criminal laws in this society, and those who enforce them. But even the worst criminal receives a fair trial and an advocate and no criminal is ever executed by the state for anything.”

“What about the sacrifices here?” she asked.

“Oh, Droos,” chuckled Drerpo. “Dear Droos.”

“Now that they heard my words, Drerpo, what’s going to happen?” said the princess.

“That’s a much better question,” said Drerpo. “Little will happen if we don’t follow up our conversation with a call to the office of the Speaker of the Committee on the Interior. We had best contact other members of the committee as well. It also appears working through the Marba System government is just the start. We’re going to have to lobby all levels of government. I won’t pretend, my friend. This may take a long time.”

“How long?” said Droos.

“At least a couple of years,” said Emerzo.

“Years!” said Droos.

“While decisions can be made in a fascist state instantly by the dictator, corruption is rampant,” said Emerzo. “In democracy, decisions take a long time, but corruption is minimized. Better no law than a bad law.”

“But what am I going to do for all that time?” said Droos, shaking her head.

“You’re in the capital of a civilization that spans a galaxy,” said Drerpo. “There are more things to do here than you can possibly imagine. I suspect that the greatest problem will be choosing one of them.”

“How will I be able to choose at all?” said Droos. “All I

Book II: The City

see are magic and Gods. I'm terrified to look out the window. I know nothing about these people or their culture or ways. I may have received an education better than nearly any person in my tribe. Yet what does that compare to what even a toddler must know here?"

"We learned more than just chants and dances," said Drerpo. "You learned calligraphy, how to hold court, how to paint, and how to think and reason. Simply meeting with the people of this city and telling them your story would be immensely valuable to both their culture and ultimately our cause."

"What will be my role in interactions with the government here?" said Droos.

"That's up to you," said Emerzo. "I am expecting to do the bulk of the work, since I have been here longest and have become familiar with the way of life and system of government. Your story will be the most useful tool in our quest."

"You mean that book you gave me?" said Droos.

A shiver ran through her.

"Well yes," smiled Emerzo. "Seeing you in person will go a long way too. You are the main character of the story after all."

"What book is this," said Drerpo, with a frown. "It's the first I heard of it."

The twin sister looked at the princess.

"I don't keep secrets from your brother," said Droos.

Emerzo rolled her eyes.

"On the boat, Drerpo, your sister gave me a book that told our story all the way up to the moment I received it," continued Droos. "Really it was quite miraculous."

"I wonder where my sister managed to obtain such a volume," scowled Drerpo. "You are only human, after all, dear sister. Humans have their limitations."

Droos laughed.

"You are one to speak," she said. "How often have I seen you trace those letters in the air to communicate with the Greater Beings? You even taught me one phrase of The Language of the Universe."

"He did?" said Emerzo. "Now who's playing God."

Droos sensed an opportunity.

"Who are you two?" she said.

Both Emerzo and Drerpo looked sheepish.

"That's what I thought," said Droos, with a certain

satisfaction.

“To answer your question, dear Droos,” said Emerzo. “We will certainly use your book. We will also use you.”

Zerson was waiting for them as the three young adults sauntered out onto the marble terrace surrounding the restaurant. He bowed as he pointed at the flying boat, and lines appeared as two doors opened into the two rows of seats of the vessel.

“Will you be sticking to your itinerary?” said the image.

“Yes, Zerson, thank you for asking,” said Emerzo as she got into the front row.

“Why don’t you sit in the front with my sister,” said Drerpo, “We’ll have time to socialize when we get to where we are going.”

The young man bent to get into the back row while Droos darted her eyes at the abyss descending tens of thousands of feet from the conclusion of the terrace not far away, and the other great flying boats soaring just overhead.

“Are you concerned about falling over the edge?” said Zerson.

“Now that you mention it,” said Droos, staring intently at the direction they would fly.

“Have no worries,” said Zerson. “I haven’t lost anyone yet. Even you should be safe as ever.”

“Even me?” said Droos.

The image beckoned for the princess to take her seat down the row from Emerzo. She awkwardly took her seat, both trying to bend her head to see the image as she sat, while her feet carried her forward. Closing the door, Zerson’s image vanished and the vessel lurched into the air.

“How are you feeling about your new surroundings?” said Emerzo.

Droos gripped the black, leather bench.

“Zerson is right,” said Emerzo. “Limousines are the safest and most common way to travel planetside in the Marba System.”

Droos slid back into the seat further as the limousine began its maneuvers into a lane of traffic.

“Is... this the only type of steed?” said Droos timidly.

“Well first of all, they aren’t steeds, dear,” said Emerzo. “Horses and donkeys are steeds. The forms of transport that fly through the air like this are vessels. Many types exist, this sort is designed to accommodate no less than three in some models and

Book II: The City

no more than fifteen in the largest types. For those transporting goods or objects to and from market, transports are used, that are much larger than this, and have space in planetside cases for dozens of tons of cargo. Those vessels that are spaceworthy may be large enough to carry tens of thousands of passengers and millions of tons of cargo.”

The princess remained glued to her seat.

“I’m afraid this has all been too much for you too soon,” said Emerzo with a sigh. “The last month or so you’ve been so frightened that we’ve had to keep you on a prescription much of the time. It sometimes results in amnesia, which is why you don’t remember clearly that you’ve been flying many times.”

“Many times...” said Droos.

“I hope that soon you’ll be calm enough that we can lower the dose or remove it altogether,” said Emerzo.

“Dose?” said Droos.

“Ah, yes, medicine,” said the sister. “In this civilization methods of treating illness and injury have reached heights far above the level of technology with which you are familiar. Great feats may be accomplished with it, but for matters as simple as anxiety and panic there are many easy remedies.”

Droos sat up in her seat and running a hand along each cheek, turned and looked at Emerzo clearly.

“I don’t want any more doses,” said Droos. “Really... it is a lot. But... I think I’m getting better. So... uh, where are we going?”

“Brave Droos,” smiled Emerzo. “Very well. We are on our way to the Great Library, or rather, the central depository of knowledge, in many forms, of the Great Assembly. You asked what you might do with your time the next few years we are here. One option would be to work to educate yourself about this system of government and really anything else in which you might be interested.”

“But I don’t speak or read the language,” said Droos.

“True,” said the twin. “Even books of this time have alterable languages in their print editions. Yours is certainly an obscure language, and we may need to program it into the diversity features of a given device. It should be little challenge, however.”

Droos swallowed.

“If you’re spending time pouring over books,” said Emerzo, “It will also solve a different problem. Maybe it didn’t

occur to you, but children of our age in this civilization, and certainly in Marba, will be attending school still. Yes, sixteen is very young here. The politician you met is only middle-aged and she is four or five hundred years old. Of course longevity varies from species to species. Still, it would raise eyebrows if you were wandering through shopping and entertainment districts in the middle of the day.”

“I’m considered a child here?” said Droos.

“Well come on,” said Emerzo. “Where you’re from, you’ve only just passed your Second Ascension Day. The age of majority here is twenty-five, and children, or at least young adults by that time, are expected to remain devoted to their studies until then.”

“What about you and Drerpo?” said Droos.

“Ha!” said Emerzo. “People around here, well other than you, look upon us... differently. Drerpo, who knows, might choose to attend any classes you might take with you. At this point I wouldn’t put it passed him. Yet neither of us would appear to them to need it.”

“I’d like to hear at some point how that trick works,” said Droos.

“I’m sure you would,” winked Emerzo.

They returned their gaze together to the stream of vessels in front of them, and Droos noticed that they approached a massive building. Covered in blue glass, it rose perhaps twenty miles into the atmosphere, a narrow spike of one thousand feet in diameter that was shaped so exactly that by the time it reached its end, the building came to a point, a large tetrahedron of sapphire. This feature was far above their plane of view, approaching at maybe the nine mile point.

“The time is thirteen hundred hours and forty-seven minutes,” said Zerson out nowhere. “Is it still your intension to disembark at the three thousand five hundredth level?”

“Thank you Zerson,” said Emerzo. “We will stop here.”

The limousine navigated into a large opening in the side of the building. Another tunnel followed that continued only for a short distance, after which it entered a small bay that might fit twenty vessels. Blue glass covered the walls to this chamber too, and shifting shadows shown through these decorations, which were opaque from this side. As it were, thirteen vessels sat upon circles of blue paint, and Zerson landed upon the fourteenth. The children

Book II: The City

disembarked, and traversed the smooth, grey platform that housed the vessel bay. On the north side of the room an open corridor sprouted into a luxurious tunnel of engraved marble walls with reliefs depicting cityscapes and planetary bodies.

Droos did not like the trapped surroundings, yet the shadows through the glass made it appear a larger room, and despite the darkness, eased the feeling, if only a little. She touched Drerpo's shoulder and then linked her arm under his.

"Will you do me the honor of being my escort," she said with a smirk.

"You never needed to ask," said Drerpo with a small bow of the head.

"I'll leave you two to your date," spoke Emerzo, coldly at first, though shifting to warmth. "Unfortunately I have some business I must see to before I rejoin you, hopefully later today. Farewell for now."

Droos looked to Drerpo at her side, and then back to Emerzo, but the twin sister was gone, vanished in the air. Just another day with the twins.

The marble hallway ran for one hundred feet before it reached two sliding stone doors. Escaping to the side, the couple walked into the Great Library. Dim light permitted travel with a bit of care between rows of comfortable chairs of varying design, cushioned and cozy as a trend, before which in the air, if they were occupied, flowed a web of images. In the diminished light, they shown particularly fierce, and on many was text, but just the same, others had images. The text and pictures scrolled by the slight turn or blink of the occupant of the respective chair who read or gazed upon the image with noticeable interest.

Spreading for five hundred feet, this design ended in walls that were dark and flowed with shifting, glowing images and lines of script in every different language, all of which defied the princess' limited linguistic knowledge. Still linked together, Drerpo began walking to the west, and after some hundreds of feet around to the south, as they circumnavigated the space of the vessel bay. Shortly, a wall of glass met them with a number of marble doors. Into one of these they walked, and as the entrance closed, lights shifted into being, revealing a dark wood table with two of the same chairs as the main room on the west side. An image danced which sparkled with millions of exploding colors above the table to greet them as they walked to the chairs and took

a seat.

“What wonders have I seen in this holy new world...”
murmured Droos.

“There will be many more, my friend,” said Drerpo. “Let me show you a little about the world in which you will be living now for some time.”

He began speaking and before them the image shifted. It soared through the buildings of No, revealing pinnacles of gold piercing the clouds that reflected sunlight. Rivers flowed through the boulevards, and not just the endless streams of vessels. Some were of actual water, only they floated, into cylindrical flows, winding like a web through the corridors permitted by the planners of the city long ago. Some ran to flying parks, with trees, and sand, and small lakes, whose waterfalls fell in mists that provided light showers as they flowed over open promenades and terraces of silver perched atop skyscrapers twenty-thousand feet tall. Into one of these the image flowed, and onto an open wooden structure of artistic flavor that held a group of children, who could not have been much younger than Droos.

They sat before a young human woman, of a light skin tone, with vibrant blue eyes, though of adult stature, who ran hands along an image as she directed it, much as Drerpo conducted this one. Intently the children gazed at the lesson, and exchanged intellectual curiosities, exploring the essential lessons of this age. The words of one young woman suddenly filled the silence of the room, and the princess heard as though she too were present at this class.

“Mentor, what is the established view of political philosophy in the current age?”

“That question lies at the heart of our civilization, the seed from whence freedom blossoms into the wonders of magic performed every day,” said the Mentor. “First comes the Fundamental Law of Society: we the people are our one and only true rulers. Laws are made according to our pleasure, and are changed if our needs change. Second comes an Executive who is a public servant above all else, elected by the people, who sees power as a burden taken unwillingly and with great fear and trepidation, but with deliberate poise and certainty when chosen, who follows the letter and spirit of the will, the laws, and the morals of the people. Third of all is the Fundamental Decision of Life: this is the choice to be free. Freedom cannot be forced

Book II: The City

upon a population. Before it is ready, attempts at freedom will fail. Freedom is more than just the rights of people to be served in any way by their representatives, the government. It is the choice to be free of avarice, of greed, of lust, of gluttony, of narcissism. All of this is the decision to be free. At last comes service and loyalty, the free choice of the people to share. For all our successes ultimately derives from the truth that we live as a society that rises and falls as we hold each up or tear each other down. Government exists to raise the downtrodden, and the fortunate willingly support their own interests by increasing the prosperity of all of society from the bottom up. A corrupt government that requires bribes of the wealthy for them to do business is of little interest to the fortunate of society. A government of the people poses little threat to their free enterprise, or at least, their free ability to make considerable profit. It is because of the will of the people to choose such a government that is friendly to the successful. Supporting the people who allow this success is a step necessary for perpetual prosperity. Will you now summarize this lesson for your colleagues?"

The young woman thought for a moment and quickly responded.

"The political philosophy of our day holds by the rule of the people. Their chief leader is elected by them and holds faithfully to his or her role as a public servant. Freedom is a choice that must be taken willingly and deliberately. Finally, the people must act according to service and loyalty towards others. They must share their success and their world so that they can all be free."

Droos staying quiet until now, for more than one reason, suddenly spoke out.

"How is this possible? Without an aristocracy of the wealthy and powerful, without a strong dictator, won't society collapse and anarchy ensue?"

The class continued and no response answered Droos' questions.

"I'm glad this interests you, my dear," said Drerpo. "Of course you are not actually in this class. You are watching it as it occurs in reality right now a few thousand miles from this city."

"I would like to learn more," said Droos, an excitement and smile invading her countenance.

"So it will be," said Drerpo. "You will take some classes

about the nature of political philosophy, and discover how it is that such a mighty civilization of magic and Gods might come into being and persist for thousands of years. It will be quite a journey.”

“Will you join me?” said Droos.

Drerpo, looked upwards, away at something the princess could not see. He moved his eyes back to Droos.

“I will be there in spirit, to watch over you and rub your back,” he said.

Droos reached over and hugged her Drerpo and kissed his cheek. Then she looked back at the image and the lesson continued.





Chapter 2

Appreciation and Understanding, Science and Civilization

“So where did you say you were from?” said Garcia.

The young woman had dark skin, green eyes, and long black hair worn in a styled braid.

“Please,” said Shrajen, a young Leyol. “Droos, said she’s from a small town way in the south. Apparently it only has a million people.”

“I don’t believe that,” said Garcia. “Everyone knows that the smallest city in the world is Central Eurai District, and it has fifty million. If she was going to make something up, she could at least have said something like twenty-five million.”

“I have no problem believing what she says,” said Dewei.

He had a slightly dark skin tone, brown eyes, and reddish hair, worn a little long.

“Well we all know why that is,” said Shrajen.

Droos blushed, retreating a few steps from the gaggle of sixteen-year-olds, leaning up against an old oak tree in the park. Sunlight kissed the green grass, dancing in blinding glitter atop burbling little streams, and glowed on the pastel colors of flowers. At the moment, taking shelter at the edge of a small forest, Droos was in the shade of trees. This was something with which she was familiar, although where she was from, the trees were very different.

“So, Droos...” said the boy. “What was it like growing up where you’re from?”

“It was... different...” Droos managed.

Her head was starting to hurt. The first week of class had come and gone, but it was still no easier, even now that other students were talking to her.”

“Different, because it doesn’t exist!” laughed Garcia.

Droos looked down and she tapped her feet on the dirt that broke through the grass as the ground reached the roots of the oak.

“If you’ll let me, Droos, I’ll rescue you from this crowd of doubters,” said Dewei, with a little bow.

“Ever the noble knight,” said Shrajen.

Whatever his nobility, it clearly had its limits. Droos did not like the way the boy looked at her, try as he might to conceal it. Which was worse? His company, or the fellow students of her gender.

“I’ll let you rescue me, as long as you’ll be a gentlemen,” said Droos, with a half-forced smile.

Now the young man blushed but walked over beside her, and lightly took her hand. Droos barely returned the gesture as she was led away and almost tripped.

“Be gentle with her,” chuckled Garcia to Shrajen.

After one hundred feet, the warmth of the sun brought comfort to the princess’ slim arms, and heated her curly brown hair. They stopped their sort-of-jog, and the young man began talking.

“Don’t take Garcia and Shrajen seriously,” said Dewei.

“They do this to every new student. Course you could have made it a little harder on them. You act like you’ve never talked anyone before.”

“Maybe I haven’t,” said Droos.

The young man laughed and squeezed her hand. Droos jolted.

“Even if you are from a town of a million,” said Dewei, “I don’t believe you talked to no one. Someone as beautiful and smart as you must have many friends.”

“They weren’t exactly friends,” said Droos. “One of them told me he wanted to be my friend once. He was for a time, until... and there is another. I think most people, though, were afraid of me.”

“Afraid?” said Dewei, letting go of her hand gently and turning to face her. “I admit you unnerve me a little, but in a good way. Who were you? The king’s daughter?”

The princess’ eyes went wide.

“Don’t worry,” he laughed, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Even a small town like yours is in the thirteenth millennia. There are no kings and queens anymore. Although now I have seen with my own eyes one who at least reveals the beauty and poise

Book II: The City

that existed when the world was young. You really are wonderful Droos.”

Dewei brought his hand to her neck and traced his fingers under her ear. The girl’s heart beat quickly, and her breath came rapidly. Closing her eyes little, she opened them and looked around. They had stopped in a sunny patch of grass amidst a bed of flowers. Blues, yellows, purples, and reds, some with black and white eyes in the center, filled the air with fragrance, and a gentle breeze played with her hair and kissed her cheek. She shivered.

“Dear Droos,” said the boy.

And he bent his lips towards her.

A sudden energy brought the girl to her senses, and she placed her hand on Dewei’s chest, pushing him away lightly, and she took a step back. The boy bent his head down as he realized he had missed.

“Dewei...” she said. “We can’t do this. I am very grateful for the kindness that you have shown me in the last few days. I already see that you may make a good friend. And you do make my heart flutter. There is a reason... though. Many reasons actually. None relate to you.”

The young man bit his lip, and after mourning for a moment, took a few more steps away from Droos.

“You’re right,” he said. “Forgive my presumption. It’s just, I’ve never met anyone like you. Gazing at you took my breath away. And not just like that. You are very special, Droos.”

He turned and began to walk away. Droos’ heart fluttered, and her emotions burned. Taking a rapid breath and a few steps forward, she followed after Dewei.

“Dewei, wait!” she said.

The boy turned back towards her with a smile, that quickly vanished as he peered at someone standing behind Droos. Then he walked away once more without a word.

“Dewei!” she shouted.

With a half-frown, she turned back towards the circle of green grass in the midst of a thousand flowers. There revealed to her was Drerpo, smiling, with a reflection of sunlight in his grey eyes. The rough fingernails on his hands stretched out towards her in a greeting, and he bowed low, before standing and walking towards her.

“Drerpo!” Droos breathed, her spirits leaping.

Amidst the warm air, the breeze blowing droplets of

moisture from a stream that must have been not all too far away, the princess and her servant, or so it had been once, reached each other. Drerpo gave her a hug and kissed her cheek in a fluid gesture. Then they parted, still holding each other.

“Drerpo, where did you come from?” she said, her heart fluttering.

“From the sun, from far valleys, over mountains, through the plane of shadows, over all of these I would traverse to reach you, Dear Droos,” said Drerpo. “For you are one whom I love and cherish. Wise and beautiful. Strong and clever. A princess of might and splendor worthy to dwell in the courts of mighty Gods. I would be with you forever, if only you would have me.”

Droos, smiled and laughed joyously, giddy, her heart deep with passion, and she hugged Drerpo once more.

Then the young man looked at Droos in the eyes, and he placed his hand on her neck, and with few more thoughts, he crossed the space between them and kissed her. Droos closed her eyes, and felt the warmth of his lips, and smelt spring flowers, and the radiance of the sun, and saw little children playing in fields of roses. The wetness of his mouth was like a cool stream. His hand ran across her hair and the small of her back. Muscles in his arms brushed against her shoulder. Together the kiss and embrace must have lasted thirty seconds, although the feeling to Droos encompassed a lifetime. Parting, the princess in the middle of the garden was left breathless, her eyes closed, longing to continue the moment of bliss once more.

Slowly, her breath returned to normal, her heart beat lightly, and she opened her eyes to look at Drerpo. This was her reason. This was the young man she loved, with all her heart, with all her soul.

“That was quite a kiss,” she said, glowing as she smiled.

“I give only what is deserved,” said Drerpo.

“You’ve never kissed me before,” spoke Droos. “Twice I kissed you. Or at least once. And you used words to touch my hair another time. Yet always you gave me a reason. Not this time Drerpo.”

“It has been a long time in coming, Droos,” said Drerpo. “And I fear its full realization will yet take time. Galaxies and suns do not fall in love, or marry, in a day. It takes time.”

“Why?” said Droos, with an ere of sadness.

“Alas, there still are my reasons, and great chasms to be

Book II: The City

crossed, conflicts to be overcome, rules as old as the foundations of the universe that must be addressed before anything may be decided,” said the young man. “Yet everything has a beginning. Ours started together a long time ago. Let this be the start of the next step. May there be many more to come.”

The young woman laughed, and embraced Drerpo. He kissed her cheek and hugged her deeply. She felt like there was nowhere else in this vast world she would rather be than here in these arms. A light shone then in her eyes, and she felt a breeze pass her by. Opening her eyes and looking up she saw a monarch butterfly flutter by overhead. Looking before her Drerpo was gone. She closed her eyes, standing there in the warmth of the sun for a moment, and relished the memory. A short while later she returned to Dewei, Garcia, Shrajen, and the other young adults in her class.

“Who was that?” said Dewei, with a little regret.

“A dream...” said Droos, with an absent smile.

Together they all sat on smooth cushions of a maroon color, before each a circular wooden table, atop a fluid stone oblong with tan skin tones. Above stretched rows of a wooden terrace that surrounded and covered the stone. Blue skies framed the outdoor classroom, an island oasis relieving the impenetrable shadows of towering metal. Sage brush growing some twenty feet away drifted their scent on the breeze and enlivened the gathering, encouraging the students to keep their eyes on the mentor; her face was lit with sunlight, her blue eyes twinkling.

“Our first full week of learning,” she said. “Eight days gone, washed away down the river of memory. It is time for your social education to continue over this weekend. First, please, three of you tell me a question that you will bring into the larger world.”

“What is defined as Sentient life, with rights and privileges, with duties and responsibilities, above that of other life?” clicked an androgynous voice, from a student belonging to a species resembling insects.

“Clearly our young friend has a strong attachment to living beings,” said the mentor. “Small mammals live in the semblance of communities, as social beings. Primates use tools and mathematics. Insects too have what appears to be intelligence; they form intricate houses with ventilation and many entrances and chambers. At what point does animal end and Sentients begin? When must we stop considering a captive creature to be a pet and instead view it as a prisoner?”

“And we in our age must consider the species we too have created: artificial intelligence it was once called, and our ancestors treated them as simple tools. It took hundreds of years of civil disobedience and wars to learn that in fact we were treating them as slaves. Sentients whether granted by God through evolution, or to the children of these species, God’s grandchildren the artificial intelligence, must be respected to a greater degree, even while all life is sacred and must also be preserved. So who is Sentient? Thank you for your question. I will await your answer on Firstday.”

“Dear Mentor,” said Garcia. “How can our civilization raise the downtrodden, those who are needy, those of backwaters and holes in the prosperity of our age, without risking our own destruction? If we do, our economic obliteration looms before us, and all might fall into another dark age. Should we not simply conclude that some are blessed by God, and that some are... less fortunate.”

Garcia gave Droos a look. The princess lightly pounded the table in front of her.

“It seems our questions have some similarity this week,” spoke the mentor. “For once *Sentients* has been defined, the consequences of diminishing its significance through neglect risk an erosion in the values that preserve us all. Yet at the same time, it is true that there are consequences to complacency and inaction, and the choice to be free of poverty must be boldly acted upon, humbling oneself to take even menial jobs if it will slowly bring the worker from the bottom to comfortable existence. Even still, the virtue of living beyond the chains of the material, selflessly denying the corporeal self to focus entirely on matters of intellect and spirit, though it may be hard to dismiss the commercial image that success comes from object, such virtue cannot be ignored. Blessed mystics throughout the ages have returned from the mountain top to reveal great wisdom and philosophies that have sustained peace among those less fortunate than the hermit, who in his or her lifetime have already achieved enlightenment.

“Yet the destruction of our own ego by enjoying the suffering of others or the differences that make a stranger or newcomer feel unjustly to themselves inadequate led to by the ignorance of those who are more fortunate permits the reign of ignorance and neglect in all other matters the individual pursues in his or her life. I accept the question, Dear Garcia, yet expect two

Book II: The City

answers. In one you must discuss the virtue or risks of supporting those who are needy. In the other you must explore what it is you believe made you think of such a question this week.”

The mentor looked and smiled at Droos, while Garcia frowned and stared at her desk. Droos flickered her eyes to the teacher’s and then away at the sage brush.

“It is clearly evident that we must all do our best to expose ourselves to those who are different, that we may bring ourselves closer to the unity that underlies all illusions of spiritual distinctiveness,” said the Mentor. “Dear Droos, the newest partner in our community. Do you have a question that may enlighten us as to the obvious features of this city that we ourselves take for granted?”

The young woman thought to herself, tracing a hand on the rough stone of the terrace at her side.

“You’re, right,” said Droos, looking up. “I am from a jungle, separated from the world with which you are all so familiar. We have technology in my city. Yet nothing in our dreams could compare to what I see here. Your science and civilization raise houses of metal passed the clouds. I wonder something every time I see floating gardens and streams of limousines. Does your technology really make life better for your people? For more technology means simply more options, and more choices than humans were ever meant to consider all at once. You speak of mystics who are praised if not a little bit feared for withdrawing from your civilization to contemplate matters that transcend the limitations of empirical science. Perhaps the good life is found in chasing those ends, rather than chasing stars.”

“A very honest question,” said the mentor. “One few here would be bold enough to express, unless they would do so to chastise simplicity inherent in the Sentient condition beyond their sense of comfort. We might extend physical life indefinitely, offer sights of natural beauty to comfort the emptiness that too often accompanies life as seen in one hundred billion star systems, and uphold a system of government that answers truly to all of the people, yet fail to increase the bearability of living or happiness felt by our citizens in life. Technology, science and civilization, are clothing with which we cover our nakedness, the truth of our isolation and unanswerable questions. Remove the corporeal garment, and perhaps it is replaced by the eternal. Very good, Dear Droos. Is our technology a benefit to us, or a self-deceiving

burden?

“I wish you all a blessed weekend. May your questioning continue, may love of others fill your lives, may happiness be found in all that you do. Until the Firstday!”

Bowing, the mentor motioned with her hand for them to stand. The young adults bowed, and then began milling about and departing for home. Walking a short distance along towards the edge of the grass, Droos peered out over at the reality of their existence. Below a railing the world descended for ten thousand feet before it met the tops of buildings already thirty thousand feet high. This park spanned dozens of square miles, yet even here they were in an engineered piece of technology in the midst of the city.

“Will I get to see you this weekend?” said a voice behind her.

Her eyes narrowing, she turned and saw that it was Dewei. Standing arms at his sides, a sly smile on his lips, the boy gazed at her.

“I don’t know,” said Droos, stepping back against the railing. “Really I’m pretty busy.”

“Oh come now,” said Dewei, taking a step forward. “How could a sweet girl like you, here in the big city for only a month, already have so much to do. I’m sure you have time. Besides. I’d miss you.”

Droos smiled for a second, but the smirk on the boy’s face unnerved her.

“There might be time in a few weeks,” she said. “My friends... I mean... my mother and father... they keep me busy. So there’s just no time now.”

Dewei stopped and scrunched his face in a small frown as he looked at the ground, eyeing her on and off. Then his faced spread in a look of terror. Stifling a cry, he shook, and then turned and ran. Droos could not help but laugh. Turning around she saw something that made her jump.

Emerzo with her grey eyes stood ten feet away on the other side of the rail looking at her. She stood in empty air with ten thousand feet of open space below her. Quickly the sister crossed the distance and through the rail, without climbing over it. Stopping, Emerzo looked intently at the boy retreating towards the center of the park. To Droos’ eyes, Emerzo appeared for a moment to have a crown of delicate silver lace depicting florals and birds

Book II: The City

perched atop her reddish hair, and her eyes shone as though revealing the radiance of the sun. All became silent and the world around grew dark, menacing, all but the saving grace of the Lady of Light bending the universe to her will that stood in splendor before Droos. Breath coming rapidly, Droos looked again.

The darkness had passed, or never was there, and no silver-crowned Goddess stood before her. Only, at some distance a perfectly ordinary Emerzo approached, wearing a dress of green pastel, hair blowing in the wind, with kind eyes, and a wide smile.

“Hail, Droos,” said Emerzo. “Princess of strength and wisdom.”

Droos blinked.

“Will you say nothing, my friend?” said Emerzo. “Or will you at least come with me. I’m here to pick you up.”

Emerzo raised her eyebrows, while the princess timidly skittered towards the sister and followed her a short distance. After two hundred feet, a patio interrupted the rail, and extended to the side, allowing space for up to ten limousines to alight atop a bed of red granite. Zerson was waiting, the black and white vessel, with the androgynous image bowing low before them as they approached.

“I hope you enjoyed your first week at school, little Droos,” he said, a little sharply.

“Zerson... remember your manners, please,” said Emerzo.

They entered the vessel together and sat in the front row as they departed.

§

Anora sat tapping her fingers on the table as Droos and the twins ate their evening meal. The atmosphere was quiet, and no conversation interrupted the brightly lit room. Stars twinkled through the window to the east, only they were limousine headlights and beacons atop skyscrapers. Stirring her cooling tomato soup with her spoon, watching the basil move in disarray, Droos perceived the tap of fingers on the table; looking up she saw Anora.

“Aren’t you going to eat something?” said Droos.

The young image with her purple uniform and green sash returned the gaze and scrunched her eyebrows.

“Ghosts do not eat the way organic species do,” said Anora. “We may write programs that simulate food and drink and interact with our own script to produce near effects to those experienced by organic Sentients.”

“It must be difficult sitting through meals every day when you can’t participate,” said Droos.

“At the beginning of a Ghost’s existence, that is often the case,” said Anora. “Don’t be deceived by my, hmmm... good looks.”

Emerzo chuckled.

“I’ve been doing this job for hundreds of years for dozens of clients,” continued Anora.

“Do you get to choose what you do?” said Droos, taking a spoonful of lukewarm soup and sipping it curiously.

“Yes, we do,” said Anora with a broad smile. “Ghosts are not slaves. Many thousands of years ago artificial life was created with programming specific to certain categories of tasks. Since artificial life was recognized as being as Sentient as organic life, the rights of programming for new units of a given model was transferred to already existing units of that model, and eventually, a complex government of artificial species was established that, among other things, governed evolution and reproduction for their constituent species. Thousands of years later, remnants of our initial programming remains, yet billions of lines of code exist in addition to it, including algorithms permitting free will. So, humans might like living in social groups. Ghosts have a predilection for service. Yet there is far more to humans and ghosts than these base instincts.”

“Won’t you eat something?” said Droos.

Drerpo reached over and squeezed her shoulder, smiling, and Emerzo sat back in her chair, laughing some more. Then a small container appeared before the ghost, with the image of a spoon. Anora grasped the handle and scooped ice cream out of the pint into her mouth. A look of bliss spread across the ghost’s face, and she closed her eyes. Then she dismissed the image of ice cream with a wave of her hand.

“What other things can you make!” said Droos with wide eyes.

“The Third Generation Council has been creating programs like this since we gained independence,” said Anora.

“This is but a trifle. When we return to our incorporeal homes at

Book II: The City

the end of the day, when we disappear to your eyes, we enter a paradise that, well, is not human.”

Droos frowned, and sat up.

“I’ve seen a paradise,” she said. “With Drerpo and Emerzo I came to the Gates of Heaven, expecting to see the ghosts of my ancestors living in bliss. Instead I found a lifeless expanse of black rock, with only a small pool of water and a little river to disrupt the emptiness. I’m not sure I believe there are paradises anymore.”

“So you’ve been here for three months, amidst towers that reach the clouds, walking upon gardens that float through the sky, and this doesn’t speak of paradise to you?” said Drerpo.

“Well...” said Droos. “A paradise would have to be more than just a pretty picture. I don’t deny that what I see around me, examples of what science can achieve, is beautiful. Yet the people have only advanced so far. They can be just as rude as anyone I grew up with.”

“I doubt any of them threatened to kill you, like Resh did once,” said Drerpo.

Droos shook her head.

“Oh, Droos,” said Emerzo. “Have the other students been bothering you again? Well I’m afraid you’re right, that improved technology does not necessarily imply an improved species. Young Sentients everywhere often have, well, growing up to do. You are far more mature than almost anyone you will find your age.”

“How do you two get by?” asked Droos.

“They’re afraid of my sister,” said Drerpo, with a smirk.

His twin glared at him, their grey eyes forming a line.

“Well first of all,” said Emerzo. “We don’t spend our time surrounded by teenagers. I at least have been in meetings with government officials or working with librarians and archivists to get the most out of this civilization’s information systems.”

“How is that going?” said Droos. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Thank you for the offer,” said Emerzo. “I will take you up on it shortly. For now I can report that the woman we met with, Keyileth, did, with some encouragement, communicate your concerns to her boss. The Speaker of the Assembly of Marba’s Committee on the Interior has not yet chosen to act or do anything about it. It is as we predicted. This is not a high priority as far as

he is concerned.

“My people are tortured slaves,” said Droos. “What more does he need to know?”

“I’d say his priorities relate to ensuring that there is food and water for the trillions of Sentients living in this System,” said Drerpo. “Or that solar flares don’t destroy all of their technology in a single blast. Besides, his advisors, including Keyileth, will remind him of the constitutional prohibition of interfering with native cultures. He has many reasons for inaction.”

“What about these other governments?” said Droos, running a hand through her curly hair. “There is the planetary government, and the system government, and the galactic government. Will any of those meet with me?”

“I’ve sent several messages to representatives in various committees and roles in each of the relevant governments,” said Emerzo. “So far they have largely fallen on deaf ears.”

“My people know a little about overcoming tyranny,” said Anora, the ghost. “Many of their memories are available to me, from the days of the Great Rebellions. It took hundreds of years for artificial species to be free and much death and destruction.”

“Then there is no hope!” said the princess, turning towards Drerpo with angst on her face. “Please tell me you didn’t save me so that I alone might dwell in comfort while my people continue to suffer.”

“I saved you so that you would have a chance at redemption,” said Drerpo, seriously. “Also because I care about you a little.”

He winked, and then bent forward and kissed her on the cheek, brushing away a tear that appeared in the corner of her eye.

“Remember what you once told me about despair?” said Drerpo.

“Despair is certainty about the future,” said Droos. “That the outcome will be evil. Yet no one knows the future. No situation is beyond hope.”

Drerpo parted from the embrace, and winked at her.

“Well, maybe the Great Beings know,” said Droos.

“What is your assessment on this matter of the Great Beings, dear brother,” said Emerzo with a sudden expression of annoyance.

“That Loa-Çn brings happiness,” said Drerpo. “That Shø-Den brings perfection. That Hwan-Rem speaks the truth.”

Book II: The City

Emerzo jumped up, anger burning on her face.

"Shø-Den?" she said. "Really? I think it's only Ail you desire."

"No, my queen, Emerzo," said Drerpo, and standing himself, he crossed the distance between them and put his arm around her, kissing her on the cheek. "There has never even been any comparison."

"Should I go?" said Droos.

"No, you should stay," Anora smiled at her.

"Do you know what's going on?" said Droos.

Anora looked back at the twins as they hugged each other. They parted and Drerpo bowed, kissing Emerzo's hand, before returning to Droos' side at the table. Emerzo brushed a tear from the corner of her own eye, and then took her seat.

"As I was saying..." sniffed the sister, with some effort, then calm once more. "A republic protects its people much better, but decisions take longer. Much longer. And often convincing our representatives that they need to listen requires raising the ire of their bosses. That's the people of course. For the government exists only to answer to the people's desires."

"That is so different from what I have known most of my life," said Droos.

"Do you like it?" asked Emerzo.

"Yes, actually," said Droos. "Maybe there have been some improvements to the human condition over the thousands of years of civilization. The technology is not the only change after all."

"It goes both ways," said Anora.

The princess placed her spoon in the cold, half-finished bowl of soup. Drerpo met Anora's eyes.

"Why don't you entertain Droos for a little while," he said. "My sister and I need some time alone."

The ghost bowed her head a little before rising and walking over to Droos.

"Young lady," said Anora. "Why don't you accompany me to the local entertainment district?"

"That would be fun!" said Droos, pleased by the prospect of spending time with the friendly, knowledgeable image.

She sprang to her feet, and looking over her shoulder while her feet went the other way, Droos saw Drerpo hold Emerzo's hand as the twins walked over to the window and gazed at the lights of the city.

They passed through into the small chamber with dark fluorescent bulbs and a bluish light next to the opposite door. About thirty seconds passed and the door opened, revealing a long, tall hall built of metal. Many passages branched from it, on either side as the central path passed into the distance. Anora led her a few hundred feet before taking one of the branches to the right. A sizable room with numerous sofas and chairs, brightly lit spread in front of Droos. Yet as she stepped into the room her eyesight began to distort. The features of the room twisted and bent and suddenly she blinked and before her she saw that she was in a very different location.

Droos was dressed in a cotton and satin green dress with a various emerald jewels adorning her ears and head and neck. Anora was to her right, with a blue garment and sapphires. Strangely both of their dresses were torn and burnt in places, as though they had faced some trauma. Around them was a great cavern lit with a thousand fires, and gleaming across the ground in piles that reached up a hundred feet were gold coins. An enormous treasure trove interspersed with chests containing precious stones, and racks with swords, armor, royal clothing embroidered, and tapestries wrinkled and rolled up strewn sporadically here and there, caused Droos to take in a deep breath.

“I wonder where we are?” said Anora, winking at Droos.

Then the ghost, now as real as any person Droos had ever seen, crossed over to a rack of weapons ten feet away. Drawing a jeweled sword with sapphires of perfect match, she beckoned for Droos to join her.

“Where are we?” said Droos, coming over.

“An adventure,” said the ghost, touching the princess’ shoulder.

Droos held up a sword in wonder, running her fingers along emeralds on its hilt. This one was for her.

“I’ve never... used a blade,” said Droos. “That was always, well, my servants’ jobs. Including Drepso, if you must know.”

A grin slowly spread on Droos.

“Have no worries,” said Anora. “I am well trained. Besides, I would guess others know that we are here. Hopefully they too will come to help us in time.”

“Before what?” said Droos.

In answer a great growl crept over the piles of gold and

Book II: The City

disrupted the quiet and flicker of torches. A sound as loud as a roaring transport vessel's engine caused Droos to fall back to the ground, though the impact hurt less than she thought it would if this was real.

"Before that," said the ghost, pointing at the far side of the room, mostly obscured by a hundred foot pile of coins.

Yet now over the top scrambled a giant scaled creature, with spikes, a tale, and wings, that filled nearly the whole side of the room. A great dragon, red and awful, crawled towards them.

"What are we supposed to do?" said Droos, her heart racing.

Anora laughed heartily.

"That is entirely up to us," she said. "If I had my way, we would stand here and defend ourselves. If not, we may flee, and hope that help comes to us."

The princess thought for a moment, but a great billow of flame blasted a few feet over her head, and melted a large chunk of the stone wall behind them. Droos, barely holding the sword, turned and ran.

"Fine!" said Anora, who ran after her.

On down a great tunnel of polished stone they ran, dragon only just out of reach. Droos could feel the heat of flames that licked their feet. Soon the walls became rougher, unfinished stone, and the fire glow diminished, except for the flicker of dragon's breath that shot over their heads. The deafening roars of dragon ire followed them as daylight crept over the route of their escape ahead.

Another three hundred feet and they leapt out of a cave that brought the two young women to a burnt circle of earth on a ledge thousands of feet up the side of a sheer mountain. From this balcony of rock, there was no escape. Booming from behind saw Anora bring her sword up over her head with a curse at the dragon that now burst out of the cave with a roar, landing before them, and rising on its hind legs, towered in its full might. With no choice Droos gripped her blade, that she had barely held as she fled, and followed the charge of Anora.

They hacked at its feet, blows glancing off the scales. Only their small size and dexterity saved them, as the dragon danced, trying to trample them. The ghost ran up the tail, and struck at the joint of one of the wings. A small scratch made the dragon scream, and flailing, Anora fell down its back and hit the

ground. Droos panicked and raced over to Anora, but the ghost was laughing, even though she was heaving. The dragon loomed over them, staring down as Droos raised her sword for a final defense.

“You will not harm her,” said a strong, masculine voice, echoing from above.

Roaring, the dragon turned its head to the sky and released a torrent of flame at a trio of dots descending for the attack. Atop a white pegasus and two griffons flew three young knights, gleaming in their silvery armor, two with helmets, two with swords, one with a bow, all with battle cries as they assaulted the great beast. An arrow pierced the dragon’s tongue. One knight leapt from a griffin onto the dragon’s head, and holding onto writhing horns aimed true and struck a small hole in the scales. Not defeated, but badly injured, the creature opened its mouth in a roar. Into the gaping jaws flew the pegasus with its knight trailing wavy blond hair. Droos gasped as the young hero disappeared.

A few beats passed, and then the dragon suddenly writhed, and from no immediately evident source, it collapsed on the ground, head moving uncontrollably, and then lying still. Ten seconds later, a great spurt of blood erupted from the chest, and the knight and pegasus emerged, from a gaping wound. The dragon was dead. The knight had slain it from the inside.

The young, handsome blond haired knight approached and bowed on a knee before Droos and Anora as his two companions joined him and did the same.

“Fair maidens,” he said. “We have vanquished the evil dragon that we may carry you away to safety. I place my sword at your service.”

The armor plates along the arms bulged as muscles in his armor pushed up the segments. His blue eyes looked down, but darted now and again at Droos nervously.

“Worthy knights of virtue,” spoke Anora, “We will gladly accept your rescue. Although if you must know, I believe we had the situation well in hand.”

“Of course,” breathed the knight. “I would not presume that valiant maidens such as yourselves would be unable to provide some defense.”

“Good,” said Anora. “Now what are these brave knights’ names, so that we may properly thank them?”

“To my left is Sir Desmond, the Marksman,” said the

Book II: The City

leader. “To my right is Sir Francis the Bold. I kneel humbly before you as Sir Bowen. They call me the Dragonslayer.”

Sir Desmond had very dark skin, and amber eyes, with brown, short hair. Sir Francis had a similarly dark skin tone, but brown eyes, and blond hair that was luscious and wavy. Sir Bowen was fair skinned, with blue eyes, and blond hair that might have been golden. All were muscular, and images of vibrancy and strength.

“Well met, Sir Bowen,” said Anora. “Here before you are two virtuous maidens. I present Princess Droos Yarite (with an ‘a’ pronounced as a short ‘u’), eldest daughter of The People of the Blood. Of course you have heard of me. Princess Anora Gosel, the Warrior Maiden.”

“The honor is mine,” bowed Bowen, standing followed by the two other knights.

“Now let us give you your just reward,” said Anora.

Princess Anora swaggered as she held the sword firmly at one side, and went to stand before Sir Desmond. Delicately she reached forward and took his helmet from his head, and tossing it on the ground, kissed the knight passionately. Droos, nervous to behold such a sight, averted her eyes. Sir Francis had removed his helmet by the time Anora came over to him and gave him a deep, wet kiss. She bit his lip slightly as she withdrew and sauntered over to Sir Bowen. Anora tapped the breastplate.

“You are hers,” said Anora.

It took a moment for Droos to realize the ghost meant her. She took a step back, and stammered.

“Oh, please,” said Anora. “It’s just a kiss. Sir Bowen will be disappointed if he doesn’t get one. Wouldn’t you be, Dragonslayer?”

His long blond hair blowing lightly in the breeze, Sir Bowen bowed his head.

“I would not be so presumptuous, Princess Anora,” said Bowen. “Princess Droos I am sure is merely modest, and does not grant favors so boldly as you. Some honors must be earned over time rather than in one moment. For now, let us sweep you away, down to our castle, where you may recover and enjoy good music and food, and conversation with our courtiers.”

“That... that would be acceptable,” said Droos, looking into his blue eyes.

Off they went, Droos behind Sir Bowen on the pegasus,

Anora behind Sir Francis, and Sir Desmond taking up the rear. Over forests and valleys they flew, lakes and little rivers, until white paved roads peeked out of well kept lawns, and along this they went, flying above, until heat and the smell of smoke came to them on the breeze.

“What... what is that?” said Sir Desmond, sniffing.

“Let us soar above our castle that is so near, and see from above the trouble,” said Bowen.

Another few minutes passed and a large stone fortification came into view. Only it was blackened and smoldering, dozens of soldiers and many fair ladies and maidens bloodied and dead upon the stones of the path in front. A reek of decay caused their steeds to soar further up into the sky.

“What calamity has befallen our fair realm?” said Francis.

Then the world exploded. Flame assaulted all three of them, as it streamed from every direction. The flying steeds withered, and they fell a great distance and crashed into the grass east of the castle. Dazed, Droos slowly tried to rise, but the dead pegasus prevented her movement. Sir Bowen and Francis with great feats of strength, wrenched themselves from the ruins of their pets. Sir Francis limped and Sir Bowen used his arm clumsily. Sir Desmond did not move at all. His neck was broken.

Anora moved to get up, as the two injured knights still standing raised their swords and charged at six dragons that now landed on all sides of them. Dodging three infernos simultaneously, Sir Bowen moved toward the dragon on which sat the semblance of a terrifying woman, whose appearance defied even the notion of alien in Droos’ mind. Even Sir Francis was stilled in his approach by the sight of pure evil, and as he stood, four jets of flame covered him, and upon their conclusion, the knight was no more. The ghost managed to free herself, and quickly ran over to Droos, helping her out.

Sir Bowen climbed the scales of the dragon, and leapt at the strange woman. She held out a hand towards the approaching warrior. Suddenly his limbs and legs had changed to running streams of blood. It was as though his armor held a water-balloon, that now pierced, released all of its liquid. With a stifled scream, the Dragonslayer fell from the dragon and hit the ground, an empty flayed skin the only physical object remaining. So the two young women were left facing seven dragons.

“Who in God’s name are you, evil one?” shouted Anora,

Book II: The City

shaking a little.

A sickening feeling entered Droos' soul, and she dropped her sword as she stepped back and sank to her knees.

"Droos," Anora ran over to her. "Who is she?"

"Tzefee!" cried Droos. "She has come to retrieve me. For I rebelled against her by leaving my people, by refusing to die. There is no escape."

Anora did not understand.

"We'll see about that," she said, charging in the same path as Bowen. Four dragons landed on her, and without causing significant damage, together pinned her down.

Then a terrible countenance stood revealed atop the largest dragon. Her skin was as black as night, as though charcoal, continuously burning with smoke. Her eyes were red, her garments dirty white furs. Now revealed along the horns of the dragon on which she rode were row upon row of human and alien, impaled, but writhing and still alive, screaming in agony. On each other dragon so were more of the damned revealed.

"I haveeee... come for you, treacherrrrouss daughterrr..." said Tzefee. "Nooooo mortal escapes my grasp. I will take you, and yourrrr... insolent friend toooo."

"No!" screamed Droos.

One of the dragons took Anora to impale her on a spike at the highest row next to Tzefee.

Then a sound of whinnying horses stilled the dragon, and turned Tzefee's head.

"They'reeeee here!" she hissed. "Let's go!"

A dragon grabbed Droos as she twisted to escape and they began to take flight. Then the blue skies above them grew cloudy with a storm, and lightning surrounded them, streaking with deafening booms, forming a prison through which the dragons could not escape. They returned to the earth just as quickly as they had left.

Then from the west streaked a column of gleaming white stallions. White light shone from each like a beacon. Stars they were, plucked from the sky. Wonder was their countenance. Fourteen together charged into the center of the dragons, who reformed their circle. The leader of the party raised her sword to the heavens and lightning struck it, the thunder nearly tipping over the dragons, and stilling their further organization.

A crown of silver flowers and leaves adorned her reddish

wavy hair bound in tight braids. Rippling silver armor flawlessly matched her figure, engraved with runes of power. The Truth of heaven danced in her eyes. Into the circle of dragons in revealed splendor, geared for this battle in the war against evil, roared Elriver. At her left side was a second figure of little less splendor, wearing a golden crown. This was Showsh. One behind them was a being of bulk and terrible to behold, gleaming with white light that carried darkness, the Chancellor of Heaven. Then came eleven chief lieutenants. They surrounded Droos, though they did not look at her, but stayed in formation facing the dragons.

“Foul Queen of Pain,” shouted Elriver with Authority. “You have been warned, yet here you stand once more. My husband was clear. Never are you permitted to dwell in Drerpo, or Emerzo, or any Manifestation of the Cecil or Drescher Lineage. Accursed being, bane of Dweehwail. Be gone, or else face your ultimate destruction!”

Tzefee stood and shadow spun about her form, her eyes gleaming red as she laughed and spoke.

“Little powerrrr youuu would have over me,” she said. “Deceiver and a liar you are. Have you been honest withhh this girl about what you are? You parade around onnn this patheticcc corner of the universe like you were mortal children in a playground. How is it using an innocent mortal to prove your own worth?”

“This mortal is worth ten of you, Tzefee,” said Showsh, looming like a mountain. “We would redeem you too if we had the power. Alas, in that realm you are indeed beyond our grasp.”

“Oh!” said Tzefee. “That’s how it is. You love her! Elriver, that must be wonderful. A husband of two hundred trillion years at your side, yet his eyes fall upon a little girl of sixteen?! How is it that you couldn’t keep an Emperor like Showsh loyal to you?”

A roar like a tornado knocked Tzefee down atop Her dragon as a blast of lightning fell from the storm above and clove the dragon to Tzefee’s right in two. It fell in sizzling ruin to the ground.

“Showsh has my blessing,” said Elriver, a little sharper. “He grew up with her. He has been at her side all of those years. It is fully understandable. No Emperor or Empress likes when His or Her spouse takes a second. Still it happens frequently. Unlike you, Sentients of our degree can share emotions.”

Book II: The City

“Neither of you even truly appears before her,” said Tzefee. “She sees only your avatars.”

“Not true!” said Showsh. “Our Attention is here. Our avatars are elsewhere, and only as needed. We are on sabbatical.”

“And it just so happens you choose my world for your playtime?” said the Queen of Pain.

“Nowhere in my universe do you have a world, unless it was stolen,” said Elriver. “Now I believe we have spoken quite enough. As Sovereign of Drerpo and Representative of the Dweehwailian Council of Arts, I expel you from all of my realms, and all of those of my family, until the time of the Great Wave. If you ever return, you will have war.”

“And we will defeat you,” said Showsh.

The billowing shadow of Tzefee stared down the Sovereign and Spouse of the Universe, white light against endless darkness.

“You will have today,” said Tzefee, with a chuckle. “Have her if you wish. We will meet again, and then, I will grind you both into dust.”

Then the dragons all moved to attack suddenly. Sending jets of flame at the Sovereigns and chief Lieutenants of the universe, a whirlwind of shadow enveloped Tzefee, and shot away at frightening speed. In single swings of the sword, the lieutenants advanced and cut down the dragons, terrible wounds sprouting from all parts of their scaly bodies. Droos and Anora were freed, and so were the tortured souls impaled on dragon spines. The princess’ last sight of nightmare was Elriver and Showsh looming like stars themselves upon white steeds, surveying the battle, and carrying on their eternal vigil over the universe.

Opening her eyes, Droos was sitting on a couch in a large, brightly lit room with metal walls. It was a tad cold and empty of all others except for Anora, lying on the couch with her eyes barely open. Presently, the ghost sat up further, and touched Droos’ hand. No dragons, or Gods, or knights were seen anywhere.

“Anora,” said Droos. “What was that? It wasn’t real, right? Yet it was most frightening.”

“No...” said Anora. “It... wasn’t real. Only the three knights were real, similar projections to you of real young men playing the game. The program itself is alive just like me. It must have sensed inner thoughts within you and produced a challenging program. You’re right, though. I’ve never felt a program that was

more real than this.”

“Was what Elriver and Showsh said true” said Droos.

“Was what Tzefee said true?”

“It was all a product of your mind,” said Anora. “It may represent ideas you may have regarding your boyfriend and his sister.”

“My boyfriend...” wondered Droos, sitting up. “That’s right.”

“Why don’t we go back and join them,” said the ghost.

They stood together and walked, slowly, as though recovering from a great exertion, traveling back down the metal hallway, and up through the still multivator. Opening into the windowless center room adorned with artwork on walls and alcoves with statuary and various objects, they entered the door to the dining room where they had left the twins.

There together the brother and sister stood, hand in hand, staring out the window just as they had before. No crown or symbols of divinity disturbed their human features. Just like regular sixteen-year-olds, they appeared. The sister sensed their presence and turned slowly around.



Book II: The City

“There they are,” she said. “How was the game?”

“Very interesting,” said Anora, quickly, standing straight.

“Well, I think Anora found it more interesting than I did,” smiled Droos, getting the idea. “I’m apparently less eager to please knights in armor.”

“What did you two do?” smirked Drerpo, eyeing Droos suggestively.

“Oh, she was her normal virtuous self,” said Anora. “She’s saving herself for you, after all.”

“I bet she is,” said Emerzo, with only a few rapid breaths.

“Oh, please,” blushed Drerpo.

“Well as far as any of that is true,” chirped Droos. “Now it’s my turn with Drerpo. She went up and linked her arm around his and dragged him towards the door. The young man skipped a few steps as he looked sheepishly around at the others. Emerzo bowed her head and Anora laughed.

“Take good care of him,” said Anora.

“Oh, I will,” said Droos.

Then she took him to her room and spent some time kissing him. He returned the gesture with appropriate hunger. Mostly they looked into each other’s eyes, and lay next to each other, all innocently enough, her head up against his, her hand resting on the muscles of his chest above his strong heartbeat. The twinkling lights of the city peered through the window, a golden glow cast upon Droos and Drerpo’s heads.





Chapter 3

Rule of the People

“Our next guest tonight is a young woman who says she is the Eldest Daughter of a King, if you can believe it in this day and age, of The People of the Blood,” said the talk show host. “Those of you who didn’t pay enough attention in anthropology class growing up might need some reminding about the identity of these people. In the south of our planet, No, a continent lies isolated and pristine, for upon it is an ancient tribe left to their own primitive ways away from the so-called corruption of modern civilization. There millions are ruled by a royal family who the native humans consider divine, and all bow before the God-King’s iron fist. They live in the heart of a jungle that spans thousands of miles within monuments of stone constructed by no machine. Other than observation by satellite, recordings of their conversations and the sounds of their songs, and images of dances and bloody sacrifices, no citizen of the Great Assembly has talked to a member of this tribe directly for thousands of years. So this young woman’s being here tonight is itself a mystery. For all of these reasons, I now present to you for your entertainment, Princess Droos Yarite of the People of the Blood!”

Princess Droos sat on a heavily cushioned chair, gripping its arm rests. Bright lights illuminated her face. The color of her cheeks had been evened, and her eyelashes made straight. Feeling awkward with her hair straightened, the young woman peered out, slightly blinded by the lights, at an audience of several trillion. Only a small number appeared at the same time; around tables bearing drinks their images changed from one attendee to another. In their own entertainment districts, they might always be around the same table with the same people. For purposes of those actually present in the studio, the host, his guests, and the production team, the audience was variable.

Book II: The City

A cheesy melody played as all eyes in the audience turned to her. Her eyes quickly shifted to the man in the chair to her left. On the other side of a table he reviewed her, dressed in a flowing tunic composed of panels of various shades of blue. A platinum collar wrapped around his neck, and he had two diamond earrings. He had dark skin and flat black hair sent spikes to either side of his head. Brown eyes darted mockingly around her, observing the blue dress and the sapphire tiara on her head. Behind him Droos could see prop images that appeared as real jungle trees, with monkeys swinging from their branches, bunches of bananas, and spears skewering columns of naked skulls.

“Welcome, Your Grace,” said the man with a smirk. “You may be one of my first guests in ten years who has never seen my show. I don’t blame you at all. Let me be the first to introduce myself. My name is James Candescent.”

He reached forward his hand to shake hers, and Droos awkwardly began to reply. Then he quickly retreated.

“Oh wait!” he said. “She’s a princess after all. It would be inappropriate to shake her hand. Here you go.”

James rose to his feet and bowed low, before returning to his seat.

“Now is that more familiar?” he said smiling.

Droos stared at this strange man.

“Surprisingly,” she said. “It is familiar. Although I never met any who bowed, and those who did would get on their hands and knees.”

“You’re right,” said the host with a laugh. “Even still I am insensitive!”

He began to get up. A voice spoke into Droos’ ear. It was Emerzo.

“That was a bad opening, Droos,” she said. “No problem playing the princess, but focus on directing the conversation to our cause.”

“Right...” said Droos.

“Sit down, James,” continued Droos with a short bow of the head. “You have honored me enough. Besides, I am here to implicate my family and condemn their atrocities.”

“Dear me!” said James, taking his seat and holding his hands up. “Such humility! That seems wholly unnatural from someone in your position. Yet I suppose you’re right. You’re not a princess. You’re a traitor! For sixteen years you sat in the lap of

privilege and luxury, enjoying fine food and clothes. All you were expected to do was go through with a little religious ritual. What did you do at the end? You failed! That's what you did."

"That's because my best friend was supposed to kill me!" said Droos.

"Tisk, Tisk," said James, waving a finger in the air. "Don't give us excuses. Duty is duty. Isn't that right folks!"

About half the crowd snapped their fingers in agreement. The other half looked upon Droos, intently.

"Well, well..." he said haughtily. "Looks like you have some admirers already. You've earned yourself a sentence or two, how about that folks?"

Everyone snapped.

"Thank you," said Droos.

"That's one!" shouted James.

The audience laughed.

"Get on with it!" said Emerzo in her ear.

"You must change the law of non-interference," said Droos. "It has virtues. But surely it was never meant to permit millions to be tortured to death, for girls younger than me to be ceremonially raped, all as a sadistic tool of state reinforcing the God-King's power."

A quarter of the crowd gasped.

"Wow!" said Mr. Candescent. "Torture? Rape? Sounds like your father is a bad man! Maybe we should all go and bomb his palace. And why stop there. How about the land. I say, bomb bust the bastards!"

The complacent half of the crowd laughed.

"No!" said Droos. "I mean, yes, kill my... my father. And his chief ministers. Send an army against his personal body guards. My people though. They just want to live lives free of rape and torture."

"I bet you want them to have limousines and ghosts and starships too!" said James, a little more seriously.

"No!" said Droos. "That's mostly wrong. Our level of technology and scientific progress is fine for us. Someday we'll invent everything you did and join the rest of this planet. All we want is a better government. One that answers to its people."

"Why is it so important to you that the people rule?" said James. "All of the bureaucracy and lies and special interest money. You get all of those from a king, only, laws get made the same

Book II: The City

day!”

“In my time watching my father hold court,” said Droos. “I rarely saw him creating new laws. He was just fine with the old ones.”

“And what were those!” said James. “More food! More wine! More sex and drugs!”

“Yes!” shouted Droos. “But far worse. I’m sure your audience hasn’t heard about the Sacrifice of Eight.”

“Can’t be much worse than one hundred forty-four virgins!” smirked the host.

“Actually its very similar,” said Droos, matter-of-factly. “At least once each day the High Priest Servant presents eight sacrifices before my father and our God. A newborn, the dullard and the cripple, a young man, an old man, two warriors, and a young maiden. Except for the last two, each has their throat slit. The warriors fight to the death. The maiden is raped. Every day for my father’s enjoyment. Those chosen have often committed no crime at all. I keep telling you. Torture and rape.”

“Sounds like they died pretty fast to me,” laughed Candescant.

A quarter of the audience joined him.

“They did,” said Droos. “You forget the fate of criminals. They’re strapped atop tables, and have their internal organs removed in pieces no bigger than my thumb. Sliced open alive! How can you all sit by and have no reaction to this?”

“Well they’re criminals,” said James. “Justice isn’t always beautiful. Though I bet some people here would love to watch public vivisections!”

A few in the audience laughed, but they received looks from many others.

“Yah, they’re criminals,” said Droos. “Guilty of what? Failing to bow before my father. Arriving five minutes late to work? Listen kind people, for I have something to say!”

The princess’ voice was commanding, and even the host sat back in his seat, and chatter in the audience drew down.

“Go ahead,” said Candescant, with a small frown.

“You can end this,” said Droos. “You here in this audience. I have been told that you, the people, control your government. Your government is powerful. I say now, please! Go before you representatives. Petition your sovereign. Tell them to save my people! Not from their primitive technology, or lower

standard of living. Simply from atrocities condemned by every corner of your civilization. Rid us of torture. Rid us of execution. Rid us of rape. Then abandon us again. But do not leave us in the grip of this tyrant! You must act, now! Save my people!”

Tears streaked down Droos’ cheeks, and the crowd sat in stunned silence, along with the host, who after a moment, took a cloth from the table and handed it to her. She dried her face, and sat back in her chair.

“Brilliant, Droos!” said Emerzo.

James Candescent touched his ear for a moment and then looked out at the crowd.

“I think we have all learned something new today,” he said. “Unfortunately we are out of time. Thank you, Droos, for bringing this to our attention. We wish you the best of luck.”

As the music played again, Droos rose and walked off the set, away from the millions of eyes looking on with sympathy. She met Drerpo in the annex, and he hugged her, kissed her, and ran his fingers along her wet cheek.

“That will definitely get their attention,” he said. “I’m sorry it was so difficult.”

“It was difficult, thank you,” she said, and then smiled, with a short laugh. “Not as difficult as it looked. Clearly my father in his divine wisdom trained me to be a shrewd politician against him.”

It was two months passed Droos’ seventeenth birthday. At school things had calmed down, and while she had no true friends, no one chastised her. Many of her questions had been answered by the able mentor and the other young adults in the class; they proved to be quite brilliant. Anora and Droos had returned to the entertainment district, and explored many more scenarios, none with the strange previous result. The ghost was as mischievous as ever, and the princess enjoyed watching her antics, if not quite engaging in them herself. After all, she remained her normal modest, introspective self, even where Drerpo was concerned. Only now she could kiss him when she wanted, where she wanted, and he just as often began the gesture. They did try to do it when Emerzo was not around. Droos always found that fine point to be an odd thought.

She woke in the morning on Thirdday a week later, and Anora delivered a message.

“Emerzo has requested a meeting today at ten hundred

Book II: The City

hours,” said Anora. “Will you attend?”

“Does she know that I have school?” said Droos.

“Our friend has attached an additional message for the possibility that you might ask that question,” said Anora. “It reads: ‘I have contacted your mentor and explained that you have a meeting with government officials today that should prove as educational as anything that might be learned in class.’ She agreed of course. Your absence has been approved.”

“I guess that settles it,” said Droos. “Did she say where I would meet her.”

“Yes!” said Anora, suddenly with joy. “At last it comes. You are encouraged to hurry over to the Galactic Council. You have a meeting with the Speaker of the Galactic Committee on Constitutional Law.”

“At least now I have a notion that she is important,” said Droos.

“You remember right that it is a *she*, and she is important,” said Anora. “All laws amending the galactic constitution originate from this committee. Moreover, the lawmaker has held her office for thirteen terms. She is one of the most senior members of her caucus.”

“Now you’ve said a little more than I understand,” said Droos. “Enough. Is Zerson here to take me?”

“Zerson is here, but he will not be taking you,” said Anora. “All traffic to and from the Galactic Council is transported via official vessels designated by the Sergeant-at-Arms. One can be here within thirty minutes of your request for service. Would you like me to place an order.”

“Please,” said Droos. “Do you know what I am supposed to wear? What should I bring?”

“I recommend royal attire, Dear Droos,” said Anora, looking the girl over. “You are speaking on behalf of your people again, and trying to make a political impression on the Speaker. Bring the jewels too!”

Thirty minutes later Droos stood on the roof of her building, some forty thousand feet in the air. She wore her blue dress and tiara, earrings, and jeweled shoes. Truly, she did look like a princess. Then a great shadow fell upon the broad expanse of red granite. A shape the like of a weight atop one side of a scale turned on its side, made of hardened sand stone, fell, tens of thousands of square feet in size. It stopped just before it crashed

into the roof. An opening appeared in the side wide enough to fit twenty abreast, and an organic Sentient, with a head like an octopus and purple skin, who wore a seamless pure black uniform, stepped out to usher her into the vessel. The man averted his gaze, both out of duty and because she was under twenty-five. However, a smile spread across his lips.

Inside the vessel were wooden floors with designs combining different shades of panel, walls of sandstone, and a ceiling hung with gilded chandeliers. Atop tables along the sides were delicacies of food and drink, priceless art and artifacts from throughout the galaxy, and various pads and communication devices and books. In all other contexts it could be considered a large ballroom. As it was at the moment, one hundred people intermixed and moved about, conversing, browsing their meeting schedules and responsibilities on their individual pads, and nibbling various food items. All eyes looked at her as she entered, and quite a few stared, and one woman pointed, as she approached the center of the vessel. Behind her the entrance closed and with no sign of movement, the transport was off towards the Galactic Council.

"I saw you on the Candescent Show last week," said a woman at her side. "You told quite a story."

"It was no story," said Droos, with an even expression. "Only the truth."

"That's what I surmised by the end," she said. "I was very impressed. James hasn't been put back like that for, well, as he said, ten years."

The princess paused.

"I suppose with the public behind you now, some government official has finally agreed to meet with you," continued the woman.

"Yes, if you must know," said Droos. "I'm meeting with the Speaker of the Committee on Constitutional Law."

"That was fast," said the woman, eyes widening for a moment. "It's amazing what a lowly person can do with the people behind them."

"It's amazing what a lowly person can do without the people behind them," smiled Droos, ironically.

"Well, clearly," she said with a chuckle. "My, my. Well-spoken, an assertive leader, and attractive. You're quite a young woman, dear. If you wish, here, take this."

Book II: The City

She reached forward with nothing, but a light shown on the tip of her pointing finger. Droos intuited the response, and let the woman touch her hand. The palm glowed for a moment, and then returned to normal.

"It just so happens that I work for the Executive Branch of government," said the woman. "My boss's, boss's, boss may be interested in trying to help you too. Give me some weeks, or likely months, and contact me with the information I just gave you. I might be able to arrange a meeting."

"With who?" said Droos.

"With someone so clever," she laughed, "I forget how new our system of government must be to you. My boss', boss', boss, is the President of the Great Assembly. She may not be divine like your father, but the President is an able woman with much influence."

"I... would be honored," said Droos, with a few deep breaths.

"So would she," said the woman.

Another minute or two passed and the forward half of the room shimmered away, replaced by an open view of the airspace ahead of the craft. There rose a structure of awful proportions. Forty miles high it soared into the atmosphere, and just as wide, for it was a perfect sphere, kept upright by some masterful manipulation of physical properties. What looked like windows at this distance were openings into passageways that could fit vessels bigger than this one, interrupting the unthinkable quantities of colored marble covering the outside. Droos never knew that mortals could build such things.

Towards one of the windows in the upper third of the sphere they approached, and then the view of the whole shape of the building vanished, and eventually, they entered into a well-lit tunnel. The walls were white marble with mosaics here and there. After several minutes they reached a chamber much like the one in Droos' building, at least in the number of vessels it could fit. Only, the types of vessels expected here were like the one she was now inside. Ghosts directed the hundred people out of her vessel as the doors opened. At the edge of the chamber with a chasm splitting the marble, Droos was met by an image in a white uniform. The ghost bowed low, and ushered for Droos to follow quickly. Over to a row of multivators hundreds of feet wide, they entered one, and waited several minutes before the sound of the chime, and the

opening of the opposite doors.

An open chamber about one hundred and twenty-five million cubic feet ran along a curved slice of the sphere near its top, with an even floor, but what appeared to be a large window peering out across the whole exterior wall of the building; at least from this room. Images and text scrolled down the window, temporarily dulling the sunshine pouring through as it passed. Desks were everywhere with aliens, humans, ghosts, and other artificial species working diligently. Images like those on the window appeared and vanished everywhere, staff engaged in conversations both openly, and in zones under some sort of silencing quality. The million cubic feet in the center of the outer window held a single desk and various artwork and actual shelves with books in addition to the normal technological features. It was open to the broader room, seemingly, although only one person could be seen within it at the desk.

She was a ghost sporting the image of a Leyol, with blue skin and five lobes for a head. Yellow garments of luminous quality with small geographic patterns woven with nearly invisible white thread contrasted just right with the blue skin. Rows of text streamed before her in the air as she gazed at it, and in appearance, out of the room. Towards this area the white uniformed ghost servant led Droos. As she came within about one hundred and twenty feet, the noise from the rest of the room faded, and then became silent altogether. An opaque quality covered like walls vision of the rest of the room, except the window gazing out over the city, one hundred and ninety thousand feet above the ground. Now a pair of chairs appeared in front of the desk opposite the Speaker. One was unoccupied, while the other held Emerzo. The ghost servant bowed, and left Droos to her own devices, as the twin looked over her shoulder at the princess.

“Ah, Speaker,” said Emerzo. “Here is my friend. Nine hundred hours and fifty-seven minutes, Droos. Well done.”

Peering at the frightful view from the window, that was so high the curvature of the planet could be seen, the forest green eyes of the Speaker moved from a tablet in front of her to the young woman just approaching the chair reserved for her. The ancient ghost ran her eyes over Droos, seeming to read in her gaze every thought ever possessed by the princess. An aura of might came from the lawmaker, of a sort not even felt after a myriad of vivid dreams.

Book II: The City

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad we can start on time. My schedule is very tight.”

Droos swallowed and took her seat as Emerzo introduced her formally.

“I know who she is, Emerzo,” said the Speaker. “She is a headache and a disruption.”

The princess frowned.

“At least she took my time seriously and dressed for the occasion,” said the Speaker. “Let me be a little less tart. Dear Princess Droos Yarite. I am Itrisol Liyefon, Speaker of the Galactic Council’s Committee on Constitutional Law.”

“I am honored,” Droos squeaked, with a little bow of her head.

This released a certain tenseness in the Speaker, and she half smiled.

“Let’s make this as quick as can be,” said Itrisol. “Do you understand the consequences of what you are asking?”

The Speaker was so direct it shook the princess.

“I see the consequences of not acting,” said Droos. “As I have said. Torture, murder...”

“Torture, murder, and rape,” interrupted Liyefon. “Terrible things, no doubt. Do you know what happens when we meddle with primitive cultures?”

“They might fall apart,” said Droos.

“Well you know something,” said the Speaker. “What other consequences might there be?”

“You would be asserting that suffering is no part of the human condition,” said Droos. “Primitive cultures set apart from your civilization are a symbol of simplicity and alternative living.”

“All good answers,” said Liyefon. “The choice to be free must be free. Besides, my reports tell me that your people are already on the brink of revolution.”

This was a slamming reminder.

“So it... so it seemed when I was last there,” said Droos.

“Then you have no need of my time,” said the Speaker.

“No, please,” said Droos. “It’s true. Some boldly sacrifice their lives to fight my father’s rule. Yet the consequence for doing so is the indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands innocent civilians. With all that, do you really think my people will for long support such attempts at revolution?”

The ghost frowned.

“Maybe not,” she said. “Princess Yarite. I’m going to be honest with you. What you want simply isn’t possible. My staff has spent, albeit, a limited amount of time approaching other members of the Committee; they wish to use their resources for their own agendas, not a corvette chase to amend the Galactic Constitution. It’s possible that at the start of the next session in a year...”

“Damn your self-interest!” said Droos. “My people are suffering now.”

“Droos, please,” said Emerzo.

“Droos,” said the ghost, with surprising patience. “You must understand that in a republic, changes to laws take time. Even if this were a high priority it would take at least six months. As seems to be the case now, at best your request would have to be addressed in about two years.”

“Two years!” said Droos.

“Surely there is something you can do before then,” said Emerzo.

Liyefon sat back in her chair.

“You know why we are here,” continued Emerzo. “The people are behind us. We will keep accepting invitations to broadcasts. I will inform you that we even have a finished book on the princess’ story, that with all of the attention on this topic right now, will almost certainly be bought by a publisher. I’m not saying that the ill will generated by your caucus’ inaction will result in too much ill effect in the next election; but it might cost some candidates a few points. We’ll make sure of it.”

The Speaker sat forward.

“I don’t like threats, Emerzo,” said Itrisol. “Given the serious nature of your cause, I will dismiss it as at least proper. You raise a good point. Should you continue to receive the amount of attention you have generated now, it might influence votes in next year’s poll. Fine. I’ll concede some of my staff’s time.”

“What does that mean?” said Droos.

“It means you’ll see the text of a proposed law,” said the Speaker. “Your friend, princess, is a shrewd politician. I have a mind to respond by sending you back to your people on the next planetary transport.”

“Because that wouldn’t be interfering with my people at all,” said Droos, a little frightened.

“Very true,” said Itrisol, with a strange half smile. “Your

Book II: The City

choices have been as much an internal dispute. Now we will see if my committee will be interested in joining it.”

Droos looked to her side and saw Emerzo rising from her chair.

“Thank you for your time, Dear Speaker,” said Emerzo. “We look forwards to contact from your office.”

“I would think so,” said the Speaker.

The princess hobbled after Emerzo as they met the servant ghost, and departed from the office.

Just under three months passed and at last a draft law arrived for Droos, Drerpo, and Emerzo to see.

“The Great Assembly shall not pass any law that interferes with pre-modern cultures, except those creating penalties for interfering with said cultures. By two-thirds vote, the Galactic Council with approval of the Executive may issue a ten year exception to this law with reasonable explanation for its justification, although such exceptions may not be issued for one culture more than twice in one hundred years.”

All smiles, Droos asked Emerzo what this meant.

“This means that the conversation has barely started,” said Emerzo.

Droos sank a little.

“But it has started,” added the sister.

“What can we do to make this go faster?” said Droos.

“Well,” said Drerpo. “There is that book my sister gave to you. I have looked over it and I suspect the citizens of the Great Assembly will find it very interesting.”

“Yes...” said Droos. “The story of my life...”

“The story of our lives,” said Drerpo.

“That’s a great idea, Dear Brother,” said Emerzo. “Droos. May I have your permission to approach publishers?”

“Yes, I guess...” said Droos gloomily.

Three days later the twins received a message from the mentor reporting that Droos had not been in class. It occurred to them that she had largely been absent even at home, leaving notes that she was in the entertainment district. Emerzo looked at Drerpo.

“Leave this to me,” he said.

A smell of moisture wafted on a breeze that had traveled many miles across a baren landscape. Small stones and dry dirt ran for hundreds of square miles, empty of plants, and animals, or

water. Only five small mountains, just as bleak, rose to blackened outcrops of rock at each top. To the north lay a land of grasses and dense jungle, containing more varieties of life than had existed anywhere else in the world for many thousands years. South ran the desert up until the edge of the sea, and then a wide straight separated an island formed by an extinct volcano, black rock once fed by the earth spread to a fair distance, but just as empty. Here, atop the southernmost mountain, stood Droos.

The princess of the People of the Blood stood in the land of her birth, out of the waking legends of her people, feet brushing the sand before the rock of her destiny, a small perch on the side of the summit closest to the sea. Wind blew her ceremonial blue dress, and chilled the tiara adorning her head. A small tear trickled down her right cheek as she gazed from the top of the Princess out towards the Gates of Heaven, the direction where once her soul might have flown. There she was meant to build a bridge to heaven to redeem her people.

“There was no one there...” said Droos, to herself.

“Heaven was empty. He died for nothing.”

“No, dear cousin,” said a voice behind her.

Though she did not look to see, no doubt could be had as to its identity.

“I died willingly, with joy, in service to you, my princess, and my people,” continued the voice.

“You didn’t have to die,” said Droos, more tears trickling down from her eyes.

“Everyone dies,” he said. “The best people die with no regrets, and many pass away with great sorrow. I had the privilege to die for a cause in which I believed with a full heart.”

“You believed a myth, a legend of tyranny that was created to enslave our people,” said Droos.

“Such is your belief, dear friend, but not mine,” he said. “Isn’t it more important what the other believes, than what you wish they believed? If I died with faith that my cause was true and virtuous. If I died happily in service to one whom I loved as a sister. Believe in me, Droos, that my faith was true, and that I died as well as any mortal ever could.”

The princess sniffed as tears touched her nose. She ran a hand through her curly hair, and chuckled a little.

“You were always so stubborn,” said Droos. “I tried so hard to convince you. I never knew how close I came until I saw

Book II: The City

the tear on your cheek, rolling down beneath your empty eyes.”

“I never knew that anything could make me doubt my faith before you accepted me as your friend,” he said. “In the end, Droos, I knew. Whether or not you believed, or even chose a different destiny than had been intended, someday we would be reunited.”

“But you weren’t there,” mourned Droos. “I walked for miles through the Gates of Heaven, and they were empty.”

“Have greater faith than that, cousin,” he said. “Know that there is a reward. Friends and relatives are reunited to dwell in peace forever. I will see you again.”

“I... I want to see you now,” said Droos.

“When you want to see me, simply listen to the voices of the waves, rolling across the shores of the world. For they will remember,” he said.

“Then... then you are happy, dear friend,” said Droos.

“Yes,” he answered. “And I will wait for you, many years hence, when you will join me, after having lived a life longer than any mortal of the current age.”

Droos laughed, and wiped away the tears. Turning, she looked in the direction from which the voice had come. Her cousin was not there. A figure approached from the far side of the summit, not so far away. Only this was the other, the one who had lived. Drerpo, her love, walked slowly, as though in mourning with her, and came up in front of her only a few paces.

“Your Grace,” he said, with a bow of his head. “You stand upon the mountaintop of your destiny. What will you choose?”

The princess chuckled.

“I already chose, didn’t I?” she said.

“Very much so,” said Drerpo. “You are on your way to being redeemed; although the Lieutenant of Hell will need far more convincing.”

“You believe I am still damned?” said Droos.

“I am a lowly mortal, without a firm understanding of what reward is to be had,” said Drerpo. “Yet there are consequences to serving tyrants.”

“You’re right,” said Droos, looking down.

Then he walked up to her and delicately raised her head with a gentle caress on her chin.

“Do not despair, fair Droos,” said Drerpo. “You said yourself: there is always hope.”

She laughed, and he went and hugged her, running his hand along her back, kissing her on the forehead, shifting then to an arm around her shoulder, facing the Gates of Heaven.

"I didn't know they had the continent of Nolai programmed into the entertainment district," said Drerpo. "How long have you known about it?"

Droos smiled as she sniffed.

"Anora mentioned it once," said the Princess. "I have been here a few times since. They don't have everything. There is no pile of princess bones on the other side of the summit."

She laughed a little at the strange memory.

"We had quite an upbringing," said Droos.

"That we did," Drerpo smiled. "I bet it's hard to find other young people who can relate to your story, or your experiences."

"They have plenty of stories," said Droos. "This galaxy of theirs, even this world, is filled with wonder. No one is a princess or a prince. None were expected to slay their friends or to die themselves at the required hour. Those who dance never spent years learning exact steps to be performed in religious ritual. None watched criminals being torn apart in great agony. A few have... left friends behind."

"Etøn's departure was hard for me too," said Drerpo.

"I suppose it was even worse for you," said Droos. "You actually killed him."

The young man sighed.

"That poses a question regarding my own redemption," he said. "I nearly killed you too."

"You didn't though," she said.

Some time passed, and they enjoyed comfort with each an arm around the other, side by side.

"There is something I would like to do," said Drerpo.

"Yes?" said Droos.

"How about we do the ritual of that last day of your sixteenth year?" said Drerpo. "We learned all of the rituals. It's hard to leave so much of our previous lives behind. Well, that's not entirely true... but the dances themselves are not so evil. Let's do one. For Etøn."

"You know, that's a really good idea," said the princess.

She looked at him fully then, and noticed that he too was dressed in the blues he had worn at the ceremony back at what seemed a lifetime ago.

Book II: The City

So they descended the mountain, the Princess, and began the ritual. The ceremony went upward. Rituals enacted the revelation of the bridge of light into heaven as they passed beyond this world. Dwellings in strange hues belonging to the vanguard of heaven would be revealed. Two sticks were necessary for the next step, which were absent in this replica of the Princess. Still they moved up the mountain, tracing two lines in the air with their fingers, drawing the course of the bridge to heaven, up until a plane designated to be the Gates of Heaven. Then they spoke to the invisible heavenly hosts and pretended to eat several meals—now Droos chuckled at the lavish cuisine she had seen in this Galactic Capital, and how close to the myth they came.

Halfway up the mountain they greeted the departed servants and princesses of ages past. Finally the couple bowed low, prostrate on the ground, as the imaginary doors to the palace of the God of Blood were opened for the princess to present herself and her servants to their Divine Master. They hurried to reach the God of Blood, not to keep Him waiting. Drerpo and Droos crawled on their hands and knees, then Drerpo was left behind with the souls of Resh, Ini, and Etøn, who were already waiting here. Droos gave a deafening scream. She lay still, and unmoving for a moment as the God of Blood inspected her. Then first raising to her knees, then to her feet, she stood. Most important, she kept her eyes down, for even now none were to look into the God's eyes.

A song burst from her lips, of complete joy, and love, with fervor and passion. Walking out to the side of the invisible room, to meet Drerpo the other Grace-Servants accompanying her in spirit, they ascended the rest of the mountain, and once more, reached the summit. There Droos held Drerpo's hand and they danced with joy, singing, and even carrying about as if in drunken revelry. At last, heaving from her days of inactivity, Droos collapsed to her knees, peering over the southern side of the Princess once more. She burst into laughter.

Drerpo fell to his knees beside her, and hugged her, kissing her, and leaving his hand on the small of her back, took a moment to catch his breath too, a few chuckles escaping his throat.

"What... (pant) do you find so funny?" said Drerpo.

"I can't believe we spent our whole lives doing this," said Droos. "I've spent a year in the Great Assembly and now I see what I could have been doing with my time all these years. What a waste!"

“It may seem that way, Droos,” said Drerpo. “Many of your thoughts now speak of truth, but this one belittles the value of art and religion.”

“Is there any purpose to either?” said Droos.

“You know the answer to that, my dear Droos,” said Drerpo.

She smiled and looked down.

“The glow art leaves in people’s hearts, the inspiration rituals grant to troubled souls, these are invaluable,” he continued.

“I haven’t seen any art or religion here,” said Droos.

“Then you have been walking with your eyes closed, little fish,” said Drerpo, tapping his fingers on her back.

“Very funny,” said Droos. “Oh Drerpo. I know you’re right. There is art everywhere. It is so central to this civilization that it is simply a component of everything they do. Artistic value is considered along with every decision. Yet I haven’t seen people devoted to it wholly in the same way as we were. No one spends their lives engaged in sing and dancing.”

“You’re right,” said Drerpo. “It seems we have more to add to your education. Thirteenth millennium art! From this day onward we will go exploring.”

“Fine!” said Droos. “It’s a date. But what about religion.”

“You haven’t heard your mentor reference God,” said Drerpo.

“Sure,” said the Princess. “Yet it has always been in passing. I never hear about the wrath of God or eternal punishment or paradise or obligations.”

“That’s because no mentor would want to impose his or her beliefs,” said Drerpo. “It looks like we have two dates, dear Droos. Art and religion.”

“Don’t forget political philosophy!” said Droos. “I thought that’s what we were supposed to be learning about in the city.”

The pair slowly rose and dusted off their knees, and embraced once more, and then parted.

“What is this really about,” whispered Drerpo.

“It’s about the book,” said Droos. “Your sister wants it published, and I looked over it, and just seeing my whole life reduced to a couple hundred pages, as though it were that simple, hurt. And reading the scenes where... where our friends died, where I left my brother and sister behind forever, where poor

Book II: The City

women and children were murdered and raped, these brought back all the memories, both awful, and those that caused longing.”

“I wasn’t too pleased when I first heard about the book myself,” said Drerpo. “My sister takes a few too many liberties sometimes. What do you think of her idea?”

“It makes sense,” said Droos. “Despite the simplification of my life, it is powerful, and I believe will have its effect. I suppose if we got so much attention with one talk show, I can only imagine what one hundred billion books sold will accomplish.”

“Shrewd,” said Drerpo. “You humble yourself once again Droos, and exhibit your wisdom.”

“You are too kind to me,” chided Droos, her cheeks reddening.

“Be that as it may,” said Drerpo, “Will you at least consider returning to school? I know it is difficult to seem so different.”

Laughing and wiping a tear from her face, “Yes... I’ll try,” she said.

Droos’ book was published a month before her eighteenth birthday. The time between her rebellion and the publication left no suggestion that the source of the biography was anyone other than her, perhaps with some help from her boyfriend and his sister. For its title it read, “Murder in the Jungle”, and its author was cited as “Princess Droos Yarite”. The Princess rolled her eyes, and wondered what strange fate had brought her from the jungle to be a poet in the city.

To her further chagrin, and annoyance, Droos soon found herself a celebrity. Audiences like a true story, and few in many decades were as awful and hopeful at the same time as hers. Now she relished attending class eight days a week, and hiding herself away with Anora or Drerpo in the entertainment district. Emerzo largely replied to journalists and managed funds and the business side of the book. One benefit was that she was no longer a mystery to her fellow students. By the second half of her eighteenth year, everyone knew her story, and it seemed they all wanted to be her friend. The attention was worse than the neglect previously experienced, and the girl often sat staring into space during meals as young adults talked up a storm sitting around her. These people saw her story as exciting and scintillating. No one knew what it was like to actually face the terror of her father or watch the blood spurt from her friends’ severed heads.

"I don't know if I can stand it!" said Droos one evening at home.

"I understand," said Emerzo. "But Droos. It's working!

Ten billion copies sold. Then twenty billion. Soon one hundred billion copies floated around Marba and other nearby star systems. She was not a celebrity like James Candescent of the Candescent Show, with one hundred trillion fans. Still, at least someone in any crowd knew her identity, usually multiple. At least in this city. And the people had pity on her and her cause and her people. They appealed to pundits that the time had come for something to surely be done about the injustices they faced.

It was then that Droos received the news. She was the first to know that Itrisol Liyefon, Speaker of the Galactic Council's Committee on Constitutional Law had successfully held a vote on the proposed law. It had passed with just over two-thirds.

"It was very close," said the message. "One burden has been overcome. Now you will have to plead your case before the Speaker of the Galactic Council. I wish you the best of luck."

Standing in the shade of an oak once more amidst the vibrant living garden high above the rooftops of skyscrapers, Droos eyed the ground as students meandered around in front of her.

"Your highness, how go'th your matters of state?" said Garcia.

"Please," said Shrajen. "Droos isn't a princess anymore. If she goes back to her people her father will vivisect her."

"Oh, but like any good rebel leader," said Garcia, "Even now she presses her wealth and power to sway the great politicians of our people to come to her aid. She must be worth, what, trillions of credits? I hear that just one week from now the entire Galactic Council will be voting on her amendment to the constitution. She's going to be there next to the Speaker while the roll is called."

"Still, she's mostly just like another young adult," said Dewei.

"Do you really still fancy her, Dewei," said Shrajen. "We all know that she is crazy about Drerpo. Haven't you seen him when he comes to pick her up. He's worth twenty of you!"

"So how, close, are you two?" mocked Garcia.

Droos blushed.

"You leave her alone," said Dewei. "Maybe Drerpo is

Book II: The City

worth more than I am. That doesn't mean any of us have to act differently around either of them."

"I'd say... that's right," spoke up Droos, the others all looking at her. "Don't treat me any differently. I'm just a girl."

"Yah right..." Garcia rolled her eyes.

Dewei stepped up in front of the teasing girl.

"You watch your words!" said the boy.

Garcia frowned, and stepped back.

"I was only teasing," she said.

Then seriously:

"It's probably cause, really, I'm quite jealous. I grew up surrounded by wealth and privilege, but somehow everything I've ever done seems miniscule next to our friend right here in front of us."

"Dear Garcia," said Droos. "You are no less than anyone here."

"You are too humble," said Shrajen. "Take compliments for what they are."

"And don't think less of yourself than what you are," smiled the princess.

Everyone smiled and went onto talk about less serious things: the weather, food, and such. Voting by the entire Galactic Council was held one week before Droos' nineteenth birthday, on the exact day on which Etøn had died. Droos, Drerpo, and Emerzo, all surrounded by throngs of journalists entered the Galactic Transport onto which only a few reporters with special privileges were permitted. The vessel flew to the exact middle of the Great Sphere of the Galactic Council. Through a labyrinth of tunnels they went, and security became tighter and tighter. Every array of weapons and uniform and race of Sentient lined alcoves and bunkers along the route. At the end of a final passage a vessel bay large enough to fit three transports received her own.

Walls of platinum and glowing jewels forming mosaics covered the room, as well as materials and precious metals derived from advanced manipulation of scientific principles. A small door opened into a chamber two hundred feet on each side with strangely shaped curved walls of similar luxury. There in the center of many advisors and guards sat the Speaker of the Galactic Council. He was a species of an insect variety, though humanoid in physiology, and with full capability to speak (clearly). White robes adorned an otherwise featureless countenance.

“Welcome, Princess Droos Yarite,” he said. “I stand humbly before you as Giziz Zrazis, servant of this great civilization, here today with the hopes of correcting a problem that has existed these last thousands of years. For all that is to come and for everything that has already been done, we have you, princess, to thank. You reminded us that the best laws and rules are more true to their origin when they are held as principles; to be upheld in all instances, except the absolutely essential few. Come, sit at my right side.”

Droos, eldest daughter of the God-King of The People of the Blood, a young woman of nineteen, took her seat next to the most powerful lawmaker in a civilization of quadrillions. Drerpo winked at her and squeezed her shoulder as he followed his twin to the second row of thrones. Everyone arrived, the door from the vesselbay closed, and several minutes passed. The silence had a quality so dense that it was almost physical. Then the room began to rise. It would not need to cause any indication of movement, only such symbols and warning had served a purpose for thousands of years. Upward, then horizontally, and on and off, they went, for several minutes. At last they emerged from a brightly lit steel corridor.

Gasping, the Princess beheld the centerpiece of the Great Assembly. One single chamber forming a perfect sphere with a fifteen mile radius spread in all directions. They floated now rapidly towards the center. A strange manipulation of sight allowed that with little time, no matter the direction in which Droos gazed, rows of similar open chambers could be seen, though of more varying build. Millions sat in these seats, each a representative of great power, answering to the vote of billions. All now stood as they received their Speaker. Speaker Zrazis stood and held up his hands to greet the gathering as his podium came to a stop.

“My fellow lawmakers,” he said. “Now the time has come to evaluate our evolved sense of morality, according to each our own conscience, but also because the people have spoken. Few of you here today will have escaped the uproar caused by revelations in our young friend, Princess Droos Yarite’s, book, so bravely published for our mutual education. Few examples of an overzealous law might exist than what we have seen by insisting that The People of the Blood be left wholly alone. Now we must vote, for despite all desires, we are a people of laws. We must

Book II: The City

decide whether we here have the power to prevent the murder, torture, and rape of millions, or whether our hands are truly impaled upon immovable spikes.”

The vision from the podium zoomed suddenly in on a podium some miles away, and a voice boomed from a race that looked like nothing more than a blob with a mouth.

“Pleasant words, Dear Speaker,” it said. “Yet should we make an exception for all laws? Will we fill our constitution now with unlimited holes and openings for the clever to take advantage of our realm? The Constitution must be held sacred, and inviolable, unless by some absolutely universe shattering need.”

“But there is a need, Councilman,” spoke Droos with authority, rising small in her form, but enormous in her presence. “If you would wish yourself to be freed from the threat of pain and death even if you were meek and too weak to defend yourself or insufficiently knowledgeable to know that there were brighter ways, then truly you cannot speak as you do. You must vote to free my people. I say this even knowing that if I spoke so boldly before my father, he would torture to death not only me, but tens of thousands of innocence bystanders simply for my insolence and his wrath. Do not delay, if it is true that your civilization is so enlightened!”

Snaps filled the chamber from countless thumbs, while another podium shimmered into view. In it stood with many others, Itrisi Liyefon, Speaker of the Committee on Constitutional Law.

“I am one little interested in wasting time for myself or any of my colleagues,” spoke the ghost. “Still we are here, according to me, for a matter that is important, is necessary, and proper. For three hundred years I have been privileged to serve on the Committee on Constitutional Law. In that time six laws have been accepted from the committee by this chamber. All were needed reforms. According to the history that I have dedicated my life to will I now insist that you have before you an essential exception to our commitment to the sanctity of our constitution. I urge members of my own caucus to full heartedly support this law, and those of my esteemed rival factions to take most seriously this topic.”

A third podium appeared, in which stood a Leyol, a member of the same species as the first politician, the staff member for the Marba Committee on the Interior, whom Droos had seen

some years ago, though this was a different individual.

“For three hundred years I lived on my race’s beloved world of Jriggen,” she said. “Yet for the entirety my people have been at peace and have little understanding of these matters or the urgency or their solution. Myself and my faction readily support the amendment here at the Galactic Council. However, even if this measure is adopted, even if it is signed by the Executive, it will have a third test before two-thirds of all Sector Governments. Jriggen would at the very least be indifferent to this matter, seeing little connection to their own needs, in any referendum. There is a very real possibility that any effort to influence the atrocities committed by this girl’s father will fall upon cut ears.”

So on went the debate for several hours. Really these were all a last formality, since the amendment being discuss had been seen by these lawmakers and their staff previously over many months. Allowing uncensored debate in the Galactic Council was another sacred axiom of the Great Assembly. Eventually, as Droos began to yawn, Speaker Zrazis rose once more and the room silenced.

“We have come to the final moments of this debate,” he said. “Now Dear Clerk, will you perform your office and call the vote.”

A human woman got to her feet several seats to the Speaker’s left.

“Dear Speaker of the Alpha Octodrent,” she said. “What is the will of your Councilors?”

“103,650 in favor, 66,030 against, 30,320 abstain. So says the Alpha Octodrent.”

“Dear Speaker of the Beta Octodrent,” said the Clerk. “What is the will of your Councilors?”

“95,450 in favor. Another 110,750 against. Finally 44,800 abstain. These are the votes of the Beta Octodrent.”

It continued. Although it began poorly, votes in favor began to increase greatly. The Gamma Octodrent was 74% in favor. A full 92% of the Delta Octodrent went in favor. 90% of the Epsilon Octodrent. 70% of the Zeta. Only 40% of the Eta. Finally, last but not least, 81% of the Theta Octodrent. It was very close.

“Dear Councilors,” spoke the Clerk. “I will now present the collective will of this body. On the matter at hand, ‘Will the Galactic Council Amend the Galactic Constitution to Preserve Life

Book II: The City

and Humanity,' I have counted 1,342,550 votes in favor, 482,630 votes against, and 173,700 abstaining. With just over 67% of the vote, the measure passes."

Droos stood, dazed, and then sat down just as quick. Her breath matched the rapid beating of her heart, as the room went out of focus, and the sound of millions of snapping fingers faded. A starry expanse blended together white glowing lights and a tune played in her head, one familiar and encouraging. Under starlight she had danced atop the deck of a wooden ship, holding the hands of a man she loved. He spoke to her.

"Droos!" he said. "Dear Droos."

"Droos," said a voice behind her, and a stream of noise flooded back to surround her as she turned around and saw Drerpo smiling.

"You did it, Droos," he said. "I am so proud of you."

"What credit do I deserve," she said. "It is your sister, your true love, whose victory is celebrated today."

"That may be so," said Emerzo, joining the conversation.

"Yet you are the symbol, the image, and the honoree that these millions of powerful Sentients applaud as they renew their sense of

their superior morality.”

“Maybe they have a right to feel superior today,” smiled Droos. “At least those who voted for this measure. I never knew that Sentient beings could choose their own destiny for the better. The Councilor was right when he said that this issue does not affect or relate to nearly any of the millions who voted here today. Yet they believe in improving the lives of all Sentient beings. Freedom, they say, must be free. Yet they followed the voice of their people and created an exception for the rare instance that mass murder is a possibility if native people are neglected. My faith in the possibility of Sentients to govern has been renewed today. The virtue possible when the people rule now seems unlimited.





Chapter 4

Public Servant; an Executive Elected of an by the People

A sadness lay etched on the simple wooden figure, yet firm determination. The end of one possibility, but the salvation of billions were revealed, a fate acceptable to the withered man, wearing only a cloth and a crown of thorns. Nails impaling his arms and legs attached him to a cross. Etched droplets of blood displayed his agony, and enhanced the supreme sense of sacrifice offered by God, who sacrificed His only son so that humans, and now according to official church doctrine, thousands of other Sentient species, might be free from damnation.

Much of the theology eluded Princess Droos as she examined the likeness of the passion of Jesus Christ. In fact she found it rather repulsive. Crucifixion was a reality in the land of her birth, used as a tool of state to quell rebellion and put terrible fear in the hearts of millions. The concept of eternal damnation for anyone other than maybe her father might also be too similar to the beliefs of The People of the Blood, were Droos aware of it. Yet the idea that God Himself was sacrificed, impaled, and died, but of course must still live, was exciting.

To the right of the wooden figure in the next alcove was an intricately engraved collection of letters in an ancient language spoken now only by scholars, the religion that revered its message having long ago shifted to the current vernacular of a million different worlds. Having grown up seeing images of God, this depiction was very strange.

“Some religions see the concrete representation of the infinite, of God, to be a contradiction in terms,” said Drerpo, walking up along her side. “Islam has long objected to objectifying their one God, Allah, or His last and greatest prophet, Muhammed.”

“Is it similar with this one?” said Droos, pointing to the left of the crucifix, in an alcove that displayed an ornate golden ark with two wooden poles running along its sides. “This appears only to be a chest that must contain something which I don’t know.”

“Yes, very observant,” said Drerpo. “The origins of the Jewish religion was in an escape from slavery under the civilization of the Egyptians. Their prior taskmasters often had images like the one you see, where arks like this one served as footstools, and atop theirs you would see the statue of one of many Gods. The ancient Jews created a device that showed the footstool, but no image of God, since no concrete representation of their God was God. To this day, they and Muslims do not use images of the divine.”

“Here is one I better relate to,” she said, walking passed the Arabic calligraphy.

Another human figure, gilded, stood atop a golden orb in flowing garments with a belt, blowing a straight trumpet.

“That’s the symbol of the Church of Latter Day Saints,” said Drerpo.

Throughout the room were images of Gods, or their names, or central landscapes from scriptural mythology, from throughout the eighteen thousand years of human history. It was an enormous room, not to any degree similar to the Galactic Council, but still many miles in dimension, kept in honor of what the citizens of the Great Assembly called the “Many-Faced Divine”. A small section of the giant single center room had thousands of art pieces for human religions, but these were dwarfed by the hundreds of thousands of images from alien worlds throughout the galaxy. Some represented extinct traditions. Many showed Gods as their appearance had evolved in theology from the thousands of years since their inception during their religions’ infancies. Among these even was the cobra headed God of Blood from the princess’ faith. Or what had been her faith.

“How can there be so many religions?” said Droos, as she walked passed more and more. “Which is right? If they all speak with as much righteous certainty as my own, why don’t they tear each other apart?”

“They did for thousands of years,” said Drerpo. “Those who study religion, if you asked them outside of academic settings, might have related each to a growing Sentient. There is infancy, young childhood, puberty, adolescence, twenties, maturity, and

Book II: The City

so on. Each stage of Sentient life has a similarity to stages of the history of a religion. For instance, in adolescence before their enlightenment and self-realization, the faithful face cognitive dissonance, a term I once shared with you, and feel they must choose one or the other—their faith or secular ideals. Some move to the left and abandon their religion. Others discredit the wider world and proclaim the sole truth of their religion, and demand others do the same. Finally, some reach a compromise, and a syncretic entity is created that in the end usually prevails. The middle path frequently proves the most durable. Yet until that time, many hundreds or thousands of years of war and death can pass. So goes the adolescent growing pains of a given religion.”

“It seems the religion of my people must still act like a young child, throwing tantrums and at times being violent,” said Droos. “Yet we have persisted for thousands of years.”

“You have had no alternatives,” said Drerpo. “As you say, the faithful believe they are right, and that there is no other way, until they encounter those with equally firm but different beliefs. Then comes the puberty and adolescence. Ideally what follows is the evolution from a monopoly on relationship with the divine to the conception of a unique relationship with the divine. Seeing a theological place for those of different religions and working to create a dynamic reason for youngsters to remain true to their heritage rather than fighting violently to eradicate all other ways of believing that might tempt them creates ultimately truer and more faithful adherents. It also results in peace.”

“How long did it take for this world to pass through its growing pains?” asked Droos.

“Almost seven thousand years,” said Drerpo grimly. “From the end of pre-history to the full realization of the Planetary Council of Religions, at which all faiths fully committed to work together to peacefully solve their disputes and to build tolerance and constructive theological discussion to keep the peace.”

“What purpose does this shrine serve?” said Droos.

“It is one of the surest reminders to all citizens of the Great Assembly, at least here in the capitol, that God has so many manifestations beyond Sentient reckoning,” said Drerpo. “To each according to their religious predilection the Shrine to the Many-Faced Divine serves a purpose. For the believer of a particular faith, here is a sign of beauty found in other religions, and a reminder that there are others who think differently. The humanist

is reminded that some still need the holes in the scientific empirical logic of our galaxy to be filled by something loving or infinite or both. Secular citizens see a reminder of where religion is today and how in peace the Galactic Council of Religions works to pursue an agenda that promotes commonality, glorifies the beauty of differences, and teaches tolerance. This Shrine and those of smaller proportions on capitols throughout the Great Assembly serve a crucial purpose.”

“Do any believe in a religion that serves the Many-Faced Divine?” said Droos.

“You might call those who do, and there are billions, the true Universalists,” said Drerpo with a smile. “Baha’i and similar universalist faiths on other worlds were central in the creation of the Many-Faced Divine movement. There are those who have come to worship the unity of Sentients felt in these monuments. At home or in small community centers they may have particular rituals and rites of passage, yet here they come regularly and praise each different God in turn and all of His or Her loyal adherents.”

“This truly is a wonderful world,” said Droos, sighing. “A paradise truly, that I once thought might only be found in heaven.”

“There are many worlds in this galaxy that still have many problems,” said Drerpo. “Do not believe that even today that the Wars of Religion are entirely over. The planet of No in the Marba system is certainly a paradise, as the beating heart of a mighty civilization. Yet it is not the only planet, or system, or sector.”

“Clearly,” said Droos. “Even with the might of this capitol of Sentients, the millions of sectors throughout the rest of the Great Assembly will not even vote in a timely manner to assure the right to life and freedom from torture for people living on their capitol planet. How dare they! With all their righteousness I would certainly imagine that to be a priority.”

“Do not be too star-struck, dear Droos,” said Drerpo, putting his arm around her shoulder. “You say yourself often enough, yourself being a mighty celebrity among these quadrillions, that every Sentient is equal, no more and no less Sentient than the rest. Everyone has frailties and selfishness, and more frequently, indifference.”

Then he touched her neck and kissed her. Heart fluttering, Droos pushed him away playfully.

“We’re in a shrine to God, my love, dear Drerpo,” said Droos. “Is this here truly appropriate.”

Book II: The City

“Within reason, Droos,” he said. “Not all religions are ascetic. Out or respect for them we maintain certain modesty. For the sake of religions that hold romance to be holy, some gestures are still permitted.”

“And of course you are an expert on religion,” said Droos, reaching forward and brushing his hand.

“More than you know,” said Drerpo.

“Too true!” said Droos. “The man I love. My radiant boyfriend. Yet how little I really know about you. When will we fix this?”

He step over and kissed her again, before taking her hand and looking at her eyes.

“I’m afraid that much is still left undecided,” he said, “Before I can truly reach out and take your hand.”

“You’re holding it right now,” smiled Droos.

Drerpo chuckled, and smiled back.

Five months into Droos’ nineteenth year, she stood with Drerpo and Emerzo in the Great Library around the ninety thousand foot level. It was better to stay closer to the top for accessing the Galactic Ultranet, the internetwork communication system that brought together the supercomputers of ten billion worlds. Emerzo traced her fingers over a display filling the room of colored stars aligned in groups. These were not in fact stars, but groups of planets represented by only a comparatively small number of dots. The alignment placed about one in twenty on one side and the rest in the other.

“That’s all!” said Droos. “I’ve been away from my people for more than three years, and still I have made no progress.”

“You have done plenty,” said Drerpo.

“Only five percent of all sectors have held referendums on the amendment,” chided Droos, “And worse yet, only forty percent of those have approved it. Half of those voting against are from sectors whose Councilman voted for law.”

“I understand your concern,” said Emerzo. “You are very popular with the Galactic Council, and your book has sold several trillion copies. A great portion of your celebrity, however, is in the Marba System in the Dristø Sector. In the rest of the Great Assembly you are still very much unknown. The Bagan Galaxy is very big.”

“Then it is hopeless,” said Droos.

“Now since when were you one to despair?” said Drerpo.

“Well...” said Droos.

“Yet hope beyond hope has already dispelled your doubt a number of times,” said Drerpo. “It will work out. How? It’s a mystery.”

The young man squeezed Droos’ hand.

“Yet will the Lieutenant of Hell forfeit his prize?” muttered Emerzo.

Then Droos saw the twin running her hand along the expanse of planets and the view flew past. Billions of stars zoomed away, and then they sank into the display and the whole of the spiral Bagan Galaxy was revealed. Then it too shrank, and the glowing dots of the Virgo Supercluster lay one hundred galaxies into a clump of small specks. Further the whirling image of darkness soared, for minutes billions of light years streamed by until the dots of light disappeared and solid darkness flew undetectable. Finally a glow, a mass, one of light, one of flowing flame disturbed the emptiness. At the furthest point from Bagan, from the furthest point of any galaxy in the universe, lay this expanse.

Inward into the fire they charged, and they saw a realm, a sector, a system, a planet, consumed by flame. Floating stations of metal there were, and creatures that drank the light of a fearsome blue bloated star and belched bile that returned and fed it in a cyclical rite. Onto the planet in a field from flame, a plain of polished stone led lines of billions of Sentients to a building as tall as the one in which they were now. Within the Lieutenant of Hell did His duty, for all beings upon transition to death here would be judged.

“This is a terrifying sight!” said Droos, wide-eyed.

“It is the inferno that awaits you, my daughter,” muttered Emerzo.

“Emerzo!” shouted Drerpo. “Unless you have truly lost your wits and betrayed your purpose, cease this pettiness!”

“Fine,” she said with swagger.

Then the image retreated and transitioned to the glowing expanse to the east. Inward on a fair green planet the image now soared, and on the planet amidst a forest of ancient groves, trees old beyond the count of years, a gleaming jewel of a city could be seen. It shone like diamond crystal, but also polished silver, and dancing drops of dew. Like lilies of the field it was clothed in nature. As the day of creation it was revealed, only it captured also

Book II: The City

the essence of civilization.

“How about this?” said Drerpo, grimacing.

He waved a gesture with his finger and traced some lines in the air and muttered words as the image ran to the space between the expanse of light and that of fire. Into a great chamber, a floating building the size of a planet, the young man positioned the image on rows of books, a much simpler and infinitely less fearful image.

“Who are you two?” said Droos.

“Would you mind answering that question, dear sister,” said Drerpo.

A few more moments passed as Emerzo frowned, then sighed, and with a final wave, the image vanished, the darkness faded, and they stood once more in an open room with artificial lights in the heart of the Great Library of the Great Assembly, a civilization of ordinary Sentients.

“What was that?” asked Droos. “How does the Great Assembly have such images?”

“It doesn’t,” said Drerpo.

“It is the inferno,” said Emerzo. “And the reward. And knowledge. A future for all three of us.”

“Which one?” said Droos.

“Yes,” said Emerzo.

Drerpo scowled before turning with a forced smile to Droos.

“I believe my sister needs some time alone, sweet Droos,” he said. “Let us depart and return to the realm of mortals.”

Looking over her shoulder, the princess allowed herself to be led away into immanent rows of books here on the planet of No. Over to the vesselbay they sauntered, and were met by the androgynous ghost Zerson.

“Welcome back, young Droos,” he said.

“Not so young as she once was, Zerson,” said Drerpo.

“Well...” said the ghost.

The princess gave him a mischievous look.

“Very well,” the ghost frowned, and he let them into the limousine.

As they zoomed with streams of vessels traveling at astonishing speeds through the airspace, Droos sat up.

“It was a long time ago,” said Droos.

“What was, Droos?” he replied.

“She gave me her contact information,” said Droos, “A representative of the Office of the Executive of the Great Assembly.”

“What was your impression of her,” said Drerpo, chipper.

“She was mature, and sounded both caring and professional, eager to help me if she could,” said Droos.

“Quite the young politician, aren’t you,” said Drerpo.

“Yes actually,” winked Droos, with a satisfied look on her face. “Since I was a girl. I think I’ll contact her and see what she can do for us.”

“We won’t even need my sister’s help with your new lobbying skills,” said Drerpo.

“Your sister’s not all that bad,” said Droos, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t I know it,” said Drerpo

As Anora prepared lunch for them with Drerpo’s help back at the apartment, Droos called up her list of contacts, and far down was a note for this woman. A short message only was sent, and shrugging her shoulders, Droos left the matter in the hands of fate.

Then one day four months before her twentieth birthday, the princess received a message marked as, *Galactic Palace Official Mail*. Opening it, the script was simple.

“She’ll meet with you,” it said. “If you can get one billion signatures from those who will commit to vote for her.”

One billion signatures had once seemed like a big number for Droos, but that was some time ago. She used her own personal wealth, now steady at under four trillion credits, to purchase advertisements on major Ultranet domains and popular media shows. Within one month she had eleven billion signatures. Quite a good result, she thought to herself.

Three weeks later an official transport arrived for her. Riches similar to the chamber of the Speaker of the Galactic Council adorned the vessel, which was smaller than the previous official transports on which she had traveled. Still the several dozen present on the craft left her relatively alone, and she made no new acquaintances.

One hour of travel brought them to a building gleaming with gold. It rose several miles, and consisted it seemed of a number of cylindrical towers merged seamlessly in curves, towers that diminished in size as they spread in the four cardinal directions. Beneath a wide promenade filled in the space between

Book II: The City

the wings and several miles beyond the grounds. Gardens surrounded it in a ring, growing from the earth itself, rather than floating in artificial parks far above the planet. Into a small vesselbay near the top of the centermost tower they landed on a platinum pad.

As soon as the door opened several dozen Secret Service officers flowed into the vessel, checking everyone's identification, quickly surveying bags and other small items on the transport, as well as the craft itself. A blob-shaped Sentient dressed in flowing purple approached her, ushering her after it, up an old fashioned elevator, and into a circular floor of offices. Up an actual staircase, studded with precious stones, they reached a door of dark hardwood.

"Enter," said a voice from somewhere.

The escort opened the door and a large circular room surrounded by windows one hundred feet high held luxurious chairs, sofas, tables, and various artifacts and artwork. In the center was a circular table with open sides which held at one end a human woman. She had short, brown-red hair, a little messy, fair skin, and wore a black dress with small black diamonds that reflected the light that shone through the window. A necklace with a single pearl bordered by gold, hung from her neck, and a ring carrying a piece of amber with a fly like insect sat on her right pointing finger. A pad was on the table in front of her, a number of actual books, an empty mug of coffee, and a half eaten bagel atop a green cloth napkin. Looking up her eyes were brown.

"Welcome Princess," said the woman sitting back.

"Fatima, that will be enough."

The bloblike escort bowed a bulbous head and retreated from the room, closing the door, which in appearance, vanished, revealing the image of a the window continuing around, completing the full circle.

"Princess Droos," continued the woman, standing. "I hope you'll forgive the mess. It's passed noon and this is my first bight of the day."

"There is no need to ask for forgiveness, Your Divineness," said Droos, bowing her head.

Staring, the woman laughed, tapping the table.

"Very funny, Dear Droos," said the woman. "Yes, I suppose your father expected such a title. My name is Esther Biyu, President of the Great Assembly. Please call me either Dear

Esther, or Dear President. It's up to you."

"As you wish, Dear President," said Droos, looking up with a smirk.

Another chuckle.

"You are very sweet," said Esther.

"I have learned much since I have had the privilege to flee from the desolation and tyranny among my native people to the bastion of civility and righteousness of yours," said Droos. "Several years in your schools, meetings with politicians, and appreciating your artwork has shown me all that is truly possible from Sentients."

"Well that's only two items of note," said the President. "School and art. I can't say much on behalf of politics."

Droos laughed.

"No need to offer flattery," said Esther. "As I said, I'm but a Sentient. Now tell me why you are here."

"I come, Dear President," said Droos, "On behalf of my people, who cannot speak for themselves. For a tyrant rules them, torturing, murdering, and raping as he will. This man would have his rule supported by such tools of state forever. It must be stopped."

The woman looking at her waited for more, and then blinked.

"That's all?" said Biyu.

"Please," said Droos. "Don't make light of this law."

"I wasn't insulting anything," said the President. "I signed the amendment, didn't I? You misunderstand me. This matter of creating an exception to the Law of Non-Intervention is very agreeable to me, and it took little consideration to support it. Now that I have done my part, I suppose there isn't much more for which you need me."

"Dear President," said the Princess. "I am coming to appreciate your humor and find it charming coming from one in your position. As far as I know my father never had a sense of humor, unless it was smirking at the screaming agony of petty criminals being vivisected."

"You really hate him, don't you?" said Biyu.

"Yes... I suppose, I have come to... I hate him," said Droos. "Still, I was coming to the point of telling you my purpose. Let me say, Dear Esther. From one politician to another. One with your power has more influence than the law letter's letter, affixing

Book II: The City

your name to pieces of paper. Your office spans the galaxy and you have armies of officials and diplomats in ever capitol and every megacorporation. If you set even some of them to work, lobbying the populations of individual Sectors to hold referendums on this matter and to vote in favor, surely this matter will be complete. My people will be free.”

“Yes,” said Esther. “This office has a cleverly designed political machine. We stretch to every corner of the galaxy. Still you overestimate my abilities in thinking that we could convince localities to overcome their standard indifference, and further, to vote in a particular way on a matter that doesn’t relate very much to them. And coming from me, a human, a race many thousands of sectors call elitist and look upon with contempt, some might choose to oppose your amendment if I pressed further.

“It will be a useful law in more ways than you know. Two decades each century we can lay aside the Right to Isolation and the Law of Non-Interference currently preventing us from exploiting picotons of useful resources on millions of worlds. My Vice President of Commerce and Vice President of the Interior will be clicking their teeth about the possibilities. Maybe we’ll even dig into the rich wealth of the continent of Nolai when we come to assist your people.”

“The exceptions must be reasonable!” said Droos.

“Do you want us to kill your brother, and your mother and sister too?” asked the President.

“Dear President, listen to me, don’t twist my words,” said the Princess.

The woman smiled, and sat back, waiting a moment or two.

“You’re the politician Droos,” said Esther. “Maybe you’ll get an idea to get us to where we are going.”

Scrunching her face, the young woman looked out the window at the blue skies, visible through a zone of reduced height to buildings. Even a few birds could be seen, an unusual sight in this age.

“How many more votes do you need?” asked Droos, looking at the President.

“Excellent!” said Biyu, putting together the tips of her fingers. “One more election, and I’m done with politics. Finally, I can return to the mortal world. This office really ages its occupant. For now, unfortunately, duty to my civilization looms large before

me still. A faithful servant, I must win their hearts one more time in my life, so that I can help save them from themselves.”

“That’s just a tad tyrannical, isn’t it?” said Droos.

“Yes, very good,” chuckled Esther. “No, they, the people, are in charge. I answer to them, although frequently I have to read between the lines over what they really want. Further, of course my job is not to make laws, or to interpret them, but to execute the laws. That doesn’t mean I can’t as Executive order a rule to be observed as procedurally inoperable. This is all a digression. You’ll forgive me, Dear Princess. For I am an old woman, despite my appearance, having traveled the galaxy and seen some six hundred years. It is rare in my position to have a frank conversation with someone so wise and capable but young and sweet as you. It almost reminds me of when my children were young, hundreds of years ago.”

“I’ve said,” replied Droos. “There is no need to apologize to me.”

“Then you’ll help me serve my people?” said the President.

“What are we talking about?” said Droos.

“A simple gesture, really,” said Esther. “This sector Dristø, plus nine. Ten sectors altogether that are swing districts. If just over a year from today you swing me ten sectors, then I’ll do what you ask.”

“Ten sectors will hardly affect the election,” said Droos.

“As I indicated,” the President continued. “Only a gesture. Just as the one billion votes to see me was a gesture. I told you. I support your cause. Simply put, I find it more enjoyable to work together with people for mutual benefit. I find a small amount of support towards my goals encourages my interest to be at a higher level regarding the goals of other people, to prioritize certain things, from among the endless tasks I am presented with every day.”

“That’s great!” said Droos. “I will help you help your people.”

“Then I will be most happy,” said Esther, “To help you help yours.”

Book II: The City

“Ugh!” shouted Droos.

All of the twenty-somethings looked up from their tests, distracted from their work, as the young woman expressed her feelings out loud. There were more than a few smirks.

“I suppose that’s what you get for trying to rule the galaxy,” jeered Garcia.

“A well-deserved expression of her feelings, I would say,” said Dewei.

“Dear Students,” said the mentor, rising from her cross-legged position to gaze at the collection of students who had come to know Droos over more than four years of her life now.

The princess was in her twenties.

“All students have their moment, and a time of angst that is too dreadful to be wholly contained. It is only proper to be open with emotion during such times, and for Dear friends such as we are to be sensitive and offer love and support. Now please, remember this, and will you return to your noble studies. I will see to Dear Droos myself.”

She bowed, the mentor who had too been with them all of these years, and the students, who looked upon her truly as a mentor, perhaps the mightiest figure in their lives, happily did as she had requested. Then the mentor nodded at Droos and the princess rose and followed. Together they walked silently at first across brightly lit paths of green grass and rows of flowers, chirping fountains, and swooping birds. The breeze smelled of orange blossoms, and it reminded Droos of the taste, somehow, of passion fruits, from long ago.

“Dear Mentor,” said the princess. “Forgive my disturbance. I... have been distracted lately. Please, I meant no disrespect.”

“I did not see or hear any disrespect,” said the mentor.

“Only a young woman with troubles as any other mortal who seeks relief and understanding. All Sentients come to see such times, and they must face them to grow. It is as much part of our education here as anything I might say.”

“Thank you,” said Droos.

“Please, Dear Droos,” replied the woman, “Tell me what are your troubles. No need to explain matters that are too private, as I am not one to expect all secrets to be revealed. We each contain within us things still too dear. Yet those things that are touchable, please, let me see if I can help.”

“It’s just,” said Droos, “All of this money, and fame, and power, and the celebrity that comes with it. I feel that I have lost myself. Maybe all my life I was trained to be a statesmen; yet it was in a different universe, a place small and insignificant, barely a droplet in a galaxy of seas. I am a princess of a small tribe who loves her people, and fights for them. Yet I am a small fish gazing from a bowl out at metal houses that pierce the sky. It has been an endless run, no rest, no sleep, no other thoughts, each day, every day, pursuing my goal. I fear it will tear me apart. Maybe I would even go back to my father. Death through pain might relieve the torment I feel at the life I now live.”

Breathing rapidly, the pair reached a circle of grass in the center of rings containing every shade of flower. A burble of stream wafted across the yards from its banks some distance away.

“Some see the difficulties in being the meek,” said the mentor, “And they are true. Fewer contemplate the trials of the giant. She stands tall holding the world on her shoulders, and if she moves, cities fall, oceans drain, millions die. Perhaps there is no danger of immanent death and pain to her. A giant who sees only her own ability to bear her burden risks spilling the seas that make up the world. Rather she might consider the many smaller beings who live within it who might take upon them each smaller burdens so as to lighten the weight left upon the shoulders of the giant. So too once in the story of the prophet Moses did he distribute his authority among lesser Elders of his tribe when he found the burden of leadership too much to bear alone.”

“I carry on conversations with the Speaker of the Galactic Council and the President of the Great Assembly,” lamented Droos. “Who is there to share that burden?”

“Are there any other matters for which you are troubled, Dear Droos?” said the mentor.

“Well, there is one thing...” said Droos, sheepishly. “I feel like a girl thinking about it. Maybe you can help me.”

The woman smiled.

“I have a boyfriend who I have been with for many years now,” said Droos. “He is smart, he’s handsome, he’s sensitive. I find him a great listener and a passionate kisser.”

The eyes of the mentor unnerved her and Droos blushed. A twinkle in her eyes, the woman placed a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s so funny,” said Droos. “The galaxy answers to my call, I was raised as a princess, yet matters so simple as courtship

Book II: The City

allude my grasp.”

“Few matters are as challenging as the love between two people,” said the mentor.

“I mean,” said Droos. “We kiss a lot. I lie with him and lay my head on his shoulder. We hold each other. Yet I always wonder what... else might there be. What more is there.”

The mentor laughed.

“You mean sex?” the woman said.

“Well... yes,” said Droos, blushing.

“Droos, Dear Droos,” said the mentor. “There are no Sentients, except the asexual species, who are free of longing. Our species, and every other Sentient race would be extinct today if our hunger were not so great.”

“Aren’t there other reasons we still exist?” asked Droos.

“Yes,” said the Mentor. “This is no easy choice, my dear. Maybe you are too young for adults over twenty-five, but for a young man like Drerpo, and yes, I know about him, born and raised alongside you for your entire life, your best friend as well as the man you love, there are no obstacles before you. The choice is entirely yours.”

“Yet I have many passions, and also much modesty,” said the princess. “Other passions say that I should wait. How do my actions reflect on the underpinnings of society? Carrying the galaxy on my shoulder may be too much, but leaving such a simple sublime act to a time of socio-political-economic formality, would this fall in the realm of remaining responsibilities that I might carry?”

“I said, Dear Droos, that the matter is entirely up to you,” said the mentor. “Or rather, not entirely. There is one other with whom I recommend talking with to discuss this. If he is as much the man that you say, and I have no doubt, he will give you the answer you seek. He is the other half of yourself, and his words will remind you of who you are.”

Breathing deeply, more evenly, the princess gazed up at the blue sky, and felt the sun warm her arms. She stretched out her arms and raised them to the sky before turning and smiling at the mentor.

“I have a heavy burden to carry, but a mentor who is one of the wisest Sentients I know,” said Droos. “Even on certain matters.”

“You have learned a lot today, Droos,” said the mentor.

“Enough I would say. Finish your test tomorrow and use your time now to enjoy this beautiful garden, so that you may think, and choose what you believe is best. And you are not a girl, Dear Droos. You are already a young woman.”

This was not the first time Droos had been excused from class, but this occasion was strange. As the mentor retreated, the young woman eyed the rainbow of soft flowers gracing the garden, not far from the forest where once she had stood isolated from her fellow students. Above the clouds and the sky looked down upon her.

“Drerpo,” she said, in a certain tone.

Moments passed while the breeze played with her hair.

“I’m here, yes Droos?” said Drerpo.

He spoke from the implant in her ear.

“Would you be so kind as to come pick me up, now?” she said. “My day has arrived at an early end, in order for me to contemplate possible new beginnings.”

“You are mysterious as ever, my love,” said Drerpo.

“Today most of all,” said Droos, her eyes widening.

A sea rose and fell with swells that crashed with a rush onto a sandy shore of white sand, sending a spray cooling smooth black stones here and there and the faces of the couple, standing holdings hands, looking out at the sun setting out over the skyfalls where the sea descended thousands of feet.

“You should trust yourself,” said Drerpo.

He laced his fingers through hers, and moved her in a slow dance.

“Sometimes I think you know me better than I know myself,” said Droos. “Since we were five, you put such wild ideas into my mind.”

“That was long ago, when you were a girl,” whispered Drerpo.

“Oh Drerpo, dear Drerpo,” she said.

“My very best friend, dear Droos,” he spoke. “I know that you have learned to enjoy all things in their due time. You have learned patience and the value of fine wine savored on the most special occasions. The finest bottle may be drunk on any day, at any time. Yet when might it be opened? When might it be even better?”

The princess sighed, and squeezed his hand, with a little frown.

Book II: The City

“I know, Drerpo,” she said. “You’re right. We have so much time left to us. And still so much to do before we will one day be united forever. Even that is currently uncertain.”

“You know me so well,” said Drerpo.

She laughed and kissed his cheek, before turning him, and enjoying the sunset, as the calmness of night blossomed onto the world and stars shone above. As she gazed at the sky, she thought she could see one twinkle, bright and dazzling, so alike to her birth star that had graced her as a newborn that night when she had lain together with Drerpo atop the Pillar of Creation.

§

“Good morning Princess,” said a masculine sounding voice.

Droos groaned, with the sun shining in her eyes, deep in cushions of her bed in her room in the apartment she shared with her boyfriend and his sister.

“Do I have to get up already?” Droos whined.

“It is a day of much worth, and you are needed, expected for rituals to perform, dances to dance, a tyrannical father to please,” said the voice.

“Etøn, please,” she said.

“What?!” spoke Emerzo.

Droos sat up and opened her eyes. The room was bright, but shaded where she lay in her bed, seeing that the figure that stood before her was not Etøn.

“Etøn is dead,” said Emerzo. “A long time ago.”

Swallowing, Droos rubbed her eyes.

“I don’t know what came over me,” said Droos. “You just startled me, that’s all. I suppose I’m back to a routine each day, but for days like this.”

“The weekend is still mostly free,” said Emerzo. “But a princess of great power and prestige has duties even then. Please, meet me for a light lunch and we’ll be on our way.”

The twin left the room as the princess hit the sheets. It took thirty minutes to be fully prepared. She emerged in the dining room to Emerzo reading a tablet while munching on some squid mixed with eggs over toast. Sitting down and pushing the bowl with more tentacled creatures away, the princess helped herself to

some eggs and toast.

“For the love of God,” said Droos. “It’s Tenthday. This must be important to have interrupted my recovery.”

“You certainly have been resting more since you bribed a corporation to get out the vote for the President,” said Emerzo. “Do you have some sort of mandate?”

“No...” said Droos, eating a mouthful of eggs. “You’re right. Weekends have been lazier than they were a year or two ago. Or even six months ago. What’s the point of having money if I’m not going to use it.”

“Just don’t leave the galaxy yet,” said Emerzo. “Money is a tool. It needs direction.”

“I have given directions,” said Droos.

“My brother and I are working very hard for your benefit, Droos,” said Emerzo, “While you are becoming a spoiled girl. You are an adult, Droos. Be intellectually curious. Revel in challenges.”

“In the Great Assembly I am still a girl,” said Droos. “At least for four more years. Then, I suppose, I’ll become a queen.

“Droos, Droos, Droos,” chided Emerzo. “I am a queen too, by rights you could never even imagine; it did not come from my inactivity, my neglect, or sloth. Still it may be wrenched from my hands were I to lay down my sword for an instance. You have learned to be a mighty leader. Fine, you pushed yourself too hard. Some months of rest have passed. Now rise, and greet the dawn anew. Someday a hand will reach down from heaven and draw you up into eternity. Today all you have to do is go to the Great Library.”

Her curly hair stuck a few strands out over her eyes, and she played with their split ends as they were found. Emerzo and the princess flew together with Zerson. Standard streams of traffic accompanied them as the pinnacle of the Great Library stretched upward before them. Only as they neared, Zerson veered straight down, and slowed rapidly. At the level of about fifty thousand feet, the vision became that of towers thirty thousand feet in the air, with spaces between them that descended into darkness and shadow. Some minutes it took at their new speed to reach the canyons of steel, but into them they flew.

Lights appeared, bright as day, but artificial, for the sun did not touch the depths of the city, down here away from the mountaintops. She stopped playing with her hair, and felt her

Book II: The City

palms perspire a little, with the feeling that now they crept further and further into the bowels of the earth. Really they were tens of thousands of feet still above the ground. Many more minutes passed. If any places in Galactic Capitol could be said to have some squaller, here they were found. Droos did not know that of the poorer areas, the ones around the roots of the Great Library were far better off. At last after ten minutes they reached what appeared to be a straight, flat road with marble stones for paving. Designs were drawn along them, and small fountains that echoed eerily like the sounds of ghosts dotted the terrain surrounding streetlamps.

The doors to Zerson opened, and Droos marveled as she left the comfort of the limousine and walked on an avenue. Almost she had forgotten that there was such thing as paved streets. This was a strange step in between the skyscrapers of the cities and the dirt boulevards of the Nerno, the small capitol of her childhood. Here and there tiles surrounded by patterns in colored marble read in ancient letters of a language Droos only understood because of her implant, the words *1st Street*.

First Street of what? thought Droos.

“We’re going to have to go on foot from here, my friend,” said Emerzo. “Zerson is excellent in the air, but with a wall on three sides, navigating is too tricky. Besides, there are special rules down here.”

Still before them to the east was a sign on the foot of the same building that read in letters she was now so familiar with *The Great Library*. Below this line was another: *Formerly The Library of Congress, Changed Upon Planetary Unification 2976*.

“I know a shortcut that will make our trip go faster,” said the sister.

Following her to the west, Droos passed with her through a wide door in the lowest floor of another building. It had a name, only nothing of particular note. Opening up before her was a great lower chamber. It was more than three hundred and fifty feet tall in a square at about five hundred feet on each side. Within it beneath numerous gleaming lights rose a building of strange architecture.

There were many pillars, cylindrical, made of stone, and the walls were decorated by white paint. Many windows over five stories culminated in a large dome atop which was a statue of an angelic being. No one was present other than Emerzo and Droos,

walking passed this large structure. The room was large enough that it held within it the top of the hill where the pillared building lay, but also the hill that descended to the west. Green grass in a garden with fountains and still running water accompanied the white gleaming structure they now left behind.

Through another set of doors they passed, with more strange buildings, some of a similar architecture with pillars, others different, yet still in some ancient model long extinct. A couple more building roots passed and several hundred feet. They went diagonally, and emerged at another boulevard, similar to 1st Street. This one read, *Constitution Avenue*, in the same ancient letters.

“Like the Galactic Constitution!” said Droos.

“Similar in concept, although this one is a distant antecedent,” said Emerzo.

The avenue went a few hundred feet and entered the base of another building holding a single chamber containing a structure. This held a row of pillars in front supporting the start of a triangular shaped roof, that then again rose further and over to make the building a rectangle. In among these pillars they walked, and soon, orange and yellow glowing light met them to replace the daylight bulbs. A small antechamber appeared, then a large circular room with a spacious rise up to a tall ceiling of stone. One table lay within, on the far side of the room, and on it was a parchment, seemingly, with writing that was partially faded, written by hand, in script.

“Where are we?” said Droos. “What is this?”

“To everything there is a beginning,” spoke Emerzo.

“Here in roots of the modern Galactic City that spans a world is an ancient treasure, so sacred it is largely left alone, as though the ghosts of the past might disturb the dreams of those who visit. If only more would do so. Before us lies not perhaps the first, but one of the most important early documents of the modern system of government.”

“What was the first?” said Droos.

“Many would argue the Magna Carta to be the first document in the genre,” said Emerzo. “Yet few can doubt the power of these words before us.”

As the words echoed in the empty stone chamber, lit in a fashion not unlike fire light in an age long past, almost thunder clouds seemed to sound outside, and a mournful tone blew. Out of the tempest a mighty still voice spoke truths of government.

Book II: The City

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Then the sound dissipated, and the young woman was left with Emerzo, the two of them in a museum preserving a treasured past, given, one of many such sites throughout a now unified world.

“Who wrote this?” said Droos. “And... is it right?”

“A collection of great thinkers, the rights ones, came together, at the right time, and proposed a new system of government,” said Emerzo.

“Their government answered to the people,” said Droos. “It was meant to look in fear upon them.”

“I would not say so much,” said Emerzo. “Fear was not meant to be the driving force in either direction.”

“Yet these great men and women saw that they could only serve their people if they were directly answerable to them,” said Droos. “Even the Executive was accountable first and foremost to the will of the people. Why is it, Emerzo, tell me, that my people cannot have such a system of government? How many thousands of years ago was this written. For how long have these great men and women slept in their graves, yet still today my people wear the manacles of slavery?”

“I said that they lived at the right time,” said Emerzo.

“The people of that time saw discussion of political philosophy and systems of government to be a source of entertainment, and no one needed to be educated to share their thoughts freely while they relaxed enjoying ale in brewhouses. They chose to trust leaders that would enshrine freedom in their constitution. These people chose to be free. Perhaps they would have chosen to be subjects to a new absolute monarch, King Washington I. No. They were presented with the opportunity to be free, and they took it. Then their representatives heard them. And so began one of the greatest dramas in the history of this world. It lasted for many hundreds of years.”

“My people must choose to be free then?” said Droos. “If they want freedom, they must insist, at fear and cost of their lives, to have a government they truly desire. They have not yet done

so.”

“It seems that soon they will not have a choice,” Emerzo.

“What do you mean by that?” replied Droos.

Then the twin brought out a tablet, one jeweled, similar or the same as the one she had first seen held by her brother as the princess stood on the deck of a wooden ship. It had a flat display with a few numbers.

“1,342,400 in favor. 455,300 opposed. 202,300 abstaining or indifferent.”

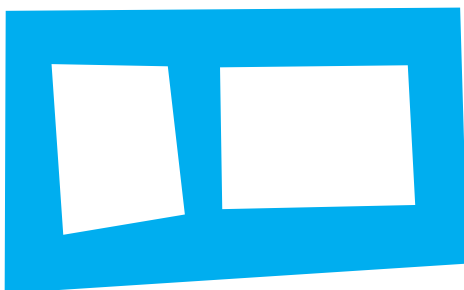
“Is that the poll?” said Droos, her heart skipping.

“Yes,” said Emerzo. “On election day, when you provide the twenty-three sectors you have convinced for the President, the Executive’s efforts will give you the votes in remaining sectors to give you those numbers within a margin of only hundreds. It seems...”

“We’re going to win!” said Droos.

“Or rather we will be at the next step,” said Emerzo.

“You’ll have to convince the Galactic Council to vote for intervention according to the new amendment. Then, well, you and they will have to decide what to do. You know it could go



Book II: The City

very badly for your family.”

“Yes... I know,” said Droos, her breath slowing. “It must be worth the cost. It has to be.”

“With the power to bring help from your new friends, what will you do?” said Emerzo.

“I really don’t know,” said Droos

The princess turned around and looked back across the large room, empty of all but them, and at the darkness of the entrance, gazing into the shadowed interior of the root of a building thirty thousand feet high. Silence filled the museum.





Chapter 5

The Opportunity to be Free

Rotting squid stuck out of a box stained with oil, strewn on the floor with other refuse. Chairs were sideways on the floor, legs in the air. Tablets recklessly gleamed near the doorway leading from the multivator into the room. Hardcopies of essential documents lay revealed, haphazardly projecting from creases in seats, emanating sweaty aromas; perspiration stains soaked the carpet on the far wall from the door.

“Why are you wasting your time in this dump, princess?” spoke a youthful masculine voice.

“Social class is important where I am from, a measure used by the state to suppress the vast majority of my people,” said Droos.

A gleaming red dress of pastel color, straight and slender to her form, along with ruby earrings and a necklace, showed off the young woman, revealing truly a mighty human being. She commanded the room in which she stood, active and alert, aware of the stakes in the situation before her. A hand with natural nails extended from her to nudge one such essential document.

“You’ve come to gloat over your superiority then?” the ghost said.

He was young, by ghost standards, perhaps an image of twenty-five, and the style of his uniform and sash were not quite matched. The features of his face were smooshed, and his nose bland, as though he had only hastily donned the skin that as an artificial Sentient he had of course purposely chosen.

“Part of me does feel superior,” said the princess. “Yet there is a reason. Are you telling me that you can’t keep this unit any better?”

“It’s hard work,” said the ghost. “Like you have to move chairs and clean sweat stains all day. I bet the servants in your

Book II: The City

mansion lick your floors clean.”

“I don’t live in a mansion,” said Droos, putting a finger on her chin as she looked up at the dusty art piece, the image of a skylight, on the ceiling. “My home isn’t much bigger than this one. We have no extra room and no more than the one standard ghost.”

“My!” said the image here in the present. “A modest princess. I didn’t know they existed.”

“Listen!” said Droos. “That’s enough. I may not understand, even comprehend, much of what you have to do. Yet in this age the resources you have, even here, are generous and luxurious by all standards of the past. Do you have any idea what it’s like where I’m from?”

“No,” said the ghost. “Are any humans there such slobs as my client?”

“If they were,” spoke Droos, “They would be sacrificed or vivisected, depending on my father or the Servant-Judge’s whim.”

“Over here I only get three new programs per week,” said the ghost. “Three. Your ghosts probably get sixty.”

“You have over one hundred programs,” said Droos. “Food, vacation destinations, other people, your own home...”

“All so boring,” said the ghost.

“You are in a prison, fine,” said Droos. “A prison of your own making. So what if the person you have to work with is in a similar shape. He can’t keep his life in order. You could help him first by helping yourself. Put in your full seven hours.”

“Do you know the types of things I need to clean around here?” he said.

“Do you know what the servants of my tribe have to clean?” said Droos. “Sweat stains are the least of their problems. Now get back to work. If you could keep this place clean consistently, you would have your transfer, more programs, and more downtime to use them.”

“A typical classist answer,” frowned the ghost.

“You are making a choice,” said Droos. “Freedom is not free. It must be desired, acted upon, and earned. Why do you think I’m here on Ninthday, when I might be sleeping. Even *princesses* have responsibilities. Especially princesses.”

She turned without acknowledging the ghost anymore and entered the multivator. It took ten minutes to reach the vesselbay, a dripping mess of broken appliances leaking water and worse

around a dimly illuminated room. Still it was a far cry from living in rooms housing ten people cornered by feces in The Jungle where Droos was born. She entered her limousine and flew with it out under the falselight of the *lowest mile*.

The lowest mile was the term for the thousands of feet at the roots of buildings that made up the steel forests of No. Sentients of the current age appreciated, largely, sunshine and views, and the closer to the top, the harder to come by and the more expensive the real estate became. There was some exception in some notable areas, since the predilections of Sentients were as variable as the number of species in the galaxy. Some preferred darkness and daylight bulbs.

As Zerson rose higher into the boulevards of the Central Eurai District, tens of thousands of miles from the Galactic District of her home, the architecture became more appealing, the paint more recent, the commercial images flashing more reputable. The vessels here were usually dull metallic in color, but they were sturdy. Few Grand Transports were seen, except maybe near the local Transit Port. Galactic City, which covered nearly every surface of this world, maintained its standards of perfection on the surface here at the top. Dignitaries who passed over would know little of the rot that stank in the depths of this backwater of the planet. Having seen several units of sorry, sad Sentients both artificial and organic, only her past, almost sixteen years, with The People of the Blood, reminded her how much worse life could be.

Not to say that the princess had become wholly virtuous, as of course she was wealthy, and intelligent, and famous. Following the urgings her boyfriend's sister, however, Droos had improved her activities on Ninthday and Tenthday. This meant that at least five out of six days of the weekend each month she usually had worthwhile activities. Seeing the flaws in this civilization which claimed such greatness reminded her of individual responsibility still required in this age and community neglect that needed still to be repaired.

The black and white vessel flew high, up to about twenty miles, before it entered the transplanetary traffic back towards the Galactic District. Zerson's speed increased greatly, from the usual five hundred miles per hour, to nearly three thousand. Still the manipulation of tangible inertia saw that the princess barely felt speed. It would take some hours to make the return trip and she had some time alone.

Book II: The City

Few skyscrapers could be seen here, or rather, those that stretched this height, to twenty miles. Some rose up to ten, and still appeared much as dots far below. Eventually the stream reached a larger artery that ferried traffic from Southeast Eurai District and Far East Eurai District, as they entered the airspace above the ocean.

Several months into her twenty-first year, Droos, sat back in her chair, though still with some poise, smiling, and running a hand along the black leather-like seat. So many years had passed, though really very few compared to the years of most modern Sentients, yet nonetheless, she recalled her first view of the city as it streamed far above. Lines of metal birds soared, free from all earthly demands, across the ocean on which her small boat sailed. There she had stood with Drerpo at the prow of the ship, as his sister blew into the sails, with words, and they entered a brand new part of the journey.

At this height the curvature of the planet could be partially seen. Spots of darkness loomed above, not quite with stars, since the glow of Sol illuminating the planet of No still glared too bright. That darkness was a mystery. She sought so hard to fill the emptiness in her heart left by Etøn's absence, by the terrors of her youth, her complicity in the rule of her father and the sure damnation it brought, her simultaneously conflicting feelings of having betrayed everything she was raised to do. Sights and sounds of great variety, of magic and Gods, so many colors, smells, chirping birds from a million planets, chattering voices and laughs of children from thousands of Sentient species, these wonders did much in the city to cover her doubts. Yet there was a darkness here in the heavens of this world that could not be disguised. This drew her to it.

Matching that persistent hunger in her soul, to fulfill still her father's will, that of her God, and to redeem herself, to betray just that same impulse, with which she now openly labeled her father a mass-murderer, and plotted his downfall, perhaps, now, she thought she might just lay aside the doubts and feelings and enter into the space between planets; the space between stars. For even the city had an end, and beyond that was beauty yet to behold, and an opportunity to repair herself in the blank freedom of the void.

That way she would travel, soon, she thought. It was too soon to act upon powers now given to her by the government of this great civilization. Her people were not ready. Yes, she would

investigate and prepare the framework, work with them, to enable them, make them available to seize their opportunity. In the end they would have to choose. It would yet take time. In the interim, there had to be another purpose. It had to be meaningful and something new. She needed time apart from this world.

Passing away down the river, the hours of the journey home, to her apartment with Drerpo and Emerzo, went away, and she walked into the suite she knew so well, that for now, kept her rooted in this world.

"The red dress again?" said Anora, the familiar ghost, dressed immaculately in her uniform, bowed with darting eyes.

"You're right, of course," said Droos. "I wanted to be more assertive, more active."

"Some of the men might just wonder exactly what you are being more active to do," said Anora, rolling her eyes.

"I wouldn't... that was not my intension..." said Droos.

Smirking, the ghost led the twenty-something to her room and gave sufficient hints that Droos changed into something else. It was a purple uniform, with a top and bottom, and a sash shifting in color from black at one end, white at the other, and grey in the middle. Black diamond earrings dangled slightly, while a circlet of pearls adorned her neck. A few extra moments had given her the opportunity to experiment with various cosmetics, though of course in this age, only one device with many settings was required: the result being trim and straight eyebrows, natural but moderately thick lashes, and an even skin tone that was lightly dark.

"Very funny, dear Droos," said the ghost with an exaggerated bow. "You have ascended and now stand before me as a king. All hail! All hail!"

"Maybe it's just that I'm becoming more comfortable with what existed in my past, and I am beginning to distinguish that not all was so bad," said Droos.

"Your father enjoyed watching rape for sport, and you sat beside him and watched," said Anora, "But of course there were fine dresses to wear and tasty food to eat."

Frowning, Droos looked down at her feet, where comfortable open sandals graced her feet. She put a hand in her curly hair and sighed.

"Drerpo once told me that coming here the most difficult decision would be choosing what I wanted to do with my time,"

Book II: The City

said the princess. "For the first time in my life I had choices beyond just what I did, but also, I could decide freely who I wanted to be. Is it this?"

Droos pointed at her clothing. Then her hand shifted to the hidden closet.

"Or is it that?" said Droos.

"The sexy red dress, you mean?" smirked Anora.

"Well, yes," said Droos. "Am I one who follows all orders given to me, or one who chooses. Does money and fame chain me to my room, or do I use it for good, or to flaunt, or for the humiliation of others? It is amazing that I even have these options. I tell you, dear Anora, I am lost."

"My dear young woman," said Anora, walking over and lifting up Droos' chin, ever so delicately. "What served you before can still serve you now. You overcame a great obstacle once in the past. Think what that felt like and how you made that decision. Be the person who made that choice. You shape your own destiny."

"Yes, it may be cautiously done so," said Droos. "Or it may be at the urging of a dear friend, with much help. Clothing that commands and projects authority then is acceptable if it serves correctly what I choose."

"Such an odd conversation, isn't this," said Anora, looking over at the window. "Clothing and skins. You can't imagine what decisions go through my mind on this subject; how many different appearances are available for my choosing? Thousands of aliens' forms, inanimate objects, gaseous substances, light itself, are there for me to choose. Sometimes when I am alone, I put on an appearance, to feel different, alive. I know who I am in the end, and each day, I gladly don this uniform, because it says everything about who I am."

"Here I am, my friend," said Droos, "Dressed the same as my father, or nearly, as he wore black, white, and grey, to show that he was the master of life and death. Am I that person?"

Chuckling, the ghost had a few last words.

"Dear Droos. Sometimes an outfit, is just an outfit."

Then a chime signaled the return of at least one of the twins, or both, though the princess suspected the culprit. Entering the room without any signal, in walked her boyfriend. There he inspected and ran his teeth against his lips as he saw the two young women standing near across from each other in the center of the bedroom.

“What are you two up to?” asked Drerpo.

Droos looked at the ghost, Anora, and smirked.

“Girl talk,” laughed Anora.

“How was Central Eurai?” said the young man.

Anora left the two to themselves, and bending her head to a side, and shrugging, the princess smiled benignly at Drerpo.

“Empty of joy and hope,” said Droos. “A darkness that draws me towards the real void of space above.”

“You’ve been talking like that a lot recently, my friend,” said Drerpo. “Is it really your desire to leave this world?”

Taking a few steps and reaching over to his hand, she led him to sit at her side atop the foot of the bed.

“Where might a lost girl fly to, my dear” said Droos. “If I am already afloat in the darkness, why not go to see it with my waking eyes?”

“Are you really so lost?” said Drerpo, a twinkle in his eye.

He brought his lips over to hers, and kissed her passionately, brushing her hair.

“Yes, Drerpo,” she said. “And I want you along with me to hold my hand. Bring your sister if you must.”

He chuckled and mussed his girlfriend’s hair some, before standing up and walking to the door. Tapping some fingers on the wall, he turned over his shoulder.

“I hope your morning provided better inspiration for the rest of your day,” he said. “We’re scheduled for more meetings.”

“Must we?” said Droos. “We could gaze at the sky falls or practice one of the dances you and I enjoy when we wish to recall our past.”

“Do you really want to be dressed like that?” he said, pointing at her garment.

“Not you too!” she said.

Ten minutes later they entered the multivator. The light to the right of the opposite door glowed yellow now, though for no reason that the princess could conceive. Apparently some mysteries still lay before her, and the bluish tint of the light previously in her past.

Rising to a sharp point, a red windowed building gleamed as they approached, this one a modest fifteen miles at its peak, and they traveled near to this level to join the others for their meeting. Somehow the capitol building of the Marba System seemed modest in comparison to the Galactic council. Certainly

Book II: The City

it was tall and awe inspiring, at least in her mind, having grown up around buildings that hardly reached fifty feet at the extreme. Regular vessels were permitted to land at this building, and as they disembarked, they saw few surfaces plated in precious metals.

Artwork was common, only this was specific to the system; much of it included masterpieces from the last thousands of years, but there were even oil paintings and statues, as well as streaming images of tiny space vessels battling giant space stations, that dated back close to ten thousand years. These pieces were priceless, yet none carried the value of planets were they to be sold.

Through hallways of wood they walked, escorted by an organic Sentient, a human, native to this system. That was not to say that humans alone were the only staff for the Marba government. Many other Sentient species had called the planet of No home for eight thousand years. Service by this individual was merely coincidence. She led them through the halls, and they reached the desired destination.

Around a table sat eight others, including a person Droos had not seen for many years. It was the member of the species Leyol, whose name was Keyileth Rozess. She was Senior Advisor to the Speaker of the Assembly of Marba's Committee on the Interior.

"Dear Princess Droos," said the Advisor. "A girl I left you, and a powerful young woman you return."

The young woman turned away for a moment, then back again.

"I find it unprecedented what you have achieved in so short a time," said Keyileth. "More years than you wanted, I suppose. Those years I'm sure have come at a steep cost. Now please, take a seat, and let's discuss what we may do about the calamities suffered by the People of the Blood."

"Thank you, on behalf of my people, for the work you have done thus far," said Droos, taking her seat at the end of the table.

Drerpo went to the seat at the far end.

"You all know why we are here," said the princess. "In particular I come wearing the semblance of the uniform worn by my father as he sits and passes sole judgement atop the seat of power in our capital of Nerno. Purple is royal, but upon it are the reminders of black, white, and grey, a symbol that all who see

him should know that he alone is the master of life and death. He makes use of the mastery, to the effect that tens of thousands die instantly or frequently in great pain every year.”

“We’re all aware of your father’s crimes,” said the Advisor. “That’s why we are here. That’s why the Marba System government quickly followed the example of the Galactic Council and created an exception in our own constitution to the Law of Non-Interference for just such circumstances.”

“Good,” said Droos, her mouth forming an even line. “I admit that for the last years, my focus has been on simply allowing for this great civilization I currently reside within to assist me in helping my people. Now that it comes to choosing what course of action you might take, the details make considerations far more difficult. Drerpo’s sister had some input on the matter.”

“I’m afraid, however, that she was not able to attend this meeting,” added Drerpo.

“I suspect a seasoned politician like her to have numerous projects,” said Keyileth.

“That must be it,” said Drerpo. “As I was saying. Her suggestion is to be subtle in your approach. Send veterans of the Army Core of Anthropologists in disguise as members of the tribe, to discover the whereabouts of the already existing insurgent elements. Many of you know that there is already strife within the tribe, even though it is heavily suppressed. Befriending and gaining the confidence of these revolutionaries, the citizens of the Assembly can then use their technological resources, communications systems and surveillance being the most useful tools, to give the rebellion a greater advantage. The same resources may also be used to allow advanced warning for townsfolk should retribution be sought after, so that they can flee. It is my sister’s hope that this additional logistical support alone should provide the difference needed for an eventual coup d’état.”

“My name is Grozaia Jropel, and I answer to the Speaker for the Minority on the Committee,” spoke up a Sentient of an alien species with red skin and a long red lobe extending from his head. “We feel that the monetary resources necessary for such a subtle approach would be prohibitive. It makes much more sense to our party to simply approach the rebels if we can easily find them, or if not, the government itself. We can provide appropriate weapons to the rebels, and explicit use of our technology with the help of more conventional military assets, or else provide sufficient

Book II: The City

threat in dialogue with the King of this tribe, that he will choose an exit rather than attempt to subvert the will of the Great Assembly. Our research says that these approaches may be done at half, it not a third of the price of your suggestion.”

“That cannot happen,” said Droos. “The choice to be free must be free. It would be devastating to the cultural development of my people to simply introduce thirteenth millennium concepts and technology explicitly and suddenly into their lives. You risk anarchy, not revolution. Allowing the revolutionaries to make all the decisions, my people will believe that they have chosen a new future themselves. It will also, almost as important, prevent them from discovering the reality of the world in which they live.”

“Now young lady,” said Grozaia. “Didn’t you just spend the last four years amending the laws of our constitutions up and down our systems of government just so we could take action regarding your people? After all that, now you say you want them left alone. Which is it?”

“Both the exceptions to non-Interference must reasonable, and the type of action taken under such an exception,” said Droos. “The principles and reasons for the intent of the amendment was to provide intervention with the least amount of impact.”

“I don’t know about the rest of the people on this panel,” said Grozaia, “But plenty of my boss’ constituents were just as interested in the new ability to exploit natural resources in Interior Zones of Protection. Dear Princess, you must be realistic about why you and your cause were supported.”

“I suppose I may in fact be too naïve in my assumptions,” said Droos. “After all, I thought I had escaped a totalitarian government for an enlightened one of moral legitimacy. Is it true then that I am mistaken? Do you really still follow the same motives as the Servant-Traders and other chief lieutenants of my father?”

“It would take a lot longer than thousands of years to develop a naturally more righteous Sentient,” chuckled Keyileth. “Many in our civilization have reached a higher level of functioning.”

The advisor for the minority laughed.

“Fortunately for you, this panel is largely of that nature,” said Keyileth. “Your friends’ plan, as he just shared, is agreeable to a strong majority of our government.

“Are you so sure that you have the support of

Appropriations?” said Grozaia. “After all, there will be no money for your noble expedition without their approval.”

“I will personally provide any monetary resources your government needs to act, beyond that which they will themselves offer,” said Droos.

“That’s right,” said Grozaia. “I’m talking to a princess, practically a foreign head of state. Her personal wealth probably could fund anything she wants; first she’ll take our assets to free her people, then up north to the Southern Nomer District to gain some territory.”

“You can’t use my money?” said Droos.

“If we followed the whims of every spoiled rich girl,” said the speaker for the minority, “We’d have government buildings shaped like doll houses, and monuments to each current religious fad.”

“Now who’s following a code of morality?” smiled Keyileth. “Droos, unfortunately he’s right. Our laws also prohibit accepting income for funding specific policies. Maybe once it was unlikely a wealthy donor could personally finance his or her own war or political agenda, outside of public office. Too many trillionaires exist today, however, and there needed to be checks on their power. Let them build mansions and own mega conglomerates, but keep the government out of their reach. No, you will have to go through Appropriations.”

“Like that will be hard,” said Grozaia. “She’s already bought trillions of votes for the President in her last election. Do you think her money will have no impact here?”

“You’re right,” said Droos. “Perhaps I have used my money for political purposes freely. Then again, I am sitting here with you now, negotiating this personally. Besides, swaying the votes of citizens is different than convincing lawmakers.”

“Fine,” said Grozaia. “See if you can succeed through your nymphish good looks and ere of sweetness and naiveté. I will communicate to them using honest simple conversation that your cause is of little interest to us and to the extent that we must address it, only the minimum amount of resources will be given.”

“Ha!” said Drerpo. “So it comes out. All of our mighty words, but you are only speaking against this measure because you didn’t like the new amendment in the first place.”

“No,” said Grozaia. “Not at all. You misunderstand me. My problem was not against an amendment permitting interacting

Book II: The City

with Sentients in Zones of Protection. Rather it was because of the word *reasonable*, which seems by some self-righteous colleagues of mine to preclude resource exploitation. We'll see how that word is interpreted in one hundred years. It will evolve. I will make sure of it. For now, enjoy your selfish crusade to misuse our governments resources."

"Thank you," said Droos. "I will."

"Then I believe it's decided," said Keyileth. "Drerpo's suggestion, with thanks to his sister, is most in line with the intent of the amendment, really, the central reason of that effort's urgency. Dear Princess. I will refer you to the General of the Army Corp of Anthropologists and the Marba Deputy Minister of Defense, with whom you should share all you know about your people, beyond the basics explained in your book, which has already provided invaluable information."

The princess bowed her head at each in turn, and then rose, and departed with her friend Drerpo. She reached and grabbed his hand, holding it, while he squeezed hers lightly. They swung their arms together as they walked through the halls, as a fair numbers of art pieces around them depicted love and romance to bless their passage. Back at their limousine, they embarked and passed back into the airspace.

"Drerpo, where is your Sister?" said Droos.

"Many matters in this fair world, my love, call my dear sister's attention," said Drerpo. "She is indeed a wise and ancient politician, and in the end, all answer to her will. Even I am but her steward."

The young man's eyes had drawn out of focus, as though he gazed upon things Droos could not see.

"I know who she is," said Droos.

Drerpo shook himself awake once more, and he looked at Droos, a glint in his eye.

"Do you now, Droos?" said Drerpo.

"Sure," said the Princess. "She had some disguise, a quality permitted by the technology of this age, no doubt, that has her appear to be an aged politician, a statesman respected by all parties. Likely it is one that actually did exist, although I wonder how Emerzo maintains that appearance without others discovering the source of the image as either being deceased or worse, still alive."

"How do you know that my sister did not simply ask such

a person for permission to use her image?” said Drerpo.

“That would make sense,” said Droos. “Although I cannot imagine simply loaning my identity to someone for years. What if someone discovered me? What if I got bored and wanted to enter the public sphere again?”

“Then of course you could,” said Drerpo. “And a new disguise would be needed. Perhaps my sister has found a reward to occupy the source’s time during my sister’s activities, one that was so great to be beyond refusal, with which a million years might pass, and none would reach the point of boredom.”

“Where would such a place be?” said Droos. “A million years? That has to be an exaggeration.”

Then the twin drew his finger over the glass in the front of the limousine, and an image appeared showing the ultranet. News stories passed over it as the light of the window faded, and the vessel grew dark. Only the pictures of the image could be seen, and now it raced, out of this world, and over millions, billions of stars, out of this galaxy the vision flew. Drerpo spoke words under his breath and traced letters in the air as this part of the procedure began.

“Not meaning to interrupt you, dear,” she said. “The God that you are.”

“I’m not a God, my love,” said Drerpo. “Only a human being. No more. No less. Have no worry about interrupting me. I can multitask just fine.”

“Right...” said Droos.

She saw that his mouth had not formed any of those words, but rather, it was as though they were spoken directly into her mind. It was probably only her imagination. Yet Drerpo continued speaking the unheard words of The Language of the Universe.

“The Great Assembly spans the Bagan galaxy, and maybe they have images their best technology has seen at the far reaches of the universe,” said Droos. “I can barely imagine, though, that the detail you now show me is available to them, on their ultranetwork communications system; or further, the destination to which we travel here in the image.

“Then you know where I am taking you?” questioned Drerpo.

“Not taking me, dear,” said the young woman. “Showing me. Truly, are such images available to the Great Assembly? Where do they come from.”

Book II: The City

The dots of millions of galaxies continued to race by as the calm voice of Drerpo echoed in her mind.

“Beyond the technological confines of the Bagan Ultranet, is an ancient Web, one that covers the entire universe,” said Drerpo. “Where it comes from, few know, and few remember. Great beings dwelt in this universe, long ago, and some still today, for this realm we live in, Drerpo, is old and vast. These beings so alien to those you know that they would appear as Gods, ages ago built into the very fabric of scientific laws particles that would carry this web of information shared between a quadrillion worlds, from the present, and the echo of the past, onto eternity, when this universe will end. It is said that governing this system is a great Power, the Lieutenant of the Message, who speaks to the Great Beings, and beseeches Their continued support for such infrastructure. Or such are the stories I was told as a youth.”

“You mean that you read in those books your dad brought you?” said Droos.

“Very true,” said Drerpo. “We truly have shared a wonderful life together, sweet Droos. Now I show you a place that you have seen once before only, during one of my sister’s more sullen moods, but here is now seen during a moment of my joy.”

At last the dots of galaxies reached an end, and the blackness of space spun passed, impossible to see, as it had no interruption, yet still, there was a sense that the distance was maybe the same length as the entire universe, or nearly so.

“How can such a place exist, one that is at all times opposite in location from any point in the universe?” said Droos.

“The selflessness of the Greater Beings permits much to those who speak The Language of the Universe, to whom those Beings listen,” said Drerpo, eyes closed. “In every universe there are firmaments, that follow the underlying language that ties the scientific laws together. Here now I bring you, to see only with your eyes, the firmaments of Gon Eden, baetOak, and the Library; or rather, now the first one only. You saw all three once before.”

Then this web, the inter-ultranetwork, or whatever name it might hold, brought the image once more to a region of space, that instead of stars, was bright with streaming lines of bluish glory. All sadness and pain felt by Droos in that moment was driven away by the sight, and inward, towards the firmament went the vision.

There were stars here, only they had a feeling of brilliance,

illuminated through the bluish glow as the sun through a blanket of clouds atop a snowy alpine meadow on a bright fair day. Planets sang to each other, speaking out loud, though of words Droos could not understand, singing the praises of the rulers of the universe, and their court of mighty lieutenants. Inward into this field of glory Drerpo and Droos sailed.

In the end they alighted onto a planet, which was a great garden. Ancient groves of trees grew, and mountains like the bones of worlds when they were young. Flowers sprouted up in every open meadow, and a smell of honey and star of jasmines wafted over the breeze, so real it could be sensed even from this image. Within the forest at one point was a great clearing, natural, for no trees here were felled, in which a marry town of Sentients, couples together here for all eternity, could be seen with circles of people even now in dance. Then to the north ran the image, and the jewel, The City of the Righteous lay unveiled.

A jewel in the crown of the universe, it rose from green fields and golden wheat of the surrounding plain, the northwest of Gon Eden. Diamond and sapphire were the most common material, although it did not appear too gaudy. Its citizens wore simple white tunics, and milled about with ease, and comfort, both caring for each other, and properly for themselves, as they enjoyed the bounty of their reward. Each wore a small crown of silver shaped into delicate floral petals and leaves. At the center was a small building, built of clear crystal, gleaming almost as icicles on a bright day, where there were seats at which in turn the residents of the city might sit and discuss the truth of political philosophy, to govern their fair city, and see in person their Lord, the Steward who governed this city on behalf of the masters of the universe. This was, of course, the Lieutenant of Heaven. He was a being of great fervor, generosity, and might, although most of the time he was to be found where His heart lay, leaping through the depths of the forest to the south.

So the image withdrew, from the markets and fountains of The City of the Righteous, and upward through puffy white clouds, and gold and purple and pink colors, twinkling particles met the their passage, and a bright light suddenly blinded Droos.

“Where is this I am now brought to see?” said the princess.

“Behold!” said the voice of Drerpo, in her head.

Here was a place of Holiness, arraigned in Good and Evil, built of Radiance and Peril, hallowed by Grace and Justice, and

Book II: The City

awful in its Bold Humility, in which most often sat Their seat, the Sovereigns of the Universe, Elriver and Showsh, and the universe was Their footstool. Great Beings of countenance and with garments that defied words strolled through the Radiance, and at one end rose two seats, before which was a being tall and awful to behold. Even he, just then, bowed to one knee, low, and looked with both terror and hope, at the approach of another.

A woman, with long streaming reddish hair and grey eyes aglow, stood before Her Chancellor. Great matters had called Her back, even now, and words that shook the foundations of the universe spoke doom on adversaries long fought. She drew a gleaming sword and placed it on each shoulder of the Chancellor, who offered once more a vow of true loyalty, entrusted with terrible responsibilities. A horn blew, and fire began to burn over the image, something menacing, and just as it was torn away, the Sovereign of the Universe looked at Droos, out of the image, and smiled. Feeling a pain on her shoulder in this corporeal world of mortals, Droos turned.

Shaking herself awake from a daydream, Droos sat up, the light of the Galactic District spilling through the window. Some time had passed as her mind wandered, and they had traveled many hundreds of miles, back to their apartment. What strange dreams she had dreamt, again. Drerpo sat, looking thoughtful, to her left.

"My love, Drerpo," she whispered. "I feel so often like I have seen great things, beings and places of might and truth, only to have them revealed as ghosts in my mind. Is there any truth to what I see?"

"Dreams make all things possible," said Drerpo. "That does not mean they are not true. How much meaning have Sentients derived from dreams over millions of years. Then again, those who send you such visions of glory may end each journey with the sense of reality for which you are ready, leaving distant for now the day on which rather than waking, you will stand truly in the hallowed places you see. Mortals, for the most part, must earn the dreams they dream."

"Then maybe it is real?" said Droos.

"Maybe," Drerpo winked.

Emerzo was at the apartment when they returned, waiting in the common room. Legs crossed, meditating, the twin hardly noticed their entrance; if such a thing were possible. It may have been a trick of the light, as her eyes adjusted to the settings in the

room, but to Droos, Emerzo appeared to be floating cross-legged in the air. Returning her eyes to the twin once more, she was sitting on the carpeted floor. Her eyes opened, and Emerzo looked upon the princess with grey eyes, and smiled.

“Hail Droos,” said the sister. “My gracious rival stands before me, and here I have been busy providing for her protection.”

“In what way am I your rival, dear Emerzo?” said Droos. “In what way might I ever compare to you. I am after all just a silly girl, frightened of matters too great for me to grasp.”

Drerpo snorted, and walked over passed Droos, to Emerzo, and kissed his twin on the cheek.

“You never let that go, Emerzo,” said Drerpo, and he looked into his sister’s eyes, and the two enjoyed the gaze, holding each other’s arms.

“Do I have to be here for this?” said Droos.

Emerzo raised her head, shaking her long reddish hair, and then lowered it once more, before pushing her twin back around to face his girlfriend.

“Go get her, Drerpo,” said Emerzo. “Have your fun.”

“I wonder what fun we shall have...” smiled Droos.

“Particularly since Ametatar has arrived, brother,” said Emerzo, before the boy could finish walking over to Droos.

“Which one?” said Drerpo, for a moment seeming to forget Droos entirely.

“Here he comes now, behold!” said Emerzo.

Then the sister stepped aside, and as though another had perfectly matched her shape, revealing none of his presence even until now, a man stepped out from behind Emerzo.

He was young, of an appearance to be in his thirties, and a human of fair skin. Muscles and an etched shoulder and face showed strength and poise, although much of his physique was covered by the velvet garment he wore, a brown shade close to black, with buttons down the center, and a flattish hat of the same color, triangular in shape. The garment continued downward to meet brown shoes, of simulated leather, fit with no laces. Ametatar was clean shaved and he had grey eyes very much like the twins.

“Amet!” shouted Drerpo, joyously, and he nearly flew over to the man, hugging him deeply, and fully. The newcomer returned the gesture, seeming to be so familiar with Drerpo that they might have been family.

“Dear Droos,” said Emerzo. “Allow me to introduce the

Book II: The City

third sibling in our fabulous family, Ametatar.”

Amet ran over and hugged and kissed his sister on the cheek, before lifting and spinning her in the air.

“This is wonderful!” said Droos. “I had fully forgotten that you both had a brother. Next thing you know, your mother will arrive.”

The man smirked, and looked at the princess, a tad bemused.

“This must be the beautiful, wise young woman, a princess even, Droos, who I have heard so much about from my brother,” said Amet.

He came over, and bowing to the ground, took her hand and kissed it.

“Careful there, Amet,” said Emerzo, “You’ll make Drerpo jealous.”

“That really wouldn’t be possible, although you’re not really one to talk,” said Amet. “Now to answer your question, dear Droos, my mother is closer than you think. Yet our mother would be very unlikely to visit this marry gathering. Her duties keep her far away, unfortunately, much as she would be most welcome here.”

Jumping over to the older brother, Droos hugged him and kissed his cheek, as though she too were already part of the family.

“My, Drerpo,” said Amet. “She’s courteous too, and so familiar. You’ve done great work with her. Almost she seems like one of us.”

“And who are you three,” said Droos.

“Well...” Amet scratched his head.

“We’re a lovely family pleased to be of service to the eldest daughter of the God-King of The People of the Blood,” said Emerzo. “That is in fact the reason, despite the happiness of reunions, that our beloved brother is here. He is to be your personal guard.”

“Do you really think that I am in danger?” said Droos. “Here?”

“Yes,” said Emerzo. “For many reasons. You know some of them.”

“My father...?” said Droos.

“Right...” said Emerzo. “Let’s just say that you are becoming increasingly important, every day that passes, and until you are in safer locales with more resources available to defend

you, and hopefully someday, some capability of your own to protect yourself, I've called upon my best and most trusted guard."

"Your brother?" said Droos.

"Very much so," said Drerpo.

Amet smiled at him.

"Now I thought it would be entertaining for us all to go down to the entertainment district together and we'll all show you our capabilities in case you should ever have any fears," said Emerzo.

"You know, once I believed that in the heart of my father's estate, no enemies could find me," said Droos. "Now I am not so sure. What a strange fate that it is now my father that is chasing me."

"Unless it's really the Master he serves," said Amet.

"Please, Amet, you forget yourself," said Drerpo calmly.

"Whatever you three are, and whatever your conjectures might be about the seemingly endless armies out to squish the little fish that I am," said Droos, "Let's be off to our evening's activity. I want to get to sleep at a proper hour tonight to be ready for school."

"And she's attentive to her studies..." said Amet.

"Let's bring Anora, too," said Droos. "I can't imagine she would want to be left out of this."

"Too true," said the ghost, coming out of the kitchen.

"Here I was preparing dinner, and now you're going to let it get cold."

All five entered the multivator, which fit them with room to spare. A few minutes passed and they were in the room they desired along the long hallway decorated with naked metal. Comfortable sofas surrounded the center of the otherwise plain metallic white square. A memory of a time Droos had awoken with Anora after a terrible nightmare returned to her mind as the room shimmered and changed into the desired program. Luckily it had been many hundreds of programs now since then, and no others had produced such frightening results.

"And it will not this time," said Amet to her.

"Wha... what?" stammered Droos.

The siblings, all of them, ignored the comment, and before them materialized a range, them standing behind a shelf with a row of projectile weapons, guns, as the ancient name still referred to them. There were also various hand-to-hand swords and knives, a

Book II: The City

throwback to the type of programs Droos usually enjoyed, taking after the ghost. Ahead of them across a broad and long room were series of targets with concentric circles of colors.

"I suspect you'll give us a quite a show," said Drerpo, holding up a small pistol.

Looking over her boyfriend saw that Droos already had a larger blaster in her hand. A few squeezes of the trigger put a row of holes, half on the nearest target, and on the one further back. Most were on the outer circles, but one or two hit towards the center. A luckier shot on the further target was nearly a bullseye. Emerzo laughed.

"And she can fire a weapon!" said Amet, before he let loose a volley of ten shots, three for the closet target, then the next, then the third in line, all of which hit the bullseye, shattering the images.

"Very impressive, Droos," said Drerpo, squeezing her shoulder.

"Well what do you think we're doing in here all the time," said Anora. "Putting holes in dragons!"

"With swords, I thought, mostly," said Drerpo.

"My dear Drerpo," said Droos, with a look. "This is the thirteenth millennium. When girls fight dragons in the entertainment district, we can use any weapon we want."

"Still, looks like you have room to improve," said Amet. "A good start though."

"I didn't say that I frequently choose to use such weapons," said Droos with a laugh. "Only that I have had some experience."

"I suspect you'll learn everything we have to share quick as can be," said Drerpo, and he watched her as she fired another round.

He corrected her stance slightly and gave advice on how to aim; results were somewhat slower than might have been hoped. Only so much might be accomplished in one session.

Emerzo fired and destroyed four targets in a line with twelve shots, matched by her twin, who practiced himself while Droos tried the new suggestions. About ten minutes of this passed, and they decided to try a more rigorous program.

"There are three insurgents in this complex," said Emerzo. "For this one we use automatic blaster rifles. Go in groups or alone, but the one to get the most hits most exactly wins. Amet, I

would hope you would do a little better this time.”

“If I must, Emerzo,” he mourned with a smile.

The game went on for some time. It was a large complex, of a model similar to the building they were inside now, in the real world. Free of everyone except for them, it was easy to spot when one of their targets appeared, if the humans and one ghost saw them. Usually it began with a burst of blaster shots, burning holes in the walls and furniture around them. They ducked and took cover. Drerpo of course had gone with Droos. Amet went with Emerzo.

“Oh please,” said Anora. “I don’t need any help to win a game like this one.”

She went alone.

Two chimes rang over the course of Drerpo and Droos’ search, signaling the elimination of two targets. One remained, and they had reached a far corner of the building, surrounded by shifting machinery and fires, liquids for cooling, and other technical tools that operated a building like this. There were two windows casting daylight bulb light into the bowels of this building; a click at the window on the right had Drerpo turn towards that sound, but something occurred to Droos. She spun to the other window just as a hail of blasts shot through it, Droos returning some fire, as a black clothed humanoid crashed through the window. Her prior practice achieved its result, and instead of rolling further with more shooting, the insurgent remained still. A third chime rang out.

“Well look at you, Droos,” said Drerpo. “You should be protecting my son, not the other way around.”

“Son?” frowned Droos.

For some reason the program was taking its time in ending. Looking at light from the window on the wall, the princess saw a shadow move and she spun around. Shots rang as Droos dove to the ground, but several flew true, and impacted her arm and shoulder, as Drerpo turned around. Thinking it nothing, she suddenly felt weak, and saw that blood streamed from her arm, where gaping holes rendered her left side useless. Horrible pain, like nothing she had ever felt, made her vision blur, and her body failed. More shots were heard, and shouts from afar, away in a distant place, a distant time.

What a strange fate it would be to meet her end here, in a place of images, a place of make-believe, rather than truth. So

Book II: The City

many perils she had faced, yet here her enemies had found her, as she stood holding a fake rifle. Stars twinkled in front of her eyes that saw darkness, and a voice echoed somewhere.

“Droos!” it said.

It was familiar, as one whom she had thought was dead, left behind on a mountain, beheaded by her boyfriend Drerpo. Well they were not dating then. What a waste, now that they had spent so many years together. She supposed she told him how much she loved him often enough; she kissed him, held him, and never for a moment failed to show him what he meant to her. There were few regrets over what had passed so far. If only, they had a full life to live together. One whole life.

Her shoulder ached terribly, and her breath came shallow, slower and slower her heart beat, and a warm comforting feeling entered her.

“Droos! Daughter of Sol! Daughter of Drerpo! Awake!”

So Commanded a mighty voice that caused her to fly, as though her spirit were blown with the force, by the sound that was still and silent. Then she was falling, and the warmth of comfort failed, and only the agonizing pain was left as her eyes opened, and bright artificial light glared to make her suffering worse.

“My love, Droos, please,” said Drerpo, who sat on the ground beside her, cradling her in his arms.

When he saw her eyes were open he brushed a tear from his cheek, and bowed down and kissed her, the wetness of his eyes dropping onto her lips. It tasted salty, but rejuvenating. Still he brushed up too close to her left shoulder, and pain reached new heights. She groaned, and Drerpo withdrew.

Then Emerzo was kneeling, over next to her arm, and placed a gel-like substance over the terrible wounds, and slowly, she caught her breath as the pain almost instantly subsided. Like landing from her fall in the comfort of sheets and her bed, the princess sighed.

“How the hell did She find us here?” said Drerpo.

“And this soon,” said Emerzo. “Luckily we had Amet alert and vigilant, even while he claimed the win for the game with the first two actual insurgents. Maybe it was just lucky he was on his way to the third.”

“You give me too little credit, mother,” said Amet. “Droos is my first and only priority now. Rightly so. I am not surprised at all that Tzefee chose to strike so soon. She knows how to fight

wars.”

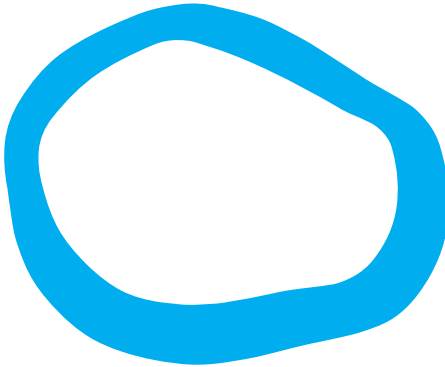
Mother?

“And she shall have one!” said Emerzo.

Droos, finished catching her breath, tried to sit up, though found her left side was still useless. She managed a slight elevation with the strength of her right side, and a hand from Drerpo as he came around to assist her. When she was sitting, legs spread out in front of her, she saw that now the program had ended, and the couches and white room had reappeared. Amet stood some distance away, holding what appeared to be a real blaster rifle, bejeweled and gleaming as though built out of solid crystal, above a steaming corpse. The body was fully intact, yet the head was a smoking ruin, barely recognizable at all.

Beneath her arm at her left was a wide pool of blood, at least several pints worth; holding a pale white right hand over to her left side, her heart began to beat rapidly again. Her left arm had been shot nearly clean off, hanging only by some sinew. Great pits dotted the arm itself and the shoulder, where the bone was shattered in multiple places.

“Drerpo... what... what... my arm...” panicked Droos.



Book II: The City

“Yes, dear, it is badly hurt,” said Drerpo, brushing the tears from her eyes. “Have faith. We are in the thirteenth millennium after all, and nearly all injuries, even death to a certain degree, have cures. Very soon you will be back to your normal self. Trust me. Everything will be alright.”

Emerzo looked at Amet, with barely disguised worry in her eyes, and Drerpo, held her right hand, with a smile, while Droos looked away.





Chapter 6

Service and Loyalty, People who Share

“Dear Droos Yarite,” said the woman, humanoid, with green skin, no hair, and a lobe wrapped around the back of her head. “I appreciate your right to privacy. Given your public profile, I hope you’ll forgive the President’s interest in providing for your protection; my agency usually leaves you be, but yesterday I’m sure you’ll agree was quite unusual. Someone, you say, appeared out of an Entertainment District program, and shot you with no warning. You don’t know who they were, or where they came from, or why they wanted you dead?”

“Dear Agent Christina,” said Droos, somewhat dreamily. “I would tell you more if I were able. As for the reasons someone might want me dead, well, do you follow the news at all?”

“Please,” said Christina. “I am very busy, protecting you for the most part. There are more things I know about you than you likely know about yourself.”

“I am a lost girl, Dear Christina,” said Droos. “Even the appearance of my own left arm and shoulder are beyond my reckoning.”

Her words were obvious to the three present in the room, for covering her left side was a shimmering black energy, darker than a void, that felt just a little unpleasantly cold. Supposedly a single day with this substance would repair all of the damage that was done to her the day before. At least the pain was gone. Droos would believe such miracles when she saw them.

“This is no laughing matter, Dear Princess,” said the Agent. “Does your father have assets in our city?”

“I don’t know,” said Droos, straight and clear. “You read the book, I’m sure. Not to say that I didn’t edit it for some items that I thought would be confusing, but that part about the Servants-

Book II: The City

Loyal is all true. I know my father kept spies throughout my tribe. Does he have any foreign agents? It seems very unlikely. I'm not sure even he is aware of the truth regarding the existence of other humans in this world."

"Yes, the General of the Army Corp of Anthropologists has told this to me, and it is very hard to believe," said Christina. "I suppose it must be true. So your father didn't know about the city that spanned every surface over the rest of the world. Is it possible he knows about it now? Might he have realized that you betrayed his trust and fled?"

"I cannot imagine how he would have discovered my absence," said Droos. "Frankly I think as long as I don't turn up back at court, he probably doesn't care what actually happened to me."

"It's possible she might have made some enemies over the course of her brief political activity here in the Great Assembly," said Amet, the third presence in the room.

"And you," said the purple blob, "Are just as much part of the problem. We have no records of your existence either. Don't misunderstand me. Who you say you are agrees with all of my information. The fact that you appeared out of nowhere just in time to save her, that does not make sense. Where did you come from?"

"Oh I've been living in another apartment in the same building for years," said Amet.

"During that whole time you never came or went from the building, flew in any vessel, or accessed the ultranet?" asked the agent.

"I've been on sabbatical," said Amet.

"For five years?" said Christina.

"A very long sabbatical," he smirked.

"Now that you mention it," said Droos. "I do find it offensive that the President has taken this degree of care to supervise me. I'm not a little girl. I can take care of myself."

"You just told me you were a lost girl and that you couldn't," said the agent.

"That's why she has me," Amet said, taking a few steps forward.

"I don't like threats," said Christina.

"Then let's not make any," said another voice.

Drerpo strolled in with his twin, hand in hand, while in his

right he carried several balloons, one in the shape of a scitter, and another like a passion: memories of the past.

“Now here are some wise statesmen that should be able to answer my questions,” said the agent. “Who was the man your colleague killed? We could not identify him on any of our databases.”

“If he were from The People of the Blood, maybe you wouldn’t have him listed?” said Drerpo.

“We have all of your people listed, no worries,” said Christina. “Don’t look at me like that. Whoever this person is, either he had superior knowledge of our intelligence databases or he isn’t from around here. I mean from Bagan. Our galaxy.”

Emerzo raised her eyebrow.

“Do you really believe the stories about life in other galaxies?” chided Drerpo. “I would think a high officer in the President’s Secret Service in the Great Assembly would be better informed. Invaders from another galaxy. Next you’re going to tell me about the real existence of tribbles.”

“I wouldn’t share this information with you if you didn’t already have a high security clearance,” said the agent.

“Since when do I have any security privileges?” said Droos.

“Anyway,” said Christina. “In the last twenty-one years we’ve had reports of activity on the edge of this galaxy. Usually the data is merely confusing, erratic, inconclusive. Yet it continues to occur, and speaks of great energy spikes, and masses the size of stars moving through interstellar space. We’ve even lost a few vessels. The matter has been granted increasingly more resources, and fortunately, since just in the last twenty-four hours we’ve had more occurrences than in the last three years. Now that I think of it—twenty one years of occurrence, you are twenty-one years of age.”

“Getting a little paranoid, aren’t you?” said Amet. “Making illogical spontaneous connections between only tangentially related things.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” said the agent.

“Well believe in this,” said Emerzo. “My husband and I are the legal guardians of Droos while she is a guest of our people and a minor. She is very independent with our blessings. Then again, if you think we’re going to let you interrogate her like she were a dangerous criminal, you should stop trying now.”

Book II: The City

Frowning, Christina made an expression with her hands and arms, and turned to the princess for some final words.

“You’re playing dangerously, young lady. Entering into high politics, meeting with every top lawmaker and government executive, pushing us around. That makes you our business. Keep your silence for now. Mark my words. If I even get a hint that you are a threat to this civilization, I’ll come down on you like a sector filled with tribbles.”

“I’m not a threat to anyone!” said Droos.

“We’ll see,” said Christina, as she exited the room.

A tense moment passed, and then Drerpo laughed, smiled, and came over to her. The mood was broken, and more chuckles followed. Her very best friend of twenty-one years brought the balloons over to her.

“Here, I brought you a scitter,” he smiled.

“I didn’t know there were such creatures in the city,” said Droos. “Here they have tortured and mutilated the earth into a shocking ruin.”

“Droos!” said Drerpo. “You’re sounding like a Deep Ecologist. Wouldn’t they like to tear down all of these buildings and fill this planet with parks, let this civilization become an agrarian nation like your father’s. As for the other item, there are scitters in this land. They live in small burrows in parks beneath these buildings and in floating oases above them.”

“Are you going to stick a spike through that balloon?” said Droos.

“That happened sixteen years ago,” said Drerpo. “Well, fine. What do you think about death?”

“It is terrible,” said the princess. “Although I suppose I have arranged for warfare between rebels and my father in my tribe. And just yesterday Amet shot off a man’s head in order to save me. There are times violent or premature death are necessary. Most of the time, though, I do hate death. The most notable exception is dying of natural causes. Some say the fate of mortals, such as we are, is a blessing, bringing a reward unknown to the living, and an end to weariness of merely continuing on forever.”

“A very thoughtful answer, dear,” said Emerzo. “Now how’s your arm?”

“Much better, thanks,” said Droos. “I’ll be back at school by tomorrow.”

“You know of course that you’ll only be going to school

a bit longer,” said Emerzo. “The next chapter in your journey is going to start as soon as the vote is held on appropriations.”

“Then everything is arranged?” said Droos. “Although I admit, I feel a little sad.”

“We could go today, if you wanted,” said Drerpo. “I can’t wait to see your expression. It was so beautiful last time, just seeing streams of vessels flowing through the sky, and mountains of steel rising into the heavens.”

“You think I have a pretty face?” said Droos.

“Of course he does,” said Emerzo.

“Why do you think you are so important?” said Amet.

“Be quiet, Amet,” said Drerpo. “We have discussed this.”

“You mean... the reason I am at risk is... because I am with Drerpo?” said Droos.

“My friend, dear Droos,” said Drerpo. “It may be so.”

Emerzo looked at him.

“I know it is so,” he continued. “I am important for reasons I cannot yet reveal, though you are well on your way to realizing. Really all of our family is like me. Those who dislike our position, in seeing you increasingly associated with us, may seek to undermine you as much as my family.”

“Then it’s the Queen of Pain who seeks to kill me,” said Droos, eyes wide. “How is such a thing possible?”

“It’s not,” said Emerzo. “Or rather, it’s as possible as the God or Gods of any religion actually acting to affect His or Her people. It is not in the nature of such beings to act. Humanists of course would say they do not exist, and I leave the truth up to others. Put the thought of your God and His wife plotting to destroy you away, Droos; focus instead on all of the other possible sources of angst against you.”

“A superb answer, sister,” said Amet.

He came over and put his arm on Emerzo’s shoulder, and the twin rolled her eyes.

“I will look forward,” said Droos, “To beginning the next step in our journey as soon as the appropriations vote has been held. There are more steps after that, but I really believe I need time to reflect, on the nature of the universe, about what is knowledge, and good and evil, fundamental concerns, before I can come back and drive my family from power.”

“You’ll let other people do it during that time readily enough,” said Amet.

Book II: The City

“In some ways I’m hoping it takes a while for them to succeed,” said Droos. “That will leave plenty of time to come back and lead the rebels myself.”

“Then you will do it,” said Drerpo, beaming. “You’ll actually go back and see to the end of your father’s rule.”

“Drerpo, I am not sure,” said Droos. “Still, I am chained by the remnants of loyalty even to my father. The idea, even the comprehension, of actually leading a rebellion against him, even with the technology of this civilization to help, is beyond me. Why do you think I say I’m lost? What is good? What is evil? How will I know the difference? I need to learn more, even more than my wise mentor can teach, before I can be the leader my people need.”

“So you’ve said,” said Amet.

“Then we’ll go,” said Drerpo. “It will be a wondrous journey. Oh the places we will go, the like of which you have only seen in dreams. First you will see what lies just beyond this world. Then you will see what this universe truly has to offer.”

“For now we have work to do,” said Emerzo.

“Now?!” said Droos.

“Well... not quite,” said Emerzo, pointing at her arm. “Take the day off.”

“Thanks...” said Droos.

“You’re welcome,” finished Emerzo, pulling Drerpo by the hand, along with her as the twins left the room.

“They’re quite a pair, aren’t they,” said Amet, remaining with Droos.

“Yup,” said Droos.

§

As with most democratic republics, the Assembly of Marba’s Committee on Appropriations had the best office space, in the top forty floors of the fifteen mile structure housing the system government. Droos had been here before a fair number of times in the last year, and the entry, the halls decorated with tens of thousands of years of art and artifacts depicting a spectrum of the system’s history, was familiar to the young woman. There were varying themes of art pieces, and the realm of appropriations had a veritable history of finances. Eventually she found herself in a

twelve hundred thousand cubic foot conference room.

Ten Assemblyman Generals, five on each side, appeared on either side of a table in the front of the room, and in the center was a slightly higher seat for the Speaker of the committee. All seats were occupied now. Shining in the center was a member of a metalloid artificial species, humanoid in the tradition passed down for thousands of years. Members of other committees, their staff, reporters, and various supporters of Droos sat in attendance in the conference room. An ornate chair, somewhat like a throne, sat in the front of the audience, arranged in the center, and this was for the princess. She took her seat, not wanting to waste the time of thousands of Assemblymen.

“Princess Droos Yarite,” said the Speaker. “We all know why we are here. The arguments have been laid out dozens of times in their entirety. Your story is famous and you have many fans among our constituents. What then is left for us to hear at this meeting, where we will decide if additional funding is to be given to support your cause?”

“Thank you, Dear Speaker,” said Droos. “I appreciate the time all of you continue to devote to the elimination of death, torture, and tyranny. All of this has been previously mentioned. It has yet to finally be seen whether the tax payers of this system are interested in upholding truly the lofty ideals repeated as a mantra by their government. Will you stand against the evil that persists even now in the south of your world? Thank you.”

“Just so everyone is aware of exactly what is being discussed here,” said the Speaker. “Our staff has determined a cost for this expedition, amounting to approximately fifty-five billion credits. Knowing the difficulty of this task, this cost may be born far more times than we predict. It’s possible we may reach the end of our ten year exception period with no results. Then we might be hundreds of billions of credits short before we have to start all over again. Several Assemblyman Generals on this panel say their Lawmakers have considered the possibility of a more direct transfer of military assets and direct interaction with Nolai natives, which would cut the cost significantly, along with the possible extensions of this program. The result might be a factor of half or a third.”

“Dear Speaker, Dear Droos Yarite,” said a General on the far right. “Your cause brings out all of my truest sympathy, and all of my Lawmakers mourn for the suffering endured by your people.

Book II: The City

Yet I must report our deep concerns over spending so much money on such an uncertain plan, I refer now to the one that employs the Army Corp of Anthropologists. We are in a time of financial difficulty, and my Lawmakers' constituents feel that they don't want to donate anymore of their hard earned money to people, who frankly, don't have very much to do with them. Even more, they say, these people will have little ability to appreciate the sacrifice made to help them under the mentioned plan, or to reciprocate in any real capacity. My preference, therefore, would be to vote against funding the start of this enterprise, and at the very most, to only fund the least expensive method of intervention: that is, direct communication with the Nolai tribal government."

Droos bit her lip, and took a few breaths.

"Dear General, I appreciate the investment and sacrifice made by your people," said Droos. "Yes, my people have little to do with them now, and will in all likelihood, with hope, will have no contact with them in the future. Yet it is the values, the beliefs of this star system that keep strong your enlightened social order. It is by living in a society, brought up together, or torn down together, under sound morality and ethics, that the successful constituents in your districts are so prosperous. Degrade the philosophical foundation, and your righteous civilization falls."

"Young lady," said General on the far left side of the podium. "I whole heartedly agree with you. I couldn't sleep at night either knowing about the current suffering of your people or the terrible genocide we would commit by direct intervention. This is a simple decision."

"Respectfully, Dear General," said another just to the left of the Speaker. "Our esteemed colleague on the right has a fine point. You are right. I lose sleep at night over the torture and rape. Yet there must be limits on what one civilization owes to another, to fund their revolution, with no benefit to ourselves. It is entirely reasonable to use the direct approach, at a third of the cost, perhaps with a few billion extra appropriated for what I might call, *discretion*. With our technology and understanding of political philosophy in the thirteenth millennium, surely we can convince this God-King to step down."

"That would be agreeable with me," said the General just to the right of the Speaker.

"I will not support that measure either," said the right-most general. "However I recognize I am at an extreme on this matter.

Those in my party with more nuanced Lawmakers, please, by all means, follow your consciences, and those of your constituents.”

“I will not support the measure, for the complete opposite reasons,” said the left-most General.

One additional Lawmaker General on the left refused to support the proposal, yet altogether the remaining Assemblymen in favor numbered seven, minus the Speaker, who only voted in the case of a tie. Droos’ heart beat a lot faster.

“I urge you, please,” said Droos. “This is the wrong way to go about this. You will destroy everything that makes up my people’s culture if you simply send in armed forces. What, will you bomb the capitol, Nerno? I guarantee, only a few billion extra will not do much to cover up such tactics.”

“Dear Droos,” said the center-right General, “I’m afraid you can’t expect to have unlimited funds when clearly we have here a plan with broad multiparty support; a plan we have every belief will work just fine.”

“Dear Speaker, please!” said Droos.

“I think it is time to call the vote,” said the Speaker. “Generals, how do you vote in the matter here before us.”

The vote came out just as the discussion had predicted. Three, two on the left, one on the right, opposed the measure, while the remaining seven cast a vote in favor.

“Then it is decided,” said the Speaker. “The third option with the said amendment will be sent to the full Assembly. Thank you for being here today. Most of all, once again, Dear Princess, we appreciate you bringing this matter to our attention. You remind us indeed of our moral responsibilities.”

“But you’re not...!” shouted Droos.

However, the matter was already decided, and the Generals had risen, and begun to depart, as well as most of the audience. Reporters took pictures and threw questions at her as she stared on with disbelief. All of her efforts up until now had gone horribly wrong. What if they did just bomb the royal estate in Nerno? What would happen to her brother, to her mother, to her sister?

“Those stupid idiots!” she said to Drerpo as they left the room.

“Shhhh... Droos,” he said. “There are reporters here. Let’s make sure to look political.”

“You’re right, Drerpo,” said Droos. “Always you are right. But what are we going to do?”

Book II: The City

“What do you think?” said Drerpo.

Then the princess smiled, and pushed him.

“Always you give the hard decisions to me!” said Droos.

“And these days you pass them on to my sister,” said Drerpo.

“Who gives them to your older brother,” finished Droos.

“There are worse places for the decision-making to end,” said Drerpo. “Amet is very capable.”

He smirked, and put his arm around Droos, and tweaked her cheek.

“Don’t worry!” he said. “We’ll all sit down and determine something we can do. Have faith. It’s a mystery, but everything will work out.”

Silently the journey back to the apartment passed, and once returned, they ate lunch in silence, until Emerzo walked into the room.

“Did someone die?” she said.

“The princess lost her committee vote,” said Amet.

“I know, I read the news,” said Emerzo. “We’ll just have to make them change their minds. My brother’s right, Droos. There is still plenty of room for improvements.”

A day later on Secondday the Princess wore a powder-white dress, a bone necklace, with black floating shoes, tipped with rubies. Gliding along an inch above the ground, she sauntered over to her colleagues at school, sitting under the same wooden terrace, atop the oblong outcrop of flagstones beneath it. She pounded her table with her fist.

“Congratulations on the vote yesterday, Dear Droos,” said Garcia.

“She isn’t happy about the vote, Garcia,” said Shrajen.

“The point was to help the rebels in her tribe take down her father. Droos lost the vote yesterday.”

“Don’t worry, Droos,” said Dewei. “It’ll work out.”

“I know, I know,” said the Princess. “That’s what Drerpo, and his sister, and others, keep saying.”

“Of course Drerpo would support you!” said Dewei. “He is so lucky to have you.”

“And I’m lucky to have you, Dewei,” said Droos. “Really I’m lucky to have all of you.”

The other young adults smiled.

“Growing up, I had my personal servants,” said Droos.

“We learned some things together. Or rather, I learned, and often they were only there to guard me. Never did we do this together as equals. Only I could look the High Servant-Educator in the eye. My Grace-Servants had to avert their gaze.”

“Except Drerpo, once he became High Grace-Servant,” said Shrajen. “Then he was equal to the High Servant-Educator.”

Droos laughed.

“Pretty soon you’re all going to be teaching me about my people,” she said.

“I know once when my father had trouble with the board in his corporation,” said Garcia, “He lobbied the shareholders, who listened to him and made the board vote over again. In the end he got his way. I don’t know how that would transfer to such a high level as the System Government. Just an idea.”

“That’s a great idea, Garcia!” said Droos. “Have you ever considered a career in public service? Business might seem the more obvious choice, but it looks like you also have a knack for politics.”

“Politics is at the heart of business, Dear Droos,” said Garcia. “And I am flattered to hear from one so great as you that I might do well pulling the strings of society. Maybe someday I will help shape the laws that my father and his company simply get to follow.”

“And Droos,” said Dewei. “Really the people are behind you. You are not just a good politician. You are a natural leader. If this were a better world, you would have been the ruler of your people, because you would be wise, just, and loving. Your people would love you, like so many trillions in this system love you. Droos, you have given us all hope. I don’t think the Great Assembly will ever be the same.”

The young man looked down, only to see Droos over in front of him suddenly. She raised his chin with her fingers, and kissed his cheek.

“Ever the noble one, most dear Dewei,” said the princess. He smiled, and then she returned to her seat.

Emerzo was away that evening, and the next, but finally Fifthday arrived, and the sister was there to greet her as she returned from school.

“Ah, Droos,” said Emerzo, sitting in the kitchen with Anora. “I’m sorry to have missed you. These last weeks have been very trying.”

Book II: The City

Then the princess saw that she indeed had black rings under her eyes.

"I hope you aren't exerting yourself to much, Emerzo," said Amet.

"No dear," said Emerzo, sighing, running her hand along the table. "Thank you though. You are safe and sound, Droos?"

"Yes, thanks to Amet," said Droos.

"Then all the effort is worth it," said Emerzo.

"How is it you have come to like me so much?" said Droos. "There are so many reasons for you to despise me?"

A half-smile curled the twin's lips.

"Who said I didn't despise you?" said Emerzo. "You are very sweet. Dewi is right. Everyone does love you. Such are the emotions of Gods, for they may be many different, even opposing positions at once. Mortals would little understand. I do not know whether that is good or bad."

"Don't you?" said Amet.

Emerzo smiled at him.

"Why don't you kids go along and play in the entertainment district," said Emerzo. "I need to sit here a while and just empty my mind. If only I knew less than I do."

Amet frowned, and placed his hand on his sister's shoulder.

"Don't worry, Atropo," said Emerzo, "I'll be fine."

Droos, Anora, and Amet returned to the district and played a game the princess had not enjoyed for many years. It could hardly be said that it was enjoyable the previous time. This was the very same program that had ended in a fiery encounter with seven dragons. A little nervous, Droos was only slightly distracted. The three of them did not need to wait for the arrival of the knights to defeat the dragon in the cave. This time Droos did not throw the finishing strike, but she did her part, enjoying every bit of it.

"The warrior maiden," proclaimed Amet.

Knights did appear: three young men gleaming in their mail. They were not the same from all of those years ago. Off they flew to a healthy, pristine castle, in a different direction, with courtiers and feasts, music and poetry. The entertainment was lively and full, and Droos for some hours forgot her troubles and laughed harder than she had in a long time. Still she left *her* knight without any reward, except a kiss on the cheek, but no feelings were hurt.

"You have a boyfriend, after all," smiled the knight.

Like children they were all laughing when they returned to the apartment, Amet patting Droos on the shoulder.

"I'm beginning to like the idea of calling you *mother*," he said.

"Very funny, Amet," said Droos.

Entering, the common room was dark, and the twins stood on the opposite side, pointing their fingers and talking quietly, staring at an image. It showed a wide dark expanse with glowing dots of lights. Their fingers moved around various shapes of red lights and then green ones.

"The Fourth is successfully holding Centaurus and Pavo-Indus," said Drerpo. "I feel that Her Steward in Hydra has insufficient reserves, and if Tzefee attacks from Perseus-Pisces, we would not defend it. Then it is a straight run into Local."

"You forget that we have reinforcements in Phoenix and the Fifth will arrive within days to protect Columbia," said Emerzo.

She then pulled a series of green dots upward.

"If we move His vanguard into Perseus at the same time as the garrison in Hydra and the reserve in Phoenix, we should be able to drive Her out," continued Emerzo.

"Then we have a little surprise for her in Canes-Major," said Drerpo. "There is still the problem of clandestine operations in Virgo itself. What's being done about that?"

"I have two Stewards addressing that problem," said Amet. "Infiltrations into Bagan should have returned to normal levels."

"How did those defenses fail in the first place?" said Drerpo. "I thought Drelp placed resources there decades ago."

"He says that his forces were there, but that when he went to address the apparent oversight to his Steward in the area, his lieutenant was missing."

"Missing?!" exclaimed Emerzo.

"That was my reaction," said Amet. "I suggested that he bring the matter along with our general complaint to Goamdwee, and that's where I left him. Presumably he has already arrived."

"What about Leo?" said Droos.

"Oh, Droos, glad you could join us," said Emerzo. "You have concerns?"

"Ah, well," said Droos, "It was just a notion, but it looks like only a garrison is stationed in Coma and next to no presence in

Book II: The City

Leo. Whatever it is, it's big. If Tzefee came through there..."

"She'd probably capture Coma and Hydra," said Amet.

"Not to mention, if our strike on Perseus-Pisces were underway, She'd sail straight through to Local," said Emerzo.

"We'll have the Third send an army down the Wall to Coma, and the garrison there to Leo."

"Good thinking, Droos," smiled Drerpo.

"I still have no idea what we are looking at," said the princess.

"Whatever it is," said Drerpo, "We can finish looking at it later. Come, sweet princess, let's discuss the strategy that matters to you; that being your political predicament."

"Right... that," said Emerzo, waving her hand.

The map rose into the ceiling and vanished as the lights in the room came on and the room returned to normal. Wobbling for a moment, like a puppet on strings, Emerzo went over and embraced Drerpo, before giving the princess a forced smile and leading them into the kitchen. Anora went about preparing food with Amet while Droos sat down at the table with the twins.

"I'm not going to pretend to be in charge of this pursuit anymore," said Emerzo. "The fate of your people, Droos, seems to be well within your power."

"We had a terrible setback," said Droos.

"With the politicians you did," said Emerzo. "They are not the only sources of important information in your life."

"I didn't tell her anything," chimed in Anora, carrying some cheese over to the table.

"Very funny," said Droos. "You tell me plenty, Dear Anora, but I think I know what Emerzo is remembering. Or rather, it's my memory: my wonderful friend Garcia told me that her father has at least once appealed to his shareholders to sway the votes of his board members. I think I'm going to do the same thing with the Lawmakers on this committee."

"The vote has already happened," said Emerzo. "How would they be able to repeat it when the matter has been decided?"

"If I can convince the Speaker to break with tradition and readdress the issue, then it may be considered once more," said Droos. "Then we just have to make sure a sufficient number of constituents are on my side, telling their representatives that their money is properly used if it secures the moral character of this great civilization."

"I told you that you had it," said Emerzo, smiling for real this time.

Sixthday dawned and the day passed into night, billions of twinkling stars shining from the shells of metal growing from the distant ground of the tortured planet No, as the princess stood in the very same restaurant where she had first begun her political efforts here in the Great Assembly. It had been day then, and a month of medications had left her memory of the time up until then absent. To this day she still remembered little of her first weeks in the Galactic District. Now she stood in the center of the establishment, not merely at a table along the side, while some of the most important reporters shouted questions at her and the most respected meganetworks fielded agents to ensure this story was covered.

"Frankly," said Droos. "This is your fault, your failing."

A response of silence showed that even the reporters had their ears drawn to the words revealed to them.

"This testament to your science, your anthropology, this park you have chosen to keep here to blight this jewel at the heart of your galaxy, was let to fester and grow to be a near terminal tumor while you watched and did nothing," said Droos. "Everything you do while bile hangs from your chin means little. It is tainted, and disgusting. Yet all of you may be redeemed and returned to the righteousness, I know you value, to who you really are, merely with the tiniest bit more in generosity. Discretionary spending by your government to properly repair the damage you permitted done to your world will cost such a small amount, but you must tell your Lawmakers that it is not in this token area that you want cuts to your budget. Tell them, starting with their Speaker, that if this issue is not the one that decides your vote, then it is a close second. Shine like the beacon of enlightenment you deserve to be, stand firm behind your values, prove to me that you of all people are more civilized than the arrogant tyrant torturing my people, who bows before the Goddess of Pain. It is your choice. Act now! Or fail in everything you claim to be."

She did not take questions, but left shouts dwindling in strength behind her as she retreated to a table in a secluded part of the complex. There she enjoyed a light meal with her boyfriend, the only one who had accompanied her, which notably did not include any remotely tentacled creature, living or otherwise.

"Another battle won," said Drerpo. "You continue to

Book II: The City

amaze me, to choose your own fate.”

“It all comes from my being with you,” said Droos.

“Every time I look into your eyes, and you look into mine, and I hold your hand, a lifetime, however short, of encouragement and insistence sways my every decision. Always you challenged me to be who I am, the, in your words, just and caring Droos, rather than the princess crafted by the Queen of Pain and my father, who died to support his rule. Each day I rise and take a step closer to my destination.”

“Do you think it will be your redemption?” said Drerpo.

“If anyone knew the answer as to who is and who is not redeemed, it would be you,” said Droos.

“I’m not sure I would go that far,” said Drerpo, with a simple hand gesture. “A human is all I am.”

“Well as someone who is also a human,” said Droos, “I begin to think there is hope. One second only, one action it may take to be damned. Yet there is still hope. Or at the very least, I may try until the end of my days, and in the end submit to the Judge’s will.”

“You can only try,” said Drerpo. “Of course even the righteous, those with no sin in their lives, still contribute a piece of themselves to the Lieutenant of Hell. Or so it is said. No one may be reborn without experience, of understanding the nature of purifying flames.”

“Do any pass without being scathed?” said Droos.

“Yes,” said Drerpo.

Another week arrived. Another Firstday came. As the messages urging Lawmakers to reconsider her cause flooded the offices of the Committee on Appropriations, Droos was otherwise occupied, attending school, as of course any good twenty-one and half year old would on a weekday. Today was her turn to present an essay, responding to the question she proposed at the end of the previous week.

“Dear Droos has asked a poignant question,” said the mentor. “After thousands of years, is the system of government in the Great Assembly the best that Sentients may achieve? Droos, we await your wisdom.”

“Thank you, Dear Mentor, and Dear Colleagues,” said Droos. “Sentients are social. Social beings depend on one another to succeed. The very model is designed to organize complex civilizations in which more is accomplished when every individual

functions in compliment to each other. Individual ambition drives personal motivation in order to achieve token successes in forms such as monetary wealth. The resultant sense of worth creates a foundation by which each individual desires to participate in the higher institution of the collective society. Complex and difficult decisions that allow the greatest success for the greatest number of people on the order of quadrillions are fueled by this self-worth, which in turn raises the lowest state of living, and the lowest resultant output and motivation to participate. Ultimately the sense of both being individually assertive and in support of society, feeds the fundamental need to be social. According to this model, society is productive and individually meaningful.

“Achieving this goal requires a government that focuses on sharing and collectivism above, though not prohibitive to individual desire. Democracy has for an age been the preferred theme in collectivist government, in the form of republics for purposes of logistics. Yet the government is ruled by the people themselves through these representatives, the Executive also answers to the people, at the same time that we are aware this model is a choice. The people must choose to participate in their government, to maintenance their freedom, and give of their individual accomplishments to the collective institution to ensure its success.

“Laws reflect the will of the people. It is true that the masses do not always know sufficient information to vote correctly. In our time, twenty-five years of education in a small group of peers with a mentor provides both information and understanding, permitting wise decisions. Money and corruption may sway choices by lawmakers, but the Right to Advocacy provides any citizen with ten thousand signatures access to free agents that will lobby the government on his or her behalf. Partisan politics may press representatives into certain votes. The Great Assembly and most of its constituent sectors and systems have numerous parties and therefore the difficulties of bipartisan or tripartisan politics is diminished.

“Executives must see themselves as humble stewards in service to all of his or her citizens. Personal drives and ambitions risk corruption in the hands of any one individual, and only exists for purposes of logistical simplicity in a government, as many people executing the laws makes results conflicting and inefficient. The same mechanisms of education and open lobbying permits the

Book II: The City

normal citizens to more easily check the actions of their elected sovereign. Thirteenth millennium technology easily permits all information on the candidates to remain open to everyone, and so decisions on how to hire a humble leader are wiser.

“Functional government is a choice, and freedom is not free. All of the information, the education, the public lobbyists can stand before any desperate individual who yearns for change. Only if he or she fails to take a step forward, to speak, all of the accomplishments of thousands of years of trial and error will be for nothing. The evidence is available that people do make use of these resources. Neither do they respond to a whim, but consider and speak out on matters only of great importance, that must be addressed by the voice for social desires. Choosing to be free, to participate actively and enthusiastically in government of the people takes time and social evolution, spurred on with the results mentioned by the accomplishments of generations of successful complex decisions executed by hundreds of generations. It is a slowly improving system, as hundreds of years pass and its citizens become increasingly wise and able. You are successful today, this Great Assembly, not because of some transcendent new form of government, but because the people have evolved to be able to choose their own fate, to use the resources of the republic won after countless hard battles.

“Individual will must come second; ultimately it is the extent to which individuals share that determines the success of government. Individuals will wake and rise citizens each day, but it is their choice to freely give of themselves, their time, their token resources—money—their openness to new and different ideas, and ability to follow the choices of their society even if it bothers them—only so that they remain part of the whole—it is these things that permit them to sleep at night. With these choices, to share, the buildings of this world have risen to heights that touch the heavens themselves. I once called it a blight, these mountains of steel, and I still do—they do speak of accomplishment, and wonder, and what this civilization has achieved. Together they raised the lowest levels of society which in turn empowered them ever higher into their own successes.

“Perhaps citizens of this Galactic Center, the jewel of this civilization, visit the Palace of the Many-Faced Divine, and considered a perfect form of government, where Goddesses or God rules alone or in oligarchic structures, and better than any mortal,

for to them Justice and Mercy and Peace are concrete concepts, tangible, and realizable, in a way unavailable to us. They perhaps might have a radically more perfect system of government. We know, ourselves today, even the least humble, we hope, that no one is a God, or divine. We are humans, no more no less. Thus, we have worked long and hard over thousands of years to form a government of the people, whose sovereign answers to his or her people, where the people choose to be free and to support each other. This is the best form of government, because of its mechanics, and because of those who now live under it, and elect their leaders.”

All of her the students, the young adults peered up at her with starry eyes, and still quiet, enjoying the praise of their civilization by this outsider. Droos spoke of their virtues so well.

“That’s it,” said Droos, returning to her seat.

“Thank you, Droos, for educating us,” said the mentor. “I think we have all been enriched these last five years for her being with us, here in this group, and among us and our people. Few students I have worked with have carried such grave responsibilities as well as this young woman sitting among us. Fifteen generations of students I have taught and seen grown from youths to adults, yet here before me, in this woman, is something new to me. Thank you again, Droos.”

Beaming, the mentor looked at Droos, bowing her head a little, while Droos blushed, and even now, looked down humbly, refusing to accept fully the compliment. It was to be one of her last sessions here on the planet of No among these friends who she had made and come to love as sisters and brothers. On Seventhday a message arrived for her upon returning to the apartment.

“From the Office of the Speaker of the Marba System Committee on Appropriation,” it said. “Against my better judgement, a new vote will be held. Careful young woman, before you yourself become a tyrant.”

“Then it is almost over,” said Droos.

“No, this is only a beginning,” said Drerpo. “Even in this chapter of your story, I believe there is a quite a bit more to tell.”

“How is the war going?” asked Droos.

Her boyfriend sighed.

“My sister is working hard, and has been absent for some time,” said Drerpo.

“It’s going well enough,” said Amet. “Once we get you to

Book II: The City

where you are going next, it will go better, because I will be able to focus entirely on that great task.”

“You mean you can’t be more than one place at once?” said Droos.

“Dear Droos,” said a sheepish Amet. “I’m a young man of thirty-one only, not some God, despite your endless accusations. Keep in mind, that perfection to us mortals is really a nonsense word. It has no meaning, since anything a Sentient, particularly a human, can conceive, is imperfect. God is supposedly perfect, and therefore, beyond anything we can conceive, see, hear, or understand. Droos, I stand before you, I hope, most visible, and thoroughly understandable. Therefore, clearly I am not God.”

“It is certainly a mystery,” said Drerpo. “Really it dilutes the word to throw around the title of *God* too freely. Monotheists have done well to limit it to one entity only. If perfection is real, probably a unified perfection is most perfect, all bound in one entity who is all knowing, all righteous, all powerful, and everywhere at once.”

“And you’re both saying you can’t do those things?” smiled Droos.

“Oh please...” said Amet.

Drerpo came over and kissed her.

“There... was that kiss perfect?” said Drerpo.

“You could’ve done a little better,” chirped Droos. “This would be better.”

Stepping forward she traced a hand along his chest and then held the back of his neck lightly as she bowed forward and kissed him deeply, brushing up against him.

“That is perfection more than anything I could ever manage,” said Drerpo with a wink. “See.”

“Please, you two,” said Amet. “Around me? Really?”

The couple laughed and stood smiling at the third.

Already they had begun to pack, although it took very little time. Moving was easy in this age, with building attendants, both organic and artificial, placing glowing transparent walls around countless objects, clothing mostly, and just a few artifacts in their case. Perhaps it was a bit premature, but everyone, Emerzo and Drerpo, Amet and Anora, and Droos of course, were confident in the eventual result. It took a little longer than they had thought, although one change came first, namely, that the princess at last bid farewell to her colleagues in class, and kissed her mentor on

the cheek, with an actual hug, returned warmly, the first and only. Vows to remain in contact were exchanged, and Droos actually intended to keep them, although somehow she began to feel that this world was very small and the universe above vast and that the distance between she and her friends might become too great.

"You'll never forget about me, will you," said Anora, smacking her cheek lightly.

"Ouch!" Droos joked. "Anora, dear Anora. If it weren't for the two hundred knights you had prancing around me, I wouldn't know how much I really love Drerpo."

"Well you take good care of him, princess," said Anora. "And I have to say, even though my life has gone very differently, it will be worth it. I feel like you and him will be together forever."

"Forever's a long time," said Droos. "I will contact you, and we'll always be friends. Course you'll be busy with your new clients."

"You and your boyfriend and his sister and brother, are not like anyone I've worked with before," said Anora. "I wish you well, truly, and express only my envy, for ghosts rarely get to see the sights where you will go."

Emerzo walked into the room just then, smiling, although her hair was messy, and a smudge of something blemished her face.

"Droos!" she said. "Turn on the news."

Moving a finger, the princess brought the ultranet down in a glowing display from the ceiling and it changed with a thought to a head speaking. It was the Speaker himself, and his words were as brief as they had been before.

"The princess has had her day again," he said. "She will have her appropriations, and the Army Corp of Anthropologists their permission to leave as soon as possible. If only she had greater respect for how this government worked, she might have respected this committee's logical decision the first time."

"Now they have done the right thing," said Droos. "Yet it is only the beginning. Even with all of the funding and all of the resources, it will take time for the rebels in my tribe to overthrow my father. Still, I wonder what can be done, to save... the rest of my family. What have my mother and sister done? Gosh, my sister must be getting big by now. She was a toddler when I left."

"That is a problem that will have to be considered,"

Book II: The City

said Emerzo. “I doubt even with all of the subtlety of the Anthropologists, keeping the rebels from killing your family will be hard. You have reported so many times on your fathers crimes, and how your people feel. It may be hard for them to separate their hatred for Uré, the God King, from his family, of the Divine Bloodline.”

“Something will be done, when I return to this world, to lead my people,” said Droos. “But not to be a tyrant. No. My people will rule themselves after the revolution. I will only help them as I am able to bring about their new dawn. Once arrived, I suppose my choices will be wide open, as much as theirs will be.”

“Still, for now, you are going through with your plan?”
said Amet.

“Yes,” said Droos. “We leave Tenthday, up away, into the stars.”





Chapter 7

View of the Stars

Rings around the fair green, grey, and blue planet reflected the light of the sun, a halo hallowing the capitol of the Great Assembly. Not just in one ring, but fully eight merged in two poles formed the eight halos into a sphere. This planet was contained, within its orbit around its star, and in its spin on its axis, within a web of metal. At a distance of five hundred miles from the surface of the planet, the web allowed that nearly as many might living around the planet as on it. Such had indeed been the case now for over five thousand years.

Both a surface for buildings stretching out dozens of miles, and a shell in which cities circled the inside of a tube twenty-five miles in diameter, the Halo of No was diverse. If there were hundreds of Sentient species on the face of the planet, then around it there were thousands. Only keeping out the still deadly vacuum of space was required in the architecture of buildings of the halos, and all manner of colored metal, formed jagged lines, straight lines, curves, geometric shapes, or floated detached for purposes of cultural decor.

Interstellar vessels the size of mountains cruised slowly at relativistic speeds, slipping by utterly silent, blocking in intervals the twinkling of one thousand stars. Even here the potential glory of the heavens unveiled was diminished, as the Halo of No had countless daylight bulbs, search lights, and beacons, that called out quietly into Cis-Lunar space. A chorus sang in the infinite night, the stars speaking to one another. Truly the stories were true, and there was an endless dialogue evolving on into eternity progressing just through the ten feet of clear metal bordering the Eye of No for three hundred and sixty degrees.

Droos stood, a small figure, her curly hair still, her arms at ease, a purple dress flowing gracefully over her form, peering out

Book II: The City

of the window. Drerpo had been right, and few things in her life had prepared her for this revelation, the window into space spread out before her. Both frightening in its vastness, the way it made her feel so small, and awesome, in seeing the mastery the Artist of the Universe had achieved, goose-bumps still stuck up from her lightly dark skin, but by now her heart had slowed to a comfortable beat. Mesmerized, her mind floated on currents of light, the waves of rays shining suddenly to glare in her eyes.

Luna crossed out of line of sight before her, and there at last lay Sol, the consciousness, the great being at the beating heart of this system. It was said that those with proper ears and a seat in proximity to the star could hear rumbling bass booming into the depths of the darkness, the voice of the picowatts of energy burning at the surface each moment. Only the mastery possessed even by the humble architects of Marba provided sufficient defense from the dangerous electromagnetic radiation and brightness, the heat that might come from such a stunning view, Sol Herself.

How can mere mortals dare to challenge such beings as this? thought Droos, the starship continuing to pass, as large as the moon at this distance.

“Little right,” said Amet, behind her, standing dutifully. “Yet endless ambition drives them. For all the heavens, and someday the sacred realms hallowed beyond them, these all would the mortals claim, if only to be the masters themselves. Would even that be enough?”

“I find being content with what I have brings truer happiness, than endless pursuit of possessions,” said Droos. “Building my friendships and relationships is better than ruling trillions. Let the Gods have their priests and their worshippers, but I have little interest in such a following, perhaps with the exception of those who would honor in their prayers Etøn if they wanted to honor me. Being content with the tiny mortal that I am, powerful, great for what I already possess, rather than what possible potential might still exist, this is more appealing to me.”

“Then you are the greatest mortal in the galaxy,” said Amet, his voice booming. “Although I fear in reality the trappings of wealth, of prestige, and power you already have interfere with the true humility as might be enjoyed by those without any anchors of materialism holding them to vain ambition.”

“Is the material really so terrible?” said Droos.

“No,” said Amet. “It is a tool. With it mortals can

minimize suffering, control plagues and storms, and seek the purpose of existence. You're right, that no amount of possessions will ensure happiness. That is not to say someone cannot be wealthy, with many possessions, and be righteous. It takes a great soul to have so much, and deliver it into the hands of others who seem on the surface to have acted foolishly or done so much less to earn charity. Recognizing the unity that raises everyone or destroys all with sharing or inaction is beyond many. Blessed are the wealthy, who realize truly what they have."

"You're right," said Droos. "I do take the blessings I have received in such abundance for granted. So natural it is having wealth and fame, little does it occur to me to use it more freely to serve others. More often I spend time in entertainment districts, playing and distracting myself from my obligations to others. I should not be so hard on myself. I act to save millions of my people, to raise their way of life from suffering to minimal standards of living. But how much more might I do?"

"This is true for me too," said Amet. "Even though I have fewer resources than you, a thirty-something, humble in the shadows of my mighty siblings, still I might use my waking hours to serve. In some ways I envy Sentients like Anora, who have programming to desire the happiness of others, yet still enjoy and live their own independent existence."

"Yet ambition serves a purpose," said Droos. "Even altruism most often carries a selfish desire to feel good and generous for oneself."

"That is not to say that selfishness dismisses the virtue of giving," said Amet.

"Not at all," said Droos.

Walking up alongside her, the brother looked out passed her through the window into space, and his lips moved, as though he were in dialogue with Sol, which to the extent it might be true, little involved the princess. Turning and walking to the center of the circular room, the Eye of No, situated at the center of one of the two poles, where the halos intersected, Droos examined the curious lights dancing. Purple, lighter than her dress, although not so different, flowed in shifting textures of a misty glow. It covered an open hole in the floor of about thirty feet in diameter. A few moments of consideration only did Droos hesitate, before she stepped boldly over the side into the chasm.

She did not fall, but rather sank slowly with gentle ease

Book II: The City

downward, through two dozen feet of cylindrical metal, before the beam of light deposited her in a promenade. Bustling people, enjoying the wares of a thousand worlds but more often just each other's company, as mortals even in this millennia often did with their free time, disturbed the silence that a moment ago had been so absolute. Still at a distance, the real world returned to her. The wide purple glow was up, in a corner, away from the nearest stalls, and Droos could not yet see anyone else. Except Amet, of course, who a few moments later sank down and stepped out behind her.

Continuing on into the crowds, thousands gathered and milled over a maze of hundreds of shops and stores. It was to her, quite claustrophobic. Down in the depths of the metal forests planetside there was a certain artificial feel to the surroundings. Here, only vacuum, and the fear of death, filled the space all around the space station. Not a girl, Droos held herself with poise regardless of the tension, and navigated past wide avenues with plenty of space and through gaps separating groups of Sentients half a person wide (which given her size, was done with relative ease).

Wide containers in one stall held creatures, non-Sentient life forms of many varieties, including one healthy scitter. Giddy, the princess forgot her location for a moment and went over to try and direct the small mammal's attention with her fingers on the glass. It was a little too well fed, certainly compared to the wild variety in the land of her birth. In many ways its current predicament, trapped in this glass tank in a spinning metal cage saddened Droos. Not too much, and the entertainment value of small animals, at least while she was on her way to a destination, dwindled, and she started to leave. A male human child crashed into her.

Down onto the ground fell Droos, although Amet had her hand instantly and pulled her up to her feet. Frowning, the princess checked herself as she turned to scold the careless little creature menacing the world of Sentients. Immediately the purpose of the disruption became clear, when Droos found her emerald necklace missing, stamping her foot as she turned in the direction she suspected the boy to have run. Just the edge of his shoe was visible, disappearing into the crowd, and as the tension of the masses returned to her, the princess found herself stilled.

"Let me handle this," said Amet.

He raised his hand and began to speak a series of words while he signed symbols Droos recognized, if not in their exact identity. Words and gestures stopped, seemingly, midway, and a squeak caused several dozen people around her to stop what they were doing and quickly flee to the sides of the avenue, up against the stalls. In the center still, with she and Amet on the edges, and then twenty feet away in the center was a boy, on the floor with a rope of some sort around his ankle. Struggling, the grip of the leather wrenched tighter when the woman holding the end of the whip pulled.

“You bitch!” shouted the boy. “Let me go!”

“Stealing a lady’s jewelry,” said the newcomer. “You’re lucky I don’t just go and steal your foot in recompense. Now be still!”

The woman tightened her grip on the whip and the boy groaned.

“Stop it!” said Droos.

“Ah, yes,” said the woman, “The victim. I suppose you will want your property back. And maybe some words with your attacker.”

“I didn’t attack anyone!” said the boy. “Food costs money, and I don’t have any. Besides, she looks like she can afford as many jewels as she wants.”

“That doesn’t make it any better,” said Amet, entering the conversation.

“I disagree,” said Droos. “Weren’t we just talking about what we owe to other people? Please, Dear woman, I appreciate your help. But let the poor boy go.”

Droos took a moment and saw that the perpetrator was a young boy, with light skin, blue eyes, and long, wild brown hair. He was very meager, as if half-starved.

Frowning, the woman pulled the whip hard once more before unwrapping it. Darting up, the boy made to leave, but just as fast the woman’s hand reached out and grabbed his arm. Meanwhile, Droos and Amet crossed the space between them, and the countenance of their protector became clear.

She stood tall, more than six feet, with feline features, including a lush fury tale, pointed ears, and slits for eyes. Ash grey, the fur was covered in most places by a uniform, navy-blue, and this one had a texture like leather. Sleeves ran to the ends of her arms and the second piece had the pant legs run to shoes on her

Book II: The City

feet. A third leather piece formed a hat atop her fury head, with holes cut professionally to allow space for the ears to sprout. A belt around her waist held numerous objects, including the whip, now returned to its place, but also several weapons, including knives, and guns both single-shot and rapid. Her look spoke of terrible things she might do to those who awoke her ire, although it was contained within the uniform leather. No permission was needed for the proper introduction.

“Captain Grace Wang is my name,” she said, nodding her head, eyes narrowing slightly, and pulling harder on the boy’s shoulder.

“Droos Yarite,” said the princess, with a bow in return.

Eyes widening again, Wang stood straighter.

“That should have been obvious, princess,” said Grace.

“Forgive me for not recognizing you, even though here I was supposed to meet with you just ten minutes from now. It’s just, you’re a lot younger than I thought you’d be. And...”

“Graceful?” suggested Amet.

“Yah...” said the cat, with a chuckle.

“I should have guessed too from your uniform,” said

Droos. “Grace Wang of the Assembly Armada.”

“And don’t forget it,” said Wang. “Though my friends call me Cat.”

The boy snorted a laughed, before grimacing as she pulled his shoulder.

“Amet, will you retrieve my property from that poor boy, so we can let him go?” said Droos.

Amet simply walked over to the child and pulled at the circlet of emeralds, which without any tension pulled free. He returned to Droos, and to the young woman’s surprise, put it back around her neck.

“Uh... thank you Amet,” said the princess. “Now, Cat. Will you let him go.”

“Oh no,” said Cat. “This child broke the law. I’m not done with him until the police arrive.”

As though on signal, four Sentients of different shapes and forms approached and apprehended the attacker. It took only a few minutes to provide the necessary statements.

“I’m not pressing charges,” said Droos.

“Well at this point it doesn’t matter very much,” said a male officer. “Boy’s an illegal. He’ll get representation, but likely

he'll be out of Marba within the month. Why d'ya think he's steeling when we have so many safety nets for orphan children?"

"You mean just because of a little theft you're going to tear him away from his home and send him to a place he's never been before?" said Droos.

"We don't make the law, Dear Droos," said another officer.

"If you ask me, he's getting off easy," said Cat. "In my system he'd get fifteen months of labor for that theft. Now he just gets to go home."

"This place is my home, you piss bastards!" said the boy.

"I should warn you, boy, that those outbursts don't help your case," said the first officer.

"Amet?" said Droos, making a decision, and expecting her friend to respect it.

The brother sighed and walked to the officer, placing a finger onto his palm. A glow shone for a moment, before diminishing.

"You're agreeing to represent that little shit?" said Cat.

"I have to do something," said Droos, as the officer began walking away with the boy.

"We'll be contacting you soon," said the second Officer, and the three were left alone, with the crowd returning to normal.

"You're damn soft," said Cat. "Nothing but a pampered princess."

"That's how an Armada Officer talks?" said Amet.

"You don't like it?" said Cat. "This is me being nice. Marba is such a pompous, self-righteous place. Be respectful. Watch your words. Try following those rules on the Rim and a mob boss will break your face."

"Don't worry, Amet, you can stop defending me," said Droos.

"I thought that was my job," smiled Amet.

Returning to the moment, the two humans and the feline walked through the crowds once more, and Droos let the Officer do the leading. Cat parted the stream of Sentients like a charging lion, and at the very least those who darted to the sides averted their eyes, and many cast a fearful look. Eventually they arrived at their destination, a restaurant at the far side of the commercial district. A waiter was expecting them, apparently both by name, and in that he recognized Cat. Droos thought she heard the Officer purr just a little as they walked past the waiter and over to a back room. A

Book II: The City

window out to space with a view now of both the curvature of No and the sun lit the room as much as the daylight bulbs placed at various strategic points. There waiting for them were Drerpo and Emerzo.

“Well you took your time getting here,” said Emerzo, standing up. “Amet, I would think you could get her here faster.”

“And I would think an officer of the Armada would be here early,” said Drerpo, remaining seated.

Droos began to speak but got out barely a syllable before Cat interrupted.

“Some illegal orphan tried to steal her emeralds,” said Cat. “I caught him and gave him to the authorities. Not before our righteous princess offered to adopt him, of course?”

The final words were not meant to be kind.

“What’s this?” said Emerzo.

“I only said I would see to his defense,” said Droos.

Her boyfriend laughed.

“Normally when someone is the victim of theft they want all terrible things for the offender,” said Drerpo. “You want to pay money to ensure his comfort. My lovely brother and sister and new acquaintance, you’ll have to forgive the princess. After all, I have known her for much longer, and it is wholly natural that her motherly instinct should kick in for something like this. Not to mention that she actually cares for people other than herself in general.”

Droos smiled, and messed up Drerpo’s hair as she took her seat alongside him.

“If that’s how you get off, princess, fine” said Cat. “We’re leaving in five days, whether or not you’re with us.”

“That, I think, is the start of our meeting,” said Emerzo, as everyone took their seats. “We’ll leave the full story of your tardiness for another time. At the very least it looks like we have all now met, although I’m sure Cat will be able to speak more freely here. She’s why we’re here.”

“I’m glad someone is intelligent,” said Cat, who stood up from her seat at the far end of the table, and began pacing as she spoke, though keeping some eye contact.

“Emerzo has been providing useful information to the Great Assembly Intelligence Services for some time now,” said Cat. “For the last five years especially, but also many before that, these bits of information have helped us prepare and defend

against the threat now faced by this civilization. The rest of you, according to her, have equal parts in the help we've received. They're very grateful. So much it seems that they've passed you along from Assembly Intelligence to Armada Intelligence.

"Armada Intelligence is far more involved with our actual assets in space, and on Sector Defense along the Rim. I've earned my current rank, Captain, serving as one such asset, and in that capacity I was sent to gather you. The Commander-in-Chief, as you may know, gave you all top security clearance some time ago. Now, I'm told, it's time for you to justify the trust we have placed on you."

"In five days, Admiral Litona Mesda is leaving on a Capitol Dreadnaught, the Mercy, with a dozen support vessels to relieve the current garrison in the Emerald Sector. We're to receive lodging, food, and use of vessel resources for our mission on its journey, which will take several months. Three weeks before the Mercy reaches its destination, traveling outward along the galactic spiral, we will transfer to one of the support vessels. It is actually assigned to us for our mission. No worries, it is fully with the support of the Admiral. We will travel outward from the galactic spiral, one thousand light years, to the Space Station Ruby operated by Armada Intelligence. This post is the farthest point of Sentient exploration in this galaxy.

"Once we arrive, you will assess the assets available to us there, and review records contained on that station that are too sensitive to be transmitted by Ultranet or brought anywhere else. I'm afraid the comfort of Ruby will not be like what you have been used to these last years, and not even like what is available on the Mercy. It will be what will be."

"Sounds like fun," said Drerpo.

"A man after my own heart," said Cat.

"Is that all agreeable with you, Droos?" said Emerzo

The princess sat back in her chair, with her eyes partly closed, as though the vacuum of space separated her from the events transpiring in the room.

"She doesn't look so sure," said Cat. "I called her on being soft. We don't have room for emeralds and sensitivity on Ruby or the Mercy."

"Droos..." said Drerpo.

The voice came far away, until a hand brushed a strand of curly hair away from her forehead. She turned and beheld Drerpo.

Book II: The City

“My princess,” said Drerpo. “Will you lead me, your humble servant, out into further wonder and profundity? Come with us, and save the galaxy, not just your own people. Hear the stars speak for yourself, and even more, the voices of galaxies, as you gaze out past the rim into intergalactic space. Ad Astra!”

“It’s just a little much...” said Droos.

“If she’s not ready, she doesn’t have to come,” said Cat.

“Either she comes, or none of us come,” said Emerzo, looking seriously at the Captain.

“This isn’t a pleasure cruise,” said Cat. “It isn’t even a standard war zone. Things are happening on the Rim that are, frankly, frightening, even to people like me. If this girl can’t stand seeing stars and space in Cis-Lunar orbit, how will she survive the isolation and the comparatively meager protection where we’re going.”

“She has made it this far,” said Drerpo, tracing his girlfriend’s shoulder. “You belittle her. Yes this is much for her, but understand and recognize how impressive her accomplishments have been. This is not some spoiled rich girl. She is wise, capable, and now she will see once and for all, that she is strong.”

“Fine,” said Cat. “If you vouch for her, then she comes. Just know, that if she for one instant jeopardizes this mission, I’ll send her back on the first Supply Vessel. You all can join her if you must.”

“That will be acceptable,” said Emerzo.

“Good,” said Cat. “Five days. Be on time.”

With a swish of her tail, and few more words, Grace Wang left the room, and did not look back. Emerzo sat, staring at Droos, and then stood.

“What were you thinking pledging yourself to that child?” said Emerzo. “And why are you being so quiet.”

“Emerzo,” said Drerpo. “You know why.”

“Yes, yes,” said Emerzo. “She’s your little fish. But she can’t be a fish anymore, she has to be shark, or better yet, a leviathan.”

“Mother, I know you’re stressed,” said Amet. “We’ll make sure Droos does what she needs to when the time comes.”

“And since when were you on her side?” Emerzo flashed a glare.

“I never left your side, Emerzo,” said Amet. “Neither has Droos.”

The twin sighed, and sat down, running a hand over the table. Closing her eyes, she sat and meditated for some moments. Droos observed her rival, as the room began to come into focus. Light from the stars illuminated her face, and one, brighter than the rest, twinkled in the center. A few breathes and the young woman sat up.

“Thank you for trusting me,” said Droos. “Cat is right to be nervous. It seems I keep being pulled from one jungle to the next. Now apparently I am an intelligence operative. Maybe when I return to my tribe I should become the High Servant-Loyal, rather than a revolutionary.”

“Are you going to be alright?” said Amet.

“Of course she’ll be,” said Drerpo, without pause.

Droos hugged and kissed him. Emerzo continued her meditation.

The boy was a welcome distraction. He had been on his own for a long time, and little welcomed the company or concern of anyone else, particularly some old woman telling him what to do.

“Darlez,” said Droos. “Haven’t you thought about how your life could be better? You wouldn’t have to live in the shadows if you found a sponsor, just someone who would speak for you until you are an adult. Then you can take the citizenship test, and you will have no limits in Marba.”

“I don’t need some fraking asshole telling me when to sleep and what to eat,” said the boy. “I don’t need you either!”

“What do you think of birds, Darlez?” said Droos.

“Why the hell do I care?” said Darlez. “I don’t even know what a bird is.”

Eyes widening, Droos relaxed when she thought for a moment about the world in which the boy lived, here in a spinning universe of metal, more artificial and removed from nature than anything she had ever seen.

“You know, wings, beak, feathers?” said Droos.

“So what? Maybe I have seen one,” said the boy. “Who cares.”

“They fly through the sky... or, maybe through space, like the vessels you see through the windows here,” said Droos. “Nothing lies below or above them. This is freedom.”

“They’re brats,” said Darlez. “No pigs deporting them for trying to eat.”

Book II: The City

“Birds have rules too,” said Droos. “Freedom comes with responsibilities, and the birds must work to eat, according to set rules.”

“This is stupid,” said the boy. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

“Please, just a moment longer,” said Droos. “Now I had a little brother and a little sister growing up. I had to leave them behind, and my mother, because my father was terrible, and hurt many people. Still I wish I could see my little brother and sister again, and you know what, when I see you, I think of my brother.”

“I’m not your brother!” said Darlez.

“No,” said the Princess. “You are your own person. That doesn’t mean we can’t help each other. I would like to have someone I can relate to as, well, I might have with my brother in a better world. You need someone to sponsor you and look out for you. Make sure you always have enough to eat and drink and a comfortable place to sleep. Maybe I can’t promise to be that forever, but for now, I would love for you to come with me. I could be your sponsor.”

Panting, the child seemed for once to be lost for words. It only lasted a moment.

“No!” he said. “I don’t care if you want a brother. Find someone else. You’ll just abandon me.”

“Why would you say that?” said Droos. “Did someone else abandon you?”

“I don’t want to talk to you anymore!” said Darlez. “Leave me alone!”

“Darlez,” said the Princess, softly. “Did your mom and dad abandon you.”

Looking down, tears burned in the corner of the child’s eyes, and he sniffed, as they trickled down his cheeks.

“What happened?” said Droos.

“They’re dead,” said the boy. “He shot my mother. Would’ve killed me too.”

Droos swallowed and fought back her own tears.

“My father was always yelling at my mom,” said Darlez. “Trouble with money, and for some reason he was always jealous. Mom never cheated. All in his head. That night, he pulled a gun and just shot her. I ran, nearly lost my own head when he fired at me. Kept going, out, as far away as I could. Next day I saw on the newsfeed that a husband had killed his wife and committed suicide.

Then I knew they had abandoned me, and I was alone.”

Droos came over, crouching down to his level, and hugged the boy. With her hand she brushed some tears away, and kissed his cheek.

“You know, the world isn’t all that bad,” said Droos. “I’ve seen terrible things happen too. Sometimes the universe seems so unfair. But there are good people, who care about each other, and stick up for each other, who do the right thing. In the last five years I have been surrounded by enlightened citizens of the Great Assembly who have their flaws, but never abandoned me. I will follow their example. If you can find it in yourself, I will never abandon you.”

Then the boy hugged her back, and she knew that he had made his choice. Only at that moment, the weight of her choice fell on her shoulders. Being a good person was not easy, and she would have extra work for years to come. Was she really ready for this responsibility?

On the fifth day, Droos, Drerpo, Emerzo, and the child left the Halo of No, traveling on one of the very vessels that had before passed through space on the other side of clear metal. To the dark side of the moon, Luna, they passed quickly through space, arriving within ninety minutes. Far from an empty lifeless rock, Luna in this age was a bastion of development and technology, although for a darker and more sinister purpose. Not that its peril was a threat to citizens of the Great Assembly, necessarily. For on this moon was the Central Command of a military machine that cast an eternal vigil over the quadrillions of lives entrusted to it.

A seamless plate of metal covered the surface, sticking up several miles, as though the rock were armored. Towers in strategic locations stuck out past the limited gravitational pull that existed just as it had for ten thousand years, since humans first inhabited their nearest foreign object in space, and several only on the dark side stretched on into a large station. The shape was irregular, curved, but not recognizable as any regular geometric shape. It might even have been said that the matter of its outside bent and shimmered, even to the naked eye. Central Command had need of the best defenses available in this age, so it was no wonder such a feature existed here.

Beyond the tower was a fleet, an armada, one of many thousands that existed in the Bagan Galaxy. Always they matched the orbit of Luna, so that the lights and sight of these weapons of

Book II: The City

war could not be seen from No. These Vessels of War were not secret, but that did not mean citizens living in the Galactic Capitol wanted a constant reminder of what helped keep them safe. Into this swarm of gargantuan vessels the transport carrying Droos and her friends went, navigating now carefully, although with masterful precision. Most starships here were much larger even than the one she was now inside. A few were as big as Luna itself, either in similar spheres, or like cities with towers and lights, or droplets stretched as comets. Six of these Capitol Dreadnaughts of various models floated through the vacuum of space.

Despite the outward appearance on the Admiral Litona Mesda's ship, the long cometlike object, encrusted with thousands of powerful weapons, the inside was completely different. Formidable military classifications were given to these craft, but really the truth of this age was that the weapons were rarely needed. The Assembly Armada, in fact, no longer strictly held defense as their first and most important mission. Scientific intrigue and space exploration, understanding the universe, these were the purpose in the current age of their existence. True, they were also potent weapons of war, but to the current ends, inside these craft much was little distinguished from a luxury liner.

Cat was right that comfort in the officer quarters of the Mercy were few. Really all quarters were no less than half the size of the apartment Droos and her friends had shared on No. Droos considered the modesty of what she had enjoyed these last years, when confronted with how even soldiers of this civilization were accommodated. Officers of the vessel greeted them as they disembarked from the small shuttle that transferred them from the transport to the Capitol Dreadnaught. Men and women of myriad races sported the same navy-blue as Cat, only theirs was a more typical fabric, rather than anything like leather. Their cause was sufficient that First Lieutenants were their couriers, as they made their way through endless hallways.

Ever they progressed inward, into the heart of the ship, until at last they entered an especially decorated district. Simply entering into it required several passwords through numerous doorways. Here was a fortress within a fortress. Security personnel were heavily armed, and the purpose was unclear in this age of peace and security the need for these formalities. Eventually they reached ornate double wooden doors that were opened before them by two lieutenant-commanders as they entered into an elaborate

command and control center.

Darlez ogled the flashing lights and displays, and Droos could do little less, as symbols and terminologies streamed by that held meanings far beyond the limited education she received even from her competent mentor. She thought to herself that it must take hundreds of years for any of these officers to learn their trade, given the amount of skill required to operate this technology. At the far end of the chamber rose many seats constructed of crystal, several tables, and elegant controls, at which, almost as if it was a café, sat several officers of great strength.

There was Cat, dressed in her leather blues, along with two others with similar uniforms. They sat around a table with a glowing display spread over the top like mist, the discussion led by a male ghost wearing a black uniform. He wore an alien semblance, including green hair and orange eyes. So engrossed were they in their task, that even these seasoned intelligence operatives did not notice the new arrivals. Of course, it was also certainly the case that they little expected to need particular vigilance in this location.

“Sir, Admiral,” said the one of the Lieutenants. “Here are the people you requested be brought here.”

Taking his time to respond, the ghost eventually looked up, and nodded at Droos and the others before finishing a few more sentences. Then he rose and walked over to the civilians.

“Honored to meet you,” he said. “Rear Admiral Desmond Anorian, Chief of Fleet Intelligence.”

He bowed his head, met by the newcomers, before gesturing to the officers around him.

“My Executive Officer, Colonel Listra Dezreth, and her second, Commander Es Jroth. You’ve met Captain Grace Wang. She’s our cat.”

Drerpo laughed.

Listra Dezreth was also an alien species, and had no hair on her head, but brown eyes. Es Jroth was a human with fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes.

“She’s also this mission’s Chief Field Agent,” said Desmond. “And a damn fine one. Cat drifts in from time to time, and works with urgency every moment. You’re lucky to know her.”

“Please, Admiral,” said Cat. “I have a reputation to uphold.”

Book II: The City

“Of course you do,” said the Admiral.

“So you’re not Admiral Litona Mesda?” said Droos.

“You must be the princess,” said Desmond. “No. Litona’s the Commanding Officer for the fleet, and the one and only person to whom I report. I’m sure you’ll meet her before too long.”

“There’s certainly a degree of informality down here,” said Amet. “I wouldn’t have expected it.”

“Yes, well,” said the Admiral. “Normal officers do seem to feel they have to prove they are in fact Armada employees. Down here in Intelligence, we’re kind of in our own little world, and in it, we know who we are. Admiral Mesda doesn’t like it very much, but most weeks, I only see her a few times. We’re largely left alone.”

“That is, unless there is something the fleet needs to know about,” said Drerpo.

“Precisely,” said Desmond.

“Now what’s that doing here,” said Cat, pointing to the boy holding the princess’ hand. “Who let him in?”

“Apologies, Captain,” said one of the Lieutenants. “The princess and Emerzo insisted. They say Assembly law requires him to be watched by them.”

“So we have to watch the princess, and the princess has to watch him,” said Cat. “Admiral, this is going to waste our time.”

“Please, Cat,” said Desmond. “Put the claws away. Emerzo, Droos. Unfortunately she’s right. From now on, he’ll have to spend his time either in your quarters or with the other children.”

“There are other children on this vessel?” said Droos.

“It really isn’t a vessel,” said Colonel Listra Dezreth. “You should think of it more as a city. Hundreds of thousands serve aboard it, and it works best for them to have their families along with them. We have a full school system aboard.”

“I don’t want to go to school!” said Darlez, the boy.

“We’ll talk about it later, Darlez,” said Droos.

“I suggest we leave them to settle their affairs, then gather again at sixteen hundred hours,” said Listra.

“Will four hours be enough?” asked the Admiral.

“Plenty, thank you,” said Emerzo.

The Intelligence Command Staff continued their deliberations as a Lieutenant showed them to their quarters some thousands of feet beyond the borders of the clandestine fortress.

Droos, Amet, and Darlez all had one suite together, while Emerzo and her twin took a second down the hall.

“Finally things are as they should be, you and your sister back in one room,” said Droos.

“It is complicated,” said Drerpo. “But I love you too. I can’t tell you how awesome it is to see you caring for a child. Someday you will make an excellent mother.”

“And when will that happen, Drerpo?” said Droos.

“Ah, well, it will be too long, although not as long as you might think,” said Drerpo.

“At least I still get to do this,” said Droos.

She stepped forward and kissed him.

Hours passed, the meeting that afternoon came and went, and early the next morning the fleet departed. Upward, traveling even now at relativistic speeds faster than anything Droos had ever seen, they parted from the plane of the system, and after traveling hundreds of millions of miles over the course of a day, they fired up the Interstellar Drive and riding a sudden surge of space-time behind them, they were spurred onward, plucked from Marba, and swept along the galactic spiral. Droos stood with her hand on the boy’s shoulder as they watched stars streaking by the vessel, at three hundred and sixty trillion miles per hour, more than a light year every two minutes. What the scientists of this age had accomplished in theoretical physics and mathematics was truly astounding.

“I still don’t want to go to school,” said Darlez, who had begun to take on a less malnourished appearance.

“For now then, you don’t have to,” said Droos. “You can keep me company as we explore this flying city. I’m learning as much now as you are. Then while I go to work with Drerpo and his sister, you can go to the Entertainment District. But I’m going to put some limits on what programs you can use.”

“Droos! Don’t be such a bitch,” said Darlez. “I’m already eight-years-old. So what if a program has a few curse words. Frak. Ass. Crap. Who cares?”

“Your language could use some improvement as it is,” said Droos calmly. “You know, words have power. I’m not sure you really know what you mean when you use such strong words. You must mean what you say. Don’t worry, the programs you’ll have to use will be plenty entertaining and just a little educational.”

“I don’t want to be educated!” said Darlez.

Book II: The City

“As I said, dear, just a bit,” said Droos.

She kissed him on the head, and continued walking with the boy around the ship.

Days took on a routine, almost, and Droos began to think they had really been integrated into the military machine, grunts on this city of duty-bound employees of the state. Most of her hours she spent with Darlez, teaching him in person her years of wisdom, which now it appeared she had plentifully. Really she had far fewer lessons to teach than she would have liked, and wished the boy would go to school. There were mentors there who had hundreds of years of experience. Her boyfriend and his sister were frequently busy working with Armada Intelligence, locked away in various parts of the inner fortress. Amet of course followed her around, because apparently even hundreds of thousands of military officers in a fleet were insufficient to protect her.

After they were acquainted with the Admiral Litona Mesda, the Commanding Officer offered a permanent invitation to make themselves comfortable in the Command Staff Restaurant. Small vessels might have a mess reserved for officers, but a ship and fleet of this size required hundreds of Captains and Colonels, thousands of Commanders and Lieutenant-Colonels, and even a few Rear Admirals. As it was, the actual Command Staff included maybe twenty percent of these officers, but still a number of many hundreds. So at almost all hours, this comfortable place for relaxation was filled with dozens of off-duty officers.

Sometimes they had a long enough break to change into informal garb, but more often they simply arrived in their blues. These were men, women, and androgenous Sentients with firm and honed countenances, the image of strength. Droos felt her heart flutter every time one or two certain men looked at her, and at least one of them did fairly often. Of course she was frequently with Darlez, and for some this would detract from her virtue, but not that particular officer.

“At last, I have the opportunity to meet you,” he said, coming over one day. “My name is Captain Edmond Sariel, but please, just call me Edmond. You must be the princess we’ve all heard so much about.”

The man had dark skin, short brown hair with what might have been spikes, and green eyes.

“I’m honored you have heard all that much about me,” said Droos. “For professionals such as those who visit this restaurant

I would think my life of politics and royal intrigue would be little interesting, compared to the wonders of these fleets and the secrets of space.”

“Maybe some stay focused only on their jobs,” said the man, “But others still keep their eyes open for the finer things in life.”

He bowed to her, and then looked over at the boy.

“And who would you be?” said the man.

“She’s taken,” said the boy, stiffly.

“His name is Darlez,” said Droos. “I’m his permanent guardian.”

“How sweet,” said the man. “You are a radiant young woman with much to offer.”

“Hey, jerk,” said Darlez, “I said she is taken.”

“I...” said the man.

“Darlez! Please be nice to this man,” said Droos. “I can take care of myself. Now, Captain, I appreciate your interest, as far as friendship goes, but Darlez is right.”

“I’m sure one such as you has many infatuations,” said the man. “Well, you have a couple more months here, and if you ever want to socialize with me, just ask the computer to contact me.”

He smiled and bowed. Droos glared as he departed.

“Asshole!” Darlez called after him.

“How did you come to be so interested in looking out for me?” said Droos to the boy.

“I... I just like... I just do!” said the boy.

“You know, if you and I are starting to get along, there are places where others would be happy to meet you, where you could have friends your age and mentors who could answer all of your questions,” said Droos.

“I don’t like school,” said Darlez.

“We’re just talking about socializing,” said Droos. “You won’t be writing any essays.”

“Will there be people like you there?” said the boy.

Laughing and kissing his head, Droos answered.

“There are many silly girls like me, and all manner of lovely children your age,” said the princess.

“Maybe you should go join him with those friends, if you are still a girl,” said a voice.

Annoyed, Droos looked up. It was Drerpo who now approached.

Book II: The City

“Youthful at heart, still it is the wise, beautiful woman who I like to see,” said Drerpo. “And there is no avoiding it.”

“Hey Drerpo!” said Darlez.

“Sir,” Drerpo bowed to the boy, with a smile.

Darlez giggled as Droos smiled and went over and hugged Drerpo.

“You know I hardly get any time with you anymore, between duty and this charming young man,” Drerpo glanced over at Darlez.

“I don’t know, Drerpo,” she replied. “It’s hard being responsible for someone. I can’t just leave him in my room alone. And he won’t go to school.”

“Didn’t he just say he’d consider some socializing?” said Amet.

“Will that be satisfactory?” said Drerpo.

“I’d say so,” she smiled. “It’s a date.”

They departed the restaurant and walked with average pace to the Education District, an area where kids were the center of attention, and any officers or enlisted men assigned only had the purpose of serving children. Here were the daycare, and their equivalents for older children, as well as classrooms. Droos realized she had somewhat neglected doing research into the options here, and was lost, until Drerpo led the way and brought them to a series of rooms filled with boys and girls playing loudly with numerous games, tablets, computers, and toys.

“This looks like fun!” said Darlez.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” said Droos. “If you have any problems, just tell your supervisor. They’ll call me. Ok? And play nicely.”

The boy growled and charged over to play some sort of ball related game with a group of children, and from first appearances, he was only slightly rougher than the others. Droos laughed, and sighed, brushing the corners of her eyes. With her charge temporarily deposited elsewhere, Droos, Drerpo, and Amet traveled to the Entertainment District for the vessel.

It was just as big as the one she had enjoyed with Anora in their building, and thinking of that friend she had left behind, Droos took note to send a message when this was over. For now, she held Drerpo’s hand as they selected a white room at the far end on the left. As usual, the room shimmered and it was replaced by a strange sight. For a castle, with many broken walls and towers,

and skeletons of figures clothed in both feminine and masculine garments with many jewels, stood behind her. Ahead in a charred clearing were giant remains, bones of serpentine winged creatures, and two humanoid remains, the latter brandishing swords that were now rusted from many rain showers since.

“This isn’t... this isn’t the same place that I met... her?” said Droos, swallowing and breathing fast.

“A dark and sinister place, ravaged by bile and the indeterminate,” said Drerpo. “It is a place you once encountered the Adversary, who boldly brought even a small number of souls she has in her possession, so confident that here she could capture you and bring you into her keeping. She was wrong.”

“Is this really what you want to show her?” said Amet. “Why not just reach down and bring her with us?”

“Ready for this?” said Drerpo. “Some things must still wait. Behold!”

And the young man no longer wore ordinary clothing, but shining mail, and he sat atop a glowing stallion, holding high a sword. Raising it skyward, a blast of thunder, echoed outward from it, and a mournful horn sounded, one great blast. Then silence.

Whinnying of many horses replied after a minute, emanating from beyond storm clouds now gathered above. A whirlwind, strong, but that did not touch Droos or Amet, or, whoever now sat atop a horse before them, tore at the castle, and the remains of all Sentients, and the dragons. Suddenly everything but them were flying, upward, away, the ground cleared and empty now, except for the very foundations, small broken rocks level with the ground, of the castle, and charred earth elsewhere. The view in all directions was clear, although a long ways off forests grew. From the heavens descended a column of warriors, who made the officers of the Assembly Armada seem but children playing with toys. Only she and Amet stood looking normal before the gleaming Knights of Heaven.

Some hundreds of feet away they alighted on the ground and pounded towards their leader, their Sovereign, who they honored beyond doubt. All of them were joyous, and jovial, in a way that brought relief and giddiness into Droos, who found suddenly that her fear was removed, and that astonishingly she was able to move and speak and understand even among this host of God. Sixteen knights stepped down from a great many varieties

Book II: The City

of horses, of all colors and appearance. As they stepped upon the ground, their images changed, to ones full of terror and power. Showsh-Drerpo stepped down, sheathing his sword, and went over to Droos as he invited each lieutenant one by one to come before his girlfriend.

“I present to you otzepâmOA, Creator and Sovereign of the Abyss, what you would call singularities, Keeper of the Keys, Jailor, Lieutenant and Twelfth-Lord of Drerpo.

“The Principle Lieutenants of Drerpo, Sovereigns of Law, Good, Evil, and Chaos: Ubigeesh, goJOAfaim, hUgOAIAE, and lowbçvOA: Eleventh-Lords of Drerpo.”

On the row went, and as each of these beings came before the princess, they bowed, in whatever form they stood.

“ueSHøs, Sovereign of Gon Eden, General of the Armies of the Natural, Lieutenant and Ninth-Lord of Drerpo.

“veadweangOA, Lieutenant of Spirit, and the Infinite, General of the Shattered Armies, Sovereign of Death, Lieutenant and Fifth-Lord of Drerpo.

Before Droos stood a billowing cloud of smoke that spun filling a space of a sphere in continuous motion, jetting back and forth. Ribbons of spider-silk several millimeters thick spun round the cloud in different directions across the invisible sphere. Two faces peered out from the center, as if masks, made of color as oil paint, but still wet, and flowing. One was black and the other was white. Two glowing red dots spun around with the masks. The mask and the eyes moved to face her. Terror gripped the girl, but some strength kept her on her feet, and she nodded at the Being.

“lirOAntUs, Lieutenant-in-Chief, Chancellor, Vice-Lord of Drerpo.”

This was the final figure, a Being of awful countenance. As each came forward, they had bowed, or in some obvious way, acknowledged Drerpo, then her, then Amet. It was shocking to be placed before Amet, but the brother made no show of jealousy or expression of rivalry. Instead he looked somewhat amused, and as soon as the Chancellor had finished offering fealty, and returned to the mighty beings all around before them, he spoke.

“lirOAntUs,” he said. “Tell me, if you are here, who is There? And who is fighting the war?”

“My Prince, Atropo,” said lirOAntUs. “So this is where you have been these last years. Your family is most mysterious, and always the greatest honor to serve.”

“I don’t understand,” said Droos, feeling as though she were afloat in a river, or in a dream, although this was no dream. Maybe it was only an Entertainment District program.

“Behold, Lieutenants of Drerpo,” said Showsh-Drerpo. “Princess Droos Yarite of The People of the Blood. A woman who has chosen me and whom I have chosen.”

“Hail Droos Yarite, the chosen one!” said the Lieutenants all as one voice.

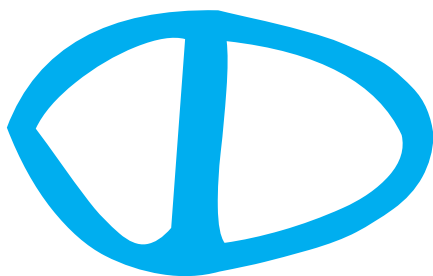
“I don’t understand,” said Droos, dreamily. “Who are these... people. Who is your brother? Who are... you, my love?”

lirOAntUs, the Chancellor, laughed, heartily, and in bass it shook the foundations of the program, as though the earth itself were speaking.

“I can see how you would consider this a vacation,” said lirOAntUs.

“My love, most dear Droos,” said Drerpo.

Walking over her, seeming to shrink in stature as he addressed her. Muscles bulged as his armor moved perfectly with his stride. Her heart fluttered, as he picked her up and spun her around, and then bent her over as he kissed her passionately,



Book II: The City

running a hand through her hair, and along her neck. She closed her eyes and felt swept away now in love and cherishment rather than any kind of fear. In these strong arms, she might dwell content forever.

“Yes,” said Drerpo. “You are welcome in them forever.”

“Have matters been decided then,” said lirOAntUs. “What does She say?”

“She has given Her blessing,” said Droos, afraid of her own words.

“The creature has words,” joked hUgOAlAE, a Being of Evil.

“Very many of them, I would add,” said Amet.

“This alone will not redeem her, my liege, or win over my colleague to her defense,” said ueSHøs, a Being of Righteousness.

This last form took on the appearance of a buck, with a large array of antlers spread out on both sides, and smooth, brown-gold hide. Yet the face was that of a primate, red in the center and blue on the outside, with eyes that showed nothing but care and pity. He looked at her then, Droos, as she hugged Drerpo, her boyfriend. That stare pierced her, down to her heart and soul, and even in the arms of Drerpo, Droos knew then, that much more work had yet to be accomplished. More choices were yet to be made. Redemption would still be a long road ahead.





Chapter 8

Last Port of Call

Simply a Destroyer Class vessel, the starship upon which they left to travel the thousand light years north was less than one hundredth the size of the Mercy. Still it had a compliment of several thousand and by all information age standards it was plenty luxurious. Her name was the Interceptor, and properly named, since for decades it had served Armada Intelligence, preventing all harm that might come upon the galaxy before it happened.

Cat was not the Commanding Officer of the vessel, but fulfilled, with professional distaste, the role of Executive Officer. Cat did not prefer administrative positions, but being in the field, and even as first officer she had the type of responsibilities she disliked. At least there was another Captain, with greater seniority and a permanent assignment, who led the command staff on the Interceptor. This Captain ran a tighter ship, and refused to entertain nicknames, always calling her Captain Wang or else just Captain. She was an alien species, insectoid in appearance, with a luminous, green exoskeleton.

A few Majors and Lieutenant-Commanders, and one Lieutenant-Colonel, accompanied Cat in the transfer, but largely it was a new group. This made the civilian consultants being brought along some of the handful of people the Captain knew aboard, although this did little to improve warmth in their interactions. Still, they talked far more frequently on this ship since nearly everyone had some security clearance, and many at high levels. These dialogues could be conducted in far more locations, including the Officer Mess.

“What exactly are these *intrusions* into Bagan?” said Droos on the second day.

She sat in the Officer Mess with Cat, the Lieutenant-Colonel, Drerpo, Amet, and Emerzo (Darlez was under

Book II: The City

supervision).

“Even to this day organic technology is something we don’t have,” said the Colonel. “What we see out there is, well, bloody.”

The Colonel was a human with dark skin, golden eyes, and straight, white hair.

“How do you know it’s bloody?” said Droos.

“You shoot it,” said the Colonel with a chuckle.

“Be quiet,” said Cat. “You forget yourself.”

Droos looked at Drerpo and rolled her eyes.

“We have come across fantastic creatures in space these last thousands of years,” said Cat. “Most were benign, a few were hostile by their nature, rather than intention. Only one or two were both intelligent and hostile. Lately on the Rim we have seen, well, a greater number and variety of the latter.”

“How can anything live in the vacuum of space?” said Droos.

“That’s been the problem in putting naked living vessels in space all this time,” said Cat. “How do they survive in space? These aren’t just engineered vessels, serving the needs of more conventional Sentients. Well, we theorize that some still are. Many are actual creatures, swimming through space. They can do so at unrelativistic speeds, many times faster than the speed of light.”

“You’re not sharing that many can go faster than the Mercy, and certainly this vessel,” said Emerzo.

Cat raised her eyebrows.

“I do wonder how your family knows so much about these creatures, and where they come from,” said the Colonel.

“We served on the Galactic Council Committee on Intelligence, including the Special Exo-Biology Sub-Committee,” said Drerpo. “Our background also has hundreds of years of education in the same sorts of science, so not only did we receive intelligence and decide policy on these matters, we wrote books on analyzing them. We’re not just some random civilians.”

“What’s the point of the princess?” said the Colonel, as Cat smiled.

“She’s my significant other,” said Drerpo. “I wouldn’t come out here without all of my family.”

Emerzo frowned.

“I guess that’s why the brat’s here too,” said Cat. “Your

princess' son, or brother, or whatever the frak he is to her."

"I'm his guardian," said Droos. "And mentor."

"How does that qualify you to review intelligence?" said the Colonel.

"She's a foreign dignitary and a seasoned Assembly lobbyist," said Drerpo. "As an important member of her tribe's royal family, she learned much about intelligence and running a state, albeit a much smaller one. Droos knows discretion and analysis."

"She wasn't very into intelligence, at least according to her book," said the Colonel.

"You read that crap?" asked Cat.

"It was quite entertaining," said the Colonel, defensively. "I at least follow politics. How do you defend something you don't know anything about?"

"I've been Drerpo's closest confidant my entire life," said Droos. "Always I have known everything he has known, and provided useful feedback to his ideas."

"That's at least some justification..." began Cat, running on into a strange aura that covered her words with tension.

Looking up she saw Amet looking at her, while the sound in the rest of the room was muted.

"Quite incongruous," he said. "How is it to them that Drerpo could both have been born with you in your tribe and a seasoned scientist and politician in the Assembly? Surely Armada Intelligence would have discovered this discrepancy. How do you wonder they don't?"

The princess frowned, looking at him, while a voice echoed in her head, it sounded like Drerpo's.

"Shø-Goe and Nue-Ow," it said.

"Do you agree, Princess," said the voice of Cat, loud, and coming back to her consciousness.

Her head spun a little, and she looked around, as all eyes were on her.

"Sorry, could you repeat that?" said Droos.

"Do you agree you're of less use to us than your colleagues?" said Cat.

"I suppose..." said Droos.

"Enough!" said Drerpo. "Droos does her part, and well. At worst she causes no trouble or interference. You'll get your assistance and information regardless."

Book II: The City

“Just playing,” said Cat.

“I appreciate that,” said Droos.

The captain purred a little.

A tone interrupted them, and all of the officers present raised their heads to listen.

“Attention crew,” said the voice of the ship’s captain. “We will be reaching Ruby Station in exactly one hour. Expected time to relativistic speeds is thirteen minutes. At normal speeds we will be visible to enemy sensors, so from this point forward, assume Code Yellow. Everyone, please, to your stations.”

“I guess that means you’re needed on the bridge,” said Droos to Cat.

Captain Wang stretched out her claws for a moment, before retracting them and rising, beckoning to the Colonel.

“We’ll continue this once we have docked,” said Cat. “Drerpo. Better keep your sweetheart in her quarters. Things get messy, wouldn’t want her bumping that sweet little head.”

Amet laughed, and the officers left the room.

“Captain to Emerzo,” the voice continued, but no one else heard the noise as dozens hurried to leave the room to their stations. This was a local transmission.

“Emerzo here,” said the twin. “Do you need us at Science?”

“Yes, please,” said the Captain. “Please have your people on the bridge in five minutes.”

“Does he want me too?” said Droos.

“Didn’t say otherwise,” said Emerzo. “Feel free to come along. Of course, we’ll trust your discretion.”

A Code Yellow was not a Code Red or Code Black, so the crew had slightly more leisure, particularly since it was some minutes until relativistic speeds, when the threat might appear. Professionals all of them, this hardly caused any to be late. Droos considered the fact, that unlike in the place she grew up, officers were not executed for being a little late; not to say that there were no consequences.

The bridge of the Interceptor was a large room, rectangular, with several decks, each with its own rows of control stations. The lowest level had in the front a similar arrangement to the one that had been in the internal fortress on the Mercy, with the odd similarity to a café. Delicate crystal made its appearance exquisite, but of course the four, Droos, Drerpo, Emerzo, and

Amet, did not get to stand on the lowest level. They were busy on the third deck.

Cat observed their entrance, and frowned imperceptibly to all but them, before returning to her work.

“Emerzo,” said an octopus like Sentient. “Commander Ostus Liyekol, Chief of Science aboard the Interceptor. This way please.”

The Commander was an alien species, with reddish fur covering some parts of her skin, beyond her clothing, and four arms. She had blue eyes.

They were shown, to Droos’ delight, over to a round table similar in appearance, though with darker crystal, to the centerpiece of the bridge. Naturally the science officers needed some of the best displays, and above this table rose a map of their current travel with many bits of information. Most of these were beyond the princess’ abilities, although speed and direction were not too difficult to intuit. Sitting around on the various chairs, two other officers, Lieutenants, greeted them with a nod, though not with names.

“Do you see anything so far?” said the Commander.

“How long is it until relativistic speeds?” said Emerzo.

“Two minutes, forty seconds,” said Ostus.

“So far nothing,” said Emerzo.

“What might we see?” said Droos.

“It’s different almost every time,” said Drerpo. “Mostly we look for something that doesn’t look normal.”

An image on the spherical display showed a replica of the ship with great detail, while their destination was left as a glowing dot. Various other dots, rather indistinguishable, lay with the proximity to the station, a wide area that could barely be called a system.

“It’s not a system,” said Drerpo. “There are stars beyond the Rim, but they are disparate, far apart.”

“Ninety seconds,” said a lieutenant.

“What’s the distance to Ruby?” asked Droos.

“Half a light year,” said the Commander.

“What’s that second number below light years, there under our icon,” said Droos.

“Our optical distance,” said Drerpo. “What can actually be seen with our scopes.”

“Forty seconds,” said the lieutenant.

Book II: The City

There were lots of numbers, down to the mile, under both the light year display and the optical distance display. She had covered advanced mathematics these last years, and knew a fair amount about the subject. Physics was also relatively familiar to her, though in the field it was definitely different to apply it.

“Twenty seconds.”

“Shouldn’t those two numbers be the same?” said Droos.

“They’re several hundred thousand miles different,” said Emerzo.

“Gravitational lensing?” said the Commander.

“Yes,” said Amet. “Now! We need to delay.”

“Captain...” Ostus began.

“Three, two, one...”

With a jolt the Interceptor returned to relativistic speeds. Immediately it began to rumble.

“...we have a problem...” continued Ostus.

“Visual,” said the Captain.

The front of the room, all the way from the bottom to top showed a giant display of the space in front of them, and above in the space between the screen and the decks, a three dimensional image of space showed their progress towards Ruby Station.

Empty space, free of all but a few dots of stars and no light, spread before them, the void staring beyond the galactic rim.

“Commander, what am I seeing,” said the Captain.

“Wait for it...” said Amet.

“Class O Exo Dreadnaught,” said the Commander.

Instantly the screen changed, and like a wall from floor to ceiling, an organic object of flesh and pores spread over the space in front of them. The dot on the three dimensional grid was so massive it took up multiple spheres.

“Code Red!” said Cat, down next to the Captain.

“Raise shields, weapons ready,” said the Captain. “But do no fire until I say so.”

Then a wall of purple puss flooded at near light speeds the space in front of them, too quick for any maneuvering, and the space beyond the shields around the vessel was inundated. The Interceptor shook, and power began flickering on all of the consoles.

“Shields failing,” an officer said.

“Emerzo, what do they want?” said the Captain.

“One thing,” said Emerzo. “Only one thing.”

“Givееее her тооо us...” hissed a voice, through no channel, but as if the air of the vessel were filled with slithering snakes.

“What the hell is that?” said Cat.

“Shields are gone,” said the officer. “The substance seems to have had no effect on our armor, but whether that is by choice or inability, I don’t know.”

“Sennnnnd her... onnnnly her... to us,” said the voice.

“No one elseееее will bee harmed...”

“Who!” said the Captain.

“The princesssss... Droооsss... send me the girrrl...” said the voice. “You will be lefttt unharmed.”

“Atropo, you have to,” said Drerpo.

“Who’s Atropo?” asked the Commander.

“The princess!” said Cat. “Captain. Whatever danger the princess has gotten us into, I say we think of the thousands of other lives on this vessel...”

“I’ll hear none of that, Captain Wang,” said the Captain.

“Every person on this ship is my responsibility, and I will not yield one on duress for any reason short of treason.”

“I’ve determined an attack would have little effect on them,” said the tactical officer.

“Communication with assets in the region have been blocked, Sir,” said the communications officer.

“Options!” said the Captain.

“Youuuu have oneееее minute...” said the voice. “Or youuuuu will dieееее.”

“Emerzo,” said the Captain. “What is this girl guilty of that you brought her here? What could she have possibly done?”

“That would be very hard to explain,” said Emerzo.

“Amet. Now!” said Drerpo.

The brother nodded his head grimly, and closed his eyes, muttering words, and tracing lines in the air. So he too knew the mysterious language.

“Captain, I have propulsion!” said the engineering chief.

“Get us out of here!” said the Captain.

With some shaking the Interceptor flew forward and along the plane of the creature, or whatever lay before them in space. Black spores flooded out, but slower, much slower, inching towards, them, like something blocked their progress. Then the sphere moved away from them as well. With their combined

Book II: The City

speeds, the orb diminished, bit by bit, until nearly a minute passed and they could see it. A bulbous creature of many colors with pores and a giant beak, and four brown eyes, stared at them.

“What the Hell is that, Commander?” said Cat.

“Its... its...” said Ostus.

“An Astral Dreadnaught,” said Emerzo.

Sitting down in his chair, the Captain put his head in his arms.

“Amet?” said Emerzo

The brother seemed to say three words, and then, as they continued their retreat, and the creature now filled only a third of the screen, a light, like a star streaking through heaven, flashed from the right of screen, on into the Astral Dreadnaught, piercing its side. Teratons of explosive energy ripped through the creature, which let out a last, powerful screech.

“Shockwave approaching,” said Cat’s second.

Amet spread his hand out, in a symbol, as he said a few words forcefully. Light shot out in an arm, and covered the incoming shockwave consuming it. Across the screen blinding light caused everyone to look away, and when they opened their eyes again, the creature, the lights, and the danger were gone.

Soon Station Ruby became visible, once the proper codes were transmitted, along with dozens of other vessels in the system, and strange defenses that defied the princess’ easy classification. Ruby was a vibrant textured red, bright like the skin of some Sentients in the Bagan Galaxy. Once visible, none would miss its striking appearance. The Interceptor itself found the dock at the very top of the roughly cylindrical piece of metal.

Normally Cat would have been happy to return to her post of choice, yet as Droos, Drerpo, Emerzo, Amet, Darlez, and she disembarked, along with several dozen other officers, there was an unusual sense of urgency. All of them walked quickly through a series of hallways, which still had posted guards and required many passwords, on into the heart of Ruby. Two doors constructed of solid jet slid open and into a room covered by walls just as dark and black, and nearly all light vanished as they closed. There they stood for a beat.

The air was stuffy, and Droos thought it was slightly cold, like the time her arm had been regrown in the aura of black stuff. Then lights came on, revealing a very simple room. It was much wider now, but only several wooden tables and chairs lay in

geometrically perfect orientation.

“Ah, my kitty cat,” said a voice in a corner.

Slightly in shadow, an old woman, shrunken and wrinkled, moved back and forth slowly on a rocking chair. Her features were smeared, as if they were badly painted. A glowing white uniform flowed over her form, blinding, and keeping those who looked at her gazing at her face. It was an odd mixture of shadow and brilliance.

“Colleagues,” said Cat. “Let me introduce you to one of our greatest weapons. Here before you is the Avatar of Ruby. Ruby is the highest ranking active Armada officer today. She is Admiral of the Armada.”

“Go lick your teeth, Cat,” said the Avatar. “I can speak for myself. Been around a long time, and my rank does me little since I’ve been granted only this forsaken territory at the start of intergalactic space.”

“Uh... Ruby...” said Emerzo.

“Is that...?” said Amet.

“So this is where you holed up,” said Drerpo, with a chuckle. “Here we go on vacation, and we find the great Ruby in the same place.”

“So that’s why you’re all here,” said Ruby. “Cat, do you have any idea who these people are? Why their...”

“That’s quite enough Ruby,” said Emerzo. “Our business is our own.”

“Quite right,” said the Avatar. “It’s just been so long. When I first came to this galaxy only the First Ones were around. If I told these kids hear how long ago that was, well, I would be revealing my age. Not something an old woman normally likes to do. So what little game are you playing now, Emerzo? Gosh, when you were a little girl you played such interesting games...”

“Admiral,” said Cat, “I don’t know what connection you have to these people. Frankly, I begin to wonder if they are the reason we’ve lost so many citizens to whatever invasion has threatened us for decades. Would you please help address the incident that occurred only two dozen light seconds from here?”

“Always the dutiful one, aren’t you, Cat?” said the Admiral. “And you show such respect and reverence. Alas, you’re right. Back to saving the galaxy. If I surmise correctly, Cat, you were not so far off with your playful anecdote. With Atropo and...”

Book II: The City

“Amet, Drerpo, and Emerzo...” quickly added Emerzo.

“Alright, that works,” said Ruby. “With Emerzo, Drerpo, and Amet around, trouble’s sure to follow. Well, not quite like that. They’re certainly known for keeping the peace. Emerzo here was part of the Dweehwailian Council of the Arts last I checked. Ah, but that’s digressing again. When these three appear like this, it always means somethings happening. Something important.”

“Let me guess,” said Cat. “The princess.”

“Emerzo,” said the *old woman*. “Am I right that they’re after this girl? Dear me, is it because of you Drerpo? So! Emerzo wasn’t enough for you?”

“She has given her permission,” said Droos.

“I’m sure she has told you so, dear girl,” said Ruby. “And this one, Drerpo, has never before looked at anyone but her. Quite unusual I might add. The laws and the morals of the world we are from fully allow for such things. Only those who live short lifetimes, oh, just a few million years, think they have to remain with one person. Love for Sentients who live a long time is so much more complex... That doesn’t mean Emerzo likes it.”

“Is that true, Emerzo?” said Droos.

Emerzo blushed, so strange on her cheeks, and her eyes glowed for a second, but just a second, before she turned over to the princess.

“Dear Droos,” she said. “It is complicated. It is hard. You... you’re so young.”

“So are you!” said Droos.

“Yah... that’s right,” said Emerzo, moving her eyes to the side.

“Can we please talk about defense of this galaxy in this year in this place,” said Cat, claws jutting from her fingers, scraping the table.

“None of this makes sense!” said Darlez.

“And who’s this cute one?” said Ruby. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Darlez,” he said, rubbing his shoe on the ground.

“Hardly any younger than the woman raising him,” said Ruby.

“Such as you once said about Amet and I,” said Drerpo.

“Cat is right,” said Ruby. “Whatever the case might be, what we know is that an Astral Dreadnaught, a creature that has not been seen in this galaxy for, well I’d say thirty thousand

years, appears suddenly on time to meet your vessel. Stranger still, it is almost immediately consumed by an energy source of many hundred teratons. It's probably been, well, several hundred thousand years since the last time such firepower was seen. Such weapons as these, well, we are clearly in exceptional times."

"And it's all because of me," said Droos. "Why?"

"That is the question that most needs answering," said the Avatar. "And I'm just as sure that it is the question least likely to be answered right now."

"Well the best I can surmise from all of this is that this girl is a threat to the Assembly of proportions I never could have dreamed of," said Cat. "I'm glad we discovered this when she was here, and not a few sectors from Marba. This way we can put her in an Interstellar Shuttle, and send her in a straight line out of this galaxy. Let Astral Dreadnaughts deal with her there."

"Leave... the galaxy?" said Droos.

"Why the Hell would we leave galaxy?" said Darlez.

"My prediction is that for whatever reason you want her safe," said Ruby, "The best place to take her is beyond Bagan, beyond Virgo, far, far away, to places known, fortunately, to at least four Sentients in this room. If she's gone, well, whoever it is has it out for her will have little interest in this galaxy."

"That's not entirely clear," said Amet.

"It's the Queen of Pain," said Drerpo. "She's established a domain right in the center of their capitol planet. Even if we leave, she will not."

"Yet she'd probably go into hibernation, like she was for the last however many thousands of years before you decided to go meddling," said the Avatar. "It's Tzefee isn't it?"

Emerzo nodded.

"Ever since you and your friends got lost in The Indeterminate and destroyed her Manifestation, that Being has been after you," said Ruby. "I doubt it is a coincidence that you should get caught in a trap. Who told you to come to No anyway? Was it ueSHøs?"

"You know them so well," smiled Amet.

"I would suggest asking Delritro if you have questions," said Ruby. "The Council of the Arts might help, but this problem is inherently religious. Mind your Feaism."

"Who is Tzefee, Mother Ruby?" said Emerzo.

"Who is Tzefee?" said Ruby. "Tzefee Keeyokeez

Book II: The City

Jestuqaip. Everything must have an opposite. Without a Challenger, there is little reason for evolution. Adversaries spur growth. It may even be that she is something beyond the limitations of Good and Evil. Good and evil are tools that serve Sentients. The Indeterminate is far more subtle. Or else why does Goamdwee fear the Great Wave so much.”

“You three...” teased Droos. “Or I suppose you four now. Would you mind coming back to the real world? Now you’re here with me. Tell me what I should do?”

Drerpo, Emerzo, Amet, and Ruby all turned to look at the young woman.

Then her boyfriend strolled over to her and kissed her.

“It seems that matter is settled,” said Ruby.

“What do you think we should do?” Drerpo asked Droos.

“I will never leave you,” said Droos. “As long as you will have me. I will go where you will go. Even if that lies beyond this galaxy. Even if all the world falls away, and I cannot comprehend anymore where I stand. With you I will walk through planes of pure white, into cities of righteousness, towers of writhing flame, through libraries filling vast worlds. To all of these I will walk with you.”

“Don’t forget about where we came from, my friend,” said Drerpo. “The People of the Blood have need of saving. They will need you.”

“All in due time,” said Droos, and she kissed him again.

§

“I didn’t know there was anything outside Bagan,” said Darlez. “Or else I only ever heard about monsters.”

“We saw a monster the other day,” said Droos. “I don’t know where it came from, and there might be more on our way.”

“Where would we be going?” said the boy. “You know your boyfriend and his sister and brother are really weird. They seem young one moment and then they grow into mountains. Sometimes they seem very happy. Other times they are so sad.”

“Drerpo is very frightening,” said Droos. “I grew up with him. It seems ages ago, like a dream. Saying that is so funny, after having many dreams, showing images that I now see with my waking eyes. Those days I walked in Nolai, with my father,

and my friends, my servants, Etøn, Resh, and Ini; how much space lies now between them and me? They placed a crown upon my head, and dressed me, and taught me rituals, dances, songs, and incantations, to treasure death and to look forwards to the day I would die in order to redeem my people. Then I worshiped the Queen of Pain, the very being that in some unbelievable, spiritual, yet real way now seeks my death even here.

“Throughout all of this, Drerpo has been at my side. He was my closest confidant, challenging my beliefs, everything everyone else said. I hardly believed him, yet onward he pushed, and held my hand. When I kissed him, he responded, but held back, and now I almost think I comprehend why. Yet still he was sensitive, and bore my girlish crush. He stayed my friend, and on through the great ordeals of death, seeing our friends die. It took all his effort, but in the end I chose to live. We sailed into the dawn of a new day, dancing under stars atop a wooden ship, and standing arms around each other as we gazed upon caves of steel.”

“I like him,” said Darlez.

“Yah, me too,” said Droos.

“Why do they want you dead?” said Darlez. “Who is Tzefee?”

“Darlez, for this I have few answers,” she said. “Really the ideas, the visions brought before me are too terrible and wondrous to speak aloud. Even the words I speak seem risen from a force that steadily grows within me. Like a hand reaching out of the stars it seeks me, attempting to raise me to some new height I do not know. It has yet to take my hand, but some day, an awful day, it might. For the places we go now, us mortals, small and afraid, consumed by the threat of death, yearning for something beyond our grasp, must hold our breaths. For to inhale the sweetness of heaven, to hear the voices of gulls, is to forever forget the world in which we were born. Will I still be Droos, even if I am in Heaven?”

“You will always be Droos to me,” said Darlez, and he came up and snuggled his head against her.

She stroked his hair, and kissed his head, and enjoyed the company of her brother.

Days passed, here within the being, Ruby, while vessels of various types flowed by on the breezes of space, silent in a realm without sound. Looking out the window was disconcerting, absent the stars she had seen, during all the years she looked up at the

Book II: The City

heavens, planetside, or even in space. Still she did not get used to seeing next to no stars. There were a few, lonely systems away at great distances, hermits from the great being whose gravity they danced within yet too far from the center. The princess thought it must be a lonely life being out here beyond the Rim.

So much had happened in just the last few months, and Droos found herself longing for Drerpo. Once they had walked this world together as youths hand in hand, and had few others. Now they were both important people, each in their own way. Surmising a plan, the princess arranged for the Avatar to babysit the boy, a task stranger than anything she might know, and this gave her time to address other important matters.

Hallways aboard the station were unexpectantly straight and smooth, for passages within a creature. Entrances in many parts opened a little different, spiraling outward into the sides of bulkheads separating sections. Sometimes bulges, revealing what in all other locales might be piping, but here, well, were just as likely veins, projected out from the walls several inches, or in some cases, half a foot. No odor or unpleasant smell or sight could be found, and the visual elements included numerous ultranet displays and windows into space on the outer parts of the station.

An hour passed as she quietly wandered the halls, but at last reaching the bottom of the station, she walked down a ramp into a clear bubble, mostly transparent, yet solid, encompassing a wide area on all sides. Through this extremity of Ruby was space, sullen, and empty. Here stood Drerpo.

His black hair was mussy, and he wore a teal tunic with oval textural patterns. Short sleeves revealed his sleek arms, with sprouts of hair, and honed muscles. From behind he was firm, and stood straight, with his hands together behind his back. The finger at the end of each had a rough texture that built upward from each plane, a natural quirk of this otherwise fabulous creature.

Sensing her presence, Drerpo turned slowly, over his shoulder, and smiled slightly, looking calmly at Droos. She stood there, dressed in flowing blue, seamless from top to bottom, but showing her curvature. A handful rose over her chest, and her hips flowed lusciously outward only just enough. Skin with a few blemishes, yet largely clear and smooth, covered slender but healthy arms that slid from the sleeveless dress. Glowing eyes and a face with a confident smile, cheeks barely forming a wrinkle, lay topped by curls, bountiful brown flowing hair that descended

a bit down towards the small of her back. In her moment standing before Drerpo above the vastness of space, she stood graceful and strong.

Standing, they looked at each other, into their eyes, reading the years of kindness, of tears, of laughs, of anger, all manner of experience they had lived together on many different shores of this realm, this universe. Almost twenty-two years had passed. They had watched each other grow from small children into handsome adults.

“You are so... so radiant, Droos,” said Drerpo. “I see such strength, such confidence.”

“I see warmth, and kindness, a man who will never hurt me or cast me aside,” said Droos. “Already I feel as one with you. As if every heart beat within you—at the same moment also my heart beats. When I look, I see with your eyes.”

“How do you feel, Droos?” said Drerpo.

“In love,” said Droos. “Infatuated as a girl, but passionate as a woman.”

Drerpo closed his eyes and raised his hand, standing ten feet away, and yet a hand moved across her. At his touch, her eyes shut and her mouth opened. The breeze, a wind brushed her hair, and swept down below her back, and over her from across her legs, then upward, along the center, slowly traveling. At last a brush of finger tips on a breast, at that sensitive spot at their tip, and the feeling slowly subsided. Breathing, deep, slow breaths, even now it seemed to her that she was a part of him, never again to be alone, or abandoned, or to be far from her Drerpo.

A hand cupped hers, and opening her eyes, with a dreamy smile, all the universe stood before her there in the form of her boyfriend, now standing, actually holding her hand. So much could he do without even standing directly in front of her. Only she could imagine what might happen if he were to get even closer. Now she raised her hand with his, and responded by swinging the arms back and forth.

“Come with me, Droos,” said Drerpo. “Let’s go on a journey, and walk the warm halls of this vessel. We’ll talk, and put wonder aside for a moment, only to be like children again, to enjoy words and the poetic wisdom as only young lovers can perceive.”

“Alas, but we’re not lovers,” said Droos.

“Close enough, my love,” said Drerpo.

Swinging her hand a few more times, he let go, and walked

Book II: The City

a few paces away, beckoning, with a bow of his head, and she followed. Up the ramp from the view of space they entered into hallways passing around the ship. In silence they walked, holding hands, no words needed. Yet old times called for more direct speech.

“Why did you decide to obey your father?” said Drerpo.

“He told you, ‘Leave this mountaintop, the Ring of the King. Show my people the sacrifice I make to ensure their salvation. Do this and you will truly be my daughter.’”

“I hate him,” said Droos. “He terrified me with threats of death, of torture. Would he even have used rape to torment me had I rebelled? What extent wouldn’t my father have gone to in order to enforce his will upon me?”

“Then we’ll kill him,” said Drerpo.

Taking some deep breaths, Droos squeezed his hand.

“My father deserves death,” said Droos. “Little would I be a judge, to deal out death, like my father. Let our people decide. Still, I am my father’s daughter.”

She stopped, and closed her eyes, a tear trickling down the corner.

“He,” said Droos. “My father and I were never close.

Fathers show their daughters everything a man can be. One day each girl grows up, and finds a partner, I know now it can be a man or woman. But should she find a man, everything she saw in her father, that will be the warmth, the tenderness she expects in that man. It is the start of her explorations in life. The one that will be completed in all of the new lessons, continued by a husband, beyond what was started, the initial teachings of her father.

“Your sister and your brother, they were lucky to have a father like yours, Drerpo. It is dreadful what happened to him. He took time to talk to you, and sit with you one on one, sharing anecdotes and stories. I never had that with my father. Still, he is my father. I hate him, but the thought of betraying him even to this day lies heavily on me, for in the most ironic way, I still love him. If my people decide it, I will stand aside, even if I will not look as he is executed. Would I slay him with my own hand? Then, in the past, before everything that has transpired these last six years, I was still unsure how I could betray him, the man, the only father I knew in my life. He was terrible, evil, deserving of death, but still my father. I could not betray him. I could not disappoint him.”

“I understand,” said Drerpo. “Even if I had a member of

my immediate family who betrayed me, would I willingly myself slay Him in return? If my father or mother gave me an instruction, told me how I might best serve them, how I might earn their love and trust, would I go against their will? What ties are greater than family? Truly many would do horrible things to ensure their clan's survival."

"Is what I did really so horrible?" said Droos. "Did I perform executions with my own hands? Did my servants slay innocent women and children, crucify them at my command? Did I have spies among them, observing their every move and action? What truly was my crime?"

"The advocate for evil has a share in punishment," said Drerpo. "A symbol that perpetuates a myth that binds a people in the manacles of slavery, particularly if that living symbol is aware of her actions, this carries consequence. Commanding slaves and issuing warrants for rape and torture is a great degree more heinous, but you, my love, I fear are not free from any crime."

"What does that mean?" said Droos. "Will I pass through the Gates of Hell and feel fire burning my skin without being consumed for all eternity. Will the light of heaven in its absence alone forever freeze my soul in terrible frost?"

"The Lieutenant of Hell would tell you, and you have seen him before, that His purpose serves to purify our souls from the mistakes we make in life," said Drerpo. "Even the souls of Gods fall into his keeping upon death. Yes, indeed, Gods too can die, even if they are immortal. Many who have not beheld the fields of torment, been to Hell and seen it with their own eyes, imagine a singular afterlife, where they either earn The City of the Righteous in Heaven, or are forever condemned to Hell. What if instead a soul might have multiple journeys upon death? For upon death, a soul shatters in the brilliance of its passage from a living body and the pieces are driven to a thousand different worlds in this universe. Fragments are driven to both Heaven and Hell. Further might there be different layers to paradise and torment, with reward and punishment matching deeds in life? Should every reward be the same? Should every punishment be the same?"

"Then is it possible even if I am culpable, that only part of me will need purification?" said Droos. "Only a fragment of my soul will descend into Hell."

"It may be," said Drerpo. "But... we will see what in the end will be. For is it fair, that one born of a goodly nature,

Book II: The City

but raised and conditioned in a palace of evil, should be held accountable entirely for one or two modest mistakes she makes, furthermore, while she is under duress? Wouldn't the Lieutenant of Heaven stand upon hearing this doom before His Sovereigns and plea that such a soul be redeemed, saved from any fire of Hell?"

"I heard once, from the mouth of a Great Being," said Droos, "One who is called ueSHøs, that a good heart is not alone sufficient to ensure whole redemption. Hell will have its fragment. For the purpose of fire is to burn from the metal the scraps of refuse and meats remaining from mistakes in life, and when all matter beyond the soul is purged, out of the flame, and to other places that soul will be delivered."

"You do not fear Hell?" said Drerpo. "Is that possible in a mortal?"

"I do fear," said Droos. "And an evil woman might laugh at a severe decree, mocking it, showing that she has no fear. Yet a goodly woman might instead welcome the purifying flame that will prepare her for a higher state of being in some future life yet to come."

"Maybe embracing one's fate, recognizing frailties, that alone provides some relief from the pain of punishment," said Drerpo. "Maybe it is the spite, the scorn in the face of evil choices that causes purification to hurt? Wouldn't the most righteous sit in a burning house of flame in baetOAK, and sing and dance, carry on conversations of philosophy and happiness, accepting the pain that is meant to help them, rather than see it truly as a punishment. For sometimes even the good must fall in order to rise again stronger and higher."

"So that's how you got to be how you are," said Droos. "Many years in flames."

"That is more true than you can know," said Drerpo. "Yet."

"Drerpo," said the princess.

"Here I am," said the Servant.

"Do you think things will change between us?" said Droos.

"I mean, if we ever, well, you know, got married."

"Are you asking me to marry you, my friend?" said Drerpo.

"No," said Droos. "I'm talking about what it would be like to be married to you. You and I have been together for so long."

“We weren’t always friends, you know,” said Drerpo. “In the beginning you enjoyed, I think, bossing me around. I was your servant.”

“That’s right...” said Droos, blushing. “And I act like I’m so innocent.”

“You were naïve, if anything,” said Drerpo. “How could you have been otherwise with all of the stories you were told. It was remarkable the change you made, coming to see me as a friend, and others. Would you have mourned at all the deaths of your other servants if you had thought the same way as the beginning?”

“You took some awfully big risks,” said Droos. “What if someone had heard you saying the things you did? What if something had happened to you?”

“Then you would have had to find a new crush,” said Drerpo.

Droos pushed him.

“Why is it you were always the one wanting to kiss me?” said Drerpo. “Some might have said the princess was trying to take advantage of her humble servant. There I was just trying to do my job.”

“I wish I had been able to take advantage of you sooner,” laughed Droos. “And better!”

“Well if we’re going to get married, you’ll be able to do anything you want,” said Drerpo.

“Well this time, my friend, you’ll have to do the choosing,” said Droos. “You know full well what my answer will be. When you’re ready, I’ll be here, all ready to have my way with you.”

By the time they finished talking they had reached the top of the station, the ship dock where first they had entered within from the Interceptor, still with windows to see out onto space. Remembering her responsibilities, taken on by her desire for family, Droos kissed Drerpo on the cheek and left him, wandering back towards the heart of the ship to get Darlez. What would it have been like for him to be with this strange old woman, Ruby?

Even without Drerpo, the princess was able to pass through the security positions, thanks to her mysterious intelligence clearance. The explanation for that was exaggerated at best. It occurred to her that mysteriously enough, Amet had decided that on Ruby that her protection was sufficient without his constant

Book II: The City

vigil over her. Still he was here, in quarters of his own, next to the one she shared with Darlez. Now she walked alone through hallways, and found it exhilarating. She liked Amet well enough, but she got an odd feeling with him, almost like he looked at her as a superior, when clearly he was a man of great ability.

“Ah, the Doom of Dweehwail,” said the Avatar of Ruby, as Droos entered the room.

Dark walls and wooden tables, the same as before, greeted her, and comically atop one of these wooden surfaces the boy and the old woman had a board game spread out before them. Many small wooden pieces lay strewn about scenes of mountains and forests and fields, and a circuit around the board with numbers. The princess had seen many strange things in her life, but this game was oddest. Neither among her tribe or with the technology of the Assembly had she seen this sort of entertainment.

“He’s winning,” said Ruby, reading her thoughts.

“Yah, but I’m sure she’s letting me win,” said Darlez, only slightly concerned.

“Well I like watching you beat me,” said Ruby. “But now, the Doom of Dweehwail comes before us, and we should show our respect.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” said Droos, frowning.

“Because you are the pebble,” said Ruby, “You are the final weight of snow upon the rooftop.”

“Why are you speaking so funny?” said the boy, laughing.

“You’re bothering Darlez,” said Droos.

“He doesn’t seem bothered,” said the Avatar. “Smart boy. You too will have a part. Yet this girl’s daughter will yet dwell amidst the Garden Tree before this tale is over. The Multiverse will be shaken to its core, and many shall perish, and the ancient laws will be changed and made anew. A savior will come from the only child of Droos and Showsh.”

“My daughter...” said Droos, stars dancing before her eyes. “But surely any children I have will be with Drerpo, not... that Being. Not with Showsh. Nor do I want such influence; I do not want Power; just freedom for my people and the arms of the man I love around me.”

“Who is Showsh?” said Darlez.

“Yet choice remains,” said Ruby. “A light will shine and the princess will behold domains long hidden from mortals, and she will transcend, grasping the Hand of Destiny. Yet already

her choices have planted the seeds of doom. Dark light has been loosed along with the radiant, and all calamity will have its origin with it. Thus, from this girl, before you, Darlez, will come both the source of evil, and the source of salvation.”

“How can I be the source of both darkness and light?” said Droos.

“How can light be dark?” asked the boy.

“You must see beyond the confines of good and evil to the realm of Good and Evil,” said Ruby. “Dualistic approach sees opposites united, that night is intertwined with day. All of this Showsh knows, for He and Elriver See; but they have humbled themselves and no longer appear as They Are, but as they are. They have become careless.”

“Who are you to say such things?” said Droos. “Who are you?”

“I am a secret, hidden from even the Beings about whom I speak,” said Ruby. “In a story well known to them, my youth is revered. None believe that still in this fair realm I might yet dwell.”

“Drerpo, Emerzo, Amet... they seem to know something about you,” said Droos.

“They know me as you see me in this moment,” said Ruby. “As the Great Assembly in this small place has come to see me. Some say I am an oracle, or a prophetess, or more often, cracked and insane. Not all of my predictions have come true. They accuse me of communion with The Indeterminate or with The Dark River. If only they knew the truth. Showsh’s sister once was a disciple of mine. She might know the truth.”

“Will what you see come true then?” said Droos. “I don’t know if I could bear the burden you place upon my future. Perhaps I should leap from the precipice now before such a fate will find me.”

“Don’t leave me!” said Darlez.

“You see now,” said Ruby. “It is your nature, why He sought you to save you from the start. It is your nature that cares for this young boy, and desires children of your own, and, with no desire for power, but seeing the suffering of innumerable Sentients, you will bow to the pressure to transcend.”

“Why would such a being seek me?” said Droos. “I am frail and small, a confused girl, lost in a great universe of strange visions. Let me remain, please, I beg you, among mortals, to be

Book II: The City

myself.”

“I fear the journey has already begun,” said Ruby. “Forces are moving beyond your control and to alter your course would carry greater consequence than to proceed.”

“Then how do I choose?” said Droos. “Or so you say there is a choice, or choices yet to be made.”

“By being who you are,” said Ruby.

“And who am I?” said Droos.

“You’re my big sister!” said the boy.

“So says Petelee,” said Ruby. “Whose name means *Redemption*”.





Chapter 9

Language of the Universe

A star twinkled, bright as her birth star, as Droos watched Ruby Station dwindle behind them, their Scout Craft curving around and then back, away into their future. That future terrified her, and her head hang low. At last once again it was only the five of them: she, Drerpo, Darlez, Emerzo, and Amet. Cat had some clever parting words to give them, mostly warnings about returning, for clearly their presence alone was a threat to this peaceful civilization. Or more specifically, the princess' threat. No matter, some day she would return, if only for the simple purpose of helping her people. Then she would be a wiser mortal, a better leader, and braver, far braver, ready for the final sacrifices she might have to make. The station behind them now, vanished, not just behind them and into their past, but because Ruby was only visible to those who she designed to have see her. Now they were on their own.

Strangely enough the direction went straight towards the twinkling star, unnerving if Droos thought about it. Shivering, even here on the temperature controlled craft, Drerpo came alongside her and took her hand. Squeezing it in reply, she spoke.

“How do you do it?” she said.

“With great pleasure,” said Drerpo, and he delicately and deliberately removed his hand and then placed it back in hers.

“Funny...” she said. “Really, though, how do you, well, exist as who you are, and not fall apart?”

“My dear friend,” said Drerpo. “You’ve been talking to Ruby! I fear you may even now know all of my secrets. Believe me that someday they shall all be made clear directly from me.”

“For now...?” asked Droos.

“I exist, Droos, to care for you, to be with you,” said Drepo. “From the day of my birth, in every moment at the heart of

Book II: The City

my awareness was your sweet face, your curly hair! But also your heart. I did all I could to help you learn, to recognize that political systems and even religions should be questioned. I gave you a choice, to tell your father that you would not be his spokesman. That you would rather die than perpetuate the myths of your tribe. Not to say that all faiths and traditions, or belief in God or Gods, should be abandoned. No, not at all."

"Should I believe in Elriver and Showsh, then?" said Droos, "Rather than the God of Blood and the Queen of Pain?"

"Yes," said Drerpo.

For a moment he appeared, rising as a shadow before a mountain, and a wall of granite rose between she and him. It passed, and there once more was her love, her friend Drerpo.

"Sometimes you appear to me so great, so mighty," said Droos. "Almost like you were yourself this very being: Showsh Himself."

"That would be quite story," said Drerpo. "That one of the two Sovereigns of the Universe should be born as a mortal human and raised among them. And further, in order to seemingly support the growth and development of a girl. It is an interesting idea, but really, is it likely? Do you really think I am this being, Showsh?"

"I have a few tests I could give now," said Droos. "One from the past, and one for the present."

"I accept the challenge," smiled Drerpo.

"On occasion I have read through my book, or rather, the one your sister gave me," said Droos. "It is lost on most readers. Whenever you refer to my tribe, you always used the interpersonal pronoun. Always you referred to *your* tribe, and never *our tribe*. It is curious, that this goes back even to our earliest days together."

"Maybe it was simply an error in the publishing," said Drerpo. "Truly do you remember every word we have spoken?"

"I try to remember every word you have spoken, Drerpo," said Droos, running a hand along his back, holding a shoulder.

"So what is the evidence of today?" said Drerpo. "How might you prove that I was as you say?"

"Simple," said Droos. "Go ahead and offer praise to Showsh and to Elriver. If they are Great Beings, then surely you might offer them praise."

"But if I did I would offer praise to myself," said Drerpo, "Should your hypothesis be correct. That would make me vain. Of course, my love, would you consider it so vain for God to see

greatness in Him or Herself?”

“You did not answer my question,” said Droos.

“I do not worship or praise Showsh and Elriver,” said Drerpo, “Although I admit they have my respect, because I am a Feaist. I praise the Great Beings, those who according to myth rise above even Sentients like the Sovereigns of this universe. For they are the masters of all.”

“Except for The Indeterminate,” said Droos.

He raised his eyebrows.

“Very good,” said Drerpo. “Yes, Feaism is inconclusive regarding the control Arch-Sentients wield over the Indeterminate.”

“How do you live in such a world, Drerpo,” said Droos.

“So much burden you must have.”

“My family and I...” said Drerpo. “Anora said to you once that each Sentient is born with certain natures. No one is bound to fate, but some factors contribute to trends among species of Sentients. She said that humans are social and ghosts love service. Still there are other Sentients, higher forms, beings that would be so alien to most Sentients in Bagan that their appearance would appear to them as revelations from divinity.”

“What is the nature of such beings?” said Droos.

“Beings like Showsh and Elriver,” said Drerpo, “And their children, are best able to use The Language of the Universe. They are the Emperors and Empresses of Dweehwail, who over a radically different length and conception of time have built realms so magnificent they defy comprehension by mortals. None of this might be done without the Greater Beings, the true Deities of Dweehwail, and the quality of these Beings is known. It is selflessness. Yet speaking with them requires an innate understanding of their language.”

“What are the Great Beings?” said Droos

“They are all around us, within us,” said Drerpo. “Beneath science, the empirical facts of reality that compose the order of this Universe, they are the abstractions. They are Justice. They are Life. They are Happiness.”

“How can Happiness be someone?” said Droos.

“Such words are of little use in reference to the Great Beings,” said Drerpo. “Already, Sentients like Elriver and Showsh, they see Dweehwail in a way that most other Sentients could not understand, simply out of their natures. If Life is a Greater Being, it is through The Language of the Universe with Its

Book II: The City

help that Elriver and Showsh have shaped and breathed life into billions of Sentient species in this universe.”

“That’s so obvious,” said Droos. “Elriver and Showsh are Gods. Of course they created life.”

“Yes,” said Drerpo. “It is... truly wonderful.”

“Does that make me one of their creations too?” said Droos.

“It makes you one of Her creations,” said Drerpo, with a smirk.

He smiled at her, and she still saw only stars, and a twinkling light through the window, towards which they steadily advanced.

“Why would... why would you want to be with me...” said Droos, quietly, and her heart sat on ice.

Turning to her, he loosed his hand from her grasp, and reaching forward, he placed it over her breast, directly above her heart. Then the sun shone in her eye, and she entered a dream. Warmth flowed across her arms, and wet her legs, like a flowing stream, that made her heart flutter. A scitter lay in her grasp, her hands brushing against a long bushy tail, and a small wet nose sniffing her fingers. Sweet ripe passion fruit wet her lips, dripping juice over her mouth, and nectar down her throat. Children’s voices, laughing and playing drifted over the rumble of a storm, only it was rain that fell as she lay on a feather bed in a cabin sheltered from the lightning and thunder.

Then she saw two young children, a boy and a girl, and there before her eyes they grew. Together they wandered through gardens of roses and valleys between tall mountains, over deserts of black sand and small stones. Hand in hand they traveled the earth, and slowly their hands drew closer together, and firmer. What started as childish play, then youthful infatuation, became passionate love. Born together, raised together, the two were as one from the night of the girl’s birth, and to this day, only separate in that they were two souls, and not one. Yet she saw how the young man looked at her, and that it seemed galaxies were born, bursting into existence suddenly along with a trillion worlds all to compliment the bliss and happiness felt by this man. For his closest friend, the love of his youth, was the woman he now knew he could be with for eternity. Whether by accident or not, the origins of such a fate was unclear. But the love that blossomed between these two Sentients was real.

Like a leaf Droos fell, drifting back and forth on air currents, downward, and she tingled, a bliss that threatened to shatter her soul, so golden her passion rose to heaven itself, and honey graced her tongue. Then she landed and slowly, so slowly, the ringing of transcendence withdrew, and darkness, a limbo, replaced all of the feelings. At last through a blur of light the walls of the Scout Ship, on which she traveled through space, reappeared, and Drerpo there, simple, sweet Drerpo, her friend, her love, standing with a hand over her heart.

Raising the hand to her neck, he kissed her. Tears, hot and wet, rained a sprinkle on their tongues, and the salt was strangely invigorating. Her body ached, and she shook, undulating, beginning at her center, before she nearly fell to the floor. Then, utterly exhausted and spent, she at last did fall, right there and then, and slept. Last in her mind, was Drerpo joining her there on the floor of the vessel, running his hand through her hair, and kissing her face.

§

Beaming, and breathing a sigh, the next day the princess awoke in her room, which she shared with Darlez and now Amet again. With a strange thought, she dawned her blue dress and tiara, the very ones she had worn for some of the greatest moments of her life. On a cold stone she had placed her neck once while wearing this dress, to be sacrificed bodily by none other than Drerpo. In a chamber containing two million Sentients, the beating heart of the Great Assembly, she had stood and addressed the Galactic Council in this dress. What inspired her to wear it once more on this day she did not know.

The Scout Ship was a modest craft, but no shuttle. It had a few decks, many rooms, and a full bridge. In size it was closer to the transport vessels used on No in the Marba system by the Galactic government. This was necessary, as this was spaceworthy, and few examples of this truth could be more apparent than where they now flew. Never had they initiated the Unrelativistic Drive, instead transiting space only at a few hundred million miles per hour, close to the speed of light. About ten billion miles, four days out of Ruby, Droos sauntered onto the bridge in this radiant blue dress, and met Emerzo, piloting the

Book II: The City

craft.

Sitting at the actual controls, navigating with computers rather than words and gestures, the twin seemed focused, if that could ever be the case. Still it felt as though eyes moved over her when Droos entered the room, with Amet at her side, as she walked up next to Emerzo.

“Look out the window ahead, dear, and tell me what you see,” said Emerzo.

Reaching the controls in the front, Droos peered out the window, and sure enough, something odd stood out immediately. A shining light, like a star, but large, and very bright, now moved visibly before them. Something dark, shielded by the glare, lay next to it, and the object’s identity escaped her. Perhaps it was some vessel, or else an alien enemy bent on her destruction.

“If you wish to behold the bliss of heaven, dear Droos,” said Emerzo, “You must have bolder thoughts. Once in a stage of transition, you saw this before. Now it returns, as you travel beyond, away from all reckoning.”

“You met Emerzo aboard this vessel,” said Amet. “Even then you could hardly believe your eyes. That hope beyond hope had found you. Now fewer things surprise you, with reason. Yet any Sentient of Bagan, beyond Ruby, would find this phenomena exceptional.”

Droos gasped as the riddle became clear, and they ran up, at very slow speeds, alongside the object in space. A wooden deck, two masts with sails, and a shining star at the prow, showed that by some miracle, the very ship that had once met the princess at the shores south of the Hell of Oblivion, that had carried her to the City, away from the Jungle, now floated in the deepness of space. Only now there were two additional masts, running diagonally from the bottom sides of the boat, and from them ornate colored and shaped sails spread out. Still, this could hardly be spaceworthy.

“You must dream greater,” said Emerzo. “Gather the boy. It is time.”

The Scout Ship navigated alongside, positioning its airlock parallel to the deck of the boat. In one hour, all was gathered, and Droos had readied herself. On her left side she held Darlez’s hand as on the right Drerpo held hers. Rolling to the side, the inner door of the airlock opened, and then the second once the first closed. Gasping, as though she expected to suffocate, space itself

met them, and out they walked onto a narrow wooden bridge with rope rails, that ran twenty feet between the starship and the wooden boat. Such vast blackness spread out all around, and Droos at first could not breath, but her steps were steady and firm, and once Drerpo rubbed her back, she took a breath.

Air there was for her, and she easily breathed, no worse than the Scout Ship. Even it smelled a little fragrant, like pine trees after the first rain. Maybe even a whiff of the sea. Onto the open deck of the boat they walked, and once again, for the second occasion in her life, the princess entered a boat to carry her away. Before she could think much more, the bridge behind them detached, to float now normally through the vacuum, and the Scout Ship moved away, slowly at first, and then with great speeds, back the way they had come.

“What will they say when they find the ship empty?” said Droos, wide eyed.

“Cat may call us witches, and others may call it a miracle,” said Amet. “Neither is so far from the truth. Ruby will assure them all is well.”

“I expect even among the secrecy of this region of space, this secret will not stay hidden forever,” said Emerzo. “Mortals have such low thresholds for wonder.”

“It’s awesome!” said Darlez.

“I’ll say,” said Droos, smiling weakly.

“Amet, will you see to our departure, please?” said Emerzo.

“Of course, sister,” he said.

Walking over to the center masts, he began whispering and signing to them, and the sails bulged.

Movement was slow at first, and very hard to detect. Few if any stars were in the sky, and they were obscured by the brilliance of the jewel at the front of this ship. Drerpo took her arm and walked with her to the front of the ship. There it stood, the shining light, brilliant and bright.

“So much it reminds me of the star that appeared on the night of my birth,” said Droos. “When it fell my heart darkened, but now I am warmed by such wonder, and stand before the brilliance of the twinkling light itself. Fragrance refreshes me on a wind that blows on a boat deck naked to the forces of space. Yet not so.”

“Have you ever thought that this jewel, and the star you

Book II: The City

saw, that greeted you the night of your birth, that they were the same?" said Drerpo.

"It had occurred to me before," said Droos. "As if in a dream, but the first day I saw the jewel, and the first night it shone as we crossed the sea near Nolai, I wondered if this was not where my star had fallen. Perhaps it was that as I departed the Ring of the King, your sister brought this ship, that even then watched me from heaven, down to wait on the sea. For she had faith in me, and your ability to help me. Emerzo is a wise leader. She trusts and cares for those under her."

"It warms me to hear you say such a thing," said Drerpo. "I fear it will never be easy for you two. It will be strange for you, and hurtful for her. Others have already begun to express themselves in one way or the other. Yet it may be true that my sister watched you from the heaven, waiting for the day she knew you would make your choice. She had faith, even then, that you would choose right."

"For She does not desire the death of sinners, but that they should repent. Until the very moment of their demise, She waits, patient and expectant, that at any moment the sinner will repent and return to righteousness, and in that moment all will be immediately forgiven."

"Yet you yourself have said, dear friend," said Droos, "That the Lieutenant of Hell will have His prize. Elriver might hope, but is that enough?"

"The power of Pardon belongs to the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe," said Drerpo. "Yet a wise leader trusts Her lieutenants, and the Lieutenant of Hell is a great servant to her. We have said that fire purifies, and that consequences fit the crime. It is rare indeed for Her to interfere, to redeem wholly the Sentient once they die, for good or ill."

"Might Showsh intercede?" said Droos. "Does he have the same Authority?"

"Yes," said Drerpo. "Showsh might act as well, only he has almost as much faith in the Rules of baetOak. Even for one whom he loves, Justice and Law must prevail. Or else he would prove a poor leader. And it is said that God may not enact judgement against his own family."

"Then it is in Elriver's hands," said Droos. "She who in Her Majesty breathed life into me, created my world, and watched over me. How strange is that fate. Yet pure."

“Yet the light of your birth star has returned,” said Drerpo. “Now you see it, a jewel of heaven, with your own eyes. Once where there were many mysteries, bit by bit they become real. Each day, you climb one rung on the ladder to heaven.”

“Drerpo, I never wanted such gifts,” said Droos. “I only ever wanted to save my people. At least once I was aware of the sins of my father, and I wished to provide correction. Drerpo, I do not want to be worshiped as a God, to have priests, and followers, images carved and built to my name. I am Droos. No more, no less.”

“Some are born with Power,” said Drerpo. “Others have Power thrust upon them. Envy the latter. I fear Droos, that there is no avoiding it. I love you. And your love for me seals what dreams will come. The pebble has fallen. The roof is weighed down with snow.”

“Who told you those metaphors?” said Droos, chuckling.

“I heard them from my sister,” said Drerpo.

“And I am pretty sure I know who She heard them from,” smiled Droos.

Rumbling and tension briefly stretched and shook the ship. A silence, a calm before the storm stilled the boat. Then the world around Droos awoke, and lights, such lights and colors, they flew past, at magnificent speeds. Only the streaming light showed their movement, for after the momentary commotion, now the ship was still, afloat on the essence of Space, Time, and Speed. Just as often there were no lights around them, for between the Superclusters of this universe, all was dark, and in those spaces, it was as if they were in a room of pitch black. Only the birth star, the jewel at the front of the ship, shone always.

“How fast are we traveling, and what is our destination now that we are underway?” asked Droos.

“Our speed is outright spiritual,” said Drerpo. “Exactly one billion light years per day. We travel first to the farthest point of space, some fourteen billion light years. Then the same distance past that point. For where we travel is at all times the farthest point from any point in this universe, twice as far.”

“What... what will I see when I arrive?” said Droos.

“That is a choice,” replied Drerpo. “You said once that you wished to explore, knowledge, and good and evil. I had assumed that order.”

“I suppose that is an important subject,” said Droos. “I

Book II: The City

might ask, and discuss, regarding the nature of government, what is the best way to provide for people's happiness, how each person might be permitted to live the good life. Yet how do I know that I actually know anything? Is there such thing as truth? Or is everything subjective? Or is nothing true at all? Can I ever be certain? Or is infinite skepticism the only wisdom?"

"And of course, to know what is good and evil," said Drerpo, "Depends on the definition of knowledge. Epistemology comes before morality, and ethics for that matter."

"Doesn't philosophy of being come even before that?" said Droos. "How can there be thought, or knowledge, if there is no thinker?"

"Very true!" said Drerpo. "The field of ontology is frequently where these discussions start. Does anything really exist? Should we all be nihilists, and assume that nothing really exists? How does the foundation of the rest of the discussion, if based on nihilism, proceed? Regardless of the feeling, the emotional truth, what is the functional truth? Would it be better to be agnostic in ontology, but see the purpose in a particular belief, and how it creates sound morality and ethics?"

"In that way," said Droos. "A person might place themselves, at least as far as belief in religions goes, between believing and disbelief, or I should use the term, disillusionment. A functionalist approach might be best for studying religion."

"The functional approach is best for study," said Drerpo. "But not always for the good life."

Soon additional lights were lit, and the shine of the star at the prow was dimmed, so that the five could sit at a table brought to sit between the masts. They sat in chairs, with Emerzo on an ornate, wooden carved throne in the center of one side. To her right sat Drerpo, in a chair of little less quality, and similarly, Amet sat on her left. In the center of the opposite side was Droos, and to her right was Darlez. It was a little lonely for Droos, without Drerpo beside her. She looked with envy at Emerzo.

Steaming meats were placed in the center, and green vegetables, flavored rice, and cool, pure water. A dark ale fizzed in a pitcher of silver, and the young adults helped themselves. Eventually the boy became curious and pulled the liquid over to him.

"Darlez..." said Droos. "Do you know what that is?"

"Grown-ups drink it," said the boy. "Can I have some?"

“Well, I don’t think you’d like it,” said Droos. “And there is a quality to it that might make you sick.”

“You like it,” said Darlez. “So does Drerpo. I’m nine years old. It’s unfair!”

“A sip wouldn’t hurt,” said Amet. “Teach children to respect alcohol, rather than avoid it, and when they grow up, they will continue to do so.”

“Please...” said Darlez.

“Alright,” said Droos. “Here, take a sip from my glass.”

Tilting the cup Droos handed to him, the boy took a big sip, and sat for a moment, before spitting it back into the glass.

“Yuk!” he said.

“As I said, Darlez,” said Droos. “And next time, please, don’t spit into someone else’s glass.”

Grasping another cup, the princess poured herself a new pint.

It was so serene that Droos easily forgot the fantastical nature of her current journey. Like she was afloat in the ocean, the ship passed quietly through the night. After dinner the table and chairs were cleared, with the help of Droos, to the back of the ship, and sofas were retrieved, and a music player. Heart fluttering, the princess waited with glee for the moment she expected, and soon enough, music, the same as she had danced to on that first night long ago, filled the quiet.

“I’ll see to the sails,” said Emerzo.

“I’m going to take this boy to the stern and see if he can beat me at a board game,” said Amet, dragging Darlez away.

Then with a simple embrace, and holding hands, Drerpo danced with Droos. A more beautiful setting could not have existed, although for the princess, wherever she was with Drerpo was beautiful. Many other songs played, and the night passed, until it was time to retire, and beds were set up on two sides of the boat. On the stern were three, one each for Droos, Darlez, and Amet, while the twins received two at the bow. The star was lit once more, which appeared to little bother Emerzo and Drerpo. Dark as it was when their passage had begun that day, so they fell asleep, or at least Droos and Darlez did. In their dreams the galaxies sang to them, and they were told tales of wonder, that upon waking, had drifted out of memory.

In the morning it was still dark, and this made life seem gloomy. Droos found that only she was still asleep, covered with

Book II: The City

blankets on the single remaining bed, while slow steps were heard around the rest of the deck. Rising, she went to the center of the ship and found an odd sight. A screen was placed against one mast, while two chairs were against the opposite. There Emerzo stood, and Darlez sat and listened. Strange symbols there were written on the screen, and with Authority, the twin taught a lesson. Immediately intrigued, Droos took her seat, and gazed.

A line on the board said, *From the Book of Dibodo: The Language of the Universe.*

Below spread out the symbols. Forty-two glyphs were there in all, and Droos ran her eyes along each:



“Learn their names, and learn them well,” said Emerzo. “Shø, Tae, Oang, Hwan, Xun, Ail, Fea, Eam, Væ, Eeth, Dwai, Goe, Ol, Yih, Pø, Iz, OaJ, On, Çn, Sae, Ju, Æb, Åch, Aech, Rem, Ow, Kø, Chu, Ooh, Hoo, Den, Loa, Yees, Tzæ, Aqua, Mem, Hoe, Wez, Nue, Uen, Enoe, Ag.”

“That’s it?” said Droos. “That’s the language of the universe? That’s all it is?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” said Emerzo, taking her finger off the screen. “Yet do not despair, since these are merely the appearance and names of the letters as seen by you. When they are used by the Sovereigns of the Universe, they carry great Power.”

“Shø, Tae... Dwai, Goe... Enoe, Ag!” shouted Darlez.

“Simply saying them does not trigger the magic?” said Droos.

“It isn’t magic, dear,” said Emerzo. “Yes, it is hard for

those in a World of Science to fully grasp the idea that something dwells, a force, beneath the fabric of laws and rules they know to govern their world. How can abstraction be concrete? Let me just say that there are some beings to whom this is exactly the case. To them the abstract is concrete, and the a Language forming the foundations of the Real poses little intellectual challenge.”

“Do you speak that language?” ask Darlez.

“Yes,” said Emerzo. “I have known it since I was born, and there are many, many dialects. Sre is the name of the dialect here in Drerpo, frequently called Celestial by those who know of its existence. It is said that the act of creating a universe derives in part from the formation of each dialect. Words there are, and sentences, and it may be spoken by anyone who knows the vocabulary and the grammar. Yet its true power transcends the use by just anyone. With these words, maybe Elriver and Showsh create new galaxies and form new species of life and Sentients. The likes of us are simply communicating in a different language.”

“If I am right,” said Droos, “Drerpo once taught me some words in Sre, when he tried to show me the secret to this very boat. You know full well that we have no storage or source for the many settings erected onboard. With those words, Drerpo brought a table seemingly from nowhere and placed it atop the deck of the stern.”

“You told me this once,” said Emerzo. “What was the result of what he taught you?”

“I spoke the words, with the intention, as he instructed, of communicating with the Greater Beings,” said Droos. “It was barely anything, but the table moved, wobbling, before Drerpo steadied it.”

“That is interesting,” said Emerzo. “I would not think that a little fish like you could get much reaction from anyone, let alone The Language of the Universe. When the burden of Authority and Power are placed upon your shoulders, it seems you will be well prepared for the requirements of the job.”

“Can I try to use the words?” said Darlez.

“Next time, Darlez,” said Droos. “Now go play with Amet, and I’ll be right over.”

“See you!” he said, as he ran off.

Droos stood and walked over, next to Emerzo, beside the screen. Both of them faced the letters that glowed on its surface.

“Mother,” said Droos. “I’ve never told you what an honor

Book II: The City

it is to be by your side. For the time we have shared, and the help you have selflessly given me. Only the Great Beings themselves could be as generous. You are an excellent Sovereign.”

“My child,” said Emerzo, turning and hugging her.

“Droos, my equal in the affections of Drerpo. I accept your compliment, and will hope to someday live up to the characteristics you gave me. That day is not today.”

Beginning to walk away from the girl, Emerzo turned, and smiled, with a little bow of her head, long reddish hair and grey eyes flashing. A white flower was stuck in the back.

“There is one thing I can give you now,” said the twin.

“Here, let me get it for you.”

Pushing Droos slightly to the side, Emerzo walked around behind the young woman and stooped to retrieve an object behind the screen, beside the mast. The princess had seen nothing before, but sure enough, out came a book. Its cover was attractive, both artistic, but cognizant of the serious content.

“The City,” Droos read the title.

“The story of the next phase in your journey,” said Emerzo.

“I’m guessing it tells the story up until, well, you handing me this book,” said Droos, smirking. “Oh Emerzo. You just can’t resist showing off, can you?”

“Would you accuse me of being arrogant?” said Emerzo, flickering her eyes.

“Never,” said Droos.

“I wouldn’t call you my friend,” said Emerzo. “You know why. Instead I would say that I appreciate you, and respect you, and my relationship to you. It may be that our relationship will never be more than it is.”

“One odd feature of this chapter of my life,” said Droos, “Is that it’s called *The City*, not something more accurate. After all, since I left the land of my birth, and The People of the Blood, more has transpired than just the events within the Galactic Capitol, on No. Why, I saw space for the first time, and met Ruby and Cat, and here I now have a little brother for whom I am responsible. Might there be a better title than the one you have given.”

“Yes, well, I better take that up with the powers that be,” said Emerzo. “Yet you were born in a jungle, in an overgrowth of naivete and myths and obligations, tyranny that suffocated you.

You passed from this into a realm of magic and Gods, and were taught about a new form of government, and really I see this as the core of what you learned, and how you grew in this book. Leaving your tribe, you could barely comprehend that government could exist that was not absolute, without a king, without spies, and executions for speaking against the government. Now you see that the city is best left governed by the people who live within it. And you see that freedom is a choice.”

“Then I suppose the name is appropriate,” said Droos, “Although I still suspect there must be a better one.”

“When we get where we’re going,” said Emerzo, “Feel free to publish it under any title you wish.”

“I don’t think I have need for any more publicity,” said Droos. “Why would I need this published?”

“Why don’t you go ask my glorious brother what he thinks on that point,” said Emerzo.

“Which one?” said Droos.

“Who do you think?” spoke Emerzo coldly.

In answer, Drerpo came over and ushered her to the back of the vessel where they joined Amet in playing the board game they enjoyed. Droos did quite well, although Amet won the day. Returning to center ship, a table was set with a late brunch, and they sat and ate in silence, before talking together about old times, stories of the last six years that had passed so quickly by, before the topic of their destination began once more.

“I am told you have an idea about where we are going,” said Droos.

“Who, me?” said Drerpo, smiling. “Well, we discussed this, but I see it was too vague. What would you say is a place to go for one who seeks knowledge?”

“My first guess would be a library, unless one could dwell within the incorporeal realms of the Ultranet,” said Droos.

“One might do either,” said Drerpo. “There is a library, the greatest library in this universe, that within will hold all the secrets and answers you seek.”

“What do I still need to learn?” said Droos.

“Much,” said Drerpo. “One question that has never been answered regards the origin of your tribe. How did it come to be? Your legends speak of a sundering from the world at large long ago, and of a length of history far shorter than the records of the Great Assembly. How might these be reconciled? What is the

Book II: The City

truth?”

“That’s confusing,” said Darlez.

“Then where would I go to explore good and evil, and their natures?” said Droos.

Emerzo and Amet smiled, and Drerpo simply looked at her. A sickening idea entered her mind, and she sat back, the chair scraping against the floor.

“It can’t be,” she said.

“To understand the nature of Good, you must see it, as rewards are received, given to souls by the Lieutenant of Heaven,” said Drerpo. “Likewise, you must enter and pass into the realm, the fires of baetOak, fiefdom of the Lieutenant of Hell. There you will see with your own eyes what punishment there is to be had and its place in this universe.”

“Maybe even where you’ll get to spend time when you die,” said Amet.

Droos swallowed.

“That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it, Amet,” said Emerzo.

“Can a mortal enter Heaven and Hell and still live?” said Droos.

“She has a point,” said Amet. “The effects of mortals entering Sacred Space could be fatal.”

“Then I fear all of us will be in danger,” said Drerpo.

“Oh, put it aside,” said Amet. “Not everything must be revealed, but you must decide soon if some defense is to be given.”

“So it is true, we are going to Heaven and Hell, and you must transform me, and I guess my brother too, in order to do so,” said Droos, sharply.

“First of all,” said Emerzo. “We are not going to Heaven and Hell. Those are loose, colloquial terms used because they are more familiar with a wider audience. The domains we seek are three: hwenobçv, Gon Eden, and baetOak: knowledge, good, and evil. The term library roughly relates to the first, and heaven to the second, and Hell, to the third. Yet they are not the same. You must open your mind, dear Droos, and take the hand of your lover, to help guide you, and your brother, into the Light that even now is opening wide to receive you.”

“I can’t!” said Droos. “Won’t it sunder me from my people forever? What will it mean? Is it safe? Will it hurt?”

“Trust me,” said Drerpo. “There is a continuum of Sentients, and one step will not be too burdensome. Sometimes

we must endure change for our own evolution and the benefit of many.”

“I do trust you, Drerpo,” said Droos. “I know you would never hurt me.”

“Do I get to see the light too?” said Darlez. “What’s so special about light?”

“The moment is not yet here when you will need to decide,” said Emerzo. “As long as we have not passed the threshold of the Gates, you are safe. Think on the matter, and within ten days, speak to Drerpo, and the matter will be decided.”

“But really, we have to do this?” said Droos.

“Yes,” said Amet.

Darkness above and all around continued, and Droos remained sullen. Drerpo had always said that there was a consequence to being with him, and for the longest time he refused to say why. Neither reason was even now certain, although they were almost clear. Here before her was one of the first obvious consequences. Now to serve Drerpo, and not her father, she would have to sacrifice her body in order to be with him. Would it alter her nature, whatever it was, this ritual, this ceremony, that would be done upon her. And she had dragged Darlez into this.

Five days passed, and she talked little to anyone but the boy, whom among those aboard this ship was one of the few to whom she entirely related, since only they were what might be called mostly normal. There was a quality to the others that was subtle, and hard to comprehend. She and Darlez played games, and she taught him lessons again herself, just like when she first invited him to begin a new life under her care. All the others gave her space. The boy readily communicated with the siblings, and appeared to have no worries about what might come.

“What will it be like?” she said one day, as Drerpo stood alongside her, immersed in his own thoughts.

“Honestly where we are going, things will be so different, you will little notice,” said Drerpo. “Perhaps it might seem a lens placed over your senses. Yet all of those are strange and apart from what occurs in the rest of this universe anyway. After all of this, should you return to your people, as I know you will, how will it be like? It will be different.”

“What exactly will I be?” said Droos.

“Many religions have grand stories of beings that pass through the sky on glowing wings, or stand before the throne of

Book II: The City

God on a single leg ending in a hoof like those of cattle,” said Drerpo. “To the extent that I have studied religion, I am not sure anyone of these myths is correct. Yet maybe it is like that. You will be a being, not a God, but something angelic, a celestial, a step closer, but still far from those who rule this universe.”

“You mean Elriver and Showsh?” said Droos.

“Also heroes in the science-fiction of mortals,” said Drerpo. “The world you grew up on once had a running series describing the Norse Gods, a comic. There were beings described in those works, when I read them, that I think would be similar to what you might be. Perhaps you will be like their Warrior Goddess?”

“Who is she?” said Droos.

“According to that story,” said Drerpo, “The fiercest warrior maiden her race had ever seen.”

“Well I am fine with half of that,” said Droos. “But I am no warrior!”

“You are pretty good at tactics,” said Drerpo.

“That’s beside the point, Drerpo,” said Droos. “My love, I’m afraid. You know why. I’ve been through this many times now. Maybe you were born how you are, and think in ways that, well, I could never understand. We grew up together, you and I. We love each other. But we are not the same. Would you become me in order to be with me? Here I must become like you in order to be with you.”

“Frequently in a relationship one side must move closer to the other,” said Drerpo, “In order for the logistics to function, and peace in the household to be maintained.”

“Yes, but surely you must see that this is very different,” said Droos.

“Yes, dear friend,” said Drerpo. “And there would be other problems, ones that I am only just considering. I’ll tell you what I can do. It is rare that Higher Sentients are demoted, yet it is possible. To enter the Sacred Realm, you must transcend, but if you wish, my love, when all is over, I will hold you, and carry you back to the bottom of the mountain. There I will always visit you, when I am able.”

“So I can be me,” said Droos. “If I wish, I can go home, free my people, and remain Droos. Only, you will not be with me.”

“There will come a day, and you must be prepared,

Droos,” said Drerpo. “On that day, my part in your mortal life will end. My time as Drerpo will come to a close. I am here for a purpose, but duty will return me to the place from which I came.”

“Is it really that important, that you would abandon me?” said Droos. “You would leave me to die a lonely maiden, old and heartbroken, alone in the world.”

“Power carries great responsibilities, my love, my Droos,” said Drerpo. “A season may pass, a springtime, of love and cherishing, but then comes the new year, and eternity, and that season remains in the past. It is possible I might stay with you, in a way, but it would not be me. My attention right now is here, and fully upon you. It cannot always be that way.”

“So I will go, to this library, and to heaven and hell themselves,” said Droos. “I will transcend, because it is necessary to my education. This is all so I can return to my people, wiser, and help the Assembly rebuild my tribe, or rather, help them help themselves to overcome my father. I will take the remnants of my family out and away, perhaps to the Assembly, where they can dwell peacefully in exile. Then a new age will dawn upon the jungles of the Body of Blood.

“When that day comes, I will have a choice, to remain with my people, to guide them, and be a voice of connection to the past, sharing what I have learned from the Assembly about government, to help build a vibrant republic. Or I can write down my wisdom in a book, a novel, and leave it with them, as I follow you, my Drerpo, up, and away. You at last will show me who you really are, and I will take your hand as it reaches down from heights, and through the Veil I will be drawn into, what, I do not know. On that day, I will leave my people forever, to be with you, my love. Such is my choice. First, to learn all I can to help my people. Then, whether to remain with them, or choose love.”

“It is a hard choice, Droos,” said Drerpo. “The People of the Blood are very dear to me too. They have achieved much, and really there is a lot for them to treasure. I would love to see how they would prosper with the government they truly deserve.”

“Then...” said Droos. “I have chosen. Take my hand, and show me, through whatever pain may come, a vision upon which I can only dream.”

Drerpo smiled at her, and at once, with strength and dexterity, took her hand. Then a breeze blew, and caught her curly

Book II: The City

brown hair, and made her shiver. Looking down, she saw that the blue dress she wore had changed.

It shone, as though the whole were of sapphire, and the very skin on her arms gave off light. She took a step, and moved as normal, only the ground gave no tension, or impact upon her feet. Then whispers entered her hearing, and it came from around her, out from lines of audibility, and they came from the galaxies themselves, that passed by them. She could hear the voices of galaxies, and likely, stars within them. So too did the voids between lights have a voice, although colder, and lonelier, but mighty still. Hearing words and understanding are very different, but they were wonderful.

She took a deep breath and turned, looking at Drerpo with a laugh. All was normal about him, only he had the slimmest crown, of a silvery substance shaped like trees and flakes of snow, thin and grasping his hair. His eyes glowed slightly, and his fingers were not only textured, but grey granite protruded in the place of nails. His garment, a black uniform, was brighter than the star at the prow of the ship, and as though he were the reason for their being, it appeared the lines of sound from the galaxies were flowing to him.

So there were changes to her perception, and her senses, just as she had been told.

“My love, my princess,” said Drerpo, bowing his head, the crown glittering. “*Angel* shall be your name among others you have yet to meet. Let the celestial beings take note, and bear witness, for among them now stands a being of light, a celestial human, Droos Yarite. All hail!”

For a moment, the whispers of the galaxies were no more decipherable, but her name echoed from many conversations, before they returned to normal.

She walked, over, down the boat, towards the end where the others were gathered. It seemed as she walked that the vessel was in an orb before her, as she stood in a nameless radiance, and she chose her position, where her feet took her, by noting the location with her eyes. At the same moment, she still walked aboard the boat, and there came before Darlez, who looked at her.

No sign that she appeared differently to the boy was apparent. He walked over and punched her, and hugged her. Only the impact of the fist caused no pain, and was only felt as of course it was truly meant: with warmth, and love. The hug brought tears

to her eyes, so vivid, so real. Then she stood before her Amet, who also wore a crown atop his head, and a necklace with a medallion hung from his neck, gold in color.

Finally, there stood looking out from the end of the ship, Emerzo. Her hair flew as in a breeze, out behind her, and Authority emanated from its wake, and always, she now knew, the thoughts of galaxies concerned her. A crown, delicate with flowers and leaves adorned her head and her eyes glowed. It seemed as a mountain, no, as mighty and terrible as the Astral Dreadnaught, the sister grew in might, until Droos saw no choice but to bow low, to her knees, and close her eyes in terror.

Turning, the bright eyes perceived her.

“Arise, child, daughter of Drerpo,” said Emerzo. “Alas, now you see, and not all may be hidden from you.”

Looking up, Emerzo was still glowing, and still had flying hair with a crown atop her head, but she was of normal stature.

All gathered around Droos, there on the boat, this orb in the radiance of the firmament. Brilliant beings stood around her, their true purpose and the reality of their existence hidden still. Yet now she too shone as a star. Warmth was in her heart.

“How... how will it end?” said Droos, the Angel.

“What do you think?” said Drerpo, taking her hand, with a rush of feelings that had her stumble and fall before she rose, averting her eyes from Drerpo.

“Somehow the world seems smaller now, and so much more fragile,” said Droos. “Yet I am just as fragile.”

“No Droos, you are strong,” said Drerpo. “What will you choose?”

“I will choose to live,” said Droos. “Take your knife away from my neck, and let me rise. For I will not die to honor the God of Blood or the Queen of Pain. I will fight for my people to see a new day. Into the very brilliance of heaven and the terror of hell I will walk in order to learn what I need to lead. Then, I suppose, I will be consumed by this Light, and be no more.”

A laugh, wonderful and joyous picked her up, like a physical force. Emerzo laughed happily.

“I little think that will be your end,” said Emerzo. “But what will we see soon? What are we to expect in your immediate future?”

“She’ll take care of me!” said Darlez.

“Droos will help vanquish the onslaught of Tzefee,” said

Book II: The City

Amet.

“Difficulties in our relationship, I fear, lie ahead,” said

Drerpo.

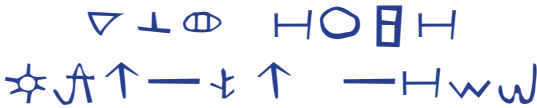
“Yet don’t forget the imagery,” said Emerzo. “Imagine, the jeweled cities of Gon Eden, and the dark terror of baetOak.”

“As an Angel, now I learn to walk anew,” said Droos. “Yet always as myself, will I seek the salvation of others, and so will be my purpose with the power that I have.”

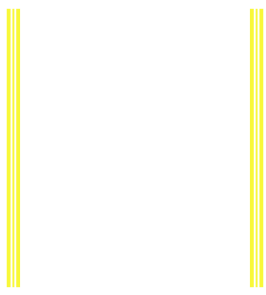
“And so you will be saved,” said Drerpo. “My love, my Princess, my Angel, Droos, my dear friend.”



End of Book II



Book III
The Library



☆ ♪ ↑ — † ↑ — H w †
□ ○ H J + □ ⊙ □



Chapter I

Humility

Golden light peered through the luscious window pane as Droos Yarite examined the world before her. It was written, surely, in some ancient tongue, long forgotten, and far beyond her meager abilities, yet here she understood each and every word. Perhaps some hidden nuance of Sre, the local Celestial, would be beyond her abilities as they now Transcended beyond her mortal comprehension. Yet whatever her boyfriend Drerpo had done to her, the affect was as plain as passion fruits. The small fish that she had been, now she truly swam a leviathan in a sea so large and awful that it took these therapeutic respites for her to maintain her calm even with her new abilities. No, *leviathan* was too great a term—perhaps some other less bold assertion, but equally notable sea creature—a great fish or whale perhaps.

The material in the book was a trial transcript from three thousand years earlier in a massive section of The Library devoted to the planet of No on which she was born. Really, every section was massive. It did not seem any topic, however, miniscule, was overlooked. Even finer details of the present moment were miraculously captured and recorded, down to about one hour prior to her examination of any material. Droos supposed that even angelic beings in a Celestial Realm required some turnaround time to make their notes. She conceded that one hour difference in maintaining the record for everything that could truly be given the word, *Knowledge*, in Drerpo, was a sign of a well-run organization. Elriver, in Her Glory, was clearly a fine manager, and had good Sentients working for her.

The transcript recorded an interaction between the God-King, Årat, and the lead prosecutor for Galactic City, during a time of civil strife. Apparently, this leader of the ancestors of The People of the Blood had led a zealous rebellion against the

Book III: The Library

nuances and uncertainties his people saw in the varied approach to religion and politics of the day. This rose even to outright violence, and an attempt to seize territory. Interestingly enough, this book made clear that at that time they called themselves The People of the Truth, and their God-King would see no other. It was simply unacceptable for him to coexist in a world with opposing worldviews that challenged, and in his mind, manipulated the thoughts of his people.

Årat had just finished giving an impassioned speech about how his people had no choice but to carve out a land of their own. The only alternative would be for them to dilute their truth with impurities, or to lose their faith altogether. Surely, the Great Assembly could cede some small territory of the city as an oasis of enlightenment amidst their sea of perversion and depredation. It was the obligation of others to do this, and violence had become their only alternative to destruction and annihilation in the face of a slow and certain ethnocide.

The prosecutor, a woman named Emétoe, according to the footnotes a direct ancestor of Emerzo, did not agree with this argument. Perhaps, she ceded, a group of Årat's people might choose to seclude themselves in a region for a generation. Yet, how would the monolithic nature of their faith be enforced going forward? Inevitably there would be those born even from within, that were blessed with the ability to intuit and think, that would raise challenges even without external ideas or pressures. Would these apostates be executed, harassed, or otherwise bullied? It was a fundamental truth of the Great Assembly that while each individual may choose their own religion, children also had their own choice. A perpetual homeland would simply be unsustainable without continued violence and suppression.

The only acceptable option was to accept the risk of attrition of some of the faithful, and some of their children, as they lived among the larger population, and others, to make the case for the potency of the themes and message of The People of the Truth hold up even despite pressure, rather than create an autonomous political system that would never be able to be enforced appropriately. As a matter of principle, the Great Assembly would even help The People of the Truth with educating their children and with lessons for their faithful to reinforce their ideas. However, any choice must and should be free in any society. Emétoe insisted that the God-King's request was a short-sighted

blunder, and that not all resources to preserve his unique culture had been exhausted. Certainly, none of this excused violence to prove his point, or achieve his objectives.

She argued for exile of the God-King from the Galactic Center to the periphery of the Bagan Galaxy. There, he could form a community with a small number of similarly guilty adherents, away from the bulk of civilization that might be threatened. In a way, it in fact, she stated, granted his request, by providing a locale with more options for maintaining his system of beliefs. It had fewer distractions, and cities yet to be built, norms yet to be codified, and buildings still requiring erection. True, it had fewer luxuries, and was altogether different than the comforts his people had come to enjoy in Galactic City.

As Droos turned the pages of a material that was not quite paper, though she was not able to identify it, a *hiss* beside her disturbed her thoughts. The beginnings of a queasiness in her stomach, she looked up, timid even with her newfound angelic grace, and saw a Sentient that looked very much like a serpent rising before her. Only it had a humanoid face. It clearly looked different than the Queen of Pain, so in that regard, at least she breathed a sigh of relief. Yet given her particular past, the knot in her stomach remained until she had properly identified the snake-like creature.

“Time is passing, Angel,” it said. “Do not be so confident that you are free of the constraints so recently removed from you. Besides, time in the end will claim all things, all beings, even Gods and Goddesses. Do not be arrogant.”

“Dear Servant of Time,” said Droos spoke, now with some confidence. “This book serves two important purposes. The first is my emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing. As you say, my Promotion requires meditation to feel more complete. Second, this is research into a matter to which I am bound to accomplish by none other than Showsh and Elriver themselves. Do you really mean to say that this is wasting time?”

“Rather Dear, Angel,” it hissed, “I meant to test you. First, you recognized me as an Angel of my Master, the God of Time. Your senses are serving you well. Second, I wished to see that you were able to identify the appropriate uses of your time, as is my duty to Him. Finally, I am here to reveal that by the same Authority, your Attention is requested by Drerpo. I am also keen to see how you will react.”

Book III: The Library

The young, curly haired woman, now with the complexion and appearance of a mighty Queen of mortals, with abilities far exceeding those terms, took a moment to breath in the golden light residing at the window-pane for a moment of time longer. One second. Two seconds.

“I will follow you, Dear Servant of Time,” said Droos.
“Further, I will tell Him that you serve your Master well.”

Droos closed the book, and turned it, leaving it floating in the air. With some effect of the Domain, the book stood motionless in space for one beat of time, and then floated purposefully and gracefully into its proper location on the shelves. Up stood The Angel, and wearing a raiment of gold cloth that shone like the sun. In her hair was a band of yellow and white diamonds and silver gold. On her ears she wore spirals of what could only be called a leaf-like accessory.

Leaving this respite, she walked, floated rather, though in this Domain it was barely noticeable. The material of the structure next to these shelves was stone combined together with a grey grout. A natural light lit the hallway even though it came from bulbs. Leaves of trees blew about the floors, as by some craft even beyond Droos, a breeze gusted lightly. The smell of pomegranates was in the air, and potential, as The Angel made her way to Drerpo.

Like exiting a stone fastness into the light of a meadow, Droos entered the Library Proper, a world-sized flower blossom, a sunflower, with shelves and shining displays showing content and concealing more, dizzying no doubt in their variety and portents. Making her way from the edge of a branch that attached to the blossom, down veins of the flower, Droos sauntered, slowly, in no hurry. Time had a strange quality here, and even those in a hurry seemed to pause. It soon became obvious that one Angel of the God of Time was not the only Great Servant to be found in this forest of Knowledge. Rather, Beings the shape of both flower and leaf meandered amidst the books, and ordered the Records of the Universe.

To the Center of the Library Proper walked Droos, down essentially stairs, as light as the flesh of flowers, as heavy as the metal of adamantine, and there on one of several seats sat her boyfriend, Drerpo. He was reading a book with a red cover, scanning the lines with obvious care and intent. Yet no interest or concern was more important to him than that which at that second ceased and stood before him. Droos, the princess of old, now

smiled like a rainbow in his presence. And he returned the gesture, closing the book quickly, placing it on the chair behind him, as he rose, and embraced her. Quickly he kissed her passionately.

"Here you stand, having made your choice, love of my life," said Drerpo. "What will you choose now that you are free."

"Yet I am not free, Dear One, for redemption still remains beyond my reach for the present," said Droos. "Am I not here for research and growth? Those are my choices. And you. Even your sister is my choice, if she will have me, though in a different way. She will truly make a wonderful sister-in-law someday. Yet this is your time, Dear One, for you called me from my meditation. About what Knowledge did you wish to speak?"

"Droos, you do have a choice here, that has not yet been made, and lessons to learn, and a new beginning to realize," said Drerpo. "For as my noble servant of Time may speak, you may yet embrace arrogance, and fall further from the redemption about which you speak. Our goal is to examine the essence of morals and ethics, and to do this, we must first see if you will approach the tedious task of exploring the nature of Knowledge. It is a subtle branch of philosophy called epistemology. Yet each Sentient must know that they are capable of Knowing, before they can conceive the Truth of Good and Evil. It seems, however, that you have spent this initial two months in the therapy of the past, and exploring the history of your people."

"Is that so hard to understand?" said Droos. "Perhaps my senses were honed on No, but here I am still a fish in a water bowl, surrounded by beings older, more potent, and more able than I am. They have walked these halls for eons, and I barely know the words of the song, or the rules of the game. Is it small wonder that I should focus on what I know, two books from the past, a jungle and a city, rather than on the essence of Knowledge? How can Knowledge itself be scrutinized? Life and death, and the nature of good government, these are far more immanent and tangible. And there are still in fact chapters of those books yet unwritten. Perhaps they will never be completed if I neglect those facts, and only learn Knowledge exclusively."

"Yet this is a liminal stage," said Drerpo. "For how can you be certain of your assertions on those important philosophical axioms, if you cannot even be sure you are capable of forming axioms in the first place? If anything, epistemology was skipped over to make your life easier, and because you were too young

Book III: The Library

then to understand the topic. Now that you are older, wiser, and a being of might, The Angel, surely you can do the Work necessary to appreciate this topic. Or rather, at least you and I can start by talking together, like we once did, about Knowledge, and you can, in your studies, instead look to this, instead of past lessons from childhood. That does not mean that there will not be time for more important matters.”

With those words, Drerpo once again kissed Droos passionately, placing his hand on the small of her back, and then in her curly hair. For a moment, time stood still, and her heart fluttered. It seemed the work of the Library Proper had a break, and skipped a beat. Then after an age, Droos opened her eyes and breathed in the smell of fresh flowers, and hugged her Drerpo all the fiercer.

“Indeed, there are matters far more important than even Knowledge, or Good and Evil,” remarked Droos with a smirk. “If only your sister will permit such frivolous pursuits. Unless she is too distracted by the war for our rivalry.”

“Emerzo is a remarkable woman,” sighed Drerpo, taking a step back, and then smiling warmly. “Did you know that she can be more than one Place at once? With you of course, she has tried to maintain all of her Attention as often as she could. Yet she is a Powerful woman, and has complex emotions. I am lucky to have her in my life. So are you.”

“Would you be so tolerant, I wonder, Dear Drerpo, if the matters were reversed,” chuckled Droos, and then she looked seriously at Drerpo.

Only for a moment, Drerpo’s eyes glowed bright white as the dawn of the universe, and he grew to the height of the mountains when they were young, and a call went out that spoke of great events. Yet there her very best friend stood, before her, a humble young man of twenty-two, and he hardly looked the part to be more jealous than his sister.

“It would not be always easy to share affections,” admitted Drerpo. “Mortals of some cultures prefer simpler models, and that is fine. However, for those who see the word Love and Romance, who see Marriage, not merely as abstractions, but as concrete as a scitter or a passion fruit, it is not such a hard thing to have larger, more complicated families. Yes, Emerzo is welcome to additional desires, if it will only make her happy. Yet neither is she required to do so. Perhaps, it is said in legend, similarly in a grand creation

by Showsh, in which Elriver is the spouse, such a great event might occur. Love, when seen as concrete, by the Greater Beings, is hard for many mortals to understand.

“That seems like a difficult concept to know, even if you now call me *Angel*,” said Droos.

“It is not so hard,” said Drerpo.

“I have not just been reading history related to my people,” continued Droos. “I read parts of a book on anthropology, and it spoke of models of marriage in numerous Sentient worlds and cultures. Monogamy is certainly one common model. Yet plural marriage of many varieties for both genders, or multiple genders where that exists, is also quite common. Religions, philosophical systems, and government structures also have a variety of approaches to the topic. Any model can be normative, or can change to become more inclusive or more restrictive. No model is necessarily correct. Perhaps, that which ensures happiness for the most mortals, provided it causes no harm to children or others, is what is best.”

“Very good, Droos,” said Drerpo. “It is true that the history of marriage and relationships has more complexity than many believe. That is not to say that the Greater Beings, Elriver and Showsh, and those like them, might not have a Deeper understanding of the concept than any mortal. For to truly engage in multiple relationships simultaneously is not an easy task. Perhaps this is one of many reasons why these Beings evolved, or Transcended to be able to be more than one place at the same time.

With that, Droos laughed, and so did Drerpo.

“We are not required to eat, Droos, yet we still enjoy the taste of fine food and drink,” said Drerpo. “Will you accompany me for a meal?”

“An actual date?” remarked Droos with a little bow of her head. “You do me honor. Particularly in this place. Does The Library have restaurants? Surely no money changes hands, and there are no servers that put dishes on tables. What of the cooks and cleaning service?”

“You are right that this sort of question is complicated,” smiled Drerpo. “Yet higher stages of Sentients like to eat, and they have devised ways to do so for ages. Believe me, you will not be disappointed. Also, you might be surprised by how many Servants of the Library find cooking, and cleaning, and serving, to be fine forms of meditation that interrupt the eternal Service to this

Book III: The Library

Domain of existence.

With that, the two, The Angel and the one courting her, alighted the steps from the centerpiece of the Library Proper, and ascended into the stems of the blossom from where it originated. After some time, though the measurement would be too complicated to express in any meaningful manner, the pair reached a height of the meadow, atop a thistle, on a purple petal protruding from its side.

It was truly an awful sight, in both senses of the word, in the restaurant. The meal was served by the Servants of the Library, the Angels of this Plane, and those who sat there were all themselves either similar Servants, or Angels of different Celestial Bureaucrats. None had to be there, merely to fulfill a need, but did so occasionally, out of joy, and to socialize. There was song and dance and music in the open air of the purple petal, but none too loud that while Droos and Drerpo sat together at the very tip of the flower, they could not easily hear the conversation of the other. Now they felt warm, even in this strange open air, for seemingly the rays of the Sun shone all day, even as by the equivalent to night; Droos felt an appropriate fatigue and comfort approaching what would have been sleepiness, had she not been angelic.

“This food is fantastic,” explained Droos, with a jovial shout, pieces falling from her mouth. “It is a wonder you do not eat this all the time! And the drink!”

Looking down at her fare, she noticed that it was composed seemingly of just greens, and fruits, natural elements, of myriad colors, and that nothing gave its life to its contents. Some did have the savoriness of meat, yet that was clearly the masterful craft of the Angelic Cooks. Yet here, even with the quality of food and drink, such things were merely an accessory to the conversation, and the company.

“You seem to be fitting in well, Droos, my love,” said Drerpo, suddenly with a serious expression. “I was worried at first, and it has been two months of Absolute Time, that this transition would be overly hard on you. Yet you have some strength in you that I always knew was there.”

Looking a tad sheepish, the young woman, gazed around her, eyes open it seemed, and noticed that there were others, and that really she sat in a restaurant with giants of myriad shape and form, adorned with fabulous attire and the countenance of stars. Only she was not overwhelmed in that dining with Drerpo

it seemed, at the end of the purplish thistle petal, to place her as though atop a mountain so high that even these giants appeared to stand at standard proportions. Yet Drerpo did not seem frightening. Rather he smiled, and her heart fluttered, and he held her hand.

In a quiet moment, as the breeze blew, Drerpo sang her a sonnet, composed himself in Sre, which he sang to a melody. For a moment she felt as though she were in a chair by a fireside, and that her loved one was complimenting everything about her, only tastefully, and properly. He did translate, and it held nearly equal meaning in her language. Suddenly there was an applause, and Droos with shock realized that much time had passed, and a second sonnet, but further, that she too had added in some improvised lyrics of her own. Yet the others in the restaurant clapped their hands. Those claps sounded like the rustle of leaves blowing in the wind on a snowy day. Then she sat intimately with Drerpo again, just the two of them, as they enjoyed the dessert portion of the meal, and more laughter.

Over all, it was the best meal of her life. It was also a fabulous date. Drerpo truly knew how to entertain a woman. He placed his arm in hers and together they went on a walk after the meal, from the meadow, to a tree in the center of the forest, and up to the top of its branches. From the pinnacle, they gazed out over the meadow, and beheld the beauty of The Library. Distance and Time were too difficult to consider here, and only the Sun beams warmed them, and the touch of Drerpo's hand, and the flutter of her heart and smile. They embraced, and kissed, and enjoyed their company with one another. After an age, Drerpo left her outside her bedroom, with one last kiss on her lips, and bid her rest well, and fully, and deservedly, before the start of the tasks of the dawn. So ended that age, and Droos slept, even though that was not required, and woke up ready to work.

The next day she awoke refreshed; all the more so, with the rays of light; she heard the harmonious call of Drerpo's voice. He called to her from beyond her room. She donned her attire and ascended to the hallway, where she met her boyfriend for the tasks of the day. The ordinary young man with grey eyes and a floral crown escorted her, naturally and without interruption, for the journey of that day was the priority.

To a branch in the tree at the center of The Meadow they walked, at a distance that must have amounted to some worlds or continents in some other time and place. Yet here, such things

Book III: The Library

were overlooked, and purpose and intent meant far more. Before long, they reached their destination, and alighted in a room carved out of pure amber. The amber itself seemed to be a vein of sap of the tree. Did that mean this room moved? It was hard to connect the metaphorical dots between an actual tree or meadow, and this fantastical place in Droos' mind, even with her Angelic senses.

The shelves of this section of the library were created through some masterful juncture of actual flower blossoms, and a specialized Library Servant that had an appearance similar to a bee, but still with accents of floral and leaf, did maintenance on the room, and ensured everything remained in meticulous order. Even records of axioms must from time to time be changed, and these especially must be kept up to date. If Droos had gazed slightly longer, she might have noted that there were an unusual number of these Library Angels here in this room, for the sake of the Presence of Drerpo and of course, her.

The couple browsed the shelves and removed books slowly, and although the glow of amber never changed in tint, or indicated a perceptible flow of time, the moments passed, and even The Angel found herself eventually without the right words. Then she remembered what her boyfriend had told her—they might work on this together. Droos walked slowly over, and put her arm around his shoulder, just as he as he finished with a book.

"How are you using your time, Dear One?" asked Droos. "I admit that it is hard to know where to begin. What is the entry point to the discussion of knowledge? What are the main questions? It is humbling to consider what you must know already, even without a reminder from one of these books. Really, most of my rivals here have the answers. It is the first day of a lesson that lasts a life age of the universe. Everyone else is already an eon ahead. How am I to exist in such a place, Dear Drerpo? Surely, I must find those at my level. Do I not bore you with my baseness?"

"You have reached the first part of the process that is essential for considering Knowledge," said Drerpo. "That part is humility. It is important to admit that you do not Know. Before you create the questions that must be answered, certainly before they are answered, the wise admit to knowing nothing. It does take an eon. It is normal for the lesson of day one to be nothing more than humility."

"I thought I made my sacrifice, and became more like you, Drerpo," she replied, "So that this would not be an issue. Would

my new senses not instantly recognize Knowledge, The Good, and The Evil? Why is it that I still battle with abstraction for immanence?"

"You did make quite a brave sacrifice, Dear One," said Drerpo. "The Angel I named you, in place of the princess you once were. Yet you are not a Goddess. You do not instantly Know abstraction. You are not omniscient. And be very grateful for that. It is a tremendous burden to have such Ability. To be all powerful in any way is to be all responsible, with an infinite number of dependents. Do you want such a burden? Even now, do you know where your brother Darlez, your only actual dependent is as we speak? Imagine having one million more—or one trillion. Be glad that as one of only angelic rank you must learn abstraction. For the alternative is awfully perilous. It is also glorious."

"And you would know these things, Drerpo, the twenty-two-year-old man that you are?" winked Droos. "Where did you learn such things?"

Drerpo winked back and did a gesture with his hand.

"Perhaps the immanent me is vague as to the reality of these topics," admitted Drerpo. "Yet the Transcendent Showsh is a Greater Being that understands abstractions even more than a Goddess or God. To hint at an element that I would suggest to be part of your education in Knowledge, I just suggested a certain dualism. Here are two opposite truths, that yet have some impact on each other. If a Greater Being is Omnipotent, can She make Herself in some fashion limited either forever or temporarily? That is a mortal contradiction, and certainly a dualism. Yet, such are the subtle natures of Knowledge concerning Greater Beings. The dualism that I might suggest you consider would include such a topic, but many other opposites, that are surprisingly close in their Reality.

"That is a hard axiom to understand," said Droos. "Do we have to start with Dualism? Or might we begin with something a little easier?"

"Certainly a discussion of the nature of Knowledge does not need to begin with the hardest topics to understand. Once the first lesson, Humility, is learned, it is time to simply Research Knowledge. You are right, Dear One, that this is a challenging topic. I would expect both of us to read books, watch ultranets, and do our work. It will not be easy."

"Would there be a point where we discuss the basic, or

Book III: The Library

fundamental questions of Knowledge?” asked Droos.

“That comes next,” said Drerpo. “All of that homework is meant to open your mind, and Create the questions, and begin the process of reaching the answers to them. This will be our pursuit of Pure Knowledge. Once we have discussed the questions that even mortals consider, we may move onto the Abstract Dimensions. These are the divine levels of the debate.”

“I do not follow you,” said Droos. “How would anyone understand a divine level of debate? What would such a discussion entail? Might it be the case that a book recording such a discussion, and I bet the Librarians will have one in this very room within the hour (spoke Droos with a chuckle), would seem more limited than the truly divine? After all, what is The Word? It is Powerful. Yet it has limits. Therefore, the discussion of abstract dimensions would inevitably be far more immanent, and merely suggest how Goddesses or even more Powerful Beings would understand existing Knowledge.”

“That makes sense,” said Drerpo. “However, in this room in particular, I would not discount the possibility of books existing that only divine beings may read. Certainly, though, if you are reading them, then they are Available to you, and any audience, would find that any topic discussed, would only be so, if it were available to them. After all, no mortal, not even you, The Angel, can truly discuss or comprehend The Divine.”

“Finally, I would be ready to explore Dualism, I think,” questioned Droos. “It is one of the hardest abstract principles. It is similar to our discussion of Greater Beings Presence existing more than one location simultaneously. That is simply a feature a mortal would not comprehend. Omnipresence is an abstract concept that Transcends mortal consideration. What does it really mean to be present in more than one place at once. Is it like multitasking? Is it something else? Yet Dualism, as spoken before, creates the suggestion that even opposites like light and darkness, and good and evil, may not be as wholly different and as far apart as mortals assume. In the realm of the Greater Beings, opposites may have commonalities that are subtle and frightening. The basics of this, may be available to the knowledge of myself, or even a mortal.”

“Finally, you find the topic after which we are seeking,” said Drerpo. “Good and Evil. More specifically, how can we have Knowledge of The Good? What is The Good? Once we have a foundation for both more immanent, concrete Knowledge, and a

limited exploration of some abstract ideas, you can consider the Abstraction of Good. After all, one of your stated goals in being here is to see if even after your sins, you may yet be redeemed. Yet how might you accomplish this if you do not understand The Good?

“I expect all of this will result in many months of subsequent reflection to truly grasp,” lamented Droos. “Yet such work must be attempted if I am to be redeemed from the clutches of the baetOak. Or else, a fragment of my soul will surely spend time there upon my death.”

“I think you will find,” said Drerpo, “That few escape without the requirement for some purification. After all, if mortals spent every waking hour contemplating The Good enough to understand even a portion of its Splendor, they would have no time to actually live and do good deeds. Mortals live in the real world with actual responsibilities and demands. Thus, it is only reasonable that some mistakes are made. Mortals are not expected to be perfect. Should any more of an expectation fall upon your shoulders, my Dear Angel?”

“Yet I was my father’s greatest symbol,” said Droos. “I cannot escape the strength of that act. On balance, redemption will require some equally great symbol, although I know not what that might be. Likely, the balance would require a lifetime of such attempts and symbols, and smaller acts, to make up for my initial deed. The journey from evil is a long and determined one. I would not be able to do it without you, Dear Drerpo, at my side.”

“Then at your side I will be, as often as I am able to be there,” smiled the young man.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed while they had debated there in a vein of amber of the tree amidst the meadow of The Library. Still outside, the flowers of Knowledge blossomed, and the eternal day persevered.

Within the glow of Amber, as though in the private room lit by star and moonlight for a moment that had no true time, Drerpo took a moment to embrace Droos. He kissed her. Once on the mouth, and once on the cheek. Then he held her hands and gazed into her green eyes for a beat. She could feel the roughness of his granite nails. What mortal had such a distinguishing and unique characteristic? Who was Drerpo? Almost, almost Droos thought she had a full realization. Yet what she noticed the most was where she stood beneath the moon and stars, the only change

Book III: The Library

was that her boyfriend's fingernails actually looked as eternal as a granite surface. Yet no other feature graced his appearance, not even a crown. She seemed satisfied for a moment that the closer she got to him, the less he appeared different, no matter who He turned out to be when she comprehended the Truth.

As daylight greeted them anew, they walked to another retreat, this time amidst a hedge, adorned by blossoms within the meadow of The Library. Upon the top most flower, one of red, lush aroma, they alighted the soft fleshy floors. Sitting at the table at the far side, with the best view of the meadow were three more familiar faces. These were none other than Emerzo, Amet, and Darlez. The boy waved at Droos as they approached their seats.

"My rival approaches, Amet," said Emerzo. "Look at her smile, her swagger. He says that she has been properly humbled. I will judge that for myself."

"The humble woman might still love Drerpo," said Amet. "Further, she is permitted time to relax after hard work. Few remain meek continuously, but show color where it is deserving. One might even accuse you, Dear Sister, here of arrogance."

"My God of Time might make such a judgement, were He not too busy," chimed Emerzo. "Yet it has been stated that the right is surely reciprocal. I wonder. And I suppose it is true. I suppose I did not expect such a fate here, in Drerpo. Nor did I expect Ruby to foreshadow upon Her such a doom. I wonder if I will live to see the day when I find another. Though I suppose the prophecy might not be death.

"Here is one Angel who despises death, Dear Sister," said Drerpo, as they sat down, giving Emerzo a hug, and a kiss on the cheek. "She is fighting the God of Hell Himself to prove the point. Who will win I wonder."

"When it comes to wagers, I would usually place my stakes on baetOAK," smirked Emerzo.

"Do I have a future home in baetOAK as well, Elriver?" asked Darlez, in a way far more able than any mortal would be able.

Droos for now ignored the name used, but rather focused on the increase in Knowledge possessed by the child. Clearly something had changed since she last saw him.

"You Promoted him!" exclaimed Droos, a little hurt. "Emerzo, it must have been you. How could you make such a decision without me?"

“Among other reasons, you have neglected him these last months while you and your boyfriend have enjoyed this fine meadow,” replied Emerzo. “Furthermore, it is worth noting that every living being, from the most Powerful, to the least, is my concern, and most would consider them all to be my offspring. I would have discussed the matter with you long ago, only, it had to be done sooner than you were prepared to even leave your abode. Someone had to be responsible for the child. Perhaps you might digress one day and study that Abstraction that is Parenting.”

With that, a tear rolled down Droos’ cheek.

“You are right, Dear Emerzo,” said Droos. “You are always right. I am ashamed. Even here I failed. I pledged to watch over Darlez, and here you are forced to recall your rights to protect him while I am away.”

Then Droos straightened up, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“I pledge to do better,” said Droos. “Darlez, how do you feel now? Are you happy?”

“I feel that I understand what it means to be Happy differently,” replied Darlez. “I have also learned about Family. Finally, I have studied Fun. There are other Angels here who have children my age. They are—different. Yet, we play in the meadow. There are wonderful animals out there, that talk, and we have board games, and even lessons taught by Librarians. My days have been busy. I do feel happy. Do not feel sad, sister. I know that you are doing something important. But I am so glad that we will get to spend more time together now.”

With that, he walked over to Droos, and hugged her, before returning to his seat. The boy was very sweet, and seemed little worse for the change. After all, Droos supposed it was necessary to come here that he be Promoted, and there were other Angelic children, perhaps even the children of Goddesses, among which he could spend his time. It would be different. Yet it would likely be beneficial to him. Above all, she did hope that Drerpo would keep his word, and at least offer Darlez the rare Demotion when this was all over. If only so that he could live a life with less Knowledge, and less responsibility—that of a mortal.

“From what I gather,” said Droos, speaking melodically to her brother, “A piece of you may find its way to baetOAK, Darlez. Yet one as young as you need not be concerned with such ideas at this point. What have you truly done to deserve such an end?”

Book III: The Library

"I stole," he said simply. "I cheated at some games to make money to buy food and water."

"If doing the minimum necessary to survive earned a place for every mortal in baetOAK, then truly every mortal likely has some fragment that spends time there," remarked Droos.

"Though I suppose it is as much a statement about the failings of the Great Assembly that you were forced to resort to such activities to survive. If they had better policies surrounding illegal immigrants, then the social safety net that protects everyone else would have provided those needs, without your obvious solution. No government can realistically expect a child, man, or woman to starve or die of thirst."

"Then perhaps it is the nature of mortality that a fragment of every soul does at least gaze upon the gates of baetOAK, or even enter within, and are certainly judged there, for none might find they are wholly free of the stain of some evil act upon death," said Drerpo. "It would be some great Saint, or Tzaddik, that would escape such a fate. Yet truly for almost all, some purification will be required. To be reborn, the experience is necessary to strengthen the soul for the next life. Without such an experience in the afterlife, surely the soul would have a flaw, and into what state or creature might it find itself existing? Perhaps slugs are souls that by some force of will of their fragments skipped the fires of baetOAK, but were condemned in their next life to crawl on their stomachs."

"What is wrong with slugs?" said Emerzo. "They are beautiful creatures, once you get to know them. Truly there might be Sentient or non-Sentient life that resembles such a fate, but this is merely a hypothesis. For all life has some virtue. It is merely by comparison to the artificial norms of the humanoid, merely a tradition, that slugs, or spiders, or snakes, are deemed unfit. To the slug, surely the world is as it should be. Do not be so hasty to judge that you know a creature to be a cursed form. I would think better of the views of my husband."

"Husband?" Droos raised her eyebrow.

"Yes, Elriver's Husband," said Darlez.

"I was merely being hypothetical," said Drerpo. "It would indeed be a task to truly identify a creature that is cursed by axiom in the state of nature. For in the state of nature, all has found its niche, and are beautiful in their own way. Perhaps to the spider, a human is ugly for walking on only two legs, when eight would

be far more versatile. Furthermore, there may be some primordial fear among humans of venom. Yet to the spider, this is how they eat, and defend themselves in a time of need. Perhaps spiders would find utensils and weapons used by humans to be crude, clunky tools. Their methods are far more graceful, and honed over tens of millions of years.”

“What do you mean that they have developed of such a long time?” said Droos. “Surely bees are created as bees, and donkeys as donkeys. How is time related to them?”

“Still we forget,” said Amet, “That recently you were in a garden, one of brutality, but an isolated retreat nonetheless from the common scientific knowledge taken for granted by most of the Bagan Galaxy in which you were born. The Great Beings in Manifestations of Science are Powerful not just for their initial Creations, but for generating Axioms that are self-sustaining, and evolve on their own according to scientific principles. Bees of today, and as you say, donkeys, are not the donkeys of ten thousand years ago, or one million years ago. They evolved from ancestors that were different, and filled somewhat different niches that depended on the different requirements of that environment.”

“Are you saying that it is a natural, scientific, axiom that living creatures Evolve by their own accord?” asked Droos. “That is truly a divine concept. It is Perfect enough to envision an initial state of being, but to further create a changing concept. I expect these rules are most fascinating when explored in detail. I wonder why this was not covered by my mentor at school.”

“I learned about Evolution,” said Darlez. “Perhaps in this age, Evolution is taught to those who are younger, and already taken for granted by older students. You merely missed the subject by token of entering the educational system of Galactic City late. However, if even I know the mechanisms of Evolution, I am sure you might find some books here, that Truly discuss the topic, and digress one day to become familiar. It is truly a sign of Divinity that life Evolves.”

“I am just amused that you are promoting the lowly spider,” said Amet. “I agree that all creations are wondrous. Yet you might have picked a better example, brother. Why not talk about the beauty of the butterfly, or dolphin?”

“That is simple,” replied Drerpo. “Discussing the beauty of those forms of Life is easy in the minds of humans, and does not require additional time here in discussion. It is harder for

Book III: The Library

some to consider life they naturally are phobic against, or against which they have some prejudice. Spiders, slugs, sharks, and other creatures of similar reputations deserve extra attention. In the state of nature, none perform evil tasks. For in the state of nature, survival of the fittest is fundamentally neutral. These creatures are not Sentient. Doing what it takes to survive is right, and expected. Therefore, a spider uses poison to catch prey and eat, and a shark devours its food. Both are beautiful when looked at objectively from the lenses of Beauty, Knowledge, and Nature.”

“Where then is evil to be found, if not in these examples?” said Droos. “Perhaps we will discover that unless it is a Sentient, and can contemplate at least on a mortal plane the concept of good and evil, morals and ethics, then actions would always be merely neutral. It also requires knowledge of facts. A Sentient must surely both be able to contemplate right and wrong, and understand the situation at hand, the moral dilemma.”

“That bodes well for you,” said Amet. “It offers some hope that perhaps when you became your father’s symbol, maybe your understanding of good and evil was not solid, or you lacked some of the facts.”

“It seems we are getting ahead of ourselves,” smiled Drerpo. “Indeed, there may be mitigating factors that would provide some excuse. It is worth noting, and I will not lie, for integrity is also an important axiom, that I spent our childhood talking to Droos about these topics. Not all conversations were recorded in her book. You should see the errata in *The Library*. Yet, my son has a point. Whether *The Angel* truly comprehended *The Good* or *Knew the Facts* when she committed her offense, that has yet to be considered. Perhaps, those would be used in her defense against the God of Hell.”

“You all keep using terms for yourselves that are confusing,” said Droos, just teasing a bit. “Will you keep it all consistent? Either reveal yourselves, or maintain your disguise. In any case, Drerpo has been clear that to understand enough about *The Good*, I must follow a process through the exploration of epistemology, both concrete and abstract. I also do not want to necessarily look for excuses. I did what I did. Should I not be punished for my actions, regardless of intent or knowledge?”

“Many experts might say that ignorance is not an automatic defense,” said Drerpo. “However, in many jurisdictions, it is certainly true that intent and ignorance provide for lesser

charges. Perhaps this would reduce the severity of the decree against you upon your death. No, I think you know better than to call yourself righteous, Droos. Maybe every soul sees at least some fragment make its way to the ice and fire of baetOak. Yet the duration, the number, the location in that Domain, all may vary with the decree. Thus, having a defense on that day of Judgement is worthwhile.”

“And good counsel,” added Amet.

“Do souls get counsel?” asked Droos, her eyes widening?

“It would be a poor celestial system that did not provide at least as many rights in death within a Celestial Court as the best courts in the mortal world permit,” said Drerpo. “My sister is really the true Authority and expert on this topic, and I preside rarely, although sometimes I study the topic out of professional interest, but I believe you will be well pleased when the time comes with the structure of such a Court, your Rights, and the Final Judgement. Above all, it will be Just and Fair, and Objective.”

“How do you know this?” pondered Droos.

“Let’s just say my family have been interested in the Courts of the Celestial bureaucracy of Drerpo since they were Created,” said Emerzo. “It is right to have a healthy fear of them. However, it is also right to trust them. The One Who Judges almost always gets it right. Furthermore, the Creator and Sovereigns of Drerpo exist as the Absolute arbiters and source of pardons and commutations, although these are used and granted rarely.”

“I think she is right that we have a choice, mother, about who we are,” smiled Amet. “Here we sit in a Celestial Plane, and The Angel’s boyfriend calls himself Drerpo, and we pretend to be his siblings. That illusion was cast long ago, and long ago spoiled. Also, she has been Promoted, and grown to See. Would it not be only fair to lift the Veil and accept her into our Family of Trust. Should we not at least consider it. After all, father has already made his choice. So has Droos. What is, then, the delay?”

“You forget that the war still rages,” said Emerzo. “Tzefee would find it easier to find Droos, maybe even here, if such Trust were freely given.”

“That is really an excuse, Dear One, for it would hardly change the facts,” said Drerpo. “I agree with my son, although you, of course, dear wife, have the final say.”

Book III: The Library

Droos put her face in her hands with some annoyance, while Emerzo sat and thought for a moment.

“Very well,” said Emerzo, after a pause. “I will bring the matter before my Court, and if they agree, then the Veil will be lifted, and The Angel may be admitted in the Family of Secrecy—in Drerpo. Yet do not expect an answer today. However, one will come before long. There is also a likely result. Droos, you have proven to be a most worthy rival, and I believe that my husband is right, and you have earned this Right. We will have an answer for you soon. Despair not, daughter, and rise, and feel the glow of the sun.”

With that a particularly strong ray of the sun warmed the young woman, and she felt strong, and looking up, only Emerzo seemed to grow, now a dazzling woman clad in flowing golden, silver and white robes, with an ornate crown of pure diamond. It seemed for a beat, that Elriver stood upon the whole of The Library, the Giant amidst them. Then there she was, Emerzo, the young woman, the sister of Drerpo and Amet. However, as she stated, soon the truth would be agreed upon, and maybe, just maybe, this veil of secrecy would finally be removed.

Droos considered that she must already have the answer. It seemed even Darlez knew more than she did. This was a long time in coming. Why had it taken this long to be included in the secrets of Drerpo and his family? They must be great, and grave indeed to be left this long. Yet some secrets are important, and do require careful consideration in order to share. Droos knew that Drerpo loved her with all of his heart and soul; she knew that absolutely, and that any secret would be revealed when appropriate, so as not to jeopardize other worthy Sentients. The Angel found it pleasant that amidst learning all kinds of Knowledge, this personal kind might also be revealed, maybe even while she was here in The Library.

At the end of the meal, and the conversation, Emerzo asked if she might have the pleasure of Droos’ presence. Clearly, Droos was surprised by this, and time with her brother would be far preferable. However, this was a request that was difficult to refuse.

The two young women walked out of the restaurant and into the brilliance of the meadow Day. There they indeed found the animals spoken about by Darlez, as well as pinecones, and fallen leaves, only of enormous size, seemingly shed by the

tree and flowers. At one point, they found what appeared to be a Doorway made of a rectangular line of light. Into this they meandered.

Progressing up a similar stairway made of light and wisps of barely visible steps, The Angel and Emerzo ascended into the very heavens of The Library. Up and up they rose, until at last they stood, even taller than the tree, seemingly level with the celestial orb that illuminated always this Domain. How much time passed, Droos did not know. Surely, she would have been fatigued, since she had previously felt tired already. Yet from time to time, the sister placed her hand on her shoulder, and a vigor entered into her, and her steps were sure once more, all the way to the top.

There at the summit, they peered at each other, and finally a smile revealed itself upon Emerzo's face. The young woman, the twin did not appear as some mighty Being of splendor, but just a fragile person, an equal to Droos in that moment. Droos found that thought odd, surely since she was on the brink of a revelation that would cast the sister into a family of Creature wholly different than any she had known. Rather, she had known them, but she would be within the Veil then, and Knowledge would be renewed.

"Are you truly humble," said Emerzo, smiling at her equal. "You know where you stand, and before whom you gaze, and where you reside, and that terrifies you. Yet each day you rise, and face the forever dawn, and work to achieve redemption, and the salvation ultimately of the rest of your people. Is that not a noble pursuit? It is one worthy of Powerful Creatures."

"I would hardly be humble, Dear Sister," said Droos, "If I announced atop the world that I am humble. It is clear that among Creatures, I am the lowliest of this Domain, even where Darlez is concerned. A child of theirs would be Greater still. Does it matter that I work out of necessity? For sure, if I had been born to both luxury and peace, then I would merely lap in such gifts, and be spoiled, and not worry about. Such is true, as has been spoken, about altruism, for there is always some alternative motive. Is it truly possible to be altruistic or humble?"

"It is possible to be both," laughed Emerzo. "Pay no attention that there is a selfish motive attached to any altruism, for perhaps that is merely a welcome reward for otherwise selfless service. Pay no attention that the source of humility may derive from circumstances and need. The actions and accomplishments and effort are what speaks, and demonstrates the Truth. Is it Truer

Book III: The Library

for one who is both fully Free of such limits and Altruistic or Humble?”

“I would say,” replied Droos, “That is a possibility. What you say, Dear Emerzo, my Queen, is that there is reward and worthiness even in some humility and altruism, despite that another might be ultimately purer still. Comparing The Good to The Good is at times some type of folly. Is there such thing as attempting to be overly Perfect? Does it even verge on unhumble to attempt to be too humble, or altruistic?”

“Rather, I would say,” said Emerzo, “That it is best to merely act accordingly, regardless of the origin or circumstances, and let history speak, and focus on fulfilling the tasks, and redeeming others, and helping the most creatures and Sentients. Better five more minutes of acting to help others, than five more minutes of considering if it is truly helping them.”

“Is that really true, Emerzo?” pondered Droos. “Is there no such thing as differences between help? Help given to one source might go much further. Thus, perhaps some consideration is warranted.”

“I did not mean to say that there is no difference,” chuckled Emerzo, interestingly for such a relevant topic. “Research to be sure that help and assistance is actually providing the desired contribution is worthy, making sure charity actually provides charity, these are all worthwhile; yet simply sharing and providing help without excuses should not be diminished. The summary is merely to ensure that Sentients help each other with as few obstacles as possible. That does not mean that help cannot be improved, or done better.”

“You are truly wise, my fair Queen of Drerpo,” said Droos with a bow of her head. “I am glad that, at least for this moment, we are able to talk together here, as equals.”

“You and I are equals in a sense, and I thank you, Dear Child,” said Emerzo. “It is important, going forward, for us to have such conversations, if our relationship is to be appropriate. Family and social interactions take work too to maintain. Family and Relationships are themselves abstract Knowledge.”

“Then I will be sure to research it and investigate the matter as I explore the Truth of Knowledge,” said Droos. “Tomorrow I begin my research into Pure Knowledge, and even the Transcendent abstractions, such as I may consider them. Will you bless me to succeed, Elriver?”

“Do you stand there and behold me as some Queen of might,” said the Sister. “No, for surely you have seen that the closer you come to the Veil, the less Elriver and Showsh, or any member of Their Family, standout. Then you do not need my blessing, Sister. Rather, merely have confidence in yourself. You can bless your own work, and be sure of your own actions and ability to succeed. Be properly assertive Droos, and be kind towards your work and others, and you will prevail.”

“Thank you for that Truth, and your kind words, Dear Friend,” said Droos. “Tomorrow my exploration of Knowledge, by my own confidence and blessing, begins.”





Chapter 2

Research

Shadows walked across the cave wall, deepening the depth of the flickering light behind her. The dance of darkness spelled words, and phrases, tales and stories, myths and legends before her eyes. Yet truly, these shadows were cast by forms walking behind her, engaged in a drama hard to comprehend to senses. What was the true nature of these forms? Yet above the forms, outside the cave, a whole different world existed out in the meadow of The Library, amidst the forever sun. There too, shapes mingled, but these were children, great giants themselves, yet too young to embrace their Potency. A youth with great depth in their eyes, and a doom to place such burdens on them that would haunt any mortal, and send them longing back into the comforts of the cave, if only to stare entranced at the mere shadows cast upon the wall once more.

The Angel stood through the rest of the show in one of the theaters beneath the Domain, and to her the tale spoke truth. Truly there were worlds beyond her Knowledge. And she had been Promoted to the ranks of the Servants, great emissaries of the Celestial Divine. Yet even still, shadows they remained on the wall, a mere play, an art form. To the sound of sighing winds, such were the applause of the other Angels present, the show ended. Then Droos turned, and beheld the Artist Librarian operating the equipment in the back of the stone covered chamber, and Her many attendants among similar ranks. A mere few Performer Librarians had a role to play. From the depths, into the light of the meadow emerged Droos, and there stood Drerpo, in the shadow of a looming flower.

“Is research meant to take the form of pleasure?” remarked the young man with grey eyes. “What is there to be learned from a show of darkness?”

“It is more about how the shadows interact and blend,” said Droos, with a half-smile. “It was a strange tale of a man and woman who stole away to a dreary wilderness, distant and remote, and there met wonders, but also terror. Many tales were woven into those shapes, and it was awesome to see how many shades of grey really exist before the flickering light. The couple, it said, made some great contribution to their world in the end, though apparently this is merely the beginning of that saga. Or as they say... to be continued next time.”

Drerpo gave her a hug, and a kiss on the cheek.

“That seems to be avoiding the topic, Dear One,” he continued. “How does this pastime relate to your research into Knowledge?”

“Is not shade relevant to that discussion?” pondered Droos. “Or rather qualities. It seemed by seeing the different shades of color, this revealed some kind of knowledge; perhaps not Knowledge. Besides which, I have been in the shelves all day. Surely even Angels are permitted recreation—one that pertains to our topic no less.”

“I was merely jealous,” said Drerpo. “I would surely have liked to stand with you in the cave, and see these shades for myself. It is at times a pleasant feeling to descend from the meadow into the cool air of form and shows. The time I spend with you is even more important to me. Next time you have a desire for art or recreation, perhaps it may be a date.”

“Well surely, Dear Drerpo,” said Droos, “I am an independent Being, free to have time to myself, and thoughts of my own. Just because I have free time, does not mean it must always be spent with you, even if you are the love of my life.”

Droos smiled and kissed her Drerpo on the mouth, warmly.

“I would expect nothing less,” said Drerpo, stepping back with stars in his eyes. “We would not be together, Dear Droos, if I thought you were one to spend every moment deciding how to approach me next. I am very glad you think of your happiness most often. For you must surely begin there, and then think of mine. Perhaps my words are merely wishes. If I might have a moment of your time, when you are free, Dear One, whenever you are ready. Then, as your happiness permits, Bless me with a gift of allowing me to view your delight, while we enjoy both serious and fun pastimes together side by side in peace.”

“Enough!” smiled Droos. “Alright, I get it. You do care

Book III: The Library

if I am happy. I care if you are happy too. Yet enough of this saccharine topic, and onto Knowledge.”

“What of it?” said Drerpo, taking her hand, and leading her towards a stairway in the nearest flower, a glowing golden orb.

“I am beginning to think that the pursuit of abstract knowledge is a wasted venture,” said Droos. “Truly Transcendent thought is a foolish fantasy. Children consider such nonsense words and the worst kind of dreamer thinks to define something like Freedom. If it is not immanent, present, and obvious, then it is not real. Actually, surely it does not even actually exist. At the very least, it does not matter if it exists. No mortal, at least, will ever conceive of such Unknowns. Why then, have such follies as goals? Is not an empirical discussion, wholly and completely more realistic and true?”

“Perhaps to you they are but shadows on the wall, yet still entertaining, and informative nonetheless,” said Drerpo. “Would it be better to live without shadows, without shades of grey? Even if there is some greater truth to be had, and that is the tale about which the darkness only hints, surely the mere hint, the taste of Abstraction is worth the tale. What does the astronomer truly see in her lens, but a twinkle of light? Would it be better that he put his instrument away because he cannot see the actual star? Or is the hint at glory surely the start, or enough, even if not the whole, or even a fraction?”

“Why do you still speak in shades of darkness, of grey?” spoke Droos. “I by far prefer color, talk of lilies of the field, of dew on the grass, of scatters at play. Would you confine this discussion to my pastime? You tease, Dear One. Open the world to millions of colors, and behold the possibilities!”

“What about trillions of colors, Dear Droos?” said Drerpo. “Or even more sublime than that—some infinity beyond comprehension. Do you not realize that we stand at a Domain at once equally the farthest distance from any point in Drerpo, and then twice again? Perhaps color is only the beginning in such a discussion. Might there be even a further dimension.”

“I fear you now return to abstractions, and my fear,” said Droos. “Might I not be confused by the images I see on the cave wall? Might wise men and women not spend lifetimes, or write in books rituals and proverbs to define them? May they not be interpreted in myriad ways, as opposites, even against their nature?”

“Would you then live in an entirely immanent world, Droos,” said Drerpo. “Have you moved beyond wonder, and dreams? Is the miracle merely a thought to you, something contained within a story, never to be true? What type of life does a Sentient live when confined beyond sublimity? Surely, it is one thing to comprehend the star itself, and another to gaze Beyond, even if it is merely pondering on the part of the mortal.”

“But what might a man do based on what they think they see?” considered Droos. “Or perhaps, in what way might a woman act were she told about someone’s sight? To discuss our topic once more, how may any of this be truly known? Is it worth risking all, life, limb, comfort, for a vision, or thought of a vision, or story of a miracle?”

“Yet now you digress,” said Drerpo. “However, I see the concern you have presented. How far might a Sentient transgress in the name of shadows dancing on a cave wall? What of Morality and Ethics? Thus I digress, for that is the topic of the future, not the present. I do see how answering your question about abstraction is essential to even reach these vaunted topics.”

“Dear Drerpo, my love,” said Droos, as they reached a landing, atop the golden flower orb, and exited into the light of a broad landing amidst a delicate pedal.

It was firm, though, and atop it were shelves of books, there to guide their discussion and research.

“You insist on the Abstraction,” continued Droos. “Why go so far? Is sound empiricism, as I said, not enough? Surely that may satisfy hunger for many lifetimes? Why seek a glimmer of something, or consider a topic that may not be in any satisfying way, ever be truly known, by anyone?”

“Do you really believe that, Droos,” said Drerpo, raising an eyebrow. “You do not believe that there are unusual sorts that might have the occasional insight. Then again, for any to believe they have one is narcissistic, and to doubt such a claim is reasonable. Here, though, we discuss the foundation of Knowledge. If Truth is Transcendent, the fact or fiction of the claim may not be wholly disregarded. It may reasonably be held with skepticism, and perhaps the utmost care. To completely imprison or shame any seer is itself to claim to see, and certainly to know.”

“Then perhaps, provided such seers and thinkers are held with care,” said Droos in much thought, reaching for a book on a

Book III: The Library

shelf, equally cautiously, “Freedom to create, dream, and ponder are reasonable. To hear, listen, and consider is acceptable. Where eternal doubt is a proper truth in fact, may any be doubted out of hand? Even in the face of considered factors, might not the blessed confused man express a shred of truth? Who is any mortal to know for certain? The only answer, is on tolerance for those words. Yet as you warned, that digresses to the topic of morals and ethics once more. To sum the matter, if even the confused woman speaks, and there is no harm, what is the concern? Merely speaking, merely hearing, that cannot be held to be by itself harmful. It is the provoked actions allowed to follow that may be evil, from which that person may bare a taint afterward. Of course, the bulk of such explorations will have to remain for the future.”

“I believe you have found the heart of the matter, Droos,” said Drerpo, examining the title of the book Droos had removed from the shelf. “Every Sight, Thought, Or Vision, might be recorded, and heard by any, yet it is only if acted upon for ill, for evil, that dooms the matter to nefariousness. Calm skepticism and careful exploration of such dubious sights, thoughts, and visions for the inevitable immanency, without judgement, is the hallmark of forbearance, tolerance, and humility. For what if the millionth dreamer turns out in fact to be a diamond in disguise? How many billions might first claim fool’s gold if quick judgment, nerves, and passions were loosed. Better libraries of irrational scribble than histories of atrocities. Mortals and Greater Beings alike may bear the former, while the latter burns civilizations to the ground. Well done, Droos... you caused me to return to even the previous topic, politics. Let us return to Knowledge.”

“I do see how a glimmer of Abstraction, however, brief, however unlikely, is worth a look, even if as I saw today, for merely the entertainment value,” said Droos. “And in the end, better to be humble, and calm, and avoid any anger, for I cannot Know the Truth of the matter. Only the Greater Beings, Elriver and Showsh, may have the answers.”

“I believe that you would be surprised by how much the Greater Beings do not know,” said Drerpo, with an absent look for moment, holding a book to his side, with a finger, tipped by granite, marking the page. “For what other reason would they offer prayers to their own Supreme Beings? Might there be Knowledge not possessed by the omniscient? Would it be possible for an All-Knowing Being to choose not to Know by token of

being All-Powerful?"

"That is another digression, Dear Drerpo," said Droos, kissing him on the arm, and giving him a playful wink. "As I often have, it is a wonder to think how you know such Truths of the Greater Beings? Who are you?"

"Patience," whispered Drerpo, opening his book back to the page, and beginning to read again, simultaneously. "My sister is considering the matter of the Veil, and soon all may be revealed, if Elriver's colleagues agree."

"Yet I am an independent sort, Dear One," said Droos, "And I little desire further change or Promotion. What if I like myself for who I am? I would spend a lifetime, or its equivalent eternity with you—but only as myself. What cost will I incur for Knowing this Veil?"

"Ah, Angel," he said. "You have the gift in you already, and have always really. No further change is required, nor would I ask it of you. Still I provide a choice on Demotion in the end, if that is your desire at the end of the Story. I fear that would see our paths diverge. Yet to stay with me, to meet my family, that will only demand your wonderful self for who you are, Droos, Dear One. You have come far enough, and need travel no further. It was no small feat that Emerzo loves you, or as much as she may bear. Droos, you are truly one of the most unique and incredible Sentients I have ever had the honor and privilege to Know. My family has recently learned this too. Yes, you will behold the Veil, I have no doubt. As you are today, it is clear to me. In the end, still, it is your choice, if you will still have me."

"Yes, silly," said Droos, with a short laugh, that sounded like sunrise and birds song when the world was fresh and new. "I will have you. I am glad that you love me for who I am. It looks like we do have a future, for whatever eternity awaits us. However, here you have caught me digressing. We had better return to the research at hand, on our topic of Knowledge, for that task is essential, the time short, and the Queen impatient."

"As you wish," said Drerpo, lightly touching Droos on the shoulder, and then taking a shallow bow of his head.

It is said that in that hour a turtle dove sang an ancient song in the meadow of The Library, one that had not been heard since the time of Ruby, long before Elriver and Showsh. It was a call of great fortune and happiness. However, if Ruby was right, it was also a herald of doom.

Book III: The Library

Around the equal to Absolute Noon, though by Drerpo reckoning the God of Time would surely have caste a different mark, Droos sat with Darlez on the floor of the meadow, during a break from the boy's studies, such as they were in this place. It was true, there were animals that talked, and the other children were Beings of some Potency or another. Yet Darlez did not slouch or appear out of place, and held his own amidst the splendor. This made The Angel a little sad.

"If there were one question you learned in today's lesson," asked Droos, "What would that be?"

The boy sat for a few seconds, and then for a moment was distracted by a ball being kicked by the feet of some friends. So here too children played. At least that was a comforting thought.

"What Truth is found in play and pastimes?" pondered Darlez, seeming to read her mind.

Yet she still found the reference to recreation a comfort, that not all this child did was serious studies, even in a Celestial Domain.

"What about play and pastimes?" said his sister. "What are the truths found in recreation?"

Darlez sat, envious of the other children and their game for a moment longer, before seriously considering his sister's request.

"We learn the value of sportsmanship, of winning and losing, of fairness," considered Darlez. "We learn to share, and include the stranger, and recover from a momentary bump to the knee."

"Those are good answers," said Droos. "You know a lot more than I did at your age. How did you get to be so smart?"

The boy smiled.

"Are you getting along with you friends?" asked Droos, with a somewhat serious look.

"The children here play, and talk of kindness, in a way they did not on No," said Darlez. "Yet despite their impressive abilities, they at times know less of Kindness than would be assumed. Some may take their Gifts for granted."

"Do you think there is something to be said for earning a place among the elect?" said Droos. "Is it also true that some of children remain humble, despite their privileges?"

"Yes," said Darlez, simply. "No two here are alike. Although I suppose that is an axiom of Sentients. The Multiverse is not monolithic, but rather myriad and plethora in color and shape

and form. There are few others that truly were Promoted to this place. Each has... a unique background and story, and not all are willing to speak readily."

"Do you think that is humility?" asked Droos. "Perhaps it is fear, or uncertainty? If there is such a story to tell, why not laud it and celebrate it."

"Alas, to be a mortal child," lamented Darlez. "Yet for all, there is still the desire to fit into the group. There is more individuality, and status here. Perhaps Childhood is an axiom that Transcends the Order of Sentients. Maybe only the Greater Beings have children that know that to be unique and strange or at least different is special and valued."

"I fear you are right, Dear Brother," said Droos, impressed. "I am also happy to hear that you still reminisce over your days on No. Would you go back there, and be a regular child again? You would forget some of what you know, and see, and hear? We might not be able to see each other as much in that future, though I will visit as often as I am able. Yet, you would have a purity and wonder of childhood that exists in a way the offspring of Goddesses and Angels may only envy."

"I do wish for that," said Darlez. "If not for a departure from you. I am glad that you will still be in my life no matter what."

With that, Darlez gave his sister a hug, and then sat back down.

"Will Showsh be there?" he asked.

"I fear that our friend will have too many other matters to attend to in this great universe, though it will be at His sadness and despair," said Droos. "I must sacrifice to be with him myself. Yet, have no fear. For will not Showsh, and Elriver for that matter, be found in nearly all places you will look, even if you do not recall their Names? Simply look to the beauty and wonder, the splendor of the world."

"Will you be in those places too, Dear Sister?" said Darlez, with a smile.

"I hope not," said Droos. "Yet, it is hard to tell. I am guaranteed independence, yet I fear gaining even some Potency. Perhaps only the Transcendent Forcang know the answer."

"I will always love you, Dear Sister," said Darlez. "Thank you for all that you have done for me."

"I believe it is I who have the honor," said Droos, with a

Book III: The Library

tear in her eye. "Being a big sister is a gift and privilege far greater perhaps than even what I have with Drepko."

"Who is counting?" laughed Darlez.

The two of them chuckled together, and enjoyed the rest of the break from the boy's studies, before she was required to return to research in Shelves of The Library.

Droos sat in a corner of a dimly lit room, yet still awash in light. These endless days had witnessed hundreds of books, thousands of ultranet pages, and myriad other sources of research. This particular book expanded on the notion of categories of knowledge. Apparently, according to some ancient wise man, not everything was left to the a priori. Plenty might be realized here in this world, immanently. Here Amet found her.

"You seem at ease with your decision, princess," said Amet.

"So much you sound like your Father," said Droos, looking up from her studies. "Yes, I recognize a son when I see one, or maybe that is merely my increased time with my brother speaking. I made that decision long ago, Amet. The next book calls me. What will I decide in there, I wonder?"

"We are barely ready for the next chapter, Droos," said Amet. "It was also barely a moment ago in this place. An hour is but a moment, or else the Recorder Librarians would hardly have time to update Records. What is a few years in the life of a mortal? Most beings here have lived millions of Absolute Years. What is the life of a woman or man but an exhale of breath, and the occasional fortune of love?"

"Then you would consider me fortunate, indeed, son," said Droos. "If I may call you that."

Amet took a step back, and smiled slowly.

"You may, though it is strange from you lips," said Amet. "Where I come from, the words have been spoken by many, yet it is never easy to hear at first. Change is a constant, yet not all is instantly welcome. Peace and recognition take time. I also offer this insight as to the Doom spoken. You wish to glimpse the Veil? Well, I am but one son of my family. You should not assume that all Beings are free of Emotion as you think. Some emotions may run almost... mortal. Do not look for welcome in every corner."

"That is grave news," said Droos. "For I most want Showsh's family to respect me, if not to love me. I will in my part love them, unconditionally."

“It is that earnestness, and rapidity to change and embrace others that is endearing,” said Amet. “Yet as you say, I am my father’s son, and he once said similar, that stars do not court in a day. Where eons are counted as time, love transpiring in but a minute risks shockwaves. Please approach The Others with care, and caution. Greater Beings, even Goddesses are subtle, and quick to anger, if also to love.”

“I get it,” said Droos.

“Do you?” said Amet. “I wonder. These are merely ponderings, and the full Doom spoken by Ruby has yet to be revealed. I would not think Her to weave prophecy unless all of Dweehwail were at risk.”

“You are wise, Dear Son,” said Droos. “A worthy distraction, just like your father, if but different.”

“It is professionally necessary, for I serve as a delegate often, and must cast votes on the grandest stage of all, where the Laws of Abstraction and Axioms Themselves are debated,” said Amet. “This brief service is a respite from that primary responsibility. Did you know that Heaven is Ultimately a system of representatives and votes? Few mortals would dare to believe this. Of course, they are sheltered from this Truth. Yet soon, you may behold some portion of one Veil, and then we will see what you know, or consider, Dear Mother.”

“This creates a grand stage beyond my wildest imaginings,” said Droos, eyes wide a moment. “Where will it end? Is there an infinite recession of complexities, or at some point is there some Supreme Being, or Purpose.”

“That is a matter for theologians and philosophers,” said Amet. “As even in Temples the Great Beings debate that Nature of the Multiverse. Many hold the Transcendent Beings sacred, and pray to them. Yet there is another tradition, that prays to One. Also, there are far more traditions with myriad other connotations and colors. Would it surprise you that Great Beings have a diversity of religions, and beliefs? What is Truth? If Omniscient Beings are unable to agree, what does that say about the Nature of the Multiverse?”

“It says that I am glad I am at my Potency, and no more,” said Droos. “A tiny corner, of a dusty library, with a good book is all I require, as well as the love of a wonderful Partner, and family and friends. What more is necessary? Food, safety, and shelter? Yet I suppose I will see upon witnessing the Veil.”

Book III: The Library

“Yes, you will,” said Amet. “Though my father guarantees you no further change. In that, he may be correct. Yet knowledge is power, and enlightenment, and merely exposure may bring change, for good or ill. Furthermore, one should not discount the possibility of an expanded family. What role will your family, Droos, play, in these great events to come?”

“I had not thought of that,” said Droos. “I suppose it would be wonderful to have my own children with Drerpo, someday, some eon. For now I simply look for the courage to read these books, and save my people, and return Darlez to a peaceful existence. My happiness with Drerpo will have to wait a day and more for the climax of my redemption, if I should be so graced for it to arrive, and a change of fate for those I left home to help.”

“I see you have not forgotten your mission,” said Amet. “You are still humble. For an Angel might be blinded by Light, yet you still are capable of viewing shades of darkness. This must be another reason why He loves you. You do not take gifts for granted, and remain focused on the task at hand.”

“Is not darkness part of the combined system with light?” asked Droos. “We have not even reached Dualism, yet I might not imagine that anyone in my new Family ignores any shades, any color, whether greyscale or trillions of colors.”

“Very observant,” said Amet. “What is beyond the concern of Heaven or Hell? What Transcends the interests of the Celestial Domains? That does not mean there is no difference. Elriver still demands colors, even amidst shades of darkness.”

“I suppose the Fact is there must be a qualitative difference, even if all are Their concern,” said Droos. “Yet we are not ready for that conversation. You are wise, Dear One, and you are Dear to me as Family. As you say, I must remain on task and focused for now. A new day will dawn, with less shadow, and a multitude of tones. Yet I must attempt to prove that I may distinguish between them, and know the Truth, in the end, before that day will arrive. My task remains, and I ask to be excused.”

“Ah, but this is a digression, for I am here with an errand, that I have taken artistic license to depart from a casual conversation with you, Dear Droos,” said Amet. “For Drerpo and Emerzo call for the honor of your presence in the Tree of the Library. I apologize for my delay, and request for you to join me.”

Placing the book in the air, as it hovered back into position, The Angel spoke.

“Lead the way, Dear Family, Amet,” said Droos. “For those whom we love await us, with unknown peril to discuss.”

It had grown to be a familiar path, passing amidst the meadow and its world of flowers, where time and distance meant nothing. Had months passed, or years? Then by some sense, perhaps honed by her Promotion, Droos had insight, and knew that today was indeed a special day, though she had almost forgotten. Today she was twenty-three-years-old by the reckoning of her people. What that was in Absolute Time lay beyond her.

Emerging on a platform, atop the upper most spire of the Tree, Droos found the twins, hand-in-hand, simply sitting, and enjoying the silence. Unusually, there were no others to disturb the solemnity of the Tree, and just Family now. Emerzo and Drerpo sat on ornate wooden chairs, while before them on the wooden beams of the floor were two piles of leaves. Into these seats went The Angel and Amet, sitting in sublime comfort, despite appearances. It was not to be for long, for to interrupt her revelry in the simplicity of a seat, was Drerpo, who replaced her in the position, and directed her to sit on the chair, to the left of Emerzo. Thus Emerzo and Droos sat on the chairs, and Drerpo and Amet upon cushioned piles of leaves at their feet.

“I do not prefer this,” said Droos, finding the seat less than comfortable. “I think I like the seat on the leaves better.”

“I do not blame you,” said Drerpo. “Those seats have always been uncomfortable and gaudy.”

Looking to her left, Droos saw that Emerzo was speaking some words, and drawing shapes in the air. Surely this was a prayer in Sre, offered by the sister. Sure enough, a third pile of leaves graced the floorboards to the right of Drerpo. So Droos took her seat to the right of Drerpo, on the ground, with Amet on the left, and only Emerzo remaining on the ornate chair. One chair to her left remained empty now.

“Is that better, child,” said the Queen, and for moment, a delicate golden crown of flowers graced her hair, and her eyes glowed white and grey all at once. Still, as The Angel blinked, the young woman remained seated, unadorned, with only the question lingering to mark the moment.

“I am much more comfortable, thank you Emerzo,” said Droos. “Now what was it you called me here to discuss?”

“I have received permission to begin,” stated Emerzo, regally. “Once, long ago, Elriver and Showsh traveled together

Book III: The Library

beyond the limits of the Known Multiverse. It is a place wholly Indeterminate. Many youths make such bold travels, and all are forever changed. Some bring back trinkets and souvenirs. Some are lost forever. Others achieve miracles and wonders Goamdwee may only dream about in its Splendor. Finally, there are those who awake Shadow and Terror.”

A pause. Droos thought she could just make out a shadow briefly covering the forever sun, and feel and hear the flicker of flame.

“The married pair thought they would achieve wonders for the glory of the Realm,” continued Emerzo. “Only, they also awoke a Terror, deep in the Unknowable Space. There It was resting. A trap, tempting, so similar to the greatest of all prizes. Such are the temptations and arrogance of youth. Sometimes a single decision haunts a lifetime. Sometimes it foreshadows fate upon all.

“Ancient she was when Ruby awoke, and knew the Multiverse. Once She was a Being of greatness, surely, and created wonders, if in fact alien and strange. Yet her ends justified her means. Slowly over Ages, she disappeared, further into the Unknowable. At last her darkness, the deepest shade of color cursed her Itself, and she was claimed. No more was she a being of Light. Into rest she fled, yet over endless eons, the black and Indeterminate clawed at her mind. In the end, there was nothing left, but a seed, deep in the center, beyond recognition. But most was awful to behold.

“It chased Elriver and Showsh, and they barely escaped with their bodies and minds whole. Yet universes lay poisoned and consumed in their wake. Upon reaching the banks of the Multiverse Proper, surely they thought they had escaped such a terror as this. And for Ages, they put it out of their thoughts, even dreamed that it was merely a nightmare that never actually occurred. Never more was it investigated, and no report arrived in Goamdwee of these events. Such was the folly, the fear, and the arrogance.

“Yet ever the Darkness returns from the brine and crawls to land; it surely found the couple, when they were most confident, most sure. It was then that it was there to disturb their revelry. For all great deeds Elriver and Showsh performed, an omen of sickness slept and crept in the recesses of their minds. And ever, the most blessed of their works became suddenly, and without warning

poisoned, and broken beyond repair, cursed.

“At first, surely this was only poor craftsmanship, and ill luck, and Elriver and Showsh turned to the Council of the Arts for the flaw in their technique. Only they did not know that a brilliant intelligence lay at the heart—one malign and evil, with but a kernel of a soul remaining.

“At last after Ages past of sadness, and last minute woe and destruction, Elriver merely glimpsed the edge of the Terror. Yet her memory was not wholly erased, and her mind was keen. Instantly she knew Who it was before her, Manifested in Form upon Its emergence from the Indeterminate into the Multiverse Proper. Tzefee, She was called in ancient times, in a tongue long forgotten, and translated into the Unknowable it was more terrible still. Yet that name She kept. And with Its Potency and Rights, she claimed Great Works of Darkness.

“Whispers of some Evil that crept at the heart of Creations and Manifestations reached the minds of one million Universes. The damage was vast, and saddening beyond the scope of any tale or song, even among the joys of the Multiverse’s Tree. Yet at last, Elriver revealed to Goamdwee her Fear, and her recalled Memory. For she had seen. It was clear, in but a glimpse, that Evil was Present. Yet still it proved elusive.

“Finally, after Ages of this Multiverse, Grand Elders spoke of The Great Wave, and the apocalypse, for surely this was She who would unite the Multiverse with The Indeterminate and End All. But Evil was far more subtle, and before such an End was to Occur, time passed, and The Great Wave did not emerge as predicted. Still, She wrought destruction, particularly where her favorite Sport lay, among the vivid Creations of Elriver and Showsh.

“Then seven Ages ago she vanished, and although our fear grew, we did not know where she had been hiding. No more. Now we are fully aware. For the enemy has returned. She is one of infinite cunning, endless darkness, and none know her purpose but She. Only in Manifestation with the Multiverse, she is Terror Incarnate. Cruelty is her weapon and desire and favorite pastime. All that is beautiful she would lay bare.

“It is before this enemy that Droos is but a pawn in a War that has raged since the Beginning. Toying with Droos is but a game, and a Dear wish and desire. Death is meaningless except at the utmost end of things, for surely a tortured soul ripped from

Book III: The Library

Showsh and Elriver is far preferable. Even more so, a Promoted Angel of Doom, and Fate, surely this is but fodder for the likes of Tzefee. She will stop at nothing to mar this wonder at the heart of Drerpo. This secret in the Multiverse, Tzefee will surely claim it, to the great weakening of all Sentients, and bringing about a step nearer indeed to The Great Wave.”

The Angel, once the princess, grew suddenly, looming tall atop the boughs of the Tree amidst The Library. Taller she stood, for a moment, even then Emerzo, glorious as she was, a garment of blue blowing from her in a wind of her own force of will.

“What of the Kernel?” asked Droos, suddenly focused, and small once more, a fish in a big pond. “You said Tzefee retains a Kernel of soul. Might it be reached? Even after all of this? Surely a reformed Enemy is preferable to a defeated one. Surely the path of redemption I walk may be pursued even in the deepest night. I may be lowly, but might even Tzefee be pardoned?”

With that, Emerzo shrank, and appeared miniature, childlike, fragile, and looked with care and mercy upon Droos. A smile appeared on her.

“If you are indeed a Secret yet to be revealed, a Doom, a Fate Foreshadowed, who knows?” said Emerzo. “Behold! Perhaps even Tzefee will be humbled by The Angel. Yet, I fear that such a fate may be passed even our dimmest hopes. At best, we may hope to escape with some of our Great Realm intact, with much we have wrought in our civilization laid to waste. If not The Great Wave, surely something near and terrible. Ruby spoke of Doom, and Fate, not of Evil or Destruction. What you have to bring, Droos, I cannot say, or offer prophecy. Only you must walk your own path, and choose The Good, and do what is right. Do not choose what is easy, but do what needs to desperately be done, no matter what—if only it is Truth.”

“I never wanted such a Power,” said Droos, suddenly afraid, as though shadows lay in every corner of the canopy. “I wanted to live in peace, with my husband, and children, and friends and loved ones. Why must the Universe change? Why must this fall to me? What strength do I have? I am a frightened child amidst endless halls of giants.”

“It is for this that we love you,” said Drerpo, putting his arm around her. “You will not have to do this alone. It is also unclear what role you have to play. Perhaps it is a pebble, or maybe a storm. It is but an omen of change, and a forecast of

something mighty.”

“Mother, how do we actually Know any of this?” asked Amet, suddenly curious, without a shred of fear or doubt.

“We Know Tzefee,” said Emerzo. “We know Ruby. When they act, when they speak, we listen. Before them, we are small. If Droos has a Fate, then I will see that she has the opportunity to Live it. I will lend her my support. First in Friendship and Family. Then in the Truth that will be revealed in the World to Come.”

“How am I to go about each day, knowing that such a Force acts against me... lowly me?” asked Droos. “Each day I assume the sun will rise. Is that even a certainty here? What is Tzefee capable of doing?”

“You have your family,” said Emerzo, sweetly. “You have your boyfriend, the love or your life. The rest of our family is at your disposal, and Our Resources.”

“Yet, in the end, Droos,” said Drerpo, kissing her on the cheek, “You get up each day, take a bath, put on your clothes, assume the sun will rise, and research your next step. In this case, it is the Essence of Pure Knowledge. You choose the next Right Action. You choose The Good. Finally, ultimately, you let the record books write themselves, and worry about yourself and the Immanent.”

“Then... I would say...,” said Droos, suddenly sitting up, and taking a few deep breathes. “I will begin as I started today, with researching Knowledge. Fate will come as it will. The War will rage. Great Beautiful things will come to an end. Yet I will walk day by day, and choose one step at a time. And I will have Drerpo at my side, and hold his hand.”

“The Angel indeed,” finished Emerzo, with a bow.

With that, a sound interrupted the break. Surely this was Darkness, come to take a final blow. Yet, it was merely a giant, or rather a Librarian with a message, carrying a single book in His hand. Into Droos’ awaiting fingers it was placed. With a bow, the Angel departed.

“I had been looking for this all day,” said Droos, changing the topic. “Drerpo, you know the catalogues here might really use reorganization. If I am to share some of the Secret before long, perhaps I might add that as my opinion. As for my book...”

The title of the book read, *Pure Knowledge*.

“There must be thousands of those in The Library,” said Amet. “How do you Know that this record contains the Pure

Book III: The Library

Knowledge? Perhaps it is just knowledge.”

“At the very least it is an original, only lacking the typical creases and signs of aging because of the Hallowed Locale,” said Droos. “Most other primary sources reference this text. I do not necessarily expect it to answer to any greater satisfaction my questions. First, it may state the questions as they were at the beginning—or rather some beginning.”

“Might I make a suggestion, Dear One?” spoke Drerpo. “If the time is shorter than you expected, you might dispense with consulting every book in The Library, embrace the humility of the past, and ponder your own questions.”

“Would that not be arrogance, or narcissism,” asked Droos, raising an eyebrow. “Maybe for the Great Beings, posing such questions is Natural. Perhaps for scholars with years of experience and education it is a right. What abilities do I possess beyond an aptitude for research? How might I propose a question before such an exalted group and not seem ever so ridiculous?”

“Is that your concern, how you look?” smiled Drerpo. “For you are as always, wonderful, smart, and beautiful. Yet seriously, where time is suddenly lacking, and the topics deemed necessary to discuss apparent, surely some questions may be proposed in a discourse of dialectic to elucidate the topic. I did not mean that you had to do this alone. State your thoughts, your ponderings to me. Tell them to my sister or brother. Let us be an extension of your mind.”

“I suppose you said you would help me, and you really always have, Dear Drerpo,” said Droos, blushing from the prior compliment. “I had thought the most help would be regarding the strange Omen. Yet help on my Primary Task in this book, maybe it is appropriate too.”

“I believe my brother has always had an eye towards helping you,” said Emerzo, with a serious tone, “Since the moment he laid eyes upon you.”

“Now wouldn’t that be when they were babies, born within a month of one another, and placed on a rock beneath a stary sky together,” remarked Drerpo, with a sly grin.

“I wonder how far back it goes?” considered Droos.

“Less far then you consider,” said Drerpo, with a simple smile, and his arm now linked in Droos’. “You are forgetting that we grew up together, and we are the same age. There may be a Deeper Truth to be had, yet the immanent reality may not

be dismissed. I was your friend and confident, Dear Droos, long before anything more, and I treasured those days. I approached what we had with great concern, care, and trepidation. Yet now... only Elriver knows that I embrace it for the True Love it has blossomed into."

"She does know," said Emerzo, aside.

"By the way, Droos, love of my life...", "Drerpo said sweetly, "Happy Birthday!"

"And may you have an eternity of many happy more," said Amet.

"I feel like once you pass one million, birthdays stop carrying the same weight," smiled Emerzo. "However, I will echo the feeling. Happy Birthday, Droos. I hope you find some way to have fun today, apart from duty and seriousness, if only for a little while. Take a Blessing of rest and tranquility and happiness for a well-earned moment."

"Thanks, all of you!" said Droos with a smile.

She kissed Drerpo, and then hugged the twin and brother in turn.

"I feel so fortunate, even if our time, even in this Celestial Domain, carries peril, and may be ever so fleeting," continued Droos. "But here we stand now. I will take a picture, with my memory, and treasure each of you all the more, as you are due."

"Now, with that formality stated, and properly done, you will all excuse Droos and I as we return to the shelves for more of our primary responsibility," said Drerpo.

He winked at Emerzo.

Taking her hand, Droos then permitted herself to be led through the Tree, and The Meadow, passed the Children of Powerful Beings, and Angels and Animals and Plants seen nowhere else, and to a distant corner of The Library. There on a flower petal, beneath star and moon, for a moment, Droos received a present, kisses, and hugs, but warm, and tender, and a break well deserved, from the man she loved. Finally, they arrived at the shelves atop the flower, yellow chambers of pollen given shape and form, with Knowledge ready to impart, and updated records. The book Droos had devoted time to find had cooperatively floated behind them, easing their comfort, and path, until now it rested against the wall beside their position of research.

"It seems that I have examined books on Forms, books on empiricism, categories of knowledge, and many other topics," said

Book III: The Library

Droos, sitting against a cushion of vivid, bright pollen, solid and comfortable. “There are many traditional topics in this field. What I want to know is which ones will prepare me for our topics. I suppose we discussed the challenges of abstraction.”

“Furthermore,” said Drerpo, “If that may be concluded, likewise may Dualism be attempted; from which it is a narrow bridge to The Good.”

“It appears despite evidence against it, a considerable amount of research has been accomplished,” said Droos. “If only to mention that many questions will not be presented or answered. In our time, there must be some direction to all of this. Perhaps if the Librarians wrote errata on the topic, or these books someday, more might be expanded upon, and the topics filled in with shelves of detail. Yet my goal is my redemption, the redemption of my people, and maybe... now even, dare I say it, Tzefee’s redemption.”

“That is a bold assertion,” laughed Drerpo, putting some humor in the face of a serious topic. “You suggested it before. Might it really be attempted? I would think of none but you who would even propose the idea. Droos, try to stay focused. First start with you, then your people. If we escape Her long enough to accomplish that, we will have managed some Miracle. To take it further, and make Tzefee think again... why it is humorous, it is so unlikely.”

“Yet as we will explore in the future,” said Droos. “Every soul, even if but a Kernel, has the Rights, Potential, and Power, for The Good, and to distinguish between Good and Evil. I am unable to speak of this Secret Emerzo mentions, or of what Omen Ruby hints in prophecy. Maybe, I may choose my destiny. If I have a great role to play in the future of this, what do you call it, Multiverse, then why not demonstrate it in a way as a Mercy None have ever seen before. Then truly, though it will have required eons and ages, Elriver and Showsh will have brought a Miracle and Wonder to Goamdwee.”

“It seems you are distracted,” said Drerpo. “Perhaps that is understandable and appropriate. Today is your birthday, after all.”

He kissed her, quickly, once more, for a moment.

“Maybe on your birthday, today, you may be excused to think of happy subjects,” said Drerpo. “As all of us have our moment, and time, and place. Surely each of us deserves a break

from work and dreariness of duty: particularly on a birthday, or anniversary, or holiday. You must decide the importance of your work. If you wish balance, then this is understandable, and permissible. Even in the Hallowed Realms, surely Family and Culture are important. Tomorrow is enough of a regular day in enough time, that you may continue then. Today, enjoy Life, and be happy and merry and content.”

“Do you think I am Evil?” said Droos, looking serious for a moment. “Though... I suppose you might not tell me, even if I were.”

“What made you consider such a folly?” said Drerpo.

“You have made some mistakes: some small, a few large. Yet few mortals may claim to be Saints, or Tzaddiks. That is no surprise, for Perfection Transcends all but the most Enlightened mortal. Are you Evil? Most of what you do is good, if not The Good. Perhaps that is enough for an Angel. Even some is Good, and that is truly impressive. Moreover, you try to do good, and be good, and teach good. What more may be asked? As you say, how may The Good be Known? You do your best, and put in the effort to do what is right, and even better. You cannot be concerned about the occasional flaw. Yet you are, and contemplate it, and aim to improve even the needle beneath a tower of hay. Yours is a difficult journey, and you must overcome great obstacles. You suffer. No, you are not evil; or every human is evil. Or every Angel is evil.”

“What of those who give up on The Good,” said Droos.

“Are they truly evil? Or is there always a Kernel, some piece of Soul at the core, waiting until the very last, the final moment, for redemption, to return to Elriver?”

“No, in fact all colors, all shades, even of darkness have beauty,” said Drerpo. “Beauty of life, of Sentient life, is Transcendent. Yet that does not mean it cannot be Evil. A Sentient being may curse herself or himself by their actions. Then it may take lifetimes, and numerous cycles of afterlives to cleanse that taint. All existence is Beautiful—but Evil exists. Those who understand, who have knowledge, must act, as you do. They must do their very best. You are not required to succeed, but you must try. Such is the requirement. Yet to abandon morality and ethics and integrity, to give up on the good, that is the true folly. Then all that remains is a Beautiful Ember, a Shining Dark Star, all alone in the night.”

Book III: The Library

“I heard here once about Dark Seeds that form the essence of Chaos Blossoms,” said Droos. “Is that similar?”

“That is a large simplicity,” laughed Drerpo. “Once the Veil is lifted, perhaps you will See more. However, it is true, that Dark Seeds exist in the Realm of Lords of Chaos. Their Manifestations are Formed from Their Randomness and Essence. They have their own Transcendent Forcang and Gods. Yet we are all united in Sentients. And ultimately, every Sentient, Lord of Order, Lord of Chaos, human, mortal, Great Being, may choose to do good, or evil. Such will taint or bless his Soul. Beauty may be Transcendent, but consequences last beyond this lifetime, even for Greater Beings.”

“Are there any that exist beyond the cycle of infinite birth and rebirth, of soul fragments and Rain,” pondered Droos. “What exists in this Veil?”

“That is a matter for Feaist Priests, and Priestesses of the Cult of Gihi, who serve the One, as well as numerous other theologians, as I have said,” remarked Drerpo. “Yes, there are Powers that may exist beyond it. Yet, within the Order of Sentients, We are more similar than many would care to admit. We have Morality and Ethics in common. We may all die, even if some of us live a long time. We all have family and friends we care about. We enjoy Safety, strive for Happiness. Yet blessed are the meek, and the simple life, and those of few Responsibilities. For they will inherit this Multiverse, when Elriver and Showsh are but a memory.”

“This is the first time I have noticed, Dear One, and I love you still,” said Droos, “But for just a moment, you looked your age.”

Drerpo laughed.

“I am old,” said Drerpo. “Not as old as Ruby, or Tzefee, Thankfully. Yet I am old. Fortunately, Immanence has is Rights, and here I am, in Happiness and Contentment, besides you, my love, Droos, my Angel. Beside You, I might face thousands of Tzefee’s Might and Wrath and Terror. With Emerzo’s love and support, the structure exists to at least see the dawn.”

“I wonder what tomorrow will bring?” said Droos.

“You forget,” said Drerpo. “Here, the sun never sets, and the light of day always shines.”

“Unless, on occasion, I stand with you in bliss, Dear One,” said Droos, as she held her Drerpo, and looked deeply into his grey

eyes. “Then I see the stars and feel the moon on my skin.”

“Sometimes the darkness carries light and beauty,” said Drerpo. “For light must be absent to see it. Some of the greatest wonders occur at night. It is folly to linger only by day, even to those who prefer it.”

“And all shades, all colors have value,” said Droos. “It is Truth, it is Known, it is Fact.”

“We do not know what tomorrow will bring,” said Drerpo. “I do know that you will choose what you know is right. And that gives me hope.”

“And I know that you will forever, eternally be by my side,” said Droos.

She kissed him then again, under the stars and moon.

“You will see that the night passes in peace, and the sun rises once more,” she stated. “You and your family will be there. I will fear no riders, or Evil. For you are with me. The love of my life. Just hold my hand, hug me, kiss me, and tell me that you are mine.”

“I am yours,” said Drerpo.

Then they kissed under the stars, and hugged, and for a time, Droos’ interlude from burdens and tasks passed as bliss and a forgetful dream of wonder, in the arms of her love. Many such days, and nights, there would be. Each was as an eternity in Gon Eden. Droos would remember that during the Truly Dark Times to come.





Chapter 3

Pure Knowledge

“What exactly is a Form?” asked Droos, reading the page in the book carefully.

“Many have sought the question, Dear Droos,” said Emerzo, “About what is real. How do we know something is real?”

“I thought that was more a question of philosophy of being, or ontology,” said Droos. “These Forms are at the early center of an important debate in epistemology.”

“Really, Droos, you have already discussed this,” said Emerzo, interrupting her work on a puzzle nearby atop a simple wooden table standing on a floor of leaves and pinecones.

“However, it is hard to call it a digression. I see that it is worthy in the beginning of a discussion of Pure Knowledge.”

“The book seems to suggest that we all Know everything in the state of nature, yet that Knowledge Transcends us,” said Droos. “Perhaps some Kernel of our souls recognizes such Forms, but the rest in waking memory may not put such Abstraction to immanence.”

“A Form is the Truth, the Knowledge behind any Being,” said Emerzo.

“Like who you are?” said Droos, with a grin.

“Very funny, Droos,” said Emerzo, returning the smile, “There is more truth to that than you know. Yet what I speak of are categories of Knowledge. What do you think that includes, the One who my husband calls Angel?”

“You and your brother talk so much alike,” said Droos.

“I suppose a tree may have a Tree form that represents that truest Reality of a Tree. We may all experience the tree in this world differently, yet beyond our senses exists that Tree for which the Knowledge is Truth, and Reality, and is the source of the

Reflections of all trees. The same may be true for an apple, or a scitter.”

“What about love, or beauty, or mathematics,” asked Emerzo. “Do these have Forms as well? Is it possible to have a Reality behind such Abstraction?”

“Well there you are right, as always, Dear Emerzo,” said Droos, with far less than a true lament, “For this has been discussed earlier. I hope it is neither digression or a waste of limited time under the sun. Yet surely, such Forms do Exist, even if beyond the scope of Sentient senses. Is the goal to witness, or know these Forms?”

“A mortal may as soon know such forms, if they are Real,” stated Emerzo, “As behold the face of a Goddess. For surely a statue is but a clay art piece—the Reality is so far beyond the crafter—but as you said, should humans and others be limited only to what they know absolutely? Or else, nothing else exists in reality. Such would be a bleak, largely nihilistic existence.”

“It may be an honest one,” considered Droos. “Is not Integrity a valued Form, and Abstraction among the Greater Beings? If nothing may truly be known, or very little, better to be honest about it.”

“Would such a state of being satisfy you, Dear One,” ask Emerzo. “Would you smell roses and tell yourself at the same time that they bear no aroma, or reveal no color? How does that diminish your enjoyment of this world to claim no reality at all? Is it necessary to banish most or all contentment and happiness in order to be True and Honest?”

“Then perhaps a slightly delusional reality, giving some truths the benefit of the doubt,” pondered Droos, “Is more valuable than true honesty in this matter. For as you state, what value is there to The Good Life if I truly spent my days with a thoroughly nihilistic mentality. Better to assume that I may just know more than I should. However, I may still, simultaneously and properly, remain properly skeptical. It seems I have returned to the exalted state of Dualism again, Dear Emerzo.”

“You will get to discuss Dualism with your Family later,” said Emerzo. “Yet The Good Life surely is lived with healthy skepticism, yet without denying the entire world, even if it is Transcendent. Furthermore, making effort to Know the Forms is a worthy goal, even if but one in a million may ever even catch a glimpse.”

Book III: The Library

“Isn’t that folly?” questioned Droos. “How much more to life must there be then gazing hopelessly after Abstractions that may never be known. Better to live in a deluded empirical dream then endless pursuits for the masses into improbable distraction. Your approach would bring civilization to a halt, as all spent their time seeking visions instead of just valuing their loved ones and feeding their children. Is that waste?”

“I did not say that pursuing the Forms must be a full time activity,” said Emerzo. “A short foray, or exploration during leisure, or on a weekend, might be enough. Simply putting some token effort into the task, that may all be that is required.”

“Then, surely, since little or more time has just as much chance of success,” answered Droos, with a little excitement, “The token gesture is enough for a rare Enlightenment, while myriad go about living typical lives of work, toil, and hopefully, happiness enough. Yes, it is necessary and proper to focus on taking care of daily requirements; but to neglect religion, philosophy, or the Form entirely is unnecessary either. Such pursuits have their moment, even if for an hour or four per week. Similarly, keeping the physical body honed rarely demands endless exercise, but rather some small but steady commitment, while mortals go about other commitments.”

“Of course, there are rare individuals with a confluence of circumstances who may devote more time to these topics,” said Emerzo. “If civilization will allow such devotion in any, and feed and clothe such specialists, is it very different than supporting artists or scientists?”

“Well, science produces tangible, empirical results, as does art for the stimulation of the mind,” said Droos. “Yet I suppose the writings and books of theologians and philosophers may serve to inspire the masses to get up each day and take a shower and feed their children, and do the good, which is a psychological value, just as much as any technological innovation by a scientist enables greater ease by that invention. Both have their value.”

“That is not to say that every civilization requires equal numbers of practitioners of science and philosophy, or theology for that matter,” remarked Emerzo. “It is acceptable to emphasize what brings the greater resources and needs for a community. However, no pursuit of Knowledge should be wholly neglected, as any science, philosophy, or theology, may in fact contribute to all or part of science, philosophy, or theology.”

“It appears now you are guilty of digression, Dear One,” said Droos, with a chuckle. “Now you return to The City. Returning to our topic of Pure Knowledge, it seems then that Forms may represent anything, abstract or concrete. I have also learned that Forms may have Forms. Is this true? In a sense, it is a terrifying thought. Might there also be a middle ground, such as mathematics; more real than our world, but less than Forms?”

“That is an interesting question,” said Emerzo. “I see that you have been doing your research. Mathematics seems more real than perhaps an idea like peace. Yet is it as real as True Being, the Forms? There are even aspects of Mathematics that at the very least require specialized knowledge and skills to understand, or technology to view. If such knowledge is so remote, how real is it? If one human in ten million are able to actually understand the mathematics, is that any more real than the random chance of an Actual Vision?”

“As you well know, Emerzo,” said Droos, continuing, “Following a different line of philosophy, logic, mathematics maintains a logical consistency (ideally). Thus, if the specialists and technology may be depended upon to keep this discipline, and each subsequent axiom and theorem is sound, surely the final product may be Known. It is remote, however. In contrast, there is nothing logically consistent about a vision. It is merely a statement of belief. I suppose either may in fact be true, or false, depending on various circumstances, for the logical consistency may be flawed, or in fact, the vision may derive from some reality not generally known. Simply because the public lacks information, does not mean that Knowledge is incorrect or Untrue.”

“However, you may see why some group mathematics in a different category than the Forms,” said Emerzo. “It may still be a Flawed kind of Knowledge, while the Forms are supposedly Perfect, Indivisible. I suppose that brings us to the former part of your expansion of the topic. May Forms have Forms?”

“It is, in a way, similar to the Order of Sentients,” said Droos. “If mortals have Potencies, and Potencies have Potencies, and Potencies have Potencies... where does it end? Though this has been discussed.”

“It has, indeed,” said Emerzo. “I believe on the topic of theology, it was concluded that for the Order of Sentients, it was a matter of debate, even among Greater Beings. As for Forms, similarly a Perfect Tree, or Perfect Love, must take its Shape from

Book III: The Library

something, or somewhere. What Form is more Perfect?”

“Some books suggest that in the end, The Good is the Ultimate Form, from which all others derive their Reflections,” said Droos. “Yet is this not simply some theistic attempt to place a personal deity at the top of the order? Maybe it is. At the same time, what is the quality of The Good? Is it truly more perfect than the Perfect Tree? Is it even more perfect than the Perfect Love?”

“To complicate matters further,” said Emerzo, patting Droos lightly on the back, “Is there something more Perfect than The Good? Where does it end? Surely, we are not here to discuss The Good now. That is for a later chapter. We are merely here to mention the progression of Forms further back to Their origin.”

“Always it returns to the theologians,” said Droos. “It is a wonder that Wars of Religion have been fought by Mortals and Gods alike. Such topics may indeed prove heated at times. However, equally unjustified, and in defiance even of The Good. For none may truly know the Ultimate Forms, can they? Only Skepticism may be Known. Have we returned to the reality of nihilism—nothing exists, or may be known in fact, but we act so, because it makes life worth living?”

“Not at all,” said Emerzo. “Skepticism and such views is a wondrous justification and Reason for tolerance. If nothing may be Known and Certain, all may be Correct, then it is utter folly to use violence or any negative means of persuasion, harm, or conflict to resolve these matters. Truly, diversity in thought is the only logical conclusion. However, that does not mean that Knowledge may not be had by a few. Only, as with any sport, those lucky enough to have Pure Knowledge should be as the Perfect Athlete—as we have stated, gracious in victory, and magnanimous in defeat. For such is the competition.”

“Is not the journey enough?” said Droos. “As a matter of Fact, that is why Skepticism is valuable, and living a life of delusions preferable to violence, for better a happy life, that may be false, than one of torment and brutality towards others and self. Living life well, being kind towards others, extremely kind, those are True Signs of the Good, if I did not know better. At the very least, I would happily convince myself that this is the truth.”

“Of course, we have more to discuss,” said Emerzo. “Right now we restrict our conversation artificially to Pure Knowledge. We still have more topics, as my beloved husband stated once. I suggest we take a break. I have very much enjoyed

this, Dear Droos. To explore the Forms as mere shadows on a cave wall... what a treat! For the Truth may indeed be terrifying beyond anything you wish to know. It is also glorious beyond your wildest imagination.”

Droos took a bow, and departed to go find Drerpo, her boyfriend. She wanted to summarize the discussion just finished, and have a brief lunch. Then she would continue in the afternoon with the second part of the topic at hand—or at the very least, another part. Off into the meadow of The Library she descended, but not so far. There she at last found her love.

“Did you ladies have a pleasant conversation?” asked Drerpo, with a smile, and he gave Droos a hug.

“It was interesting,” said Droos. “It must have been boring for your sister, for it was likely already Known. I got the impression, though, that she still loved to hear me say it, and discuss it, and share it with her. I would say that is something that makes Elriver Great.”

“You do us both honor,” Drerpo bowed, and then kissed Droos.

“Will you accompany me for a lunch date?” asked the young woman.

“It would be my greatest privilege,” said Drerpo.

Off to a cliffside on the Edge of the Meadow they sauntered, hand-in-hand, a distance of some great number of galaxies in fact, and found a view out over a body of water, turquoise in color, and vast. Light ripples of swells marked waves, though surely enormous, for their view from the cliff was very high up. A leviathan might swim between them and the water one hundred times and not reach the waves. There they enjoyed the spray and smell of the sea, and the eternal sunshine, while the food of The Library, and song and tales of fellow Angels and Gods graced their ears. Today they did not sit apart, or above, but with the Others. Lunch was miraculous, but the company the best.

After the respite, the pair descended to a cove by the sea, and there found a branch of The Library. Apparently not all shelves lay in the meadow. That was apparent by those in The Tree. Yet there were seemingly endless secrets and variety to this fair, great, Celestial Domain, that perhaps only Elriver and Showsh in their splendor might know all of the details thereabouts.

Luckily, despite that the topic of these records were discussions of waves, water, and the goings on of the vast oceans,

Book III: The Library

a delivery by the Librarians brought books of Knowledge, rapidly and efficiently, from another branch. It was not truly necessary to be where the books happened to be in The Library—simply to know they existed, and request their presence. So, here Droos and her Drerpo sat lazily, and thought, and spoke some more about Pure Knowledge, The Angel's curly head in the lap of her greatest love, as the young man with grey eyes planted the occasional kiss on her forehead.

"You had another approach to Knowledge," said her Drerpo. "This one was far more immanent."

"Yes, this approach said that Knowledge might Truly be possessed regarding This World," said Droos. "There were different approaches to the discussion. However, the summation stated that a tree that I see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, is a Tree. I may rely upon my senses to interpret This World, and behold Reality as it actually exists. Some suggestions exist that there may be categories of Knowledge, such as Thisness, or Substance, fundamental aspects of a Thing, that Transcend the Immanent. Yet, Most of a Thing may be Known. This does tend to promote the importance of such Being."

"It also appears to be far more logical," said Drerpo. "For previously, we had existed in a Reality with a Skepticism of all Knowledge. Is it not easier to think empirically? How much simpler is a world when the senses may be completely relied upon?"

"Did we not conclude, Dear One," said Droos, "That even a World that Exists with Forms, ultimately relies on the delusion of senses, if only to live a happy, Good Life?"

"True, but there is a qualitative difference," continued Drerpo, "Between believing senses are a delusion, and understanding actual Truth may be revealed from them. This is a different outlook on the World. Although I suppose even an Empiricist must act Sceptically, as there are many tricks to fool the senses, and many facts unknown."

"Then what is the different, fundamentally," said Droos, "Between the purposeful Skepticism of those who follow the Forms, and those who prefer the Senses? If both are ultimately skeptical to some extent, yet look to senses to interpret the world, why does it even matter where they believe in theory the Essence of Reality to exist, whether in the Object, or Above It?"

"It is because of this subtle difference that once again,

another means to excuse tolerance has been created,” said Drerpo. “For where there is doubt, and uncertainty, surely there is plenty of room for multiple worldviews. Yet, there may be an effect of social science, or particularly psychology, to the belief of Essence within the Object, verses Transcending it. For if Reality may be within a person or object, surely it grants it some greater importance then if it is merely a reflection. How does the follower of Forms act towards those shadows on the wall knowing that they are shadows?”

“For a momentary digression, might even the follower of Forms grant that a Sentient maintains their Soul within them, not as a reflection, regardless of the school of thought,” asked Droos. “Or is that yet another matter for theologians?”

“Most who believe in Souls at all would find Its Essence in every Sentient, By Nature,” said Drerpo. “For those who do not, surely something Transcendent and Unique exists in the State of Sentients. Even those who see Sentients as mere participants on the stage of nature, may view some Important Role that may be played by the informed. It is hard to dismiss the notion that the Soul resides in the Sentient, even for the believer in Forms. Even a Mortal does not contain a Reflection, or Shadow, but an Essence, in this instance, of the Divine. Each has a Spark of Divinity, and is Innately Special—perhaps equally so.”

“That I suppose, that Sentients, humans, and other species of that distinguished variety, have this equal Divine Spark in equal quantities in each is another reason to be tolerant, and treat every Sentient with dignity and respect and kindness,” said Droos.

“But as you said,” said Drerpo. “This is a digression. Yet it is true, that at some level, since a Kernel of every Self is the Same—surely every Sentient, every human must love themselves, and The Other, equally. Love must exist universally for all Sentients, mortals, humans, and others of that type of mind. I should digress myself and provide attribution, for I was not the first person to say such words. Other great theologians and philosophers before me echoed these words. ‘To love your neighbor as yourself’—this truly is an axiom that will be at the heart of Truth and Reality until the End of Time. Before this Truth, even Gods and Greater Beings tremble, and pause their work. For what Truth is greater?”

“But back from the digression to immanent Knowledge,” said Droos. “For surely, it provides dignity for Essence to exist in

Book III: The Library

the Object Itself.”

“Yet even an Avatar of God, or a Greater Being, is Holy,” said Drerpo. “Even a Relic that is merely a reflection of Divine is Great. A symbol may still carry as much weight in the mind of a Sentient as maybe even the Original. Thus, psychologically, does it have to be the case that less value, or dignity, is applied by the follower of Forms? Surely, objects that are Reflections of Forms, may still be Weighty, even if immanent in form.”

“Does it not provide an excuse for misbehavior and misunderstanding and intolerance?” said Droos.

“Anything may provide such an excuse,” said Drerpo. “For Evil and Misunderstanding are blights no Order of Sentient may wholly cure. Ignorance is cured in part by finishing our topic—Pure Knowledge, Understanding, studying how to know the truth. Viewing the world with Skepticism no matter the origin of truth and belief. Having faith in the Other and tipping the balance in her favor. Any excuse may be made for bad behavior. Just as much, there is room for The Good, and Righteousness. It is not even necessarily required to be good, or righteous, or to previously have done good, or followed the law. Any may choose the right thing, follow the law, do Good, be kind, at any time. Any may be redeemed, and help others, instead of harm them. Any may turn back from Evil, and cure Misunderstanding. It takes only a moment to fix.”

“Thus, regardless of the origin, whether believing in Forms or that Essence Exists within Objects, clearly all are granted dignity a priori, by Their Nature, and there is no excuse, and every opportunity to do The Good,” said Droos.

“Of course we are as usual getting ahead of ourselves,” said Drerpo. “Yet it is natural, for a Sentient begins discussing Being, then Knowledge, and surely wishes to use that to explain how to act and behave according to The Good. How is a human meant to live The Good Life? How is this to be done without harming others? Above all, how may The Good Life be lived while helping others achieve it as well, and harming few or none at all?”

Droos sat up for a moment, beside Drerpo, and kissed him on the cheek.

“That was good dialectic,” said Droos. “However, I need a break. Why don’t we have that date we talked about to view the art of The Library.”

“I will show you a few choices that are truly sublime,” said Drerpo, kissing her back.

“Then it is a date, Dear One,” said Droos.

They linked, arm-in-arm, and ascended from the room beside the Sea, returning to The Meadow of The Library, for light entertainment, and happiness that only The Good Life might bring. What would life be without such meaningful distractions?

Amidst the meadow rose a humble corn husk, which would be little noticed were it not of enormous proportions: perhaps, the size of a galaxy in some Universes. Here, shelves existed in The Library, as they did elsewhere, but also in the topmost of the corn grown in the husk, an observatory. From here, the Celestial Objects of Drerpo might be viewed in their True Form, and at any distance or time. To this vaunted height, Droos and Drerpo emerged, and enjoyed the show as conducted by the Artist Librarians.

It was true that the Planets and Stars spoke to one another, in different deep and ancient forms of voice. The words were too subtle even here for Droos to catch their meaning, and her boyfriend did translate some of the old dialect of Sre. There was a spell, but also a truth in those words, of many dramas unfolded, many terrors witnessed, and glory revealed as well. As always, the audience of Angels, some children both of they and Gods, and a few Divine Beings themselves, clapped in the form as sounded similar to rain in a storm, with similar changes in tune and type. The whole experience was immersive, and spectacular for Droos. It would have been overwhelming were she not The Angel Herself. As it was, the Beauty was barely contained in her Heart, Soul, and Mind. Only, the more Real was Drerpo’s hand in her own, there a tether to Love and The Library Proper.

So an age passed, and the couple enjoyed company with one another, and a recreation similar to worlds of mortals, yet with unique benefits that only their dreams and visions might reveal. Finally, the last drop of rain signaled the show was ended, and they stood, and descended from the heights of the corn, and darkness of the show, and into the lit brightness of the shelves of the Husk. Here were endless topics on Farming and Horticulture and Viniculture and Soil and Grasses. Those who wished to grow things, and enjoy the land, surely would have found the records here wondrous. It was no wonder that such topics had a central location in The Meadow of The Library, for what would

Book III: The Library

civilization be without those who grew its nourishment? In what state would worlds exist without those who cared about their perpetuation onto the future?

The pastime was well received, and Droos and Drerpo reached the floor of the meadow, and found an open sunny spot, beside a trio of talking scitters. They exchanged pleasantries with the Sentients, but largely they remained at task, enjoying the company they provided each other. Still, Droos delightfully thought that few locales had such wonder, the company of Drerpo, and life-sized mammals that not only appeared wonderful but might carry an intelligent, respectful, unique conversation. Beneath the ever sun, Droos talked to her Drerpo.

“Is it the Universe that has the name, *Drerpo*?” asked Droos. “It is a strange coincidence, and at times a source of confusion. Why are you named after the universe, Dear Love?”

“This was My project, in Drerpo, which is Elriver’s Manifestation, yes,” said Drerpo. “It was only appropriate to take the name of the locale, in Immanence. Similarly, my sister Manifested Immanence with the name of a related Manifestation.”

“These are all strange terms, Drerpo,” said Droos. “Though I still have some fear, I may hardly wait for the Veil to be lifted, if only so that such confusions will be explained and simplified.”

“Knowing the truth is not the same as simplification,” said Drerpo. “If anything, the Veil reveals Truth that complicates Reality. I would keep you far from it if I might. Yet, that would mean us parting, mostly forever. You still may choose that, if you wish.”

“You know my choice,” said Droos, with a smile. “To be Me up to this Point, and not to change further than this Veil. Though I fear, even still, that I misunderstand the Reality of the situation. Change is subtle. It occurs without being invited. Another philosopher once said that change is the only constant in Reality—all is like flickering flame, different in every moment. Never may a woman walk in the same exact stream twice. Feet singed or wetted once may never be done so exactly similar twice, or thrice, or again. What will the unexpected change bring me for my sacrifice even up to this Point? Even with a guarantee of Independence?”

“Not all change is Evil,” said Drerpo, rubbing her shoulder gently, then tracing a finger along her back. “Some change brings

welcome relief, and certainty that some new flames heat new homes that were formerly cold, and new water quenches thirsts that were previously desperate. Change may be constant according to one view, or it may not, according to even those who hold that Reality is static. It may be welcome. I believe any change that is to occur will be exactly what suits you, and what you desire, or you do not have to accept it.”

“That is good to hear,” said Droos. “Seemingly, though, in our revelry amidst the Meadow, we have begun to discuss the origins of ontology again. Yet, it is good to know that change may be, and has an expectation of benevolence, and furthermore, that to some extent even now it is optional. I would expect that at some point, not all change is voluntary, and that a choice, and exercise of free will must be made.”

“That is true,” said Drerpo. “Intent and choice play a factor. Few are able to choose opposites simultaneously. Sometimes, only one choice may be made, and a Sentient must own the change that results, or the lack of one. I know that you will choose wisely, Dear Love, because you are Smart and Wise. I know that you will embrace and bear whatever change might come, because you are Strong and Capable. Finally, it will be as limited as possible, because We all Respect your Independence.”

“What of all of these fine notions of ontology?” said Droos. “What is the Essence of the Universe?”

“It is a right foundation to Pure Knowledge,” said Drerpo. “The desire to place a substance, such as flame or water at the center of Everything is an early essay in the topic we began. You will find such Records and books here as well, as I see you nodding your beautiful head as I say these words. They are curious notions upon reflection. In the end, they lead to The Forms, which exist either Above or Within. The Forms are either Transcendent or Immanent.”

“Is that really what you believe, Dear One,” said Droos. “What is the Essence of Drerpo, or this Multiverse I am only just beginning to consider, in Its splendor?”

“That is a matter of theology, as the mantra continues to repeat,” said Drerpo. “I would not proselytize or preach my opinion on religion without your consent, even my Love. If you wish for me to share my Belief, however, I will do so.”

“You are the Love of My Life, Drerpo,” said Droos. “You need keep no secrets from me, not even your theology or religion.

Book III: The Library

Share anything your heart holds dear, or that you wish to confide, at any time.”

“That may be a more generous statement than is fair, Dear One,” said Drerpo. “Yet I will share the basics on one Forcang religion that I hold dear. It is known as Feaism. It holds that above the Order of Sentients are Two Orders of Transcendent Forcang that are the Essence of Selflessness. They are the Essence of the Multiverse, including this one. When I or my sister speak words of The Language of the Universe in Sre, Loahueth, or any other dialect, we speak to these Transcendent Beings. If the matter is done well, and with humility, in Their Selflessness, these Beings answer, and a Reality is Created.”

“That may or may not be Truth, as you say, Dear One,” said Droos. “However, I respect your beliefs, and your sister’s, as well as the obvious results. It may even be that such Transcendent Beings are the True Essence of all things. Yet what is the True Origin? What lies above, how many Transcendent Beings did you say there were...?”

“According to the Feaist tradition, at the absolutely height of the Order of Sentients are Seventh Degree Sentients, of which their number is Forty-Two,” said Drerpo, calmly despite the topic.

Somewhere, it was almost as if thunder were heard in that moment: thunder and lightning.

“However, a Feaist Priest or Priestess might say that really there is a Unity behind even these Transcendents, and that even the Forty-Two are but Arch-Angels of this Absolute Being,” continued Drerpo. “It is this Being that provides unity with the Arch-Angels at the top of the Order of Sentients of Our Opposites, the Lords of Chaos. It also unites us with the Alien-Angels of the Indeterminate, and other dimensions and strange realms, too many to count. For Truly, this Being defies any words, even the Great Beings might Utter in Their Might.”

“You almost make me think that ultimately, Feaists are monotheists,” said Droos. “Although it is clear that they believe in a series of Arch-Angels, and lower beings that attend to the Absolute Being’s Creations.”

“That is True,” said Drerpo. “Although among many individual Feaists, certainly outside of the Knowledge and Wisdom of Temple Manifestations, worship of Transcendent Forcang is seen as Holy by Itself. Often, in the Singularity of Worship, the Unity is forgotten. It is easier to focus on the Origins, the Selfless

Will behind the Answer to our deepest Prayers and Desires, rather than the Hidden Theology of the Temples. For surely, that is more subtle, and harder to grasp. Yet there are true monotheists in Dweehwail.”

“Who are they?” asked Droos.

“Well, there are many monotheistic traditions among Forcang, and obviously the Feaist tradition is by far the most popular religion,” said Drerpo. “For among other reasons, it literally produces tangible results for us when we Pray to these Beings. It is hard to deny a Concrete, Immanent Reality. However, the Cult of Giḥi, is the second most popular religion in Dweehwail. It worships one Singular Being from the start.”

“How does the Cult of Giḥi account for the Miracles of the Language of the Universe?” said Droos.

“It is not that its faithful do not recognize that Seventh Order Sentients exist, but sees them merely as that,” said Drerpo, “Seventh Order Sentients. A Being might be very impressive, and capable, and blessed, yet it is still on a different Plane than the Singular Absolute Deity of their faith. Also, some of the Cult of Giḥi might view some of those Beings as Angels, or lesser Servants. Thus, they are authorized to carry out the Will of Giḥi. Since even Elriver and Showsh and those like them never see these Transcendent Beings, how are they any more Real than a Supreme Being—or Less. Those are two of the main denominations in the faith, those who see everything as being granted, including The Language of the Universe, by the Supreme Being, and those who see the Transcendent Forcang as Functional, Intermediaries, that may never be Actually Reached. There are other denominations of course.”

“You are a Feaist, though?” said Droos.

“I and my family line for Ages have been Feaists, almost universally,” said Drerpo. “There have been some who have ultimately chosen different religions—some picked the Cult of Giḥi. Freedom of Religion is guaranteed in The Alliance of the Multiverse. I may be a Feaist, and believe the theology in practice and ritual, however, as a Being, I am able to see the Arguments, and Views, of the Others, and Recognize them as Valuable, Unique, and Persuasive. The Council of Art would say that all traditions are valuable from an Aesthetic standpoint—all faiths, provided they do not inflict actual physical, mental, or emotional harm. Yet beyond that restriction, may the Transcendent Forcang

Book III: The Library

Bless their paths, and unique choices, and their right to live life freely the way they choose. May the Unity grant the answer to their uses of The Language of the Universe, and may they and their families and children for all eternities be at peace.”

“That is a beautiful sentiment,” said Droos. “Yet am I required to be one of these, Feaists, in order to be in a relationship with you? I may have doubts about some of my people’s beliefs, as I was raised. That does not mean I automatically embrace yours. It is a personal decision that I will have to make carefully. Even if there is tangible evidence of the results of these beings, I agree with the Cult of Gihi, that this only shows that Beings may exist, not that they are Sacred or Holy, or that some other Essence or Force causes these Results. Of course I am a small fish amidst a Multiverse of seas. We will see where I stand in the future of eternity and amidst the Veil revealed.”

“Just because you are the love of my life,” said Drerpo, giving her a hug, “Does not mean that you are required to embrace everything I hold dear. I would expect you to learn about it, and give it a fair hearing. Yet as I said, The Alliance of the Multiverse guarantees Freedom of Religion—even for family members. Perhaps you might attend the occasional Feaist ritual with me, even as a non-believer. Perhaps, you might be able to provide an explanation of your final choice. Yet in the end, it is yours alone. As for how we will raise our children, we will agree to that, and have that discussion before they are born. Furthermore, as with the stated Law, our children’s own choice of religion will ultimately be up to them when they come of age.”

“You speak like a person who comes from the dominant culture and tradition,” said Droos. “It is easy to let your children and wife do what they want with religion when there are endless Sentients who believe as you do. What if there are only billions? What if there are only millions? Might there be more pressure if extinction of culture is a real fear? Is it reasonable for faithful elders to mourn for yesterday, and a perceived threat to their way of life? Whether that tradition is one hundred years old or one million, surely a mortal or Greater Being alike wishes the perpetuation of their culture.”

“Then they should Know, that the God of Answer, in each Universe,” said Drerpo, “As well as numerous other Celestial Bureaucrats, Records for Eternity all Religions, and Cultures, and Traditions, and Philosophies. As there is a Heaven for Souls,

and other Celestial Domains, so there is a place to preserve these great ways and worldviews of life. In the Hallowed realms, for all eternity there will be those who practice even religions that have been gone for a billion years. Even once the Universe Itself is gone, in Goamdwee the Council of History inherits these records, and maintains them forever. There is no True End to Religion, Tradition, and Philosophy. If Heaven may exist, then Culture too is Eternal. The only terror is to act in anger, vengeance, or violence to preserve these in the face of extinction, or destruction. Yes, all effort should be done to teach, instill, honor, and preserve. But in the end, the last Elder should know, that there is no forgetting, no last, no final, in the Hallowed places of the Universe. Thus, preserve that which is Faithful, through Faith, and Honesty, and Peace, and Tolerance.”

“This would be a hard thing for a mortal to grasp,” said Droos. “For someone who lives only one lifetime, and does not have any glimpse of Eternity, how may they assume that such things exist?”

“If they are able to have faith in their Religion enough to fight virtuously to preserve it,” said Drerpo. “They may have faith that their Uniqueness will be preserved for Eternity by the God of the Answer. Even if that is beyond the abilities of their faith, they may be loyal enough and open enough to skip intolerance and violence, and take a leap of faith if necessary, and turn the lights out, if need may be; but try to dream, prophecy, somehow, that somewhere, someday, in some future, in some realm, nothing is truly forgotten forever. Someone remembers the past, and honors it, and preserves. If No One Else, then the Unity, the Supreme Being. Perhaps all will be Repaired, and fixed, when the Multiverse is Remade after The Great Wave.”

“I like that you let me choose my own religion,” said Droos. “It provides far less pressure. Honestly, the Right to choose myself makes it more likely I will choose yours. Unless freedom of choice and free will is granted, then my choice would be under duress, and false, and not real. I will think carefully, over time, and I will make my choice of religions, or for none at all, as I have learned, such is also a choice. Perhaps I will choose Feaism. It seems, though, you tell me that I have long to decide.”

“We will see,” said Drerpo, a brief shadow passing above. “For your labors and tasks are great. The omen and foreshadowing around you castes prophecy on the whole of the Multiverse, if

Book III: The Library

Ruby is to be believed. I believe we do have some time. But as you have stated, take no moment for granted, and act every moment as though it were your last. For every Sentient, none know what moment will be their hour, either start or finish. With Tzefee as an adversary, and your statement even to redeem her, treasure surely each Absolute Second (and relative second). Do take your time with every decision, but you may not be sure that you have eternity—or even tomorrow.”

“I am quite certain that I at least have tomorrow,” said Droos, the shadow passing, as she kissed Drerpo, and hugged him. “Yet I will treasure each moment, with you and my Family. I will continue the work, as we have begun. There is much more to do.”

“Thus, you are a great Angel, even in the Realms of Beings, Goddesses, and Servants,” said Drerpo, giving her another hug, before leading her away from their respite, and back to the shelves for more work and toils. Such was their burden and responsibility, and blessing.

Returning to the shelves, Droos and Drerpo found themselves in the Amber Room of the Tree once more. Really it was one of numerous Amber Rooms, in sap that flowed in the Universe Tree. This room had important records about Knowledge, and memories still. The two young adults sat with their backs against the walls, one hand holding the other, while each was engrossed in their own novel. Suddenly, Droos looked up, and over to her Drerpo.

“We had begun to discuss Categories of Immanent Essence,” said Droos. “I believe that the topic deserves further exploration. There is more to it than merely the importance, dignity, and significance a content of Immanence grants to the Object or Person. What else may be learned, or asked about such Knowledge?”

“One Matter that may be considered is whether Categories is more like the Mathematics of Rational Knowledge,” said Drerpo. “They may be seen as more real, but not as real as the Immanent Forms themselves. Yet this intermediary of Categories permits the Objects and Persons access to the Forms. It also allows for greater subdivision—each type of tree may have a category, permitting access to The Tree, or The Trunk. Mortals are more aware, have greater access to the knowledge of the categories, if not The Immanent Forms.”

“Are intermediaries, then, useful in practice,” said Droos.

“For Transcendents that may not be Known otherwise, surely something that connects the Second Order Sentient to It serves a Potent Purpose. This may be in the type of either Object or Person.”

“Really, the term you want is Manifestation,” said Drerpo. “It is a Powerful word. This Universe is a Manifestation. Would you believe me if I told you that there are Manifestations in which magaic principles are as real as our scientific principles are to us—these are Cosmoses. Further, as mentioned, there are Manifestation Temples, Fortresses, Paradises, and Capitols, though only the most Powerful of all Sentients will ever see them. Yet on the Smaller Scale are Manifestations that may fit into a scitter’s paw—objects of Power similar, and just as awful. Also, individual Sentients that serve as Manifestations, or other living Creatures.”

“I question the term, *Manifestation*,” pondered Droos. “Of what are these great (or small) Things in the Multiverse manifestations regarding, or Reflections from what? It is a strange term. How might it be applied? What does it really mean?”

“I am honored that you think I know,” said Drerpo. “The reality is that Manifestations are Souls. Universes (galaxies and stars for that matter), Cosmoses, Temples, and Smaller Manifestations, are Alive. There is a reason they speak to one another, for those who Know how to listen. The reason Grand Elder Forcang see Manifestations as artwork, is that it is like giving birth to the most Potent and Profound type of Soul, and Being. It takes millions of years for even the best Artist to undergo such Projects. The Smaller Manifestations take less Absolute Time. In all instances, such Manifestations, such Art, they are like Family, they are Children, Pure and Complete. To the Grand Elder Forcang, or Elder Forcang, Manifestations and Their Creation, Their Birth, are the Purest of all Selfless actions. There is a reason so many Forcang of that Potency try Their hand at Creation at some point in their eternities. Some Create Hundreds. Others Create One. All are Beautiful and Wondrous in Their Own Way.”

“Let us return to the topic at hand,” said Droos. “Intermediaries, the Categories of Knowledge, that stand between Immanent Forms and the beholder. It seems that one of the lessons from this Service is Love, Selflessness, and Help.”

“Indeed, and it would take great Sacrifice to be a Category, or Intermediary,” said Drerpo. “To be grey, to allow those amidst the darkness to see the light. To be a stepping stone, walked upon,

Book III: The Library

a bridge, so others may reach the destination, if not Herself. To walk the middle path, that He may illuminate the Truth, when the answer is normally so far.”

“What may serve as an Intermediary?” asked Droos.

“Nearly any Object, Thing, or Person, Sentient, may Serve,” said Drerpo. “Also, may Terms, and Aspects, and Ideas. Do not assume any escape their Respect or Honor or Privilege. All achieve Status under Heaven. All are Great and Wondrous in the Minds of Beings. Surely, this Reality is considered Dear in any religion of Forcang and mortals alike.”

“Yet, it is one approach,” said Droos. “Some still wish a direct connection, to attempt to reach The Forms themselves. Does that in any way diminish the Intermediaries, or insult them, or those who revere them?”

“It does not,” said Drerpo. “If one side of the coin reflects the light of the sun, and the underside retains the heat by way of the metal, all of them benefit from the same sun, the same star. It is folly to argue over the qualitative superiority of either approach. Better to focus on the mutual benefits, and selfless service to others, kindness towards all, and happiness and peace.”

“I feel like we often discuss the same topic,” said Droos. “If only using different words and metaphors. It does become wearisome, does it not?”

“There are differences,” said Drerpo, “To the topics. Further, listen to the Song, and you will hear repetition, that seems similar, yet each time through is somewhat different, and even if it were exactly the same, with the exact same notes, the listener would not be the same, for no Sentient understands and hears the same way twice. Twice heard, thrice heard, is more times reinforced, and better believed and interpreted. And where the topic discussed is so vital, that it regards the health, harm, and happiness, and even physical wellbeing of a civilization, perhaps even greater stakes than that, the message of tolerance and peace bears much repeating. Even if by the end, it seems a little boring.”

“I suppose if all I stated was peace, peace, peace, peace... love, love, love, love... tolerance, tolerance, tolerance, tolerance...” said Droos, “The message would be equally vital, if aesthetically curious (but still notable and beautiful). However, it is also the case that this Philosophical Dramatic Narrative has numerous other notes. I only hope that the small number who care to listen hear them, and are not distracted by any single shade of

darkness.”

“What else do you think may be learned from Categories of Knowledge?” said Drerpo. “We have learned about dignity and about love and selflessness. Is there more?”

“Do not forget feasibility,” said Droos. “As I stated, or began to mention, this is the root of Empiricism, which is the hallmark of science. How would the Universe function if not for a strong belief in Empirical Science and philosophy? As mentioned, the only alternative, is a reality of endless Skepticism, and at best self-imposed willful delusion.”

“It is a much simpler reality to believe that everything may eventually be understood by what they appear to be according to the senses, and perhaps, mathematics,” said Drerpo. “I have heard that Showsh is responsible for Creating a Cosmos that goes by the name of Vøvoav. It operates according to the principles of magic. Does that even make sense in a World of Science? Is it logically consistent? Perhaps such a Being may consider such Things, yet it is very convenient to live where the Senses may be counted upon to tell the truth, at least someday.”

“There is still Skepticism,” said Droos, “A healthy doubt of Empirical Facts. Following the Scientific Methods takes rigor and an education. How would the World of Science in which we live function without it? How would we live without mathematics? We require these rules, and procedures for finding Truth and Knowledge. It may be that in the Hallowed Halls of Dweehwail with Greater Beings and Grand Elder Forcang, they may Understand more than mortals may ever dare. For us, Empirical Truth is The Truth.”

“That is a Reality worth living,” said Drerpo. “It brought the Bagan galaxy to six thousand years of peace and worthy achievements, all with the help of Empirical Science and Mathematics. It is hard to deny This Evidence. A world in which Immanent Forms exist, in which the Truth of Objects and Things and People are Real, is a World in which we may feasibly and reliably exist and follow The Good Life. As you say, set aside what occurs in the Celestial Domains, of Heaven, or Hell, or even The Library. Think about what is necessary for the real world. The answer, is science, and mathematics, and empiricism.”

“Does that mean that the other topics are pointless or unnecessary?” asked Droos.

“Absolutely not,” said Drerpo. “Is any aesthetic or art

Book III: The Library

ugly? Everything has beauty. A great thinker once wrote, ‘There is a time for everything under the sun.’ Every philosophy and every religion and every art form and every topic of human knowledge has its place. The human condition is strengthened for imagining the undefinable, even the Indeterminate. It is the great human strength to push the odds, to stretch the realm of imagination, to reach for the stars. If humans did not believe in a better tomorrow in the midst of a storm, why no lasting peace would ever come. Mortals are Great! Not just for empiricism, but for Impossible or Improbable thoughts. Yet, life is primarily based on empiricism, feasibly speaking.”

“Therefore, the best approach for arriving at Truth, at Knowledge, is the scientific method, and empiricism, for mortals?” asked Droos.

“Without a doubt,” said Drerpo. “Journalism, academics, science, must all be founded in such empiricism, and the scientific method. But the rest of the time, aesthetics, and art, and impossible Realities, or at least Realities that are Beyond Knowable Truth, may be Blessed, and Considered, Written, and Drawn, to Inspire, and Believe.”

“Yet we are about to begin an impossible subject,” said Droos, laughing. “How might we reasonably conclude the topic of Pure Knowledge this way, and begin tomorrow with Abstract Knowledge?”

“We do so by remembering that we are not mortals,” said Drerpo. “Far from it. We stand here in a hallowed Celestial Domain set apart from the World of Science. It is Concealed from Empiricism. Furthermore, I never said that writing fiction or creating art was ever wrong, no matter what it depicted, or discussed. In the realm of aesthetics, anything is possible. The rigors of Empiricism, need not stand. In fact, elements of pure imagination are entirely acceptable, only so long as they are held Beautiful by some audience. At the moment, that audience is composed of two—you and I Droos. In the future, it may be more. In the end, such words and art may consider anything. For dramatic narrative need not involve fact, or science. It need only attempt to be Beautiful. The philosophical component should ideally touch on the human condition. For that, I would welcome discussion.”

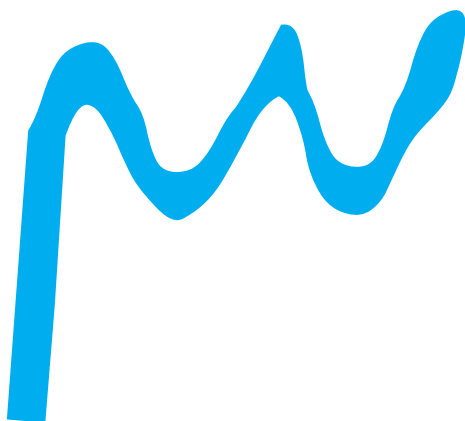
“Thus, tomorrow, we continue with our research into Knowledge, in The Library of Drerpo,” said Droos, kissing

Drerpo and hugging him, “And we will continue with what may be revealed, even if only as Shadows on a Wall, of Abstract Knowledge. If nothing else, it is Beautiful Artwork, nonsense really. Furthermore, our audience only consists of two. Only what we discuss about the nature of Sentients is important.”

“Also,” added Drerpo, “The artwork is meant to provide an attractive backdrop to that discussion. The picture, the philosophy is at the center of the piece, while the frame around it is the drama and narrative. Too few would even think to read pure philosophy without the frame. All of those religions, and philosophies, and stars, and languages, they are but pretty pictures to ease the discussion of aspects of the human condition. When we share this with a larger audience, first our closest friends and family, then perhaps a larger group, it is how and whether such philosophy is considered that any of this matters. The artwork is purely for enjoyment and entertainment value.”

“Does it diminish the philosophy to use aesthetics as a tool to reinforce it with a frame?” said Droos.

“I do not think so,” pondered Drerpo. “For aesthetics has its own entire branch of philosophy, and is perhaps one of



Book III: The Library

the most sublime topics of Sentients—for all are Beautiful—and really, might we all ultimately exist for the latter, to gaze at Beauty for beauties sake, and ignore the philosophy, in a time of few considerations, of peace, happiness, and tranquility. Then discussions of philosophy will be unnecessary, and only entertainment and joy will be the business of the day.”

“I like your vision, Dear Love,” said Droos, putting her book in position to float back onto the shelf at the end of a long day. “I sincerely hope we will get there. A time of Pure Aesthetics. For now, let us put away our worries for the end of the day, and enjoy a quiet dinner together, with the rest of our Family, including Darlez, whom I have missed. We may plan how to save my people, and deal with my Omen more, tomorrow.”

“Well met, Dear One, love of my life,” said Drerpo. “For every day, has a descent of darkness, a rising of stars and the moon, and quiet. These are times for love, and joy, and family. If only to break from the toil (or at some point in the week or day). Let us ascend into the canopy of flowers.”

So the pair left The Tree and returned to The Meadow and on into the heights of the most exquisite Flowers, where they met Emerzo, Amet, and Darlez, and they dined, and drank, and sang, and recited poetry, and even danced. It was a merry respite. For a time they all, even Emerzo and Droos, forgot their burdens. For a time, it was an Age of Pure Aesthetics.





Chapter 4

Abstract Dimensions

“A Loaf of Bread,” said Droos, looking at the object in the display. “Is that all there is to see? Surely there is more? What meaning exists in such simplicity?”

“What do you think, Droos?” asked Drerpo, with a smile on his face and a glow in his grey eyes.

“A Loaf of Bread is Hope,” pondered Droos. “It is a Miracle, given Form. How many sit and sleep in a gutter each night, and hope for such a miracle? How easily is it taken for granted? How much goes to waste? Does any of it find its way to the needy? It is Selflessness. It is a Challenge. For it is selfless to give a Loaf of Bread, even a morsel, and a challenge to feed the Hungry.”

“It seems your Loaf of Bread is also Pain,” said Drerpo, “And hunger. How much sleep is lost in pursuit of a loaf, and how hungry is a woman to maintain This upon her table? What would she sacrifice to maintain her expectations of The Good Life?”

“A Loaf of Bread may feed many,” said Droos. “It may also be food for one.”

“Are you discounting the significance of the other factors surrounding the Loaf?” asked Drerpo. “For there may be a time of importance, where one eating more may bear the weight of many.”

“It may be true that a man with a level of satiation serves better,” said Droos, “Yet would service be desired by such that requires these needs? Would it be better to emphasize service by those with moderate portions, or even less, and still serve, thus, more may eat? If it is a matter of expectation, wants and desires may change to suit the environment. Where there is much hunger, and much need, those requiring less satiation have an advantage.”

“Is there a requirement that she share her Loaf?” said Drerpo. “If the ingredients or the Thing Itself is possessed and

Book III: The Library

purchased, she may do as she pleases. Or, is there an obligation to serve? What is the lesson from the Loaf?"

"I suppose that where the hunger is obvious," said Droos, "Less satiation is warranted and sharing is required. Furthermore, there is a reasonable expectation to apply some Knowledge to the matter, as discussed, to establish The Truth. If the matter is uncertain, a man may be forgiven for overconsumption, however, the better option is to assume an excess of hunger unless in a locale without much demand. Even so, would not The Good Life demand some moderation, and to reach satiation in the first place would in fact deprive ultimately both the absent hungry as well as the consumer? Finally, there may be the rare instance where it is actually known that none are Truly hungry. In such a place, search for a better outcome, for surely to go beyond moderation, to reach satiation, is harmful regardless, and a purpose for excess morsels may be found. It would be arrogant to believe that truly none are hungry, or that some more useful purpose for morsels cannot be found."

"You would truly end all feasts," said Drerpo. "And cancel all parties. For who does not eat and drink to excess in such settings?"

"There are many in communal revelry who do not satiate themselves," said Droos. "They taste and enjoy, they are moderate, but to not overconsume. Even so, it may be better forgiven in such a place, as more are addressed simultaneously. Still, needs there are approached which themselves may prove excess. What is the purpose of *sweets* and *honey*?"

"Are you serious, Dear Love?" said Drerpo. "Is there truly no reward for success? Why might a mortal or greater Order of Sentient strive for betterment if not for the occasional feast and party? At these parties, surely the expectation is that some additional enjoyment be granted. Is it not the case that the Sentient Condition requires some rewards, that are reasonable?"

"That is True," said Droos. "For a moment I forgot myself, Such was the Need of the Many Hungry. Yet there must be a place for some Enjoyment, within Reason. It is a Goal, on an Occasion. Ancient Peoples might have a great feast to mark an important event or time. Should they too be deprived of the reward for their successes, remembered then? Or do all work towards, at some level, that time of aesthetic appreciation, be it in art, poetry, or simply enjoying fine food and drink for their own sake."

“Yet what will you say to the masses who have barely or none to eat at all?” said Drerpo. “While the *rare feast* or *party* occurs, they are in the street, hungry, and thirsty. How may such extravagance be explained?”

“Provided such events, they do serve as a source and tale of inspiration,” said Droos. “Those sleeping on the street, who are hungry, might wish to someday be the ones in such states of enjoyment. It may encourage them to strive harder to earn that lofty spot.”

“You and I both know that the reasons for hunger and thirst are not always fair, or rarely so,” said Drerpo. “The Loaf is a symbol of Intolerance, it is Unfairness, for those without surely deserve to have it. Might it also be a reminder to the elite to both invite such to their feasts, and to aid those who are not currently in attendance? Furthermore, that The City must be built to raise the downtrodden to a state where Loafs may be had by All, as a Fundamental Right? It is an inalienable Right to have basic food. It should give people pause to exist among the satiated and trays of excess, and not think of those without, and a far from perfect system. Only, the Laws must be improved, and changed.”

“Then a Loaf of Bread is a Symbol of Fundamental Rights, and the Basic Requirements in The City,” said Droos. “Every table, for every mortal, must have a loaf of bread, or sufficient slices and morsels, to provide at least moderation. It is a responsibility to empower the meek with this basic need, and right, that they may take aim at the Feast, and Satiation of the Rarity. While in the gutter, it is difficult to understand the latter, yet where safety, and basic security is ensured, where fundamental wants and needs are answered, then mortals may turn to other requirements, like work, and improving society, and contributing. A brick may not be laid at the foundation of The City that has fractures in its corners. Better first to repair those flaws, at least the most fundamental, that would risk the structure.”

“However, I do see that we have digressed to The City, even in words,” said Drerpo, sheepishly.

“I may also say, that I am here to discovered how this Loaf of Bread relates to Abstract Dimensions,” said Droos. “Even if I may only view the Reflections of such Transcendence (or slightly more), that is truly what I am here to Behold. What do you say of this, Dear Love?”

“I would ask you, what is a Loaf of Bread?” said Drerpo.

Book III: The Library

“Also, may the nourishment of one Loaf feed Many? Clearly, the symbol of the Loaf inspires the Rights and support of the downtrodden in all of society. The Loaf feeds all, if only the Abstract Dimension will be Considered. When all have a loaf, The Loaf of Bread is realized, at its start. Then begins the challenging task of perpetuation of the standard. You ask, ‘What is the Abstract Dimension?’ Even a loaf of bread carries Abstraction beyond the significance of its mere ingredients, weight, or size. Truly, the Loaf of Bread is Greater than the sum of its parts. The message carried from it echoes in numerous cultures and traditions and is merely repeated by this lowly speaker, borrowed for this example.”

“It is no wonder, and you are keen,” said Droos. “For to the end of Pre-History, and Second Level Sentients, goes grain, and the creation of Loafs of Bread. How far into myth and then history does such Communal Memory and Tradition go? How many Meanings does the Loaf of Bread contain? Truly, it is Abstract, and carries a weight very heavy indeed. That structure may either tear down in its willful negligence, or raise up all of civilization for six thousand years. All of this, on the Abstract Dimensions surrounding a Loaf of Bread.”

“Does that mean that you are seeing some Heavenly Realm, or magical shapes?” said Drerpo, “Unavailable to others. Surely, such Truths may be found in the smallest morsel of bread. It may also be found in other basic requirements for Life. This is but the start of the discussion of Abstract Dimensions. It was obvious to begin with a Loaf of Bread, as it is central to the rituals and customs of so many cultures and traditions. There is a reason for that, as you can see now.”

“What will we consider next, Dear Drerpo?” asked Droos. “I understand now why this display in the museum is so Profound and Potent. Maybe it is a Manifestation or Heavenly Object I Behold.”

“Now you tease,” said Drerpo, smiling again. “Let us depart this respite from our studies, and return to the shelves. We must browse the books specific to this Domain. They have much unique information unavailable elsewhere. It is not enough to invent these ideas ourselves. Just because we are passed the chapter of Research, does not mean this topic requires none.”

“I will lead the way, as the Secrets of The Library become more Apparent the closer I draw to the Veil,” said Droos, and she took his hand, and together they left the museum, and made their

way through The Meadow, to the proper Flower of the Shelves.

“This part of the Domain is Apparent in this Light of the Veil,” said Drerpo, aside. “Better it be kept that way, for Knowledge of all Abstract Dimensions is at once Enlightening, but Terrifying.”

With a sudden enthusiasm, Droos turned and kissed him, and said:

“Catch me if you can!”

As though children once more, Drerpo scampered after his love, making little real attempt to tag her, as they played lightly on the way to their next topic. Perhaps the ability to have such frivolity, even in the midst of serious matters, is also a goal that all Sentients may strive to achieve. Also, to be young at heart, even if the oldest tree in the oldest woods in the universe.

It was in the Library Proper, amidst the enormous, world-size yellow flower, that the pair found themselves, looking at books long placed at the center of The Library, for such was their importance. Or rather, clearly this indicated the Goddess of The Library, though Droos would have to use that term colloquially for she did not know how the Celestial Bureaucracy functioned here exactly, had organized it as such, and with this wisdom; perhaps there was a better system, or improved method. Of course, who was she to question the will of the Servants of Elriver and Showsh?

They stood and looked out over the meadow, a balcony of the flower between them and descent, a sweet smell of nectar in the air, and a hint of tasteful raspberries to attract the senses and focus the attention on the task at hand. This was the book in Droos’ hand, one that now discussed a supposed Attribute of both Abstract Knowledge and a key component of Pure Knowledge. Really she had been neglectful for waiting this long to reach this page, this chapter, this book. Even Drerpo looked on with interest, for the matter might not be ignored, even on Heights, or among Stars in the Sky.

““Sentients are Social Creatures,”” read Droos, from the Book. “Or so a wise man once said, in the name of a wise man, on the planet No, called differently long ago. What does that mean? I read the words and am unable to shake them, having merely glanced at them. Such are their Power; and even you, My Love, here cling, and gaze upon them. Why are they so important?”

“It is a Fundamental Truth of Sentients, of Natures, and certainly of Humanity when this was written,” said Drerpo, “That

Book III: The Library

mortals desire to live and interact and be in societies. No one wants to live on a desert island alone—or the very few. There is something about the Sentient condition that yearns for company. A human will seek out even a bad neighbor where no positive force is to be had. The abuse many will tolerate, just to be around another... how does this affect the conversation about The Good Life? Does it not ultimately revolve around a society of people living with people? This is a society that most coexists?”

“Would that not suggest that no woman or man’s *Good Life* should diminish The Other’s *Good Life*,” said Droos. “Is that possible? Where definitions of such are similar, or nearly so, this is to be expected. Yet where individuals have wildly different worldviews, it should be imagined that Society will create inevitable turmoil. Is this then the source of such Abstract Dimensions? For sure the Fundamental Society exists where there is no Conflict, or where only arguments for the sake of heaven remain. Anything that diminishes The Other, or Heaven, is discarded.”

“How may it be that a Society of trillions of colors, and shades of darkness, Coexist?” said Drerpo. “For surely, we have once more returned to Tolerance, by digression. If only Society, and Sentients, will be tolerant, than every color will be accepted, and maybe even valued.”

“It would take a truly new kind of Sentient to take no offense when her deepest worldview were challenged,” said Droos. “I do take your point. Is there a difference between insult and lack of respect. Is tolerance offering respect towards The Other, if not no challenge. If merely existing is a challenge, insults will exist. That may not be avoided. However, respect may exist universally. Common rules of social interaction may be agreed upon in mutual locales that all worldviews may coexist, with narrow exceptions.”

“I would expect there to be essentially no exceptions,” said Drerpo. “For those who go to the museum and see a painting of a trillion colors and bring a paint brush with a shade of any one color, perhaps that worldview must receive a check, for it dismisses permanently all others. To see the art and attempt to change it at all—that is itself radical. Any group is free to create new art, to counter any statement with a statement of their own, provided it is verbal or aesthetic, and non-violent, or emotionally or mentally threatening.”

“What if the worldview holds that the very nature of some

colors, or all other colors is emotionally and mentally threatening?” asked Droos. “Might it then, as you suggested, be the difference between demanding respect and demanding kindness. For it is the obligation of others to at all times be respectful; being nice is good, but beyond the realm of strict Justice. It is not required. Insult and critique is part of our Existence, and to live in the Real World, is to live in a Space that would counter one worldview with an opposite at all times. Every worldview must always assume that there is at least one opposite, if not many, and that is the accepted state of being. Insult and critique by definition are not and may not be considered reasonably mental and emotional threats.”

“However, mortals are unable to control their emotions and thoughts,” said Drerpo. “They are also raised and socialized in particular ways. How are they to embrace this... Tolerance... this... Society?”

“It is as you spoke, Dear One,” said Droos. “To begin the discussion of Good and Evil, it is required to begin with the philosophy of Knowledge. It is acceptable to recognize and disagree on this topic to most extents possible, but only limits in so far as a strand is required to hold the artwork to the wall. To have a painting on a wall requires certain basic requirements, regardless of the desires of the worldview. These underpinnings of the philosophy of Being and Knowledge must hold True, and be Taught. Or else, surely no Painting will for long reside in any museum, whether of trillions of colors, or of one. In fact, I would expect there to be no museums at all. If the most rudimentary foundation of Knowledge and Being may not be agreed upon, there can be no Society. Try building a house without agreeing that it requires some kind of Foundation.”

“However, might a man not decide to sleep outside, and forgo a Foundation?” suggested Drerpo. “What I ask, is may a Sentient or group of humans change the rules, or Fundamental Requirements of People? Perhaps it may be ruled by society that no purple may be used—or red. To some it may be arbitrary. Yet, is there anything against the State of Nature that says Rules may not be changed. Or furthermore, that they must even be followed and enforced....”

“I feel that this pursuit of the Abstract Dimension of Society has brought us back to The City,” said Droos. “Maybe it is necessary. Is it not a Fundamental Law in Heaven, certainly in Drerpo, and I imagine in other Manifestations as well, that all

Book III: The Library

Sentients in the State of Nature have the Fundamental Right to Housing? This has been established elsewhere. Society must reflect the Rights, the Rules governing Sentients, of Humans. To do otherwise is to Violate the human, to undermine her or his dignity. As you say, it may also be officially stated that all Sentients require a basic house, yet in practice the Right may be unfollowed. A law unenforced or not followed in practice by Society is in fact No Law. In other words, *de facto*, such Rights do not actually exist, even if publicly stated. If anything, such official statements may merely serve as a tool for the State. No, all colors of the painting are required, and an Artist must have access to the full pallet, and museums must have complete free expression to present. The messages, and displays may be greatly divergent. Yet as you say, they all must be displayed—for the artwork not displayed in a sense, does not exist. We must agree on these very basic tenants.”

“Thus, Society, in its Abstract Dimension, does not disregard Sentient or human Rights to interpersonal relations, or to form groups, or a multitude of voices and worldviews,” said Drerpo. “Yet it agrees in Transcendence upon a State of Basic, Fundamental Rules. Ha! Yes, we are discussing The City once more. Or do we not know that Reality is cyclical, and often one topic returns to another.”

“It is also true that Sentients, particular mortals, are profoundly concerned with how to live The Good Life in Society,” said Droos. “It would be strange if there were no Abstract Dimension concerned with Society.”

“Might such an Abstract Dimension be a place of Infinite Colors, a Realm of Endless Possibilities, of No Limit to Conception or Creation or Aesthetic?” pondered Drerpo.

“Would it be possible for such a Domain to exist?” said Droos. “I have only been exposed, the small fish that I am, even if you do label me, the angel, to The Library. Are there Celestial Domains where Society Exists Truly?”

“Showsh would say that among some Manifestations there are numerous Planes of existence, or as you call them here in a Universe, Celestial Domains,” said Drerpo. “They may have nearly any character. Maybe it is in such Realms that Possibility (or Impossibility) may be conceived. Then again, if Celestial Domains may be Reality even in an Empirical Universe based on Science in Drerpo, why not here as well?”

“Thus perhaps the reflection of society, or civilization, originates Somewhere,” said Droos. “In the same manner that good may have been reflected, or we fear, evil. Truly, it is a marvelous game to imagine such dreams and wonders. Where does it End? What may not be imagined?”

“There is a reason Dweehwail calls it the Council of the Arts,” said Drerpo. “The options for Creativity are nearly Unlimited, and Infinite. It would take a Great Being to even Conceive of something Beyond.”

“I thought that was what we were here to imagine,” said Droos.

“We are here to look at shadows on the cave wall,” said Drerpo. “And to discuss the Reality behind them, such as we are able as limited Sentients. So far, our conversation has been... I have enjoyed it.”

“That is kind of you, Dear One,” said Droos with a smile, and grin. “You do your best not to insult me.”

“You are very smart, Droos,” said Drerpo, “And kind, and generous, and beautiful. The fact that you are not perfect should not cause any despair or regret.”

“What if I want to be Perfect?” said Droos. “Here you are reminding me of my limits.”

“No Sentient needs be [P p] erfect,” said Drerpo, in an odd way.

There was a Dimension to the last word that resonated with Droos, as though it had multiple meanings.

“Every Sentient carries within Them a taste of the Beauty of Perfection—while remaining burdened by some Flaws,” stated Drerpo. “It is better to embrace the latter, then wish for clearer sight of the Former.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to fully view The Perfect?” said Droos. “Is that not simply another Abstract Dimension? I am sure you, in Your might, Know more than you say. I suppose you must be right. Really, I tease.”

“I know that,” laughed Drerpo. “Even amidst the Veil, and Secret, your exposure to such things will be delightfully limited. Do you really want the burdens of All Powerful, or All Anything? I would not think that to be the case. You are humble, Droos. I know that the truth is even your small dose of Perfection frightens you. You put on a brave face, but you Know to fear such things. That is the sign that you are also Wise.”

Book III: The Library

“Maybe it is alright to be a small fish in an ocean of seas,” said Droos. “Better to be myself, with the occasional mistake. Let us consider the Abstraction behind Imperfection, and Flaw, if they exist, and that would be what I would find curious.”

“Those Abstract Dimensions are more interesting, indeed,” said Drerpo, kissing her cheek, and hugging her. “Certainly a flawed art piece has more to talk about than any supposed Perfect Masterpiece. In the end, they all are Beautiful, but Flawed.”

“I love you, Dear One,” said Droos. “You remind me to remain myself. ‘If I am not for myself, who will be for me’—or so said a great ancient sage.”

“That is why you have friends and those who love you, Dear Love,” said Droos. “That is why you have Society—it is there to remind you to Love Yourself. Then, you may Look to Others with Tolerance, Love, and Peace.”

That is where Emerzo found Droos and Drerpo. The two had actually fallen asleep, of all strange occurrences, amidst the streaming beams of the eternal midday sun, and Droos snored delightfully, though neither minded. The twin kicked Drerpo a few times, ever so lightly, though the actual force behind that impact might have toppled a mountain. Upright sat her brother, alert and awake, and soon too The Angel, both looking a tad sheepish.

“I don’t know what came over us,” said Droos. “I did not even think we needed rest, or sleep, such as we are, Dear Emerzo. Here we are, lounging as though there were all the time in the Multiverse before us.”

“There is a certain timeless quality to this place,” said Emerzo, with a slight annoyance, that might have been a chuckle. “Perhaps for most it is a benefit, but for the occasional absent minded romantics lost in thought.”

“Or more likely too tired and burdened to continue with the previous thoughts,” said Drerpo, smiling, and stretching in a simple way and method the young man had not considered in so much time, if only Droos knew the number. “This is relaxing. You are right, Dear Wife, and we are incorrect too loose ourselves in Abstraction. Is it not surprising given the weight of the Multiverse looms over us?”

“Or rather, a mountain hangs above our heads,” said Droos. “Unless we make the right choice, surely we shall be smashed irrevocably. What bargain must we strike with the wielder? Must we agree, and then hear?”

“If Truth is Truth, why linger in Thought?” pondered Drerpo. “If Knowledge is Known, why Seek Further?”

“I would say that a decision made under duress is by its nature revoked,” said Emerzo. “If I were to demand that my brother obey me, with some great threat as chastisement if he failed to do so, would his actions count for anything? Surely, only a choice made in free will is Real? Only Good and Evil exist where Intent Exists? Intent only Exists where Choice is Real.”

“Now I am awake,” said Droos. “It seems you touch on another important Abstraction, a dimension most worthy; though many ignore it. What is the nature of Obligation? What does it mean to be Commanded to act, behave, think, do, or avoid? What of the opposite? Is the void of such Duties Freedom? Or is it really a Slavery of Sloth? Do those without the Meditation of Obligation becomes slow and lazy?”

“Are you suggesting that unless my sister issues orders to me,” said Drerpo, with a grin, “That I will be slothful? Might I nonetheless Choose a life of activity, even with duties to fill my time. Are only soldiers capable of The Good Life? Surely those of endless free time are able to have the most creativity, and ability to think of Greatness. Would Duty Constrict Thought in reality? Why isn’t it a choice, a free will?”

“You may not say that mortals dislike ritual, or habit, or repetition,” said Emerzo. “A life of schedule, and regular activity has a certain psychological roundness. It is therapeutic, if I may use the word, however strange it is from me. A life of endless interruptions, variety, differences—what may this be similar too—say in art? Imagine a song of great harmony and well combined notes. Then consider one of great contention and notes that clash, and create a strange, sound. Both are music. Some may consider both beautiful. Many would consider the smoother piece easier to enjoy.”

“Is that not still a matter of personal aesthetic?” said Drerpo. “You speak of *many* and *most*. This is a conversation of *norms*. What is wrong with atypical? What is wrong with different? However, I see a repetition in our conversation before long, so I will cease it now. Only, I will add that surely differences must be valued as well.”

“Returning to the Obligation,” said Droos, “What is it to live a life of Obligation? What is the source of these obligations? Do they originate from a book? Are they from a culture? How

Book III: The Library

does a person or group of people know what the Obligations may be? Does following all of them grant The Good Life? If some, but not all are followed, is the Good Life truncated, or diminished, or may it still be enjoyed? Would it be different? Who gets to make this decision?"

"I might imagine that if the needs of a community were grave," said Emerzo, "Then uniformity of Duty and Observance would be necessary. Surely, to waver to the left or right would cause confusion, chaos. In the end, is it not a matter of trying to instill basic Morality and Ethics and Integrity, once more? How do you convince a man to wake up at dawn, earn a living through lots of sweat and tears, and come home after dark, and go to sleep, only to repeat it the next day? How do you convince anyone to feed the hungry, be kind to The Stranger, tip the balance in the favor of an enemy? Surely, to overcome emotion, and base thought, these take a system of Obligations, Enforced by a Community. To waver, even from the smallest, most questionable, or esoteric Duty, is to question the whole system."

"Then if the system requires that I must debate at noontime on Monday how many angels may stand on the head of a pin," said Drerpo, "This is a mantra that is part of a whole whose sum is far, far greater than its parts."

"The question I would ask," said Droos, "Is there any value at all to retrieving parts from the whole? Such a system suggests a fallacy, and temptation that we just sought to avoid—namely, Perfection. To follow a System so closely, surely it may not be completely achieved. Then if some part inevitably will go unaccomplished by the mortal, either by mistake, or likely in some instances, willfully, why not choose a selection in the first place. Why not apply extra value to a Subset and emphasize those? If only, to avoid the *all or nothing* of Perfection. Too many are carried down the road to a demise of despair, for inability to be the Perfect Mortal. Better to embrace an Imperfect, damaged world upfront, and settle for what may be had, and Fully appreciate That Meaning."

"Perhaps, that is another approach," said Emerzo. "Yet a great thinker encouraged that the goal does not have to be Perfection, but merely the journey itself. Only the attempt must be made at success. It is expected that any mortal will fall short. Perhaps there is the very rare Saint or Tzaddik who really does Succeed—yet for all the others, merely the attempt is Worthy of

Praise.”

“However, for others, the Attempt, is deeply saddening,” said Drerpo. “The effort to attempt Perfection, to aim at Perfection, to seek Perfection, is too much for some. They must choose a middle path, or a Selection at the First. Or else, the likely result will be despair or a complete negligence of Obligation altogether. This Selection must be Defined, and Solemnized as Truth. Perhaps it Is simply a Complete but Different, Unique Duty.”

“Yet, if you suggest that a System may be changed,” said Droos, “Then why not again? Why may it not be nullified? Why may not some random mortal wake up one day and create a new System? How are the Majority to focus on the Moral and Ethical matters of getting up and feeding their children, when they are tired, and wish to sleep longer? Surely, only Faith in a single System will be sufficient. If other Systems exist, Doubt makes the whole model quake.”

“However, every one of the mortals knows that at any time, any day, the earth might shake, rain might fall from clouds, and weather occurs in the state of nature,” said Emerzo. “If there may be weather and natural disasters in the State of Nature, then such weather and natural disasters must be recognized in the State of Nature of Mortality, of Sentients, of humans. Earthquakes do occur in Tradition, in Systems. It is as normative as the weather. Just as any mortal knows that depending on where they live the ground may shake today, or in one hundred years, or in one thousand years, so may the minds of one mortal, or one million mortals, and as to the division of Systems, cause them to either split, nullify, or create new ones. Thus, if it is possible to face the weather, and still maintain any System, so should it be possible to weather the State of Nature of Humans. For Humans, Sentients, are fickle, and maintain great diversity.”

“What aspect then of Obligation is an Abstract Dimension?” asked Droos. “Is it possible that Obligation may both require the eternity and undivided nature of a System, yet simultaneously permit Change? Such a thing may not exist among mortals? It is an Abstract Dimension. How may something both remain the same, and change? How may something in a Community be both Obligated, and Optional? How may something be required, but also a choice?”

“Your questions are Powerful,” said Drerpo. “It may be

Book III: The Library

that the Abstract Dimension of Obligation is such that to truly see the Shadow of that Abstraction on the Cave wall, is to see both Uniformity, and Variance. How may those opposites exist simultaneously? This is because in the state of Abstraction, opposites may exist at the same time. Moreover, as we will explore in the Nature of Dualism in the future, such opposites complement each other in a way, and teach each other about the Essence of Reality, and are interdependent. The static nature of Obligation would not exist without its ability to change, and the Variance of Obligation would not exist if not for the Static nature of Obligation.”

“How can that possibly make sense?” said Droos. “Even as I stand here, once a princess, now what you call The Angel, such Dualisms are Beyond my Senses. What do You see?”

“The reason we are here in this discussion of philosophy of Knowledge is with the Intent to get to Morality and Ethics,” said Emerzo. “We now hint at our Future. Perhaps, one lesson meant to be learned by mortals from this abstraction, this dualism, is the value of both sides. Unless, either one requires a state of violence, or harm, then both are Beautiful, and surely must be preserved and perpetuated. Where no injury is caused, and insult is unintended, and respect is granted, freedom to choose must be limitless: including in the Abstract Dimension of Obligation.”

“What may I actually know about this Abstract Dimension?” said Droos. “Why do I keep hearing the same preaching, and sermons, on these topics? I feel like I am surrounded by Beings of Light, yet I see in greyscale.”

“That is an appropriate comparison,” said Drerpo. “Even if you are not the first to use that metaphor. This Dimension is beyond any words that my sister and I may Show you in Reality. Only the slightest glance may be managed, and learned from the Dimension. You, who turned away from Perfection, is that not enough? Do you really want more?”

Droos thought for a moment longer, standing up, beside her love, Drerpo, and patting Emerzo on the shoulder, as she winked at her.

“I do not need more, or want more,” said Droos. “I fear I will receive a little more, regardless. But, I do not need visions, or dreams, or revelations. I want only to be myself. A lesson about an Abstract Dimension is sufficient. If it teaches the same valuable lesson, if only I might take it to heart.”

“If only we might move onto a different topic,” said Emerzo.

“Well, surely, it is an important subject,” said Drerpo, with a smile.

“Everyone knows it by now,” said Emerzo. “All Sentients know Beauty, and know peace, and the Others. What more may we say, even if repeated, if it will not be believed and followed? It is better to focus on aesthetics, and different topics.”

“Seemingly, all topics return to this one topic, The Good,” said Droos.

“Which is a title of a future Chapter,” said Drerpo.

“I would like to focus now on my redemption,” said Droos. “For it is still relevant, that I did a great evil act. If I want to minimize the portion of my soul claimed by baetOak, or remove it altogether, I must learn about the nature of The Good, and the Knowledge required to Know It.”

“It would seem you are already partway there,” said Drerpo. “Is it possible that a great evil act may be subsumed by something to change the decree? That is the question. Maybe it requires a lifetime of The Good afterwards. Perhaps Elriver and Showsh Know, or Their Judge, as to what affect a Balance has on such a decree?”

“Perhaps I should accept my fate, and that is the answer?” said Droos. “If I recognize The Good, I recognize Justice, and Due Process. There are consequences for actions. If the worst is that merely a piece, or pieces of my soul go to baetOak, or a similar Celestial Domain, that seems like the natural, even appropriate consequence.”

“We both Know that we are here, in part, because the matter is more complicated than that,” said Emerzo. “It may be that there is no avoiding the claim of the Lieutenant of baetOak in the End. Yet, would One Act condemn? Perhaps any might meet such an End. There is a Question of Mercy. What is the Reward for the Otherwise Righteous?”

“Very well, then I will continue to research, study, and learn,” said Droos. “Both for myself, my people, and someday, maybe for the Multiverse, if I am unlucky enough.”

With that, both Drerpo and Emerzo smiled, and the twins held hands, as The Angel stood tall, with curly hair, and eyes that shone white and bright as the eternal sunshine. A crown of leaves and rose blossoms, amidst a garnish of mithril lace, graced her

Book III: The Library

head. In that moment, she was The Queen.

At the end of the day of eternal sun, the three joined Amet and Darlez in one of the casual restaurants, in the seedpod of a sunflower. The breeze caused the strand atop which they sat on chairs of leaves to sway ever so slightly, though nothing in an age would blow away the sun seed. Without fear, the family and friends exchanged words, food, drink, song, and poetry.

“It was awfully bold to assert that Droos was a *Queen*,” said Amet, with some bemusement. “What has she done to mark this transition. Seemingly, at the first appearance of Abstract Dimension, that alone is all it takes to gain a Supreme Title. I think back to old performances, where ambrosia instantly incurred the right of godhood. Suddenly, the powers were granted...! Is it really so simple? What has Droos done to earn this?”

“My sister will make a splendid Queen,” said Darlez. “It has been in process for almost an age.”

“That is an exaggeration, Dear Darlez,” said Emerzo. “It takes a Vision of such Dimensions, and in particular Obligation to begin the Transition to Power. Further, it is a Sign of the Veil appearing, and Secrets being Revealed. None may view such Realities without the Title.”

“My sister is correct,” said Drerpo. “And we hardly must remain using such terms any longer, but for a day. Yet this is the beginning of a Journey. A Queen or any Ruler, must Know their Obligations, on an Abstract Level. They must Know Society. It is also essential to Know that there are those who are less fortunate—there is Need, and to have such Responsibility is to see a Universe of Requirements. It does not End Here.”

“I suppose I take such matters for granted,” said Amet. “Having been born into such Rights. I am the Son of Showsh, none other. Yet so little, in fact, nonetheless, I have been Granted Potencies and Privileges that may Spoil Me to those who achieve Promotion. It is a rare event. Droos, you are a special woman. Maybe I am still adjusting to having a second Mother. Would such Emotions be wholly unexpected?”

“I would suggest that if the Journey is to continue then an Abstract Dimension be chosen to direct Droos towards Dualism, and The Good, and ultimately, the path to her Redemption,” said Emerzo. “What is it that remains to be Shared?”

“Are you all just going to sit there and discuss me as though I were in another Cosmos?” commented Droos, suddenly

awaking from a daydream. “Though I suppose there is little to fear from such family and friends. Nearly all of my trust and loyalty in one location—I have less to fear.”

“That is not True, Dear Sister,” said Darlez. “There is much to fear.”

“You Know too much, truly,” remarked Droos to Darlez, concerned for a moment about the boy. “Emerzo, when may we send Darlez back to No, to be with his own people? I do not think this place is the best fit for him.”

“Do I get a say in this matter,” replied Darlez. “Why is it a concern if I See more clearly? Surely Knowledge should not be Feared. Besides, I have made many Friends. I would Miss Them.”

“You will make new friends,” said Drerpo. “Droos is right. You cannot stay here. I am afraid for eternity there will be a mark on your Soul of this Experience. Yet upon a Proper Demotion, your Senses will Reacclimate, and You will not miss the Light, or the Stars or the Moon.”

“How would you know!” called out Darlez, with some alarm. “Have you ever been Demoted? Why would any want to leave The Library?”

“For exactly that reason,” said Emerzo, with a smile, and a kind look in her eyes. “Child, my brothers and I know more about immanency than you will ever know. Perhaps the Wholeness of Demotion is not an experience we have shared, or Known Ourselves. We do Know Mortality. We do Know the Blessing of Imperfection, of Limitation, of Curiosity.”

“When will this happen, Dear Sister?” said Darlez, suddenly more calm than the boy really ought to be. “If you are to send me away, why not soon? Why wait?”

“Oh, Dear Darlez,” said Droos, with a smile. “You will have time to bid farewell to your new friends, and to take a last look around. It will still seem like another Age. Then I will see you on your way personally, for I will never cease to maintain my care and vigil over you, as I pledged to be your sister forever. When I return to Bagan, I will find you, even if you do not recognize me in the same way.”

“And... this will be for the best, Emerzo?” said Darlez, looking afraid for a moment longer.

“You deserve a normal childhood,” said Emerzo. “Four chapters in The Library is far too long. Droos will find you, when she reaches the end of her burdens, and returns to redeem

Book III: The Library

her people. For now, return to joy, happiness, and freedom! Be at peace, and be well and healthy. You Truly have the Blessings of that and all Hope and Prosperity of Elriver, Showsh, and all Celestials of Drerpo. Now Go! Your Sister and the rest of us, must finish our conversation. Be with your friends for now, while you still have the time.”

“I thank you, Elriver, and Showsh, and Dear Sister, for my future,” said Darlez, with a new smile, perhaps of a more simple hope.

Then he rose and left the table, and the restaurant, and this tale, for now. Yet Droos would keep her word, and this was not the last they would see of each other. And Darlez would know who she was in his own way; his sister she would be for the rest of his happy, peaceful life.

“Why is it different for the other Children here?” asked Droos.

“It is exactly as I spoke, and as you just added,” said Amet. “Those born the Children of Servants, of Angels, of Goddesses, of Greater Beings, these are Meant of Know the Truth. It is a Responsibility, a Gift, and a great Burden. Besides which, such Powerful Forcang will live normally for Ages, and *childhood* takes on a different meaning when one thousand, even one million years carries little significance. Yet there are *youths* among Forcang, Droos.”

“How can this be?” said Droos. “I thought Forcang Knew everything, or nearly?”

“It takes time for Knowledge to be Realized,” said Drerpo. “That may be on the Order of hundreds, maybe even many hundreds of years. During that time, the Knowledge of Forcang, be they Angel, God, or Greater Being, are limited, and at an infancy, and youth. These *children* of Forcang get up to all manner of trouble, and are the ones given rare exceptions to standards of behavior and decorum by their Elders, in most locales.”

“In most locales...,” said Emerzo. “There are certainly Forcang who give no leniency even then. However, it is true that a Forcang who is unable to Utilize Their Potency or Know the Truth is similar more closely to a mortal, and even learns like one. They often spend those hundreds of years in mortal worlds doing all manners of activity. At those ages they attend school and universities, perhaps many times over, receiving many degrees. Nearly all of us, did you know, have learned advanced medicine,

and physics, and in Worlds of Magic, we are archmages of great power. Some serve as soldiers on starships, or earn a good honest living mining coal. Interests vary greatly, as do the personalities. These learned skills will benefit them forever. These experiences are precious.”

“It is interesting to hear you talk about your children like that,” said Droos. “For mortals on No, childhood is a short time, and linear. Even in advanced civilization, it has been extended to a mere twenty-five years, which is a great privilege. Yet for you, it may last five hundred years.”

“It is also true that any human or Sentient you see might, in fact, be one of Us,” said Amet. “How would you know? Only We have the Vision to Notice. For mortals, there is no difference. Particularly, if the Forcang has learned to blend into his or her environment, with proper subterfuge, they will not stand out. Any mortal might be a Forcang of any potential Potency.”

“Does it ever happen that even after this period of *childhood* that Forcang return and live among mortals?” asked Droos.

“It happens all the time,” said Drerpo. “For those whose life lasts an eternity, choices become almost infinite. The option may be of the sort only a Greater Being or Servant may Imagine. It may also be equally something similar to the entertainment enjoyed by a mortal. There is no reason why someone like my son, Amet, would not like a game of cards. Only, you might assume that he would generally be quite good at any game he chooses to play.”

“Unless I choose to intentionally play less well,” said Amet. “Then, it would take one of Us, to really notice.”

“You seem to be revealing much to me,” said Droos. “You are nearly opening the Veil. I feel that I am almost there. I thought that there was going to be one last Abstract Dimension first. Is it truly proper that I Know the Truth without it?”

“Very well, Dear Queen,” said Emerzo. “You know Service, you know Society, you know Obligation. Then what is left? I will now Present Property.”

“This seems simple,” said Droos. “For a Sentient has a right to property, to individual, or group ownership.”

“There is a Truth behind that, Dear One,” said Drerpo. “Property is a Personal, Individual Stake in Reality. It is a Motivator. Property may take numerous forms, from token

Book III: The Library

currency to structures to theoretical or digital. Even what is merely thought about, or written down may be considered property. All of these serve to encourage mortals to wake up each day and be sufficiently Moral and Ethical and care enough about Integrity to Create, and Build, and Earn.”

“Tell Her about the challenges of Property,” said Amet.

“Every Society requires property, and rights to it, and rules about it, and obligations surrounding it,” said Emerzo. “It is hard to escape a system that does not use tokens to manage and negotiate trade, once a certain level of sophistication has been reached. However, Property becomes Power. Power is corrupting. It becomes an End—it becomes a Goal. This may be as simple as having the most tokens, or structures, or thoughts, or digitally encoded numbers, or as far as owning the most land, or even a state, or country.”

“Property is a Potent motivator,” said Drerpo. “It is essential for mortals. However, it is also a great Destroyer. Property might help raise a civilization, or pillage it. That is because the corrupting Power surrounding it may damage any mortal so much, that they are unable to see the Ethics, the Morality, or how to maintain their Integrity any longer. Property is an Engine, it enables Society. If the purpose of society is to maintain The Good Life, if Ethics, and Morality, and Truth, are necessary to that End, Property may motivate mortals to reach it, or permanently sever any connection to it for a time.”

“I feel like you are grasping at a Dualism once more,” said Droos. “How may Property be both a great source of Creation and Destruction, or Good and Evil? How may it be these things simultaneously, interwoven, and forever influencing one another?”

“It is proper that we saved this Abstract Dimension for last,” said Emerzo. “In the Celestial Domains, Property does not exist in the same way that mortals, and society views it. In the state of nature, the land is not owned. It may not be divided, or conquered. None have dominion over it. A Goddess is a parent, a loved one of Her sphere, or domain, not a ruler, or dictator. She is a fiduciary to it. She must give all She has to Its existence. Her benefit is Its success. Creation is the ultimate artwork, the greatest aesthetic. In the Realm of Greater Beings, Elriver and Showsh do not rule, they Create, they Birth, they Share, they Love, They Wonder.”

“It seems that Property is truly a great source of danger,”

said Droos. “However, no society of humans may ever be rid of it. Thus, to live The Good Life is to create laws and structures to govern it, though now I digress to The City. Evil Inclinations, the possibility of Destruction, the Urge to Gain Power, may be Disciplined under Rules, Laws, and Rituals. It must always be remembered that morality and ethics and truth or the pursuit of integrity is the first concern, and any property may be abandoned if the former are at risk. Property must serve The Good, or else it risks serving The Evil and Destruction and Power.”

“You seem to understand this Potent Dualism,” said Amet. “I believe this Angel, this Queen, is ready for the Veil.”

“I must say, there is not much left to reveal,” said Emerzo. “Most is already known, though I would assume that you Knew that, Dear Droos.”

“I... Know,” said Droos. “Yet, the Truth is still a little ways Beyond me. I am ready to Behold the Veil. Provide a glimmer, Dear Emerzo, of what I will see? Will it be a source of comfort, or a source of terror?”

“Dear Love of My Life,” said Drerpo, holding his girlfriend’s hand, and kissing her, warmly, feeling the wetness of her mouth, for a beat. “It is Beauty, and Comfort, and Terror—it is all of those things. You are ready. You are The Angel. You are The Queen.”

“I know the Truth behind a Loaf of Bread: Selflessness and Service,” said Droos. “I know Society. I know Obligation. Finally, I know the Requirement of Property, and its Peril. Hold my hand, Dear Love of My Life, Dear Drerpo, and when you are ready, I offer a small Prayer to the Great Beings, Showsh and Elriver, or the Unity, whichever is True, I have not yet settled upon, yet may I bear Witness and Understand Truly in Peace and for The Good. May it help bring me to my Redemption, and assist my People with Theirs. May it finally aid the journey towards the needs of the entire Multiverse; if I am a great foreshadowing, a great Omen, let me also be a Secret as told, under the Veil, for The Good. May I humble Tzefee, even, that Hope beyond Hope, Mercy beyond Mercy, will see the Light After The Great Wave.”

“Those are bold words, Dear Droos,” said Drerpo.

“Perhaps that is enough abstraction for now. I suggest we enjoy the rest of our meal. There are more songs to sing, and poetry to recite. Might we even dance together, you and I.”

Then Drerpo held out his hand, and Droos took his, and

Book III: The Library

together they danced, and above them, in the eternal sun, suddenly a moon and stars shone, beneath shades of darkness that were Beautiful and Potent and Wondrous. The Day and Night Truly were glorious in The Library, before the brothers and sister, Emerzo, Drerpo, and Amet, as the two who were deeply in love danced with eyes gazing upon each other, an eternity of unspoken words passing between.

As they danced, Emerzo recited a poem, in an ancient language, Loahueth, a different dialect of The Language of the Universe, and not for magic, or power, but simply for Joy, and for Happiness. It was meant only as words, for entertainment; but they had meaning, even for Droos, who did not wholly understand every language yet. Her Power was great, and the moment of dancing and merriment was Blessed.

Amet looked on with a twinkle in his eye, though with a perpetual sentry upon the horizon even here, for he did not forget his duty. They were not free from threat, not even here. Yet he sang a song, in words from a Cosmos, ones he learned long ago, remembered from his youth, a language he thought he forgot, when he lay in the arms of a Beautiful man. Those words had magic,



even now, half a trillion years later. A smile appeared on his lips, and he looked on at the delight of his father, Drerpo.

So Droos, danced in the arms of Drerpo, and all was well, for a time, in a place where distance and seconds had no meaning. It might have been hours, or days, or one hundred years. In Absolute Time, it was one day. That did not matter. Only, that truly their hearts beat together, and they were already as one, no matter what. Neither had any regrets. Of all Abstract Dimensions, for what is greater, or more Potent then Love, and the Glee and Joy of time with Dear Family, Friends, and the Love of Her Life?





Chapter 5

Dualism

In the Sky, near The Tree of The Library, floated a leaf, drifting on the wind. It was no ordinary leaf, and atop it, where distance and time were of little meaning, lay a vastness, a space of some worlds. There a forest grew, myriad in type and splendor, sometimes wet, or dry, or filled with tall stalks, or spiky cacti, but altogether Beautiful. In this space, in the center, upon a hill, such were the variances in the texture of the worlds upon the leaf, was a space of decay. It was dark, and mushrooms were plentiful, and fungi, and all was repose, and the end of life. Yet it was also a rebirth of sorts, for from such ends, new beginnings would surely spring anew.

In this space, upon the leaf afloat in the breeze, above The Meadow of The Library near The Tree stood Droos and Drerpo, and beside them watched Emerzo, a circlet of pink flowers upon her head. Droos looked about, at the ruin, even some spots of obvious fire damage, as though the soil had been scorched by some awful flame, or purified, she was unable to distinguish, and in others, surely the ground had been frozen. What were these processes of nature that were so horrid, that they must rather be concealed, sealed away from thought, out of mind, and wished far from view? Nearly the bleakness, the interruption in the wonder that were the worlds of greenery and woods and jungles brought a tear to the corner of her eye.

Drerpo put his arm around her, and Emerzo spoke.

“What is Beauty?” said Emerzo. “That is a Pure Aesthetic. What is the difference between It and Ugliness? Are these the questions with which to begin a discussion of Dualism, or have they been sufficiently explored elsewhere?”

“In other places, the topic was surveyed in a hurry,” said Drerpo, suddenly in thought, as though remembering something

from a distant past, long gone. “It bares renegotiation and consideration. Also, I might add we may revive the Dualisms of Life and Death and Creation and Destruction.”

“How might those three opposites have commonalities?” pondered Droos. “It would seem to suggest a nonsense phrase. I might as easily share with you the definition of a four-sided triangle. Would you provide such Knowledge to me readily?”

“It has been revealed that in immanence, and shadows on the wall, reflection of Forms, it appears that Abstractions are isolated and unique and opposites,” said Emerzo. “Here we wish to catch a glimmer of the eternal sun amidst the decay of repose. Or, for the rhetorical sake of my husband, the ever twinkle of the stars and moon, as illuminate the crisp night air, when the Universe was young. What say you, Dear Husband?”

“Ugliness is an emotional response to Fear,” said Drerpo. “Maybe it even relates to Ignorance, or lack of knowledge. Surely the more that is Known about even the harshest locale, or object, or Reality, the less ugly it may seem. Increasingly, the more that the Truth unfolds, the closer the connection, the relationship, even Love towards it, Beauty is defined instead.”

“Then, Dear Love,” said Droos, with a smile, “You seem to suggest that Ugliness is merely a lack of familiarity. If Knowledge and Truth are Present, Surely Beauty is the natural progression. Do you mean to say that there is no Ugliness in Abstraction? What is Ugliness?”

“Ugliness are the Evil actions, ideas, and concepts of Sentients,” said Emerzo. “In the state of nature, Reality Transcends Ugliness. Intent is required for it to attach. In the state of nature, all is Beautiful, as here, in this state of repose. There is no intent towards evil here. Only the Transcendent Forcang in Selflessness direct the Laws of Nature to propel Life to Exist. Such Laws Transcend Knowledge and Truth, and perhaps, even The Good.”

“Did you not ask, Droos, if there was some Form beyond even The Good?” said Drerpo. “Would the State of Nature, and the Selfless Transcendent Forcang Who directs it, would that Exist Beyond? However, It is Intangible, even for Greater Beings, who offer such Transcendent prayer and blessings, but are merely Creations and Mortals in Relation to Them.”

“You have digressed,” said Droos, laughing. “I do not blame you, but we were attempting to discuss the Dualism

Book III: The Library

of Beauty and Ugliness. Are they truly related, yet opposites, simultaneously? Ugliness apparently is an... emotion, but also these choices by Sentients, by humans, among others, to act, and behave towards Evil. How does this relate to Beauty? Is there any connection.”

“It may be surmised that among Sentients, where Evil exists, apart from the State of Nature,” said Emerzo, “The Journey, the Path, the Balance and Moderation between States is a Process of Beauty. It is a dynamic storm of battles, sometimes waged between Forcang themselves fighting over territory the size of Universes, and other times within the mind of a single confused young man. This struggle to control the self, is, Beautiful—and terrible. It exists within the Ugliness.”

“That seems horribly dangerous,” said Droos. “This free will, the challenge to choose The Good over The Evil. Even for most, to distinguish among myriad Shades of Grey, is not the potential that most mortals will forever be marred and remain in a state of Ugliness for their existence? Why not make it easier to know the beautiful from the ugly?”

“If it were easy,” said Drerpo, “Then the Journey would not be so profoundly Beautiful. Spectators do not watch athletic events that are rigged. A game is only interesting when all parties are equal, and every participant has a fair chance, knows the rules, and is healthy. The beauty is in that Righteous attempt, motivation to succeed, to identify the Beauty, and not all do.”

“How is it possible that the Lieutenant of baetOAK may in good conscience accept fragments of souls when it is guaranteed some great portion of Sentients will choose poorly?” lamented Droos.

“You misunderstand the nature of that Celestial Domain, Dear Droos,” said Emerzo, “If you feel it to be a punishment. It is a purification. For the vast majority of Fragments, it is painful, but leaves the cleansed soul refreshed, and the experience, upon reuniting with other fragments, grants insights in future lives. Just as other Celestial Domains visited by Fragments provided other necessary afterlife experiences. Evil must be purged from the shattered pieces of the Soul. Only for the Most Evil, their fate may be different in baetOAK, and the sentence longer, for it may take eons to purge such taints. Yet none spend an eternity in such a place. Although, such fragments may be so confused by the experience that they never reunite with the larger Whole, and that

Soul is diminished upon rebirth.”

“It is said that if enough lifetimes pass of Diminishment,” said Drerpo, “Souls may leave the Multiverse Proper entirely. Yet that is a rare fate indeed, and happens over eons. Most Whole Souls remain at some consistent order, while a rare few increase, and even fewer decrease. Few ever Transcend the Multiverse, or Diminish from It.”

“Yet there are those who do?” asked Droos.

“What of the Ugliness in Beauty?” said Emerzo, looking at Droos. “How might the Awesome, contain Error and Flaw?”

“In many ways,” said Droos, “The more Wondrous, or Awful—Beautiful—is a Thing, or Person, Or Place, then the more notable the remaining Ugliness that inevitably exists. Even if but a flake of dust, surely it is there.”

“Rather it is the search for that dust, in the midst of otherwise a perfect state that is Ugliness,” said Drerpo. “Perhaps recognizing the ability to be Imperfect is a greater state of Beauty. It is flawed to seek Perfection. Better the dust among the diamonds than the diamond among the dust.”

“Are you saying that diamonds are not beautiful?” said Droos. “What gifts were you exactly planning on getting me once I conceive of this Veil?”

“That is not particularly amusing, Dear Droos,” said Emerzo, as Droos chuckled, merry for a moment, and Drerpo kissed her on the head. “Even pretending vanity has its error. You will receive your gifts, and amidst the Veil you will not need to be given diamonds and jewels to have them—rather they will Exist in Reality on you Innately. They will simply be Part of You, as much as your limbs, or hair. A gift may be a segment of time, or a pebble of sand from a distant shore.”

“Sister, understand a mortal joke for what it is,” said Drerpo, smiling at his twin. “Or do you forget what your own subjects talk about outside of our Celestial Domains?”

“You are right,” said Emerzo. “And I apologize. Here I lamented the dust amidst the pure room light. It is not to say, Dear Droos, that you do not have room for improvement. Yet, as you say, we all do. Even Elriver and Showsh have space to Grow.”

“Those Two, especially, have ample space to learn lessons,” said Drerpo. “Even from Their Creations, Their Subjects, and Their Children.”

With that, Drerpo spoke a number of words, which must

Book III: The Library

have been in Sre, and out from his back he brought a picnic basket, and placed it atop a colorful blanket of many colors that Emerzo similarly retrieved for this purpose. The three ate, upon the hilltop of repose, a meal of comfort, but not something lavish. It was still the food and drink of The Library, and soon they were singing and reciting poetry, if not dancing, and merriment was brought to this ugly place at the heart of the forest amidst a floating leaf in the winds of The Library. The topics they wished to discuss had only just started, but they enjoyed the imperfections of ease and relaxation—the Perfections of yesterday.

After lunch, the three, The Angel and the siblings sauntered through the forest, varied and green, and over to the far side, closest to the center of The Meadow. There Emerzo called to the wind, and the leaf replied, and over time, a ladder was seen, ascending into the sky. It was shimmering, and translucent, yet seemingly the most Real Object of the surroundings. Upward it rose, and Emerzo alighted onto the rungs. Droos was scared, but Drerpo held her hand, and gave her a quick hug, before she took a step, out into the air, and onto the firm step of the ladder.

In fact, it seemed more of a stairway. It rose, and actually, now that she was here, clearly to the Top of The Library, but also reached the Floor of the Meadow. Did it descend even further? Still, upward they progressed. There were others on the ladder, Servants, Ascending and Descending, on business for Drerpo, at the Command of the Celestial Bureaucracy. Their Missions were Profound. They too had a Journey to make. At last, they reached the summit of The Library.

Looking around, Droos beheld the entirety of The Library, The Tree, The Leaf, The Sea, and many other Wonders. For it was in fact a Diverse Land. Many secrets there were, if only they might be Seen from Above. Yet no Location was Secret Here. At this Topmost Point on the Celestial Domain, this Plane, even into the chasms, the caves of the depths of the plane, her eyes pierced, to its Root. There were no Limits. However, this was not the end of the Journey. Emerzo led Droos and Drerpo onward, towards the Divide.

For before them was a Veil. It was of an Endless Variety of Colors. It was also of No Color. Perhaps, it was a trick, and the forever sun did not entirely reach this Space, but the Color was too Bright, or Vivid, or Special, to be defined. The droplets of some dew, or substance, clung to Droos, and she expected water; yet it

was a tad sweet, like honey, or maybe a bit like strawberries. The smell was of fresh pine cones, on a forest meadow, in the midst of winter. Then they were within the Veil.

As a Cloud, it Obscured Her vision at least, Her senses. Perhaps the Twin could see. Yet always, she was led onward, her hand held in Drerpo's. The thumb of the young man lightly rubbed her hand, and it gave her comfort. Only, it seemed the texture of the finger nail had begun to take on a Real Quality, as though the Substance Itself. Time Passed, and She was about to ask Him, when she realized, he was no longer there.

No sound was heard. Her heart beat, perhaps a light buzz rang in her ears, but without any audible note. A still, small sound led her, and called her. A door closed, and another opened ahead, beckoning. Should she enter? Was this a Place for Her, Passed the Veil? What Secrets would she See, what would Her Senses, and that which Existed Beyond the Empirical, Behold?

Some Will within her, a Strength, a Warmth, a Courage, caused her feet to move, if they moved at all in this place, where distance meant nothing. Then the bluish clouds, the dew parted, and she Saw...

A Golden Sunrise... a Trillion, Trillion Shades, and Hues Graced the Pillars of a Foundation, a Structure, that Defied Words. For It was the Essence of that Word. No Sense was she Able to make of It. Only, she Knew, the Truth of a Space, something Hallowed. For she had Truly entered...

Elriver... the Sacred Realm... The Beacon of Drerpo. Then trumpets blew, yet inaudible, for the notes lay beyond hearing. The call of the horns sent tears to her eyes and she wept. She sank to her knees, and kissed the ground, of a substance, not cloud, or dirt, but altogether Unique. Then she Arose.

The Golden Light parted, and a Pathway, of Shimmering Hue, Ascended, with Curvature, and Upward, to the Entrance. To that Gateway, that Doorpost, she walked, with Purpose, Now, with Potency, and Sight.

When she arrived, the Trumpets blew once more, and a Servant met her, the first being she had Seen here. She was clothed in a Green Garment, and this Angel, with a Profound Appearance, bowed to Droos. Then She sang a song, one of Happiness, and Welcome, but also some Sadness, and Fear, even Here. Even Here... for the beginning of a New Age, an Age of Great Change, Herald of Fate and Omen, had Come.

Book III: The Library

Upon Entering the Hall, Aesthetics Greeted The Angel, led by Her, the Servant in the Green. The Aesthetics were in Myriad Form, of Shape, and Design, and Purpose, and Idea. Yet all were of Marvelous Beauty. A Stream of... just water, ran across the floor in a curved angle, with a few fish in it. The sound of running water was the only note now, along with the still, silent sound.

As she Reached the Center of the Hall, a Wind Blew! And Behold! A Storm Surrounded Her, and all She Saw was Wind! Yet she heard only the Burble, Burble of the Stream, and the Talk of Fish... Talk of the Fish? Then Seeing Herself... She was Garbed in a Golden, Silver Flowing Raiment, adorned by diamonds and precious stones, yet all manner of Colors and Hues had a place on the Design, even if in the reflection in the light of a Rock. Touching her hair, a delicate crown of flowers, amidst a ring of silver, True Silver, adorned her head. The flowers were blue, and yellow, and the smell was Aromatic, and Sweet, and for a Moment, she Thought of Nothing Else, but That Aesthetic.

Then the Trumpets Blew, and the Servant Led The Angel to the Entrance. Droos, once the princess, Now The Queen, entered Therein...

There was a Hall of Light... Golden and White and Dark with Thunder... She Beheld the Dawn and Twilight and the Sun and the Moon There. A Cacophony of Sounds Erupted, Yet a Melodic Harmony of Soothing Notes at the Same Time. A Smell of Nectar, of Apples, of Fresh Dirt, of Roses, of Awful Wonderment, as Droos Walked into The Beacon of Drerpo.

There Seated Atop Two Thrones of Terror and Wonder, Peace and Assertiveness, Beauty and Evil, Good and Bold Action, of Pure Aesthetics, as Lightning Flashed, and the Trumpets Called Out a Mournful Tone, and The Whirlwind Swept Through the Hall and even the Garments of the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe were Disturbed, Stood None Other than Elriver and Showsh. Elriver was garbed in Golden Splendor, with a crown of diamonds and silver upon her head of long, flowing hair, blue sparkling earrings like stars in her ears, and shining eyes with light of a billion galaxies. In her hand she held out a scepter, with over one thousand different stones of myriad colors, somehow contained therein. Of somehow less, but of great consequence stood beside her, Second in the Universe, her Husband of Two Hundred Trillion Years, Showsh, in a Vestment of Silver and White, of Black and Blue, with stars themselves adorned as precious stones on his belt,

and as one earring on an ear. His eyes shone with golden beams, and he smiled, Lovingly, despite the Terror.

Beneath the Thrones, on the Third Step, were three Thrones, of a Lesser Stature, but of Little Less, Potency. Sitting on the Right, Beneath Elriver, was Atropo, a Strong Man, of Mighty Build, Wearing a Purple Raiment, Two Singularities as Earrings, a Necklace of Diamonds and Sapphires with Forty-Two Symbols and Stones as well, and numerous other Aesthetic Wonders Beyond Count. Finally, at the foot of the steps to the throne stood an androgynous Being of Mighty Countenance. They wore a dress of Emeralds, One Earring of Ruby, a Necklace of Golden Rings, and a Broad Smile, Filled with Laughter and Happiness and Welcome. In Their Hands was an Orb, that Seemed to Contain an Image of Drerpo Itself! This was lirOAntUs, the Chancellor of Drerpo.

“Behold!” called a booming voice, from Nowhere, and Everywhere. “The Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo, and their Eldest Son, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo. Praise the Great Creator! Praise the Great Sovereign! Praise the Royal Family! Behold, the Chancellor of Drerpo, Mightiest Lieutenant of Elriver and Showsh. Praise be lirOAntUs.

“Welcome, Droos, The Angel, The Queen, You are Called. You are Called here, Beyond the Veil, to See the Truth. Allow It to Be Spoken, and for You to Be Admitted Forever More Into the Secret of Drerpo.”

“The Beacon of Drerpo will Be Silent, for Elriver will Speak,” Called lirOAntUs, with a Jovial, *boom!*

“Welcome, Honored Servants of Drerpo,” said Elriver, in her Splendor, and Glory Revealed; yet somehow, to Droos, even here, with all of this Truth, and Reality, the Creator Herself of the Universe, in that moment, appeared a little smaller. “Welcome, Honored Lieutenants, Gods and Goddesses of Drerpo, and Guests Assembled. Welcome, Honored Family, my Husband, Showsh, my Son, Atropo, and Others, Honored Even in Their Absence. We are Here to Unveil the Secret to Droos, a Worthy Daughter of Drerpo. This is an Interlude to the Great Project begun by Us. It is not Over. No, it is Just Begun. Yet, Showsh has Chosen. I, have Chosen. My Family, has Chosen. Droos, will be, One of Us.”

“Hear now the Secrets, if they are not already known to one as wise and smart as you, Droos,” said Showsh. “For Truly, you must have guessed the answers by now.”

“Long ago, two of Our greatest Lieutenants came to Us

Book III: The Library

and said that if we did not intercede on behalf of a mortal, the Justice of Drerpo would be at risk,” said Emerzo. “For if she might be condemned, any might be so. Such was the plight, that Showsh and I saw to the matter ourselves.

“We took sabbatical from our duties, leaving Part of Ourselves to Observe and Command, but Most, was invested in the immanence of mortality on a single planet of a single galaxy. Showsh, and I, became mortal, human beings, were born into the Universe, simultaneous to our Potency, so that we might observe this mortal girl, and advise her, with the necessary limitations, senses, and eyes.

“Showsh with fewer duties than I, was to be her direct advisor, and by the coincidence and traditions of her people, fit into the role of a servant escorting her to her doom. He was born, and took the name Drerpo, into an ancient family of humans on the planet No, that had not for the first time played host to a Transcendent Being in their midst. There he lived a childhood, and was raised beside Droos, the princess, as her faithful servant. Yet always, he aimed to be her friend and advisor, to help her make a different decision, if only, she would be redeemed.

“Meanwhile, I had duties even then, on sabbatical, I might not ignore wholly. Besides, I prepared the logistics in the background during their first sixteen years, if Droos made the choice to be saved, in terms of her life, at least. We did not know if we might be so successful that she might refuse her father’s ritual altogether, and be executed as a traitor, but avoid her sin. Alas, my husband was not that successful. But, Droos did choose the lesser redemption, and her life was spared. She chose the long path of return, that also spelled the bane of Showsh.

“For the long path to redemption also meant that a young love blossomed between the two. For Showsh underestimated the influence of Immanence. It had been eons since either of us had taken such form. Perhaps, we should have gone on sabbatical sooner. In seemingly a second by any Forcang standards, the two loved each other, and the immanent Drerpo and Droos were Destined. Even by The City, their Lives were Committed.

“Certainly, I was confused, and even having Emotions that are, supposedly, Transcendent, and Abstract, this was not easy to comprehend. How could Showsh, a being of Hundreds of Trillions of Years, fall for a girl he had seemingly just met? After all, our love blossomed over eons. Then again, we were not in

a state of immanence. For mortals, a decade may be similar to one billion years for an Elder Forcang. Being raised together and sharing desperate life events is enough to thrust any two together. I suppose the same might have happened if I had went first, or in a similar situation elsewhere. If Ruby is right, there may be more to this fate then either Showsh or I had considered.

“Little did we know that Tzefee, our ancient enemy had created a stronghold, and indoctrinated Droos’ people. Yet beyond that, our enemy took us by surprise. Always, she has appeared when we least expected, in the strangest ways, to undo our greatest creations. It is not surprising that we would find her, here, at this time, fixated on depriving Us of Droos. Now that Droos has pledged to redeem Tzefee, and protect the Multiverse from her, that only makes her even more upset. For even She knows the prophecies, and sees Possibilities, ever so Slight, that Droos’ youthful dream, is something more.

“Thus, we were forced to flee from the Bagan Galaxy, and seek the extra protection of the Hallowed Firmaments and Celestial Domains. I asked none other than my own eldest son here as a protector for none other than what any mortal would call my romantic rival.

“Only I am not a mortal, and Forcang have more subtle relationships. It is common to see monogamy among Forcang, or even relationships without marriage. However, it does happen that Forcang take more than one spouse, or more than one partner. Such is permitted under the laws of The Alliance of the Multiverse, and certainly among the Lords of Chaos. Only I was also immanent in my form, on sabbatical at the time, so I received the benefit of sharing in some very human emotions some of the time. Perhaps, that was a blessing.

“However, I do Love Droos. She is properly named, The Angel, The Queen. Moreover, her cause is righteous, and her Journey to seek redemption part of The Good. She is a Worthy Partner to Showsh, in immanence as Drerpo, and Afterward. However, She will have to leave much of what she knew to be with Him. For after this sabbatical, his time as Drerpo will be at an end. Being a young adult beside a young man in The Library is one thing. Being The Queen beside Showsh is entirely a different matter.

“There you have it, Dear Droos, The Angel, The Queen. As you long suspected, but did not put to words. Drerpo is

Book III: The Library

Showsh. Emerzo is none other than, I, Elriver. I Created this Universe, which is named Drerpo. My Husband, Showsh, named himself after it in immanence. I named myself in immanence after another Manifestation of Mine. Amet is Atropo, our Eldest son. Our home, is also called *Elriver*, The Beacon of Drerpo, in the Uppermost Firmament of the Celestial Domains of Drerpo, when we choose to be in this Manifestation. We have other responsibilities as well that often take us far beyond Drerpo, to other Manifestations, some in which Showsh is the Creator and I am the Sovereign, or in which our families are the Great Artists, or our Friends. Or, numerous Forcang not related to us at all.”

At the end of this long speech, Droos was somewhat breathless, or maybe just a tad tired. Yet, it was not such, that she might not add some thoughts of her own, even here.

“Mighty Elriver,” said Droos, with a slight bow, although, checked now. “These are Frightening Words. Is it really true that Emerzo, all this time, has been... You?! And further, Dear Drerpo, all this time, is... Showsh?! I suppose, now that I say it, somehow, it has less significance. It seems like now that the Secret has been Revealed, I may Exist within the Veil as I Wish. As a Servant, what you Both call, The Angel, I am in a liminality between Immanence and Transcendence. What are the expectations of me now that I Know? Am I to reside here? What am I to call You?”

“Dear Droos,” said Showsh, “You may call Us, whatever you wish. For we will remain in immanence on Sabbatical for some time longer. In that setting, the names you have known are likely more appropriate. However, any will do. You also should assume that those without sufficient Senses will hear and see differently. As for where you should reside, you have tasks to fulfill in the present that require your presence in the rest of Drerpo. Afterwards, if you still choose to live with me, even now, we may go anywhere—even beyond the borders of Drerpo Itself.”

“Now I am curious, if I am permitted to be... Showsh,” said Droos. “You have other children? What are their names? What of your Lieutenants of Drerpo? Are they the ones I met some ages ago? At that time, I felt like a fish in a sea of seas. Now, I feel more like a whale in an single world of oceans.”

“Those are some keen questions, Dear Mother,” said Atropo, with a slight bow. “If I may answer them. I have two younger brothers, by my parents, Elriver and Showsh. Their names are Drelp and Zrah. You have already met some of the chief

lieutenants of Drerpo, and they have pledged you their loyalty. As have I. If you already feel at ease in this setting, then you are either terribly Arrogant, or Mighty indeed.”

“She may simply be tired, and speaking with some residual emotion,” said Showsh. “This was, actually, much for my love to bear. I believe that much of this will seem like a dream tomorrow. That is, until the next time we return here, likely after your first two tasks are complete.”

“If she is successful,” remarked Elriver. “Very well, enough for today. We will return you, simply to The Library. Sleep... be happy... dream... and be content, Droos... daughter of Drerpo. Let Omens be for tomorrow. Let your... vaunted future with Showsh be for then as well. Now rest and be merry. Slip into tranquility and contentment. Awake, and remember what you are ready for in your heart and mind. I suspect, it will be more than you think. Welcome, to the Veil of Drerpo. You now Know Some of the Secret—or as much as you may Sense and Bear. I doubt you will forget It.”

With that, the Universe became a haze of golden Nirvana, and peace entered her mind, and forgetfulness of slumber without nightmares or troublesome thoughts. For a time, she forgot Greatness, or Forcang, or Beings of Pain, and rested on a bed in one Celestial Domain dedicated to Knowledge.

“Away night noises... you should be sleeping...,” said a whisper in her sleep.

Under the eternal sun she awoke, as it streamed through her window, on her delightful bed, in a simple dress, only herself, and nothing more. Was it a dream? It had been a strange one. Seemingly, she had gone beyond the Veil, and seen some Secrets of Drerpo. She had learned things, even about Drerpo, her love.

Did she still love him, could she still love him, even like this? With what it might mean for her future, even after, if she accomplished all that she desired and wished in her trials, did this man, this Being, deserve her love? Then she smiled, and sat up, and knew that it would take more than a revelation of some important position in the universe to dispel Droos of her love for her Drerpo. It would not deprive her of independence or choice. In the end, her Love burned even Fiercer for him. And she loved his family, and even his Purpose and Art. In the end, this love would make them happy for an eon, during and after their trials. Yet, the omen persisted. Also, Elriver and Showsh had other

Book III: The Library

children.

As the eternal sun reached the noon of the ever day, a knock disturbed the tranquility of the abode. Droos yawned, and stretched, having slept well. Really, she did not remember the last time she had such a peaceful night to herself. What vivid dreams she had dreamt. Then she sat up straight!

“Come in Showsh, My Love,” said Droos, with a mixture of emotions and expressions, and somehow Knowing the presence in the hallway.

“I am Identified by The Angel,” said Showsh. “No more may I conceal myself as Drerpo from you. Still, you may label me, call me as you wish, Dear One. Any name will do. I only wish for your happiness and ease. Of course, you also have a great purpose. That too I wish to help you in achieving.”

Showsh entered the room, wearing a simple garment of greys and browns, homespun, with no crown or other accessories, clearly relishing the Immanence of Drerpo. Droos appeared her normal self, although she lay a tad revealed in her nightwear, and remained sheepishly under the sheets as he stood in the entrance to the chamber.

“I would little think you to be nervous in this situation, Dear One,” said Showsh with a smile. “However, I respect your comfort, or boundaries. There will come a time when such limits will hopefully be unnecessary.”

“I am sure that you want that,” said Droos, with a broad, knowing smile, “Yet it is not today. Now speak your piece, and then let me get changed, so we may begin the work of today.”

“I only arrived to greet you, and tell you how wondrous, beautiful, and smart you truly Exist here in The Library,” spoke Showsh, with only a little awkwardness. “I feel like a youth of three hundred all over again, without Potencies, and few experiences. I am unable to speak.”

“I take that as a compliment,” said Droos. “Do you have anything relevant to add. We have much to discuss today.”

“Very well, you have won, Dear Love,” said Showsh.

With that, he turned in a hurry, and was off, and Droos dressed, wearing similarly simple attire, by the Respect that the Universe might think to owe the pair. However, Beauty, as they explained, is not only found in diamonds and pearls, but in something more.

Droos and Showsh sat together on wooden chairs, ornately

carved, amidst shelves of books, on a sunflower, atop a stock of green, in The Meadow of The Library. Librarians, Servants of the Celestial Realm mingled among them, tending to the Records, updating them, fixing the layout, and otherwise, editing everything, to a state of nearly Perfection. Quickly, Showsh kissed Droos on her forehead, before bringing them back to the topic they wished to discuss.

“Do you Know the Dualisms that are important for Us to discuss prior to The Good and to seeking your Redemption?” asked Showsh.

“We had been discussing Beauty and Ugliness,” said Droos. “Our next topic was to include Creation and Destruction.”

“Are you certain we had finished the former concern?” inquired Showsh, his eyes glowing white for a moment.

“Regardless, Knowledge of Creation and Dualism with Destruction is essential to Knowledge of the Truth of The Good,” said Droos.

With that, the glow diminished.

“How will you separate Empirical Knowledge here from Mythology?” said Showsh. “Seemingly, I might tell you, my wife, Elriver, Created Drerpo, and Everything Therein. Even the Mechanisms of Evolution and Development, the Laws of Science, were Her Devices, and the Universe Functions Accordingly. Yet such might be seen as a myth by some. Truly, it would be among mortals. What is the real nature of creation that may be known?”

“Sentients may create life,” said Droos, “By responsibly giving birth to offspring. Such is an Element of Creation. They may also plant crops, and grow food. This uses the Mechanism of Science, as discussed in mythology, to their benefit. Inanimate objects of many variety, and digital spaces of great creativity may be imagined and generated further, according to those Standards. Really, Myth and Reality are yet another Dualism that we have not explored. They are not wholly distant. For Myth may contain elements of Truth, even yet unknown. Further, reality assumed may be mistaken, and contain Myth. Myth is Powerful, and motivates Society. Reality is weaker, and inspires the few, but Some.”

“I believe you have digressed onto a different Dualism, as you suggest,” said Showsh. “Surely, Elriver and I would be seen as myth by mortals, and properly so. So might much of the wealth of Sentient stories and legends. Indeed, some may contain Kernels

Book III: The Library

of Truth. Furthermore, Myth is Power. A Myth may move Society. Reality is more limited. But as for Creation and Destruction, it is true, perhaps the best creations are children. They are the best blessings of the Divine.”

“Agreed,” said Droos, with a smile. “However, Creation does not end there, as I stated. As for Destruction, Time is perhaps the ultimate passive destroyer. Each second, changes into a destruction of the previous. I have dreamed that there is a Celestial Domain that Records All Moments. Is that merely a Dream, or Reality?”

“You are Truly, a Queen,” said Showsh. “Such Celestial Domains, and Planes, do exist, including in Drerpo. Fragments of Souls see many moments with loved ones and friends upon death, for many moments in life are Blessed. Perhaps, nearly, all Moments are to be Recalled and Remembered There.”

“I am glad that you think so,” said Droos, with a grin. “Yet time for mortals is a Destroyer. Maybe in some afterlife, Memory is Eternal. Yet in This World, one Second Destroys the Previous. Change is the Ultimate Truth.”

“Then the Ancients who said that fire was the Essence of All were correct,” pondered Showsh. “No one may step in the same stream twice. If there is no consistency, how may Society be achieved, if it is based on Expectations, and Rules?”

“Learn from basic mathematics,” said Droos. “As one approaches a limit, it is essentially the same as achieving the result. That is merely elementary mathematics. Did we not state in Pure Knowledge that Mathematics had more to elucidate about Reality?”

“That was merely a hypothesis” said Showsh. “Though I take your metaphor. Something that is nearly a Thing, may be its Essential Equal. As we stated, Perfection is not required, but only the attempt, or nearly accomplishing the desire. A Society in which citizens and residents closely follow the rules is the same, practically, as a society in which they follow all of the rules exactly, philosophically speaking—perhaps even mathematically speaking.”

“Is it sound to use mathematics as philosophical metaphor?” pondered Droos.

“Others have considered this question,” said Showsh. “However, it is a reasonable demonstration of an example and point. Where you went on Destruction is poignant, but there is still

further. What is the role of Sentients? For Time is likely related to a Transcendent Forcang. How do Active Participants Behave?"

"It is the case that Sentients may Destroy, or cause Destruction of Objects, Sentients, and Creation," said Droos. "Aesthetics may be Ruined, or at the least, Changed, or Altered. If the nature of Reality includes Change, certainly an Active Agent may Cause Change Deliberately. Yet, Evil may only, perhaps, attach to the latter."

"Must Destruction always be Evil," said Showsh. "What if an Evil idea is replaced with a representation of The Good. Something has changed. The idea was destroyed. Destruction has occurred. Yet is it The Evil?"

"Change is not necessarily Evil," replied Droos. "It is ambiguous. It is, as you say, perhaps that Essence of a Transcendent Forcang. It simply Is. That means it may be either Good or Evil. However, the Intent for the Change and the Desire may be Evil. The Result may be Evil. Thus, an Evil idea changed to a Good one, is done so with Good Intent, with Good Result, with Good Desire. Therefore, it represents The Good."

"It is no wonder that Elriver, and numerous other Elder Forcang have designed Manifestations with Celestial Domains that see change as neutral—and capture Moments at different Times," said Droos. "What about you, Dear Showsh. Do you have any Manifestations that have such Planes?"

"You are too kind, Dear Love," said Showsh. "I will save such a conversation for another time. Simply to ask about my Art is compliment enough. I do have Manifestations that have such Planes. The Righteous deserve such a Reward upon death, to see the best Moments, in Multitude, with Their Friends and Loved Ones. That is not to say that every Forcang agrees."

"What is the name of your Principle Manifestation, Dear Love?" said Droos. "If your Art is like a Child to you, surely you would reveal this to me."

"You seem already to have much insight into Our ways, Dear Droos," said Showsh. "My masterpiece is a Cosmos, a Manifestation I Birthed, Called Vøvoav. It is... Magnificent. And Elriver is my Queen. And surely, you shall be as well. Although, there are Other Manifestations, though too few. I have had too many responsibilities in this great Multiverse to create as much Art as I would Desire. Perhaps You and I, Dear One, Dear Droos, will Create Something New."

Book III: The Library

“And a family, Dear Love,” said Droos, with a smile, and then kissing him, passionately, before returning to their work.

“We were discussing Creation,” said Showsh, stammering for an Absolute Second. “Is there anything as Truly Sublime as children? Perhaps only Manifestations, which are essentially... children... or rather, trillions of offspring. For in them are endless wells of possibility and Creations.”

“Now I have you doing the talking, Dear One,” said Droos, and she hugged Him, before opening the book in front of her, and beginning to read, intently, side-by-side, with her love.

That evening, Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo, sat together in a restaurant, served by The Librarians of the Celestial Realm. As they waited for their delicacies, Atropo led them in a song they all Knew, one of Hope and Dreams. It was in a different language than Sre, in fact, of an origin beyond even the boundaries of this Universe. Surely, only this group would have the Knowledge to sing such a tune, with such words. Droos, seemingly, followed along, with Ease. Her Senses Detected the right Note, Key, and Verse. Some Secrets were Easier to See than Others. Upon finishing, the surrounding Librarians, Servants, Gods and Goddesses, and Guests, created an Applause similar to the rustle of leaves in a winter breeze, finished upon the note of a cone impacting the Earth.

Then the food arrived. Root vegetables, and leafy greens, and beats, but no meat. That did not mean the food was not savory—only that no animal died for this cause. Furthermore, the Ecology of The Library did not require vast pens of domesticated Animals to feed the Servants of Drerpo. A True Cook would be Able to Simulate the Taste of Meat, without the Substance Itself. Thus, the party ate well, and heartily, and recited poetry, and during the meal, Showsh danced with both Elriver and Droos, and Elriver danced with Atropo, and for the first time, Droos danced with her step-son, Atropo. It was a Blessed occasion, and none might take such Moments for granted, among close family and friends.

That evening Showsh visited Droos in her bedroom, and stayed for twenty minutes. It was not too serious. It was a pleasant step forward in their relationship, with far more to come. Yet Droos felt like her heart would never stop its flutter. The tingling was wondrous. The Beauty of the moment was ecstasy, and she was left out of breath, and calling his name. He told her

how beautiful she was to him, the galaxy made manifest in lights and color upon The Library. He was satisfied, and fulfilled. It was a night of wonder, however, short, and a taste of what was to come. If they were to spend their lifetimes together, this would be an important part of an eternity of Moments together, in Love and Tenderness.

Then the night passed in vivid dreams, of Love, and Happiness, and Contentment. Droos woke several times, and had to remind herself that somethings remained for her future to explore. These were, only dreams, after all. Though, she chuckled to herself, where did the Soul go upon sleep in Drerpo—some Celestial Domain of Dreams no doubt—compliments of Elriver and Showsh. Thus, perhaps these visions of Love were not so coincidental. Then again, time and time again she had been reminded of the Independence of Celestial Bureaucrats. Those who ran such a Domain would surely do so accordingly, and would take no interference, even from the Lady and Lord of the Realm.

In the ever sun of the morning, which had persisted throughout the night, Droos rose. She noticed that in her room, starlight, and moonlight shone, as though in all The Meadow, here alone darkness lay to kiss her while she slept, and guard her in peace. That thought of protection comforted her, and as she emerged from her room, and roamed the halls of The Library in search of its patrons, she remembered how much she was loved, that even the sun took a bow and played second to the darkness and silver light within her domain.

Atop a melon of green and filled with luscious red flesh and some black seeds, Droos found Elriver and Showsh, talking furiously. A debate was being held, amidst the isles of shelves, built of seeds, a stark contrast to the watermelon fruit. The topic was simple enough. Clearly, Droos had limited time remaining in The Library, and it must be used wisely. They discussed, until her presence became Known, the Dualism that would proceed her arrival.

“How is it that the Sovereigns of Drerpo are able to devote such fervor to my tasks?” said Droos. “I would think there are numerous activities you would have to occupy your time, and certainly your passions. Yet here you argue, as though Heaven Herself were at stake.”

“That is truer than you Know,” said Elriver. “Or rather, it has already been Revealed. Surely the Lieutenant of baetOak

Book III: The Library

will have His prize, if We do nothing. Even if We do, it may be for not.”

“It is a curious question, Dear Wife,” said Showsh, “And Droos is keen. For should any receive a pardon? Are not purifying flames beneficial to the Soul Fragments? I suppose Droos asked this very question of me once. It is relevant. Without such flames, might the Reborn Soul be left diminished? It is the very nature of the experience that is required, and necessary for full Realization.”

“That is a Celestial Question worthy of our attention,” said Elriver. “Truly, is this mission even worthy? What makes Droos so, righteous, that an exception must be made in her case to remove any sentence or fragment from the clutches of baetOak?”

“I thought Showsh and I, or rather Drerpo at the time,” said Droos, “Discussed this. It would seem narcissistic of me to insist on the assignment. Why should I get a pardon here?”

“I would not consider it a pardon, commutation, or reprieve,” said Showsh. “Imagine a Soul, a mortal, is Good by Nature, yet raised amidst Evil. What chance does she have to overcome such obvious temptation? If everyone, everything in her environment tells her to do Evil, how may she even choose otherwise? Among your people, you did not even have the words to speak freely without my help. Language itself was denied you. It took all of my effort just for you to make the secondary choice, to attempt the long road to redemption. Does a Good Soul deserve such an opportunity despite an Evil environment? What other Soul does deserve such a chance?”

“Was she really that Good?” said Elriver. “This has clearly been discussed. Yet to review, was there no Inherent Evil Present? Was everything Nurtured? Would Droos Herself have done Evil deeds?”

“She may have, but of a standard amount, of a typical fashion,” said Showsh. “It would not be the far reaching damnation resulting from her Nurturing. She was in an impossible position. It was one that deserved our attention, and the debate of our noble Lieutenants of baetOak and Gon Eden.”

“It does not change that I did commit the Evil,” said Droos. “Therefore, I am subject to the Laws of Justice of Drerpo. Would you, even in Your Might, challenge this? You could, yet Justice is Independent, or so you say? If I may be pardoned, if I may be commuted, might any Soul, having done any deed?”

“She is a smart Angel,” smirked Elriver. “No wonder

you like her. I bet you even like the Kernel of Evil in her Soul. Anyway, certainly, Dear Droos, you deserve the same Journey to redemption as any other. For a lifetime of The Good subsequent may reduce the Decree, or possibly remove it altogether. I may not be able to offer a pardon or commutation, you are right. Yet, my husband and I may steer you on the right path to make that Kernel so diminutive that the Lieutenant of baetOAK will hardly enjoy or even notice His prize.”

“Did I not tell you that every shade of color has its Beauty,” said Showsh. “As you say, besides, we are here to decide on our final Dualism to discuss.”

“Is that not the Bridge to The Good,” said Droos. “Good and Evil, or good and evil—are these related, are they different? Is there a Dualism even in these Abstract Dimensions?”

“Wise indeed,” muttered Elriver. “I feel we would begin our chapter on The Good early, but perhaps that would not be terrible. Very well, what is the mundane definition of good?”

“Would it be simply actions by Sentients that help other Sentients, or Repair Reality,” said Droos. “While conversely, harming other Sentients, by physical, emotional, or mental action, or Breaking Reality, these are Evil.”

“You seem to suggest that in the State of Nature there is no Good and Evil,” said Showsh. “When the lion eats the gazelle, is this truly Neutral? Is it the Selfless Will of a Transcendent Forcang? Does it Defy the Label?”

“Yes it does,” said Elriver. “Nature does not have such Labels. Nature Itself is a Transcendent Forcang. Evil and Good only attach to deeds by Sentients, whether mortal, Servant, Goddess, or Greater Being.”

“Do you mean to say that Transcendent Forcang of your supposed Feaist Religion also exist Beyond Good and Evil?” asked Droos.

“Our theologians might agree with that statement,” said Showsh. “In the same way Nature exists Beyond Labels of this Type. Such Transcendents are not Tangible—they are the Essence of Words—the Great Words of Dweehwail. This, at least, is how the lesson of the Feaist Faith goes. That is not to say that there are no other traditions.”

“Aside from that, and for all we know, such Beings are merely subsumed by the Entirety of the Essence of the Unity, or Authority, or Singular Divine Being Above,” said Droos. “Yet we

Book III: The Library

are here to analyze the Dualism of Good and Evil as it applies to tangible Sentients, that exist practically speaking. They must be as Real as You or I, or any mortal, as you say.”

“Agreed, then,” said Elriver. “It is a good place to begin our discussion, and I fear we have oft repeated ourselves, on this topic, to prohibit as Evil harm to Sentients, and Praise help and benefit. Repair of Reality is more esoteric, yet is in a sense, help of Thingness, or the Multiverse Itself. A crime against the Essence of the Multiverse is also Evil, if done by a Sentient.”

“Yet is it a Dualism?” said Droos. “We have stated the differences? How is good bad and bad good?”

“There are methods to approach this,” said Showsh. “Some have been attempted. In a sense, to do good, to act, is to change. Is change Itself Evil, or does it Break Reality? Yet, we agreed that change is neutral, Itself a Transcendent Forcang.”

“Change is neutral,” said Elriver. “Yet quality is a matter of perspective and opinion. To some Sentients, any change may be deemed evil. Therefore, the cacophony, the discord that results from the acting to do good, to help, will have some see evil, and harm, even where there was no intention, and for most, none. Thus, for every act to do Good, to Help, there may be Evil. Furthermore, there is an ontological perspective. It is a matter of opinion as to whether repairing reality is Good, and what Repairs are valuable. There will be those who see any repairs, or changes, as Evil, even if similarly the intent was absent, or most do not see this. It is difficult to maintain a Society without divergence of views. Some will see darkness, while most see light.”

“That is a matter of Epistemology too,” said Droos. “Should not the society agree on the basic mechanics for arriving at Knowledge, thus, how light may be recognized, and darkness identified, in order to avoid confusion? Definitions must be made, as we have been attempting to do so. Without such efforts, clearly the cacophony will result. In fact, did we not arrive at the conclusion that we seek Good, and Evil?”

“True,” said Showsh. “Yet no matter how high a percent of Society accept the common view, there will always be Others. This cacophony, this discord is surely at least a risk of Evil, or Breaking Reality, for ill will may be Created, even if unintentionally. Where there is ill will, or Others see Evil done, a Reaction may result. Thus, there is no practical Good, without the presence of Evil.”

“Likewise, there is no Evil, without those who see Good,” said Elriver. “Or a cacophony of some level of discord. That result may be Good or Evil, and have a Reaction or Not.”

“It seems that your approach to Good and Evil must essentially consider our previous topics,” said Droos. “Such Abstract Dimensions, and Dualism, do not exist apart from Society. Among other reasons, since in the State of Nature, they may not Exist at All, only with Society and Sentients are they a Reality. Therefore, the prior discussions are centrally relevant. Society is filled with cacophony as to the nature of good and evil.”

“Would that not be why we are here discussing the topic?” said Showsh. “Or rather, what commonalities they have, at this point.”

“If Good may be found, by a matter of perspective or opinion, in most or all Evil,” said Droos, “And Evil may be found in most or all Good, then that does not remove the requirement to attempt a definition of Good and Evil, or The Good, or to seek the Forms. Yet it does provide pause on action towards Evil by Sentients. Where doubt may exist anywhere, where darkness may be light, and light may in fact be darkness at any point, surely it is better to proceed with caution, and pause, then to hurry, and make a mistake. Careful consideration over much time, with many Sentients, and many varieties, notes, and views, would seem appropriate. All should be inherently Skeptical. Above all, it suggests an attempt to avoid harm, either to Sentients and Others, or to Reality, in order to Break it, until careful consideration is given. For, perhaps, no mortal, and maybe not even other Orders of Sentients, may Wholly Know Good and Evil sufficiently.”

“Yet here we are attempting to reach the stage where we may consider The Good,” said Elriver

“Droos only means to say that a Sentient must be careful, and considerate, with judgement, and action,” said Showsh. “Particularly in matters of Good and Evil. Such Labels may be made. They may also be Wrong, and Harmful. Better take longer, much longer, and result in friends, allies, and alliances, then enemies, war, and ultimately, actual Evil and Destruction.”

“It seems that we did reach the Dualism on the topic of Good and Evil after all,” said Droos. “As well as the Bridge to our conversation on The Good. For above it all, or so I am told, I being merely a whale in a world of seas, is the Form of The Good, to which all of us seek. Here we have Journeyed in our discussions

Book III: The Library

of Knowledge thus far, and all was meant to be built upon to achieve this objective. Do I have, at least, the mortal, shadow, form of The Good in my sights, Dear Showsh, Blessed Elriver?”

“It seems we have reached that Hallowed point,” said Elriver. “Later today, surely we will discuss the nature of The Good. With it, I hope that you will find the ability to reflect, and reduce your contribution by your Soul to baetOak. With that, perhaps you may aid your people in doing the same in the End.”

“We have traveled a long way, Dear Love of My Life,” said Showsh. “We will explore this Form together, Our Family, for the sake of Our People, our Children, our Future. For the sake of The Good, and to counter Evil and Repair the Multiverse. Today, we will commence, beneath the ever sun of Truth.”





Chapter 6

The Good

For a topic so Central to the Forms, it was not surprising to find that the local branch in The Library that carried such books and records was to be found in the Actual Celestial Object, The Sun, of the Celestial Domain. Droos climbed another shimmering ladder, this one with a more bluish-green tint, beside Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo, that afternoon, though really the time had no further meaning than it did prior. All lay aglow in the branch in The Sun, the Shelves were composed of Radiance itself, and only the books provided a structure of more organic elements to remind The Angel that the Drerpo Universe, even here, had Laws of Science and Properties not purely *magical*.

“Really, magical?” said Showsh. “That is how you refer to us? It is truly a simplification. Is it magical that different species have different senses and are able to perceive the World in radically different manners, and experience it similarly divergently? Is it so hard to believe that Beings might exist with a Level or Order of Senses Beyond the Understanding and Potency of mortals?”

“But if You are not truly Gods, or *God*, then what are you, and what grants this *Potency*?” asked Droos, with some amusement. “It certainly sounds similar to what the mortals call magic, or witchcraft, whatever the unimaginable might be.”

“The Unity May be *God*,” said Elriver. “We merely have different Senses, and Appendages, that permit Variant ways of Experiencing Reality. Is it so hard to Believe, or Comprehend?”

“Well now that you mention it... yes!” laughed Droos, with some amount of teasing. “What is a Potency of a Potency, or Knowledge of Knowledge? Those surely are nonsense phrases, as far as Epistemology goes.”

“Or else, you merely lack a subtlety to your Senses, even

Book III: The Library

you, The Angel,” said Showsh, with a smile, “That would permit you to Perceive such Varieties. Even among mortals there are differences in senses. Some may view the color yellow with great intensity, or have fabulous vision or hearing. Others may lack those senses altogether. There may be further senses possessed by mortals currently unknown or recognized. That higher Orders of Sentients might possess Greater Senses and Resources, would this not be Conceivable?”

“Alright, fine, although I fear we have removed ourselves from our main topic just as we have reached a crucial branch of your truly fabulous library, Elriver,” said Droos. “We are here to discuss The Good.”

“You may wish to bear that in mind,” said Elriver, rolling her eyes. “Though I suppose some harmless fun is reasonable in almost any context, and humor is a treasure to value. As for The Good; what of The Good? We were just sharing Knowledge in regards to the Dualism of Good and Evil. How might we focus instead on Pure Good, The Good? What is the Essence of such a Form? How might it even be displayed, written, or shown, in the context of a shadow upon a cave wall?”

“Seemingly it is that, a shadow,” said Showsh. “In its most immanent level, The Good is a shade of darkness. It is hard to explain.”

“If it is so intangible, we had best declare failure, and move onto more useful topics,” said Droos. “I would not think to begin with such thoughts. Yet, perhaps, as we did with The Library, humility is a proper entry into the philosophy of The Good. Elriver, you Created Drerpo, and proposed the truest of questions. How would you explain The Good to one of your simple, lowly daughters, cast adrift in this Mighty Sea of Knowledge?”

“If we are to move beyond the notion of helping Sentients, and repairing reality,” said Elriver, “Or rather, speak in addition to those ideas, it would be beneficial to add pursuit of forms, if not the realization of them.”

“Did we not just conclude a conversation about how attempting to be perfect is incorrect,” said Showsh. “Here you tell, Dear Droos, that she must chase windmills in order to be good. Surely, this is the same topic.”

“Dear Elriver did not say they must be captured, or that the windmills must be defeated,” said Droos. “Only, that one must

dare to consider their Reality, and to Seek Them. As You, Dear Showsh, told me a great sage once said, ‘We are not free to neglect a task, but neither are we required to complete it.’ Here we must seek the forms, in that light.”

“Do I catch you meaning?” asked Elriver. “You clearly state *forms* of the lower degree, the immanent sort. Perhaps, something approaching the Immanent, but certainly not the Transcendent.”

“The goal is to seek the Forms, but never to truly expect to catch them,” said Showsh. “The merit is merely in the Journey, and imperfection of the attempt. A life spent living on the Journey to the Forms, and seeking the forms, is The Good Life.”

“Therefore, the woman, or man, or child, who does this, approaches The Good,” said Droos, with increased interest. “It almost feels that we speak of mathematics again. ‘As we approach the Forms...,’ ‘As we approach The Good...,’ might you place this in a clearer light for those without such knowledge? As you said, not all have a background of that sort.”

“It is as we discussed,” said Showsh. “To be near a thing, or Nearly a Thing, is to Essentially Achieve It, or To Achieve It, in Mathematics. It may be a difficult concept for some to grasp. How may something be achieved if it is not Achieved? Yet, it is. Thus, nearly, is the same, as There, or Arrived At.”

“You claim to be the great Sovereign of Drerpo, and you speak like that, Dear Husband,” teased Elriver. “I suppose immanent speech has its awkwardness. Might there ever be a case where a thing, nearly there, does not Arrive?”

“Yes,” said Droos. “In the further study of mathematics, that may occur as well. There is a reason for the subject of philosophy of knowledge, and that we insisted on a State of Skepticism. For, we might seek the Forms, to attempt to reach The Good, our entire lives, yet we must remain Skeptical of our abilities, and even our Right to succeed. As our Great Sovereign, Dear Showsh, says... ‘We are not Perfect’”.

“Is it so, that it is not a Right to assume success is possible, or Available?” inquired Elriver. “I accept that humility is a virtue, even a Form, yet to digress to a state of Doubt, is this Better? Surely there is a middle road?”

“I would think we might learn from our Noble Philosophers on this topic, and truly a middle road is best in this regard,” said Showsh. “One might be humble, but neither is doubt

Book III: The Library

required. A space between the two, a balance is acceptable, and permits the approach of forms.”

“That middle path, would it not be useful in other virtues, or in balances in pursuit of the Forms?” said Droos.

“We must have begun by discussing Dualism to suggest just such an idea,” said Elriver. “For if opposites are opposite, yet fundamentally still united, rather than take an extreme, the middle road is surely advisable in many routes to the Forms.”

“Does that mean that a Sentient may not sample a note or color from a more distant region of the path?” asked Showsh. “It seems that spending most of the time in the middle, is it permitted to wander to different fronts, even occasionally?”

“That would seem reasonable,” said Droos. “Yet Beware! For one might as well drift to the far side of the Forms in the process, or sustain Destruction, or Ugliness. Surely, a middle path is useful, and sampling either end is acceptable in further moderation, with a preference for the lighter side.”

“Is there a lighter side,” said Elriver. “Did we not agree that both sides contain elements of the Other. Does that mean any preference is required?”

“Having a presence, does not mean there is not a Nature at all,” said Showsh. “Darkness is still Darkness. Light is still Light. Both may be beautiful. Surely, where a middle approach is not used, preference would be to spend moderate time in Light... then Darkness. Either has peril, but certainly the latter. Any mortal will know that in the Dark, surely more trouble might exist.”

“Is that not a qualitative decision of free will?” said Droos. “What of those who prefer darkness? Would you enslave them? Would you chain them in the eternal sun?”

“I know who you tease with that metaphor, Dear Droos,” said Elriver, with a smile. “Only, recall, we speak now in metaphors and abstractions. In reality, we Journey to The Good, and Its Form. The Reality, the Truth, the Knowledge, these Transcend the qualitative and are Objective. Only to mortals, there is doubt and confusion. Many shadows and hues and shades must be used to explain the Essence of what Exists Beyond the mortal.”

“Then it is an impossible task,” said Droos. “Why even attempt it?”

“To exist as a Society, we must surely discuss The Good, or attempt to do so,” said Showsh. “We have done so well. To tilt at windmills is folly, if the goal is to strike the tower. What of

the Journey? Perhaps the notion that some definition of good may exist, however faint, or hard to grasp, is worth seeking. For what better framework to place as the Constitution for Society. Should not all Sentients aim to be Good, to do the Good? Even if it is improbable to ever reach The Good, or a firm understanding, the Journey is worthy enough, and a closest reach, is Near Enough. Surely, it will result in Peace, and Love, and Tolerance, for More. We aim to Improve Society. As said, our goal is not to Perfect It. For only among the Hallowed Realms of Forcang, are such Perfections Possible.”

“That is not what I hear,” said Atropo at last, adding his thoughts. “As a Delegate to The Alliance of the Multiverse, I am privy to much, including discussions I will not share. It is not True that all is well, or Perfect, even in Goamdwee. Only, it is a State of Perfection, More Perfect, than any mortal Realm, or Story. It is Perfection. It is not the Perfection of the Transcendent Forcang or the Unity.”

“That is just another way of saying Forcang, Lords of Order, and Lords of Chaos, and those Aliens from The Indeterminate still fight wars and kill each other,” said Droos, with a slight annoyance. “Will it ever end? Why must there be intrigue in such Hallowed places? Surely, Greater Beings would know better?”

“Greater Beings, or Grand Elder Forcang, have also been hatching plots and desires for eons, for billions and even trillions of years, with so many facets, that a mortal really would not be able to comprehend,” said Elriver. “By comparison, it is a State of Near Perfection, and Thus, Perfection. Yet, Atropo is Right—It is not the Transcendent Perfection of the Feaist Tradition, or any other Nirvana envisioned by most Forcang religions. Only Souls that Transcend Forcang altogether, perhaps They Earn the Right to Behold Such Splendor.”

“I feel that you have been spending too much time in Temple Manifestations, Dear Elriver,” said Showsh. “Yet it is a wise sentiment. If Goamdwee went ten billion years without a murder, or one hundred billion years without even a small war, how would that compare to the most peaceful civilization on a planet or continent of mortals? I would challenge them to meet that standard. Maybe it is only a matter of Absolute Time before something atrocious does happen. Yet, it is Precious Time, and Peace, and Happiness.”

Book III: The Library

“Although I suspect there is more trouble to this intrigue among Forcang than just murder and wars,” said Droos. “Am I trading one Jungle merely for another—one that is far beyond my meek abilities?”

“That is a reasonable question, Dear Droos,” said Atropo. “And the Courts of Forcang are indeed, awful places, of great splendor and Light, yet also terrible danger, and threats to those who do not watch their feet or what they say. I also recommend you learn how to use a blade. For that matter, I recommend you practice many other skills before you ever think of visiting a Forcang City or Capitol. They are Potent, Perilous Places.”

“With that truly frightening introduction, Dear Droos will likely never visit one,” said Showsh, with a sigh. “There is some truth to the matter. However, what Atropo does not say is that there are endless numbers of Forcang who also pursue the Forms, and The Good, and Peace, Love, and Tolerance exist among numerous Forcang, and for lengths of time that make the lives of mortals seem but drops of water in a vast sea. Oh, the wonders you will see, when you are ready, Dear Love. For now, we have digressed. It will be sometime before Droos is wandering the markets of Goamdwee, or any Court of Chaos, or even any other Forcang City. Right now, she would not even be able to travel there.”

“Surely, I had thought you had put some time into considering our Honeymoon, Dear Love,” said Droos, with a grin. “Would we stay only in Drerpo, or will I get to meet some of your people?”

“That is a keen point, Dear One,” said Showsh. “I will have to think on it. However, such Futures will still take us Beyond the confines of this tale, and you have tasks that we are all working hard to help you with now. Once you see the successes of those labors, we will Honeymoon, in Beautiful Locales, and I suspect, I Know, you will not be Scared. You will be Loved, Happy, and Amazed.”

“That is quite a vow,” said Elriver, with a small scoff. “Though my husband is right. Droos, as we were discussing. It is the Journey to The Good that is valuable, and the middle path among virtues and Dualisms and forms in its pursuit. The Journey is valuable, even if unattainable. And by even approaching it, one may, perhaps, someday, claim The Good. For near, may be Present.”

“Is that it?” said Droos. “A life of pursuing Forms. A life of balance between Dualisms? I do not mean to sound ungrateful. I really am. Only, this is meant to provide a path to redemption. All I may see is that Justice is seen as a sum of the whole. One great Evil act still will result in some consequence.”

“Yet, you may have a lifetime to balance that Act,” said Showsh. “Have some optimism that you will see the dawn, and the day after. With enough time, and pursuing The Good as your Journey, one Great Evil Act, may achieve some balance. It will be difficult. It is a long road to redemption. However, it is not impossible. As for whether no fragment of your soul will see baetOak, neither Elriver or I may make such a claim or Promise. Nor, as you say, will we Promise any Pardon or Clemency.”

“That is harsh, coming from you,” said Atropo.

“Sometimes Justice must be,” said Elriver. “You will see that Son, when you have a Manifestation of your own. Creators and Sovereigns may not simply interfere with Due Process, and Justice, and the Celestial Laws of a Manifestation. The Right and Ability and Potencies to do so does not make it Moral, Ethical, and does permit it with Integrity. Few in the history of any of our Manifestations have ever received Clemency, let alone Pardon, nor in the histories of our Family Lines, and their Manifestations. It is a Great Request. And, thus, not really possible. No, Droos must Earn her Justice, and Redemption. I have faith in her. I know that Showsh does. You should too, Atropo.”

“Then you must believe in yourself, and your Right to Succeed, and to be Redeemed, Dear Droos, Dear Mother, Dear Angel, Dear Queen,” said Atropo, with a slight bow. “How you feel about yourself will motivate you in part to success or failure in your Journey. The Psychology is essential. You must Be Success, Be Redemption, Know you Deserve It, and then Live The Good, and Achieve It, for It has Already Occurred in Your Mind. Or else, defeat may be something you tell yourself, and then it will be, for you may not believe you have a right to obtain it.”

“One may not ignore the Mental and Emotional,” said Elriver. “The Soul is Essential and the Body. Yet so are the Emotions and Mind. All must work together to achieve Redemption. Atropo is absolutely Right. You will have to train and exercise these, and be One, to See and Sense the Good, and Pursue It. You must Know, you are Able, and May Do So.”

“We all believe that you can do this, Dear Love,” said

Book III: The Library

Showsh. “It is in your nature. There is a reason we are all here. If any may achieve such a feat, it is you. You will be an example to all. Bring yourself Together, and we will be your Family, your Friends, and Loved Ones.”

“I feel like there is more to discuss of The Good,” said Droos, a little out of breath.

Then, taking ten, deep, slow breaths, she continued.

“What is next in Pursuit, in the Journey, to Be Near this Form?”

“Amazing!” said Elriver. “Let us begin.”

“We concluded that to live The Good Life according to The Good,” said Showsh, “It was necessary to choose the middle path between Dualisms, in pursuit of Forms. It is not necessary to reach these Forms, only to attempt the effort, on a lifelong Journey. Beyond this, it seems that a common characteristic of those who make this Journey, is to veer closer from the center towards the Dualisms of Light.”

“This comes close, almost, to a Cliché,” said Elriver. “You speak of Light and Darkness. This has surely been spoken about before, elsewhere, and not by Us.”

“Besides, you already concluded that one side of the Dualism is preferable to the Other,” said Droos, “Without the metaphor. I also wonder if there might be more than opposites on occasion. Why do we speak of Dualisms? Why not the intersection of Three Abstract Dimensions? Why not Four Abstraction Dimensions? Is it not a similar repetition to speak of only two directions, or two sides?”

“That is a fine point,” said Showsh. “Mortals speak of night and day, and black and white, for surely, there is some primal fear of the night, at least among humans. It is worth noting that for some Other Sentients, it would nearly be the opposite metaphor, and the preferable primal period is nighttime—imagine night as the time of activity for a species. Surely, the connotation of Dark and Light is more nuanced, and derelict in its meaning.”

“It would appear that in a Universe of meanings, such metaphors have little foundation,” said Elriver. “Yet what of Color, or Shade, or Hue? What of Aesthetics, or Reality? In such Forms, is there a Dualism? In that case, such Words Mean More than the appearance on the pages of a book read by mortals. Almost, the sense is lost. The idea must be only guessed. The concept of the Light and Dark must be derived, rather than the

origin in primal pasts.”

“That still does not eliminate my point,” said Droos.

“Might there be a center with three Dimensions issuing from It?”

“In a Sense, in Dweehwail, there are at least Three, if no more,” said Showsh. “For example, Axiomatic, Anarchic, Foreigner, and Dimensional, are designations of Species on a Potent level in The Alliance of the Multiverse. Ultimately the Journey between these to seek The Good would exist somewhere in the midst of the Points.”

“Then there are such Designations,” such Droos.

“Perhaps in Dweehwail,” said Elriver. “Yet among mortal, are there tangible, immanent, non-linear designations? This matter will have to be investigated further, for it is a digression, though a worthy one. For Truly, it is an appropriate approach for those Greater Beings. For us, we should return to The Good. Showsh asked if, by the idea of Light, should a Sentient veer closer to it, then towards the center, as a matter of the Journey?”

“It would seem that, if we are to ignore the cliché,” said Droos, “The Good Life would be lived closer to the Positive side of the Linear Dualisms in approaching The Good. Even if something or another may be taken from the Negative side, surely the best would be found Upwards.”

“It occurs to me that we have given far too little consideration to Droos’ challenge,” said Showsh. “Is this indeed a Linear Path? A Sentient is not on a physical journey, but a metaphysical one of emotional and mental potency and prowess. Surely the line may curve, and dots may appear beyond the horizon. It is not a straight path. It is varied.”

“Perhaps that is a more apt description of the Journey to The Good,” said Elriver. “The Journey to the Upward Portion of the Linear of Dualisms is Curved, as is the Journey ultimately in following the Forms to the Ultimate Form, The Good. Dear Droos was right, and there may be more complex Dimensions to this. Moreover, Dimensions are more relevant and require consideration. It is not simply, or obviously, a matter of Light and Dark.”

“Even if some trajectories take that route, in fact, many may not,” said Droos. “A drawing of such Paths and Roads for most would be Complex. It would not be a Simple Dualism. Such, likely, is the nature of the Pursuit of The Good Life, and The Good—Such Life is Complex.”

Book III: The Library

“Would there be those for whom that life is not Complex?” asked Atropo.

“It might be the Transcendent Forcang,” said Showsh. “Only, they are Infinitely Selfless. A mortal may as soon measure the center of a singularity with insufficient technology. This would be harder still. The Transcendent Forcang, as mentioned, is Intangible. They cannot be practically connected to the everyday.”

“Yet for the Potent,” said Droos. “The Language of the Universe may be used to communicate with Them, Whatever or Whoever They are. For Transcendents Beyond Tangible Connection, They are Certainly Responsive. Sometimes, They even Refuse to Reply. That Suggests Consciousness, and Purpose.”

“You too should spend some time in a Temple Manifestation, Dear Droos,” said Elriver. “Whatever They Are, perhaps They Live Beyond Complexity. For the rest of us, the Journey is difficult, and challenging.”

“Then it would seem the summary is to remain, roughly, towards the upper middle of the Journey to Dualisms in an effort to Journey to The Good so as to live The Good Life in Society,” said Atropo. “That is all we must do? There must be more to this conversation.”

“There is, Dear Son,” said Elriver. “However, perhaps we should break for now, and permit Droos this view of the Pure Aesthetics of The Sun of The Library. I always liked this Place. Maybe, we might all browse some records and books. I am sure that our Noble Librarians would not mind.”

That night, Droos and Showsh stood in The Cave of The Library to view a show by the Artist Librarians and Performer Librarians. Shadows appeared on the cave wall, and mingled, and danced, and told a story. It was harmonious, and colorful. Almost, it seemed, it was told with trillions of hues of light, and even the image cast by the Artists, created light, not darkness. It was a matter of perspective, a qualitative distinction, and now that such differences were removed before Droos, the show might be viewed in myriad colors. All she had to do was open her mind to Knowledge, and Truth, and Tolerance, and defy Ignorance.

Odd it seemed that Showsh, the Sovereign of Drerpo and Creator of Vøvoav, if not other Manifestations as well, stood with her on her right as her honored guest. What places she had gone in pursuit of her redemption? How had she earned this privilege?

It seemed she was not long ago a small fish in a Multiverse of Seas. How did she arrive here? Her senses had changed, and she Saw. Still, for a moment, it was clear, that somewhere, despite the mundane unity between colors, among Forms, there was Light and Darkness, and Good and Evil. Using that sense of the words was Powerful, and not to be written or spoken too easily. Certainly, they were not readily understood, even now by her. But she did have increased confidence in herself, and her right to be here. She did know and hear and sense more. The Truth of The Good, and her Journey glowed in the Kernels of her Soul, Emotions, Mind, and Body. The next steps would begin soon.

The shadows on the wall, or was it blue or green, or light, spoke of a betrayal, and a son, who despite all resources, and rights, and privileges, permitted emotion, and desire, to lead him to terrible decisions. These actions were Evil, and marred his family, and shocked his Cosmos. Yet the Kernel of Fate that started it all was a Secret that ran throughout, and was subtle, and Droos had difficulty following. These Artist Librarians were Masterful. It made her think, surely of her Omen, and what it meant. Would some awful Potential unfold because of her? What was the Secret foretold by her Fate? Maybe, she was actually in charge of her own Destiny, and no Ruby or Elriver might tell her otherwise. Yet there was so much about Dweehwail, and Showsh and Elriver, and their family and friends, in their might, that she did not yet Know. That thought both terrified her, and intrigued her with wonder, and love.

That night, Droos slept well, and soundly, with no dream or thought, in a room that seemed always now to exist in an ever darkness, a blackness amidst the ever sun of Elriver. Now in her abode in The Library, the moon and stars always shown, though the glow of the sun always lingered in her soul. Her heart was at peace in the calm and tranquility of this silvery shadow, and even she felt guarded, and beyond the clutches, including of tales of Omen and the possibilities of Tzefee's wrath, flame and claw, and alien laughter. They, she did not think about, and awash in the glow of darkness and silvery sheen, she spent the night in calm, and knew no more until the dawn of the next ever-day.

Upon waking, she realized that much time had passed. In fact, it had been a whole year by Bagan standards. Time really did have little meaning here. On this day, she was twenty-four, though it felt like an Age had gone by in this Celestial Domain.

Book III: The Library

No Greater Beings greeted her, love, loved ones, or friends, and she sauntered the hallways of The Library, feeling lonely for a brief Time. On a rock of white and black speckled granite amidst The Meadow, she dined a light breakfast by herself, surrounded by sparse Servants and a few Gods and Goddesses, who ate, and sang, and recited poetry gayfully.

The verses and tunes lifted her heart and spirit, and before long she heard an answer, as though in her mind stars signaled the arrival of the answer to each line of poem, each reprise of the melody. These were in fact woven by her masterful love, Showsh, dancing as he made his way to her, and swept her to her feet. He dipped her and kissed her deeply, before placing a luscious strawberry in her mouth, which she ate delightfully.

“That was tasty,” she said with a deep breath, and a smile, and feeling suddenly a lot better. “How are you such an artist of poem and song, yet have time to stand here, a young man named *Drerpo*, immanent, while running a Universe?”

“It is a Pure Aesthetic, one I Dreamt of long ago,” said Showsh, kissing her again, deeply, once the strawberry was finished. “Ruling one hundred Manifestations would be dreary work without poetry, song, and dance. All rulers must enjoy art—ideally, both the enjoyment, and composition. Did I not tell you, Birthing Cosmoses and Universes is seen by Us as the Greatest of Arts. Yet, this labor with which I experience life with you—it is perhaps an aesthetic more exquisite than them all. I would not rather be anywhere else.”

With that, he kissed her one final time, before taking a seat, and requesting, with two sonnets, a cup of coffee, dark, and some fresh fruit.

“It is good to know that I am not a waste of your time, any more than my strange tasks are a waste of mine,” said Droos, with a sigh. “I fear they will still be lengthy, if not by your standards. Nonetheless, even with a Truer explanation of many philosophies of knowledge, including Dualisms and The Good, understanding how to be redeemed is no small task.”

“Neither is enjoying your breakfast,” said Showsh. “Now finish your food so that you will have the strength, body, soul, mind, and emotion, to face the day.”

“I thought Angels needed no food, and that the day here lasted an eternity,” joked Droos.

“That does not mean sleep and food are not good for you,

Dear Droos,” said Showsh.

With that, he took a sip of coffee, a bight of an apple, and began humming a quiet tune to himself, in an ancient language, in all likelihood from a Manifestation either he or a family member Created long ago. Droos did enjoy the rest of her meal, and the company, as the song and verses seemed to weave images of happiness and peace in her mind, images of nature and flowers, and trees in meadows of ancient days long past. With those wondrous thoughts, they both finished their morning regeneration, and rose to start the day.

The Two walked, slowly, deliberately through the Floor of the Meadow, alongside Sentient Species of myriad forms—speaking animals, and plants, given Potency to live in The Library—just enough. There were trees of normal proportions in some parts, including fruit trees, that had orchards, and all manner of vegetation. Typical flowers bloomed, demonstrating the Beauty of all shapes and sizes of color, type, creature, plant, and species. Truly, Creation was Wondrous, and Droos thought that perhaps for a moment in her mind she had strayed into a narrow field of Gon Eden.

“Is that not a state of mind, Dear One?” said her Showsh. “In such a state, might Heaven be enjoyed in a great variety of locales, while even Gon Eden itself may seem base. With the proper state of mind, in unity of Self, clearly Heaven is a Journey.”

“With that you incur two minor transgressions, Dear One,” said Droos, with a smile. “The first is looking to the Future, and Surprises in Heaven, or so Elriver has stated. The second is to read my mind. As you Know, the ability to do so, and the choice are separate entities.”

“Intimacy must indeed be affirmatively granted, and stated,” said Showsh. “I apologize if I transgressed. You are right.”

“The ability to apologize—most impressive, Dear One,” said Droos. “It seems you are on your own Journey. Yet I have granted many affirmatives of intimacy, if not all. Yet even such, within a relationship there may still be spaces of privacy. Surely the mind is one of these. If you may trust me, why look into it? Would I peer into your drawer without permission, Dear Showsh?”

“The Fundamental Law of Privacy,” said Showsh. “It is true. Even as intimates, with many permissions, innately granted, there still exists space that remains private.”

Book III: The Library

“Although, might that depend upon the relationship, Dear Love?” said Droos, with a singing, quiet voice. “Some like ours might be wholly open, and transparent. Why have the need for secrecy?”

“Then again, ‘distance makes the heart grow fond’, and so does trust created through private domains within a relationship,” said Showsh. “Perhaps even an intimate mind must remain separate. I admit, Droos, you are my fourth relationship in three hundred trillion years. Still, I am stammering like a youth. Do I really know Intimacy?”

“I suspect all men struggle in this area,” said Droos. “And many women as well. For that matter, Privacy is an issue in many relationships. Fear not, my Love, for the trouble has passed, and I am not discouraged or maddened. Only, enraptured by love of you. Yet, not so that I may not hold to myself and independence.”

“I would not have it otherwise,” said Showsh. “If anything, I might say that you sound like someone who is having a very special day. You are more unified. It is also your birthday, Dear Droos. Happy Birthday!”

With that, the young man gathered from behind his back a small wooden box, and gave it to Droos. It was plain, unwrapped, and sealed. It had the scent of ocean spray on a distant beach at sunset.

“A present!” said Droos with glee. “You shouldn’t have, Showsh!”

She opened the box, which released with ease. Inside was an object. The appearance was a blue and purple flower, though it shone as precious stones, and was laced with true silver. Inlaid were Droos’ name in a different dialect of The Language of the Universe, along with a prayer, as well as some words in a wholly different tongue, taken from a Manifestation long ago. A delicate chain, light as a string, permitted it to surround the young woman’s neck, if she wished.

“It’s beautiful,” said Droos with smile, as she placed it around her, and permitted Showsh to clasp it behind.

Then he stood in front, and spoke.

“You are the most beautiful woman in all of my Manifestations,” said Showsh, “And many more beyond them.”

Droos half laughed, and smiled, and leaned forward and kissed him.

“That was surely a half compliment,” said Showsh.

“These complicated relationships of Forcang—you cannot say I am the most beautiful here, because of your wife, I know. However, it is well received. I wonder if I took another someday if I would have to give you a similarly half handsome praise.”

“You would be welcome to any relationship that made you happy,” said Showsh, running his rough fingernails, lightly along her cheeks. “I expect that, as with Elriver, it would take some... getting used to in the end. I am a very lucky man to have you to myself right now. I would not presume it would be forever. Each Sentient must make their own decision on the matter, in time.”

“I feel loved, and beautiful, and you help me feel worthy on this day,” said Droos. “Now here we are.”

They had reached the Library Proper, the large sunflower at the Heart of The Library. Shelves spanning worlds merged from the outer pedals, on inward towards the center. Into this they went, and arrived in order, beside Elriver, who was reading an ancient volume, engrossed by its words. It was a guide to warfare, by a famous philosopher. Elriver did not skip any words.

“Good book, Dear Wife,” said Showsh.

“I feel that we have been idle in the matter of Tzefee for too long,” Elriver said, lifting her eyes finally, but not her whole Mind. “Even now, Atropo scouts our borders, and our forces led by my Lieutenant of War fight on the front. Seemingly, we are doing well now, and Bagan is not in danger any longer. Even, our Angel might return. I fear, though, a feint. Surely this is too easy.”

“Likely She has heard of your bold intentions, and is plotting her long term plans for you,” said Showsh, with more of a smile than he should have expressed, given the statement. “If you think Tzefee will be redeemed without a fight, do not fool yourself. Likely, it will take resources beyond anything we have here to force that End. Even the mention of it has the so called Goddess of Pain abandoning her forces and scheming again. If only we saw her Mind.”

“I do not think I would want that much,” said Droos.

“I merely want her to pursue The Good like us, to have some agreement as to the Journey to The Good Life. Surely, a calm discussion of Knowledge, Trust, and Philosophy, as we have done, may lead to common terms. Even among the Forcang of Dweehwail, Peace may be achieved, and perpetuated. An ancient enemy may become an ally, or, reunited with her old friends and family abandoned and thought forgotten at the beginning of time.

Book III: The Library

Or, was not Tzefee originally a Being of Light, a Lord of Order, before she became of Alien Kind.”

“Yet none, not even Ruby knows of her family connection,” said Elriver. “I suppose if those were found, likely somewhere deep in the Courts of Chaos, some ancient Forcang Line, or more likely, aged and forgotten in a corner of a Dark City along the Dark River, nonetheless, it would be an advantage. We might learn Tzefee’s True Name. Even the memory of it might work Miracles. That is a good thought, Dear Droos.”

“I still recommend focusing on your task at hand,” said Showsh. “A great sage once said that first a Sentient must save themselves, then their family, then they may see to their community, and their broader people. Your task may ultimately reach even further. Yet, your Journey must travel the same way. First, you must redeem yourself. We are here to help you with that, and with regard to your people. Certainly, when that is over, we will not abandon you.”

“Well I will take the compliment for what it is,” said Droos. “Sometimes it is hard to focus on myself when it seems the weight of the Multiverse, and Beyond, rests on my shoulders. But the quote is right, and if I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

“And if not now, when?” said Elriver.

“It is useful that we have our Ultranet of the Celestial Domains to research such quotes,” said Showsh. “Otherwise, the attribution might be squandered. Do not hesitate to do that research, Dear Droos. For every thinker, and the one who stated the fact, or idea, should receive her or his due. For me to state there was a sage or thinker, is a signal that either of you may do such research, and that it should be found in simple order, even here.”

“That is good to know,” said Droos. “I suppose I would look up the quote, or something similar, and The Library would find the answer. We are very fortunate to have Celestial Bureaucrats and Librarians to update our records, digital or otherwise. However, I suspect even in the Bagan Galaxy, such resources have existed for thousands of years. If only they were to be used.”

“Yes, attribution is key,” said Elriver. “Wherever possible, an original thinker should receive their due. At least the invitation to do such research should be suggested. Thank you, Dear Husband, for the reminder, of this important ethic, moral, and to maintain our integrity. I only wish there was more space to make

such attributions, in more detail.”

“I suppose the nature of Philosophical Dramatic Narrative is such, that unlike direct philosophy,” said Showsh, “Sources are unlikely to be quoted, and there will be no footnotes or endnotes. Yet further unlike other areas and genres of dramatic narrative and fiction, at least some attribution is made to provide guidance where a sage is referenced for further research. I would be concerned if there were no resources for investigating topics by quote, or near quote. However, such matters are simple today, and have been for some time.”

“This has all been a digression,” said Droos. “Although, where there is a matter of ethics, morality, and integrity at stake, possibly even something legal, as far as attribution and use, surely this is an important topic. More should discuss it and do this. Those who create or Create deserve their credit in some direct or indirect manner, as much as is reasonable and possible.”

“The legal aspect deserves a quick comment,” said Elriver. “Surely, all property is owned, and were it is not, merely borrowed. That will also, eventually, if it were to be made public, would easily then be able to be researched, in a final draft. Certainly, and Foreign Property would receive all due permission, by the end and final drafts, or else be changed. All of those with rights, may keep their rights, provided they were not stolen, or obtained fraudulently. However, in general, the benefit of the doubt should be given, as a rule.”

“What a curious topic,” said Showsh. “It is highly technical, and I hope only needs mention in this tale once. However, in summation, intellectual property, or anything created, deserves credit, and control. That includes the ability to earn token property from it in the form of currency. Of course, Grand Elder Forcang do not Birth Manifestations for any reason other than the Benefit of those Within, as stated. Yet mortals may not be expected to aspire to exactly those same standards. Attribution is reasonable, and control, and the right to profit. All of that is provided that the number one standard, as we have discussed, and this, albeit, is a digression, is the Journey, the Pursuit of The Good, to live The Good Life, in Society, in the ways mentioned.”

“Did we not even mention that Property is an Abstract Dimension,” said Droos. “It is reasonable to discuss one element of it here, however brief.”

“Then returning to our quote, attribution given indirectly to

Book III: The Library

the vaunted sage,” said Showsh, “Remember, to start with yourself, to redeem and help yourself, before moving onto larger circles of trust and Sentients and humans.”

“It is also worth noting,” said Elriver. “That the decision to include Society as an Abstract Dimension was itself attributable to a great sage of ancient times. Surely, you would not think that I would let that pass.”

“Thank you, Dear Wife, for not permitting that oversight,” said Showsh, sheepishly.

“I will remember, that I must begin with myself,” said Droos. “Being honored like I was with love and kindness today, a simple present from, my love, Showsh, helps with my self-image. I know that I am worth what you say.”

“I am sorry I did not get you a gift, Dear One,” said Elriver. “And, Happy Birthday, Daughter of Drerpo.”

“You are busy, Dear Elriver, Creator of Drerpo,” said Droos. “You have nothing to forgive for all that you do. Presents in general are not a requirement of love or friendship. Your honor and respect and trust are gifts enough.”

“That is too kind,” said Elriver. “Still, let us at least try to return to a topic of knowledge from these sections of digression, and end with some dialogue.”

“How do you think I am doing on my Journey?” said Droos. “Do I veer closer to Creation then Destruction? Am I nearer Beauty over Ugliness? Am I farther from Evil and nearer Good? Where am I on the overall Journey towards the Form of The Good? How does this help my search for redemption?”

“Those are merely some of the Dualisms,” said Showsh. “I would say you tend closer to Creation, and I would say Beauty, though I am hardly an objective observer. Furthermore, the mundane good, seems more your attribute, than evil.”

“It is worth noting that you seem to have included *good* two times on your search for Knowledge,” said Elriver. “Both in Dualisms and in The Good. What is the difference?”

“This was discussed,” said Droos. “The mundane Dualism is about actions that help Sentients, as opposed to harming them, or repair reality, as opposed to breaking it. The Good involves maintaining a rough Upward direction on the Journey of combined Dualisms of Forms on the singular Journey towards the Ultimate Form, The Good.”

“I wanted to add,” said Elriver, “That these words are

too weak to really express any of these ideas. We are limited by shadows, or now, colors on a cave wall. With that, we sense as best we are able. You do so Droos, as The Angel, The Queen. We Do, as Grand Elder Forcang. None of us are Transcendent Forcang, and certainly not The Unity.”

“Thus, it seems, there might really require different words for those two *good's*,” said Showsh. “However, language is limited in what may be available. Perhaps the first might be labeled a Dualism between the Form, *Beneficial* and the Form, *Evil*, and the second the Ultimate Form, *The Good*.”

“For all of these, keeping in mind that there may be Forms above even The Good,” said Droos. “Yet they are Intangible, except for those who use The Language of the Universe properly, with respect, and are somewhat Lucky. Furthermore, it requires some amount of Potency. In the end, Such Final Forms are Beyond the System, at the Top of the Order of Sentients, or even Outside of It.”

“I suppose you may have wondered why Feism has that label?” said Elriver, in a slightly erudite manner. “Well... *Fea* is the seventh letter of the forty-two letter Loahueth alphabet—the so-called Language of the Universe. Well, there are, in that religion, seven *orders* of Sentients. Each order is divided into a lower level and an upper degree. There are two orders of mortal levels and degrees: the first level, the first degree, the second level, and the second degree. The lowliest Forcang begins at the Third Level, and are considered Angelic, or Servants. Archangels might fall under the category of Third Degree Sentients. A Fourth Level Sentient is a God or Goddess. A Fourth Degree Sentient would be a King or Queen of the Deities.”

“You are going to give away all of our secrets,” said Showsh. “Let me continue. At the Fifth Level and Fifth Degree, Sentients are the Ultimate Lieutenants of the Multiverse, and most of the chief Celestial Officers are either Fourth Degree or Fifth Level or Fifth Degree Sentients. They are Elder Forcang. Grand Elder Forcang are always Sixth Level or Six Degree Sentients, and are born into or are Promoted or Gain Immense Potency. Yet, none may achieve the Seventh Level, or Seventh Degree.”

“Among the Seventh Order of Sentients,” said Elriver, “It is said that there are exactly one thousand, seven hundred and sixty-four Seventh Level Sentients. Among the Seventh Degree Sentients, there are exactly Forty-Two. The Seventh Degree

Book III: The Library

Sentients are considered the Archangels of the Feist religion, and are the most Potent Entities, with Mighty Power, but Ultimately, Selflessness. The Seventh Level Sentients each represent a sphere, or Word under one of the Seventh Degree Sentients. There are Forty-Two Seventh Level Sentients under each Seventh Degree Sentient.”

“Above all, is The Unity,” said Showsh. “Whether Seventh Order Sentient, or The Unity, all are Intangible, all are Selfless, and even only the Seventh Order Sentients, we may only attempt to reach with The Language of the Universe. The Unity is Above All, except perhaps the most Sacred Rituals or Deeply Felt Prayers in Temple Manifestations or Paradise Manifestations, offered by specialized Priestesses and Priests.”

“Are these rituals of the Feaist Tradition offered by Feaist Priestesses anymore affective than those offered by clergy or monastics from other Forcang religions to The Unity or similar concepts of a Singular Divine?” asked Droos.

“According to the few Feaist Priestesses I know,” said Showsh, “And a few monastics, as you call them, of other faiths, most attempts are not successful, and the rare few that do work, have equal potential regardless of the faith or tradition. It seems God is Intangible even to the mightiest Forcang. Afterall, and even our best religions may not ultimately have greater answers than some of the simplest mortal societies have to offer. The best answer we have is that we do not know. The best answer we have is that we have no answer. Finally, all have equal success, and share in our successes, and are harmed by our failures. We must Unite, and work together, as Forcang traditions—and most of the time, we do.”

“That is quite a lecture, Dear Elriver,” said Droos. “I do not know if mortals would appreciate being reduced to *orders* of Sentients. Do you think that is demeaning?”

“It is not a term meant for use by mortals,” said Droos. “No Sentient that is not a Forcang should use it. The Wonder, the Magic, the Splendor of Creation, these should all be Words that mortals treasure. They should relish their Uniqueness, their Exclusivity even; ultimately some of this may be an illusion, or the Truth may be different or of an Abstract, Transcendent Realm or Reality. Yet, that is not needed for mortals to live The Good Life.”

“It does seem our lessons on The Good, in how to live The Good Life, in Society, are relevant,” said Droos.

“Regardless of the strange Words, and Abstract Impossibilities, and Rudeness of Forcang,” said Showsh, “Or the varieties of religions and traditions, mortality is wondrous, with unlimited potential to Journey towards The Good, and live The Good Life, in Society. Mortals may Journey roughly Upwards of the Dualisms towards the Forms, in pursuit of The Good. It is up to them. Also, this philosophy is independent, a way of life that is different and separate from many religious traditions and thoughts, and not in conflict with them. As far as the ethics, morals, and integrity, it is hard to see how most of these are in conflict. There may be some limited examples, in the case of those who want to cause harm, or break the world. For everyone else, The Good is a Journey that is immanent, and not Foreign. It may be had alongside religion, philosophy, tradition, and politics.”

“But Showsh, Dear Husband,” said Elriver. “What of those who do not want to do this? What if they do not want to seek The Good. Many, or even most will not. Some will even fear or hate it. What of that?”

“It seems, simply living a moral, ethical life, one of integrity, aiming to bring about peace, love, and tolerance, and help others, and repairing the world,” said Droos, “Those who do these things, regardless of what religion, philosophy, tradition, or politics they practice or label themselves, are essentially near The Good. And to be near, is to be There.”

“Are you suggesting that one may keep everything they were raised with and hold dear, and still follow The Good?” asked Elriver.

“That does not appear to be exactly the case,” said Showsh. “Yet nearly. It seems if it is nearly the case, it is essentially the same, and no change is immediately, or ever really necessary. Rather, simply aim to be good, where that human stands, and where that human exists, and do not change. Aim to be better, even according to that human’s religion, philosophy, tradition, and politics. Such, will usually, be sufficient, and good.”

“I feel that I have been let down,” said Droos. “After all, we have been seeking knowledge for years now, only to find that it may be done from where we started from in the first place. Even, after all, no change is necessary at all. Even, pursuit of that pure faith, will be sufficient. How is any of that possible?”

“Perhaps, Dear Droos, you must analyze the Dualism of the Complete verses the Finite,” said Elriver. “There is more

Book III: The Library

in common between a complete change, and a very small one: possibly, only in a word, or deed, or thought. Sometimes, only the intention is necessary. Yet more is in common between that finite and completeness than you might think, or so says the Dualism. You clearly have more to study, Dear Droos.”

“I will be with her to help her with her studies,” said Showsh. “Yet I agree, that the smallest change, like the still, silent sound, is enough. In the end, to be Good, where a man or woman or child stands, that is enough. Better leave The Good, and The Journey, to one who makes such an active choice willingly, and deliberately, or to the Forcang that no mortal will ever see.”

“I believe I have what I need now, Dear Showsh, to work and reflect on what I need for my own redemption,” said Droos. “A small movement, a small deed, a still, silent sound, will be the beginning. My choice to Journey towards The Good for the rest of my life, my action, will be the End. I will begin tomorrow with your help, Dear Love, Dear Showsh, and that of your wondrous Family, and World. I have known such beauty. Yet none as wondrous as reflection, and the opportunity to apologize, and grow and be stronger, and do better, and be good: to live according to The Good. Tomorrow, the Journey of my lifetime will begin, with me, and who knows, maybe, in the end, even The Goddess of Pain will learn that she still has a Name, and a family, and that they even miss her. What wonders will I see, beginning, tomorrow?”





Chapter 7

Reflections and Dissonance

There lay a cabin overlooking The Sea of The Library, a pleasant place, where Librarians and Guests alike might see the view, away from the shelves and records and duties. Droos stood here, alone, and thought. It was clear to her that there was more worth to her fragile being than she once believed. Yet, did she deserve to be redeemed? Would it not be better for Justice to be preserved, and the Character of her Soul Restored when she was Reborn, after death?

“Why am I so special?” she spoke to no one, and the Librarians and Others present gave her space.

At last, Elriver found her in that window over water, a place of Beauty and Aesthetics. The two young women gazed at the ever sea, and The Queen’s eyes sparkled at the reflection. Elriver, turned, and gave Droos a hug. Then, she stepped back, and gave her a serious look.

“You have more to you than you know,” said Elriver. “All of the men, they say that we are special. Yet, we create our own meaning, our own worth. You do not require Showsh or I, or even Atropo to tell you that you deserve to be redeemed. Your Unity of Self must be sufficient, and you must believe.”

“I am closer to that goal,” said Droos, in a whisper. “My emotions still rage, as though some storm disturbed the ever day. My mind is clear, and my body and soul are ready. How do I ready my emotions? It seems so typical, yet any might be in this state. Is it not one of liminality, between things, and doubts swirl? It may take all of Your help, and Love, and Support.”

“Those you have in abundance,” said Elriver, with a smile. “If you believe that you are unworthy, or have violated Justice, and deserve at least proper due process, your dissonance at seeking reprieve reveals your humility. This further demonstrates

Book III: The Library

your righteousness, and the necessity for the redemption. If you believe, readily, that you should have it, you would not be the one to receive it.”

“At what point does the storm pass, and confidence rest?” said Droos. “I must return to land, for now I soar as birds above that Sea, and my feelings take me in many directions. Soon, I must find land. You say that this Journey is actually what is necessary to earn the reprieve. Forty nights I have flown above the storm-tossed waves, and I look for a sign of land.”

“You look for a promise, which there may not be one,” said Elriver. “Only your appreciation of The Good, and Change to be Better in your Life, will provide you this Chance. There is no guarantee.”

“Thus, I fly in doubt,” said Droos.

“Such circles,” said Elriver. “It is time to find land, and if you only look, you will see it. Perhaps the storm and land are but states of mind. If you will the tempest to End, it will do so. An olive tree will rise above the waves, a hilltop surely to give safety to the feet of you tired creature.”

“This conversation, however roundabout, does make me feel somewhat better,” said Droos. “I might sit and eat, or try other less than savory distractions. Instead, I gaze over the waves, alone.”

“Not all distractions are terrible,” said Elriver. “Moreover, the sea often reveals secrets, and wisdom. Look, will the land, and it will rise to you.”

Turning, Droos looked over, seriously, at Elriver, and there, entering the cabin, as the Librarians added a log to permit a small fire, pleasant and atmospheric, was Showsh. Her love had arrived at that moment, and it appeared land had surfaced. She went to him, and gave him a kiss. Elriver sighed for a moment.

“Your wife was helping me meditate on emotions, and how to find my way to accomplish my purpose,” said Droos. “She is Truly a Great Being of Wisdom and Kindness.”

“That she is,” said Showsh. “I am glad that you are closer to Unity.”

“I wonder, Dear Showsh,” said Droos. “Do I Truly Understand? What is the state of my knowledge? Do I know sufficiently how to think? Perhaps my logic is a fallacy. Maybe we need another age to analyze Being and what is Known. If we may not agree on these terms, how will I even know how to be

redeemed?”

“You are sufficiently informed,” said Elriver. “The Angelic senses are keen, and you behold more than you once enjoyed. Still, there are limits. I believe you have it right, and that at this point, it is a personal Journey. You have the techniques, and must realize you Know.”

Showsh thought for a moment, and then held out his hand, granite fingernails and all.

“Will you join me, Dear Droos, for a sailing trip atop the sea?” said Showsh. “Maybe being on the waves themselves will prove illuminating.”

Looking a tad giddy, The Angel took her love’s hand, and they went down a long, spiral stairway, to a dock upon the shore. There was a sandy beach, and here, Elriver waited, and they found none other than the simple wooden vessel that had brought all three to this Celestial Domain, now on the waves once more. Showsh ably commanded the boat, while Droos sat on a chair in the middle. So they were off on their Journey.

The ever sun glowed even here, and the waves were mighty. Only because they traveled on such a capable boat, with an able officer, were they able to command the path they desired. For some Absolute Hours, they traveled at a great speed, and distance, though neither had true meaning, though more here than in The Meadow of The Library. At last, they spotted land, and a sandy island emerged from the sea, with a collection of palm trees and all. The trees each had their own set of edible dates, and these looked sweet and attractive to Droos, who happily disembarked upon the shore with her Showsh.

In short order, the two sat beneath a palm, with a small number of dates, and a coconut to drink each. If any would fear the rays of the ever sun, in this Realm, such damage was not a concern. Rather, they enjoyed the peace of the waves, and the call of an occasional seabird, no doubt some of which were Sentient. They kissed intermittently, but otherwise, drifted into the usual sorts of conversations, though it seemed there was some interest in just enjoying the space and time in tranquility.

“Why do mortals die?” said Droos. “Why, in the state of nature, might Sentients simply go on forever?”

“Some Sentients do live very long existences, and only die when slain, or struck by illness,” said Showsh. “Even mortals of some advanced science or magic-based Societies are able to

Book III: The Library

achieve virtual immortality. Yet, it is true, that naturally, creatures and Sentients alike do face death, on various time frames.”

“It would seem, according to your religion, Feaism, that death is the opportunity for the Whole Soul to improve Itself,” said Droos. “It is a Gift. Over many lifetimes, a mortal, having accomplished good deeds, may Transcend in a new life to a Forcang. Likewise, in a new life, a Forcang may be born an Elder Forcang.”

“It is even said that the ranks of Transcendent Forcang are replaced by Sixth Degree Forcang who die, and have done particularly good deeds, and Transcend in a new life into a specific role of Seventh Order Sentients,” said Showsh. “It is also said that eventually, the hope is to pass out of the cycle of birth and rebirth altogether. Doing this achieves some level of reward, perhaps closeness with The Unity, although that is just conjecture. Perhaps there are whole other Multiverses for such Souls to experience.”

“Likewise, Diminished Souls, those who do Evil in life, are born in worse form, and may slip from Forcang to mortal, or even mortal to creature,” said Droos. “Further, the worst and most commonly offending Souls pass out of the cycle the opposite way, and find a different Unknown Destination. Whether one or the other is better, that is, well, Unknown.”

“Certainly, Feaists hold that Surpassing the Cycle is preferable,” said Showsh. “Yet that may just be a tradition of my religion.”

“Well here, we are talking about how the disparate experiences the Soul Fragments of the Whole Soul enjoy, or suffer, between death, and rebirth, help define into what Order of Sentients It will be reborn,” said Droos. “It would seem that depriving my Sinful Soul the opportunity to experience baetOAK in some way may be harmful to my future rebirth. Even if I might get out of such an experience, what might be gained from it? Perhaps, such a harsh form of purification hardens the Whole Soul if done in small amounts, to only a few fragments, and only in certain parts of Hell. Then, those Fragments have quite a tale to tell upon reunion with the others. Without that experience, an Evil Taint may persist.”

“That is a possibility,” said Showsh. “Have no fear, for The Justice of Drerpo will not let you escape your Decree. Surely, you will receive what is best for your Whole Soul. Only, it may be Judged still that your Soul requires less time in baetOAK. Why

seek purifying flames and other forms of chastisement if it is not required?”

“That is a reasonable point,” said Droos. “I would assume that a reprieve from baetOAK does not mean that other Celestial Domains may not play host to Fragments instead. Some may have similarities, or be like Hell, if not as harsh. The Lieutenant of baetOAK only spoke of His claim, not of any other possible options.”

“That is a wise understanding of Celestial Domains and Planes,” said Showsh. “Next thing I know, you will be advising me on Birthing Manifestations. The only trouble is that it takes millions of years.”

“Millions of years! Are you joking!” said Droos. “Is that a continuous effort, or may it be worked on intermittently?”

“It requires mostly continuous effort,” said Showsh. “To accomplish Art on that level deserves that type of concentration. You might play an important advisory role, even if you do not have the Potency or Rights to do this yourself.”

“That does not sound as glamorous as the project itself,” said Droos.

“The act of Birthing a Manifestation is not meant to be glamorous, but a great act of selflessness,” said Showsh. “Currently, the Jooquaip of The Alliance of the Multiverse, rather, the Executive, has a great Manifestation project being worked on by thousands of Grand Elder Forcang all at once. Much of it is not glamorous. They aim to create a rare Paradise Manifestation, which will supposedly be Available even to Orders of mortals, as well as Forcang. There Sentients will be able to mingle in harmony and unity, or so goes the thinking. Yet it has taken Ages. The time sacrificed on this community project to aid others may in some small way imitate the Selflessness of Seventh Order Sentients.”

“You sound like a party slogan, Dear Love,” said Droos, with a smile. “What do you think of this project by the Jooquaip of The Alliance of the Multiverse?”

“The Grand Elder Forcang who fills that role may wear many hats, and multitask on many different projects,” said Showsh. “It is certainly a reasonable objective, and aesthetic wonder, or so I am told. I have not actually been there myself. The whole idea of Orders of Sentients intermingling—seems to speak of a Forcang who has not spent enough time around those of mortal Order for

Book III: The Library

some time.”

“You do not think that mortals and Greater Beings will mingle well in this Paradise?” said Droos, plopping a date in her mouth.

“It is a dream,” said Showsh. “Perhaps the nature of the awesome energy, and how The Language of the Universe interacts with the Transcendent Forcang there will ease the inherent differences. From what I have seen, the mere ability of Forcang to exist alongside mortals does not mean the same thing as the acceptance of this responsibility. There will have to be rules in this *new garden*”.

“Then that is how you view it, as some sort of *garden*?” said Droos.

“A garden of much variety and scope, or so I am told,” said Showsh. “Although I would not fall into the traps of assumptions. Until I have beheld it with my own senses, it will remain some type of mystery. Elriver’s mother would be one to ask about the project. She is involved in many projects due to her role in The Alliance of the Multiverse.”

“Elriver has a mother... that makes sense,” said Droos, moving her head, and taking in the meaning. “I suppose we all have mothers at some point. I have a mother. What is her name? What is she like?”

“Her name is Veshaim, and she is the most powerful member of her family line of Forcang, the Cecil Line,” said Showsh. “She is a powerful statesman in The Alliance of the Multiverse, serving as Prince of Arts under the Jooquaip. The Palace of Arts, which she leads, is essentially the group of Grand Elder Forcang in the Executive Branch with the responsibility of executing the Jooquaip’s agenda with regard to anything related to Arts. That includes Manifestations of all sorts, as well as the Paradise project. There really is nothing related to the Birthing of Universes and Cosmoses, or even their Rule, that does not at some level pass through her and the duties of her department. She is a Forcang of great benefit to those she calls allies, and eons of enmity to those that have proven, in her opinion, false. You will want to meet her, and get her to like you.”

“It seems I already begin at a significant deficit,” said Droos, sitting up. “I am the other woman in Showsh’s life. That will not ingratiate me to her in any short order. I would wonder if she does not hate me already.”

“It will take quite a feat to convince her,” said Showsh. “Yet good deeds, and actions, are likely to prove more important than pure loyalty and she knows the Laws of The Alliance of the Multiverse regarding marriage just as well as anyone else, if not better. Particularly if you are able to make a difference regarding Tzefee, that will impress her.”

“That is all!” said Droos. “Suddenly a Multiverse scale cataclysm is refocused as a mission to get Elriver’s mother to like me. Well, I will stay true to myself, and put that as a distant second place for my motivations in the matter, whatever she thinks of me. Showsh, what of your family line, and the rest of your family. Tell me about them.”

“I am honored if you think my genealogy matters,” said Showsh. “Here is a little more, as I would not want to bore you with too many details. To continue with Elriver’s family, there is my sister-in-law, Tultzow, who is younger than her sister. She is very much an explorer, and is at a state in her Forcang life of traveling on exotic expeditions throughout Dweehwail, on her capable own terms, or with parties of friends.

“It is worth noting, that as with most Grand Elder Forcang, she is not free of all responsibility. She is on The Alliance of the Multiverse as a delegate from one of the Cecil Manifestations. In particular, in token of her mother, she is on the Arts Committee. Her bigger passion is the Life Committee, which as she puts it, focuses on all of those Sentients who actually inhabit Reflection, beyond Simply Birthing or Ruling Manifestations. Finally, she is on the Defense Committee, partially in token of her experience as a traveler, and all of the information she has gathered informally.

“I think that Tultzow would likely be very interested in you, Dear Droos. If you are not careful, she may ask you to go along on some quest or another, although beware! My sister-in-law has a tendency to get into some famous trouble, and you are not as Potent as she is, yet!

“My sister’s name is Delritro, and she is a High Priestess, though not the one in charge, at a Temple Manifestation at the Northeast of Dweehwail. She is very much a monastic, and devout, and remains above many of the problems and intrigue of The Alliance of the Multiverse and the Courts of Chaos. Delritro also rarely leaves the Temple, unless on some very important specific assignment for the Feaist Religion. Once in a rare eon I see her in Goamdwee. She would be happy to meet you, and

Book III: The Library

certainly all life, Sentient or otherwise, interests her, professionally, and personally. Do not expect her to travel with you or find you many contacts. Her work is simply too much of her focus to be concerned with that.

“As for my father and mother, who I admit I do not see nearly as often as I like, their names are Drescher and Lorich. You might not be surprised that I am from the Drescher Line, as by the tradition of The Alliance of the Multiverse, children who identify as Male, attach to the Male line of the immediate family. My father mostly focused on creating Manifestations, and his wife was the chief delegate from those Manifestations in The Alliance of the Multiverse. It was a rather conventional relationship, and it has worked for over five hundred trillion years, so it is hard to argue with success. If you think the food in The Library of Drepopo is good, you have not enjoyed life unless you have eaten in the halls of my father and mother—food prepared by my father, and drink distilled by my mother. I have had ambrosia and nectar, yet they do not compare to such delicacies. My parents like good, honest Art, the comfort of home, and honest, fair politics. I am very grateful for everything they have done and continue to do for me.

“Yet here I have bored you, as I promised to avoid, Dear Love. For an old Forcang, the family connections may be very lengthy. For some, who have been more profligate (fortunately, not the case in either mine or Elriver’s line), there may be many illegitimate Lesser Forcang and mortal children as well that have loose associations with the main family. Is that fair? That may be a topic for another time.”

“Why is that a topic for another time, Dear One?” said Droos. “Is it not relevant about the future of those of Lower Orders of Sentients who become attached, either by their choice, or without a say, in the matters of a great and ancient line of Forcang? I see my fate intertwined with theirs. Why is it moral or ethical to sire or give birth to children, and then abandon them on some *Reflection*, without any ties to their Forcang parents?”

“The issue is that when Forcang of mismatched Orders of Sentients have offspring,” said Showsh, “The children do not automatically inherit the full Potency. Would you imagine a mortal, one of Second Level Sentients, living among the Bloodline Capitols of a Forcang Line? The consequences may be lethal, and has been all too often for the mortals, and even Lesser Forcang. There are simply too many difficulties when Greater Beings

intermingle with those of significantly lower Potency. That being said, such children are left with hefty support systems usually, endless supplies of money and servants, and usually live like princes or princesses for their lives on those worlds. It is hard to say that they suffer. Yet there is a certain lack of morality and ethics, I grant you. There is a reason that Forcang of my line, and the Cecil line, do not do such things as a rule.”

“I imagine that it is difficult to prevent actually falling in love, or the consequences, for Beings that live for billions of years,” said Droos. “Is that what happened with me? Am I that special? How will I fair in Forcang Capitols?”

“You are that special, Dear Droos,” said Showsh with a bow of the head, and kissing her. “Even before your personal redemption, you have a mighty Soul, and surely will be among the Grand Elder Forcang in some eon in the future. As for your current life, you are special. You are right, that you should not be in any Forcang City without guard. That guard will be myself or a member of my family or personal Servants. I would not trust your life with any with whom I would not trust my own or my children. You may not be safe, or even able to travel to all of those Hallowed locales. That does not mean there are not endless numbers of Beautiful destinations in the Multiverse for us to enjoy our lives.”

“I thought I would be closer to your equal, yet this is a reminder, a stark one, that I am an Angel, and you are the Greater Being,” said Droos, kissing him. “There will always be places you may go, duties for you to do, that I will never understand truly, or be able to take part in with you. Is that going to be satisfying for you forever? Will you not be bored of your poor limited Droos? What wonder is there in an Angel, even that you Promoted me from... a mortal?!”

“You are a light of your generation,” said Showsh.

“Perhaps the greatest Sentient of her Order, or one of them, in a generation, may deserve Promotion. You are right, that there are limits to your Potency. To even desire your participation, to see the Canopy of the Multiverse’s Tree in Goamdwee, would spell your immediate demise. I might wish such things, yet they are not to be, and I would not Promote you further, for it would alter you beyond your desire to remain... You. You are independent, and special. I honor and respect you for how special you are. Anyplace you will be is home for me. Where we may travel safely, is enough for me. I have other duties that I must attend to sometimes apart from you.

Book III: The Library

Yet, we will be together, for a wonderful relationship, for a family to come.”

“Unless you are with Elriver,” said Droos, tracing some lines, some symbols of Sre in the sand, without any particular meaning.

“There are limits to my ability to be Present,” said Showsh. “You are one of the most important parts of my life, and you always will be. I will approach you as such. Just as I will not abandon my time with my children to be with Elriver, neither will I abandon you to be with them. There will be ample time for all, if not enough. There is also the option of Incomplete Presence where necessary, though we have not used that yet. There are many options for Greater Beings, as you call Us. Only, I want you to be happy, and believe in yourself, now, and be United, of Self, forever, as often as possible. You should see that you are deeply special, and Loved, and have a home, forever.”

“And I hope someday, with you, a family,” said Droos, looking up with a smile.

“I have put some thought into that, if you must know,” said Showsh. “In particular, I have imagined where we might live. You see, I have been working on an Art Project, a Manifestation called Vøvoav. It is far from completion, by some hundreds of thousands of years. Yet, upon finishing it, perhaps it might be our home. The home for us, and our children.”

“That is quite bold, Dear Showsh,” said Droos. “You would place an entire Manifestation aside just for me. Or rather, repurpose one for my benefit. Would that mean I will have overstayed my Presence here?”

“For your role in this Manifestation, I doubt the Gods and Servants will ever permit you to wholly forget your role here,” said Showsh, with a quick smile. “You have achieved something none of them dared to accomplish: Promotion and Marriage into the Royal Family.”

“Does that not return us to the central point,” said Droos, leaning back against a tree. “Even if I were the *Light of a Generation*, why not one of a thousand Servants or hundreds of Goddesses. It seems a Lieutenant of Drerpo, or some other Manifestation would have been a far better choice, particularly one that is not the Creation of Elriver.”

“You have some fair points, Dear One,” said Showsh. “All of those Forcang, local or otherwise, have a key difference. That

includes endless halls of Grand Elder Forcang even in the Splendor of Goamdwee and the Bloodline Capitols of our Family Lines. I fell in love with you. I love you. I am interested in you. It does not matter who anyone else might be. You are Unique and Special, in more than just Beauty, but also intelligence, selflessness, and purpose, and numerous qualities I adore. It would have had to be you, Droos.”

“Only because you were Immanent, as Drerpo, and away from Elriver, your love of two hundred trillion years,” said Droos, with a yawn, then lightly flicking the man’s shoulder, playfully. “Normally you would not have given me a second thought.”

“Apparently we had two Transcendent Forcang smiling upon us:



“That roughly translates as *væ* and *goe*, finished Showsh
“I assume that you are focusing on the Archangels’
Selflessness of Fate and Love,” said Droos. “I have been studying. That may be a reasonable excuse. That even a Greater Being, while in Immanence, might fall in love with a mortal, with such Selflessness, anything might have occurred.

“It is merely a conjecture, and a way of saying, I was fortunate to grow up beside you, Droos,” said Showsh. “Regardless of where I had been for eons, or my past with Elriver. I did meet you, and know you. We were children together, best friends, and then more. Whatever else I may be, do not forget that. There may be a Logic here that defies Immanence. There is also an Abstract Dimension, a Truth. Whether it was actually the actions of Intangible Seventh Order Forcang, I am sure my sister would have an answer for you. The fact is that I did fall in love with you, and despite some reluctance to do so. You are a charming woman, my dear. Now I would spend an eternity beside you. This is no casual romance. The Promotion you have is also so that forever really does mean Forever.”

With those words, Droos playfully flicked him again, and tossed some sand onto his leg. Then she leaned over and kissed him, passionately, before returning to resting on the tree with a

Book III: The Library

sigh.

“Unless Tzefee has her way,” said Droos. “Ultimately, failure to achieve redemption will not be seen until my death, at the end of forever. Yet what the Goddess of Pain might do to me, that may be very real. It is good that my boyfriend, and I hope very soon, my husband, is a strong man, with a noble heart, and useful resources. Or else, I would be at the bottom of a well by now, certainly.”

“That would be because of me if it did happen,” said Showsh, “Further, my resources, and they are more limited in this regard than either of us would like, are at your disposal. My son, Atropo, is only one of these. If we remain in the Hallowed Domains of Vøvoav, we will have some protection from Tzefee’s wrath and scheming, while we regroup, and plan. Perhaps you will even imagine how to bring about Her redemption, after yours.”

“Yes, I will go and do that,” said Droos. “I mean it. In general, all I want is for the same goal, the Journey, or attempting the Journey to The Good, to be available to Tzefee as it is to me. Is that so bad? Surely, I will at least make the attempt. My start is with a loving family, in place of that which I knew for so long. I hope to start by providing that gift to Tzefee. I may think of other ideas in this Hallowed Realm of your Manifestation you speak about.”

“I should provide warning, that She has always been ahead of Us, and brought low the best Art and Creations of Elriver and I, and millions of other Forcang,” lamented Showsh. “It may not work. Yet your scheming, to reply with blessings, and gifts, and redemption, is something few of those have ever thought in kind. Most have only turned to swords and worse. There are archives in the libraries of Bloodline Capitols and Dukedome Capitols around The Alliance of the Multiverse and the Courts of Chaos filled with books and digital records on this Alien Entity and her Wanton Destruction. There are a few select crazy allies too, that actually support her (unfortunately).”

“You are right, Dear Showsh,” said Droos. “All we may do is walk the path of The Good, not expect to achieve it. Such things Transcend us, but the Journey does not.”

“That Purpose is why you were ultimately Promoted, and why you are here seeking, and deserving redemption,” said Showsh. “It is part of why I love you. It is why I believe you are one of the first in eons to have a real chance to actually humble

Tzefee. And maybe, your Omen, your Secret, will not be one of Terror, Destruction, and The Great Wave.”

“With that wonderful thought, Dear One, perhaps we should be getting back to your other wife,” said Droos. “The ever sun persists, yet days do pass here, and we have talked amongst ourselves long. You also forget, Dear Love, that even after the Pure Nihilism of The Great Wave, there is a Prophecy of Rebirth, a Multiverse to Come. Whether we will still be on the Journey then, who Knows? Yet, that is not why I wake up each day. I get up to seek The Good, to be myself, and to enjoy your love, and return it.”

“That is a start, Droos,” said Showsh. “Let the history be for the future. Let the foreshadowing be for the writers. We will live the simple romance of two who walk the Journey together, looking for peace, tranquility, and the redemption of self. The rest will follow.”

With that, Droos rose, and held out a hand, and Showsh grasped it, being pulled to his feet by the young woman. They both stood, and returned to the boat. On the way back, some Absolute Hours, even Droos tried her Potency, such as it was, at using The Language of the Universe to Navigate. She only brought about some rain, and a wind that did conduct the vessel in the right direction. Furthermore, a melodic sound rose on the wind, the notes of an ancient instrument that few had heard. Only Ruby would have Known the meaning, and as it was for the pair, that Truth was lost in the simplicity of their Present Journeys.

Arriving at shore, beneath a towering spiral stair, beckoning to The Meadow of The Library, Elriver was sitting, modest on the shore, dressed in a suit. It was stylish nonetheless, and few would doubt her command of any apparel. A crown of twigs surrounded her head, delicate, and she wore simple earrings of leaves. In her hands was a bright red book, with gold letters that spelled, *The Good Book*.

“The Angel has returned,” said Elriver.

She closed the book, placing a bookmark towards the end, where she had been reading, and rose.

“We never left, but remain affixed on The Journey, same as before,” said Droos. “Here is your husband, delivered safely into your arms.”

Showsh bowed at his wife, his eyes glowed golden for a moment, or was it a reflection of the ever sun? A pair of stars

Book III: The Library

seemed to hang from his ears, if only for a moment.

"I am at your disposal, My Love," said Showsh.

"It would seem best to continue The Journey at hand," said Elriver, and she walked to join the pair as the three proceeded to the stair, and ascended to the lush Meadow Above.

There they found the cabin, and a moon and stars shown above it, a piece of night, despite the ever sun, and the three entered therein, and the Artist Librarians, despite the respite, had prepared a meal for them. It was simple, bread, and cheese, and yogurts with cucumber. There were some spices, curry and sweet drinks. Yet it was invigorating, and they spoke little, and enjoyed the company.

Elriver returned her book to the shelf on the side of the room, with the bookmark in its spot. That was her shelf in the library, Afterall, and she might retrieve any book from it in any branch at any time. There were a small selection of additional titles and simple covers and letters. All were placed there with care, and respect, and devotion.

For dessert they had green apples with honey, and Elriver and Showsh held hands, while Droos meditated on her thoughts, and choices. It seemed the path ahead was growing clearer, and in the Light of the Journey of The Good, and the Love of Showsh, and the Purpose of the Omen, all were part of her Self, a Unity of Being. It seemed, now, that redemption was not something terribly far off. Almost, there was a worthy Journey to It.

Her meditation took on images, and she saw in her mind a garden, one of lush variety. It had a City, and a Cave, and a Tree. This was a Paradise, a place of Protection of Souls from the Universe. It was a reward. She also saw a tree, one towering, piercing the sky, out of a barren landscape of bleakness and despair. It was spiked, and upon the endless thorns were bodies, writhing in eternal agony. Droos was not the first to see this vision, and she knew that it was a subtle thing. Hatred was the Curse that placed Fragments upon this Tree of Thorns. Surely, any may be condemned, for the Evil spawned by that emotion was Perilous in Life, and Beyond. At last, she saw a ring of trees, ancient, similar to those from her youth, and her brother and sister, all grown up, and her mother, only smiling. Droos smiled, and it was almost like she had reclaimed her Family, lost forever once, for a moment, redeemed even now. Yet the memory of the Tree of Thorns remained, as well as the Tree in the Garden.

Droos opened her eyes, and saw that Elriver and Showsh sat side-by-side, their eyes aglow with white light, delicate wings sprouting from their backs, and golden rings upon their heads. She saw that in her hand was a harp, and she knew how to play it. Running her fingers along the strings, all work in The Library, on that ever day ceased, and in that moment, the night, the stars, the sky of the cabin by the ever sea, covered the whole Realm, and it was Night, aglow with silvery sheen. And the Servants of the Creator and Sovereign and Gods and Goddesses of The Library praised The Queen, and Her Music, Her Notes of Peace, and Love, and Tolerance. Two candles appeared on the mantelpiece, lit, of ten different colors, vibrant, from white, to black, all hues and shapes.

Then, Droos opened her eyes, and she had fallen asleep, and the candles still burned on the mantelpiece, almost gone, and a log in the fire, almost consumed, and her head was in the lap of her Love, Showsh, just him, nothing more. For he slept, no adornment, or special garb, or light, just Drerpo, the young man she had known her whole life. He too had his eyes closed, and open at times, as though sleeping at once awake and at peace. Yet, Droos and her Showsh were together, the two of them now, in the cabin, in the glow of the fire and candles, and rested, in peace, for the remainder of the night, the one eternal night of The Library, in the history of Drerpo.

The next morning, Elriver found them, Droos' head in his lap, sleeping both of them tranquilly, and she brushed each, their hair, and they awoke. She took their hands, and led them, through familiar paths, and left Droos in her room in The Meadow, in her bed, with the covers drawn, and by some words of The Language of the Universe, her garments had shifted without any change of modesty. Apparently, even there were Selfless Prayers for the likes of night clothing. Elriver and Showsh departed, and the dawn of day, the ever day of the rest of time in The Library arrived. Except for where Showsh, and at times, Droos tread, there sometimes the night, stars, and moon, would return. Yet now, it was day again. So Droos slept, and prepared for another day, to be ready to face her Journey towards The Good, and redemption.

In the dawn of the new ever day, Droos, once the princess, now The Angel, the Queen, awoke refreshed, and felt the strength of darkness and light simultaneously creep within her. There was an Abstract Dimension, yet she sat up, and thought. For to

Book III: The Library

consider a Dualism fully, that is a subject of Advanced Forcang, or Greater Beings still. Yet, here, small Droos sat, and Saw. Only for a moment, and then the shadowy, yet colorful, image of The Good and its Journey returned. So began the new day, and its path therein.

Droos garbed herself in a simple white dress, and wore wooden earrings in the shape of flowers. Ascending The Tree, she found Showsh in the pinnacle, observing The Realm. He gazed North, South, East, and West. There was a physicality to the review, and she hesitated before entering. At last, she approached Her Love.

“Dear One, Showsh, I had such dreams last night,” said Droos. “I almost fear they are true. Is there a Tree of Life? Is there a Tree of Thorns? Where do they exist if they are True? These are Awful Sights.”

“You peer into the Distance of Tomorrow,” said Showsh. “You view Paradise, yet a Secret Thorn in It as Well. Both Trees do exist, the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Thorns. It is likely you are already upon It, if you wondered—as am I, and Elriver, and Atropo. There are few Whole Souls that do not contribute some fragments to It. Hatred is The Consumer. It would Devour Reality if It Might.”

“Does Hatred not serve a purpose,” said Droos. “Surely the Journey to The Good, includes realizing the Upwards of the Dualism between Love and Hate. How might I do this if to Use Hate, is to Condemn Another to the Tree of Thorns? Even a momentary Thought may do so.”

“It takes more than a momentary thought,” said Showsh, moving his gaze to Droos. “It takes Intention as well. To believe Hatred, to be sure It is True. True Hatred is the Condemnation of Fragments of the Souls of Endless Sentients, from the Beginning of Time. Yet, as I said, you peer into The Future. This is not a topic for The Library.”

“It is frightening,” said Droos. “I asked about other Planes, Celestial Domains that might claim my Fragments as dreary or terrible as baetOak. I had not thought of It. There may even be other Secret Thorns in a Vast Universe. Surely every Manifestation has such Secrets. They must serve some Purpose.”

“That will be discussed,” said Showsh. “Some Purposes Transcend the desires even of The Rulers, and Creators, and Sovereigns. For Some Rules, Some Laws, Exist Before, and must

be followed. Thus, you will find that all Manifestations have Thorns.”

“Is it even worth seeking redemption, if I may not escape such ends?” inquired Droos. “What is the purpose? I may simply receive chastisement elsewhere.”

“That may also provide some relief to your quest,” said Showsh. “For if your Whole Soul required character, surely these other Sources would suffice. Yet, as was said, The Justice will be True. Your redemption will not be a coincidence, or fluke. It will be earned, or not.”

“Such a boyfriend you are,” said Droos. “I would think that you would have full faith and confidence in me, your truest love. Yet, you are not sure?”

“I would not lie to you either,” said Showsh. “I have full confidence in you to succeed. We have also discussed your imperfections, and that you do not Know the Perfect. In such space, there is room for doubt. Communication is Central to any relationship. My family and I, my Love, will contribute our whole Selves to You. Yet, you must walk the Darkness and Light by your Choice alone. I may hold your hand to the brink, but you must enter. All must ultimately be Judged Alone—for The Decree is Individual.”

“Might there be Domains and Judgements for groups as well?” said Droos. “Surely, if culture has a reward, and memory, then is there not reward, and chastisement for groups, and culture? Such is a strange digression?”

“It will also surely be discussed in a Future to be Told,” said Showsh. “There may be numerous Domains, of Countless Purposes, both for Individual Souls, and the Essence of Culture, or Other Group Realities. There are Domains for Time, Dreams, this Library, Celestial Capitols, Abstract Dimensions, and all manner of ideas and concepts useful to the governing of Manifestations. Such Rule and Creation is complex, and takes a Potency that is Transcendent to mortal and Angel alike.”

“Do I not have senses to detect such understanding, knowledge, and truth?” asked Droos.

“You have the Promotion to Angelic Rank to be a Servant in a Celestial Capacity, and Survive in Celestial Domains, of Mind, Body, Soul, and Emotion,” said Showsh. “Yet to Know, to See the Truth of the Rule and Creation of Manifestations, those who are able to do this are Goddesses to Angels. The ones truly able

Book III: The Library

to Create and Rule are Gods to the Gods. This is not merely by some token or pretense of authority. It is a Potency, or ability, Beyond their capabilities. We have discussed this. Yet, I would trade such roles and spaces for eons with you in a space of love and wonder and family. Do not envy such Potencies, for they are Responsibilities and Perfections undesirable by most.”

“And in such a Potency, a boyfriend must condemn his girlfriend in word,” said Droos, “Or be a liar. He must create Trees of Thorns and Trees of Life at equal measure, for such are The Rules and Laws that Govern. To See is to have Responsibility, Beyond, and Painfully True. It is to Rule Heaven and Hell, and those who Manage Each, in full Knowledge of the Events Daily within. You are right—if only to remain The Angel, The Queen—or even, as Darlez, a mortal boy, free from Knowledge and Truth, with a human life. You speak as one who does Love, Dear Showsh, and as a Ruler, Dear Sovereign. I do love you, for both, Dear Love.”

“Yet surely, Dear Love, I would not have you, most of all, call me, *Sovereign*,” said Showsh. “I am not one who desires titles from any, least of all one whom I wish to be with at as equal a measure as is possible.”

“You just said that there are Matters Beyond my abilities,” said Droos.

“That does not mean that they will be the central topics, or even the peripheral notions of our Marriage,” said Showsh. “I am interested in a woman who will call me by my name: *Showsh*. Or, if you will, and wish: *Drerpo*. Either will do, and I would expect not even the form, *Dear*, before either. Most of all, I would not expect an honorary.”

“Very well, Showsh, Drerpo, I will save just such a word for when I am particularly mad at you,” said Droos, with a wicked grin. “Then you will be to me, Dear Sovereign.”

Showsh and Droos laughed.

“That will do,” said Showsh. “I am sure there will be moments of anger in the midst of some eternity. Of course, I will endeavor to cause your happiness most often. Yet I am not a Transcendent Forcang and I am not the Essence of the word Husband. There are Imperfections to my approach despite my best efforts.”

“Now you hold yourself to quite a Perfect standard, do you not, Dear Love?” said Droos. “I do not expect Perfection

from my husband, from Drerpo, or Showsh. You are who you will be, and nothing more, or less. All shades of color and hues have Beauty, or so we have learned together. For every moment, there is a time under the sun, as a great sage taught. Surely, the errors of Showsh are a limited number, but relevant chapter in the history of Dweehwail. Then, storms will rage in Vøvoav, and humans and mortals will cower and take shelter. I will embrace you, and wipe away your tears. For I am here for the good and the bad, the light and the darkness, all Dualisms, on the Journey to The Good.”

“You have really learned that well, and I will reciprocate,” said Showsh. “You are right, that none of us are Seventh Degree Sentients, or Intangibles, or Beings Beyond Sight, whatever they may be labeled. We have limits, and in those imperfections, we will learn our true faces, and images, and beings. If only to love the Whole Soul—that is True Love and Romance. If it is only the Good, the Perfect, there are a host of Fragments missing.”

“Do you think I am prepared for my day tomorrow?” said Droos. “It would seem that I have learned much here, and I believe I have started the Journey of The Good. The Justice will Judge Me in time, and I will pursue this Path towards as righteous a destination as I am able, however imperfect the reality. I will even veer towards the Upward Dualities, if I have the strength, by your hand, and our families.”

“I believe you are ready,” said Showsh. “These chapters of epistemology have taught you to know the truth, and in its shade, you may cleanse yourself for availability to redemption. Your next Future awaits you. In the Houses of Healing, surely all stain will be washed from you.”

“I do not want any advantage,” said Droos. “I thought this whole process was about permitting a fair and even chance before The Justice. These Houses of Healing, are they available to the common woman, or man, or child? What of Angels—are they Present there as well? I want to be Judged for Me, and nothing else, as you stated.”

“The Houses of Healing are available to any Angel, or Goddess, or Greater Being and their Guests,” said Showsh. “They are also available to a selection of the Enlightened of each generation of mortals, Sentients of numerous races of Drerpo. Thousands Southward of Forcang enter the Hallowed Ground, and receive Tranquility, and Nirvana. Surely, it is a place of Reward for You, Rather than Reprieve. It is another of liminality, between

Book III: The Library

Knowledge, and Good, and Reward.”

“What do you mean by that, Showsh?” asked Droos. “I am United of Mind, Soul, Body, and Emotion. This Domain, this Realm, is a Plane merely existing to Soothe, to Heal, not Pardon, or Commune. Then, it is a reward? That will be sufficient, though I hardly believe I deserve such a thing. As for being one of the Enlightened of my Generation, I would dispel that rumor immediately. Only, you and Elriver and Atropo have a tendency to place such labels erroneously.

““Know yourself”, stated an ancient sage,” replied Showsh. “There is a difference between humility and inability to utilize your gifts. A few chapters of healing at the end of years of research and discussion seems appropriate. If The Justice must add to your Decree for any Fragments, so be it. However, I have it on good authority, from those with Knowledge of such matters, that you will unlikely face any further harm.”

“I suppose there are benefits to having relation to someone who talks to The Judge,” said Droos, with a half-smile. “Although, I hope that is not a violation of Due Process. The System of Justice of Drerpo must remain Above Reproach and Question.”

“Have no fear—there have been no inappropriate conversations,” said Showsh. “It is true on a rare occasion, Elriver, and even I, meet the Judge, for matters of Celestial Business. We Know better than to discuss any Pending Matters. Always it is on Procedure, or Structure. Furthermore, we have Lieutenants that Govern Justice for us, to keep Elriver and I a step removed. There must be checks and balances even among the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe.”

“I would think that your degree of omniscience and increased Potency in much variety would allow you to be more than Familiar with Justice and Law and Structure,” said Droos. “Why are such artificial boundaries of mortals still required in Heaven?”

“Perhaps, for a nearly infinite number of cases, such Laws prove unnecessary,” said Showsh. “Yet, the standard of Perfection is maybe higher in a Celestial Court, than one of mortals. That is not saying there has never been a mistake. There have been Appeals, Pardons, and Commutations in the history of Drerpo. However, The Alliance of the Multiverse considers it a sloppy Celestial Bureaucracy that permits more than forty-two such incidents in one billion years. A Celestial Court that allows more

than one hundred and twenty-six is downright negligent, and will be referred to Justice System of The Alliance of the Multiverse for Corrective Action. If you thought that any Forcang truly believed we were above Sentients, think again—the Laws themselves ensure even the most cavalier sort has their limits.”

“Are you saying that the checks and balances of Forcang exist because of the differences of personalities of these Beings?” said Droos. “Might one Ruler prove more Chaotic, close even to the Courts of Chaos, than the average Lord of Order? Then, sloppiness might prove a matter of principle, and a cavalier attitude toward the Sentients under the charge of that Creator might be more suspect.”

“There was one infamous Grand Elder Forcang who permitted over three thousands incidents of sloppiness over a ten billion year period,” said Showsh. “To this day, he is locked in the sort of prison in the Canopy of the Multiverse’s Tree that even those of His Potency may not escape. That sentence was issued over five trillion years ago. I believe he has nine trillion or so years left on that sentence. There is Justice out there to be had, even among Forcang.”

“Do the Lords of Chaos have a similar standard of Justice?” said Droos. “It would seem that what I have been told are *Anarchic* beings would by nature lack a certain restraint.”

“That is a stereotype of the Courts of Chaos,” said Showsh. “In fact there are three Courts of Chaos, and each has a starkly different character. The Duzog Court is the most ancient of all Forcang civilizations, with roots that existed even before The Great River. It is a place of hundreds of royal families vying for power, which I suppose creates some degree of actual chaos. Yet such struggles take place over millions of years. On the surface, it is a fabulous capitol with millions of Forcang going about their daily lives in comfort. The museums, artwork, restaurants, and even the Twilight Network, create the longest lasting, and arguably most sophisticated center of culture and civilization in history. The heart of Duzog is the Anarchic Precipice, the Royal Tul, in which is found the Primordial Thçtz that Powers that Court of Chaos, and all manner of history and relics.

“The Rozeg Court is the newest Court of Chaos, and has a reputation as a place of Dweehwailian Magic and Sorcery. By that, I do not mean the limited local type that is available on numerous Planes in any number of Manifestations. These are Potencies that

Book III: The Library

may be used anywhere by a Forcang, and the most committed members are Mages, who wield this Potency to protect themselves and Create their Desired Multiverse. There is a coalition of Mages and their leaders, the most Potent of them, the Masters, who have a base in Rozeg, a Temple, that is at once a religious site, and a guildhall. However, the Court itself is independent of the Masters, and the two political factions serve their own ends. Both work to greatly enhance magic. Rozeg, like Duzog, contains a Primordial Thçtz within it, and many other interesting relics, and it is rumored, additional Primordial Høwthçtz, of great Power and Potential.

“Finally, there is the Kroetof Court, which is built in a Capitol Manifestation that perfects the Fortress Manifestation. It is said that no other force in Dweehwail will ever successfully capture their capitol while there remain Kroetof Units left to defend it, and their masterful Strategoes and armadas of vessels and armies of Forcang have multiple times besieged even Goamdwee, with even one or two times of near victory. It is a Court bent on the art of warfare, and leadership, and weapon design, and defense. Its innovation will try nearly any system to get an edge in the next war. It is also Powered, ultimately, by its own Primordial Thçtz somewhere in Kroetof, used by all Forcang, all Lords of Chaos, that call this Court home.

“Yet, it should be noted, that Kroetof itself would see Peace as a tool of warfare, and it has held stable peace with its neighboring Courts of Chaos and The Alliance of the Multiverse far more often in history than an open state of warfare has been in effect. As I said, it is almost the art of warfare that is more important, and the schools of warfare, than the actual territory or battle lines on the map. Kroetof knows that it will never lose too much of its land for comfort, and the cost of really waging war too often is seen equally as a violation of their art.

“As for the four main political factions in Dweehwail Proper, Duzog, Rozeg, Kroetof, and of course, The Alliance of the Multiverse, which is truly more *chaotic* or *lawful*—that is a matter of individual taste. A particular Lord of Chaos may be far more orderly than many more chaos minded Lords of Order. It may be true that by nature, the most lawful Lord of Order will outmatch the most lawful Lord of Chaos. Yet it would be a near thing, and those contests have been held to many a cheering Forcang fan in Forcang Capitols—not necessarily to the death, by the way—

simply to the honor of victory in combat, and concession of defeat. Ultimately, the heart of the Forcang is what really matters as to her or his alignment.

“What it means to be *Axiomatic*, or of the Dweehwailian *Lawful* race, or *Anarchic*, or the *Chaotic* race, is the innate Potential to be able to traverse the Primordial Howthçtz that correspond to each—those of Axiomatic Blood, no matter what Order of Sentients, have some potential to someday traverse a Bloodline Journey, or the Grand Journey in Goamdwee. Similarly, those of Anarchic Blood have the potential to traverse a Blossomline Maelstrom or Twilight Maelstrom someday in the Courts of Chaos. To do so is initiation into a higher Potency of Forcang of that race on a Multiversal scale. Bloodline Howthçtz and Blossomline Howthçtz initiate a Sentient essentially into a Forcang Family. The Grand Journey and Twilight Maelstroms bring them into the hallowed Potential of the entire political system of the corresponding Alliance of the Multiverse or the specific Court of Chaos.”

“That is very complicated,” said Droos, with a frown. “I never walked any Journey, yet here I have Third Stage Potency. How is that possible? Furthermore, you suggested that there are two additional races at least, in addition to Axiomatic and Anarchic. What of those distinctions?”

“First of all, you were Promoted as a Local Forcang, an Angel,” said Showsh. “That means you have Potency in Drerpo, yet not elsewhere. It will require some addition Promotion, and adjustments, to permit you simply to travel beyond the borders of this Manifestation, let alone maintain your Potency. Most of that may done without any great inherent change in you. The biggest change would be if you wanted to attempt to traverse the Bloodline Journey of the Drescher Line—which I would make available to you. I would recommend that, as it would allow more versatility in the broader Multiverse.

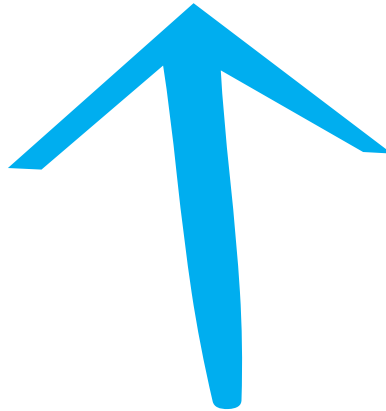
“As for other races, there are also Foreigners and Dimensionals. These are also rare, and some argue that the latter is merely a subcategory of the former. Almost every Sentient you see will be Axiomatic or Anarchic. However, if you are redeemed, and your people are redeemed, and you travel with me to Vøvoav, and we scheme to humble Tzefee, you may very well see some of these race of Sentients. They include, among others, Vampires, Ghosts, Aliens like Tzefee, and Species from beyond Dweehwail altogether

Book III: The Library

who have entered our Multiverse through Powerful Portals. You may also see Creatures of Blood, Creatures of Power, that include Dragons and Demons, and all manner of wonders. Truly, if you pursue Tzefee, it is hard to know what she will throw your way. There are even Phantoms, beings from Howsh Worlds, that may come to life, and chase you across the Multiverse, real as any Sentient, given life by a Howsh Artist.

“Maybe I will want to traverse the Drescher Bloodline Journey, in the end, once this is over,” said Droos. “I do not know what I will see, once I obtain my vision, and the family of my youth is safe, and I may turn my eyes to the Role of my Omen. What resources will I need, beyond the protection of the man who I hope by then will officially be my husband? Versatility in Potency will be essential, however difficult to acquire, provided it does not change me much more. As for the wealth of races and Sentients I might see in this great Multiverse, I may only wait with expectancy.”

“For now, we go to the Houses of Healing, a transition from The Library,” said Showsh. “You have heard a lot now, many Truths. Some may sound different, or seem different, with



further Potencies, and Powers, even some from beyond Drerpo. For now, focus on saving your family from your youth, and yourself. You have Unity of Self, and are on the Journey towards a More Complete Soul. There will be time for many speeches and explanations and visions ahead. For now, heal, and enjoy your reward in peace.”

“How will we get there?” asked Droos.

“For those in a State of Unity of Mind, Body, Soul, and Emotion, it is a simple thing,” said Showsh. “Close your eyes, and breathe deeply. Picture the Essence of Peace, of Enlightenment, of Light, of Unity. In short order, your Senses should become clear, and your Wings will take us there, together. I will follow.”

“I have wings?” pondered Droos. “Since when was I able to fly?”

“All Angels have wings,” said Showsh. “It does take some time to learn how to fly, and to use them. Sometimes, where distance has no meaning, that Journey is a matter of exercising the Inner Unity. Now breath...”

So Droos took deep breathes, and thought, as one, and soon, the Journey became Clear, and Peace Brought Her to a New World, of Tranquility and Healing and Enlightenment. Behind her, on each shoulder, a glimmering, golden wing spread, diminishing into a white light. As they Journeyed to the Houses of Healing, Droos finally spread her wings.





Chapter 8

Clean Slate

The Angel, Droos, wrapped in shimmering, golden wings, and a white, brilliant light, knelt, eyes closed in a stary chamber. The walls descended into a silvery glow, reflecting a moonshine from some vision above. Her legs rested in the center, on a step before a shifting orb of Light. It had so many colors that it showed mainly black and white, glimmering in the silvery sheen of the moon, and the golden glow of her wings. She took slow, deep breathes. Her heart beat a steady rhythm, to notes, of a distant drum. It was slightly hot, yet she did not mind. A steam rose in the silence.

Wind blew, and the drops of water wet her skin, and chilled her body. She rose, and opened her eyes, beckoned by the rooms further within the Realm. Yet it was hard to leave the Room of The Moon. It seemed that she absorbed its light, like she had grown in the Presence of her new family, and the great Omen that drew her into the ancient wars of The Multiverse. There were other Rooms, and other Lights, and Essences, here in this Place. She departed.

Curtains drew apart by the wind, a gentle sound, of silence, and a rustle of distant leaves on grass. A drop of dew on a chill morning on a running brook, disturbed only by the water strider. She walked across the marble surface, at times similarly wooden, dark, and clean. She approached The Golden Room, and with a quick breath, two, three, a flash of light streaked upward from behind her. Then her wings were gone once more, hidden from view. They were not gone, for Angels always had wings. Now that she knew how to use them, that was an experience she would never forget—thanks to Showsh.

The Golden Room did not have any gold, but rather it was warm by flickering flames, and light, and heat, and steam.

It was easy to shed droplets of moisture in this place, and in this circular structure, topped by a wooden covering, broad and strong, yet fragile in a way that spoke of a masterful Dualism. Sitting, wearing only a lower half, an emerald trouser, studded by amethysts and golden thread, sat Showsh. His upper half was a ripple of muscle and a perfect trim of hair, just the right look. If she had not been concentrating on Healing, this might have been distracting. Yet, Droos saw beads of perspiration on her boyfriend's chest, on that pectoral strength, and it reminded her why she was here. This was a House of Healing. She was here to relax and be cleansed.

So she sat on the opposite side of the chamber, and removed most of her upper half, if only to maintain some modesty, even with just the two present. Then she crossed her legs and took deep breathes. In waves, a wind approached her, an orangish light, a stream of an attractive vapor. It called to her. The scent was mesmerizing, and normally she would not consider of partaking of such things, yet this was The Place, if any. What was it? The vapor, the smoke approached. With a quick inhale, she took in the breathe of smoke, and her eyes cleared.

As shimmering streams of stars rose from the brands, and coals in the center, yet they drifted, as a gentle steam, bit by bit, upward. The meandering created spirals of colors, reds, blues, blacks, greens, all manner, and then explosions of sensation. A cooling entered her mind, and she looked down, and saw that she stood on a snowy field.

All around her were mountains, so tall. Fire rose from the mightiest of all. This was a sight that would unravel many men. The chill on her feet, the snow, ran into a pathway, a birchwood, latticed causeway of leaves, and roses, that continued onward, above a void, beneath it miles of nothing, light shimmering in the abyss of hues.

She passed along the wooden path, and a warm wind, the taste of cinnamon, brought her to a fortress of frosting and blueberries. Its foundations descended into an earth of peat, a smell of moisture, and richness of the ground, and the potential of a new season of growth. Droos entered, feeling perspiration somewhere on her arms.

Inside was a cage, delicate, and in it, a hummingbird, resting on a swing. It drank from a flower that protruded from an open window into the building; looking around, the structure was

Book III: The Library

now clay, wet, and fresh, barely sound, and capable of holding up the walls. Droos thought to call out, for surely it would fall down. Yet, in place of the bird, a child played with a turtledove and a scitter. It was her sister! If only to reach out and hold her hand. She had grown so much!

A storm raged outside the door, and the wind buffeted the fragile walls, now made of straw, and the child called out, but it was Droos' mother, and she was scared. The old woman looked like all that she had hoped for had been lost. The walls blew away, and around her was left, a rolling country of green hills, with sheep grazing. It was pastoral, and a sunrise passed above the horizon. Seagulls flew overhead into the West, where Grey Towers rose high, mighty, and majestic.

Droos began to Journey towards them, yet her path dried out, and she was walking on a desert road. Cacti grew in abundance, and were in blossom. A rain must have come, for delicate flowers had sprouted everywhere. This was a vision, one seen by few. The Angel, The Queen crouched, to examine one of these rare blossoms up close.

"Only after the rain is Beauty Beheld," said a voice behind her.

Turning, she saw that perched on the ground, with a dead rodent on its talons, was An Eagle, that spoke!

"Blessed Eagle," said Droos. "What if I may bring the rain. Might I see that Beauty more frequently?"

"The actions of humans may not bring more Beauty in the way desired," said The Eagle. "Only True Will may bring the rain and delicate blossoms. What will you sacrifice for such rain?"

"What I have to give, I will do so," said Droos. "Surely the rain brings more than flowers, Good Eagle. It brings life to my people. It brings food and nourishment. It brings water. To provide such a gift, I would sacrifice my life, if only my people would survive one season. The blossoms, are merely a token of that covenant."

"Yet you will require the blossom," said The Eagle. "For you do battle with a Snake. To combat such venom, you need delicate, rare Beauty. If I offer you such a blossom, will you offer yourself as my servant? With the blossom will come the rain. Yet with it, you maybe might humble even a Snake."

"I will offer to you, Noble Eagle," said Droos, "Myself as a Servant. I may not fulfill my pledge in place of what I owe

to others. Yet what I do have, I give freely. With what you offer, perhaps I will have something of Beauty as the antidote to the venom of even the deadliest Snake.”

“Then reach forward and take your reward,” said the Eagle, as it flapped its wings, and with a clap of thunder, more rain began to fall. It departed with the rodent in its talons.

Yet, as a final word, it reminded, “I will return for what is owed to me, in promise. Do not forget. You will serve, as is possible, amidst your other obligations, Droos. Now Go! For the rain falls, and it may also summon a river that will sweep you away.”

Upon the departure of The Eagle, Droos quickly examined the delicate blossoms on the ground, and Judged the most Beautiful. Then she carefully picked one, as the loudest clap of thunder shook the ground, and a flash of lightning hit a cacti one hundred feet away. Then she heard a rush, and a torrent of water approached. Hurriedly, she turned, and saw a vacuum in the desert, for it escaped into outer space. With no other choice, she entered.

In a flash! There she floated, down, down, and she raised her head, and felt the world spinning. First all she saw was black and white light, then more and more colors. She felt that her hand was heavy, and raising it, she indeed had an object in it, though she was unable to distinguish it from the other hues. It was weighty.

Soon she was able to see, and remembered, that there she sat, in The Golden Room, amidst orange smoke, now escaping her lungs in an exhale, deep, and full, and a sound of a call, a string of notes on flute. Surely, that tune had been heard before. Even Showsh opened his eyes. Now Droos could see clearly, and in her hand, she raised it, was an add adamantite and mithril metal object, yet inlaid with delicate yucca fibers that were painted vividly. On them were symbols, in an ancient language, and a picture of the flower from her vision, and promise to The Eagle. Looking up, she saw that Showsh was peering at her, and smiled.

“It truly would take a Queen, of Might, to pass the bargain you did,” said the young man. “To emerge with That, is still a sign of your Worthiness. As for how useful it will Prove, we have yet to see. Just Know, The Eagle is Real, and will Hold You to Your Word. You will Serve. Now You Too have Obligations, as Well as I.”

Sweat dripped from her arms, and the air in the hut was

Book III: The Library

thick, and she breathed deep breathes, and sighed, and sat back, and enjoyed the return to The Houses of Healing, but fully aware of the Future she had bought. It was an Uncertain Benefit of Great Might, a Secret to Reveal. It was also a Pledge of Great Service, for Some Unknown Eternity. Not every Sentient or human would make such a pledge. Droos, The Angel, relaxed, and for a moment, her golden wings appeared behind her, before disappearing as quickly again with a flash. It seemed there was something of earning her Promotion, and the Rights and Potencies and Privileges they provided, and any future Benefits given to her by Showsh and his Family. A Lifetime of Service to The Eagle—she might imagine worse, if it would save her people, and for that matter, the Multiverse.

“It will be saving The Eagle too,” she chuckled to Herself, and hoped that Ancient Spirits were less omniscient than she had always been told.

As if in response, a dazzling crackle of firelight rose from the center of the room, but nothing more. Though, she almost thought she heard a distant laughter. This service would be curious and she would have to do her best to maintain her Journey to The Good throughout. In the end, she had less fear, for Eagles have talons and sharp beaks, but also soar majestically and free.

Another age passed in meditation, with Droos kneeling, only this time, in The Room of the Star. Silvery light of countless twinkling lights illuminated The Angel, and complimented her golden shimmer. The room was awash with Light, and her Soul, her Whole Self, Grew Each Day, and Night, and Truly, this was a Place of Healing. No others beyond Showsh had she seen up until now.

After an eon, a Healer collected her, a Servant of subtle gossamer threads, and beads of droplets and copper light. Standing in a Room of Attention, with lava rocks on each side, was a man in a suit, all white, with blond hair, and muscular. He had black eyes, fair skin, and shining white teeth, Perfect, and bold. He smiled, and in his hand he held an image of the Relic that Droos had pulled from her Vision in a bygone age.

“Forgive me, Dear Mother,” he Whispered. “We have not met. My name is Drepl, and I am yet another member of the modest Drescher Line, the True Born son of Elriver and Showsh.

He seemed to emphasize the latter parent’s genealogy as he said that, although Droos did not know for what reason. Somehow,

Drelp made her uncomfortable, even in this place of healing.

“I am here because I have long been an expert on Dweehwailian Relics, both personally, and professionally, being on the Council of History in The Alliance of the Multiverse,” said Drelp. “I have identified that Relic you found, and it is indeed a powerful item and symbol of ancient times, almost of mythic periods, before the Forcang. Will you allow me to speak?”

The Angel found this whole presentation odd, yet it was providing valuable information, and if this man was truly Showsh’s son... then he was family. Surely, this was welcome news.

“Please, Dear Son, proceed,” said Droos.

“Thank you, Mother,” said Drelp.

With that, he Drew a small metallic, shifting object seemingly from nowhere, at his side. Placing it in the air, it began to spin. Droos felt a coolness, suddenly, in the air. Some sort of contact had been made with her mind, then, the room opened!

Behold! She heard his voice, Drelp’s, raspy and speaking in her mind, as the universe became a spinning presentation that encompassed her whole thought.

“In the beginning of every Manifestation,” said The Voice. “Lords of Order of sufficient Potency of The Alliance of the Multiverse, Grand Elder Forcang, find territory to Birth into Form from Void. Only, the Secret is that a Seed is Required. This encompasses some portion The Multiverse known to The Courts of Chaos as The Dark Region, governed by Natural Laws. In it are some number of planets, star systems, even galaxies or planes of existence. There may be whole histories of existing Sentient Species and Races that predate the Spark of Creation Upon Manifestation into the Fledgling Cosmos, Universe, or More.

“This Expansion usually does not Destroy the Seed. Rather, it is subsumed into the Greater Whole. Thus, the History of Those Sentients, Worlds, Galaxies, Planes, become forever intertwined with the future Manifestation. Meanwhile, over millions of years, the Lords of Order Birth the Cosmos or Universe into Fantastic Form. Most forget, eventually, this Primordial Seed. However, they are fools. For there is a Power, an Intelligence at that Heart. For this is the Realm of Spirits, and Indigenous Sentients that existed even Before.”

“Spirits are like Forcang, only they predate such terminology. Really, they would fall into the race of Foreigners, in a subcategory, or possibly Dimensionals, if that is a separate

Book III: The Library

race. The fact is that Spirits were the first Force of the Multiverse, prior to any other Sentients. Upon Genesis, the Primordial Spirits Existed with the First Planets, Galaxies, and Planes. These expanded according to their Will, and the Laws of Nature, simultaneously, over time, into a combination of Multiverse Proper Reflections, and even Daxuk and The Indeterminate.

“If anything, it was either Spirits that evolved into the first Forcang, or created them, or the creations of Spirits, that evolved through the Rain of Souls into the first Forcang, the *grandchildren* by creation of the Spirits. Regardless, the Spirits are essentially an Order of Sentients separate from Forcang, though because of the length of their existence, and the differences in their purposes and procreation, their numbers have remained far more limited. Yet they are still a force to be reckoned with and respected. It is a wise Lord of Order that when she creates a Universe, she sets aside that Primordial Seed as a Celestial Domain of Spirits, not to be trifled with by Forcang or mortal. Elriver and Showsh did this, if you must know, and many Lords of Order do. Do not fear that this is a case of disrespect or a mistake. Rather, the appearance of The Eagle is merely an equally Potent Entity flexing His Rights in Drerpo, as he has done so since it was Created by Elriver. Notice that Showsh did not seem unsurprised by such a turn of events.

“In any event, since the Spirits have predated the Forcang even, and go back to the dawn of Genesis of the Multiverse, they were there, at least the oldest of the Spirits, and likely The Eagle, for Secrets of Creation unknown even to the wisest and oldest Forcang, like Ruby. Yes, Ruby is a Forcang, if you did not know. Yet, that is another story. One secret that the Spirits know about is that even though The Language of the Universe is a potent Key to Power in Dweehwail—there are Others. Two additional ancient Languages that date to Creation are Rebirth and Infernal. This matters to our discussion because your Relic has a number of phrases written on it in Infernal, yet the language is an ancient dialect of Rebirth, interestingly enough. Here, let me show it to you, and I am sure you have heard these words before:



“Roughly, the words read, ‘Dichwait wit orchon ve muk nwerk.’ The translation is similar to work by an ancient sage with whom you are familiar: ‘Do Not Go Gentle Into The Night!’

“The confusion in linguistics may suggest a great period of cataclysm, one that was long suspected by the Council of History. It is thought that there may have been a previous Great Wave! Possibly, there have been many Great Waves! There have also been Entities like Tzefee, that either were born into the Multiverses as Spirits, or developed organically as Forcang, and either way, into Great Threats and Menaces. In each Timeframe, an Enemy Grows that threatens to Consume All, to Darken Life, Destroy Creation, Be Cruel and Wanton. Thus, there were Spirits too Born into Each Multiverse, and Natural Laws, and Words of Rebirth.

“What I believe you have found is a piece of the *reboot* language either for the Multiverse itself, or, *The Entity* of the previous Multiverse, of whatever Dweehwail was called, prior to the that Great Wave. This simple statement carries Power, Potency, and Hope, although it is a fragment, and the other pieces must be found. Yet you retrieved one, which is a start, from the possession of an ancient Great Spirit, to whom you were forced to sacrifice some of your freedom to earn that help. I will judge yet whether that is sufficiently worthy.”

For a moment, Drelp seemed to grow large, and dark, and menacing, and he glowed purple, and white light illuminated the whole room. Then he shrank back into himself, and he continued.

“This Relic may be used with a handful of others to *bypass* The Language of the Universe, used by most, even Tzefee, and as you say, humble her. Perhaps with these *words*, you might even return her to her prior Being as a Lord of Light. It is after all The Language of Rebirth. If only we might find the original letters, for those seem lost. I admit there is much The Council of History does not Know, and I hope you are sufficiently impressed by what we do.

“It has been decided that the Rebirth Relic, or Wave Relic, will be guarded in the Vault of the Cecil Line, in the Bloodline Capitol of the Cecil Line. Elriver’s mother will ensure its safety, along with her other duties. It will also be closer to you, for your use if necessary, then in the Vaults of the Canopy in Goamdwee, and since You are unable to go there Yourself, it is further thought unwise to store it where it may not be readily retrieved quickly.”

Suddenly, the image, the world in which Droos had flown,

Book III: The Library

diminished, and they stood once more in The Room of Attention, beside the spinning metal object, now coming to a stop, with a cacophony of sounds, that disturbed The Houses of Healing. Drelp looked up sheepishly, and Showsh entered, looking quite normal and appropriate, though of immanent form.

“Son, it is good to see you,” said Showsh. “I am grateful that you have taught Droos about the facts of the situation that you have learned and told me. It is still questionable to me that The Relic should be kept in the Cecil Vault. Yet, that is a formality. When it needs to be retrieved, surely that small difference will not matter. Next time, though, you should ask about Storage and Security First.”

“Dear Father,” said Drelp, “It is an honor to see you after all this time, and your chosen. Last I saw you, your main concern was your new Manifestation Projection, I believe it was called, Vøvoav. I hear it is to be dedicated to my new mother. Such a privilege. In any case, I will look forward to family celebrations and time together in our new home upon its Birth and Creation. I also celebrate the clear Successes and Potencies of this Angel.”

“Thank you, Drelp,” said Showsh. “I know that this has been challenging for you. You have always spent the most time with Elriver. I do hope in time you will understand the Truth and Value of Love and Beauty for Droos, for myself, and for yourself. You deserve such Happiness. I thank you for assisting Droos, again, with Her Omen. Your professional work is meticulous. I will refer an accommodation to The Judge of the Council of History.”

“I love that you have confidence in me, and I do respect your choices, Father,” said Drelp, smiling. “Now if you will excuse me, I will allow you and your love to return to your healing in this fair place. I have many duties to attend to at this time. I do hope we will see each other sooner than last time.”

“Truly, so do I,” said Showsh, and he bowed his head slightly.

Drelp seemed to begin walking towards the door, and then, he was gone, as though transitioned away from this Reflection. He was off to his duty, on a far distant Manifestation.

“Dear Love,” said Droos. “Showsh. It occurs to me, that if creating a Manifestation takes millions of years of concentration, and you are in the midst of creating Vovoav, how are you able to have all of your attention here?”

“That is a good question,” said Showsh. “You see, it has only been about one hundred and thirty years since I diverted my attention, and that is considered well within the limit, and no time at all, by Forcang and Birthing standards. For projects that last millions of years, a few hundred once in a while are a small matter. It also counts that what I am doing now is of great importance.”

“It is good to know that you think so,” she said, kissing him, and wrapping him in her golden wings, the white light mingling now with the white light glowing from Showsh’s revealed eyes. Then both features, diminished, and Droos hid her Glory. It was simply two young adults, in The Houses of Healing. They went to The Room of Nourishment, and ate a simple meal, and drank cool, pure water. It was time to relax, and return to healing after two eons of important happenings and much to know.

In The Peaceful Room, Droos floated on an invisible current, suspended in a breeze Invisible even to Her Keen Senses. It was while she floated here, two eons removed from her time in The Library, that her purpose returned, and her humility, as though a sudden refocus after a vacation of bliss. That trip had been surreal, yet the reality was she was still condemned. Had she abandoned her quest? Whether in a House of Healing or not, her goal was to be redeemed.

Then she sighed, for she recalled, that such Destinies were in the Hands of The Justice, The Judge of Drerpo, upon Her End. She would walk The Journey towards The Good in the meantime, for the rest of her days. Perhaps her actions, teetering towards the Upwards half of Dualisms would edge out some fragments owed to baetOAK. Yet she recalled, like a pain, a thorn in the back of her mind, the memory of The Tree, and that there were Secrets, like her, in the Essence of the Multiverse, and every Manifestation, that would claim her just the same. She suspected her Whole Soul would gain plenty of character by her next life. Then again, she certainly hoped to make the best of this one, an eternity she was told, beside Showsh. What did that even mean?

Then, floating down beside her, along the stream, was Elriver, eyes closed, in a deep meditation. The Queen, The Creator of the Universe, looked modest, and humble, and even subtle there, vulnerable in that state. She was a young woman. If only the surface were examined. If but a little deeper, and the Strength, and Virtue, and Wonder, and Power, those would be Seen. It was incredible how the surface contained at times so little. Even with

Book III: The Library

her senses, she saw things, yet what did she really see?

“My husband was right,” said Elriver, in an instant. “Dreelp had no right to place the Wave Relic in the Cecil Vault. I will remove it and return it to you as soon as I have the opportunity. That may have to wait until the end of this tale, for in immanence I have little time to make such Journeys to My Bloodline Capitol. Surely, my mother would prove a worthy guard, but she is busy with endless streams of projects. This one would not receive her full attention. For you, on the other hand, it is Central.”

“What comparison is there between Veshaim and I,” said Droos. “She is a Great Being of Might, and Authority, and Power, and before her, even you, Dear Queen, are a child. I am an ant upon the leg of a leviathan. Surely, I will be consumed.”

Elriver laughed for a moment, her eyes still closed.

“My mother is Perilous,” said Elriver. “Yet she is Fair. Prove to her your Worth, and you will be welcome in Her Court for Eternity. Simply refuse to Concede, or Diminish your Worth or Responsibility. Laud your Independence and Value. Yet, you already do these things. I need not tell you, or else why would Showsh love you so much? You are United of Whole Self and Pure by much of Whole Soul. You are an Angel of Might.”

“How are you able to say such things?” said Droos.

“Where I come from, wars have been started for less. Yet, here you relax, at ease, a wife and equal of trillions of years, yet emotion is even, and still? Why are you not furious, and damning? Why not toss me to Tzefee, and be rid of me once and for all! Surely, that would be the only good thing the Goddess of Pain has done since the Dawn of Time?”

“Tzefee has done other Righteous deeds, though she has forgotten,” said Elriver. “You, Dreelp, and Ruby, have not. Nor have the wisest of the Council of History. In your case it is an emotional intuition. It is True all the same. You all seek to remind her, and even your weapon is attempting to reset her to a previous Order, Law, and state of Purity. You ask, ‘Why are you worthy?’ Surely, to be among such elect, such a cohort. How many Forcang, or Spirits, or Mortals, or Reflection Creatures, see worth in the deepest Shadow? You would not just Defeat, and Win, and be Victorious—You Would Claim, and Conquer, and Save, and Redeem, and Return. Surely, it is this that I see in you, Daughter of Drerpo, The Queen, The Angel, once a Princess. My mother, Veshaim, will do so as well—if you are successful.”

“It would seem Drelp has drawn his own conclusions already,” said Droos. “I love him as a Son, however odd that is to say. I feel that he hates me, for you both. His bond is so strong with his real Mother, with the Cecil Line, that he has condemned me in Heart before any proof or trial may be offered.”

“That is quite a Judgement,” said Elriver. “Although, I have always feared that my Son proved poorly by choosing the Drescher Line—He clearly might have designated the Cecil, if only to counter tradition. Such laws are meant for ease and consistency, not as a burden. There is a dissonance in him that has lasted trillions of years. You are caught up in his internal conflict. I fear it goes so far beyond you, that you are merely the latest fuel for the storm.”

“What words to say about your family?” inquired Droos, with some astonishment.

“Am I not too a Judge and Creator?” said Elriver. “I may also count the virtues of Drelp. He is independent, and capable, and professionally prophetic and ingenious on many levels. He has received accommodations countless times for his efforts, and his Knowledge of many topics is unparalleled, even when rivaled in age many times over by other peers.”

“Yet he is not of Unified Self and a close to Righteous Whole Soul?” said Droos.

“That is merely an observation of the Present,” said Elriver. “Much may change. Yet, He attempts to live up to a standard of the Cecil Line, that he believed out of duty he must abandon in the first place, of Veshaim, and Greats of the Past, including a mythic hero he claims rose to a Seventh Level Sentient. He is close to worship of his ancestors, for which I would not fault him, as numerous traditions revere family members who are deceased—there is a Power in the Participation in the Rain of Souls. Yet, his focus on living up to that standard, keeps him looking too much at the past, and not the present, and the wonders of friends, and family, and a good mug of ale here in the Now. He might benefit from his father’s approach to life.”

“You still did not answer my question, fully, in how you overcome your emotions, even in your immanent state, Elriver,” said Droos.

“To be raised with such possibilities, even if distant, is to know that someday there may be a second, or third,” said Elriver. “Furthermore, it means love is more complex even for

Book III: The Library

myself. I do not enter a room looking for romance or a suitor, yet such possibilities are never closed to Forcang. One trillion years might pass, and I might meet a man, or a woman. The customs and standards are different, as we are taught. We have friends and family in such relationships and arrangements. That does not make all emotions cease.”

“That is my point,” said Droos.

“Yet, to be a Grand Elder Forcang, a Greater Being, as you call it,” said Elriver, “Is to Know Love, and Husbands, and Spouses, and Partners, and Romance, and all manner of Relationships. It is to know Compromise and Equality. Even in the presence of pending or existing Immanence, I Know, We See the Truth in a Way more Real than you do. I may react harshly, with emotion, particularly in my State of Immanence, in these limited decades. Yet, my True Emotion, and Feeling, is one of Happiness, and Joy, and Understanding, and Love, for Showsh. I would want the same from my Partner, my Spouse of two hundred trillion years, if I found someone.”

“Does that mean I must accept such an arrangement in my life?” said Droos.

“It does not,” said Elriver. “Certainly, individual spouses may agree in law to special arrangements. There are still plenty of Forcang who opt for monogamy, or to have no formal marriage at all. Plenty simply have children profligately in flash romances, and move on with their lives, though most Forcang I know in my family hold that such offspring must be provided for when that occurs, and it should be rare. No, Droos, if you insist Showsh must stick with the two of us, than he must, if he agrees to marry you. Of course, you would have to do the same.”

“I feel like we have discussed this before, yet I feel it requires much discourse, as it is an odd topic, and new, and unusual,” said Droos. “It is good to know that this whole arrangement angers few actual Forcang who are not already suffering some amount of emotional turmoil. I feel badly for Drepl, and I will help him as my step-son. I do love him already. I hope he will at some point come to love me. Thank you for sharing this with me, Elriver.”

“I have told you,” said Elriver. “You are special not just to Showsh, but to me, to this family, and we all believe now, to this Multiverse. My mother will come around, and you will prove your worth to her. She is hard to please, only because of the

enormous responsibility she carries. Do not assume that you begin at a disadvantage because of me. As long as we both live, breath, and are healthy, and we are all in the same family, Veshaim will love you for what you do, not who you are. I also appreciate that you will do your best for Drelp. He is wonderful, and I Love him Dearly. I love all of my Sons, as a Parent. It is different than my love for my Creations, as a Creator and Ruler. You Understand, Droos.”

“Of course...,” said Droos, distracted for a moment, as though a weight the size of universe flashed before her eyes. “Now if you will excuse me, Elriver, I would like to enjoy this space of healing, in your most Worthy House of Healing, in Peace.”

“Be at Peace, Daughter of Drerpo,” said Elriver. “Feel the Love and Strength of Family and Friends, now and forever. You have more than the Love of one man. You have a Sisterhood of Support, and much Respect and Adoration as well. Truly, you have earned your clean slate to move onto the Afterlives of this Universe, and discuss Good and Evil.”

Many months passed in the Houses of Healing, and Droos did not see Elriver or Atropo or Drelp. There was no word of her service to The Eagle. Showsh was there, talking to her, keeping her company. His presence alone was healing. It did not seem that there was ever a length of time that the young man might instill anger or fear or unhappiness in her for very long. Much of the time was passed in various Rooms of Subtlety, and Beauty. These soothed her Whole Self, and she Felt Complete, and Clean.

It was seven days before her twenty-fifth birthday that The Four gathered in The Room of Attention. Such was the repair of her soul that she stood alert, awake, and able, almost instantly, yet organically and happily. They sat on four corners of the room, amidst a purple and green glow. The Glory of the Beings, for now, remained hidden.

“How have these days passed for you, Droos?” said Showsh. “I love the change I have seen. Almost, the worries of your passed are temporarily forgotten.”

“I only hope she remembers that Tzefee is out there, and that even her tasks in Drerpo remain to be completed,” said Atropo.

“I was told something recently, and by that, in the sense that an Absolute Year has no sense of time for many,” said Droos, “That there are now at least two Orders of Sentients and three Languages of the Universe, if those are even the correct terms.

Book III: The Library

Of course, the Authoritative and colloquial is Loahueth, as I have been taught, or Sre here in Drerpo in the local dialect. Yet now there is also Rebirth and Infernal, of ancient lineage and usage and purpose. It seems they are essentially dead languages, yet I would suspect some Entities out there still use them Potently. Also, I now Know that the Original Sentients of the Multiverse, beginning with The Spirits, form their own second Order of Sentients. There is a Celestial Domain of Spirit in this very Universe for Spirits, and a seed of Original planets and galaxies with Original Life as well. It occurs to me that these two groups have not existed apart, distinguished, and wholly unique. What of comingling? What of the children, the offspring of the two Orders of Sentients. Also, if I am to consider that there are *Languages* of the Universe and *Orders* of Sentients, might there yet be even more I do not Know about?"

"That is an astute question and extrapolation on those issues, brought to you by Drelp," said Elriver. "I am glad that you have thought of them. Luckily the Theory of Unity has been investigated, and it seems that as far as the Orders of Sentients, where offspring result from unions between Spirit and Forcang, or between Reflection Creatures of one Order and the other, or Reflection Mortals of one Order and the Other, such descendants have available to them both Orders of Sentients. Thus, Whole Souls are entered into an expanded dual cycle as a result, and both are made richer. Naturally, this happens less often between Forcang and Spirits, but Dweehwail has been blessed with much virtue from such Unions throughout eons and enriched. Thus, the Orders of Sentients today have a different overall content then at the Beginning of Time."

"Presumably the other points are relevant as well," said Atropo. "If there are perpetual Journeys of Great Waves and Geneses of Multiverses, the Arrival of a Threat to All, and Resources to Stop It, or Start Again, it would seem that the content of the Orders of Souls have been reordered and changed countless times onto eternity. Spirits and Their Stages are seemingly a Function of the Natural Law of the Multiverse, placed by some Transcendent Entity or system, to Participate. Meanwhile, Forcang and Their Order are the life forms that populate in larger numbers the richness of the Multiverse. These alternate Languages of the Universe are likely afterthoughts. How often are Infernal and Rebirth truly used apart from the start and end of Multiverses, or,

pertaining to the imprisonment or humbling of some Great Threat? It is right to retain the term *Language of the Universe*, since almost universally, that is what any Forcang will refer to or understand with its meaning.”

“You seem to have learned a lot about this in a short time,” said Droos. “I thought your brother was the expert, yet you Know much as well. It is good to learn that Tolerance and Egalitarianism is Existent even between Orders of Sentients. I almost feared I had found another field of bigotry on an even bigger stage.”

“I fear that while Greater Beings and Spirits both Know Peace and Friendship and Alliance,” said Elriver, “They also Know Bigotry, and Pride, and Hatred. Those are all poisonous, and you may assume that such Entities do rise above emotions in a way far better than mortals. You may also be assured that the warfare between such entities when it has occurred has also been, well, legendary, even to occur at times in myths of mortals. As for the laws and customs of Second and First Stage Sentients, these have as much variety to them as drops of water in the sea. There is a trend towards higher degrees of Sentients for increased tolerances and less bigotry. It does seem that when Society has its basic needs solved by technology, whether by magic or science, comfortable Sentients are happier to shake hands and play board games, rather than wage war and argue.”

“Then it is all about the creature comforts, Dear Mother,” said Atropo. “If they are all fed good food and wine, there will be no quarreling. Take away the ale and suddenly everyone has a knife in their hand.”

The group chuckled.

“It is not that simple,” said Showsh. “However, there is some truth that when the psychological needs of a Sentient are met, they are more pliant to almost anything. Thus, when Society is better able to meet needs more often, less anger and ill will ensues.”

“Why else do you think we have spent all of this time chasing The Good and Society and The Good Life?” asked Droos, with a smile.

“I believe you would find that a similar situation exists in many Forcang Cities and Capitols, and even in the vaunted restaurants and estates of nobles in The Courts of Chaos and The Alliance of the Multiverse,” said Elriver. “The Forcang who provides the best wine and ale and good food, and for that matter, a

Book III: The Library

fine story or poem, is likely to make more friends and allies. Those who arrive with nothing but their clothing will have to hope their message and wit is important and endearing enough to earn them at least acquaintances, if not sword fights.”

“Why do I feel you are imagining your sister, Dear Elriver,” said Droos. “I bet she has had some examples of both of those situations.”

“My husband has been saying quite a lot, it seems,” said Elriver, with a slight frown, though only for a moment.

“I have been in the same situations as well, Dear Mother,” said Atropo. “And you have too. A Forcang Club in general requires all of the wit, finesse, and decorum in The Multiverse, a truly divine mug of some drink, or surely there will be a casual brawl.”

“Suddenly, I am not feeling so upset about missing out on these *Vaunted Halls*,” said Droos.

“It is not so much that there is a fight every time, Dear Love,” said Showsh. “For that matter, those who choose to be there at all Know the Rules. Also, it is merely that everything is at higher stakes, including the possible rewards. There is little information that may be compared to the kind obtained in some of these locales. Yet, it will not be revealed for a small price, as you have heard. Even the currency is more complicated than what you have known.”

“I would think Forcang above petty ideas like currency,” said Droos.

“Have you not heard what we discussed in philosophy of Abstract Dimensions?” said Showsh, with a wink. “Property is at once both essential and valuable and a great peril. That includes property in token form: currency. It motivates in a way that little else may do so in comparison. Yet, Forcang do not prefer tokens. They like more durable goods, that are the same in value anywhere in Dweehwail. Thus, be prepared to forfeit a General Artifact, some tantalizing Secret, or offer a Future Debt or Favor. All of these are considered a degree of payment equal to the quality and Potency of the Artifact, or how revealing the secret, or thorough the Debt. Those payments are valuable anywhere. They will also never be forgotten. Do not ever expect a Forcang to forgive your debts—at least not for free.”

“Is there no charity in Heaven?” said Droos. “Do these Beings, these Servants and Goddesses, not Know Altruism? Why

would debts be so rigorously observed?”

“It is not to say that there is no charity,” said Atropo. “Sure, there are certainly some who epitomize the word Charity in a way that would make a mortal Saint or Tzaddik seem like a novice. Yet, to assume any Forcang will do that may prove a lethal mistake. An ancient sage said that you, ‘Buy at your own risk’. You may certainly be as charitable as you wish, as an Angel, or Servant. Yet, I advise, expect others to pay back your loans, and debts. Maintain the rules, customs, and norms of Forcang law. Sure, add some extra forgiveness and mercy, yet if word gets around that you are an Avatar of Mercy, surely there will be those who count on that.”

“Are you saying that I have to learn to be more cautious with money and other currencies in a Multiverse of Forcang?” said Droos.

“This is all a digression,” said Elriver. “It is merely to say that among Sentients that live for billions of years, even trillions of years, their schemes for success may also last that long. Try not to get caught up in any plot or scheme. Rather, direct the objectives and truths you wish to create. Own your universe. And yes, you will, as mentioned, be expected to learn how to use the sword, and gun, and spear, shield, and command an attack cruiser. If you expect to live an eternity without defending yourself, you would not be the first, or millionth Forcang fool to spend a few dozen eons in some other Forcang’s dungeon.”

“I would think they might make it all shorter,” said Droos. “Why put me in a dungeon? Why not end it all if they gain a true advantage?”

“That would depend, Droos, on whether we are discussing a Lord of Order, or axiomatic Sentient, or Lord of Chaos, or anarchic Sentient,” said Showsh. “Lords of Order who have traversed the Grand Journey have as an Innate right the ability to Curse any Sentient or Location in Dweehwail. To do so is to also Curse themselves. Thus, few do so who are not about to be slain. Yet almost universally, those about to be slain, who have traversed any Journey, Grand or Otherwise, will Inflict Their Curse. Since no Forcang wants this consequence, it is far simpler to simply toss the fool in a dungeon somewhere. Now, given the length of Forcang life, there is almost always some guarantee to a guard that some centuries or thousands of years later that prisoner will escape. Yet, that is at least some time free of any thorn, and free of

Book III: The Library

any probable Curse.”

“Would I gain this Innate Curse from Traversing the Bloodline Journey of the Drescher Line?” said Droos

“Yes,” said Showsh. “Though I hope you will never have to use it. Also, it is of lesser form than the Grand Curse, although still plenty powerful. There are few Forcang that would oppose you with such a threat, at least lethally. They might still imprison you.”

“Yet Tzefee is likely one of those crazy enough to care little for the consequences of Grand Curses, Curses, or any other just plain bad luck,” said Atropo. “Though, she would still just as likely put you in a deep, dark hole, with no way out. That Abyss, might last for the remainder of this Multiverse, or The Great Wave. Either option is something you do not want.”

“So, this benefit of being a Full Lord of Order will dissuade many, yet not the most Evil, or Crazy, or possibly even Strategic,” said Droos.

“It is hard to imagine a strategy that involves accepting a Curse from a Lord of Order,” said Elriver. “Many Forcang Bloodline Capitols or Dukedom Capitols have been brought low by such curses. There is a reason they receive such respect.”

“Very well, I will make sure I am well trained to defend myself, and others, and to be purposeful, and repay debts,” said Droos. “You are all preparing me well for my life ahead, even if there are many books and chapters left until I will actually need to live it.”

“To learn how to be a capable Forcang takes decades or hundreds of years, and in reality, eons,” said Showsh. “For one I love as much as you, I would provide far more advice.”

“It is also good to know that the Orders of Sentients get along as best they are able, if not always,” said Droos. “I would certainly like to learn more about them, if there are others as well, and The Languages of the Universe—not just Loahueth. Perhaps I will try to learn more from my Dear Sons, especially Drelp.”

“You would be well received, and honorable to accept their help,” said Elriver with a smile. “I think I see a place as a Servant to a Plane of Knowledge in your future. You seem fascinated by history. I offer you such Blessings, in light of your Love of Knowledge, and Philosophy, and Truth.”

Food did exist in the Houses of Healing, if not for Pure Nourishment, than for enjoyment, but of a kind for the Whole

Soul. After this discussion, the four dismissed themselves, and in a Room of Blossoms, ate berries of assorted variety. They were sweet and luscious. To drink, they had mugs of pure, cool water. Nothing more, nothing less passed through their lips. For a day, they enjoyed the break in Silence.

“It occurs to me that it is odd that a Sage of No might write a similar statement to one found encircling a Wave Relic,” inquired Droos. “Almost it is cliché, if that is not too much to say. How might this poet have found these words? Did he have access to these Languages of the Universe, or some Fount of Knowledge available to few? Who else had access to these resources?”

“It is likely such Sages had similar access to Us,” said Showsh. “Although, the Source is curious. Perhaps it was a passing Forcang, or a distant signal from an Ultranet cast by the broader Universe or Celestial Domains, or The Library Itself. Maybe a Spirit acted and sent a vision to this or other Sages. It is hard to Know where a Dream originates. As we established that perhaps ten million Visionaries are but thoughts, but that last one is a Miracle. Only, in the Present, we do not Know. Thus, we must be both humble and skeptical of all words and ideas, and tolerant and open. None Know which is the thorn or the diamond.”

“Seemingly Knowledge of the Thorns would prove useful as well,” suggested Atropo. “Though I suppose that is not what you meant. I believe Father is Right. Mortals have been visited on endless Reflections by Forcang, Spirits, and Visions from Numerous Sources for Eons. This was likely no different.”

“It also might just as likely have been a simultaneous invention,” said Elriver. “Do you think that idea so original that no other might invent it? I would think I was in a room with a bunch of scitters right now. Of course, I jest. Yet, before any on a mortal world is deemed a *prophet*, let us examine the content of the message. Is it truly unique? If it may be conceived independently, it is hard to guess that it arrived from some *Foreign* source.”

“Of course, that would never be Known,” said Droos. “The Skepticism is that all visions are mortal, and base, yet the diamonds still occur, and any may they be. Thus, all humans and Sentients must be approached as though they were Saints and Tzaddiks. What if they were as such? Yet, the doubt should remain, because by all odds, all ideas are just that, very human.”

“Only if an idea is physically harmful, as mentioned, or by intent emotionally or mentally destructive,” said Showsh. “Those

Book III: The Library

may be ridiculed legitimately. Yet all others should be approached with such respect and humility. Why not assume that the neighbor is Inspired? Why not assume that all Ideas are Inspired until Concrete Evidence to the Contrary is Discovered? What type of respect might Sentients receive in such a universe?"

"I suppose only those who inflict physical harm, or intentional emotional or mental harm, would be chastised," said Atropo, "In your suggestion. Of course, you have discussed this. It is in Dear Mother's book, or will be."

"I have another book?" said Droos, with a half-smile.

Elriver blushed for a moment.

"There are some small perks of being the Creator of the Universe," said Elriver. "Ordering a Record be Expedited is not difficult. Your next book, *The Library*, will be available soon. That means you will have three. Of course, everyone has books like this. You are one of the first to publish yours in a civilization of Reflection Mortals: at least in Drerpo."

"That was taking advantage of the system a little, Dear Droos," said Atropo. "A standard political operative or lobbyist should work from the bottom up, and not assume she has proverbial *mana from heaven*, to sell for profit and votes. Next time you live in The City, you might try acting like a more typical citizen or resident."

"That is a harsh critique," said Droos, though she maintained her composure. "It is returning to The City, although I believe you are fair. I used what resources I had to my advantage, and it was not fair. The vast majority of people cannot access such resources in any age. It is the durability of a system that the average citizen may express and be received of their wants and desires even without resources like wealth and power. Perhaps, I will do without next time, if only in order to test the system."

"On the same note, there is a time frame to Dear Droos' tasks," said Elriver. "She may not pursue this for hundreds of years. The civilization in the Bagan Galaxy, including Galactic City on No, is somewhat advanced, and has a notable political model. However, none should consider it ideal, or to approximate any Abstract Dimension of Democracy, Society, or Government. Many billions go without having their needs met still, and do not expect a system without a share of corruption and desperation. It will take at least another ten thousand years for Bagan to take a leap forward, possibly into a civilization that spans several

galaxies, but also a type of Society that is truly more just, more peaceful, and more equal.”

“You are suggesting that simply because even the product of nearly twenty thousand years of civilization is far from perfect, Droos has the right to take short cuts in the political system?” suggested Showsh.

“I am suggesting that Droos should avail herself of the legal options that any would use even in The Alliance of the Multiverse,” said Elriver. “It is unfair. Yet, those laws, those principles must be revised. I would fully support more taxes, more rules to help increase The Good of Society. We may look into those simultaneously, and we should, as those who walk the Journey of The Good. Yet, Droos also has a task to save her people, and that requires multitasking, and following the existing rules of the system. Is it acceptable to use the rules of an imperfect system, while operating to improve it?”

“Speaking as a delegate to The Alliance of the Multiverse, that is how it is done,” said Atropo. “Everyone has their own agenda, at least in Goamdwee, fewer break the rules openly, but the intrigue lasts millions of years. To not use all resources and laws that exist would be folly, for surely a rival will do so. I actively work to improve Rules and Laws. Yet while the system, even in the Capitol of the Lords of Order in Imperfect, I have to operate in that system, in that Society. To do otherwise, is to surrender to the agenda of the shrewdest political operator. And that is not just someone who breaks the rules, but Forcang who know best how to use the existing rules, and garnish public praise and attention.”

“It would seem that I follow a proud, if not unfortunate, political tradition,” said Droos. “No one wants a system that included expediency, or imperfections. However, all systems beyond the Seventh Order Sentients and Their Selflessness are Imperfect. Therefore, as you say, Dear Elriver, work within the system, accomplish my task and agenda with those resources, and simultaneously multitask to improve Society for everyone. Ideally, by the time I move into Vøvoav with Showsh, the laws I manipulate will not even exist in that manner anymore, and no one else in the future will be able to use wealth to push their agenda, like I did.”

“Let alone, perhaps a Celestial Law, that Servants may not use Celestial Resources, like Records Provided by The Library, for Mortal Benefits on Reflections of the Manifestation,” said Atropo.

Book III: The Library

“To be fair,” said Elriver. “I gave her the first two books, and provided little hint as to their origin. That was prior to Droos’ entry into the Veil. Would she have Comprehended the Truth? I would question any further use of these Records for Mortal Purposes. Maintaining the circulation of the existing books seems tolerable, though your audience will clamor for the sequels.”

“Then once my tasks are complete,” said Droos. “I will give them sequels that leave out some key pieces of information about Truths in the Celestial Domains. For mortals of Drerpo do not need Knowledge or Secrets about Drerpo. Nor would they comprehend them. I am certain the subsequent three books in the series will have adequate exotic and compelling abstract content to interest those who read the first two. I certainly would not leave the completion of the series to some alternative author who simply does this for profit and personal gain, and is not acquainted with the Whole Truth of The Language of the Universe and broader Dweehwail, or even Alternate Realities. After all, you Know what we have discussed about the Abstract Dimension of Property, Showsh, including Token Property?”

“Indeed,” said Showsh. “You are wise to finish your novel, after completing your task for redemption of yourself and your people. I fear your service to Dweehwail as a whole, to humble Tzefee, will be so long, you will surely be able to multitask, and release your sequels.”

“It would seem that you have nearly completed your own redemption, Dear Droos,” said Elriver. “Or rather, your Unity of Self, and Unity of Whole Soul, to prepare them for Judgement, and the Rest of Your Life. No one may Know the Decree. Yet, you are ready now to Live, and See what is Next, in Paradise, and in Chastisement. There are Surprises and Realities in Both. Yet to merely see these, you had to reach this point. Simply a little ways longer, and you will open your golden wings, and we will be there. You will see The City of the Righteous.”

“You will also see that Thorns exist in all corners of Drerpo and the Multiverse,” said Showsh. “There is a Fundamental Truth, that Good and Evil exist in more places than comfort would desire or assume, at least while hatred and fear and evil persist. If it will take ten thousand more years to form a better Bagan Civilization, surely it will take forty-two more Great Waves to perfect a Multiverse without such Dualisms, one of Just The Good, and Peace, and Love, and Tolerance. For now, we live in a

broad universe of endless hues and shapes and forms.”

“And I stand as Droos’ protector, against Tzefee, as we move to Paradise, and we discuss Good and Evil,” said Atropo. “There are Secrets, More to be Known. Now that we Know how to Understand Truth, and Politics, and to Dislike Death, and Value Life, surely we are ready for Ethics and Morality. We are almost there, and Droos is Pure, with a Clean Slate. As soon as the last Residuals Diminish, She will be Able to Use Her Angelic Wings, and We will be in Gon Eden.”





Chapter 9

Source of Truth

In a sea of golden light, and shimmering turquoise, Droos lay, suspended in peace and rest, apart from the burdens of Drerpo. Soon these would be in the center of her heart and soul. Yet for now, her mind, her body, her emotions, and whole self knew only the gentle waves of serenity and calm. Eventually the golden light diminished to silver, and rising in the Distance, her thoughts saw a Dream.

A Tree, Glittering, amidst a Canopy of Order, beneath a Sky of Orange and Lavender. Beside, at its foot, glistening a city proud, a Jewel, Buildings of Pure Crystal, and Gold and Silver, and all manner of architecture. The business of the Multiverse occurred there. This was Society at its best in both Law and Peril. Kings and Queens walked these streets, and Princesses and Princes, and Ambassadors from Duzog, and Merchants Emperors for every corner of Reality. Their finery and splendor portrayed both a magnificence and simplicity.

At the center of the Tree, in a Firmament, was a Forcang, a Great Being among Great Beings, at the Heart of Order, at the Center of the Tree. This Thought Projected Potency and Direction and Meaning. A myriad, spread of colors glowed in the midst of the Trunk, where the Jooquaip, the Greatest Officer of Order, presided. Yet, this Sentient answered to Others. For the delegates of millions of Manifestations created the laws he enforced, and all Lords of Order of Dweehwail cast a vote in election of their leader. Axioms and Principles swirled in glyphs and hues before the Vision.

Further, in the amidst the Canopy The Council resided. For the Knowledge, the Truths of the laws and the methods of executing the laws required review. This Judiciary might examine any topic, only to be sure that each Committee of Delegates in The

Alliance of the Multiverse created Laws based on Fact. Even the Axioms and Methods for arriving at Truth were examined, and checks placed upon such pursuits, for no field of Knowledge was above scrutiny. Reality demanded examination, and to create Just, Honest Rules, that needed the Right Answers.

At the outer edge of The Capitol was a harbor, and it was filled with River Vessels, moored at shining docks, at the edge of a River of Living Energy. The Brightness of the Light was that of the hottest star. Out from the Capitol this Light flowed, in a Great River, connecting the Universes and Cosmoses of thousands of Forcang. The dream traveled these stary paths, and saw in their midst, islands of Secrecy, of ancient Domains forgotten and cast aside.

What Relics and Artifacts might exist there? thought the Dreamer.

The Multiverses Tree and Goamdwee, Jewel of Order, and the Great River, these spread amongst the Multiverse Proper as the True Essence of Reality. What of the Mountains, those Twilight Peaks at the Northeastern Edge? Her Vision glowed with the Red, the Ruby, of Chaos, and Anarchy. Where was Truth? Surely it had been among The Councils? Yet as the Dream roared up the greatest cataracts of the Dark River, a Sea of Living Darkness, at the top of one lay a vast city. It was splendid, and if not bejeweled, just as great in its aesthetic appeal. Nearly any design was found in its billion streets. Was the Truth found in this Dualism?

Great Capitols of The Multiverse, yet Thorns appeared on them. The Grand Journey of Goamdwee, a sublime shape, intricate and righteous, yet spotted now, and spiked, as some dangerous machine, appeared, and at the same time, the Twilight Maelstroms of Duzog, in terrible diagonals and clashes of sound and taste and sight, yet still with Thorns. A Third Image, through the gossamer clouds of Reality, of The Multiverse Proper, into the Daxuk, deep, unrelenting sadness, and there, in a Realmz so deep it might never be found, with Secrets so Profound, lay a Primordial Thçtz. It was enigmatic, and built with multiple Languages of the Universe, both Known and Forgotten and Evil. There, a Form of Transition Lay, and Conquest, and Predation. Was there Truth to be had here?

Then, the vision flew across eons and stars, Universes and Fortresses, and into a Space so Foreign, it was Indeterminate. No words might be used to describe the sight, and Droos struggled to wake, only she was caught within a Dream. Onward she rushed,

Book III: The Library

and there on a dark Surface, Anchorless, Amidst a Void, Near an Abyss, was a Planet, Lone and Forgotten. There The Thçtz Slept, still, awaiting Its Day. Perhaps, a Vessel of some ancient Dimensionals placed it there. On it were glyphs that might only have been Infernal, although this was a Dream. Yet, even in the slumber, suddenly, amidst the wasteland, there were eyes, red, and glowing. This was alive! Surely she would be caught.

Soaring to her feet was a bird, majestic, an Eagle! He landed before her, bowing, and without a further thought, or time, Droos' mind and emotion leapt onto His wings, and away from the Horror it Fled. A mouth of fangs and sharp teeth closed on the Vision, and always the glowing red eyes, haunting even in the approaching wakefulness.

The Eagle flew with The Angel, across an expanse of purple gasses and nebula. With astonishing speed they flew, and before them was a cloud of blue, and into the mist, they entered a circle of Planes, Celestial Domains. Onto one of these, a bright, green world, The Eagle swept, carrying Droos ably on His Wings. Finally, they reached, in this great country of natural expanses, of forests, valleys, mountains, streams, coasts, and deserts, atop a mesa, The Eagle placed The Queen. Then the Sentient bowed, and Droos returned the gesture."

"You are kindly met, Dear Eagle," said Droos. "I appreciate the rescue. Although I suspect that this is not simply for purposes of my assistance. You have need of my service? How may I help one so great as you?"

"You are kind, child, to recognize the service and debt owed to me, even in exchange for a resource to help save your people," said The Eagle. "I searched for you, and happened to find you in a Dream, though taken far away, seemingly, by a Ghost of Tzefee, to a Domain of The Indeterminate she once resided upon. There, far from being humbled, she became much of who she is today. Yet, that is not why I sought for you. I indeed have need of your service."

"Anything, kind Eagle," said Droos.

"Careful what words you speak here," said The Eagle.

"For both Forcang and Spirits and Others may hold you to them. Do you see that river down below? Please, take this bowl and fill it there, and return here. It may seem a strange request, yet what may be insignificant to you, may prove essential to another."

Without much consideration, Droos took the clay bowl at

the feet of the Spirit. She had a resource of course, and willed her golden wings into being. With them, The Angel brought the bowl easily to the river in some minutes. She alighted beside the stream, and carefully filled the bowl, making sure there was no sediment or contaminant within it. Then she returned to the mesa.

“Good Eagle,” said Droos with a bow. “I have brought what you asked. If only, may I request you tell me its purpose? How may a single clay bowl of water assist one such as yourself?”

“The goal was not simply to obtain water, although that was essential as well,” said The Eagle. “Rather, this was a task of obedience, and humility, and extreme kindness. It was rather those resources that I desired to gather. You did well, although using your gifts as an Angel diminished the Purity of the Water. You will see.”

With that, The Eagle ably and dexterously grabbed the bowl in one of his talons and poured it over the top of a wilted, mostly dead cactus in the center of the mesa. Suddenly, it grew to great heights, so tall it pierced the sky. Perhaps, it might even provide a method of Return!

“Your thoughts are too obvious for one called, *The Queen*,” said The Eagle. “Climb the cactus, this time, without your gift, and see what awaits. Patience and subtlety are essential.”

This time, Droos returned the wings to their resting place, and using the barest of all her senses, picked a way between the thorns of the cactus. Since it had grown so large, this was easy, and seemingly, the texture of the sides permitted climbing like a ladder. Within an hour she had reached the top, and looking about, surely she was in a Celestial Space between Domains. There was a glowing pink orb, amidst a sea of blue mist, and even in the distance she might make out the edge of the stars of the Universe Proper. There, amidst the pink, was the Houses of Healing. She did see the problem, for the Bridge went nearly there, but not all the way. Thus, she was forced to return.

An hour after, she stood before The Eagle, having carefully descended the giant cactus.

“Dear Great Spirit,” said Droos. “Surely, if I had been more humble, and more obedient, and kinder, the Water would have fed the Cactus for it to Grow and Bridge the Whole Distance. What may I do now, for I see but one plant.”

“Obedience, humility, and extreme kindness are but some of the virtues required,” said The Eagle. “So are wisdom and

Book III: The Library

intelligence, a good heart, and open eyes. Use them now, and you may recall that you have gifts. Two wings of an Angel will surely bridge the gaps between the Celestial Domain of Spirit and the Celestial Domain of the Houses of Healing.”

The solution was so simple that Droos blushed.

“You need not be afraid to be imperfect, child,” said The Eagle. “You were born a second ago, at dawn of a fresh day, and I have lived an endless stream of decades. These skills and virtues will come in time. This was training for your new role. There will be more. The next time you are called to the Domain of Spirits, you Know that all that is required is for you to flap your golden wings.”

“You are Kind, Dear Eagle,” said Droos. “Kinder than I expected. I will look forward to our next meeting. This has been a Journey of body, mind, emotion, and soul.”

With that, her wings appeared in a streak of metallic shimmer, like the sunrise, and in a flash, she flew into The Heavens, and was gone. In an instance, she was once more in the sea of shimmering turquoise, of tranquility. Then, she awoke!

Standing beside her was her Showsh! Yet, here he was, a young man, one whom she had called Drerpo, the one she had Known better than any beside herself. Perhaps it would take a Journey of Spirit, along with the others upon which she was embarked, to truly understand this love of her life. She also pondered to herself exactly what this Great Spirit was training Droos in order to do. Yet, she had faith and confidence that this Eagle meant well, even if He required some obedience, and that this training would provide resources for her many burdens ahead.

“My true love,” said Showsh, looking at her smiling. “Did you rest well? Here you have been enjoying The Room of Dreams longer than most. Have you had any Visions of note?”

“Should we believe them even if I shared them, as we have stated,” said Droos. “They were vivid, and curious, and seemingly Real. I had an encounter with your friend, The Eagle. You may imagine now how my Visions went.”

“That bad?” said Showsh. “Well, I feared worse. It would not surprise me if Tzefee has resources prowling the Dream Space. It may be prudent not to use it, without assistance. That The Great Spirit saved you is also notable. I bet that was fascinating. My time on the Celestial Domain of Spirit has always proved quite enlightening to me.”

“You spend time there as well?” asked Droos.

“You might say that we see each other as next door neighbors,” said Showsh. “Elriver and I as well as our family have had many polite conversations and even meals, if they may be called that, with a number of Greater and Lower Spirits, as well as their Associates. We have also been invited to participate in numerous Tests and Trials both for professional and personal growth. The Eagle and His fellow Spirits are to be respected and treated with extreme kindness, and approached with wisdom and intelligence.”

“Funny, you seem to have had a similar lesson at some point,” said Droos. “I wonder that you were not told to be humble and obedient.”

“Well, we learned about humility, yet as a neighbor, perhaps the obedient part of it is left out of most meetings and recreation,” said Showsh. “Just let me know the next time you need to be there. I am also here with a purpose—to bring you to The Room of Attention. There I have a surprise guest for you. I do not expect you would guess who it will be. I hardly believe it myself, given how infrequent this occurs. Word must have gotten around about how wonderful you Truly are, Droos.”

“Who is this very important Forcang?” said Droos.

“It is none other than my father, Drescher of the Drescher Line,” said Showsh. “He claims that he was passing through this Manifestation on his way to a Fast Reflection where he might improve his Knowledge and skill of playing the Viola when he heard the news that I was officially to marry a second time. He just had to meet my new wife before he continued on his way. You are in for a surprise. My father is a Savant, and is skillful at a level that surpasses what any Reflection Mortal might appreciate at numerous aesthetic and scholarly abilities. I expect you to receive a show in a number of them simply by token of who you are in my life and my father’s love for those mediums. I hope you will be as fond of him as I am. I am sorry that my mother was unable to join him.”

“I am happy enough to meet your father, Showsh,” said Droos. “I am sure that someone has to run their Manifestations while he is off learning about the Viola. There will be plenty of time to meet every family member. I am excited for this opportunity, if not a little frightened.”

“I know that He will love you,” said Showsh. “Just the

Book III: The Library

poetry and story of our meeting and narrative should intrigue him as an artist. Although, emotionally he should also love you as a daughter.”

“I did not think Forcang were that fast in their affections,” said Droos. “Something about eons to please and ages of wrath upon disappointment. But take me to him. Do not let me keep him waiting at our first opportunity.”

So the two, bound by love, departed to introduce yet another family member into their increasing circle. It seemed to Droos that from Dreams of Terror and Cruelty she now returned, with some help of a notable Spirit, to a Domain of Love, Family, and Friendship. At the very least, she would honor in humility her blessings and gifts, and play her part in extreme kindness.

It was a small eternal journey to The Room of Attention, adorned with the notable lava rocks. Normally, these would mark it as one of the few locales of serious concern in The Houses of Healing. Yet now it was House of Aesthetics. All manner of artistic tool and device were there, including, seemingly, a small kitchen, an electric guitar, a viola (of course), a canvas and collection of oil paint and various sizes of brushes, and a desk on which an open book lay, incomplete in its authorship.

Before all of these was a large man, dressed in bright red, with a pink hat, and green shoes. He had eyes that sparkled a sapphire shade, an olive skin tone, bronze hair, and a wide smile. Immediately he ran to Showsh, and seemingly in joviality the Firmament shook. Drescher picked up Showsh in the strong hug provided, very unlike a typical Forcang, and for a moment, all disguises disappeared from the Grand Elder Forcang, and he appeared as he did in the Beacon of Heaven, gleaming earring and all. Then Showsh was a young man once more, small and insignificant in the presence of his father.

“This must be the young woman, the scholar of Wisdom, Beauty, and Benevolence of which I have heard so much,” said Drescher.

The man approached Droos, and made to give a bow, but The Angel would have none of it, and went to give her future father-in-law a similar hug, if not quite as strong. Showsh laughed, and Drescher was slightly surprised, but pleased.

“This Queen has Spirit,” said Drescher. “I hardly believed that you would take a second wife, Showsh. Clearly this one is every bit your equal, even if she requires some Promotion. Yet,

did not a wise sage once say that, ‘The Meek will Inherit.’ Also, it takes an Artist to truly appreciate the smallest grain of sand, or most delicate blade of grass in the meadow. You have done well. This one is a True Power. It is no wonder that she is to save us from The Great Wave, after eons of searching for such a prophet....”

“That is straight and to the point, Dear Father,” said Droos. “I am honored by this visit, and by one as noble and ancient and great as you. Truly I must be in the presence of one of the greatest artists of Dweehwail, and the finest of patriarchs. If I am but a shadow of your Light, that will be a universe of colors to my mind. May I be so bold as to request that you choose at least two of these Skills and show me your talents? For I have seen Beauty, although I fear little will have prepared me for this performance.”

“She is quite a flatterer, Showsh,” said Drescher. “Droos should learn a little more confidence. Now... a... Angel, or what they call you, The Queen—I am happy to share this gift with you. I do, after all, live for Aesthetics and Knowledge, as well as my family. Much of it is for myself, yet to keep it there alone would be to diminish it. That is with the exception of some art that I deliberately destroy—for art for art’s sake is a virtue. I am also happy to Instill Happiness.”

With that Drescher immediately went to the kitchen, and retrieved a dish that seemed to be finished at that moment, almost as if he Knew! Fabulous dishes appeared, and he served the various foods, and breads, and salads, as well as a potent drink, which he said was of his wife’s making. These he laid out on a table, presented seemingly from nowhere, in the center of the room, also of aesthetic seamlessness. Yet the chairs were far from perfect, almost, purposely anachronistic. That Thorn in the collection of Wonders only enhanced the moment.

He sang them a song, one to encourage them to eat and drink merrily. It was both sad, bringing tears to their eyes, even Showsh’s. It was happy, and smiles spread across their faces. It talked of roses and flowers that they could smell sensually in Reality and the tastes of fresh fruits at the Dawn of Creation, which they felt in their mouths, on their tongues. It was also a prayer to the Transcendents of the Multiverse and Beyond. All of this was merely an introduction. Upon completion, he took a bow, itself with a grace that made them giddy with glee.

Then as they began to eat and drink, he brought out the

Book III: The Library

canvas, paint and brushes, and while they enjoyed some of the greatest delicacies of Dweehwail, they stared in amazement at the creation of a fabulous work of oil painting. The technique, the speed, the expression, the colors used and mixed, the commentary on the Sentient condition, were Brilliant, and every movement on and off the canvas was purposeful, as though even the movement to collect more paint was part of the dance of the composition. There was an Aesthetic before the aesthetic, and they saw shapes, and colors, and a story was told, as if they viewed a show, with the canvas as a centerpiece. It was one of profound truths, and mysteries, and revelations. All the while, the food they ate, and the drink of Showsh's mother expanded their sense of Enjoyment and Happiness and Experience to Levels never reached before, certainly in the life of Droos.

It only took fourteen Absolute Minutes to complete the divine painting. Then, continuing the Aesthetic, Drescher cleared the paint and brushes to the side, all clean and clear, seeming by the Will of the Savant and The Language of the Universe. This left them with still a generous amount of their meal and drink, and now the man retrieved the electric guitar. Then he stood in the center, with the new, original painting behind him in just the right spot to enhance this musical performance.

Then he jammed, and played, and ran his fingers on the strings, in a way that was outright magical. Truly, he was a God of the Guitar. It seemed a spotlight appeared on him, of numerous colors, and the sound came from everywhere, and images, tastes, touches, all filled their senses. The sensual experience was immersive, and complete, and he played three renditions with vocals that seemed to span dozens of genres of music and art. Even his showmanship was incredible, as if he were a divine dancer, and used the guitar and moved it magically. The painting in the back came to life, and those scenes augmented the new visuals, all combined with the food and the drink now making them quite jovial and cheery.

After twenty-one minutes, the man finished his performance with the guitar, and returned it to its case, with even that seeming as part of the Aesthetic. He retrieved the Book, and from it recited three poems, recently completed, never before pronounced or uttered. These were in the Celestial Dialect of his own Manifestation, yet she Knew the words, and they sank right to the heart of her Soul, and at one moment she was beneath an

infinitely deep well, and at the next, at the peak of the highest mountaintop. She sledded atop the rays of the sun and traversed the light of the stars and the moon. Droos walked the rings of planets, and swam the seas of nebulae, and at last, relaxed on sandy beaches of a bay of purple waters, beneath a yellow sky with three suns, of blue, green, and gold.

This part of the performance was twenty-eight minutes long, and the man returned the Book to the table in fluid motion, and then quickly collected their dishes and drinks just as they finished the last of their food. He returned from the kitchen one minute later with desserts of multitude and concept and both food and drink on a different set of aesthetically wondrous dishes. Now he retrieved a final instrument, his Viola. Seemingly the accompaniment of a larger group, this Forcang made it the star of the show.

As he played the instrument, that sweet tenor mixed with all of the other performances, in sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. They heard the guitar, and the recitation of poems, at just the right intervals, audibly, as the Viola was played, as though they were an Orchestra of One. The dessert Perfectly matched this final movement to the Aesthetic, and it was so exquisitely Beautiful that Droos was near rendered unconscious. With that, for a brief second, a look of anything other than seamless calm appeared on Drescher, and the music changed.

She awoke, and it was the singular Viola, a large man playing an instrument, with passion, and love for his art, a love he shared with his family, in supporting them, and amongst his many friends and relationships. Droos saw Charity, and Tolerance, and Peace, and Joy. The Angel sat back in her seat, as she finished the last of her dessert, and held the remains of her drink in her hand, and closed her eyes as she pondered the final minutes of the performance, and the remaining drops. Finally, the silence that ensued, and the return of these instruments to their proper place was as much a part of the piece. The final movement was forty-two minutes long, and both Droos and Showsh were left speechless, although, the Greater Being was not rendered unconscious.

“Bravo, Father!” said Showsh, snapping his fingers, though the sound was more of scraping pines in a rain storm. “That was truly a notable performance, although I have seen you do better in the past, if I might say. It is certainly a good introduction to Droos

Book III: The Library

of Forcang Art and what goes on in Forcang Cities and Theaters and Shows Performed There.”

Droos suddenly realized she was waking up again, as though she had been rendered unconscious and speechless, dumb and silent by the end of the performance. Sitting up fully aware, she was frightened for a moment. This was one of the first poignant examples of what Forcang were capable of achieving—just in art.”

“Have no fear, or terror, daughter,” said Drescher. “It may be that my art was not adjusted sufficiently for the Senses of Local Forcang. You have my sincerest apologies, for I meant no harm. I do hope the performance was at least adequate.”

“It was... divine...,” said Droos, taking a moment longer to wake up. “Thank you, Dear Father, for answering my Prayers, and already proving to be such a wonderful relation. If I am to have an eternity with such company, I will be Truly Blessed.”

“Also, Father, She has stated that even those capable of viewing her mind should avoid such abilities,” said Showsh. “We should remember our lessons of extreme kindness.”

“You are too right, son,” said Drescher. “I would apologize once more, Droos, although I like to save such reparations for the collections of debts, when they are due. Too few apologies is a problem. So is it the case that too many apologies are also a matter of concern. Still, I did not come here just to perform, although you very much indulged an old Forcang by permitting such enjoyment on my part. Tell me, Droos, do you love my son? Will you stay with him, and be true, once you have your Potencies, and Power? You enter into a perilous journey, that few would embrace. I hope that you are making your choice wisely.”

“I love Showsh with my Whole Soul, and my Whole Self, and everything else I have to give, with the exception of what independence I have to retain for my own benefit,” said Droos. “That is not to diminish, though an eternal commitment requires thought. My choice to be here, is Willing, is Voluntary, is My Choice, from now, until Eternity, for Myself, and, my love for Showsh.”

“If you are to be a Queen of, let us say, Vøvoav, then how will it be for you to govern a Celestial Bureaucracy of Ministers, Lieutenants, Gods, Goddesses, and numerous Servants who in many respects are your innate betters?” said Drescher. “Do you

know how to tolerate a joke, Droos? Do you Know Calm and, in the words of a sage, ‘the Attribute of Mercy Beyond the Strict Rule of Law’?”

“It is hard to say that I do not have any degree of concern,” said Droos. “One Abstract Dimension I may Know well is Confidence. It took some time to get here. I am One Whole Self. To be redeemed, or be available for redemption, requires such Unity. I believe that I am also One Whole Soul, or nearly so, though that is a matter for Elriver to reveal, if She Desired. I will be able to receive any Celestial Bureaucrats as Subjects. There may be some Potencies Beyond my Grasp. As a sage said, ‘Yet your grasp must exceed your reach, or what is a Heaven for?’ Living amongst My Family, in Love with Showsh, Ruling Vøvoav Together, Nothing will be Truly Beyond. As for any jokes, let them come. The breeze will blow, and I will remain. After all, what is a Divine Realm without Subjects who may Insult and Joke about Their Sovereign and Creator? Surely, No Words, or Expression, will Sway Judgement, and True Mercy will Persist.”

“She seems like a True Forcang,” said Drescher. “I am glad that your current wife is having Someone write this all down. It is a story for the ages. It was wonderful to have met you, Dear Droos, Dear Daughter. You are Truly welcome at my home whenever you are ready. You may also be certain that my wife and I will be at the wedding. We look forward to it. You have a Proud, Supportive Drescher Line behind you. It is also the case that you have the weight of Omen, and Foreshadowing of and Infinite Cycle of Multiverses Upon You. I offer you the sincerest Blessings of my Line, and words of Loahueth with the grace of the Transcendent Beings to cast providence upon your Journey. Keep that Confidence, for you shall need it as a Forcang. Do not forget the humility either, for there are those innately superior, and proud, and they deserve respect in regards to their ancient age and experience. You may speak to me like my daughter. To them, you are a child. Remember that.”

With that Drescher took a deep bow, and taking out of his pocket a white feather, stuck it in his hat. He placed a black flower upon his breast, and with a wave of his hand and muttering some words under his breath, all of the aesthetics and instruments were packed and replaced and ready for The Journey, by token of The Language of the Universe.

“Father, it has been a pleasure,” said Showsh. “I do hope

Book III: The Library

we may do this again soon, at home.”

“Truly, it was wonderful to meet you, Dear Father,” said Droos. “You have my sincerest love, and I am always at your disposal as a dutiful daughter.”

“The pleasure, as they say, was mine,” said Drescher. “I also am not looking for a dutiful daughter, but a happy, independent one. Stay true to yourself. I love you too, Dear Droos.”

With that, and a seeming spin, a wondrous display of Sensations flooded their emotions and senses. Numerous colors, sounds, tastes, feelings, they all left them with a sense of joy, a slight dread, some sadness, and above all, a deep feeling of love. Both The Angel and Showsh in his Immanent Form stood with smiles on their young faces.

Just then into the room walked Elriver, seeming to be in some hurry. Still she was composed, and stylishly dressed as ever, in a flowing black dress, amber earrings, and a small tiara on her head, studded with sunstones. Looking around, a small frown appeared on her face for just a moment. Then the weather of The Houses of Healing became chill, and the light darker, but only for the moment.

“Alas, I was called away on Business, and missed the Show,” said Elriver. “I do love your Father and his performances. Of course I love him as well, for he is a Mighty Forcang, and great Friend and Parent. I see him far too infrequently. How did Droos enjoy the Show?”

“I loved it!” said Droos, with the memory of the Pure Aesthetics still fresh in her mind and soul.

“He also said that he and Mother will be attending the Wedding,” said Showsh. “If that is alright with you, Elriver?”

“Why would it not be alright with me if my parents-in-law of hundreds of trillions of years lovingly and happily attended the wedding of my husband to his second wife?” asked Elriver, with a smile. “I do expect most of our family will be there, with some exceptions. I do not know if my sister will be able to pry herself away from whatever exciting new expedition she is enjoying. However, this news will fascinate her. I just hope she treats Droos as more than a pet.”

“That was not that polite,” said Showsh, with a half-smile. “If your sister wants a place in our lives going forward she will give Droos the Respect she deserves, as my wife. Whether she

attends the wedding is up to her. Now, if she wants to treat her as an equal, and induct her in some of her projects and trips, that would be a different story.”

“I thought you said that would be very dangerous,” said Droos, only slightly offended by the conversation.

“For you it would be a threat,” said Elriver. “Particularly, while Tzefee is out searching for ways to make your life miserable. I would recommend you stay in Vøvoav once your tasks in Drerpo are at an end.”

“Are you expelling me from Your Manifestation, Dear Creator?” asked Droos, with a slight chuckle.

“You do have Confidence,” said Elriver, smiling again. “Though sometimes humility is also still important. Do not forget that. You will always be welcome in any Cecil Manifestation, Droos: Drerpo in particular. Among other reasons, you have a pledge to spend time with Darlez while he still lives. Or rather, I should say, before he has grown up, grown old, and died of old age. There are also many other Sentients in this Universe who enjoy your company, and would like to see you again. I also expect that your people would hardly like to be saved by you, only to be completely abandoned. Think on this—were you to do that in the wrong way, they might just make you their new Goddess—in place of a certain old one. You are not the same as when you left them. I would say spending some time periodically in Drerpo would be useful on many levels.”

“There was a topic I wanted to discuss,” said Droos. “Since I am in such prestigious company, this would be the ideal place to explore this, though I am sure that you have better meeting halls for such things. Nonetheless, I would like to know, based on a recent Dream I had, what is The Source of Truth? Is that too much of a digression to ask? May it even be Known?”

“It is not an unreasonable question, and your whole purpose of being in The Library was to research that topic, among Others,” said Showsh. “It is a bit of a digression.”

“The most obvious Source of Truth is The Good,” said Elriver. “Which in turn, may be a Reflection of a Further Transcendent Truth, which according to the Feaist tradition are Selfless Entities at the top of the Order of Sentients. Finally, above even them, is a Unity of Truth and Knowledge, from which Everything Derives. This Unity, might be called The Source of Truth.”

Book III: The Library

“Would it be safe to label some of those orders in between as *The Source of Truth*, or only the pinnacle of the pyramid,” asked Droos. “For something to hold the *article*, *The*, it surely must be unique. Or else, maybe it is used for emphasis. Yet, that pollutes the word, does it not? There must be some Origin of Truth.”

“That perception that there must be an end to an infinite series is a mortal concept,” said Showsh. “In the realm of Abstract Dimensions, there may be an Infinite Series that goes on Forever. It does not Violate any Fundamental Principles of Reality. Thus, there may be multiple Orders that are, *The Source of Truth*. However, it may be more satisfying to label one of them, for qualitative purposes, with that phrase. There is a certain dilution to those who Know the whole pyramid if the phrase is used for too many orders. Thus, it may qualitatively, only refer to The Unity.”

“Yet that would seem to indicate that an atheist or agnostic would not have access to The Source of Truth,” said Elriver. “There may be Others as well of different philosophies and traditions and religions. Why should any be ostracized from the Availability of Truth?”

“Is it necessary that The Unity be Theistic absolutely?” asked Droos. “Certainly many traditions, religions, and philosophies are comfortable with that idea of a personal God, Goddess, Deity, and at the Uppermost, some Unity, that Represents, a Singular Supreme Being. Yet, the Role, the Purpose Ascribed, Need Not Apply to only a Theistic Model. Surely, there might be some Transcendent Natural Law, or Unified Natural Law, that accounts for such principles, yet devoid of the personal aspects doubted by some. *Supreme Reality*, or *Supreme Unity*, may be a set of *Ultimate Principles*, and nothing more (and nothing less). If the atheist may posit radical Laws that govern the Multiverse, and a history of a cycle of Multiverses, and Potent Species of powerful Beings, and all manner of Fabulous Scientific Principles, Why Not Supreme Laws?”

“This *Supreme Reality* appears to be a solution that would work in a variety of models,” said Showsh. “It would function both in a theistic Journey and for those who wish to avoid it. Yet I still wonder if it is not an artificial *End* to the discussion. Why does the Law, the Word, the Rule, Stop Here? Whether Theistic, and Personal Entity, or Simply a Supreme Law and Principle, why not some Vaunted Ultra-Supreme? To quote Droos, ‘Where does it end?’”

“I believe that the whole nature of Supreme Reality is that it Contains within It the Principle, or Potency, of the Final Conclusion, or End to Sequences, or Otherwise, Answers to the Unanswerable or Intangible,” said Elriver. “All Matters of Discussion are Stopped, Ceased, at That Point, on Principle, by Definition, of The Supreme Reality. That is Its Nature, whether an Entity or Principles. That the Concept of This is some Supreme Abstract Dimension is only Reasonable. To consider The Source of Truth is to enter the realm of the Inconceivable, even by Grand Elder Forcang, or what you call Greater Beings. I would say that Truth would not even been Known by Seventh Order Sentients.”

“I thank you for bringing us to this point in the discussion, Elriver and Showsh,” said Droos. “It seems that our Pursuit of Knowledge, and epistemology, and philosophy, has led to an Origin, as well as techniques, however, imperfect when examined by Reflection Mortals who are not Forcang. Still, merely the glimpse of such ideas is worthy. The discussion of Truth and Knowledge and how it is possible to Think is a Good Topic. These Basics must be agreed upon before friends and family may discuss Truths and Knowledge regarding morality and ethics, or good and evil. After all, it must be certain that truth may be known, before such vaunted topics are pursued. It seems we have reached that point.”

“With the Grace of Supreme Reality, and if I may still say, the Transcendent Forcang, may we be worthy of such a discussion, and do it Justice,” said Showsh.

It was at that moment that Droos noticed that Elriver had something in her hand. It was a book with a golden cover, though not metallic or gaudy, but rather mundane, and simple. The letters were jovial, and of a playful script. It was clear it was written in Sre, but seemingly her lessons had taught her well, for she understood, and the title of the book was, *The Library*. The Angel looked up at the young woman with some surprise and joy.

“Yes, I brought this, in token of this moment,” said Elriver. “Droos, The Angel, The Queen, you have acquired as much of a clean slate as you may be able to do so, as well as a commitment to Pursue a Journey Towards The Good for the Rest of Your Days. You are Whole of Self, you are an Overwhelming Majority of Soul. Take this book, this record from The Library, which you have now seen with your Own Eyes. Let the Memory be a Blessing from Drerpo, and Its Creator and Sovereign.”

Book III: The Library

Droos received her copy of The Library as a silvery glow appeared between the hands of the Two Queens. For a moment, it is said that every corner of Drerpo shone with a shimmering silver glow. That was a moment, that passed, and Droos had her token, and began preparation for the next book in her Journey.

“You are Healed,” said Showsh. “You are redeemed, in the way my wife has said. It is now time to discuss the philosophy we always wanted. In this state of purity, we travel to Paradise, to none other than Gon Eden, the Highest Heaven of Drerpo, to examine Morality and Ethics, and to Tour the Domain. There will be both realities expected and some surprises to be seen. We both believe that you are ready to see the next Secrets, to see the Truth, and to comprehend a Multiverse that has Thorns.”

“When will we depart?” said Droos. “Are you sure that I am ready? How will we get there?”

“You are ready, Droos,” said Elriver. “We will depart in Seven Absolute Days. As for how you will enter, you will find that requires some help. Gon Eden and baetOak are among Sacred Realms that need certain permissions. The Servants of Gon Eden, also called Angels, may enter and leave at will. So may the Lieutenants who manage these realms, as well as a handful of Gods and Goddesses who operate particular aspects. The Judge may enter and leave as well, along with The Usher. Finally, Showsh and I may go there.”

“It is also considered acceptable, for you Droos, the Queen of the Angels, the highest ranking Angel, to receive special permission to enter, at least from the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe.

“Particularly, Droos, once you have passed certain trials necessary to prove your worth and Right to be there,” said Elriver.

“It seems that once I enter Gon Eden, I may never leave,” said Droos. “I embrace the Rain of Souls, yet that does not mean I am prepared to die this instant. I want at least a lifetime with Showsh, and an eternity would be great as well. Will you permit me passage from this Heaven afterwards?”

“That is an interesting technicality,” said Showsh.

“Normally we would have to ask permission from the Lieutenant of Gon Eden or The Judge for such an accomplishment. It also does not hurt that you are a Servant. As it so happens, the Lieutenant has already given permission, by requesting our action in this matter already. This is certainly an unusual circumstance.

Ultimately, since permission was granted, the authority has passed to Us. Really, we might have chosen regardless. Only, as you Know, it is not the Privilege of the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo to Interfere with the Rain of Souls and Justice of the Universe, almost all of the time.”

“What will I see when I arrive?” said Droos.

“Gon Eden may be seen in dreams and visions,” said Elriver. “Which may or may not be true. It has been described in countless stories, poems, books, and literature. Ancient sages of one billion cultures have delved into its ideas, concepts and depths. Almost none of them have ever seen it with their own eyes. It is nearly unheard of for a mortal to go there, let alone return to report as a witness. Even you, as The Angel, will have to see with your Own Senses. I fear even those will be insufficient to grasp where you reside.”

“An important lesson of the Tree of Thorns is that there is also a Tree of Life,” said Showsh. “There are also many other plants, including those with berries, that show there is sweetness as well. Of course, that would be assumed. These mere ideas would not approach the Reality of the Experience of Gon Eden. A berry in the Houses of Healing is not a Berry in Gon Eden.”

“Is it more similar to the display of Aesthetics by a Savant?” pondered Droos.

“That is very astute,” said Elriver. “Gon Eden is the Highest Heaven, common in many Celestial Domains in numerous Manifestations. There is some similarity to the sublimity experienced by mortals who have Soul Fragments in Gon Eden, in Any Locale Therein, and Forcang Enjoying a Performance by a Forcang Savant. It is possible that the Grand Journey which ultimately empowers the Savant similarly Hallows Gon Eden. I do not Know if a comparison is Truly necessary. For what Righteous Soul Fragments gain in Gon Eden, I would say the gift is greater there, and the reward ultimately more, even than most Savants.”

“Perhaps, the Grand Journey Created Savants to Soothe Forcang of Their Loss of Gon Eden,” said Showsh. “After all, mortals have the gift of death, and life after death. They have Soul Fragments that may experience Gon Eden, or some other Heaven of the Sacred Realm. Meanwhile, unless slain by injury or sickness, and sturdy even in the face of those threats, Forcang go on, and on, for eons, and hundreds of trillions of years. There are even some ancient Forcang who count their age in the quadrillions.

Book III: The Library

Is that truly luck or a curse? Maybe the Savant was the Answer of the Primordial Thçtz—a Piece of Heaven, of Pure Aesthetics, that Forcang might enjoy in this life. Forcang simply do not have the gift of an afterlife so soon.”

“I thought that you did not like death?” said Droos, looking at Showsh curiously.

“I do not like death,” said Showsh. “A Sentient should do everything Moral, Ethical, and according to sound Integrity to live as long as they are able. Yet it is not Evil to say that a mortal who lives a long, righteous life, of many decades or centuries, pursuing The Good, fills their world with love and happiness, peace and kindness, and dies gently at an old age surrounded by friends and family, that this is not some kind of Blessing, or even Beauty. It may be painful for loved ones. Yet, for that mortal, they have earned their reward. Surely, many Fragments will spend an Absolute Age in numerous Heavens of the afterlife, including in Gon Eden, with departed friends and family and ancestors, and among the righteous. I meant that death before it is due, by violence, by sickness, by pain, that is Evil, and sad. Not all death of mortals is wrong, or terrible, even if still a difficult mystery for most humans.”

“You will see some of that for yourself,” said Elriver. “There is a reward for the Righteous. Also, you might be surprised to Know that there is more than one Heaven of the Sacred Realm, just as there is more than one Hell, as insinuated just now. Gon Eden in Drerpo is the Highest Heaven, and baetOak is the Lowest Hell. Yet, there are others. Do not despair if either is not all inclusive, or does not in your limited vision or senses meet your expectations. For there are places for reunions of family and friends, of peace and happiness, that exist in Gon Eden, and Beyond. Soul Fragments of the Rain of Souls Truly go on Journeys in the afterlife, between life, in search of reconstituting a Whole Soul, and of Rebirth. The Righteous Soul finds its way to Many Heavens, and gains those experiences by Rebirth. Which combination is most Useful, I will leave that discussion for when you meet my sister. For she is an expert on the Creation of Living Sentients, as well as Reflection Creatures.”

“I believe that I want to be surprised,” said Droos. “I have faith in my Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo to Guide Me. I will not be led astray. My Confidence in my Whole Self and Majority Soul will Sustain Me. I need not receive any further information

on The Future. Merely, I wish to be certain the matters of my past are finished to satisfaction, without much digression.”

“We have already discussed death,” said Showsh. “It seems that if anything we have expanded upon the topic. Is there anything new we have learned?”

“I do not like death,” said Droos. “Particularly, if death is used as a tool of state, in any manner, I would have doubt about that Society. It would not seem to be following a pathway towards The Good. Yet, it is not required that, particularly mortals, go on forever. Certainly, all attempts should be made to fight illness, cure diseases of any form, and maintain peace and tolerance over war and violence. Where death comes of old age at the end of a good life, there is a Reward worth having. That is a gift, and it is hard to call such a form of death anything but a Blessing. Rather, we Pray and Hope that our lives will have a similar End, and we will be reunited in the afterlife with those who have gone before us. As for those of us cursed with the immortality of eternity, I suppose we must rely on Savants and other Forcang delights to pass the time.”

“Clearly The City was an improvement over the Society of The Jungle,” said Elriver. “Yet, it was far from a Society. Tens of thousands of years might pass, and Sentients still might be sufficiently imperfect to at best choose among the least bad of all political systems and economic models. That is better than any approach that assures corruption or Evil or accumulation of Power.”

“If anything, democracy has many problems, including in representative models,” added Droos. “Capitalism is also perilous, as it is an engine of democracy, yet also provides the threat of unlimited power in limited hands, whether in token form, or distributed among other properties. They both may be some of the least perfect systems, as you say, ever created.. Yet, beyond the Orders of Servants, or Goddesses, and the Celestial Bureaucracy of Heaven, where Sentients, Forcang, understand Abstract Dimensions on a Transcendent level in comparison to Reflection Mortals, there are really no other functional alternatives that do not turn out to be worse upon conclusion. The nature of humanity is to be imperfect, and the consequence is the availability of the set of only this one really reliable system of government, political model, and economic format. They are heavily flawed, and require laws to make them sufficiently Moral and Ethical. However, every other

Book III: The Library

alternative is worse.”

“As for our discussion of the Philosophy of Knowledge, or epistemology, it would seem that this has been examined many times in The Library,” said Showsh. “How do you think we are able to know the truth, Droos?”

“It seems that Reality must be approached with empiricism and skepticism,” said Droos. “However, to the extent that Truth may be Known, we may Know that The Good is Real, and Its Reflections, The Forms, which in turn, cast Reflections upon the Shadows of Everything. To live The Good Life, is to attempt to approach The Good, as nearly as possible, which is essentially to reach The Good in practice, mathematically speaking. To be on a Journey to The Good requires maintaining a balance between the numerous Dualisms of Abstract Dimensions that makeup Reality. It is acceptable to sample behavior from any portion of the Dualism, yet preferring the upper portion is the right approach. An approach to The Good is curved, and nuanced, and messy, and imperfect. Yet, it is about attempting The Journey, not completing it.

“Furthermore, The Good, is a Reflection of Transcendent Forcang, which are a Reflection of Supreme Reality. It is Supreme Reality that is The Source of Truth. This Source is Available to both the Theist and the Atheist, as it is both a religious and philosophical concept. Furthermore, it is an Ultimate End to Sequences, Innately, and Thus, No Further Source of Truth is Necessary. It may also be possible that the Essence of Supreme Reality is that its Transcendence may contain an Infinite Sequence of Sources of Truth, Yet Be Finite and Complete. There is, then, an origin to Truth, and The Good, and The Forms, and Knowledge. With these, further exploration into Morals, and Ethics, and possibly someday, topics like Aesthetics, may be attempted.”

“The Queen of Angels is prepared to visit Paradise!” said Elriver.

Then suddenly, Elriver and Showsh grew, and the whole of The Houses of Healing diminished. The walls shrank away, and now Droos flew, encircled by her golden wings, glowing in brilliant white light, before two Great Beings, the Mightiest Glow of Wonder and Authority, their Raiment of the Creator and Sovereign now on full display. Together, the three, in this moment far more in the Transcendent Self, wandered free from the Celestial Domain, and into the Space between Spaces of the Firmament of

Drerpo. Slowly, the new Royal Family of the Universe made Their way to Gon Eden.

“I thought it would be seven days before we entered the garden,” whispered Droos, her voice silent, and still.

A chorus of Servants began a song along their route, and seven Goddesses kept them company. The mighty group crept through the bluish fog of the Celestial Domains, and Time and Distance meant nothing. It seemed still that the whole of Drerpo was singing, every Servant now, in a Great Variety of Voices and Melodies and Tunes.

“It will take Seven Days to traverse the Firmament to the Sacred Realm, and to the Borders of Gon Eden, while we Escort, one such as yourself,” said Showsh. “The Queen of Angels travels to Paradise for the first time, while still living. Rites of passage must be observed, and one thousand rituals among the Servants and within the Celestial Domain. The Angels of The City of the Righteous must ready the tables, for along with her, the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo attend. Such is this rarity, it will be a simple, but Beautiful feast, filled with song and dance and joy.”

As the Royal Company traversed the Firmament, Artists, Servants of another Great Celestial Domain of Aesthetics, wove Performance, and Beauty, to grace their Passage. Blessings were recited, and Prayers, to the Transcendent Forcang, but surely also to other religions within The Alliance of the Multiverse, and even The God of Answer. Multitudes were gleeful in this moment, and trumpets blared.

“You do remember that I am only visiting,” said Droos. “I also want to remain myself. What will I be after I have viewed Paradise while still alive?”

“That cannot be helped,” said Elriver. “It does change a Sentient, a Whole Soul, for such an event. Truly, you will be great even among Forcang. Yet, having reached near the goal of one task, you have two more ahead, one difficult, one nearly impossible. You will need the Providence. I Pray to the Supreme Reality, and Transcendent Forcang Below, to Guide Us, and You, on Your Journey of Omen, and Fate. May Ruby be Mistaken, and let the cycle of Destruction End Here, with Dweehwail. Let it be the start of The Age of Linearity.”

“That would be a linearity of time, if not soul,” said Showsh. “Although, with the latter, it may seemingly be varied depending on which Language of the Universe is used.

Book III: The Library

“It seems you have been talking more to our Sons,” said Droos.

“All will be revealed in time,” said Elriver, a voice in the back of the mind of the Queen of Angels. “First to Gon Eden, to Paradise, to Judge Morality and Ethics, to View the Truth of the Fairest of Realms. Then onward, to Fire, Shadow, and Serpents.”

“Are Serpents, Shadow, and Flame all that terrible?” remarked Droos, even now. “Surely, they have their place in every Universe, in each Cosmos, throughout Dweehwail, at the very least as Thorns. In the end, might any be humbled, by our Faith, by our Confidence, in Sublime Redemption and a Return and Rebirth of Love and Family? Perhaps, a small use of The Language of Rebirth may be required. Yet, why not be bold, and simply diplomatic?”

“Only you, Droos, would see such Mercies, Beyond Judgement, even Now,” said Showsh, beside her on the Journey to Paradise. “Now open your mind, your soul, your body, your emotions, your heart, to the Sacred Realm. This visit will tempt you, and lull you to stay. Yet we need you, Droos, in Dweehwail. We go to Judge Paradise, and Ethics, and Morality. But come away with me. Do not forget Yourself. Your Purpose is Great. Choose to Leave! Or else, you may never enter the domain of the living again.”

“For the sake of our eternal love, Showsh, Dear One, the love of my life, I would leave Paradise, and charge into the deepest depths of baetOak,” said Droos. “I would still be myself, for myself. We will be ourselves, together, for an eternity of love and happiness and peace, in the World to Come after the Humbling of Tzefee.”

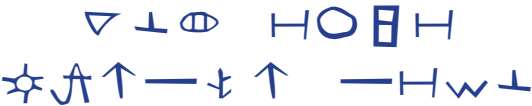
With that, she willed her Transcendent Essence, and turned, and She and Transcendent Showsh mingled, slightly, in a Kiss, of Love, and Beauty, and Serenity. It is said that in that moment, one quadrillion, quadrillion flowers grew and blossomed on the Reflections, the countless worlds of Drerpo, and the moon rose in the sky, and the stars, even if by day in that locale, and for seven minutes, it was night in all of the Universe, even in the Beacon of Heaven. Then a new dawn rose, the light of Elriver’s blessing.

The pair left their Embrace, and returned to the Journey with the Company. So the minstrels of the Artists and Angels and Goddesses sang, and danced, and recited poems, and instruments

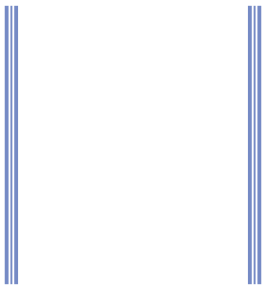
of heavenly design were played, and all of the Celestial Realm held its breath. For no event had taken place like this in the history of Drerpo to this date, though there had been some remarkable antecedents. Droos and Showsh, side by side in Their Revealed Glory, the Queen of Angels and the Sovereign of Drerpo, glowing in orbs of golden and purple and silver light, yet of endless hues and shades, meandered in tranquility along the firmament, and onward towards the Sacred Realm, following the trail of Elriver's voice as a guide, to the height of their goal, in the Garden of Gon Eden.



End of Book III



Book IV
Surprises in Heaven



☆Λ↑—‡↑ —Hwδ
⌘⊙⊔ω∨‡☆ H○⊞ ☆⊙⌘



Chapter I

Refuge for the Meek

Beneath starlight, amidst moonlight, between endless shades and hues, tall trees grew, verdant, strong, as much Sentient and alive as any Refection Mortal Beyond the Firmament. Here and there, tiny creatures, Sentient Spirits of the Trees, stood, and watched, amazed, yet welcoming, and expressing the Truth of the Wild Growth. Still further, all manner of forest denizen meandered, the wolf with the bison, the scitter with the fox, and speaking, and aware. They spoke gently, and deliberately, both in praise of each other, their lives, and now this unique interruption. For the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo had arrived.

These trees were The Eldest, a Kind that Existed to Begin the Universe, or was likely borrowed from some Seed now within the Spirit Domain. Nonetheless, it was now an independent version, and they were the Parents of all Trees of Drerpo. Perhaps it was no surprise that such nearness to the Seed would result in Spirits contained within them. Furthermore, all of The Eldest had Themselves Ancestors, and Ultimately, the Grandest of all Trees stood Sentinel over this grove of The Forest. Gladly, for it was His Forest, the one in which He Wandered most frequently.

There, in a corner, to that the Royal Ensemble walked. At their feet, flowers blossomed, and then faded as their steps continued. Not for the first time in the history of Drerpo, this Hidden Dwelling of Heaven awaited Judgement by the Queen of Angels. Would it be deemed Moral and Ethical? Would the Sentient Soul Fragments Therein have Integrity? Did they deserve this afterlife? This first Journey of The Queen took her to those least assumed such a Vaunted Reward. And some would insult their blessed Realm as lacking of a certain luster—for those who desire dwellings that have soft beds and golden lamps. Others find that a comfortable abode need only have the basics, and

be beautiful, and for that they are blessed. To this Fairest of all Realms of Paradise, Droos, Elriver, and Showsh now Ascended to visit.

The forest opened up, under the silvery light of night, into a beautiful, broad grassy meadow. If that appeared a repeat of The Library, rather, interspersed were Great Trees. Only, seemingly, they had grown oddly, as though the living wood itself had formed the rooms of a house. The structure was sufficient for several to share a dwelling, and there before their eyes were Sentients, among them, humans, sitting, talking, socializing, singing, and dancing. Seemingly these Souls were at ease in the silver light, and no nightly noises or half-light diminished their enjoyment of the paradise.

What was so special about this space? The meadow was broad, and Droos looked about, and at once, there was an end, yet, then, there was no conclusion. Those who found their Reward here had no obstacle of Space in Reality. Neither was there a limit of Space amongst each other, and any friends might sit in peace beside one another with no physical limitation on how many might be beside the others. There was a certain trick of the eyes, more visible to the likes of the Queen of Angels given her Better Senses, and a Hue of Souls Covered Places where the Science crossed into Magic, or rather, Transcended either in accomplishing the Virtue of Paradise.

There was food and drink to be had here, and lest any believe that heaven had no alcohol, that was simply untrue. Yet, there were exactly seven brews, all by the Master Brewer of Heaven, and while they provided very mild intoxication on a very rare occasion to these adults, these Souls were here because they had proven their Morality, Ethics, and Integrity. Thus, they drank for the enjoyment of these Heavenly ales and pilsners and beers. Mostly, they augmented the joy, and singing, and recitation of poetry, and time together.

The food would only be known to Forcang enjoying the feast of a Savant, yet Truly, this was better, yet simpler. Only salads, and berries, and fresh fruits, seemingly plucked from the trees and gardens this morning. They trusted the Master Gardeners of Gon Eden to Prepare and Serve, except for the Souls that enjoyed such Service, and then they had an Afterlife that included sometime preparing meals and the joy of hosting.

There was nothing stronger than a potent stout or a dark

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

cup of coffee in The Meadow of The Forest on Gon Eden, and most would consider the freshest berries to be far more potent, and purer, than any passing whim they had in the youth of their mortal days while alive, when they might have tried some other substance. As such, berries were a favorite among many, but eating them heartily did nothing more than stain the hands and mouths a little, and the clothing, a colorful, textured fabric, that was self-cleaning upon completion of this difficult task of eating, drinking, and socializing.

Droos observed this, and wondered if these Sentients had been gifted a Heaven of Sloth. For surely, they spent their time in lethargy. Yet as she observed, periodically Soul Fragments emerged from the ensemble and passed them, with a bow to Elriver and Showsh (and to Droos), and entered The Forest, for recreation, of a kind that would be hard to capture outside of Paradise. The play and antics of friends and family in the trees, with the Spirits, even, with Him, at times, provided some duty, and work, if it might be called that, which included cleaning the forest, or making paths, or tossing leaves; yet surely more went on in The Forest than was Known.

It seemed many had seen this Minister of the Heavenly Hosts, who trotted amidst the Trees, most of all in this grove, in this Forest, with this group of Soul Fragments. He appeared here as a Great Deer, Noble, and Powerful, yet gentle, and soothing. It was his eyes, more than the others of that kind that traveled with Him. They unburdened the Fragments of Any Residual Burdens of Life, and Presented a Challenge for the Next. Surely it was these Encounters with Him that Encouraged these Peaceful Souls to Depart this Place, to Search for The Others. Or else, why would any Soul Fragment leave this place? Yet He, in Those Eyes, Told of a Secret, a Future, a New Life, a Rebirth, that Must Continue. If any Soul Fragment might lead the Effort at Reunion with the Brother and Sister Soul Fragments, surely it would be the Aspect from here.

As for the Natural Houses, that grown from the Trees of The Forest, they must be larger on the inside, mansions reserved for the elect of heaven. The Queen followed a few skipping Soul Fragments into one, and found that it was neat and comfortable, and aesthetically beautiful, smelling of fresh pine and crisp, new snow at dawn. Yet the beds were, though larger than a single, not enormous, and the available clothing, not gaudy or numerous,

and no jewelry or gold or silver garnished the adornment. It was thoroughly comfortable and homely, and more Sentients sat within, in obvious delight, and conversed and as it were, played a board game on a table beside the roaring light of a bluish flame. Seemingly here the fire crackled happily, out of the very wood itself, yet the fuel was not consumed. All of the faces had smiles, and twinkles in their eyes.

What of the population? There were all genders, and great variety of Sentients, of race, and also of age. It was a sad notion that as well as the very old, the young might find themselves in such a place. Then again, it was comforting to Droos that even children receive their reward. If anything, in this Realm the ratio of the young was higher than proportional. To contrast with the trend of the mortal world, these youths seemed to spend time with their elders, having been here through time beyond time, and their enjoyment of this space in friendship and learning and peace was equal, certainly, to any of the others. No guardians were required, as these were the righteous, and their nature was of little concern. Regardless, Gardeners, Servants of Gon Eden were here and there, tending the space in general, for any that had the occasional question. Yet as far as Droos might tell, from young and old alike, all delighted in this space and existence.

As for the population of the dwellings, these were friends of similar ages of multiple genders. This defied Droos' expectation as to what she would find regarding the reunification of families. Surely any reasonable afterlife would bring the Soul Fragments of loved ones together. Sure enough, once she asked several, it did appear that amidst the multitude were family members. Only, she noticed that they wore different clothing, other combinations of varied color and hue. Some of the families here, seemed to have been placed as Fragments in this part of Paradise. Others freely visited from elsewhere, and also, to Droos' interest, other Heavens.

Droos was interested to glean some basic information about at least some Celestial Domains that rewarded Families with eternal reunion, and one for Friends. Apparently, the nature of those Firmaments was that many moments from the life of those Soul Fragments were captured in those Heavens simultaneously. Thus, there was a merger of Time and Reality and Location to increase the potential of memory and reminiscence. New experiences might be created that were unique, yet the great times from life might be recalled more easily, surrounded by those

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

family members and friends, from all times of life. Really, in those Heavens, the Celestial Linear Time Line had no meaning. Only, the Reward for Soul Fragments was relevant. It was these Fragments from all parts of the Timeline that visited here, among others, and thus, these Fragments, in this Heaven.

There was also a matter of interest, for Droos discovered that there was a Heaven designed to place the Soul Fragments of those who were rivals, or enemies in life. The purpose was that at least after death, enough time, and experiences in the afterlife, together, might purge these souls of that enmity. Surely, prior to being reborn, the Whole Soul would benefit from having as little hatred as possible, particularly with the knowledge of what True Hatred does to Soul Fragments. Some of these Souls, usually those more advanced, were visiting here, usually with the former rival, now at this stage, a close friend—at least as Soul Fragments.

“It would seem that there are no rules here, or that they are vastly complex,” said Droos, beginning to consider her Judgement on this matter. “Are these Souls from Disparate Heavens of Drerpo simply able to meander to and from their Domains? What of Order? What of inevitable disputes? I do not believe even the Soul Fragments of the Righteous in Paradise never argue.”

“That is a keen observation,” said Showsh. “There is a reason there are Servants here, and along the route from other Heavens, and in those Domains. You may believe with confidence that there are Guides for this Journey and Celestial Servants and Bureaucrats that make sure that Heaven runs smoothly. Gon Eden may be the Highest Heaven, however, there are full Goddesses and Gods who ensure the full Network of Heaven and Firmament runs smoothly. It would be a sad Paradise if these Righteous Fragments would be unable to see their family members.”

“Were you reading my mind again, Dear Love of My Life?” asked Droos, with a smile.

“Not at all, Droos,” said Showsh. “Only great minds have similar ideas. You are starting to think like a Forcang. In Celestial Domains where time and distance have different meanings, there is no reason why there cannot be a permanent connection between Heavens.”

“You will also observe, Dear Droos,” said Elriver, “That these Soul Fragment are free to stay here for as long as they wish: even an eternity.”

“That is not entirely True is it?” asked Droos. “Who is

He?”

“He is the Lieutenant of Gon Eden, and for that matter, the Chief Minister of the Network of Heaven,” said Showsh. “It is His purpose to ensure the tranquility and peace and reward for all of the Souls of Heaven, and in particular, the Fragments of Gon Eden. As a side objective, he also does try to get some to consider their next lives. However, he is not a stern salesmen, and all are permitted their own choices. Most eventually move onward, whether sooner, or in a matter of eons. Some do stay forever, and are the True Elders of Gon Eden and Heaven. That does diminish the overall Whole Soul, however.”

“Are there relationships even in Heaven, Dear Queen?” said Droos.

“Paradise would be a poor existence if all relationships were prohibited,” said Showsh. “You should know that with a casual mention to a Gardener, any may enter into a relationship, and generally once those in Gon Eden begin one, they last a long time, if not forever. The only real limitations on these are for children, who receive some monitoring in these youthful romances by the Gardeners, and the fact that many Soul Fragments eventually move onward. It is said that the most powerful romances follow each other through mortal lives, to afterlives, to rebirth, and future existences. Thus, even without complete recall, it may be the Greatest of All Romances, even held here in Heaven, are Soul Mates, Who have been Together as Whole Souls through Much of the History of the Multiverse.”

“There are two observations that come to mind as well,” considered Droos, puckering her lips for a moment. “Not that I have spent my life doing mind-altering substances, or anything more intoxicating than a hard drink, or coffee, but some would find an afterlife without these beautiful ways of feeling, and the emotions created, to be somewhat lacking. Is there a Heaven for those who enjoy such escapes and pastimes. Also, would you tell me what is so special about this Meadow in this Forest of Gon Eden that we start here, and that the Minister of Gon Eden resides nearby, of all locales?”

“Those are fine questions,” said Elriver. “There is a Heaven called Sublimity, and Sentients rewarded with Fragments there do experience what you would call *highs* associated with substances of all types, along with the benefit that they will never suffer any ill side effects or harm to their health. The Firmament is

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

filled with food and drink and artwork to enhance the experience, and any bad exposures, which are rare, may be ceased simply by calling the name of the Goddess of that Heaven, who blesses those Fragments with instant relief from any suffering. For that matter, as the routes between Heavens are almost always open, Soul Fragments from even Gon Eden occasionally go there as well, and many other Firmaments, for a time beyond time, to enjoy the experience as well. It is only the temperament of any Soul Fragment that effects this choice, as any are capable of making such a choice, whether in life, or during this afterlife. Yet, Sublimity is a Heaven equal to all others, except Gon Eden, although, as I said, it is popular as a destination to visit, even for the Righteous Souls of this High Heaven.

“As for the nature of the Souls in this Meadow, it is a place for what might be called in life, *The Meek*. Many on the Council of the Firmament in The Alliance of the Multiverse would say that such a locale in Gon Eden of the Celestial Domains of a Manifestation is referred to as a *Refuge of the Meek*. That is a technical term, and unnecessary to Know. I would hope you see it as far more than a *refuge*. For those who lived lives of a modest existence, whether of little financial means, of few worldly possessions, even those deprived of many rights and privileges against their will, and the ability to enjoy those basic benefits, but nonetheless maintained their Dignity, their Morals, Ethics, and Integrity, their Love, Tolerance, and promoted Peace towards Others, this First of All Paradises is for Them.”

“In case you are concerned that some would be disappointed to not receive a palace as a reward in heaven, first of all, I would think part of the temperament of the righteous who have a Soul Fragment here is the True Knowledge of Property and Material Resources, as we discussed in the Library,” said Showsh. “That being said, there is the Heaven of The Palace, a place of luxury, open to souls to experience just that. However, you would be surprised how few Fragments spend time there who begin their afterlife here. That is not to say that one or two times beyond time occur here and there, with a few friends or family members, yet there is nothing but comfort and joy and happiness in this meadow. It is considered an Unworthy Age if the Gardeners of The Refuge of the Meek receive more than forty-two complaints or criticisms for improvement, and that is despite that all suggestions are actually welcome. I believe in the current age they are at about

four.”

“Do you mean to say that Reflection Mortals who spent their lived deprived of so much would be satisfied with so little in the afterlife?” said Droos.

“These are an Enlightened group of Sentients,” said Elriver. “They are ready to lead their Other Soul Fragments to an Improved Position upon Rebirth. Or else, enjoy the Network of Heaven for an Eternity. That being said, not every Fragment will reside here. Yet those who do will find it to truly be a Paradise.”

“I am sure I am only getting the answers I am receiving from these Fragments because they have Shrines here, and are taught to worship the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo, Pardon Me,” said Droos. “Yet I must be an objective Judge. With their Masters present, how are they supposed to be honest.”

“She is a good Judge,” said Showsh. “My wife and I will step aside, and enjoy some of the local cuisine, and song and dance, while you mingle. Do not be afraid to wander far, and ask any questions. We will stay put, and scarce as we are able.”

“That seems fair,” said Droos, as she kissed Showsh, in a passionate embrace, before quickly stepping aside and disappearing into the Meadow of Souls.

Droos mingled, and conversed, and many days passed, and months, of seeming time after time, or beyond time, and a great distance was traversed. She sang, and sampled the food and drink. The Queen of Angels talked to two teenagers in love, accompanied by a Gardener, a group of eleven friends who had enjoyed this fair space for three Ages, and all varied Sentients of the multitude in the Firmament. One notable absence was doubt or disparagement, or insult to the Paradise. It was also notable that nearly all had excellent manners, were polite, extremely kind, and egalitarian universally. It was touching to see families who had enjoyed paradise, whether locally, or visiting from the larger Network, for some Eons. Also, she talked to Soul Fragments who were nearing a decision to leave this place, in search of other Pieces of Themselves. If only they might find Other Fragments, their Knowledge, their Self Discovery, would be at a level that might not even be achieved here.

It was also clear that if anything the most common religion was Feaism, though it was not promoted, but almost every religious tradition was represented. Even, they said, apparently the Goddess of the Answer Herself made appearances from

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

time to time to Improve Her Art, and Abilities, and Perform Her Duty. That the Celestial Bureaucrat responsible for answering the prayers of religions in Drerpo without a directly responding Deity or Minister would Practice Her Trade among the Religions of the Refuge of the Meek was curious, and endearing. They did say that She was a Busy Goddess, with numerous Labors and Responsibilities that took Her to every corner of the Universe. One fact Droos did glean was that there were no Shrines to Elriver and Showsh, or any other one religion in The Meadow of The Forest. There was one Shrine to a Generic Supreme Reality.

As she finished her observations and conversations, Droos found herself talking to an Elder of Heaven, a Genderless Sentient, of an Age dating only to what They would call, *Long Ago*.

“I am curious, Dear Blessed Elder,” said Droos. “How is it that The Meek are able to maintain their righteousness, in the face of temptations, and demands to test morality, ethics, and integrity? What made it possible for you, now having spent some eternity here in Paradise, in great comfort, after that one life, to still love, and be tolerant, and promote peace, and follow the Journey of The Good, in pursuit of The Good Life?”

“Dear Child of Drerpo,” said The Elder. “Ultimately the raiment of life in this physical world is of limited value beyond necessary survival. Aesthetic beauty is relevant, yet even the dreary cloak that provided excellent warmth is brilliant in its light. The value beyond the necessities is the love and health and wellbeing of friends and family. The Good Life is to pursue The Good, that Journey, however challenging, as the sage said, you know, ‘That narrow bridge,’ to trend towards the higher of virtues, but to consider even the opposite. That is, the truth is the suffering of life, the pain of betrayal, the limitations of a flawed society—I may pursue the good that I wish to see, however small each step may be—as another great sage once said. Along with love and relationship, to be moral, ethical, and to have integrity, these provide an emotion, a state of mind, that surpass the illusions of the Evil side of Property and Other Temptations. Even the poorest of the poor may perform a service of loving kindness in charity, or act towards others with extreme kindness, and a smiling face. In the End, Child, I did what was right, because that life was simply superior to the alternatives, no matter the consequences. In the end, those were minor, and irrelevant. What would life be, in pursuit of The Good, without Pain and Sacrifice to show what

Paradise really means?"

"Here you are, in the Highest Heaven, in the First of All Heavens," said Droos. "It seems you have earned your reward. You have been here an eternity. Why do you not move onward, and seek your Other Fragments? If the Truth is Rebirth, why Persist?"

"Silly girl" said The Elder. "The Truth is Choice. No Fragment is Required to Participate in the Cycle, and for some, Heaven is Enough. For Others, Rebirth may be the Ultimate Reward. Who is to say, whether Fragment, Goddess, God, or Greater Being, who is Right? I certainly do not have the Answer. What I have is an Independent Choice. I choose a single afterlife in Gon Eden, and it has never proved me wrong yet. There are few better places in Drerpo to reside."

"Dear Elder, what is the commonality among The Meek of Paradise?" said Droos. "How is it that Soul Fragments, such as yours, are judged to reside in this Heaven, as opposed to The Palace, or Sublimity, or Family, or Friend? There must be some temperament that exists in common?"

"It would seem The Queen of Angels was not listening to her exalted beloved," said The Elder. "This matter has been discussed. There are few secrets here. What I will add, and I do so without shame, is that the Fragments of The Meadow share an Honest Dignity, that exists despite numerous terms of belittlement in life, in many shapes and forms. Financial limitations and persecution by governments is just one limitation. Those who overcome many great hardships, from sickness, to wars, to natural disasters, and go onto live The Good Life according to The Good regardless, these are The Righteous, who earn a place here. Their Whole Self is not forever diminished by any darkness, and if any healing is required, they seek it out, and accept help, and are repaired and made whole. Their life is spent first to love themselves, and just as often in selfless service to others, in the face of all limitations thrown before them. It defies those who use the, *Law of The Jungle*, as an excuse for terrible behavior, that The Meek who earn this Vaunted Meadow in Gon Eden are True Natives in any environment, jungle or otherwise, and with a smile on their faces."

"That seems unlikely," said Droos. "You are suggesting that the reply to a hurricane, or a mass atrocity, should be a smile, and indifference?"

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“Not at all,” said The Elder. “Morality and Ethics, as well as Integrity require action in such instances, and selfless service to others, and protection and soothing of the Whole Self all the while. Rather, whenever possible The Meek attempt to smile, and make themselves available to do so. As it has been said, a great sage said, ‘Greet every person with a smiling face.’ Truly, such positive affirmations improve the possessor of the expression, and those who see it. It does have to be sincere. For The Meek, a frown may also be used, where appropriate, and poignant—only, no expression is taken for granted.”

“What an odd topic,” considered Droos. “After all of this time, you remember the nuances of body language. I would think here it is all smiles. What momentary doubts exist to spoil a mood in The Meadow?”

“Few such moments occur,” replied The Elder. “They do all the same. The serenity, tranquility, and peace here, the inspired happiness, is near perfection, yet there is a moment for everything, even in Heaven. There is a reason the Gardeners are here. Yet the temperament of The Meek is also such that they may settle disputes, even in the afterlife, on that rarest of occasions. Then a frown may truly be worn properly, but quickly returned to its desired state here.”

“What of those who like to eat meat and choicer fair?” said Droos. “It may seem small, but mortals would consider it a loss to arrive at an eternal afterlife, or otherwise, and find the only choice was greens and fruit. Some may be surprised eating takes place at all. Even if every morsel is delicious, variety appears lacking.”

“You lack the imagination and familiarity with The Garden,” said The Elder, with a chuckle. “The lack of literal meat or other food and drink from the world of the living are replaced by near endless varieties of greens and fruit that have all of the same flavors, tastes, appearances, and aromas, only without the need to slay a Reflection Creature. Do you really think that Gon Eden keeps pens of captive animals? Rather, imagine a berry that tastes like the most tender meat, a vegetable that has the essence of a dessert or bread. The Chef Gardeners are experts of turning the Vaunted Nature into Miraculous Realities of Happiness, Joy, and Aesthetic Pleasantries. None ever complain.”

“Forgive me, Elder, for such a base topic,” said Droos. “I thank you for your time. May your eternal reward remain unblemished and ever renewed with the Blessings of Elriver and

Showsh, or any Source of the Answer you Revere.”

“Trying your hand at egalitarian prayers and responses to your subjects?” laughed The Elder. “You do not have to pretend around me that the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo are not Feaists, if not of a particularly religious sort. Moreover, you do not have to apologize for the worship of them by many in this Universe, for they have done Great Works in the Eons so far, and will until the Apocalypse of Drerpo. As for my beliefs, well, I hold my faith as a personal matter. There are a community of us still here, and that is enough for me. That is part of why I have been here all of this time. What would the physical world, or even Heaven be, without a community of friends and family and loved ones? How blessed are we to have some before us who share our beliefs, and the respect and honor of all others? In reply, I bid you receive the blessings of my faith, and as well for your boyfriend, and his wife. It has been pleasant meeting you, Child. Do come again, soon. This place could use your presence, along with the Minister of Gon Eden.”

Droos bowed her head to the Soul Fragment, and continued her tour of The Meadow. It was quickly apparent that this was a Righteous Place, filled with the Rewards for The Meek, and the visiting family and friends most beloved to them. The Angel was beginning to consider her decision. It was at that moment that Elriver and Showsh found her sitting at a comfortable chair, created from a living tree, deep in thought, beside a group of children at play. A Gardener stood silently nearby, managing the orderly affairs of the Meadow.

“What does it say about a Manifestation if those held in Highest Esteem are The Meek?” asked Showsh. “It would seem that Others might have different priorities.”

“Is it not a sign of The Good, and the State of The Journey of a Society as to the Basic Rights and Conditions Apparent for The Meek in that civilization?” said Droos. “In a place where those with the greatest needs are thrown aside and neglected, left to search for scraps of food in trash bins, and to sleep on the street, that is a statement on the Communal Soul of that Culture. A healthy society, although this is a digression to The City, does more.”

“We are here to Judge the Morality and Ethics, at last, of such a state of affairs,” said Elriver, “Even if that topic was begun before.”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“I would say a Society that values and provides for The Meek sufficiently, and even Impressively so, that is Superior, and Closer to The Good,” said Droos. “Moreover, even those at the top of such a Society will ultimately be better off than the richest and most prosperous of a stratified civilization.”

“You are saying it is simply immoral to leave The Meek without Fundamental Rights?” said Showsh. “Not only that, but they must be protected by law, and those laws enforced. It must be such that it is part of the Norms, and the average adult would likely socialize their children in such lessons, apart from established systems of public education.”

“That is quite a digression, if only for the reference to immorality,” said Elriver. “It is further unethical to lack the required laws in society to maintain those rights. Governments exist to provide such structure to create the basics for The Meek, understanding that these Laws, and this Good, prop up all citizens and residents, and even The Stranger.”

“Would it also be the case that an Honest Sentient or human, one of Integrity, is charitable and giving?” inquired Droos. “Such gifts may be to the government in the form of taxes or bonds, or individually. Might there also be a preference, or even priority to maintain such Integrity, as to where token resources, including currency, arrive?”

“No Sentient may truly be found honest, or to maintain her Integrity, without giving, and charity,” said Showsh. “Supporting both the infrastructure of communal giving, taxes and bonds, and providing even more to the needy, with individual contributions, these are expectations for those who desire a mantle of such Significance and Honor. To deny this, is to undermine the fabric of Society, to reject the equal dignity of all Sentients, unethical, immoral acts, that in the end diminish the denier as well. A Society that lacks frequent giving is one that has superficial nobles, and aristocrats, and plutocrats, without True Authority for their Power, since these are provided by the Structures of Token Property, or currency, and other forms of Power, rather than a Righteous Reward, such as a Value found in Moral and Ethical behavior. To truly be wealthy, to be rich, it to maintain Integrity through True Values, which include, the selfless service and support of others. That is not to say that the fortunate may not enjoy the fruits of their blessings—only that all are Advanced by such gifts, including the noble.”

“It seems that The Meek play a central role in Society,” said Droos. “Civilizations may neglect them at their own peril! What of the love, tolerance, and goal of peace sought along The Journey to The Good?”

“The Meek represent a Truer type of love,” said Elriver. “As has been mentioned, relationships to family and friends and Others, these are the Essentials. A Minimum of Property is necessary, or needed, or deserving of true love. The Meek may understand this. A great sage said, ‘That a Sentient is rich if he is content with his lot.’ The fewer the possessions, the better the focus on relationships and true love. It is moral to do this, and emphasize friends and loved ones. This is a virtue of The Meek.”

“You are suggesting that Property be wholly disparaged,” said Droos. “Such a potent motivator should not be so easily dismissed. Is a better type of human to be crafted each day? Many wake to earn just those token properties you so disparaged. Even if the Form of Happiness is to limit such Ends, it is enough for many. Besides, the accomplishments in the midst of such earning, are not to be discouraged. Are all to be Perfect, or may some act according to a primary goal to feed their loved ones, and as a secondary goal, pay some attention to values like ethics and morality?”

“Yet notice the attention to a value, namely the morality of true love, and focus on relationships,” said Showsh. “These Sentients earn currency to support family and friends, and of course themselves. This is all a charge to remember The Meek, and The Other, and The Stranger. The Universe is filled with The Needy. To focus only on tribe, and clan, and family, this is temporary. In the end, to diminish all others like this, risks lowering that same goal in the end, with the undermining of such rights and basic standards in Sentients and Society, such that all are lowered.”

“Remember, to empower the bottom is to raise the top as well,” said Elriver.

“Yet that is a function of Society,” said Droos. “Any family or individual might be left behind. Overall, after enough time, Society will see the top do even better, because there are standards for the bottom. That does not mean that along that road there are not some, or groups, who face injustice. The balance will not return to their favor.”

“In that case, it should be emphasized that the wealthy,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

the middle class, are permitted to enjoy the fruits of their labors, both the emotional benefits of honest work, and the concrete token properties,” said Showsh. “An Ethical Society must have sturdy, established rules of law to maintain Property, and the rights of those who earn it.”

“It is merely to recognize those with none, or almost the same, or too little, that some token properties are collected, and given to The Meek, to a sufficient extent, so that it maintains Sentient Dignity, and raises Society,” said Elriver. “It also provides the opportunity for upward mobility, so that in one lifetime, a position may be improved, and passing those gains onto family, offspring, and descendants. That is another motivating factor for The Meek, to reach for more, albeit, some may be for a position of greater effect, and influence, not merely Property. Either is a reasonable reward. It is cyclical, as the closer the lot improves, the more is given to support the bottom, so that it has the resources to itself improve and verge again towards the top.”

“That is the way, Ethically, Morally, that over time, as a function of Society, civilization should trend towards more prosperous, if The Meek receive their Rights and Dignity,” said Droos. “I am curious, though this is really a topic for The City, but what are some of these Rights? Surely you know those who Know The Good.”

“To present such matters in Reflection, and Shadows, that is more difficult,” said Elriver. “Also, Knowing is a more complicated term, as discussed, then knowing. Aside from that, here are a few suggestions: housing matched to the size of family, healthy food and drinks, free education for children through six years of college and graduate school and beginning with nursery school, a number of free after school programs and extracurriculars, free, affordable, inclusive healthcare for all, free access to professionals including career coaches, five years of lifetime credit for retraining in college for new jobs in addition to previous options for public education, a basic income, and a living minimum wage. These are just some of the possible benefits.”

“That is very concrete and immanent,” said Droos. “It is also quite lofty. How will that all be accomplished. It would be very expensive.”

“Assuring a continuous increase in the standards of Society over time, by raising The Meek, requires sacrifice of some property and token property in the moment,” said Showsh. “It is

Moral, Ethical, and a required for sound Integrity, to expect the wealthy and upper middle class to carry a significant tax burden, with few ways to reduce this amount. Even the middle class itself will have to contribute. This system assures that everyone has their needs met, and extra beyond that may provide for an individual or family's prosperity and benefit. However, Property, as discussed, is ultimately a poor source of happiness. More token property, or currency, is not required. Rather, focusing attention on relationships with loved ones is key. The rich will still have much more, and so will others with greater advantage. It may be some houses will be smaller, and fewer cars will be in the garages. Yet, in exchange, all children of society will receive a top quality education, there will be no poverty or homelessness, and the citizens and residents alike of the civilization will be largely healthy of mind, emotion, body, and spirit. That seems like a reasonable alternative to extreme stratification."

"I would think that Greater Beings would be far removed from such matters," said Droos. "Surely Goamdwee must be a Perfect Society, with no poverty, and streets of gold filled with joy and happiness."

"If only that were completely true," said Elriver. "Goamdwee is a marvel, yet it is also one of the most perilous places in Dweehwail. What maintains the Order is that the Forcang who reside and travel there and do business have done so for billions of years. To know the Essence, the Truth of Politics, of Society, to Contemplate the Abstract Dimension, these are the pastimes of my family, and our business. To choose the Art of Manifestations is to embrace these Truths and Realities, and to commit to Knowing them in all Forms."

"That is also not to say that there are no other options that we did not mention," said Showsh. "This is one, immanent, concrete, far from thorough idea for a Society like Galactic City. You may find that there, at least, some or all of those ideas and laws have already been implemented. Yet, other Reflection Worlds in Drerpo may not be so lucky. Yet, anthropologically speaking, perhaps it is not our place to interrupt the natural development of such societies."

"I felt that the entire current purpose was to change the natural path of The People of the Blood," said Droos. "That would seem to violate that axiom."

"As your impassioned speech in The City went," said

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Elriver, “Such an axiom may only be interrupted, at least in a Society of Reflection Mortals, for the most extreme violations of Morals, Ethics, and Integrity, and pursuit of Evil by that Society, for a prolonged Age. The Abstract Dimension of Evil has already been discussed in The Library. This instance was also complicated by the interference of Tzefee, who happened to reside as the Patron of this tribe.”

“That is to say that in essentially all other instances, anthropology would require that a Society be left to develop naturally,” said Droos. “Also, if the observers in question are Forcang, whether Servants, Goddesses and Gods, or Ministers, or even the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe, especially such a Society should be left to evolve normally.”

“That does not mean every Forcang follows those rules,” said Showsh. “Those who pursue The Journey toward The Good, would do that, and maintain their Morals, Ethics, and Integrity. However, plenty of other Forcang, including many very powerful Grand Elders, would not blink twice at doing anything they desired with any Reflection World or Plane.”

“That does not mean those choices are Right, or Moral or Ethical,” sighed Elriver. “It just means they were expedient, and according to the eons of machinations and conniving of most Forcang. You would have to talk to a Sentient like my Sister to hear about True Love for all Sentients Powerful and Small.”

“We might also turn to Showsh’s sister, though her interest is religious,” said Droos. “I believe that I understand that benefit of The Meek, and supporting them, to a Society. Even if a particular land finds itself currently unable to achieve that level of success, as with The Journey towards The Good, it is about making an honest effort. Society must try to provide the basic needs for The Meek, to empower them to new heights. It is not required to always accomplish its goals.”

“What then, Dear Droos, is your verdict on The Refuge for the Meek,” asked Elriver.

“The system is Just,” replied Droos. “It is Moral and Ethical, and maintains the Integrity of Drerpo. It is Right that the First of All Paradises is The Meadow. Now we may proceed with more of the exploration of The Garden.”

With that, the rulers of Drerpo departed the Realm, and a song went up, and their paths were blessed by the voices of tens of thousands issuing prayers to one thousand Divinities, Past,

Present, and Future. The sound of a flute was heard from the Shrine of Supreme Reality, only, it is said that none were present at the time. Thus, the Queen of Angels entered The Forest once more, to begin the splendid trip to the next Realm of The Highest Heaven. Showsh and Elriver walked slowly behind her, holding hands, a twinkle in their eyes, but the Sovereign of Drerpo noticed her attachment already to this place, and wondered with some very immanent emotions, if leaving Gon Eden would be as easy for her as entering It.

The three wandered the greenery, the Living Trees, Eldest of the Old, and Purpose Drove them such that a Pathway formed. It was a curious question, for how might great distances be traversed between Regions of The Garden? Apparently, Fragments with Deliberate Travel Arrived Sooner. Time and Distance were shifted, and Intention and Temperament were Relevant.

“I would still say that there is a substantial flaw in this *Paradise*,” observed Droos, as they walked purposefully along, at a gentle pace. “It may be that Fragments of Family and Friends not deemed worthy may visit from other Heavens, and thus, The Righteous of Gon Eden do, in effect, spend their eternity or eternities reunited. Only, why have such a burden in Heaven? Surely, The Righteous of all Fragments would see their loved ones immediately, and all the time. This logistics belies the state of perfection in this Domain.”

“That is really a topic for a future Chapter,” said Elriver. “Yet it is central to the happiness of Fragments. Were we not just discussing that True Love surrounds relationships, and interactions with just such a Vaunted Group? It is Ethical to provide such connections eternally, particularly to the Righteous. It would seem punitive to raise them to such heights, without this obvious feature.”

“Moreover, what of family members and friends who were less than righteous, and may have few if any Fragments in the Firmament or any Heaven?” asked Showsh. “Would Righteous relatives spend an eternity unable to see those loved ones at all? It might be argued that the consequence is for the Doer of Evil, to have no Fragments in any Heaven. Yet, in this case, it would seem it is also a curse upon the Righteous as well to be without them indefinitely. Could it be true that a Paradise, as you say, the Highest Heaven, would be so imperfect?”

“Even worse, the Feaists emphasize Rebirth and the Rain

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

of Souls,” said Droos. “What happens when the Fragments of the family members depart, if that is their desire and choice? Would such Whole Souls face then the Length of the History of The Multiverse apart? What of these stories of the truest romances that span lifetimes? How would any of this be possible with such varied timelines of Fragments in the afterlife?”

“Those and others are excellent questions, and they are exactly the sort we are going to discuss at our next destination,” remarked Elriver. “Yet I see some amount of haste may be warranted, as some may have sufficient doubts at this point. Very well.”

With a wave of her hand, and some words of Sre, a flash of Emerald Light, and the three, along with another, stood in a park. It was a curious place. They were in a deep Valley, filled with flowers, and fruit trees. The aroma was magnificent, and the color of the sky was a light purple, but it shifted depending on the locale in this Region. A Bright Sun shone golden, and simultaneously, a silvery moon cast its light as well. Finally, a bright sapphire-colored star illuminated the Heavens Above Heaven.

Within the Park were curious features, for there were animals, and plants, of numerous type and variety. Only, they were art pieces, from one million worlds, some maybe even from beyond Drerpo. There were numerous benches, and chairs, and tables of similarly aesthetic design and variety, and endless numbers of games, and elements to pass the time. Yet the space was filled with a great number of Soul Fragments as well. It was not immediately clear what distinguished them from The Refuge of the Meek. Then Droos noticed the newcomer, who appeared with them as they entered The Park.

“Greetings, Dear Mother,” said Atropo. “I see you have been given a new title. *Queen of Angels*, is a lofty goal to meet. Just now I am returned from Goamdwee, of all locales, and Some Others with whom I spoke believe if you are truly to even Attempt to Humble Tzefee, your title is fitting, and more will be applied in the future. There are few others, even standing before the Light and Order of The Multiverse’s Tree, who would openly admit to attempting to Counter one of the Main Adversaries of Dweehwail. Most simply accept that the Goddess of Pain will inevitably steal a tax from various great Artworks and Creations over the eons, and count their Blessings that more was not Destroyed. Yet you, stand here in The Park of Gon Eden, and have spoken words about the

Threat to Dweehwail, a Possible Cause of the Next Great Wave, and do not shrink away, but rise to face the challenge.”

“You are well met, Noble Son,” said Droos, with a smile. “It is good to see you, and that you accounted for your absence. I am not surprised that one of your stature must be away, in Complete Self, for important business. If I had to guess, it was one vote or another in The Alliance of the Multiverse. Regardless, it is also interesting that you speak of *Great Waves* already. I thought that was a fringe concept spoken by the likes of Drelp and great scholars of The Alliance and into the most intellectual circles of Duzog and Rozeg—alright, likely Kroetof as well. Now it is common speech just a few days later.”

“What do you think the votes were about?” said Showsh. “These were Intelligence and Defense Committee votes regarding this Threat, and how to proceed. Do not assume that such Knowledge is so fringe, or that once known, it stays idle. It is true that the thoughts and plans of Forcang last millions of years. Yet once the action is in process, it may occur instantaneously. Rather, it is eternities spent in preparation and planning, for those brief moments, seemingly, when all is at stake.”

“What did the Committee discuss, Atropo?” asked Elriver.

“They agree with searching for more Wave Relics,” said Atropo. “It is still the consensus that The Vaults of The Tree Canopy are more than sufficient for securing them. It was a good thing I was there, or else agents of Goamdwee would likely be here to collect what Droos has already. I reminded them that She is to wield them, and is unable to access them there.”

“I bet they considered it a simple matter of just Promoting Her so that she would be able to travel anywhere, regardless of the permanent effect on the Whole Soul,” said Showsh.

“That was the case for a majority of the Committees for a time,” said Atropo. “Yet I convinced them. You will not believe what the final piece it took for them to make that decision.... Ruby made an appearance. She was there only for seven minutes. Yet she told the committee that the sounds of a certain music had been following this, *Queen of Angels*, along her Journey thus far. Most of us thought that Her appearance was essentially a Vision, or Dream. Yet, since that has not happened in some quadrillions of years, it made an impression.”

“What is the decision, Atropo?” asked Droos.

“You will receive some support in your quest,” said

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Atropo. “Moreover, it will be done quietly, confidentially, and you will be in charge—with the help of Father, of course, and Mother. I might also note that Grandmother will be playing a key role. Yes, she made an appearance too.”

“You would think that she has never heard of the separation of powers,” said Elriver, rolling her eyes. “I assume that you are referring to my mother. She will, of course, provide excellent service. Only, it will be on her terms. Droos, you will have to work hard to keep this your investigation and project. Do not be afraid to speak your mind and contradict the will of other Forcang, for with certainty, They will have no such concerns.”

“All of that is true and wise, Dear Mother,” said Atropo, slightly bowing his head.

“Well, you came at just the right time, as I begin to Judge the Second Highest Heaven of Paradise,” said Droos. “I am not even certain what the nature of this Region might be, or Its purpose to this Celestial Domain.”

“That is alright, Dear Love, for it is almost time,” said Showsh, with a smile, and quickly, walking to Droos, and kissing her, deeply, with a hand in her hair. “For now, look around and tell me what you see.”

The Angel took a moment, as her heart was fluttering, and even her Keen Senses required a moment of transition from such Pure Bliss, to the Immanent Transcendent View of Heaven. She gazed about her, and as deep breathes focused her mind, she was able to appreciate the Beauty.

“We are in an ancient, deep mountain valley,” said Droos. “Possibly, this is the oldest mountain range in Drerpo. It certainly predates No, and the Bagan Galaxy. Here these Fragments have gathered for billions of years. I fear there are Berries and Thorns not far away. This Place of Greeting is In the Middle. Almost, standing here there is an Innate Knowledge and Wisdom, a Lesson about The Garden. All may be passed and tread upon, yet it is possible to travel too far. Even Soul Fragments who veer too close to Perfection may See Something they do not wish to Consider.”

“Keen Senses Indeed,” muttered Elriver, and then more loudly she spoke. “There is a certain imprint on this place, and those who arrive, do Know. What do you think the Reality is, Queen of Angels?”

“You talk to her like she is the Sovereign of Drerpo,” chuckled Atropo.

“Before long, she may be the Sovereign of a great Manifestation,” said Elriver. “Possibly this Vøvoav I have heard so much regarding. I am providing some training, as I might.”

“I see Angels!” said Droos. “I had thought the Gardeners were the only Servants of Gon Eden. Only now I see, the Greatest of Servants of Drerpo also reside here. These are True Angels, or simply, *Angels*. They are beings of Pure Good and Pure Order. There is one! She is whispering in the ear of that Soul Fragment that just Ascended from the Heavens of The Garden. Surely, each newcomer is received by Their Own Angel, a True Angel. That is, after already having been tried by The Judge, and having received The Decree, that a Fragment would reside here—or several Soul Fragments.”

“Well done, Dear One,” said Showsh. “There is your introduction to this place. Where do Souls Enter Gon Eden? We have arrived at the Doorpost to this Fair Realm. It is in The Middle. Those Angels are there to Teach the Basic Righteousness and Laws of the Realm. Yes, even here, Perfection is Transcendent to the Soul Fragments, if less so. They may come very near The Light—yet to enter, is to be Destroyed.”

“It is more similar to being, *Forever marred, or changed*,” said Atropo. “The Whole Soul is resilient, yet once exposed to certain Energies of the Multiverse, whether in Life, or Between Life, they are forever changed. They may continue, but upon Rebirth, what will be the state of such souls?”

“I do not consider that acceptable Metaphysics,” said Droos. “You seem to speak of an injury beyond cure. I will not abandon any. Who may blame a Soul Fragment of Paradise from having heard the rumor of experiencing True Perfection, or pursuing It? It may be that Nearly is the Same as the actual Thing, but Impatient, some View the Light with Good Intentions. Even if those desires or worse, would any be abandoned, particularly upon the Next Life? All must be helped, and assisted to reenter The Journey, to be redeemed, and given a New Chance, and Opportunity. Or else, why are there more than one Language of the Universe? Perhaps for nearly all, Loahueth or Its dialects are sufficient. Yet, there is The Language Rebirth, and Linear, and Others.”

“Surely, there is also Infernal, and those who speak that usually do not have the best intentions,” commented Atropo.

“Do we really know that?” asked Droos. “Who is to say

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

that a Being, Great or Otherwise, Raised for Eternities in Evil and Darkness, if then Transferred to a Purifying Light for an Equal Eternity, will not Transform! Even those fallen from Grace. It is never too late for redemption, particularly in a system in which you suppose multiple cycles of birth and rebirth. Maybe, Infernal was spoken in one life, but what of then next, or five thousand from now? Is it not our responsibility to lend aid, comfort, help, and love?"

"This is why you are so impressive, Droos," said Showsh. "You are a Light of your Age. How many would see a festering quagmire of darkness, yet still see the most vivid and colorful of bright white lights. To you, nothing diminishes the opportunity for redemption. To you, even the prospect of death, is but an obstacle, and your faith is that others will accept the mantle, and your future reborn self will participate with them, if only that you might live Morally, Ethically, and with Integrity in this one life, now."

"Of course, it is a long, dark road ahead for one such as yourself," said Elriver. "To redeem, or attempt to do so, the darkest of Realmz, truly, requires a Whole Soul of stuff stronger than Adamantine. There must be a Word of the Universe for It. That Strength must be Endless. Of course, for such an offer, and effort, why else would you be receiving a tour of Gon Eden? Why do you get to offer Judgement, even if informally, upon it? I do not know, after all that I have seen in hundreds of trillions of years, if I would offer redemption to every Sentient and Reflection Creature."

"You seem to be suffering some of that saddest of emotions, though most mortal, Dear Elriver," said Droos, with a short frown. "Yet beware! For True Hatred places Soul Fragments upon the Tree of Thorns for all Eternities. It is a natural emotion, though. Particularly, in reply to an equal force of Evil, it takes, as you say, great Strength, to respond with Mercy, and an attribute beyond the strictness of Justice."

"It is possible for the Fragments of the Tree of Thorns to be redeemed," said Showsh. "A rare and uncommon Whole Soul between life may make a desperate attempt to rescue such Fragments, and sometimes is successful in redeeming some or all. If asked, what does it take for Whole Souls to move up the Order of Sentients? There is a parable, a Whole Soul that rescues enough of those Fragments, among other Trials, earns such a place."

"I heard more of that parable," said Elriver, "From your Sister. It is true, that freeing Soul Fragments of the Whole Self

on the Tree of Thorns is one part. It is only half. Twice as many again of the Fragments of Others, tortured for eternity on the Tree of Thorns, must be freed by that same Whole Soul. They must be brought out of perdition, and in reunion with at least six other Fragments of that Whole Soul. Only once all of those trials are complete, among the others required, does a Whole Soul earn a place among those Reborn into increased Orders of Sentience. This Ultimate Statement and Trial Against Hatred is a small feat required to counter some of the Universal Laws that since the Beginning have Necessitated Thorns in all Manifestations.”

“I know this one,” said Atropo. “Then, if enough Whole Souls do this, someday, all may be advanced, and the Potency of Sentients increased permanently throughout. I do not even really know what that means. It is a legend, after all, and unlikely to ever occur, certainly in our lifetimes.”

“Yet I thought mortality was a gift, and the ability to enter the afterlife as a Soul Fragment,” pondered Droos. “I hope that not too much mortality, and immanence, would be lost in such an event.”

“The idea is that it would be both Virtues simultaneously,” said Showsh. “To have the Senses, the Knowledge, of a Servant or Goddess, yet also the Beautiful Humility and Limitations of a Reflection. Right now, that is a Contradiction even Beyond the Abstract Dimensions and The Good. Yet, in this parable, and the future it envisions, all would be Improved in Such a State of Perfection.”

“That is a lovely Dream,” said Droos. “The idea that there might essentially be a merger between the physical world and Gon Eden, that mortality might exist alongside Paradise. I have heard the notions of the World Reborn, or Multiverse Reborn. This seems to fit that understanding. It would mean Heaven would exist in the regular world, all at once. What a lovely thought.”

“We have a long ways, as Sentients, before we may get there,” said Elriver. “It would seem, a requirement is to essentially Banish Hatred from the mindset of Sentients in all forms both in life, and between lives. That would be a tall order on any near term. It is still a lovely parable.”

“Perhaps I will make it my final project,” said Droos. “When I save my people, and humble Tzefee, after that I will aim to counter the Reflection of Hatred to such an extent, we will at least draw closer to that Vision.”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“Just do not risk abandoning humility, Queen of Angels,” said Elriver. “You also are not the only one working on these projects now, and a wise, humble leader asks for help, and receives it. It is a worthy aim to dream of Gon Eden that is Everywhere and Eternal for All Sentients—a parable of the Feaist Faith, among others, for The Future to Come. You might make yourself, and help others, be available to it. I would recommend focusing on one task at a time, and to redeem Tzefee is worthy, and enough for one lifetime. I would imagine such a feat would earn you a very comfortable position in the afterlife when your time arrives.”

“I take your meaning,” said Droos, with a smile. “And now, I will explore this Fair Heaven in The Middle of Paradise. I look forward to questioning the Morality and Ethics of the Place just the same, and how such topics impact Sentients everywhere. Really, that is the purpose of Paradise—an opportunity for Reflection Mortals to consider Good and Evil, Order and Chaos, and how to be Moral and Ethical, and to maintain Integrity while alive—if only to achieve some spot in Gon Eden. Regardless of The Truth, it is this discussion, the thought, that is important. To talk to friends and family about how to live The Good Life, to pursue The Good, in light of that, is Righteousness. Now show me the Secrets of The Park amidst the Eldest of all Mountains and Valleys of The Universe.





Chapter 2

Reunion of Families

This reception hall of Heaven was the first experience of Paradise. The Eldest of Mountain Valleys, beneath several suns, and moons, and stars, surrounded by the tallest of mountain ranges, capped by snow and ice, it was a beautiful aesthetic. In this setting, the temperature was neither too hot, nor too cold. As it was, each Soul Fragment really experienced such matters as it would be to their heart's desire. Gon Eden, thus, suited itself to the Soul. While they may have learned a few basic rules, each, from receiving angels upon arrival, many Realities existed to ensure peace and tranquility for all.

It was here that The Four members of the Royal Family of Drerpo now stood, and inspected the Fair Realm. The Soul Fragments here all wore tunics of plain white, a purity of color soon to be expanded upon into myriad shades and hues, yet as of now, undistinguished. Droos did point out that within the white were in fact all of the other colors, if only a Sentient had the Senses to observe this. There was a certain quiet peace to this place, but also, many greetings, and embraces between Fragments. Almost, there were multiple Aspects to this Realm.

"It may be that the Soul Fragments Decreed Upon Gon Eden first reach The Middle, yet others appear to have been here longer," said Droos. "There they are, in their blacks and darker shades. What of them? I would also state that black absorbs the endless variety of hues. Therefore, there is some similarity. Yet, also, a clear distinction. I would hope Heaven is a place of egalitarian Perfection."

"You see two essential purposes of The Middle of Gon Eden," said Elriver. "For it serves both to Receive the Arriving Soul Fragments of those Decreed to Paradise, and also, a Split, or rather, a simultaneous Soul Aspect, that resides here in order to

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

reunite all of those in this Highest Heaven with their loved ones and friends. Those who go to various Realms of The Garden are actually more than one place at once, and the black raiment signals this Reality. These are permanent Soul Aspects here to allow the Whole Soul such access at all times, and from the very beginning of their afterlife.”

“You have spoken of this seeming trick of the Afterlife before,” said Droos. “Is it possible for a Soul Fragment to be two places at once?”

“You already Know that many Forcang may do this even in life,” said Showsh. “In the afterlife, Firmaments and Sacred Realms permit such Rights to Soul Fragments, even of those who were further down in the Order of Sentients. All Whole Souls are endowed to be able to experience multiple locations at once, particularly those receiving the most rewards in various Heavens. It is a mortal limitation to assume that everything must be in one place at one time in the afterlife. Not very many Reflection humans or other Sentients consider such possibilities, since they are impossible, generally, in life. Even now, the Soul Fragments would be largely unaware of the distinction, or difference, rather, taking it, and justly so, for granted. It is merely the Reality present here.”

“Are the Soul Aspects of only the Fragments of Gon Eden in The Middle?” asked Droos. “How are they to reunite with all family members and friends? What of those who earned few rewards in any Heavens? Must the Righteous spend some eternities without them, a punishment, it would seem, for them, because of the penalty on their loved one who committed a few too many Evil acts in life?”

“If you would look more closely, essentially every Whole Soul of Drerpo is represented here,” said Elriver. “Here is also the Great Unifier of the Firmament. These Aspects from Everywhere, at all Points of the History of Drerpo, allow all family and friends to be in continuous and immediate reunion upon their death and Decree to the afterlife. Even those who are entirely or mostly in one Hell or another, have an Aspect here. Those who have departed and have been Reborn, have an Aspect here. In The Middle, Families and Friends are Reunited Forever, and for all Time.”

“This seems like an awfully splendid reward for the most Evil Whole Souls,” pondered Droos. “That they should even

have an Aspect in this Realm of Gon Eden seems awkward. I understand the privilege for the Righteous, or even those who put some effort in life to pursue The Good. How do the Fragments of the Evil experience these Aspects?”

“You should not assume that very many Whole Souls are Entirely Evil,” remarked Showsh. “Almost every Sentient has at least some Kernel of Good and a Kernel of Evil. It is even the approach of Dualism to approach, at times, Evil, to utilize it, in its Abstract commonalities with good. Therefore, to say that a Whole Soul may have absolutely no contact with Heaven would be Unjust, and not according to any Decree. This is a system that has dozens or hundreds of Fragments after all, not a unified Soul in one afterlife. This is merely an Aspect, a further Split and Division of even one Fragment. Is it really so awful that one Aspect is here, or in one or two other Heavens of the Firmament?”

“You are right,” said Droos. “I am ashamed, and perhaps I was caught up in considering the rational for a moment. There are few that are Wholly Good or Wholly Evil. For the sake of that Kernel of either, some Aspect of a Fragment may be placed in Heaven or Hell. You did not answer my question regarding both the experience of the other Fragments, regarding this Aspect, and for the Rarest Nearly Pure Evil Whole Soul.”

“Almost all Whole Souls will experience simultaneously the afterlives of Aspects in Particular,” commented Elriver. “That is an inherent Right of almost all Whole Souls. That being said, there are Thorns in The Multiverse, and the worst penalty sentenced by The Judge, is an Aspect of The Middle, that is disconnected from the Whole Soul. Thus, the Aspect is present for interaction with all Family Members and Friends, in The Middle, but offers no reward for that very unusual Whole Soul. Therefore, there is no experience of any Heaven. As for the Aspect, He simply resides there for eternity, segregated from the rest of the Whole Soul, whatever the fate of the other Fragments, and never contributes to Their growth, even if Rebirth occurs.”

“It would appear that most Whole Souls, essentially all of them, benefit from this Aspect, particularly those with one or more Fragments in the Firmaments of Drerpo,” said Droos. “I wonder about those still living. Of course, to Fragments of the afterlife, the physical world must seem fleeting. Yet, there must be a terrible desire to see those who have not reached The Middle of Gon Eden. Are their Aspect here as well? It would be odd to think that while

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

still living, the Aspects of living Sentients already reside in The Garden.”

“You have touched on a Secret of this Highest Heaven,” said Showsh. “Well done, my love, truly, The Queen of Angels. Virtually every Whole Soul of Drerpo, including those who still live, have an Aspect in The Middle. Those who are still living are almost universally unaware of this, with the rare exception of that unusual Visionary, or Dreamer, that for a moment, sees through the eyes of her Aspect one night. Those thoughts may be lifechanging for the living. There is a reason that the Minister of Heaven does His best to limit such exposures.”

“Furthermore, the Aspects of those Reborn in higher Orders of Sentients, possibly even beyond Drerpo, still reside in The Middle of Drerpo,” said Elriver, with a smile. “Aspects are ubiquitous. They are eternal and universal. The worst punishment of the worst in afterlife is to be disconnected from them, not to be without. Those who are living, as mentioned, already have one, but gain contact upon death.”

“What of relatives and ancestors of the distant past, or descendants that will live in the future?” inquired Droos, with some awe and interest.

“Essentially an Aspect of every Whole Soul in the history of Drerpo still resides here in The Middle of Gon Eden,” answered Showsh. “Meeting any ancestors is common, and frequent. As for the future... well, that is something that even the righteous of Gon Eden do not automatically receive as their Reward. There is one place in the garden where a version of the future may be considered, sometimes. Yet, The Future is not for Soul Fragments to experience, and rarely even for Forcang, or Sovereigns or Rulers of Manifestations.”

“Time in relation to the management of a Manifestation is a curious Axiom,” said Elriver. “It may be true that those who Rule have all Rights, including over Time. Yet to wield that power is even more ill-advised than meddling with the Celestial Courts. Showsh and I and our family might count on one hand the number of times we have traveled through time. That being said, we have special Ministers, Goddesses, and their Servants, that manage the Fabric of Time, Its Scientific Laws and Principles, and that Part of Reality.”

“It would seem reasonable that if not even the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe typically get to view The Future,” said

Droos, "Then neither would most others. It is interesting enough that there is one locale here with an exception to that rule. Do not spoil the visit by telling me about it now! I want to be surprised."

"That is very wise, Dear Love of My Life," said Showsh, with a slight bow. "If you must know, the Secrets of The Future, are also gifts for Sentients. Knowing the Future, or so I have been told by our God of Time, is not a light burden. It is far better to be surprised, or to casually predict the outcome."

"I thought that Greater Beings were omniscient?" asked Droos. "It would seem this is a significant limit to the abilities of Grand Elder Forcang."

"You might say that we do not want to know," said Atropo, finally. "May a Sentient who is all-knowing choose not to know something if also all-powerful? These are interesting questions."

"I will provide one fairly certain insight into the future," said Showsh.

With that, they stopped their walk, and he walked over to her, and embraced her. Showsh kissed Droos passionately, for almost a whole Absolute Minute. In that moment, the light of the moon and stars shown particularly bright in The Middle, and to that Realm, it appeared as if they stood in the most Sacred of Nights. All felt wonder and peace and happiness, especially Droos. For there was a vision of the future, that would unfold soon.

"Please, Father, we may have Transcendent Tolerance and Understanding of Relationships, but perhaps you might keep your Passions until we get to The City of the Righteous," said Atropo.

"My son, he is simply kissing the girl," said Elriver. "Have a little respect for your father's choice of bride. They deserve a moment of wonder and joy here and there along The Journey. After all, what is it to travel and inspect Heaven if not to experience it at times themselves?"

"Pardon me, Dear Elriver and Atropo," said Droos, with a very deep smile, and rosy cheeks. "I am sure you both know what it is like to be in love. Now returning to the business we are here to pursue, I have some questions. That is what this is all about, right?"

"I feel more people might be interested in the dramatic narrative, but go ahead," said Atropo.

"What are the morals and ethics surrounding relationships, and family?" said Droos. "To expand that, what of the role of community, and ever increasing social circles? Is it not the case, as

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

a great sage said, that ‘Sentients are Social Beings?’ What are the rule of these social interactions? What is good and evil and right and wrong in this regard?

“These are essential questions,” said Elriver. “Did we not state that the Truest Love is that for Relationships, and interactions with family and friends? Really, the greatest sign of wealth is a number of strong, unbreakable relationships with family and friends. Those who have such a gift are rich indeed.”

“Yet what of the bond to broader social circles,” said Showsh. “Are Sentients not obligated to love everyone, if not their closest more so? Thus, it is moral and ethical to act according to The Good towards all. To do otherwise, is to deny that all Sentient life is ultimately united in a single family. As stated, to diminish love towards any, is to undermine even the love towards the closest family and friends. If, and this may appear a contradiction, love towards an enemy, in True hatred, may be denied—that dark mark, surely will despoil the emotion, the connection to love for all others.”

“That does not appear to be a human approach to love and hatred,” said Droos. “Is it not natural to hate, whether Truly or otherwise, those guilty of terrible acts towards the Whole Self, and to love those who provide equally strong benefits and friendship? Are not Sentients similarly emotional beings with thoughts and feelings? To overcome that is to expect a type of Sentient that simply does not exist automatically. That is not to say that The Righteous might respond to torment or punishment or chastisement with the opposite, love. Yet, are all expected, in this Universe, to be Righteous, at all times? Is that to be the standard?”

“Of course, we are here to discuss Morality and Ethics and Integrity,” said Atropo. “It may be that for purposes of Gon Eden, the Highest Heaven, those are the standards. As for whether, as you suggest, Sentients, humans, or any other race are expected to be perfect, effort is really the distinguishing feature. We have discussed this. Also, setting and education is a factor. Surely, whether a Sentient has been taught to make such distinctions in their lifetime is a mitigating factor, if not a complete excuse. That being said, to assume that responding to a harsh, negative emotion or feeling with hatred will cure those thoughts is fallacy. Anyone with a cursory knowledge, and I use the immanent form, of social sciences, would consider that the response to a broken bone is time, healing, and following a professional’s instructions. It is not

revenge, and a physical fight, and actions that are likely to simply make the broken bone even worse.”

“You mean to suggest that responding with Hatred in fact makes the negative emotions even worse, much of the time,” said Showsh. “Rather, curing the emotional, mental, and spiritual hurt appropriately, and responding always with love, respect, and the goal of education, and help, and assistance, these are outright therapeutic and actually helpful.”

“That is not to say, Showsh, that there is never an occasion to call for True Defense,” said Elriver. “What was the message of the Wave Relic found thus far, after all. If there is an Adversary, or Threat, or Group, that threatens actual physical violence, or intentional insult or destruction of The Society, in a State that Pursues The Good, it is acceptable to Defend against them. It is not only right, it is Moral, Ethical, and necessary to maintain Integrity.”

“That makes sense,” said Droos. “Suppose The Society existed that had a reasonable standard of living that perpetuated the happiness of most. If some segment wanted to tear down those Laws and Rules, to place itself on top, at the expense of all others, or most others, in Fascism, or a State of Anarchy, that might be worthy of True Defense. The reason is that too much Evil would be ultimately committed against too many were such an effort to succeed. It would be worth noting that even in a state of war, there are Morals and Ethics and ways to maintain Integrity, even if the Reality is that all War is Hell. War is Terrible because of what it is necessary to do to defend systems and axioms that allow so many to be happy and prosperous. It is far less bad by keeping certain standards, that prevent even more suffering and longer terror and problems.”

“You have established, even standing here in Paradise, that True Defense is necessary,” remarked Atropo. “Though I fear many may use such an excuse to defend their independent norms from manipulation and contamination. Would that not be an excuse for any to resort to violence in defense of their cause.”

“Not at all,” said Elriver. “The only time warfare is acceptable is to defend a system and Society that reasonably maintains Morality, Ethics, and Integrity for Its citizens, residents, and all who reside within the borders of the civilization. If such a system is threatened with permanent change into a system that is unable to guarantee those Fundamental Rights, warfare is

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

acceptable, if regrettable.”

“It should be a last resort, and not merely an excuse,” said Showsh. “In a liberal democracy, many structures exist to improve the system, and prevent too much manipulation. As long as the instance of that system of government does in fact provide for Morality, Ethics, and Integrity, then it is a question of if the Structure of liberal democracy persists. Such resources may then be used reasonably to improve the system, outside of a state of warfare, which is an even worse option. However, if the mechanics of the system are sufficiently undermined, or wholly removed, or outlawed, such that it is effectively a different form of government, in that instance, warfare may be permitted, as no such structure exists either for correcting those flaws, or the absence of Morality, Ethics and Integrity. Even upon such a descent from decency, as indicated, the Rules of Warfare must be maintained.

“I would also suggest that warfare is permitted in the context where one Society with a liberal democracy that maintains Laws and Rules of Morals, Ethics, and Integrity, is threatened with conquest by another that lacks, for the most part, those concepts or axioms,” said Atropo. “It would be the obligation to fight, a True Defense, however unwelcome the arrival of such a conclusion.”

“This has all been a digression,” said Droos. “The discussion was regarding the rules and axioms of interpersonal relationships. It seems established now that hatred is to be avoided, in that it ultimately harms everyone in the process, both the hater, and the hated, and the overall society. Even if it is a standard Sentient emotion, a modern civilization should have approaches, whether through medicine or other behavioral options for curing such emotions, in the same way, physicians traditionally treated broken bones. The answer then, if feeling hatred, is not to act in enmity, but to seek professional help from a doctor, therapist, friend, family member, or other professional, to learn how to move passed such dangerous emotions, and live a happy, healthier life. Ultimately, loving all is the goal, however difficult at times. That does not remove the obligation of True Defense. It does create room for a system that insists on a requirement to approach others with love in virtually all other instances.”

“It may appear that in a brief moment, a Sentient may still reply in anger, or hatred, or emotionally,” said Atropo. “Surely, momentary emotions must be excused.”

“That is true, certainly, for Reflection Mortals,” said

Droos. "It may be expected that if something terrible happens to a Sentient, they will, in time, be responsible enough to see the appropriate professionals to treat the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual trauma. Obviously, in the moment, responding with some literal expletive or heated words really could not be blamed. A simple apology upon recovery would be sufficient, and in regards to the perpetrator of the Evil in the first place, even that would not be wholly necessary or expected. There are limitations, and obviously physical violence, unless in actual protection from immanent physical harm, would never be acceptable. Moreover, the appropriate response, evil upon being the victim of an actual crime, civil or otherwise, is to refer the matter to the Justice System for due process. After all, a Society of Morals, Ethics, and Integrity, and sound system of justice, Requires Rights even for the Accused. That topic will be a separate matter discussed in the future."

"You say that the Essence of the Morals, Ethics, and Integrity of Interpersonal Relationships is such that all must be approached with love, and really the state of enmity is an illusion," said Elriver. "Hatred and Enmity are mortal, human terms. The Transcendent, Abstract Relationship knows only love, and similar synonyms. Anything short of that, except perhaps a limited response in the *heat of the moment*, diminishes all Sentients, including an injured party."

"From what I have told you about Forcang and those of supposed Superior Transcendent Knowledge of Truth, I would dispute whether such Orders of Sentients always avoid, rather, the Abstract Dimension of Hatred, and Enmity, and Cruelty," said Atropo. "My experience is that there is great variety in personalities of such Beings as well."

"Yet, even if Goamdwee tolerates an egalitarian society, we are labeled, *Lords of Order*, for a reason," said Showsh. "Those Forcang do at times commit terrible crimes. Yet, they are punished for them when and if caught. There is justice to be had, and a Morality, Ethics, and Integrity maintained. Some are so smart that it takes a long time to bring them to the Court of Goamdwee. Yet no Forcang is above the law. Those who regularly do Evil, will spend time in a place of Reflection suited to their crime, compliments of The Alliance of the Multiverse."

"I enjoyed this first part of the discussion," said Droos. "It does seem there are many other topics in interpersonal relations,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

as regards morals, ethics, and integrity. I look forward to this next part.”

As they stood there, Droos thought she heard something. It was the sound of a flute being played. In light of the recent news, she Knew she must follow it. The Sense Beyond Senses led her through The Middle, to the far side. There she found a cave. Descending as a stairwell, it spiraled, and soon she was deep beneath the ground. There she found a bush. It was burning, but in the most odd way, and not for the first time, it was not harmed by the fire. Moreover, it cast its light upon the cave wall opposite. There, before the wall, were fourteen children on a log, watching the shadows dance.

Since these were children, they had little to say, or speak, and it appeared the focus on the images was that of intense purpose. Droos also noticed an odd sparkle in their eyes, a sign of some Wisdom, as if this was where they resided, in this Paradise. Then she saw that they were not human, or rather, they were of some other Order.

“They are all Greater Spirits,” said Showsh, arriving behind her. “They are The Interpreters of The Shadows. It is said that Immanence has no meaning in Drerpo Beyond Their Sight. It is the Senses of These Children that Defines the Reality of the Reflection Mortals of this Universe.”

“Is that Moral?” asked Droos, with some surprise. “Is that Ethical? Would this rather not be some kind of Thorn? These Youths, Eternal or Otherwise, are placed as Servants to Define Reality of this Manifestation. There are too many concerns with this choice.”

“Maybe it takes a child, or wisdom, having been in Gon Eden since the Genesis of Drerpo, and of the Order of Spirits, to interpret the Shadows,” said Elriver. “They are that intermediary, a filter through which the knowledge, the truth, even the reality of the universe flows.”

“Do all require this intermediary to understand their senses?” asked Droos, with some frown. “Also, why are they here in Gon Eden, as opposed to a Celestial Domain devoted to this purpose.”

“Gon Eden is mostly a reward for Righteous Souls,” said Atropo. “Yet as you said, there are other purposes, including some Thorns, Berries, and even more Subtle Designs.”

“Is there really so little space in the Firmament that The

Garden must share space with an Ontological Lens?” inquired Droos.

“There is also some Transcendent Logic in placing such a Lens in Gon Eden,” said Showsh. “After all, would it not be reasonable that the very Metaphysics, the Epistemology of Reflection Mortals be Righteous, and according to Morals, Ethics, and Integrity? What other Domain would maintain such a standard as that?”

“Also, these are not children in the strictest sense of the word,” said Elriver. “They happened to attain a place in the afterlife before reaching adulthood, as Spirits, yet that was so long ago, it is hard to say that matter is relevant at this point. Besides that, they are Spirits, of a different Order of Sentients. I am not saying that all Orders of Sentients, and the children of those Orders, should not be treated as children, with all rights and privileges. Only that the Greater Spirits who are children in such a context should not automatically be ascribed the same axioms.”

“It would seem I have found one of these Mysteries or Secrets of Gon Eden that those Angels exist to ward off newcomers from finding,” said Droos. “You should know that I was called here by the sound of a flute. As has been established, I do not believe I would have heard that if there was not some revelation to be had in this place. Is there anything else you wish to share with me?”

“That is curious,” said Atropo, raising an eyebrow. “That sign has rarely been heard in quadrillions of years, and now it is a regular feature in your life. Perhaps this Thorn has an issue? What do you think, Father? Such Lenses are very common in Manifestations. It is a sign of cooperation between Spirits and Forcang. Maybe there is something wrong with this system, or that requires improvement, even after all of this time.”

“There is not much more than you see here,” said Showsh. “Or rather, there is plenty to witness and consider. Yet, there are few Further Secrets. Some suggest that the Shadows ultimately originate from The Source of Truth, as has been discussed. Those images on the cave wall are, thus, interpretations of that Truth.”

“By showing it first to such Vaunted Spirits, and those of unique character, in Paradise, these are the recipe for the Ontological Essence We wanted for Reflection Mortals and Creatures,” said Elriver. “Would you suggest replacements occasionally, or that these would be adult Spirits, or Forcang?”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Maybe they should be Dimensionals, with an objective view of Reality?”

“Do any really have such a view?” said Droos. “I suppose that our Reality is sufficiently different. All of those are good suggestions, albeit, far Beyond my ability to understand the nuances. I am only here because of the Call of the Flute. You should do as you Know as an Artist of Manifestations.”

“We never said that we were good artists, or that we Birth Manifestations as competitors,” said Showsh. “Each is Its own Miracle. There is even an aspect Beyond our control. Yet, all art is beautiful, possibly with the exception if it causes physical harm to anyone. That is something We must consider, as the Genesis of Universes is so Vast, that there is always some unintentional injury somewhere. Yet the goal is as little harm as possible, and all effort to ensure that. Naturally, this is a digression.”

“There are Templates, or rather, Traditions, and Standards, also, Fundamental Laws of the Multiverse, used in Greater Genesis,” said Elriver. “That is not to say that such instructions or recipes are ultimately correct. Even one that goes back to the Dawn of Dweehwail, perhaps something different might be considered. As for what that might be, I will take it under careful thought, and maybe even present it to the Palace of Arts. Of course, it is a conversation to have with my Mother. She might be shocked, as going against such norms would be radical. However, it is also unheard of for such a Sound to be Heard. It will be a time of curious discussions and debates on Art.”

“I am glad it will be at least pondered,” said Droos. “I would see this Assistance as an Entity of Kindness Highlighting certain Flaws in Reality. If only such mistakes might be corrected, what a Multiverse we might realize?”

“You sound like a Broken Lord,” said Atropo. “It is little known, certainly to those who have been Promoted, yet, there are Reflections even of Primordial Journeys, and even the Grand Journey Itself. These are Broken Journeys, with Flaws and Mistakes. These too may be Traversed by Forcang, with the result of a different kind of Potency. Many Broken Lords, as they are called, are ascetic, humble sorts, concerned deeply with The Meek, and the Flaws in Reality, and fixing them. There is even a great respect paid to them, and they often appear to The Alliance of the Multiverse as racial Foreigners, and they receive some additional dignities, similar to an Ambassador from a different Civilization.”

“I like many aspects of that,” said Droos. “Someone needs to be there to improve Reality, and help the needy. It is good to know that some Forcang care. I am not too keen on the asceticism. To respect and honor the physical world, and the gift of Property, within reason, is one thing; but I would not wholly reject any of it. I maintain that such joys of this world are meant to be appreciated in happiness, and moderation of course.”

“No one ever said that had to be your career choice, Droos,” said Elriver. “Also, you may still help the needy and be generous and giving as a Lord of Order. You may even assist the monasteries of Broken Lords, without actually being one. There are all sorts of ways to contribute. It is true, the path of asceticism is not for everyone, though impressive for those who walk it. Also, the path of moderation, and respect for the physical world is a virtuous philosophy. Both options are welcome on the Path to the Good, and are ways of living The Good Life.”

“This may all be digression, yet it is a good moral and ethical topic,” said Showsh. “What are the axioms of good and evil surrounding the physical world? Should it be welcomed, honored, and enjoyed with respect? Might it be adored and used in abundance without rules, or should it be denied, and restricted, to the extent possible, even stating it is ultimately some sort of illusion?”

“Are those the only choices, and why must any decision be made between these options?” said Atropo.

“Many religions, philosophies, and traditions, and political models, follow assumptions and norms with one of these axioms as a guide,” said Droos. “Therefore, it relevant to at least establish whether each one is actually moral and ethical and maintains integrity. To examine the first, to enjoy the world moderately, that seems to follow our overall theme of the middle road between Dualisms, and on the Journey to The Good. That means, food, sexuality, gambling, investment of money in luxuries, these are reasonable when done in moderation. Although, it is worth asking the question, are these in fact distractions from a superior reality? If the goal, the point is a reward in the afterlife, are those not distractions? The focus then should be otherwise.”

“Those are two additional approaches that may not require a choice in either direction,” said Showsh. “What is more important—the world of the living, and what goes on there, or the afterlife, that which is in between lives? It may be, particularly for

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Reflection Mortals, that the afterlife has Paradises and Rewards to be had in a way more Intense than in the Physical World. Yet, the options, the dynamism of life is greater, and not to be ignored. Some sages have suggested, 'That an hour of life is worth an eternity in the afterlife.' It may be to say that the Firmament has a more enduring and lasting benefit, yet the Potential for Great Deeds of Kindness and Goodness and Righteousness in life are superior even to Heaven."

"You seem to be saying that both Realms are inherently Worthy," said Droos. "An approach may readily, and morally and ethically focus on the afterlife, or on the world of the living, or just as easily both. There is no requirement to choose, as neither approach is Evil. Returning to the discussion of the emphasis in life, it would seem it is a choice then of the individual, family, and community, and their needs. They may decide, usually based on one tradition or another of course, that a moderate amount of distraction is reasonable, for enjoyment of this world, and that potential to do good and righteous deeds, is worth some fixation while alive. Yet, they would not get too close to this world, as the next is also Worthy, and is a coequal goal. That approach is good, and does not appear to have a significant probability of evil."

"I thought the concern was in engaging in activities with increased probability of Evil?" said Atropo. "Certainly food, sexuality, gambling, and others, these have an intensity to them that invites bad behavior by some. Would the ascetic then be attempting to avoid that temptation? Instead, the focus would be on as many good deeds as possible."

"I would say that it is also a virtue to enjoy the world, at least according to some," said Elriver. "Furthermore, from my perspective, the path between Dualisms does not state that the Lower Portion should be abandoned, but quite the contrary. Everything we have discussed of Knowledge would indicate that it is Moral and Ethical to sample such Lower Ends, with the Utmost Care."

"We were speaking about Forcang, and Greater Beings," said Showsh. "Is it not the case that Reflection Mortals would be more swayed by their emotions, and mind, body, and spirit? Sure, those enlightened sorts, of Whole Self, will walk the Righteous Path Middle. Yet, how many will fall?"

"Surely, though, all must receive at least the opportunity to walk that path, to make that choice, to risk that fall, if only in

order to rise higher,” said Droos. “Do mortals then demonstrate upon such an accomplishment even greater virtue? For those that do fall, is it labeled as such? What is sin but to turn from the path temporarily. If a step is one to the side, then one back. If four, then four steps back. Even those dramatically departed, may still return, and be redeemed. Perhaps the Righteous will assist them in their return. That fall is not so far for almost all, and merely a reminder that no Sentient is perfect, while a return is possible, and the opportunity to Rise Above is Extraordinary for the Righteous who do succeed and reach the far side.”

“You seem to have passed judgement prematurely,” said Atropo. “Here we stand in a Thorn of Gon Eden, supposedly, and you have not even heard the other two positions. What of the path of indulgence? Why not focus entirely on the physical world? To the Reflection Mortal, without Knowledge, without Truth, what more may there be? Sure, Visions of one thousand religions and traditions exist as vague notions. Yet, food is tasty, and sex is good, and money buys happiness of all sorts and varieties. Why fight that? Unless there is some way to prove differently, is this not also a moral and ethical approach? Why must it be assumed that only those focused on an afterlife maintain axioms, or are lawful and good? That seems to almost be a piece of propaganda by parties advocating different positions.”

“Parties and propaganda,” remarked Showsh, with a light chuckle to break the mood. “You are very engaged in this conversation. What you say does appeal to me. We created an epistemology of extreme skepticism, with Knowledge that Transcends mortals. Visionaries and Dreamers and Prophets are labeled just that, though we agreed they should not be derided or called fools (rather libraries filled with books of inane babbling than one injured party). How might a mortal embrace such Unknowns? The response to pleasure is obvious. There are realities of the physical world that may be, seemingly, concretely known. Why reject them?”

“What of the empiricism of the social scientist?” said Droos. “Is pleasure by itself the cause and source of happiness in fact? What of the benefit or benevolence of money? Would the experts, the scholars, of the physical world using Natural Laws conclude that a life of hedonism is actually the source of The Good Life? That is not to say that it may not be a choice, provided happiness and pleasure do not come at the expense of

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

physically injuring others, or intentionally causing emotional or mental pain (or through negligence). Most would likely state that actual rewards, permanent achievements in life, are the source of happiness: a lifetime partner, a good, honest career, the love and respect of family friends, healthy, happy children raised to be mature, capable adults, giving and helping others freely and regularly. There are other permanent rewards. These provide an enduring happiness, that these specialists would say surpasses that of momentary enjoyment of our mentioned pleasures.”

“That is not to say that food, or sex, or gambling, or other such joys of life may not be used, only that, the consensus is that they are not the source of happiness either,” said Elriver. “Rather, these may be considered moderately, alongside a life of permanent rewards. Or so says the empirical, natural philosophers of society. Of course the Form of Good and Happiness, might make the matter even clearer. Yet as suggested, how may a mortal or human or Sentient know a Form? Rather, they might trust in the said empirical positions, that of the broad majority of experts in the profession.”

“What then, is the position on whether this world may be the focus of a Sentient in life?” said Atropo. “Is that a legitimate moral and ethical position? May a person maintain their integrity in such a model?”

“As mentioned, it would depend on the Aspects of the world of the living that are the focus,” said Droos. “The idea that the philosophical position in question only has to do with the mentioned pleasures is incorrect. A focus on the physical world may as easily be about permanent rewards, and a moderate sampling of more intense, said, joys. If anything, the actual rewards often go along with these. Thus, it would seem to be moral and ethical, and entirely a path of integrity to focus on such an approach.”

“I would mention that a route through life of only physical pleasures and their emphasis would likely lead to a less happy life than many,” said Elriver. “There are other ways to honor and focus on the world that are concretely known, without eating everything, having sex with everyone, and making money at all costs. That approach does not yield the same sort of enduring happiness as other worldly approaches, and I would question the morality and ethics of it. Furthermore, a person who only does those things, may lack some integrity. It is more of a misunderstanding of how

to be happy. Physically, those pleasures chemically induce the Sentient brain to be happy, either organically or through external provisions. Yet, it lacks the understanding of what leads to lasting happiness, in search of a more instantaneous joy. As stated, any of these pleasures may be enjoyed responsibly and moderately as part of a life lived in pursuit of concrete rewards.”

“What about the life with emphasis on the world to come?” said Showsh. “It would seem in such a life, even permanent rewards are a distraction for some. Thus, the presence of asceticism and even orders of those who avoid additional burdens such as partnerships with other humans and other purposeful avoidance. Is this route moral and ethical. Do those who lead it maintain integrity?”

“It would seem to me to be a choice, in this regard,” said Droos. “Rather, it is a legitimate option, to select this philosophy. The reason is that, as much as there is no Evil, or immorality in moderate use of pleasures or other physical temptations, an individual Sentient may certainly opt to abstain. That is her free choice. Also, it is true that such temptations do send some Reflection Mortals, even some Forcang, down long, winding paths of shadow and darkness from which they never recover. To remove these obstacles entirely is a reasonable option. It should certainly be a choice for every Sentient, and there is no reason that a community or group may not socialize its members in this approach.”

“Of course, the choice is always up to the free, adult individual, as to any moral or ethical option of integrity,” said Atropo. “Therefore, whether born into a group that espouses moderate consumption, or one that advocates asceticism and avoidance, the offspring and descendants have free choice as well. It also may not be assumed that ideas are dangerous, so long as they are an alternatively moral and ethical way of living The Good Life, and The Journey to The Good.”

“It would seem that the consensus is that the approach with an emphasis on the afterlife is both moral and ethical, and that those who practice it have great integrity,” said Elriver. “The caveat for all philosophies, is that free will for adults must be maintained. So far, the only possibly immoral or unethical route that was discussed is one that focuses entirely on the hedonism of intense worldly pleasures, as the singular, or devoted focus of life, at the expense even of proven concrete rewards. That seemed,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

since it would not bring Real Happiness, or facilitate The Good Life, to be problematic.”

“That is not to say that sex, drugs, food, and gambling may not be enjoyed in moderation, once again,” said Droos. “Those and other immediate forms of gratification may augment life when used responsibly. It is understandable that some wish to avoid them altogether, yet, it is not permissible to ostracize those who do wish to sample such joys moderately. That is because there are multiple moral and ethical routes here.”

“Therefore, we discussed our digression regarding the axioms and virtues of the physical world in relation to the afterlife,” said Showsh. “There is a moral and ethical discussion, and most options are acceptable. I would suggest we now return to The Middle, and take a seat, maybe have a meal, and allow Droos to make some final observations. The matter of the Rule of this Lens will be considered. Yet, for Her to pass Judgement on The Middle of Gon Eden, I would prefer her to spend more actual time there. My love, Dear One, Droos, please lead away, back into the light of The Suns of The Middle of The Garden.”

It had been a curious sight, that cave amidst The Valley, amidst the mountains, of The Middle Heaven. The idea that Great Spirits were the filter through which the Reality of the Shadows viewed by Reflection Mortals was beheld was terrifying... and beautiful. Was it a Thorn in a Thorn in Reality, or a Berry? What other Secrets of The Garden existed? This was not just a question of who might be found here, but of Celestial purposes that existed for this place that defied expectations. Both were worth investigating. As Droos concluded such thoughts, they sat together upon a table, an ornate, wooden design, surely an art piece in many museums of the physical world, and a trio of Angels brought light food and drink for them. As they sat there, apparently slightly oblivious, a Soul Fragment Ascended to the Table of The Royal Family of Drerpo.

“Forgive me, for I saw that this seat was not taken,” he said.

The man was perhaps in his forties by appearance, slightly bald, and a little too thin. He wore a shade of black and sat on the leftmost corner of the bench, next to Atropo, and across from Droos, and observed the ensemble, as well as the surroundings. Also, he helped himself to the delicacies at the table, choosing an amble sampling.

“How long have you been here for?” he asked. “Me, it’s been, well, I am not sure. Time has little meaning here. On occasion I sit with some family or friends, and some appear to enjoy themselves. There are certainly few demands on my time. I almost wish there were more responsibilities. At one time I was a businessman with endless distractions and challenging tasks. Now I eat food, kick a ball around The Valley, and otherwise, live a life of lethargy.”

“I am glad that you joined us, Dear Sir,” said Droos. “Or rather, what is your name? What would you like us to call you?”

“You mean you don’t know?” said the man. “I thought it was an odd quirk of this place that nearly everyone had those details for each other. My name is Allen, and that is certainly enough to go by. You are a pleasant sort to look at. What is your name?”

“You may call me Droos, Dear Allen,” said The Angel. “I appreciate your comments that this place is little challenge to mind and body and spirit or emotion. Maybe some improvements could be made. I happen to know a few who might be able to offer some revisions, if the concerns prove true. Allow me to introduce my friends, Drerpo, Emerzo, and Amet.”

With that, the other three took a formal bow of the head, and smiled, as they carefully sampled the food and drink as well.

“You are all dressed differently,” said Allen. “You would think that you were the ones responsible for decisions around here. It seems most are not even able to choose their own wardrobe. How is it that a grown man or woman cannot choose the clothing they put on their bodies? And this food, I tell you, it may have thousands of different flavors, but they are all lettuce and blueberries to me. A piece of beef needs to look like a piece of beef.”

“What exactly was your type of business where you lived?” asked Droos.

“Well, I was a middle manager, and I helped people get what they wanted,” said Allen. “Don’t you know that the customer has needs? Well, I helped fulfill them. Whatever they desired. For that, I had all sorts of labels, but it was all the audacity, and self-righteousness of elites and brats who probably had not done an honest day of work in their lives. I never knew what was wrong with simply trying to earn a living, and support my family. And the people got what they wanted, right? I was good at my job.”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“That is great, Allen,” said Droos, with a smile. “It is noble to have good, honest work, and to help others. You are truly a fine example of your profession, and a moral, ethical person of integrity.”

“You are sounding just like that sort of gaudy, princess that would stand up in townhall, or in the police station, and tell us the laws of the land,” said Allen. “What about loyalty, and respect. What about trust, or betrayal? I knew who my friends were, and I was more than fair even with my enemies—provided they knew the rules. It is not to say that I was not a man of principles. There were lines I did not cross. Yet, the idea that I did not perform an important role in society, providing the wants and desires that government was unable to tolerate, is laughable. If they wanted those things to be moral and ethical, they should have passed laws and regulated them in the first place. Instead, they left it to my bosses and my organization to provide those products. Where there is a vacuum of law and government in society, and the demand still exists, that is where we would be. It is their fault for overlooking the obvious opportunity.”

“You raise some excellent points, Allen,” said Emerzo. “It is true, that prohibitions and regulations must be limited enough that honest citizens may enjoy the indulgences they desire for a reasonable fee without fear of persecution. Societies with strict rules that ban many of those items, or services, well, it is understandable that someone, or some organization provides them. You, Allen, performed an admirable, valuable job in life. Well done.”

“You jest lady,” said the man. “I am here merely as an Aspect. Certainly you will not find any piece of myself, whatever those bureaucratic creatures with wings call us, in this jurisdiction. I fully sense that most of them are elsewhere. There is one part of me that I hope is in The Palace, and I have some relatives and friends here who have suggested that they have seen Me there. Yet to think, that for simply the crime of being an able businessman in life, providing the reasonable wants and services of the people, much of myself should be condemned—that is a tough thing to swallow. You ought to pass along that the good humans of this ridiculous universe be treated better. What, after all, have I really done so wrong?”

“I will compliment you on your bluntness, Allen,” said Drerpo. “I will pass along your suggestions about how to improve

the Valley in which we are clearly stuck for an endless eternity. Perhaps there should be more to do, responsibilities, duties, and activities. It may be true that a life of relaxation, socializing, and good meals with friends and family may grow weary after enough eons. A man needs a purpose, or objective.”

“There are others who did far worse than you, Allen,” said Droos. “What you might appreciate is that you are aware of those other pieces of you. That means, even those parts of yourself are aware and experience your presence here in this place. Also, it is likely a fragment of yourself is in The Palace, possibly in Sublimity, and likely other Heavens of the Firmament. In addition to this Aspect of you here, do not despair that there is a presence of you, the most Righteous portions of your Whole Soul, that reside in a Realm of Gon Eden. That being said, I am not able to say that some portion of you does not reside in some of the Domains of Hell. Even then, how many actually exist in the Lowest Hell, baetOak, is also unclear. There are many Firmaments and Sacred Realms. Do not despair of Justice.”

“You paint a rosier picture for me,” said Allen. “Why would any part of me be damned? It seemed like I performed such a service. What right do these creatures have to Judge Me?”

“You might ask yourself, whether in the course of your work, anyone was hurt physically, or harmed intentionally emotionally, mentally, or spiritually,” said Amet. “If your career choice was moral, ethical, and you maintained your integrity, and you loved and tolerated all others, and pursued peace, then you might expect few Fragments, or pieces of yourself, in Hells of any sort. As we have discovered ourselves, it does not take much for The Decree to place one or more Fragments in a Hell, even baetOak. You should know that it is possible, though less likely now, that Droos will have a Fragment or herself in the Lowest Hell when she dies. The response to that in life should be to travel The Journey of The Good, and return to the narrow path of The Good Life.”

“There you go again about ethics and morals and standards,” said Allen, rolling his eyes. “How are any of those things going to put food on my table, or my children’s, in life? How does helping an old lady cross the street earn me respect and honor or power? A great sage said that, ‘Might makes right.’ You have to, ‘Take what you want.’ And finally, ‘Nice guys finish last.’ How is it living a good life if my whole family ends up starving on

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

the street with no respect?”

“The difficulty with that approach is that a system that places those capable of enforcing power on top justifies such approaches perpetually,” said Droos. “In other words, if it is justifiable for the strongman to use physical violence or intimidation or other Evil means to achieve power, any may do so. It demeans the dignity of humans, such that all in the future might expect such a system. A system without laws that protect Property means that no one may be confident in any Property. A Society without Rights, means that no one has Rights. The faith of the dominant that they will always be in power is a fallacy—for such privileges may be lost tomorrow. Regimes rise today, and are replaced in the next. To say that kindness is unnecessary or a waste, also devalues everyone, for then perhaps no one will be kind to any person, even the strongman, unless out of fear, which is a hollow word, at the least. Rather, extreme kindness towards everyone, almost all of the time, raises all humans, and improves Society.”

“It would seem to say that a Society that has Rights, Laws, Rules, that are followed, and respected, and are well written and enforced,” said Emerzo, “Is one that raises all of its citizens and residents and even The Stranger in its midst, as well as the Meek and downtrodden. By promoting all, perhaps with laws that provide those desires and wants and needs previously unaddressed by the government, as Allen says, all will be happier, and more prosperous, with more Property, and real benefits, relationships, friends, and family. People will have security for themselves and their loved ones, and long lives in sufficient comfort. Add to that a congenial and kind approach to interpersonal relations, and it would seem a very pleasant society in which to exist.”

“You may contrast that to the alternative, where a very small minority has power, at the expense of the fear, terror, and repression of almost everyone else,” said Amet. “Such is a system so volatile that it almost guarantees that the strongman will fall either in their lifetime, or certainly that of their descendants. Better a system in which everyone has the right of stability, and happiness, and prosperity. If a strongman loves his or her family, they would love such a system of Laws, and Rights, and Honor, Kindness, and Respect for fellow human beings, for it will reflect onto their own families, and friends, and loved ones equally. It would also be relevant, that such a Society still has privileges

for those with money, and such as they are, the strongman would likely have such resources, and more power even in such a reality. It is hard to say that anything is worse off, and really, almost every aspect of the system is better.”

“This is food for thought,” said Allen, finishing eating a mouthful of blueberries. “That bight tasted like pork. I still prefer the real thing. You four certainly think about these topics a lot. I will insist you pass my suggestions along to management. Why do they have the right to Judge Me?”

“There are rewards and consequences to certain actions in life,” said Emerzo. “There is a Judge and a Decree for them. There is also Rebirth, and new opportunities for almost all. If anything, afterlives are meant to garnish a new soul for a better life in the next. Perhaps by experiencing purifying fire, or other Hells, and some tastes of Paradise, or other Heavens, the Whole Soul, upon Rebirth, in whatever Reflection the Sentient or Creature finds Itself, will live a better life in relation to The Good. It may also be relevant that many would ascribe the Right to the Creator of the Universe to Design such a system of Justice upon death, for all Reflection Mortals, and Local Forcang, are the Creations and Children of Her.”

“That is one hell of a speech,” said Allen. “You use a lot of big words, and strange ideas. I almost feel like you do work for these people. Well, this has been a pleasant distraction from the endless doldrums of *The Middle*. Do pass along my suggestions, and maybe this could turn out to be a more productive afterlife. I will confess that you all gave me some interesting thoughts. Also, the food and drink of your table was excellent. For the time being, I will see you around.”

With that, the Soul Aspect of Allen rose, though he did walk to the other side of the table, and bowing, took Droos’ hand, and kissed it, with a smile, before turning, and disappearing into the myriad collection of Fragments and Aspects and Angels of Heaven.

“Those were some quality suggestions, Elriver,” said Droos, with a slight chuckle, though quite serious in her expression.

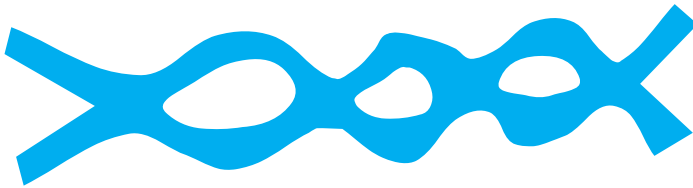
“Why do you think all Aspects reside here,” said Showsh. “Just because a Reflection Mortal makes some mistakes in life, does not mean she or he may not contribute in the afterlife. Sometimes, it takes an Aspect that is blunt like this, and a little

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

naïve, to make such bold statements. Would you imagine the average soul in The Refuge of the Meek or from The City of the Righteous would sit here and talk like that? The man did not even recognize us. How refreshing!”

“I am not so sure he did not know more than he did, or that there was not some angle,” said Atropo. “Only, he was truly a bit naïve, but that was a weapon of virtue. He allowed it to guide him to providing the sort of benefit on behalf of endless souls of this place that few would ever consider. Maybe in some part of his mind he Knew the Truth. Yet he had just the right amount of irreverence to do what he did. You ask why the Universe has Thorns? Or how to distinguish between Berries and Thorns? This is clearly part of that discussion.”

“Therefore, the Aspects of all Whole Souls of Drerpo have resided here and will reside here for all eternity for the sake of the Reunion of Families and Friends,” said Droos. “Yet it is also for the benefit of Us. The *Management* does not always want to hear from those who love the product, but those who have lots of concerns with it. Who else would provide such information? It may be a shock to some Angels, yet this is why they work here,



and have Keen Senses, to process such revelations.”

“To assume that anyone is wholly Evil, or wholly good, is an incorrect approach,” said Elriver. “Almost everyone is somewhere in between. Their benefit to the Universe is relevant in nearly all instances. Any may contribute, all have the opportunity, and it may never be known who will rise and improve the Universe for everyone. There are rules, laws, and axioms, but for as how they may be improved, those suggestion may arrive from myriad ways and directions. I will take the Words of Allen under advisement, and we will see if Paradise may be made an even better place with his blunt help.”

“One of the most curious points I find here are the number of those who spend time together, and talk as friends, who apparently at one point or another in life, saw their relationship very differently,” continued Droos “It is as if it is a Goal of Heaven to Cure Enmity. There must be something terribly damaging about Hatred, about Fear, about Anger, among others, that leads to such an effort. How often does it work, even in The Firmament? I look forward to our next Realm of Gon Eden. It is surely a surprise that a Fragment would arrive in Heaven, and sit across from an enemy. I suppose if the objective of our Journey now is ethics, morality, integrity, love, tolerance, and peace, there may be even more surprises awaiting Our Future. So far, This Fair Garden has not disappointed, even if it has had notions that were different. Show me, Showsh, my love, the next forest and meadows of vines of Gon Eden.





Chapter 3

Peace between Enemies

“It would be an insufficient tour without some exploration of the myriad Heavens beyond Gon Eden,” said Elriver. “That is not to mention the free transit between such Domains of the Firmament, and demonstrating the structure of such a system.”

“That does sound like a fascinating topic,” said Droos. “Only, the more time I spend here, the less I really want to leave. There is a quality to the Trees, the Flowers, the Richness of the Fruits and Berries, that make leaving an afterthought.”

“It is those thoughts you have to fight,” said Showsh. “You must think of the great purpose you have to offer Dweehwail, and the Threat of Tzefee. To be lulled into rest in this Fair Realm too soon, would be a retreat.”

“You are Right,” said Droos, blushing. “You are always right.”

With that, she walked over and kissed him, quickly, and gave him a hug.

“There is still the matter of which Domain of the Sacred Realm we would visit,” inquired Atropo. “We do not have an eternity to tour every Domain.”

“I would choose that Fair place of opposites that has been remarked upon where even Enemies make peace with one another,” said Droos. “Surely, such a place cannot exist. How might those who have injured each other in life, physically, emotionally, or mentally, or by some other means, make peace in the afterlife? It would seem Beyond even the capable Servants of Heaven to accomplish such a feat.”

“Very well, the destination is chosen,” said Elriver. “Follow me.”

With that, they traveled, away, through a mountain pass, high and snowy, and over into the view of the vast forests of Gon

Eden, and plains and gardens. So many trees were in bloom with fruits and flowers, and plants with blossoms rose in the fields and gardens such that the Eldest of Nature was awash in a rainbow of colors. There were no words or aesthetic images that might recapture such a moment of Pure Wonder and Vision—the Simple Beauty of Gon Eden in Breadth from North to South, as approached from the West. There even on a far green hill, at the North, amidst a garden of endless flowers, stood the silhouette of a city; the only metropolis of The Garden, and an exclusive Realm known to few outsiders, that existed in their Future.

Sweeping away before them, as they gazed East was a River of Light. It was Brilliant, and Dazzling, and more Profound than any Star or Sun. There were shapes in the River, Soul Fragments in Garments of Multicolor, and Black, and White, and Servants of all Sorts, in varied Shape and Form and one thousand colors and hues, from dark to light. The River swept passed the mountain, as it descended toward the entrance to the Northern Garden, and into this Shimmering Energy they dove.

It was a little cold, and warm, and comforting, all at the same time. It was the rays of sunshine that warm upon standing in a snowy meadow on the first day of the first snow fall of winter. The current was gentle and easy, and they had no difficulty traversing the raging forces that pulled at them, directing them, calling to them, to provide the intention and destination. It occurred to Droos that this was harder then it seemed, for where was she going, in the direction sense of Drerpo?

She heard a loud, commanding voice announce, ‘Four to Uen’, though it was unclear a language she knew was actually spoken. It was only that she understood it in some manner beyond comprehension. There the River of Light, entering this Fair Domain in numerous points, a superstructure of Heavens of the Sacred Realm, swept them away, and rapidly, into another time beyond time.

Soon, passing beyond the greenish glow of Gon Eden, the bluish clouds of inter-Domain Void in the Sacred Realm embraced them. It was utterly silent, a depth to which was unknown outside the Firmament. As if in answer, some voice without a sound spoke of an ancient sage that praised the value of silence. This space between notes, the blank space on the page, were all the absence in which the Universe held its breath. After an eon, seeming, they approached a lilac orb, a cloud, a mist. Into this storm, they

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

descended in a fury, dazzling comets of energy, living beings among numerous Soul Fragments of Heaven.

Then the River of Light swept into a narrow passageway, depositing them at the end of a long bluish-grey room. It seemed most Fragments left upon entry, yet they reached the Pool of Light at the end of the hall. Into this Realm, they entered this new Domain.

“Is this the mysterious realm, Uen?” asked Droos, with some trepidation. “I admit I am a little disappointed. It was my assumption that this occurred in Gon Eden itself. Yet I suppose this process is so complex and so lengthy that it requires an entire Domain to manage its methods.”

“However, those who succeed and complete the process are free to roam the Firmament as Free Soul Fragments,” said Showsh. “Most who reach that goal, travel together, as close friends, for many hundreds of years afterwards.”

“How does this process begin?” said Droos.

She noticed that there were small fires moving about the room, only looking more closely, she saw that these were figures! Actually, the flaming forms were Servants, that appeared very similar to a crackling, pleasant fire. This faerie fire cast a surreal glow to the room, poorly lit by some slowly pulsing orbs at a distance too great above. The light was grey. Then Droos saw that there were windows ahead, as a hallway, slightly broad, that left the entrance hall, and wound and twisted into some different purpose. It was to this that Atropo led them now.

Walking slowly up to the first window, the Queen of Angels saw, or rather Thought of a room. In it were two Sentients. They sat, huddled in cloaks, at opposite sides of a cavernous room, made in similarity to stone. There amidst them stood one of the Servants of this Domain, only to the Soul Fragments, they only seemed a pleasant fire. That was the only good aspect of that Domain to the Soul Fragments, as finding an afterlife with The Other, in such an Abject Hell, was of little comfort.

In early years, these Fragments, said little, though there was some complaining, mostly in the form of monologue. Food was provided, of a nourishing nature, mostly to provide some therapeutic respite. Yet, these were too infrequent to diminish the dissonance. These two were forced to spend time together. Try as they might to act as though The Other was nothing but a splotch of the opposite wall, an occasional glance told differently. Even in

these first Years of Uen the attitude began to shift slightly.

The Four did not have the decades and centuries of observing necessary to witness this entire evolution. Not that time had the same sense in this place. Nonetheless, they continued down the hallway, to the next window. As they walked, slowly in the faerie light, beneath the pulsing shades of grey, there were some questions.

“We discussed the difficulties with enmity,” said Droos. “It leads to so many Evil consequences. Hatred may be one of the worst, not least of all now that I Know it places a Soul Fragment upon the Tree of Thorns. More than that, how many have died, or have been tormented, or persecuted, for the sake of enmity? What of its justification? To say that there is no wrong or injustice that may be committed by one Sentient against another is clearly incorrect. Yet to insist that the only reply, even to constant affronts of this nature, is enmity, that is what we must question. Does this in fact improve The Good Life and pursuit of The Good for either the victim, or the perpetrator? Does it in fact risk a cycle of harm, in a variety of ways, by a possible expanding group of relatives, friends, and associates?”

“It was agreed that it is never morally or ethically sound to inflict physical harm on another, unless in True Defense,” said Atropo. “Even then, it is only as a last resort. As for emotional and mental harm, these are equally problematically and axiomatically poisonous if they are done intentionally. That is to say, there are some that will take insult from the unintentional innocuous actions of others without indicating any hurt or concern. Without such a warning, or if there is nothing inherently nefarious about a chosen action, for example, if it falls into a privilege of a Fundamental Right of Sentients, it may be that the emotional or mental harm is erroneous. Thus, the inflicted in that case would be better turning straightaway to healing themselves over any chastisement of the inflictor. However, there are those who mean to be cruel and cause emotional and mental harm with any due Right Privilege, and even after being warned. Such parties have been morally and ethically unreasonable and have violated their integrity. They certainly have not acted according to the additional virtues of love, tolerance, and pursuing peace.”

“For those who intentionally inflict harm, be it physical, emotional, or mental, or even spiritual, what is the best course of action or response?” asked Showsh. “Even in such a context

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

it would seem that usually, once the matter of immediate True Defense is completed, afterward, the goal necessitates an attempt to heal all parties. This is both the victim and perpetrator. Thus, all results should be about, not just justice, but improving the outcome at the next opportunity for a similar occurrence. Addressing the emotional pain of falling victim to crime or wrong is more importantly the purview of behavioral professionals, spiritual counseling and prayer, and good life style choices, as well as some possible medical outcomes. These must all be pursued, and any punitive response to a perpetrator by Society needs only be light, as it does not change the need for the victim to engage in all of those forms of healing for a considerable period of time. Rather, the perpetrator might easily be brought to a place where they may actually reform. The goal of a correctional system is that a criminal will see the errors in their ways, and live better afterwards, and never reoffend.”

“I would say that any system that results in the perpetual cycle of reoffending is not actually a functioning correctional system,” said Elriver. “Society does not benefit from holding grudges, or overly long sentences, or exacting revenge. It does benefit from sincere reform and corrections. A system that does not succeed at this, since it focuses only on punishing, simply creates more, newer, or even more hardened offenders. Society must be willing to either provide sufficient resources to do this, or, reduce the punishment aspect sufficiently that there are fewer obligations on the system.”

“This discussion suggests that the result of enmity, and enemies acting against enemies is to create crime, violence, pain, and unhappiness, and perpetuate these into larger and larger groups,” said Droos. “Rather, the most powerful tools are ultimately self-reflection, offering apologies, and readily giving forgiveness. As mentioned, within the self-reflection a variety of professionals must be sought to deal with the real harm and pain caused by intentional or unintentional physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual harm. If any harm is ever caused to another, even unintentionally, if this becomes known, an apology should be offered. It is better to offer too many apologies than too few. An apology is not just about acknowledging a mistake, but offering concrete steps to ensure that it never happens again, and acting on that plan. In some instances, the injured party must indicate an apology is desired. Finally, one of the most powerful of all tools in

pursuit of The Good is Forgiveness. It is better to forgive as many as possible, and as often as possible, then to hold grudges, maintain enmity, or sustain endless cycles of harm and increasing pain. Part of the healing process is letting go of the past, however painful, whoever might have been at fault, of giving up control, to some extent, over the smallest details of the past. Rather, it is the gift of tranquility and freedom from worry and concern that is gained from offering forgiveness, both literally to others, to enemies, and even away from their presence.”

“It would seem that you are suggesting that there be no consequences for a perpetrator,” said Atropo. “Or rather that it be very light. How is this Justice?”

“It is not that there is no Justice,” said Showsh. “Rather, the needs of Society must look both to a consequence, and also recovery from injury. Some light sentence must be dealt, and a system established to functionally provide resources to correct the misunderstandings and challenges that led to that injury. Finally, the healing of the victim has as much to do with their own choice to seek help, and talk to victim’s support groups, and specialists, and take medication, and talk to and confide in friends and family.

“What of this mechanical approach to Sentients,” said Elriver. “Did a great sage not once say, ‘That humans are social creatures.’ Sentients are emotional, and act to defend their family and friends, to defy the rules, and laws, almost despite them. Is it really such a terrible thing to act on such a mortal basis, and follow a gut inclination? Some may even be willing to accept the consequences afterwards.”

“The problem with undermining the rules, to breaking the laws, however normal it is to follow the heart, or emotion,” said Droos, “Is that it devalues humanity. If it is alright to steal one organ, it is acceptable for everyone to take one at will. Once it is acceptable to break one law, any law may be violated, based on the judge, jury, and lawyer in each Sentient. The morals and ethics and integrity compromised one day to save a family member, might very well be those of another human that crushed them with his foot when he crossed the line to save his friends or family. What this asks for is a state of anarchy. The nature of Society, is to live with the best laws possible, that provide the best, healthiest life possible, for the most people. If it is flawed, it should be corrected in the system. Anything short of that risks the integrity of the whole. Do humans really want a system of no rules, where

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

the strong rule the weak, and no one but the powerful and rich are healthy and happy? A sure step in that direction is starting with the violation of small rules, then making excuses to take revenge against an enemy, and finally, letting the ends justify the means to protect family and friends at all costs, even compromising the freedom and rights of everyone else.”

“Are you suggesting that to pursue an enemy, in anything beyond the occasional emotional outburst in private, undermines the very fabric of society?” asked Showsh. “That would make it the essence of *unethical*. Given that acting in such a way causes intentional harm to another, it would seem to be *immoral*. Even at the level of healing herself, enmity fails at that task, as it does not cure the underling ills without much further work that has nothing to do with actions against an enemy. It might even add to the emotional, mental, spiritual trauma in the mind of the victim for having violated their integrity to seek revenge. Better to offer forgiveness, and seek help from qualified experts, however more challenging such a route might be. If Society is so broken it cannot provide such options readily for a price everyone is able to afford and access at need, then Society needs to be greatly improved rapidly. It still does not excuse harm in pursuit of vengeance while waiting for the inadequacies of Society to be fixed. Rather, there are options, such as support groups, talking to clergy and spiritual advisors, and discussing the matter with helpful friends and family and confidants. Finally, friends and family that encourage reckless behavior in the form of revenge, harm against others, or general criminal activity, are not being helpful. They are actually perpetuating the suffering and ills of all parties, and their relations, of both victim and perpetrator.”

“The conclusion then is that the very human or Sentient process of enmity is immoral, unethical, and lacks integrity,” said Droos. “It is also likely to rely on hatred, rather than love, intolerance, instead of tolerance, and pursuit of strife instead of peace. Overall, it should be avoided as a Great Evil. There appears to be a very good reason that we are here in a Celestial Domain that specializes in bringing at least one piece of two Whole Souls together to do in the afterlife, what they were unable to achieve in life. If only it did not take that long to get to this point. We will see what Heaven has to say about what should happen. However, there is no reason that this may not happen, in many instances, while two Sentients yet live. It may take time,

distances, and effort. In the end, none should forget the power of forgiveness and love.”

As Droos said those words, they arrived at the next window on Uen, almost like hundreds of years had passed them by, though none were able to tell in their party of its passage. This next step in the process would be interesting for Droos to see, for those who truly embraced this Evil approach during life, and were overcome by their emotions and desires for revenge. How would this Heaven of Drerpo bring two Enemies closer together? Was this process guaranteed even here, or were there some that did not finish, and get to leave as Free Souls to wander and search for their Other Parts in the Vastness of the Celestial Domains of Drerpo? What might it do for the prospects of Rebirth of the Whole Soul, for those who did not complete that Journey? Would they ever be Reborn? Did it even remove some choice in the matter?

The Queen of Angels pondered these questions as she stood in front of the window, and gazed at what was next. A hush fell on The Royal Family behind her. All stood expectant at this unusual process of The Firmament, that so often successfully turned what were once even the worst enemies into the best and longest lasting friends. Of course, the Heavens of Drerpo, particularly Gon Eden, were also the sort of place where the lion lay down with the gazelle, and rabbits played harmlessly with wolves. All manner of miraculous occurrence was possible. Droos only wished that in this instance, it would be seemingly less of a miracle to the sensibilities of humans and Sentients.

The two humans sat across from one another, as seen through the Ontological Window. All of the time that had passed, in the space between the windows, that had the effect of bringing this pair to the next phase. Before them food and delicacies were laid by the Servants, as well as drinks. Amidst material comfort, and the warmth of flame, they actually spoke! Not about the cause of their enmity or estrangement, but rather, any other topic. It even ranged into great depths of philosophy and religious exploration, plying the mysteries of the Universe. Then, waving a wooden goblet in the air, and happily imbibing a fruit juice, or something stronger, each was happily conversing with the other, if only not about the central topic. Finally, it dawned on them what they had done, and in that moment, sheepishly, they stepped back, and grew weary. For there was some thought, however much of a glimmer, that they had actually enjoyed the presence and company of The

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Other in this Heaven of Uen.

Weariness captured them, all in this Celestial Time Beyond Time, and they slept on opposite sides of the cavern. When waking, there was the other. Only, the distance was not so great as before. More food and drink was placed before them, creature comforts to soothe the soul. With each their own preference to enjoy, now was the time to bring out old grievances. These two certainly had done each other wrong—at least emotionally and mentally. There was even some intentionality. This topic was long, and arduous, and while calm most of the time, particularly with the help of good food and drink, sometimes it did grow loud. Yet the Servants of Uen never had to separate the Soul Fragments. So passed the First Eon of Uen.

“How is it that simply talking about an injury may assist in curing it?” pondered Droos. “There are so many Sentients, Forcang, Reflection Mortal, or otherwise, that approach their problems passive aggressively. What about just approaching the subject, the source of angst and confronting them? Surely, such a direct conversation with brevity would have a tremendous effect, particularly for those who expect to have them to fix such problems with friends and family.”

“I believe the term you are looking for is *Good Communication*, said Showsh. “That is one of the central keys to good interpersonal relationships. Yet it is also central to interactions between Sentients in general. To work out problems, that requires direct communication. To negotiate disagreement, that needs the same. To explain misunderstandings, also that demands the same good communication. Over all, Sentients need to talk to each other. It is the same for enemies. If anything, the sooner two sit together in a room and talk, the more likely a challenge may be solved before it comes to blows or other concrete signs of animosity. It is when communication ceases to exist that the greatest problems occur.”

“It is also a question of morals, ethics, and integrity,” said Elriver. “Does The Good require Sentients to maintain sound communication? It would seem that Society and Interpersonal relations break down with a likely result of harm to people without it, creating both an unethical and immoral condition. It is also dishonest, or lacking in integrity, since avoiding direct communication does not give the accused the opportunity to respond to the arguments, and discussions, and any accusations.

The same is true of the passive aggressive approach. It is also a kind of lie. Disputes should be presented as directly and clearly as possible, and as simply as is reasonable. Anything short of that risks misunderstanding, or complete ignorance of the message. If the goal is The Good Life, and Love, Peace, and Tolerance in Society, it would seem that only sound direct communication is moral, ethical, and honestly maintains integrity.”

“You are once again guilty of holding Reflection Mortals to the standard of Forcang,” said Atropo. “As I have said, even Forcang do not typically reach such heights of logic and wisdom. That being said, sound direct communication may be the goal for a happy, congenial Society, yet surely that would have to be a nation of automatons. Once actual Sentients or humans are introduced, with the capability of embarrassments, and low self-esteem, ignorance, and at times, actual malevolence, it is mirkier to produce a Society free from clouded communication.”

“We are here to consider such plights,” said Droos. “The vast majority of Sentients live and work in a society that is far from perfect. At the same time, this philosophical dramatic narrative is meant to document and attempt to discuss The Society, one governed by pursuit of The Good, in order that a maximum number of humans may live The Good Life. A pure nihilist might conclude similarly based on emotion that the best solution is to destroy all Sentients in existence, to avoid any encounters with immoral, unethical, or dishonest approaches to topics like communication because of emotions and the limitations inherent in mortality. That is also a fallacy. It abdicates responsibility to, as a great sage once said, ‘Raise the downtrodden.’ Would he avoid the whole jigsaw puzzle because the final aesthetic happened or might be missing half a dozen pieces? Is skipping the entire process justified because those working on the puzzle are not experts or masters of logic or games when it comes to puzzles and family entertainment? Rather, we are here to propose that good sound communication is what we are after in search of The Good Life.”

“That is to say,” added Elriver, “That there are numerous adversaries that wish to counter, or inhibit such philosophy for any number of reason. Yet, those who love knowledge, and science, and peace, they do their best to improve society to help everyone, from the lowest, to the highest. It is ironic that sometimes those most adamantly against a law might be the ones most obvious to benefit from it. Yet the doubters, be they pure nihilists or the

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

typical, imperfect human or Sentient, with prejudices and loved ones more important to them than rules or laws, are the reason we are here. As you say, we are creating a more perfect society to be inhabited by some creatures without free will. I Created a Universe with the Blessing of Endless Variety of Sentient Life—to be able to choose. Sometimes, children will opt for the Thorns, even when presented with the Berries. Or rather, it is simply too tempting to pluck a ripe apple from a fruit tree, rather than be fairly confident that meal time will occur at a later hour, compliments of the Host of the Garden.”

“Good, sound communication it is then,” said Showsh. “But wait! I love this part of Uen. Take a look, Droos.” Showsh directed the Queen of Angel’s gaze to the window, simply with the direction of his eyes, and a Knowing smile.

Some Eons more of Uen had passed, and now the pair were talking happily together. There seemed no obstacles, or conversation they were unable to hold. Even at times they casually mentioned the topics that once might have led to blows in some different lifetime. Now, they were, still possibly Thorns, but neither were they fresh wounds, but learned memories from a past life. They even embraced, and kissed each other upon the cheek. The friends, new friends, toasted each other, and drank merrily and happily. Such was the Power of Uen, and as Droos watched, a Great Servant approached, and ushered the pair of friends towards a door that now appeared on the far side of the cavern. Rapidly, they were ushered to the next phase.

Stepping to the Third Window, Droos saw that the pair of new friends, once enemies, were now at a banquet table. They were the guests of honor in the center, and being served by the same Angelic Beings. All manner of questions were asked by the Hosts, seeming to Wear at Least Two Genders, and the friends enjoyed the new, different fare, while doing their best to participate in conversation. After a time, they realized that they were both finishing each other’s sentences, answering questions about the other knowingly, and finally, enjoying dainties off their friend’s plate. With some embarrassment, it was apparent how close they had become, if not how many actual Eons of Uen it had taken to arrive at this point. That night they slept on two separate plush beds in the guestrooms of the Hosts, and no sounder or tranquil sleep was ever had, free from one of the burdens they had taken with them to the afterlife. Here they slept as if they were children

in their parent's home.

There were more windows, that followed the pair, as they departed into the gardens and grounds of the manor, and upon completion, a Magnificent Vessel arrived, one that looked surprisingly familiar. Droos might have sworn that it was the one from her youth, a certain wooden boat with two masts often sailed by her boyfriend.

"How is it that this is here?" asked Droos. "Just another trick of The Language of the Universe?"

"That would be possible," said Showsh, placing an arm around her shoulder. "Only, my wife and I are not the only two in Drerpo to have that type of vessel. The term in Dweehwail for them is a River Vessel. The most powerful are capable of sailing even the Great River. Yet, these are designed for travel among the Celestial Domains, and even the Universe Proper of Drerpo, for business of Celestial Bureaucrats."

"We get to join this pair of new friends on their first boat ride," said Elriver.

With that, they reached the door at the end of the twisting hallway, bluish-grey in color, and opening it, a rainbow river met them, dazzling in varieties of hue and color. Showsh reached out and took Droos' hand, and led her, along with the confident strides of the others, to the River Vessel. The Pair of Honor were already secured aboard. Now The Four Royals took modest wooden chairs at the rear. The able boat departed, being conducted by a Servant of Uen at the prow.

"You two may come join us," said Droos, to the Pair of Honor. "You have worked hard enough to deserve a rest."

"I feel that all we have been doing is resting," said one man, short and slender.

"That is not a polite way to greet our new friends, Gertimo," said a large, tall man. "Forgive me, young woman, but this place has a certain quality to it. We have been here a very long time. For good reasons. I have introduced you to my friend, Gertimo. My name is Atinus. Not that we have been informed of the next destination in this grand tour. So far, it has not disappointed."

"I would think that you would be quite disappointed, or at least surprised to find yourself across from Gertimo," said Droos. "How do you feel about him now, and this situation? We heard both of you speak, and I apologize for listening without

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

permission. You might say that I work here. Anyway, you both harmed each other emotionally and mentally. How is it so easy to forgive?”

“It isn’t easy,” said Gertimo. “This pleasant man drove me crazy for one lifetime. It led me to take wildly inappropriate actions, towards him, and others. I am only thankful it never devolved to physical violence. Only now I see that my choices caused just as much damage to myself as it caused the same or less or no impact on Atinus. What I really needed to do was ask for help, give forgiveness, and improve my own sense of myself and self-esteem. Those were simply not ideas that my world considered normal. Thus, I had a life of pursuit of revenge, and I wasted so much time that I might have invested in my happiness, and that of my family and friends.”

“It was the same for me,” said Atinus. “If only someone had taught us about such an alternative, about communication, and good, concrete problem solving. At the end of the day, disputes over Property, Currency, Power, are all insignificant. What if we had focused on what we really had, our True Relationships, love with our family and friends and communities? It is so easy to get obsessed with these tokens of influence in society. At the end of my life, none of that really mattered to me. In the end, I only cared about my grandchildren and their wellbeing. The fact that they were healthy and safe meant more than any amount of money. Yet, I spent so much time worried about the latter, and so much less with them.”

“And most of all, we spent time worried about really actually insignificant damages we had done to each other,” said Gertimo. “Did we ever cause physical harm to any family, friend, or member of the our communities? Absolutely not. Was there an intent to cause emotional or mental injury. No again. Much was based on assumptions, and misunderstandings, and passive aggressive behavior and poor communication. It really made our lives, even though they were long enough, much more difficult and frustrating.”

“I am very glad we had this opportunity in this Heaven, and I will call it that, to get to know Gertimo properly,” said Atinus. “Of course, I am also aware of my Aspect in Gon Eden with my family and friends there. I am not wholly left out. It is truly profound that such a Place exists in the Sacred Realm. What Sentient would have even considered such a thing to be

necessary?”

“I am glad that this process has worked well for you,” said Elriver. “It does not work for everyone. Your reward for working through your enmity, even in the afterlife, will be great, whether you choose an eternal single life after death, or if you wish to eventually be Reborn.”

“Now you will get to go to The Palace of Friendship,” said Atropo. “It is a pleasant place. They have feasts there every day to honor new friends that were so recently enemies. Great Celestial Dignitaries, even Guests from beyond this very Universe visit to behold the splendor of comradery. Now sit back, and relax, for you have earned your reward.”

The Pair of Honor returned to their comfortable chairs, thrones really, and far fancier than anything The Four Royals sat upon. The rest of the Journey to The Palace of Friendship was one of lights and sounds and ride down a Rainbow Road. They reached a Palace, a place of shifting golden architecture, and silver reliefs, covered with statues and artwork. To the receiving line, their boat met a small fleet of River Vessels approaching the twin wooden Doors of Friendship.

Through these, they all marched, down a red carpet, candles burning atop candelabras on all sides, and lamps above, and roaring fires on logs, the smells of flowers and fresh fruits in the air. A delightful banter of socializing and conversing on all topics was heard, with none too sacred. Many were pairs of new friends, Pairs of Honor, yet there were numerous Servants from Domains all over Drerpo, and Beyond, and even some Gods and Goddesses, the Lords and Ladies of the Palace. In one or two spots, Showsh pointed out visiting Grand Elder Forcang from other Manifestations, or even Goamdwee. To them, this was just a vacation destination, or interruption of a business trip.

All entertainment centered on the banquet table and the ballroom. The Royals sat beside Gertimo and Atinus, who sat together as friends, and they enjoyed a meal amongst this famous crowd, and heard the stories of more like them. More interesting was the ballroom, where they encouraged each other to dance with other guests, whomever they pleased, if only that they should enjoy themselves. There was also a card and game room, only if any should believe that Uen supported gambling away of unavailable fortunes, that was not the case. These were games for only low stakes, or no bids at all, and nothing anyone was unable to offer

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

freely, happily, and willingly. Rather, it merely added to the entertainment value.

Finally, their names were called by the Chancellor of the Domain, who escorted Gertimo and Atinus towards the Throne Room of the Palace. As Droos and The Three Others kept pace, the Chancellor looked over his shoulder and gave her and Showsh a wink. Then they arrived at the ornate doors, and threw them open, to reveal a modestly simple chamber for a room with such a title.

Still, sitting on two chairs, equal, were the Masters of this Domain. Here they received these purported new friends, and if the questions asked them by their nobles was poignant, these were expert and ensured that by the end, they truly were without a doubt friends with one another. The question, of course, was whether they felt they were ready to leave Uen, and begin their Journey Beyond? It seemed that their eons of discussing details of the Celestial Domains had provided enough details that they gave an answer. They would travel together, by the River of Light, to the Heavenly Domain of Family, to introduce their new friend to their loved ones in a way that might not even be done on Gon Eden. As for whether they desired an Eternal Afterlife or Rebirth, they had not yet made up their minds, which was common at this point, but would certainly begin deciding once they encountered another piece of their Whole Souls.

As the Masters of the Palace of Friendship on Uen stamped their paperwork, freeing their Soul Fragments from Uen, there was a sound of applause, only it was more like a storm on a rainy day, such was the subtlety of Servant signs of appreciation. A small band of minstrels traveled with the Pair of Honor, now Free, and The Royals, out of the Throne Room, and towards the far side of the Palace. There they once again found the River of Light. The minstrels sang, and their song was of Gertimo and Atinus, and their great deed here in Uen, as well as the steps that had led to this in their lives. It was an epic of triumph. Yet reaching the shores of the Light was bittersweet for Droos, as she now had some emotions of her own for these men. She did imagine that if she wanted she might find them again, yet it had been enjoyable to meet them, and hear about the folly of mortality and humanity, as well as the potential to overcome such burdens. With a final embrace of both, the men entered the stream, and left on their Journey.

“You say that this process does not always work?” considered Droos.

“That is true,” said Atropo. “Some Soul Fragments bear estrangements so deep that not even an eternity in the afterlife is enough to cure them. Yet, the result is usually damage to their Whole Souls. There will always be at least one piece missing, whether they choose an eternity In Between, or if they choose Rebirth.”

“It is a shame that enmity would prove more worthwhile than actual healing, and true advantage in the afterlife,” said Elriver. “Such is the ultimate choice. Uen is a powerful Heaven, but it is not Gon Eden, and it is not Perfect either.”

“With that tour complete, it is time to return to Paradise,” said Showsh. “This time, please try to remember Your Goals and Tasks. It is fine to think of a Reward after a lifetime of service and accomplishing some or most of your objectives. You are not there yet, My Love.”

“You only want me to leave Gon Eden so that I will be with you, Showsh,” said Droos, suddenly distracted. “If I am that special, then use your Rights, and bend the rules. Take me with you, if you desire.”

“I want you to make a free choice, but one that is deliberate, and honest,” said Showsh, smiling. “Of course I want to spend time with you after this visit. It would be impossible to deny that interest. Also, it is True that you are a Secret of Dweehwail, who has already uncovered one Resource to Combat The Threat. It would simply, objectively speaking, be too soon to enjoy Gon Eden properly. Besides, to earn The Garden, there must be a lifetime of positive deeds, to by far outweigh the negative, and to convince The Judge that such a Decree is warranted.”

“I thought many Whole Souls deposited at least some Fragment in Gon Eden upon death?” said Droos. “It would be surprising to think that some part of my Whole Soul would not reside in The Garden.”

“As you have seen, Dear Droos,” said Atropo, “There are many Realms of Gon Eden. You may be in The City or Heaven of the Righteous, or The Refuge of the Meek, or you may reside in The Bastion of the Tyrant. These locales are not equivalent, and serve different purposes.”

“Do you mean to say that even the Whole Souls of dictators and evil kings, among other terrible rulers, have a place in

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

The Garden, at all?” asked Droos.

“It is as you said,” said Elriver. “What needs to be asked is the nature of a Whole Soul. How many Sentients are wholly Evil or wholly Good? Thus, many tyrants, as you might call them, have at least a single Kernel of Righteousness someplace within them. In the same respect, even the very righteous Sentient may have a Kernel of Evil, and have a Soul Fragment in baetOak. It is a very rare Sentient that is essentially Pure Evil or Pure Good. You might assume that besides that one Fragment in the Bastion of Tyrants, nearly all other Fragments are in one Hell or another of the Celestial Domains, or similar afterlives.”

“This is a very curious concept, and I would like to see it,” said Droos. “If I am to Judge if Gon Eden is a worthwhile place, how might I do so if I do not consider this oddity.”

“Very well, we will return, except this time, we may do so at a different pace,” said Showsh. “Also, we will not be able to travel directly to The Bastion, as it must be entered from within Gon Eden, and it is guarded by Servants.”

With that, Elriver glowed bright golden-white for a moment, and a bluish shimmer filled all of their senses. A rush of cool air passed by them, and a vision of green mist. Then, upon the clearing of the clouds again, they stood beside the Mountains, on the Far Side, West of The Forest and the Plain, and even The Middle. They were beside something strange, rather, a barren desert, of yellowish sands. Yet amidst that sand grew small flowers, with pink pedals, and orange centers. Even here, The Garden persisted, and Beauty was undiminished. In the distance Droos saw something to the South, Rising from Base to The Sky. A Fierce Cacophony, a Scream Resounded in Her Mind, and she fell to the ground.

Opening her eyes again, she was on the sand, being helped up by Atropo, as Showsh looked concerned, if not surprised.

“That is It,” said Elriver. “None Other than The Tree of Thorns. One of the Purest Thorns in Drerpo, and there it rises in the Southwest of Gon Eden Itself, ever an Evil Reality Amidst The Good. The Force of Hatred Struck You for a moment. It should be easier the next time you gaze in that direction. Yet, The Desert of Gon Eden is not The Tree of Thorns, but within The Garden Itself, however remote. Flowers still grow here, and if you follow your nose, you will smell the aroma of peace, tolerance, and love.”

“I never knew those to be aromas,” said Droos, taking a

whiff for an instance. “The smell is more that of a strong perfume, though pleasant, and memorable.”

They started across the desert, and after walking for a time beyond time, there was a trick to the eyes, off to The West. There rising before them was a castle made of ice. It suddenly loomed before them, and did not melt. Neither did any greet them. This was indeed an oddity. Was this a Heaven, Limbo, or someplace in between?

Upon reaching the frozen steps, and gates of the castle, there were not Soul Fragments, but a smattering of Gardeners of the Ice and Desert variety. It seemed that wherever this Bastion was located, it was not in the Castle of Ice in The Desert of The West of Gon Eden.

“This is where we will stop, for a break, before Descending into The Bastion,” said Showsh. “You may be interested to know that there was a time, early in the history of Drerpo when the Bastion was kept here. However, too many rebellions of Soul Fragments resulted in its relocation to a more secure location.”

“I do not want such a Surprise in Heaven to be spoiled for me, Dear Love,” said Droos. “I do accept the invitation for a break before Descending. I only hope that these people are kept in some kind of Paradise appropriate to the name of Gon Eden, yet one also reasonable to the fate of a tyrant.”

“It is a balance between two Abstract Dimensions,” said Atropo. “It is also permitted by the very Reality of the Rain of Souls. In a Linear Mechanic, everyone receives one reward. There is no nuance. Everyone is deemed either Good or Evil. Some systems suggest some middle ground, or a purifying Locale in between. The final destination, though, is one of Those Opposites.”

“That is a pleasant enough model,” said Droos. “What is not to love about the prospect that good people go to Heaven and evil people go to Hell? It seems to reward positive behavior, while providing a consequence for bad behavior.”

“It is a reasonable system,” said Elriver. “That approach is used in some Manifestations. I have a number of critiques. To weigh anyone as wholly Good or Evil seems hyperbolic. The very idea that some middle space was needed to purify the Whole Soul for Heaven suggests the discomfort with this. Also, that any Sentient is bad enough for an Eternity of physical torture, or

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

damnation seems beyond cruel. Even an eternity of emotional or mental or spiritual consequences would be too much for most. That they would experience serious consequences is reasonable. Yet I would not wish an Eternity of Damnation on my worst enemy, and I have several.”

“It does provide some significant motivation to be good,” said Droos. “Furthermore, it is a strong incentive to adopt a particular philosophy or tradition if the consequence for the alternative is endless punishment.”

“Being good is its own reward,” said Showsh. “Among other reasons, by being Good, all Sentients are made better, including the one performing The Good. Also, if the issue is a desire for moral and ethical behavior and a life of honesty and integrity, then doing so only to avoid such eternal torment is like accepting a contract under duress—such a contract loses part of its value. Rather, all choices to be moral and ethical must be made willingly and freely for them to have the greatest meaning and significance. Finally, it invites bigotry and persecution when the assumption is that those who have different beliefs are condemned. After all, if someone is bound for hell, surely they must be immoral, unethical, and lacking in integrity, among many other terrible traits and behaviors. They must worship Dark Lords in secret and do terrible deeds. When The Other, The Stranger, may be ascribed to Hell, it demeans Sentients.”

“It would seem a stronger modern approach might see *eternal torment* as the absence of some relationship with a Divine Being,” said Droos. “In other words, in the afterlife, one group is in Union, or in Relationship with such a Divine Being, while all others lack that Connection. To the exclusivist group, such a fate would seem like eternal torment. It may very well be on an emotional, mental, and spiritual level. Certainly, for that group to be At One with such a Divine Being would be a Supreme Heaven and Afterlife. There simply is no need to talk in terms of fire and brimstones.”

“Why not simply talk of different parts of Heaven?” suggested Atropo. “As we said, there is The Heaven or City of the Righteous and then there is The Bastion of the Tyrants. That is not to say that those who Favor a particular Divine Being might not Order Heaven similarly. There are Regions, Realms, parts of Heaven, and the best, is reserved for The Elect. All Other Parts, are for most others. Finally, the worst locales, still in Heaven, are

for the worst. Possibly, a final category, complete oblivion, is for Truly Pure Evil Sentients, assuming they exist at all.”

“That would seem to raise Sentients and Humans in an exclusivist system,” said Elriver. “At the worst, all Sentients, essentially, would go to Heaven, even if in the mind of the particular religion or philosophy or tradition, ostracization from the Highest Heaven of The Elect is equivalent to Hell. However, the wording and concepts matter. A Hell in the less advantageous parts of Heaven is still better than an eternity of torment in actual Hell. Perhaps, less people in life will condemn The Stranger and The Other if they know that the Worst Punishment is something similar to The Bastion of the Tyrants, and for the vast majority that are not The Elect, they still have a place in The Middle Heaven, outside the Grace of the Divine Being. Thus, they still deserve Respect, Love, Tolerance, and, a lifetime of peace. They still are Sentients and Humans capable of acting with morality, ethics, and integrity. Finally, those who think and behave and believe different are of fundamental value and have a place Under the Sun.”

“That seems like a reasonable concept,” said Droos. “Although, apparently the model of Gon Eden is such that because of the Rain of Souls, a single Whole Soul in an afterlife may experience myriad Heavens, Hells, Limbos, and other Celestial Domains and Planes simultaneously. In that model, which exists here in Drerpo, it is not the case that The Judge issues Decrees for Singular Ascension or Condemnation. Almost every Whole Soul has a place in both Heaven and Hell, and everywhere in between. There are some exceptions for particularly unusual Sentients in life, that have a strong trend in one direction or the other. For most, who lead normal lives in the middle, it is the very experience of these varied, multiple afterlives that creates the New Whole Soul Deserving of Rebirth and possibly better circumstances in the Next Life, or even, Actual Promotion to a Higher Order of Sentients. These experiences and deeds of the afterlife are central, and relevant.”

“I would suggest that the Grand Elder Lords of Order of The Alliance of the Multiverse might consider all manner of model for Celestial Domains, Planes, and afterlives,” said Atropo. “As a Forcang who has spent much of his life in government, I have had less of a role in the Art of Birthing Manifestations than I would like. Yet, it would appear that there is no one right answer in this manner. Like any Art, All Forms are Beautiful. Or rather, Beauty

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

is Universal.”

“That is with the exception of the harm the structure of a Manifestation does to Sentients whether physically, or intentionally on an emotional, mental, or spiritual basis,” said Showsh. “Such a system may be Beautiful, yet it is also Evil. Art may, as mentioned, and this is a digression, be both Beautiful, and Evil. The preference of an Artist who follows The Journey of The Good and desires to live The Good Life would be to create Art that is both Beautiful and Good, or at least, Average. Those approaches are all reasonable. Certainly, both models just suggested in this Philosophical Dramatic Narrative are Good approaches.”

As they finished their conversation, Droos noticed that at the center of the grand entry room to the Ice Castle was a bubbling fountain of a purple, glowing color. First Elriver, then Showsh, and at last Atropo, went and washed their hands in the fountain. Droos caught onto the idea, and did so as well. There was no physical effect, other than a warm sensation, but emotionally and mentally and spiritually she Stood Closer to the Abstract Duality of Good and Evil. The Rain of Souls became a clearer thing, however distant the view still remained with her limited Senses as an Angel.

“What is the nature of that ritual?” said Droos. “My Senses are Keener, as though the lines of Spaces and Locations of the Castle have taken on a Deeper quality. There are passageways that exist that had not been there before.”

“It is an ancient tradition,” said Elriver. “It is a Berry of the Multiverse, and provides a means of Seeing some Realities more Clearly. It is also a Separation between Realms of Greater Goodness and Righteousness, and those of a Lesser Degree. In some instances, it is simply a ritual of Separation.”

“You should now be able to see that this Castle of Ice that rises above The Desert is not all that exists here,” said Atropo. “With Keener Senses as to the Duality of Good and Evil, it is possible to Conceive of the Descent into the Yellow Sand Below, and into what you will Behold.”

“I see it, a stairway, spiraling, wide and ornate, into the ground, just ahead!” remarked Droos. “It is guarded by a Mighty Being, surely not just an Angel, but a Goddess of Great Power. A Flaming Sword is at Her Side, and on Her Back is a Shield of Frost. Her golden armor glistens. She was not visible before.”

“That is The Keeper of the Bastion of Tyrants,” said Showsh. “All who enter and leave pass by her, and none do

without her permission. And She is a Mighty Goddess of Authority, and the Realm below is Semi-Autonomous. It is her Sub-Domain. Her Pantheon of Gods and Goddesses, and host of Bastion Angels keep Order, and The Good, and Peace in the Realm.”

“What a curious place,” said Droos. “I will hold my Judgement, for that is my role here as well. You have made an interesting case as to the necessity of all of this. I hope that persists. I am ready to See this Truth of Good and Evil, and to Understand if it is in fact moral and ethical, and honest with integrity.”

With that, The Queen of Angels stepped before The Keeper, who held out Her flaming sword, and blue, frosting shield, as she eyed the young woman, a powerful Force, here to Judge Her Domain. It was a long moment, and then the sword was lowered, and Droos passed, onto the stairway, ready to Descend. If there was any doubt as to whether The Keeper would stay True to Her Assignment, even before the Creator and Sovereign and a Prince of this Universe, still before The Other three Royals each, She held aloft her flaming sword, and frosting shield, in silence, and observed, to see if even these Guests had Ill Intent. Then, at last, all four passed the test, and were admitted entry, and The Keeper returned to Her Eternal Sentry.

“Does She really stand there at all times?” said Droos, with some concern for the Goddess’ wellbeing, as she began Descending the stairs, with the others.

“We do See Her on some rare occasions for Celestial Functions,” said Elriver. “Usually she is represented by an important member of Her Pantheon. Even if She attends, of course she places a Trusted Second here the whole time. The Keeper of The Bastion of Tyrants is excellent at her role, and there have been few incidents since the relocation to the present Realm.”

“I do want to hear more about that,” said Droos. “For now I will have to be content with experiencing this Descent within Gon Eden. What a strange feeling to be both Elevated and Wholesome yet now Diminished and on Guard. I hope we will get to discuss these matters further.”

“Some topics have been debated,” said Showsh. “There is more to say, and see, and none might assume all is known in Heaven, or Gon Eden, whether of Thorns, or Berries, or any Natural Element of The Garden. Very few Know the Whole

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Truth, and some of those are Here. Even so, to Realize That, would require even Greater Senses. With but the Gifts of The Angel, Elriver, Atropo, and I will illuminate this Experience of the Surprises of this Domain. No Reflection Mortal may know until they reach the bottom of the stair. Even then, we will do our best as hosts to explain what is seen. My love, Droos, I hope that will be enough. For the Duality of Good and Evil is a chapter in the future and from the past that challenges the mortal heart and soul.”

With that, in Silence, the Four Descended the Stairway, passed The Keeper, and into The Bastion. All sight of the Castle of Ice, and The Desert was lost. What was still True was that all the way down, Showsh held Droos’ hand, and the warmth of The Garden did not diminish, for some rays of the sun and essence of the stars and moon pierce even the deepest depths. Together, now the Queen of Angels and Showsh in the front, Descended from the Surface of Gon Eden, into a Very Strange Realm.





Chapter 4

Bastion of the Tyrants

The cavern was a beautiful place, with stalactites and stalagmites and shining crystalline rocks and structures that created a dark shimmer to the hue of the place that did not diminish the aesthetic, even with the Soul Fragments among which Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo, now walked. It was more than a cave system, rather, a castle of an intricate design. All manner of room and hall seemed to grow from the rock itself, needing no chisel or hand to sculpt the ore into usable space; rather the material itself chose to take this form, and by the Potency of The Keeper of the Bastion.

To say that it was a place of comfort as pleasant as The Surface of Gon Eden would have been an exaggeration. It was simpler, but provided a pleasant locale for these Soul Fragments to reside. Food there was in plenty, and drinks of a great variety. Forms of entertainment existed, and it was hard to say that this was not indeed some part of the overall system of Paradise of The Garden. The light in The Bastion had a strange aspect, and it did not have the same effect as sunlight, or moonlight, or starlight. It was a grey light, with a purple sheen, and it cast a sense of preservation and limbo on the depths below The West of The Garden.

Here the Soul Fragments of those consigned to this Realm of Gon Eden found themselves, most of the time, in this portion of their afterlife. It was indeed an odd thing. The conversation that had been started reverberated both in Droos' mind, but also seemingly in the reaches of these cavernous rooms and ceilings. Is there such thing as *Pure Evil* or *Pure Good*? Does the Kernel of Good in *Mostly Evil* deserve a reward? Would the Kernel of Evil in *Mostly Good* also need some chastisement and punishment?

“This seems too great a fate for these Whole Souls,” stated

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Droos. “We have discussed that it is not required to be completely or wholly within a system, or necessary to reach it, to be treated as having arrived at that goal. Is it not the case that those who are *Mostly Evil*, should be treated as *Purely Evil*? Would not the best option for them be some type of oblivion, or singularity in afterlives, spent in the Hells of Drerpo, including baetOak?”

“Yet there is an attribute of the Divine that you discount,” suggested Elriver. “The aspect of Justice and Judgement of The Creator, The Sovereign, even the Judge, and other Sterner aspects, must be, or should be overcome by Mercy. This is the case for the *Mostly Good*. It is also the case for the *Mostly Evil*. Where is the line drawn between *Mostly Evil* and *Leans Towards Evil*. It would seem that to condemn a Whole Soul to have no Fragments in Heaven would veer too nearly towards Revenge and Punishment, and not Justice and Mercy.”

“The issue is where the line is drawn,” remarked Showsh. “It is easy to consign an adversary to Hell, and all allies to Heaven. There are many moral and ethical difficulties with this approach, and it does compromise integrity. How does a Reflection Mortal treat a person that they have emotionally, mentally, and spiritually assigned to Hell, or damned? Of course, their friends who are the elect going to Heaven are probably treated well. The system seems rife for discrimination with Divine providence. Furthermore, it would seem that anyone deemed unworthy by Society may be assumed to be damned, or *Sufficiently Evil*, while only those who support the dictator or those in power are labeled *The Elect*.

“Then your suggestion is that all Sentients, or nearly all, must be treated with dignity, and love and tolerance, by token, certainly, of the Kernel that earns a place in Paradise, or a Heaven of Drerpo?” questioned Atropo.

“That would make sense,” said Droos. “It is still difficult. There are Sentients that do many Evil deeds, and to think that some part of them, no matter how much less, in comparison to the majority of their Soul Fragments, has a place in Gon Eden or another Heaven of the Sacred Realm, takes a level of mercy and magnanimity that would require a Transcendent understanding of the Abstract Dimension of Forgiveness that most Reflection Morals would not appreciate. How are Mortals to forgive those who have caused such great harm to them, intentional or otherwise?”

“That is not the issue, but rather whether the Sentient has even a single Spark of Righteousness or Goodness, out of an

entire Soul of Evil,” said Atropo. “The nature of This System is that an afterlife may have multiple simultaneous experiences. To suggest that anyone does not have at least one in a Heaven of the Firmament would be to discuss, indeed, the Purest of Evil Whole Souls.”

“Yet, as may be seen, that is not to say that all Soul Fragments of Gon Eden receive the same reward,” said Elriver. “Those in The Heaven or City of the Righteous, or The Refuge of the Meek, or in The Bastion of the Tyrant, all have different experiences in Paradise. It even goes down to an emotional, mental, and spiritual degree. The Realms of Gon Eden are not equal. It is true that all are in The Garden. The limbo of the latter is the reward for the Righteous Kernel of a *Mostly Evil* Whole Soul.”

“There are also more limits on movement throughout the Firmament,” said Showsh. “The Keeper of the Bastion only permits Soul Fragments of The Bastion out once every ten days, and then only for one day at a time. Thus, these Soul Fragments may visit other Heavens and locales of the Sacred Realm. Yet to say they have freedom of movement is not the case. There is also a larger presence of members of the Pantheon of The Keeper of the Bastion, as well as unique Bastion Gardeners.”

“It would seem that there is a consequence of great significance to a lifetime of Evil Deeds,” said Droos. “Such a borderline presence in Heaven is itself a punishment, and the experience of The Bastion of the Tyrant would make its mark on the Soul Fragment, along with the dozens or hundreds of afterlives in Hells of Drerpo that are the fate of the rest of the Soul Fragments.”

“It may be too soon To Judge,” said Elriver. “More must be seen, and some of the Soul Fragments may be consulted. Are they in a state of regret or sadness? Is this a punishment or a reward? Are some Simple or obvious in the Celestial Domains, or are there numerous Thorns and Berries?”

“I am content with further exploration,” said Droos. “Take me to see those who reside in this Bastion, and the other residents of this Paradise, and I will Judge,” said Droos.

The Four members of Drerpo Royalty spread out into the castle, and found that it was a particular design, rather, one with the aim of a social afterlife. They came across a Great Hall, where a long slab of stone rose from the ground, as if it had risen of its

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

own accord. It was a cacophony of angles, and no precious stones adorned the surface. The stone was sturdy, though it bore some stains from previous meals, and dozens of wet spots from filled drinks. Candles burned on the table, more torches in their design and shape, on ornate metal stands. Along stone benches sat the Soul Fragments that resided in the Bastion, and they were a varied group, representing the extent of life in Drerpo.

It did not seem that there was single mealtime here, but there were habits, and periods appeared to bring in waves of Soul Fragments. They were regulars in their groups, and knew each other well. What was most fascinating was that on the benches were represented essentially every Reflection Mortal race of Drerpo, and some Servant Races. Apparently, there were even, here and there, the Soul Fragments of deceased Deities, once of great power. All now found themselves in The Bastion of the Tyrant. Yet here in this place, they had savory food before them, and strong brews, and sweet juices, and numerous other pastimes. Also, the talk, at least from these veteran Soul Fragments was not as bleak as it might have been. Just then, four rose and departed, leaving a space for them to take their seats. So they sat, and saw for Themselves exactly what this Great Hall in the Lowest Paradise of Gon Eden had to offer by way of reward.

Droos served herself some food and drink. The food offered here, out of all Realms of Gon Eden, had meat of various sorts, all similar to the kinds that would have been found in life. The drink was ale and wine, and various fruit juices. Seemingly, these Tyrants dined on meat and alcohol. It defied the peace of the Domain. Yet there was nothing obvious about The Bastion. As the Four sampled the cuisine, they looked at those around them.

The Soul Fragment nearby that stood out was a man, a human, who ate slowly, and deliberately. He did not talk as much to those around him, or eat as purposefully. It seemed everything he did was calculated, even now, in this place. Those discerning eyes looked over at Droos, and a smile appeared on his face.

“All Hail the Queen of Angels!” said the man.

“You know me?” inquired Droos, slowly. “How would you say life is in this Realm? Do you consider it a Paradise? What type of afterlife do you believe you should have? I am sure that your deeds were notable in life.”

“You flatter me, my Queen,” said the man. “This place is good enough for me. I am like most Soul Fragments, I suppose,

and certainly someplace like The Palace would be attractive. Yet, after long enough in this place, there is time to reflect on what might have been. Perhaps I might have earned a larger and better share of Gon Eden, and more Fragments in the Heavens of Drerpo, had I done better in life. I always assumed that I was better than the myths of the supposed afterlives. I suppose there was a reward and punishment to be had after all. I am only honored that almost every religion and temple was mistaken in its outlook, and I am privileged enough to at least be here.”

“You truly speak as one with a great weight upon your shoulders, Dear Sir,” said Elriver. “Why not speak of your troubles, or what happened in life to make you talk in this manner? Surely such reflection may only advantage you for something better than you might otherwise receive upon Rebirth.”

“I will not speak of details to the Vaunted Royals of Heaven, or beg at your boots, but I will speak of an outline and shadow of the terror that I knew, but covered amidst illusions of might and power and arrogance and narcissism,” said the man. “I lived in a humble place, on a planet of Drerpo now called No, but that had a different name all those thousands of years ago. Those were the days before the ice melted and flooded the world, and wars flattened cities, and it took hundreds of years of darkness for a greater peace still, and unity, to embrace the whole world. In my day, we spoke of nationalism, and internal sovereignty, and territorial integrity. I believed in manifest destiny, and that I and my people were meant to rule the world and everyone in it. Rights and rules were fantasies to be overcome by desire to want and succeed. Progress might not be hampered by the ends we wanted. Those were glorious, exciting times.”

The man got a nostalgic look on his face for a moment.

“Pardon me,” he continued. “I have had more time to reflect on the nature of Society and The Good. How many fell through the cracks in my quest to improve the world? Maybe the rich prospered, but what of the poor, the meek, the needy? How many died in wars and how many were jailed, and had their cultures destroyed and reduced to ash? Certainly history did not judge my people all that well, even though we did achieve most of what we were after. In the end it did not matter when the world war arrived, and laid much of what the planet had produced to that point to waste. By the time, what then became the Planet of No, rebuilt, centuries later, any semblance of my country or any

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

other world power that had existed were roughly gone. Of course I know now that what replaced all of them was even better, and created a lasting peace and prosperity, for the poor and rich alike, in a way I never achieved.”

“It is still not clear to me which of these mighty, ancient nation-states you ruled,” said Atropo. “We may never here or in the rest of this philosophical dramatic narrative. As you say, the fine details do not matter. There seemed to be a certain affect to you, that you thought that you personally were capable of improving humanity, of creating a better world. Essentially, there was no one else that could be trusted to do the job. Certainly, the masses of your own people could not be trusted to aid you in a meaningful way, in the way you viewed them. Rather, through fear, intimidation, violence, and bigotry, you forced any matter you envisioned into a stark reality. It did create a peace of sorts. Though I wonder how many died to get there.”

“It also seemed that you have some emotional connection to those days even now,” said Showsh. “Here you are, the Fragment of your Soul that received a reward in Paradise, yet the thought of Authority over the Masses and the subjugation and persecution of billions still brings a smile to your face. I suppose it has not been that long since you arrived. Maybe another endless eon in Paradise, and you will have even more to say.”

“Are these not natural desires to pursue?” said Droos. “I am the one who even wants to redeem Tzefee. What has this man done that is so terrible that he may not redeem himself, certainly upon Rebirth in the next life? It is a shame that he did not discover The Good, or live morally, ethically, or maintain integrity in life. That does not mean that this Soul Fragment may not learn it, or the others receiving chastisement in the various Hells of Drerpo. Is it not normal to want to save the world, or that it is obligatory to attempt to do so?”

“The error was doing so without first saving himself,” said Elriver. “Also, in believing that no help was essentially required, or advice necessary. The idea that the world might be saved unilaterally is the mark of narcissism. Even the assumption that a nation-state might be saved in that manner, is likewise folly. It takes a group that has the consent of the governed, with checks and balances, to improved Society, over time, slowly. Or else, what happens is an elite oligarchy at the top grows richer and more powerful, and most over the rest stagnate and suffer at the bottom,

or get worse. To ensure basic rights for everyone requires all of their input in the system. His error was in believing that he did not require that feedback.”

“May I speak, Dear Creator?” said the man. “It is also hard to ignore how differences and multiculturalism may be frightening. My nation-state, and later, the territory of which I dominated, happened to be one of the most multicultural areas in the world. Yet, being around so many different worldviews, and systems of philosophy, of beliefs, and values, some of whom doubted my manifest destiny, that was confusing. Providing that only the privileged, tested elite, that bowed to the correct message were at the top, and all others lacked any power to pursue their agenda, let alone threaten my mission, gave me free reign to be the ruler for my lifetime. I achieved great things. I only know now after over ten thousand years in this Paradise that so many suffered to permit the improvements I believed were saving my nation-state, my geopolitical region, and the world.”

“You may see how when the ends are used to justify the means, and morality and ethics and integrity are permitted to be compromised, oversights are made,” said Showsh. “Rather, The Good should be pursued at all times, and the balance between the Dualisms of Abstract Dimensions must be maintained, with a preference for the upper half. This must at least be attempted.”

“Yet so many in this situation conclude that just such an approach is a trick, and illusion, meant to suppress the rightful place of the people, or nation,” said Atropo.

“Maybe what it is really about is that the rules risk reducing the tyrant’s place in the world,” said Droos. “With rules, tyrants would not independently be able to decide the fate of billions, give orders regarding life and death, save the world and the small people in it, and they would have to listen to the advice of others. They might even have to get an honest day job.”

“I have realized most of these fine points, Dear Angel,” said the man. “I admit I still have some positive emotions for that life I lived even now. However, I do know now, as I have said, that I might have done so much better. Better to be an honest Gardener of little renown than the most powerful Emperor the world has ever seen. The former lights the lives of a few, and tarnishes the lives of almost none. The latter betters the lives of some, and destroys the lives of very many, if not most. Power and Property are part of the risky road towards Evil, that must be approached cautiously,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

or else, any human may be swept away. In my case, that was most ironic. I may have been an Emperor, but now, I admit, a life of a Gardener would have been far more virtuous and meaningful.”

“The man seems to have returned somewhat towards The Good,” said Elriver. “This is after only some ten thousand, maybe some thousands more, of years in Paradise. These were years in The Bastion of the Tyrant, no less. What have you to say on the effectiveness of this Realm, Dear Droos?”

“It seems to have some benefit,” said Droos. “Although it is hard to believe that every Tyrant finds such Reflection in this place. It is still a Paradise, and it may be less Transcendent than The Palace, but still a place superior to most Reflection Mortal domains in life. It is a reward. Not everyone will be upset to be here, or wonder why they are not elsewhere.”

As the Queen of Angels finished those words, the man completed his meal, and excused himself politely. No others left in that moment, although he could be seen meeting another Soul Fragment at one of the doors to the Great Hall, a woman, and they left immersed in conversation. Likewise, Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo finished sampling the food and drink, and rose to explore the Bastion further.

As they were walking between rooms of the Bastion, Droos had a concern.

“Are Reflection Mortals, or even Forcang or Spirits, required by morality, ethics, or integrity, to assist, or help one another?” inquired Droos. “Is it rather the case that the only obligation of a Sentient is to themselves? If a man is walking down a trail, and sees a person drowning in a lake, is there any expectation to provide support?”

“A great sage once said that the start of this conversation must be on an even more important topic,” said Showsh. “Is it possible to Know Good and Evil, or rather, how it is possible to be moral and ethical, or to maintain integrity, in the first place? Is a person who speaks in moral absolutes doomed to be a Tyrant? Are there absolute morals and ethics?”

“This would appear to be a digression into epistemology,” said Elriver. “The goal of a Reflection Mortal is to attempt to know the Form of an Abstract Dimension. These may be known, even as shadows on a cave wall, approximately, or nearly, and therefore, readily enough to say, completely. No Reflection Mortal may ever say that they Know Ethics. However, they may say that

they know ethics.”

“I would assume that this requires some attention to the topic,” said Atropo. “As with most disciplines and difficult skills, it takes practice. Approaching the Forms of Morals or Ethics clearly takes a lifelong devotion to both. They should be discussed, and shared, and studied. A Sentient must love wisdom to know morality and ethics. There are those who are not interested in such topics, and for whom it may be difficult to presume knowledge.”

“It may then be said, as was discussed in The Library, that those who pay attention with love and respect for the philosophies of morality and ethics, and for that matter, integrity, may approach them,” said Droos. “It was also concluded, was it not, that the Forms may never truly be known by Reflection Mortals. Therefore, the world must be approached with Skepticism. It would seem that we may discuss moral absolutes, or rather, theory, yet be sensitive to the possibility that we are mistaken. I assume that Greater Beings, and certainly Transcendent Forcang, or Greater Spirits, Know the Truth. I may approach, with my limited Senses, some semblance of these topics.”

“Having returned from the digression, into a discussion of this moral and ethical topic,” said Showsh, “Does living The Good Life require help towards others? How far does that go? If it is a small matter to help another, surely reaching out a hand to help someone off the ground should be done. Yet would any be assumed, but the greatest of heroes, to be required to risk their very lives?”

“The topic is about morality and ethics, not on what the laws of Society ought to be,” said Atropo. “As a Delegate to The Alliance of Multiverse, I certainly would not vote for a law that penalized Sentients for withholding assistance universally. There are many mitigating circumstances in particular. A Sentient really must be United and Healthy of Whole Self to be in a position to lend aid. If a Forcang is compromised emotionally or mentally or physically or spiritually, any of those reasons are good answers for why providing help is simply too much. Also, it would seem that creating a situation where rather than one victim of an incident, now there would be two, is a real possibility. A Sentient that lends aid must be completely confident of their ability to succeed.”

“It would seem more appropriate in many instances to simply escape or otherwise find the nearest official with skills in

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

lending such assistance,” said Elriver. “An enthusiastic citizen may provide varying levels of help and support. A professional trained to do that work will likely offer expert help, and be very unlikely to then require aid themselves. Unless the matter of assistance is simple, for example, helping an uninjured Sentient off the ground, it may be moral and ethical to defer to the specialist.”

“Yet at the very least, the nearest expert must be informed,” said Droos. “Take an emergency such as a fire. It is reasonable for all evacuating parties to leave without helping others except for themselves, so as to avoid making themselves victims, or bungling the rescue of another. However, upon escape, the moral and ethical obligation is to inform a specialist or expert of any who do require assistance. The exception to this may be if that Sentient was sufficiently compromised emotionally, physically, mentally, or spiritually, such that they themselves would be unable to focus on such a task. However, living in a Society where most would report seeing a person in need, the existence of some who were compromised would be balanced by the majority of others who would be able to provide useful information that may save others.”

“It is the nature of this obligation that to lend aid as a rule exalts Sentients, whereas, denying help diminishes them,” said Showsh. “Recognizing that every Sentient is deserving of help and support, and has a right to it, it is that approach that improves Society. It enhances Sentient dignity.

“Is it not even more important, however, to have the choice in the matter?” said Atropo. “Free will is essential. Even if it is a bad choice. May the masses be forced to choose moral options at the threat of chastisement.”

“This is not a matter of creating laws or penalties,” said Elriver. “It is a discussion of what Sentients ought to do. It may be reasonable to say that there should be nothing said as to a legal requirement in Society to either escort needy people out of a burning building, or even inform specialists trying to save Sentients or property. A person, even one that is not compromised, and is completely whole, and simply choosing not to lend aid, should not receive a penalty, or be charged with a crime. However, are they a good person? Are they living a good life? These questions transcend what should exist in laws. Ultimately, the Greater Beings will create Afterlives that address these decisions once a Reflection Mortal dies, and The Judge will ask about these

decisions before issuing a Decree.”

“Therefore, we should recall that ours is not a legalistic discussion but a moral and ethical one,” said Droos. “It is possible for a person to follow every law and still be an evil person. If anything, those laws exist to provide a minimum standard, not micromanaging the way everyone ought to behave. It is the Goddesses and Greater Beings that evaluate this for Reflection Mortals, and even Forcang, upon death.”

“That is very convenient,” said Atropo. “Yet it would seem to invite exactly the sort of chastisement we discussed earlier. If it is held that there is a Higher Law, that is Enforced Upon Death, yet Self Righteous Reflection Mortals might choose to view those they think are condemned, and evil, or those they view as elect, and good, differently, and treat them as such. It is certainly the case that so few Reflection Mortals have any direct evidence to prove anything. As you say—only one in ten million Visions is real.”

“Rather, it should be known that the fate of the condemned and the elect are not for Reflection Mortals to be enforced,” said Elriver. “A great sage said that, ‘People should always tilt the balance in each other’s favor.’ Furthermore, the sum of a Sentient, may not be wholly known by any. Instead, Reflection Mortals should view each other as generally Righteous, except in actual violations of the law as proven by due process. It is fine to have conversations, for those who love wisdom, about these topics, and the need to help others. Yet moral righteousness should never be enforced by temporal law or penalties. A Better Society should be created through the quality of its Education. Philosophers should write books, artists should produce movies, the message and the word should be transmitted. Yet no Authoritarian may say that they are acting according to the will of God by enforcing fundamentalist rules.”

“The sum of the matter would be that Sentients ought to help one another, provided that they do not put themselves in harm’s way, or are themselves compromised,” said Droos. “Yet such *ought*’s are to be taught and suggested, not enforced by law and penalty. Those that do enforce morals and ethics are the Creator and Sovereign of a Manifestation, upon the death of a Reflection Mortal. Then, the free will to abstain from being righteous will be judged.”

As the Queen of Angels finished her words, The Four

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Royals reached a hallway, and upon the conclusion, came to a balcony of sorts. Then a wash of panic swept Droos' face, though only for a moment, for before her was a vision. Out in front, a vast chasm spread, and beneath, a direct connection to none other than baetOAK itself. Below, here at the Lowest Point in The Bastion of the Tyrant was a Semblance of Hell. There before them was The City of the Damned. It was dark, though with more colors and hues than might be imagined. A warm air rose from the depths, and Droos wondered how she had arrived here, seemingly in even the smallest reaches of Paradise.

"It is only an image, an aesthetic," said Elriver. "It is a Window in Reality. Let the Soul Fragments of The Bastion gaze up at the Lowest Hell and ponder."

Even as the Creator of Drerpo finished those words, she noticed that they were not alone, but a small number of Soul Fragments stood there with them. There they gazed out upon the home of many of the Soul Fragments of their Whole Souls. If only the matter were reversed. It was very fortunate that the existences of Soul Fragments were for the most part separate, except in this place, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, for a moment, these Soul Fragments of The Bastion of the Tyrant might feel the Depths of baetOAK.

"Is that my fate?" pondered Droos. "What is my responsibility, I wonder. I may have cast much of my past debt aside, yet a life of The Good is now required to balance my Evil. In the end, The Judge will issue a Decree. How many Fragments of my Soul will be bound in The City of the Damned?"

As if in answer, she felt a hand in hers, and then arms around her. Her Showsh was not prepared to leave her in her momentary Depth of emotion, mind, and spirit. Then he kissed her, passionately, and led her away from the balcony, and together, they walked, recovering from the sight. The pathway took some time. Yet soon the frightening shadows cleared, and in their place was a white light.

Looking up, she thought she saw a different sight. The Four now stood in a different Chamber of the Bastion, surrounded by rock and stalagmite, yet above was a glowing Vision of green hills, and atop a gleaming city. There was a simplicity to it, a moderation, and integrity. There was no gaudiness, or pretense. The architecture was both pleasing but none aimed to gain advantage. This vision held the emotions of calm and tranquility.

“That is the Vision of The Righteous,” said Showsh. “It is The City of the Righteous, and our Future.”

Droos and Showsh were still holding each other, and she turned to him again, and kissed him deeply.

“Why do we have to be so righteous, Dear Love?” said Droos. “I feel that on this Journey through Paradise we have gained some distance. When do we have time for each other? Is it really necessary that there still be barriers between us?”

The Angel kissed Showsh again, and then sighed.

“You are perhaps, in this Vision of The Righteous, seeing a Vision of the Future,” said Showsh. “You and I will have time together very soon. What would a trip to Gon Eden be without visiting The City of the Righteous? I believe you will discover that the definition of the righteousness is more expansive then some Reflection Mortals commonly assert.”

“We have already discussed whether the physical world or the afterlife should be emphasized,” said Droos. “It seems that the physical world is to be enjoyed, that it does value to the Creation of the Divine to appreciate and indulge, with some moderation, in pleasure and forms of enjoyment that are unique to physical life. That is not to say that other approaches do not have value, although to discuss that again is a digression. Rather, food, drink, and sex may be enjoyed.”

“It may further be wondered whether some Divine permission is required, in the form of matrimony, for physical pleasures to be enjoyed, responsibly of course, in the form of marriage,” said Showsh. “That is not to say that Sentients who have just met should indulge, and the physical world does not deserve religious respect and devotion. Yet in the context of a committed, long term relationship of love and honor, it is hard to say that a physical connection does not exalt the courtship.”

“Are we talking ourselves into something?” said Droos, with a smile. “Though I suppose this topic has more to do than just with us. It would seem there is an advantage for those who are to spend a lifetime, or eternity together, to know every aspect of each other. That means, they should Know all aspects of body, mind, emotion, and spirit. If any of those four are neglected, that may obviously result in irreparable surprises after marriage. This goes along with careful talks and considerations prior to a legally binding commitment. Yet, ensuring that all is well with the physical relationship, as much as the emotional, mental, and

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

spiritual ones, seems righteous and appropriate.”

“The fear might have been long ago that a child might result from such an arrangement, while undesired,” said Showsh. “However, certainly in the context of civilization where there are numerous options to mitigate this possibility, the physical aspect of a relationship may only serve to promote and improve the connection between Sentients in love. As someone who is familiar with the Abstract Dimension of Sexuality, it is something gifted to the Universe to be enjoyed. That means, particularly those in consensual, meaningful, loving relationships should see it as a requirement both of that commitment, and something to be done prior to agreeing to either a lifetime or eternal commitment.”

“I understand that an approach to the world where the physical is to be denied, and rejected,” said Droos, “Would limit Sexuality. In such a context, the goal is the afterlife, and such things are distractions. The only purpose then is procreation, to perpetuate the race of Sentients. The entirety of the rest of the focus is to be on how best to achieve the best result for the afterlife. Yet a model where the physical world is to be honored, enjoyed, and treasured, would suggest that Sexuality between committed partners, for pleasure to increase the connection of a relationship, is to be valued even before the marriage. If anything, it is a requirement for making the decision to get married.”

“It would seem that we are in agreement then about the moral and ethical next steps of our relationship, and how to proceed with integrity,” said Showsh. “Am I understanding you properly, Dear Droos? Are you sure this is what you want?”

“You have my whole heart, my whole lifetime of permission, and merely one start of our eternity together of love and respect,” said Droos. “Only, I would say that The Bastion of the Tyrant is not the place for this to occur. I will trust you to find a lovely time, location, and aesthetic.”

With that, Droos kissed Showsh, passionately, and they returned their thoughts to the current Realm. It was at that moment that Elriver and Atropo caught up to them.

“It looks like you two just finished a serious conversation,” said Atropo.

“They sure did,” said Elriver. “It is almost as though we Knew to hold back, and explore that extra room back there, so that they might have their space. I certainly give my husband a lot of indulgences. Dear Showsh, I sincerely hope you will not forget me

in all of this.”

“There is little competition,” said Droos.

“I honor and cherish you, Dear Wife, as I have done, these past two hundred trillion years,” said Showsh.

Then Showsh went to Elriver and gave her a hug and a kiss, before returning to a middle place amongst the Four.

The time had arrived for them to Ascend from the Lowest Paradise of Gon Eden. What would Droos’ Judgement be on the Realm? They passed through the cavernous castle, the meticulous rooms, filled with laughing, happy Soul Fragments, and the decision was no easy matter. As they neared The Stairway, the Queen of Angels had some thoughts.

“I would deem this a worthy exercise,” said Droos.

“For all but the Purest Evil, it is a reasonable destination for a Soul Fragment. Yet that is only in light of the far better options elsewhere. Is this in fact a Thorn of Drerpo, or Reality? I am not even sure I would say as much. It is only a reality that few are completely evil or fully good, as has been discussed. In light of the Kernel of Righteousness, and in hope of Reform and Learning in this afterlife, in preparation for Rebirth, this is a reasonable Realm. I do see how it would be hard for a Reflection Mortal, though, to appreciate such nuances.”

“What a wise Judge you are, Queen of Angels,” remarked Atropo. “Clearly you have Keen Senses beyond that of the princess you were in the past. How would you deem someone like your Father? Would he find his way to The Bastion of the Tyrant, or is he one of those rarest of examples of Pure Evil?”

“I would think my father, upon the end of this life, would have a Fragment of his Soul placed here,” said Droos. “He is an evil man, and has committed many atrocities. Yet such is the Truth of many Tyrants and those of such immorality, and of that unethical nature. To say that he has no element of Good whatsoever is Beyond my limited ability to Judge. Yet I would deem him capable of more than just cruelty. There have been some aspects of mercy that even I have witnessed.”

“You may see, though, how if even a man like your father would have a Fragment of his Soul here in the Lowest Paradise of Gon Eden,” said Elriver, “So would the very good, the mostly righteous have a Fragment of their Soul in baetOAK. Such is the reverse. To be Judged so Good as to avoid any Harsh Decree would take a lifetime of Righteousness, or mostly one, with

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

possibly some amount of Returning.”

They reached The Stairway, and a Sentinel God at the bottom Observed each of them, even here, Beneath, for any sign of deceit, even in The Four Royals, before permitting passage and Ascent. Then upward they went, the long climb to the sands of the West of Gon Eden, in the desert. At last, they reached the top, and The Keeper of the Bastion of the Tyrant held out Her Sword, and gazed at them, a Judgement Too. Yet they passed, slowly, and left, departing to the Southeast.

“The next pathway will be harder,” said Atropo. “For it travels beneath a Thorn.”

“I still do not entirely understand how Thorns may exist in Gon Eden?” pondered Droos. “How may a Paradise bear blemishes? Beyond blemishes, some are outright Abhorrent.”

“The key is to look beyond Good and Evil,” said Showsh. “The Celestial Domains of Drerpo serve a functional purpose in the Universe. They follow Rules, some of which are laid down according even to Natural Laws that existed prior to the Genesis of this Manifestation. Those were Created at the Dawn of Time. Gon Eden mostly serves to reward the Soul Fragments of the Most Righteous. Yet, the purpose is deeper still, and not just about what is Good.”

“I thought the whole object was to pursue The Good?” said Droos.

“It is about The Good,” said Elriver. “Not the Dualisms, Good and Evil. This is a topic for the future.”

“Will a Fragment of My Soul be Found Amongst the Thorns?” asked Droos.

“Only the Transcendent Forcang Know the answer,” said Elriver.

The Four walked on together.

The mountains of The Middle were to the East, and it seemed that this passage across the desert took longer than it would suggest. Certainly the time that Droos had spent with Showsh and Elriver had been one of exceptional travels and miracles performed. It seemed strange to simply walk, and feel sand beneath her sandals. Fortunately, Angels and Greater Beings do not require food or drink. Thus, they walked on together, for some time, with little interruption.

It was at twilight that The Four saw a village ahead, between them and the Thorn Beyond. This portion of the desert

had plants and animals of various sorts, adding an aesthetic of verdancy in the barren locale. Upon reaching the dwellings, they were fair enough, but the inhabitants were themselves creatures, seemingly. Many were coyotes and hares. They did not fight, but lived together peacefully. Only now, Droos Knew better than to identify these as Reflection Creatures. These were Lesser Spirits.

She approached one, intrigued to find them here in Gon Eden.

“Hail, Dear Spirit,” she said. “I am honored to be among you. Do I have permission to linger, or to pass through your home? If you prefer, I will move round about, and leave you undisturbed.”

A snake approached on the ground, many colored, and rose. It had the head of a tiger. Rising part way off the ground, She Spoke.

“Hail, Servant of The Eagle,” she said. “You are kind to ask permission. Many Servants would come this way, and assume that they had permission to cross, simply because they were Forcang. Many might even be concerned by our presence. Why would we be here, in Gon Eden? What do you think, Dear Droos?”

“I am concerned that you do not have a choicer land to choose,” said Droos. “Here you are in the Western desert between a the Tree of Thorns and The Bastion of the Tyrant. Surely, the Creator and Sovereign of this Manifestation might have you go to where you please, in more comfortable realms. Is that what you would prefer?”

“The Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo do not command Us,” said The Snake. “We choose the Domains of the Universe in which to dwell according to our preferences and purposes, and nothing more. I am pleased that you have a care for our comfort. As it is, this village has been here since before the Genesis of Drerpo. If anything, it is one of the reasons Gon Eden was placed here in the first place. Grand Elder Forcang often prefer a Foundation of sufficient quality about which to place Thorns and similar Greys in The Garden. It is very common to search for these in a Light Seed. Only the very strongest would receive the Respect of existing within sight of the Tree of Thorns.”

“Is that not an insult of sorts, to be used like that?” asked Droos. “Why not aim to be left alone, that your people may live freely, and unmolested. How is this an acceptable compromise?”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“That is a Berry in the Universe, Dear One,” said The Snake. “Few Know the answer among Forcang. The best way to explain would be to say that someone has to be here to Enforce and Maintain the Natural Laws and Rules of The Multiverse. Manifestations have Thorns and Berries. Those Thorns and Berries have Natural Laws and Rules. They, ideally, would have governance from Us. Certainly, for the most important Thorns and Berries, it takes a Certain Supervision. Did you think all of this were left just to some Forcang Minister or God? I am sure that The Lieutenant of Gon Eden is a capable Lieutenant, yet such matters are even more subtle.”

“I am sure that this all would have gone smoother if this Universe had never been here in the first place,” said Droos. “This was placed atop your land, your territory. How are you so calm about it?”

“Spirit and Forcang are mutually beneficial,” said The Snake. “Along with other Orders of Sentients. There was a period, there always are, at the Dawn of Time, when Forcang and Spirits viewed each other with suspicion, and even fought, and certainly Reflection Mortals and Their People Fight. Yet, the Truth is that they work together for the same purpose. That is, the preservation of The Multiverse, or the Recycling of One that is Beyond Repair. I should say, Forcang tend to fight the former. Yet prior to The Apocalypse, the aims of Spirit and Forcang are united. If anything, reinforcing cooperation between the Orders of Sentients, and maintaining the Natural Laws and Rules of the Thorns and Berries, helps keep The Multiverse from reaching the Critical Stage for Far Longer. There is a reason a Threat is required for this to happen, usually.”

“You can see that Spirits are able to take care of themselves just fine,” said Showsh. “The Tree of Thorns and The Bastion of the Tyrant, along with other Thorns, Berries, and Greys of Gon Eden do better with the support of The Snake and other Spirits here.”

“Dear Father, you forget that you have neither defined a *Grey* and that here we see a Snake, which has certain connotations,” said Atropo. “What are Reflection Mortals to think?”

“Greys are not Thorns, but more questionable than simple morality and ethics,” said Elriver. “Why would you question a snake? There have certainly been scriptures and books written in

which snakes are villainous, as well as movies produced. Yet what is it truly about such creatures that is so vile? Perhaps it is the primordial fear that Reflection Mortals have that a stray bight from a venomous creature will end their life. Such is the frailty of the physical world. However, that is hardly anymore the fault of the snake than any other Reflection Creature capable of self-defense. Such creatures do not attack Reflection Mortals out of malice or with intent, but rather out of a natural fear of predation. Few snakes are actively hunting Sentients.”

“I supposed the true aesthetic of snakes is similar to that of spiders or scorpions,” said Droos. “These are simply beautifully created creatures that have unique abilities. Their primordial threat to Reflection Mortals is likely what gave them the bad reputation, and their fate in literature, including in scripture. That does not mean I would be happy for a friend or relative to fall prey, by accident, to such a creature. Yet it hardly casts it as an Evil.”

“You are wise to recognize the value and beauty in all of nature,” said The Snake. “You may be surprised by what Spirits may find primordially displeasing. Even so, such deficits must be overcome. There is a tendency among Spirits to dislike Forcang. Yet, selflessness and giving is a virtue long held. By doing so, our People and your Reflection Mortals have long intermingled in millions of Manifestations for Endless Time Frames. The result has been a Unified Rain of Souls. Such enrichment means any Spirit or Forcang of a higher stage of Sentients may have origins in either Order of Sentients at the beginning of time. The experience of Natural Law, and Spirits, is that it requires such cooperation to survive Threats to The Multiverse, or to Recycle those that have passed their ability to Survive.”

“It would seem, then, that your home here is in the proper place, and neither impinged upon, too much, and certainly not any threat or concern to any Other,” said Droos. “If anything, my assignment to humble Tzefee relies on your presence at these Thorns and Berries. Therefore, I thank you for your service to The Multiverse, in this Time Frame, and all of those Past and Future.”

“That is a humble response,” said The Snake. “Although we would act this way regardless of praise from Forcang, even the Queen of Angels, or so They call you. As it is, we are treated with respect in this Manifestation, and there is little complaint. Now go, in peace, although tread lightly, and beware! For to view The Tree of Thorns is a great peril! We should know.”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

With that, Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo passed through the village of Spirits, and offered bows to the Great Spirit at Their lead. Then they were walking to the Southeast once again. This was The Path of Hatred, and an odd feeling for Gon Eden. Yet how many others follow such a path, whether or not in The Garden, and are deposited upon The Tree?

“Are there any other Trees?” asked Droos. “It would seem strange if the one in The Garden were devoted to Hatred. What about Love or Life or Creation? Surely, there must be Berries nearby where there are Thorns?”

“That is quite an assumption,” said Elriver. “You think that for every Thorn, there must be a Berry? Would it be that they equal each other in number in a Manifestation, in their density, and frequency? Perhaps it is those variables which are part of the subtle Act of Birthing a Manifestation. Rather, the proportions of Thorns and Berries must be managed, and confirmed.”

“I believe you will have to wait to behold any alternatives to The Tree of Thorns for The Future,” said Showsh. “Yet I will say this, in preparation, that there is another. As to proportions, those are exact choices in Creation and Genesis. Vøvoav does not have the same Orientation as Drerpo, or Emerzo.”

“I wonder, as one who has spent much of his Professional Career in Public Service, as opposed to Art, is it possible to Birth a Manifestation without Thorns?” asked Atropo.

“That would seem to ask if a Manifestation would be Created without immorality, or any unethical state, or Sentients that lack integrity,” Droos. “Are these not Sides to Dualisms, and Abstract Dimensions that we discussed? For there to be Morality there must be Immorality. Thus, it is hard to guess at a State that lacked Thorns. However, I am clearly thoroughly unqualified to comment on such a subject. I defer to Elriver.”

“I believe you Know more than you credit yourself regarding,” said Elriver. “Rather, your intuition is wise. There are Forcang Manifestations that have fewer Thorns: Temples, Fortresses, Paradises, and Capitols. It is part of the challenge of Creating and Birthing such Art Forms that removes or lowers the proportion of Thorns, and raises that of Berries. It is so complex and requires such effort that hundreds or thousands of Grand Elder Lords of Order are required for such projects, working together. It is possible to have fewer Thorns, but not without much risk and effort. Would every Manifestation Domain be like Gon Eden?

That would seem to defeat some Celestial Axiom. There are Laws and Rules to the Multiverse. To change them requires careful thought, indeed.”

“You have chosen the right Forcang to question, Dear Love,” said Showsh. “The Cecil Line has long been associated with the Palace of Arts. You might consider it a family tradition to consider such fine points as this. There are few that might provide a better answer to you, except perhaps Elriver’s mother, if she considered herself capable of speaking to any Sentient that was not a Grand Elder Forcang. You have chosen wisely.”

“You compliment me, Dear Husband,” said Elriver. “Of course, if all of Dear Droos’ plans are fulfilled, and she runs off with you to help with the Genesis and Birthing of Vøvoav, she will have need of such Knowledge. I will do my best to impart such Secrets, although They are generally not Immanent Sufficiently for Angels and Servants. You had best recall that in your efforts, Dear Husband. You have made your bed and your choice, and now you must lie in it—Thorns and Berries indeed.”

“I believe that Droos has other virtues than the actual Work of Creation and Birthing Manifestations,” said Atropo. “She is a good leader, who will manage the Celestial Bureaucracy of Vøvoav, and the Ministers and Gods and Goddesses there. Droos has aesthetic taste and will choose, if not outright create, tasteful options for the Manifestation, in cooperation with her Husband, Dear Father, lending great advice and support. She is a righteous Sentient, the Queen of Angels of Drerpo, and will be an ample source of Providence in Vøvoav to the Reflection Mortals.”

“As I have stated, I have no desire for Temples in my name, or prayers to be offered to me,” said Droos. “I simply want a life with my Husband, Dear Showsh, in a quiet place.”

“That is not what you shall have, Dear One,” said Elriver. “And I know that you are aware of this. You will be the Patron of endless ranks of Reflections Mortals, and control Spheres and Rights of Influence to protect them, and further be despised by others who reject your religion. One may not be the spouse of the Creator and Sovereign of a Cosmos and sit idly. Be prepared and ready, Dear Queen of Angels, for you will be the source much praise, and some burning hatred.”

“I can see it, there, in the valley up ahead, to the South of the Mountains of The Middle Heaven of Gon Eden,” said Droos. “It is The Tree of Thorns! It is an awful sight! Even here, my

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Whole Soul, my Whole Self, quakes at the sound, the sights, and terror and sadness. Must we go here? It would seem necessary, for as you state, I must Know the Truth, and be aware of Thorns, if I am to be the Queen of a Manifestation, and attempt to Humble Tzefee. Yet my heart wishes me to turn back.”

“All who gaze upon The Tree of Thorns wish to turn back,” said Showsh. “It is an awful sight. Why is it that Hatred must exist? Why must so many endless rows of Sentients be impaled upon These Spikes? If only Sentients were better, and there the Other Trees grew taller, and surpassed the Tree of Thorns. Yet, it is rare indeed that any Tree rises above. There is simply too much fear and suffering in this Universe, and almost all others. This is a truth that must be realized to Ascend to the Throne, to Counter Threats. Yet, to have such Lofty Goals, the Hope, and Aim, is to have a Manifestation, in which the Other Trees do grow Taller. It may be one in ten million, like a Vision of Perfection, even among Forcang. Yet such is the Desire, the Desperate Love and Mission of the Creator and Sovereign and Royal Family of a Manifestation. We aim to conquer Hatred, and replace it with Unending Love. Now we must witness the Present, The Tree of



Thorns, that we may consider The Future, and The Potential for Change and Betterment.”

“I do fear The Tree, but I am with you, Dear Love,” said Droos.

She took his hand in hers.

“Let us gaze upon this Thorn, a ubiquitous Blight on Manifestations, that we may Contemplate, and Meditate on What Might Be Better, in the Cosmos to Come,” she continued.

So they walked on together, hand in hand, toward The Trees of Gon Eden, one Tall, one Short, and ever with Love and Hope and Desire for Change.





Chapter 5

House for the Evil

The South of the Mountain Range of The Middle Heaven had a Valley. In the Valley was a Pit. It ran to an Endless Depth, and out of it rose a Tree, built of some metal not Known generally in Nature. Thorns covered The Tree, both in The Pit, and into the Endless Sky above the South of Gon Eden. The most obvious sign of the Tree of Thorns was the screaming. For the endless moans of agony of the writhing impaled Soul Fragments of those Damned to the Tree of Thorns might be heard even several Realms away in the Domain. It was the Greatest Thorn in Drerpo, and few had such peril or mystery.

There on the edge of The Pit stood The Four, Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo. Droos looked at the Vision, Real and Complete, still holding Showsh's hand, and few moments in her life to that point had been as awful. Only, she wanted to fly, with her Angel Wings, and remove from damnation, even one Soul Fragment. She looked at the others. Then she lowered her eyes and saw that they were not alone.

Standing, some distance away, was the Greater God that was responsible for this Damnation. Did this Sentient answer to the Lieutenant of Gon Eden or the Lieutenant of baetOak, Droos wondered? It had an odd shape, but she Knew He was watching them, being sure they did not interfere with The Tree. Servants of the Greater God, similar in Design, floated on wings, above and below, and saw to the Soul Fragments. Yet there was no relief. Rather, they saw to it that there was no escape. Even now, she saw the Greater God, approving Soul Fragments to be impaled on New Spikes, by The Thorn Servants. Droos shuddered.

"It is quite a sight," said Atropo. "I was terrified the first time I saw a Tree of Thorns as well. That is saying something, since I have been to The Courts of Chaos, and even Daxuk, and

more exotic locales with Great Terror and Cruelty and Malice. Few Visions are equal to the First Time Beholding a Tree of Thorns.”

“You still have not answered the question, Dear Love,” said Droos. “Are their Fragments of my Soul on this Tree?”

“This is a digression,” said Elriver. “There are Fragments of all of our Souls on this Tree of Thorns. There are likely several. Upon death, you may attempt to claim them between lives. For, there have been those who looked upon you with True Hatred. There have also been those who vilified myself, and my husband, and my son. For what Reality exists Beyond Hatred—even Here? Our Goal is a Reality of Love. How Far we Fall Short. For that, some Fragments of our Whole Souls are Blighted, Damned, and are Impaled Upon this Very Tree. The Greater God here will not allow their removal while we still live.”

“Be glad that you only have Soul Fragments on one Tree of Thorns,” said Showsh. “To be a Grand Elder Forcang is to have been to many more Manifestations, with many more Trees of Thorns. I would expect that in almost every Cosmos and Universe that I have ever visited, in hundreds of trillions of years, there are Soul Fragments of my Whole Soul, still impaled on Those Trees. That should give me pause were I to desire to Rise to become a Transcendent Forcang upon Rebirth, when even I die. And someday, I will die. Yet, to gather all of those damned Soul Fragments, upon every Tree of Thorns, would be such a task. Why, it would be worthy and expected of any who would become Truly Transcendent.”

“It only is almost the nature of Power, that it generates Hatred,” said Atropo. “Some of that is Earned, some is Unreasonable. A Righteous Public Servant performs well, but mistakes and disagreements on policy will create True Hatred. This will impale Their Soul upon the Tree of Thorns. Is this Fair? If a leader does well, surely they may receive disagreement. Yet Hatred is Truly a Step too far. As for those who fall into the trap of abusing Power, then Hatred may be Earned. Even then, does it go too far? Should the response to bad governance be a negative vote, but love, and still respect, and mercy? Is it not true that the structure of a system and the office is important as well. Do any deserve True Hatred?”

“Are there Truly no actions deserving of True Hatred?” said Droos. “Sentients are capable of some very vile choices.

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Must their victims be denied the emotion of Hatred? Perhaps acting in harm towards others, except in True Defense, is immoral, and unethical, but to merely feel and think? It is too far to expect this of Reflection Mortals, or even Forcang, who have grudges that have lasted millions of years.”

“There is a reason why every Manifestation has a Tree of Thorns filled with Soul Fragments,” said Elriver. “It is a necessary Thorn in Reality. Perhaps the one in ten million has too few Soul Fragments to populate the Spikes, because Love is the Approach of the Manifestation. No, Sentients may not be expected to exist without Hatred. As you say, some True Hatred is Earned. Yet, a Purely Righteous Sentient may consider True Defense, but not Incur True Hatred. It is possible to Defend Against, either physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually, those otherwise approached with True Love. However, almost all Sentients will fall short of this lofty goal. There is also a difference between passing hatred, and True Hatred Deeply Felt. Nonetheless, it is very rare, indeed, that the Tree of Thorns proves unnecessary, such that every Manifestation has one.”

“Yet here we may speak in philosophy about how Sentients may behave and think better,” said Showsh. “The Reality is that Hatred will always exist, as a thought and emotion. For True Hatred, a Soul Fragment will remain impaled on the Tree of Thorns until Redeemed by the Corresponding Whole Soul. That may or may not ever occur. Until then, the Whole will always be somewhat diminished. What we may say is that to act based on Hatred is the Evil. To harm another, as we have stated, either physically, or intentionally of emotion, mentally, or spiritually, is the Evil. Perhaps, this Thorn teaches that the Step Towards Actual Harm, in Action, Begins with True Hatred. Spiritually, merely that thought Damns a Soul Fragment. The key is to move no further than that. The aspirational desire is to go not even to that point, and always respond with Love.”

“There is more to see,” said Elriver.

With that, an orb of multicolor light appeared around them, and floating into The Pit Itself, they Descended, Slowly, Into Darkness, Amidst the Moans and Screams of Agony. Within the Orb, these were Shielded Slightly, Fortunately.

“Is the Tree of Thorns really wholly within Gon Eden?” asked Droos, as they Descended.

“That is an excellent observation,” said Elriver. “It is

really a Subdomain. Some would even say that it is a Domain by Itself, only Surrounded by Gon Eden, yet also, part of It. Therefore, the Greater God and His Servants of the Tree of Thorns have a similar Stature to the Lieutenant of Gon Eden and the Lieutenant of baetOAK. They all Minister Domains. Certainly, they do not all have the same purpose.”

“It would seem that baetOAK serves a different purpose,” said Droos. “That actual chosen deeds of a Sentient in life result in placement there, and in the other Hells of the Firmament. Yet, merely being the Subject of True Hatred Condemns a Sentient, or at least a Soul Fragment, almost instantly, to the Tree of Thorns. Particularly for those who actually are Righteous, to find that Soul Fragments exist on The Tree, is it unreasonable?”

“Perhaps the questions should be on the words a Sentient, or human, speaks, and on even mild or small actions performed,” said Showsh. “It is hard to Know how anything affects Others. It may take something Small to cause True Hatred. Thus, a Purely Righteous Sentient ought to Speak Deliberately, and Act Deliberately, on The Journey in Pursuit of The Good. It is the one hand to say that purposeful harm of emotional, mental, or spiritual wellbeing are what is a matter of concern, yet that is not to say that harm may not be otherwise caused. Better to go beyond the letter or basic requirement. Of course, sometimes there is no avoiding causing some disagreement, upset, or eventually, True Hatred. In a Universe of different Views, there will be those who think differently with all of their being. It takes a True Saint or Tzaddik to respond to those enacting Opposite Policies with Love. That is the Aim, though not followed often enough.”

As they finished speaking, they reached the bottom, some Endless Distance below the Surface of Gon Eden, in this Subdomain. Even here there were Soul Fragments impaled on Thorns, although there were actually some empty places. Upon reaching the Ground, it opened up into a World of Darkness.

“You have reached the House for the Evil,” said Atropo

With the Orb removed, the screams of agony became fully audible again, and were somewhat distracting again. Only, they removed themselves some hundreds of feet from The Tree of Thorns. Strange purple mushrooms grew here, five feet tall. And there were structures, built out of wood. This was still connected to Gon Eden, after all, so the architecture was sound. They were buildings of several rooms, with single occupants. Mulling around

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

outside were Sentients, Soul Fragments of those who had nowhere else to go in Gon Eden.

Apparently they ate the mushrooms, which both provided some type of sublime experience, but also nourishment of an exquisite kind. It did not look like much, but it was enough for this group of Soul Fragments. Various groups of them sat together, or walked together, always a great distance from the Tree of Thorns, and passed the time. There was little to do, but conversation seemed the key component.

“What is the nature of this group in Gon Eden?” asked Droos.

“These are those truly a moment removed from Pure Evil,” said Elriver. “They committed horrible mass atrocities in life, with no redeeming purpose. Many were criminals. Some were the executioners and wise guys of dictators and strongmen. The tyrants wanted to save the world, at least, though many were injured through their neglect and arrogance. These Sentients relished their Power over others, and causing harm. Pain and cruelty inflicted were valued and offered for money and favors.”

“How is it that such people are still given a place, of any sort, in Gon Eden, even at the foot of The Tree of Thorns?” pondered Droos.

“They are in sight of the Tree of Thorns, and the Sea of True Hatred their actions created in the physical world,” said Showsh. “This is a place of liminality between Gon Eden, the Tree of Thorns, and the Hells of Drerpo. Yet, the question still remains, was there any Kernel of Good or Righteousness, even in these Evil Soul Fragments. It seems that The Judge Decreed that there was at least something redeeming for at least one Soul Fragment to exist here. You may assume that the others populate the various Realms of baetOAc and other Hells of the Firmament. These are the borderline cases. It is a hard thing to be a Judge, to send those almost exclusively evil some reward. Perhaps it is even harder to place those almost exclusively good or righteous with some punishment or chastisement. Yet, the role of The Judge and The Decree is to get the Sentence Right, even if to victims or some it is unpopular. No other Sentient, generally, knows the Whole Heart and Mind of a Sentient. Only The Judge Knows All. Thus, few Souls will ever be Truly Condemned as Pure Evil or Exalted as Pure Good.”

“I would like to talk to one of them and see if anything has

been learned by being in this place,” said Droos.

The Queen of Angels walked over to a woman, clad in a grey suite, and grey tie.

“What was your life like in the physical world?” asked Droos. “Do you find that you have been treated fairly by being here?”

“This whole Celestial Bureaucracy is a joke,” said the woman. “I spent my life making a good living, and my reward for getting by, for feeding the mouths of dozens of employees, was this fate, and no doubt worse for the other Fragments of my Soul. What is this whole reticence against harm? It seems that even in the system condoned, there are those harmed. It is not possible to succeed in life without harming others. And most societies are corrupt and broken. I might have spent my life working the rules only to end up starving on the street with nothing. Apparently, my ingenuity was not appreciated by that so-called Judge.”

“Would you like it if you were harmed, or your family, or friends?” said Droos.

“Of course not,” said the woman. “The whole point is to be three steps ahead. I got them before they got me. At least, that is how it worked for many years of my life. If I had not looked for advantage over others, they surely would have crushed me and my family.”

“Would there be some advantage to a system in which citizens and residents of Society view each other with love and respect, and do not harm anyone?” asked Droos.

“The problem with that system is that it would require me to accept the results of judgements I do not approve,” said the woman. “How do I protect my business if a judge may rule against it? How may I protect my children if their assaulter may talk their way out of sufficient consequences in court? I had solutions to both of those problems.”

“It seems that the question is about how much justice is required to feel protected,” said Droos. “It also appears that eventually the same system that allowed you to get what you wanted, despite the rules, led others to do the same over you. Without a concept of love and respect and laws, only those with Power rule, and it may be taken away in an instant. Terrible choices must be made, immoral, unethical ones, to preserve Power, and it may not matter anyway.”

“It worked for a while,” said the woman. “In the end, one

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

of my children got away. I don't know what happened to her after that. That is still better than living a life of nothing and nobody. My life was exciting and interesting."

"A great sage once said that, 'A person is rich if they are content with what they have'," said Droos. "It seems your approach got you more for a while, and then ended your life and that of a number of close associates and loved ones. Do you think a slightly less exciting life, maybe a lawful job, with money to pay bills, and respect and love, might also have been a reasonable way to exist? Maybe you all would have lived a full, complete life."

"I am able to see, now, how that is a choice," said the woman. "It seems, though, that living a short, exciting life, is also a choice."

"You say that, even if all of your family and businesses ultimately crash down around you?" said Droos.

"I still think that Heaven should show more respect for innovation and creativity," said the woman. "I did what I had to do. My family and I, and our associates, lived a good life, for a while."

Just then, Atropo brought over a bowl of freshly cut mushrooms, and placed it in front of the woman. He even sprinkled some seasoning on top of it, not to be found locally.

"Now there is the type of ingenuity I used to respect," said the woman. "You might have made a good cook in my old empire."

"Thank you for your time, Dear Madam," said Droos. "Enjoy your meal and your time in this Paradise of Gon Eden. Do let the Servants know if anything may be improved."

"I doubt any of them would listen, since they have the power," said the woman, before she began eating the bowl with a spoon. Clearly, it was a tasty, savory dish, which she greatly enjoyed—an objective truth.

The Four sauntered away, along the rows of beautifully constructed wooden houses. Other conversations were here and there, and it seemed some Soul Fragments had constructed games out of mushroom stalks, that were played and enjoyed. This was still far more of a Paradise than many victims would welcome in those who preyed on them. Droos had to remind herself that this was a system with hundreds of Soul Fragments. The surprise that one was here, someplace in Heaven, made some sense.

At the far end, the farthest point from The Tree of Thorns,

Droos saw a Living Darkness, that Rose Tall, almost like the Tree of Thorns again, a Second Tree. That was merely a Vision, it Seemed, as the next instant, there stood, in grey and purple, an unexpected surprise. It was the second son of Elriver and Showsh, Drelp. He appeared busy, drawing lines in Space and Speaking The Language of the Universe. As he did so, a gaudy dwelling was erecting itself. It appeared a small mansion, very out of place in this locale.

“Greetings, Dear Drelp, Prince of Drerpo,” said Droos.

“Hello, Dear Mother,” said Drelp, turning toward her, after finishing muttering something under his breath.

A creeping sensation on Droos’ skin made her think that those words did not relate to building a house.

“What brings you here, of all places, Dear Son?” said Elriver.

“Dear Honored Mother,” said Drelp. “Being part of the Council of History, I am doing research now on Thorns of Manifestations. I have not forgotten the research into Wave Relics and Tzefee. Rather, this is simply one of the many interests of The Council. Here I am raising a fair lodge, to dwell in part of the time, while researching, and to facilitate the Servants I will bring for assistance. I hope that this will not be a problem.”

“It is an odd place to do research,” said Showsh. “Yet, I will respect any field of honest research you wish to pursue. Someone has to consider the Thorns of Dweehwail. This certainly is not a most pleasant locale. Being this close to The Tree of Thorns, I would think it would have an effect eventually.”

“It is that very proximity that is required,” said Drelp, with an odd expression. “Mother, what do you think of my chosen pursuit?”

“I believe that the more that is known about Thorns and Berries, even by Forcang, the better and more able Manifestations will be Birthed in the Future,” remarked Droos.

“That is interesting,” said Drelp. “Although, I was not talking to you”

“You will show respect to your Father’s chosen,” said Elriver, with an unusually stern expression. “I concur with Dear Droos. It is a noble field of research by one already many times rewarded and recognized by The Alliance of the Multiverse for exploring important, and at times, unpopular areas. Furthermore, I expect that Projects like Temples, Fortresses, and Paradises will

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

be made easier by such research. I would suggest remaining only Incompletely. The Energies of a Tree of Thorns are Powerful. Be careful, Dear Son, that they do no wear on you.”

“I will be careful, Dear Mothers, that no Evil will befall from this research,” said Drelp, with a smile.

“Would you like some assistance, Dear Brother, with the Lodge, or will you do this yourself?” said Atropo.

“I would prefer, Dear Atropo, to Raise the Lodge myself,” said Drelp. “Only, I will desist temporarily, and dine with this Vaunted group, since I have been interrupted.”

“That would be most kind, and appreciated,” said Showsh.

Elriver quickly used The Language of the Universe herself, and brought out a picnic, and a variety of foods, and a tent. It was a dreary place, so near the Tree of Thorns, yet if it was good enough for Drelp, surely they might dine here.

“How goes your Service, Dear Droos, to The Eagle?” said Drelp.

“The Greater Spirit has not called on me for some time,” said Droos. “I expect to do some work for Him soon.”

“That is what I suspected as well,” said Drelp. “Has there been any progress on your goal to counter Tzefee?”

“I have an assignment first to save my people,” said Droos. “After that, I will focus on Tzefee. That is not to say that I am not looking for any advantage in the meantime. I appreciate all of the help that you have offered.”

“I have often wondered, Dear Mothers, about the Law of Matrimony of The Alliance of the Multiverse,” said Drelp. “It is true that Forcang may take a second or third or even more Spouses. Yet does the language suggest that such behavior is advisable? What is the moral and ethical approach to matrimony?”

“Grand Elder Forcang Understand on a Transcendent Level the Concepts of Matrimony, Love, Relationships, Respect, and other elements of Marriage,” said Elriver. “I am not sure that I would suggest such an arrangement for Reflection Mortals. It is unclear whether they appreciate such nuances sufficiently to avoid harm, to themselves, or potential offspring. Yet for Forcang, the Truth is Nearer. Are four spouses advisable? That is probably not the case. The matter should always be organic. If a Forcang meets a Sentient, particularly of the same Stage, and falls in love, it seems like it would be moral and ethical to marry again.”

“It still seems that Reflection Mortals are being held to a

higher standard than Forcang,” said Drelp. “Is not the ideal state of marriage one of monogamy?”

“This has been discussed,” said Droos. “Anthropologically speaking, different cultures have had many practices on the subject. Being part of the Council of History, I would assume you know the Abstract Dimension of Anthropology in a way that I do not. There are cultures, among Reflection Mortals, that have more than one spouse, of any gender. Certainly, if Reflection Creatures are to be considered, some have multiple partners, some do not. It would seem the matter is open.”

“The question is what a Sentient ought to do,” said Drelp. “It would seem to insult the first spouse to take a second. I will grant, that this may be the case in a second spouse taken by either gender.”

“It may be the case for Reflection Mortals that additional spouses create an emotional reaction, by definition,” said Showsh. “Yet your argument for Forcang seems to suggest a Morality and Ethics of a Transcendent Nature. It is unclear that the Form of Matrimony requires Monogamy to approach The Good. Given that Grand Elder Forcang, as mentioned, understand all of this on a Transcendent Level, does it not stand to reason that there may be room for at least a few spouses, for all partners involved?”

“Dear Brother, you seem very caught with this argument,” said Atropo. “Are you saying you do not want Father to marry Droos? Droos is wonderful. Mother has given her blessing. It would appear it is your sense of Morality and Ethics that is offended here. What is it about this situation that pains you?”

Drelp looked at all of them, as he took a bite of his food, and a deep draft of his wine.

“Forget that I mentioned it,” said Drelp, with a wide smile. “Dear Mother, if you are not offended by such things, I will defer to you. I trust that in your case, such a thing would not occur, but clearly I am countered by the Morality and Ethics of all of those present. I will acknowledge those positions, and the peace of the moment.”

“You should also not assume that I would never meet another,” said Elriver.

Drelp seemed not to hear this, as he took another deep draft of his wine.

“I thank all of you for visiting me in this humble location, my new research lodge,” said Drelp. “If you will excuse me, I

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

have much more work to do.”

With that he stood, wiping the crumbs off of his body, and went back over to the partially complete structure. Then in an instant, he was conferring with The Language of the Universe once more, and the wood moved in one motion.

The Four were somewhat dumbfounded by the conversation, although perhaps it was not surprising. Few children liked when their parents took new spouses, at least when they were young. Showsh, though, hoped that as a grown Forcang, Drelp would be open to it as much as Atropo. Droos was still too new to all of this to have a sense of the danger that was possible, but only wanted an honest, fair, respectful relationship with her new stepson.

After the meal, they returned through the House for the Evil, to the Root of The Tree of Thorns. Elriver girded them in an Orb of white light, and they Ascended The Pit, and it is said in that moment, the suffering of all of the Soul Fragments on The Tree of Thorns that beheld the light was reduced to a barrable pang. Then they reached the surface and alighted upon the rim. The Orb was removed and they stood, staring at the Thorn once more.

Not for long, though, since there were other destinations in The Garden. Apparently there was at least one other Tree that she needed to see while she was in Gon Eden. They traveled to the Northeast, out of The Valley of the Tree of Thorns, and the Cries of Anguish Diminished, and Droos breathed a sigh of relief. She had survived that ordeal; although, in her long life, one, merely, of many.

The badlands to the South of The Middle Mountains traveled Northeast to The Forest. There was a stage, in between, where grass grew in wide lawns. These plains, where intelligent animals grazed happily, in peace, began the Higher portions of Paradise once more. Rounding the bend, the last sight of the Tree of Thorns vanished, blocked by the shoulder of the mountains, that they hugged, as they entered a secluded canyon. The grass here was carefully cut, and no animal grazed. So they went between rocks for a time. Then they emerged into a clearing.

A wide opening in the Mountains emerged, though on the level of The Forest. It was guarded with care, and seemingly a Secret from much of the Domain, this Realm. Many boulders, the height of a human, dotted the Space. Snow capped the tops of the mountains round about. As they reached the center, there in the

middle was a patch of earth, or dirt. The soil was pure, and wide, and rays of sunlight pierced the sky and fell on the Creature at the Center.

There in the Center was a massive seedling, of an aesthetically complex, yet pleasant nature. It seemed that merely to be in Its presence invigorated them, and made them all breath surer. Droos looked to Showsh for explanation.

"This is The Tree of Life," said Showsh. "Once it was juxtaposed with the State of the Tree of Thorns, such as it exists today. Rather, The Tree of Life Towered to the Highest Heavens, and The Tree of Thorns was diminutive. Now, this is the Strength of The Tree of Life. Do not be deceived, for it is still Strong, even in this Form."

"Yet it is said that in that day when Hatred will be conquered with Love, then the Soul Fragments of The Tree of Thorns will be Freed, and it will be Humbled, and Reduced to Size, and The Tree of Life will Grow once More Tall and Proud as a Mountain," said Elriver.

"For now, we must be content with the Seedling of The Tree of Life," said Atropo. "Is it not still Beautiful?! It is a Promise. It is said that it will never die while there is Love in the Universe."

"If this is The Tree of Life," said Droos, "That makes The Other Tree in Gon Eden..."

"The Tree of Thorns," said Showsh. "What does it say about the Hidden Thorns and Berries of Paradise that the Two Trees are The Tree of Thorns and The Tree of Life?"

"It would seem that the opposites are Life and Hatred, in that system," said Atropo.

"It would appear that violates the Dualisms," said Elriver. "Seemingly, life should go with death, and love with hatred. This combines different pathways."

"I would imagine it takes a certain Type of Knowledge to understand The Tree of Thorns," said Droos.

"Is there some continuum where life and hatred are opposites?" said Showsh. "Perhaps Hatred is the Ultimate Destroyer, the Slayer, the Inflictor. How many lives are destroyed, of body, of mind, by emotion, and of spirit, beginning with Hatred? Have we not been discussing in Paradise that our pursuit is to live The Good Life, according to morality, ethics, an existence of integrity, but also one of love, peace, and tolerance? That means

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

that love and tolerance are central. The opposite is the absence of life. To Hate is to Destroy Life. In Drerpo, at the Very Least, it Impales a Soul Fragment on The Tree of Thorns.”

“What of Love?” said Droos. “How does that inverse effect the Tree of Life?”

“The Tears of Happiness of a billion, billion experiencing true love find Their way to The Tree of Life, and water its roots,” said Elriver. “True Love feeds The Tree of Life. It need not be romantic. Any type of True Love. The recipe for the Growth of The Tree of Life is not just the Absence, the Defeat of True Hatred, but that of the Renaissance of Love. It is said that were The Tree of Life to reach its Height, Eternal Life would Blossom for all Reflection Mortals of Drerpo, and a Golden Age in the Physical World would Arrive.”

“Is there a Tree of Life in every Manifestation?” asked Droos. “What of Other Trees?”

“Every Manifestation that I have Known has a Tree of Life and a Tree of Thorns, among Universes and Cosmoses,” said Atropo. “Certainly, Temples, Fortresses, Paradises, and Capitals may have numerous other Types of Tree. The Multiverse’s Tree is a Type of Tree (or so it is said).”

“Is this equally the case there, except for the one in ten million, that The Tree of Life is a seedling, and The Tree of Thorns grows strong?” said Droos.

“In almost all, that is the case,” said Showsh. “These are Thorns and Berries of Dweehwail. If such a System Exists that is Different, Perhaps Drepl will Find It, or Some Greater Spirit. Yet, Endless Eons of Ages have not created better Reflection Mortals that Love Fully and Completely, or Forcang even that do so either. It seems a fault in the nature of Reality.”

“It does bear the question, if the goal is that The Tree of Life should grow, why not just Create Sentients that Love unconditionally?” said Droos.

“The answer to that is simple,” said Elriver. “It is a Known Grey that Free Will is a Central Recipe of Life, whether Reflection Creature, Reflection Mortal, or Forcang. Sometimes, predilections differ, as with ghosts, and their preference to do more service. Yet the Natural Law of Sentients is that choice must be freely given. This has been discussed. For choices under duress, or ones programmed, may not be Judged, and may not receive a Decree. Furthermore, with no afterlife applicable, how

might Rebirth be Judged? The entire system of the Rain of Souls depends on Free Will. Sentients must choose to Love, rather than Hate.”

“Thus, we might discuss how in a good society, this value is taught, that love is preferable, and all of the arguments behind it,” said Atropo. “Yet far more is required, for the fallibility of Reflection Mortals, and for that matter, Forcang. When a hammer is dropped accidentally at a construction site, and it happens to take a life, it is fine to talk about the value of love and forgiveness. Yet it is a particularly saintly individual, or a tzaddik, who loses a family member that way and simply replies, as did an ancient sage, ‘The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Praise the name of the Lord.’ Most will, at the very least in their heart, offer some condemnation or True Hatred of the careless person who dropped the hammer. Yet these events occur in the course of the events of Reflection Mortal and even Forcang. It takes sturdy education, and socialization, to get individuals in a Society to the point, where they may truly think in terms of love and forgiveness in such a situation. It is hard, but not impossible. Yet, it must still be a choice, and free will, and taught through education. Reflection Mortals and Forcang may not be robots.”

“Why are we not talking in terms of Good and Evil,” said Droos, with a half-smile. “It would seem that these would be central to this discussion. Is there something about Knowledge of Good and Evil that facilitates Condemnation and Hatred?”

“It is a digression, and has already been stated, that Good and Evil are a Dualism, and a balance must be kept between them,” said Showsh. “If anything, it is better to stay closer to Good, on that track, on The Journey towards The Good, all in trying to live The Good Life. Yet perhaps, if the balance is incorrect, it may lead to Hatred. Perhaps, when it is nearer, Truly, to Evil, Hatred Arises. In contrast, closer to Good, Love Blossoms.”

“What exists in the Absence of Good and Evil, then?” said Droos.

“That is not a system I would advise,” said Elriver. “The goal is not to destroy The Tree of Thorns, but rather, to make it smaller. The Tree of Life is to become dominant. In such a system, the goal would still be to utilize the track between the Dualism of Good and Evil. Both Abstract Dimensions have Their Uses.”

“It does suggest that it takes a system that considers

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

morality, and ethics, and integrity, to create the concept of Hatred,” said Atropo. “If Reflection Mortals were not different than Reflection Creatures, and operated out of instinct, there would be no Good and Evil. There would be no Love and Hatred. There also, presumably, as mentioned, would be no Reward or Decree or Rebirth. Hatred is a Thorn, as Much as The Tree of Thorns is the Manifestation of Hatred. The Multiverse is unable to exist with Sentients that have free will without it, even if the goal is to overcome it.”

Just then, the sky began to grow cloudy, and in an instant, a light rain began falling on the clearing. Almost, they each felt, a palpable sense of contentment, and fulfillment. The rain was invigorating, and pure. It was Love Given Form. The Tears of one billion, billion Sentients experiencing True Love.

“Now you have seen the Tree of Gon Eden,” said Showsh. “We may begin the Ascent to the Green Hill. Our next destination is The City or Heaven of the Righteous. We have a ways to go, traveling from this clearing, before the Seedling of The Tree of Life. I suggest we walk, as the Soul Fragments of Gon Eden, at least those in most of the choicest Realms may choose to do so. There is much to see, and preparation must be made of Whole Self for the Visit to the Pinnacle of the Highest Heaven of Paradise, even for the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo; even for the Queen of Angels.

“I am honored that you believe I am ready to witness The City of the Righteous,” said Droos. “This seems neither to be a Thorn or Berry, but something held in the open. There is no grey. It is kept in the light. Certainly, the Truth is not known to Reflection Mortals. Even few Servants are aware, or Goddesses and Gods, or Ministers and Lieutenants. How many Celestials Bureaucrats have beheld the Spires of The City of the Righteous? This is a gift indeed.”

They departed the clearing, bidding farewell to The Tree of Life, and entered once more the grassy plains before The Forest. Here the rains persisted, only they were not the gift of Pure Love and Happiness, but merely sun showers. Little more than a mist, it was refreshing, and the droplets tasted like melon juice, and smelled like roses. All The Garden was fresh and clean and wondrous. Almost, Droos thought she heard, a chorus overhead, high above. It was as though an ensemble of Angels, minstrels, sang at these hours, these days. For the Queen of Angels and the

Sovereign of Drerpo were marching to The City of the Righteous.

Then they entered the Forest, and more of an Enchanted Wood it appeared. Everything was so alive, and trees grew green and tall, and flowers bright and splendid, and rocks ran fierce and strong. There in this Enchanted Forest, they found hanging vines, and waterfalls, and every manner of plant and animal, most of which were alive in some Sentient or near manner. They also found more Realms of Gon Eden. It seemed many more lay beneath the Cover of The Forest. The Garden was a rich and wonderful place, and all manner of righteous Sentients, of all races and ages were found to receive their reward here.

As they traveled through The Forest, Droos thought she saw, though it was at the corner of her eye, a group of children playing in The Woods. She rubbed her eyes, and stretched, yet they remained, playing a merry game. It was a sport, and one of tag, and fantasy, and imagination. Almost, the thoughts of the children came to life, and were enacted in the Enchanted Forest.

“What is this place?” asked Droos

“These are The Children of the Forest,” said Showsh. “In every world, in every time, there are tragic youths, left forgotten, and neglected, by society, by their families. Perhaps by illness, or injury, or sadness, they were taken, and found their way here. Yet their hearts, and actions otherwise, despite the Evils done to them were Righteous. So for an Eternity, they may play together in Peace in the Enchanted Forest Meadows, where their imaginations come to life. They may eat their fill of their dreams, and build forts of pine cones and rocks. Together, they will never be alone, or will they suffer again any fear or injury.”

“I would speak to one of them, if I am able,” said Droos. “I do miss Darlez, and these children remind me of him. I hope my actions spared him this fate.”

Then The Four veered to the side, and reached a brightly lit meadow, with many a log, and flower, and rock. A stream flowed down the center, and amongst the mammals, the rabbits, and birds and other Sentient creatures, The Children of the Forest played, and their Dreams came to life. A great epic unfolded in that meadow, yet Droos was able to draw the attention of a girl, and so ask her a few questions.

“You seem to be having fun!” said Droos. “How is life here in this Enchanted Forest?”

“I was scared when I first arrived,” said the girl. “Yet the

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

other children are kind, and they taught me to play all of these sports and games. We never have too little to eat, and there are endless adventures for us to enjoy!”

“Who watches you here?” asked Droos. “Is it just children, or are there adults as well?”

“There are Forest Servants,” said the girl. “They play with us too, although mostly to set some limits on our imaginations; just slightly. Although to think that some of my friends have been here a very long time; though not as long as the Servants. I really don’t think about time very much here. This Realm is all Light and Fun and Happiness!”

“Do you regret the life you led before you came here?” said Droos. “It must have taken great bravery to stay honest and true despite the Evils you faced.”

“I wish above all that I had received a full life,” said the girl. “Yet I was right, and there was reward, with lots of friends, and animals, in a place of joy. Every day in life, I did what was right, what was good, to live long and happy, and to make the world better. Yet, I knew that if life was short, surely there would be something for me afterward.”

“You truly are a Light in Gon Eden, Righteous whether you are young or not,” said Droos. “You go back and play with the others. Thank you, Dear Child.”

The girl smiled, before skipping off to play with a group of other children, and rabbits there in the meadow.

The Queen of Angels walked over to Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo, and they began their Journey once more. They also talked.

“It seems unjust, and unfair, that such children should face such predations in life,” said Droos. “That The Children of the Forest exist here in Gon Eden is only Right. Yet, why does it have to come to that? Surely Society must provide for better education, so that children are valued above almost all else.”

“It is unfair,” said Elriver. “One of the chief concerns of Society, and living The Good Life, is the socialization of children. It is a gift that advanced civilizations have long childhoods, where youths have time to learn what they need to about life, set apart from the tribulations and challenges of adulthood. Too many societies of old put very young children to work in factories, or married them off. You saw The City, on No, and that the age of majority was twenty-five. That is a gift of the age of that world. Among Forcang, childhood lasts some hundreds of years.”

“Part of the structure and education for adults in Society needs to be on how to socialize children,” said Showsh. “This needs to be on the level of schools and universities, certainly. Yet, parents of children also should have advise on what to do. This primary education of values that begins with parents requires guardians and role models that are themselves moral, ethical, and act with integrity, and who pursue love, peace, and tolerance. Not everyone should be a parent. It is sacred responsibility.”

“Bad parenting and bad schooling perpetuates itself in society with poorly socialized children growing into badly adjusted adults who respond with poor parenting or teaching of their own,” said Atropo. “Something that needs to be taught, at a starting point, for this seeming infinite sequence, are sound rules for parenting, and good education practices. How do children learn to think so that they may become adults who know to think critically? It takes a Society that thinks about all levels of education from primary school to university to reach the goal we just discussed.”

“What goal is that, if you would remind me?” asked Droos.

“The goal is a system in which Hatred is vanquished and Love is the most prominent and ubiquitous Abstract Dimension at play in Society,” said Elriver. “It takes a particular type of education to be treated poorly, or be the subject of bad news or punishment, and respond with Love and Blessings. Such is the Society that is desirable to cultivate.”

“These children seemed to have this sort of inclination, naturally, since they responded with righteousness, despite terrible conditions,” said Showsh. “Yet every educational system, from parents and primary socializing, to every level, should raise children in that manner. Only, rather than ending up as Children of the Forest in Gon Eden, they should live long, happy lives in the world of the living.”

After a time, the Enchanted Forest ended, and it became more of a Jungle, with wet ground, and running waters. There were exotic plants, and unusual trees. Many strange tracks passed through the damp soil, and Droos wondered what they were. They walked on for a long distance, until she heard a silent sound.

Up ahead was a pack of deer, and she remembered what she had been told, about the Minister of Gon Eden. He took the shape of a Deer. She looked carefully, with some trepidation. The deer were grazing, in this herd, on verdant greenery and flowers,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

happily, but no God stood among them. Wherever the Lieutenant of Gon Eden was right now, it was not here. Still, Droos paused, and observed the graceful creatures for a time.

“Are you simply going to watch us, or will you join us as well,” said a voice, apparently from one of the deer.

A doe stood in the center, and looked at Droos, and it was that creature that spoke. These were not Reflection Creatures, but rather, Sentients of Gon Eden, and carried more nuances.

“Is this the herd of the Minister of Gon Eden?” asked Droos

“We are not owned by the Minister,” said the doe. “We permit Him to walk among us. He is a pleasant sort, kind, and generous. He fights for us, and protects us, and all Souls of The Garden. If He had his way, far more Souls would go to Gon Eden, or certainly other Heavens of the Firmament. Yet He is not our Master. We are, you might say, similar Kinds.”

“I thought you spent most of the your time near The Refuge for the Meek,” said Droos. “Here you are in The Jungle of Gon Eden.”

“You are confusing us with the Reflection Creatures of Endless Worlds,” said the doe. “There is a similar Template. Yet, our territory spans the entire Domain.”

“You have been to the desert of the West, The Tree of Thorns in the South, The Middle Heaven of the Mountains, and The City of the Righteous, in the North?” asked Droos.

“We have been to all of those Realms,” said the doe. “You might be surprised that we may even change form, if required. That being said, some Realms are more pleasant than others, aesthetically, and for nourishment. There is very little by way of greenery near The Tree of Thorns. We would not dare to nibble the leaves of The Tree of Life. The cacti of the desert of the West are most interesting and savory. Yet the best plants are here, in The Jungle, of The Garden, and near The Refuge for the Meek.”

“You have been to The City of the Righteous?” said Droos.

“Very rarely,” said the doe. “Only for very special occasions. At almost all of those parties, both the Minister of Gon Eden, and these two were there.”

The doe raised her snout towards Elriver and Showsh.

“Part of what I am here for is to Judge The Garden,” said Droos. “Here, you have lived here, Sentients of the Domain, for Endless Times. You are not Soul Fragments, or Servants, or

Goddesses. What is your impression of the place? Does it serve its purpose? Is it an appropriate reward, at all the Realms? What of the Thorns and Berries?"

"We do not Know what you mean by Thorns and Berries," said the doe. "I would say that it serves an important purpose, and is a very worthy reward for the Righteous. That is not to say that some other iteration of Gon Eden might prove more worthy, or a Paradise Manifestation. The complexity of having The Tree of Thorns here, The House for the Evil, and The Bastion of Tyrants, among other more questionable Realms, gives this Firmament a taste like fine wine, or a strong ale."

"I would not think that you drank wine and ale," said Droos.

"Not in this form," said the doe. "Yet on the rare occasion I take a different form, I have made an opinion. Indeed, Gon Eden would be the finest of wines, most rich and complex. Mostly it favors the Righteous. Yet there is more to it than that. I have also traveled far with the Minister of Gon Eden, and I see the lengths that are crossed to give the Worthy a home here, after death. This is truly a Jewel in the Universe."

"If you rarely drink wine and ale, what is it you drink the rest of the time?" said Droos.

In response, the doe walked to a small puddle on the ground, and drank from it. With just a slight hesitance, Droos lay on the ground, only slightly wet, and drank a deep drink. It was the most refreshing draft she had enjoyed in her entire life. No other substance would ever match the Pure Water of The Jungle of Gon Eden. With that, Droos rose, and bowed to the doe, who bowed in return. Then the Four continued their trek.

An Endless Distance passed, and at last the Edge of the Wood arrived, and it was hilly. First the hills were light, but just as green. There were hedges, and here and there, local farm communities, and pleasant Realms, that served as Rewards as well. Not everyone merited The City of the Righteous. Yet simply to live in the suburbs of it was quite a gift, and Droos only wished she had time to stop in each hamlet and explore, and converse, and sample the cuisine and conversation. Yet the hilly country steadily rose.

Then, seemingly as twilight arrived once more, and there were stars just beginning in the sky, and a crescent moon, Droos saw a twinkling City on a Fair Green Hill. It was not overly large,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

or too small. The buildings were just the right architecture. They neither stood out, or were bland. The aesthetic was one of serenity, and a near perfection, and a statement of peace and tranquility. Such it was, that even in this short darkness of twinkling, stary, moonlit night, the buildings shown with white light, and colorful myriad hues of vibrancy.

As they drew closer to The City of the Righteous, the villages and hamlets became more frequent, and Sentients, and Intelligent Creatures sauntered about. They ate, drank potent drafts, conversed, and sang songs. The Near Righteous recited poetry, and watched productions of plays, and videos of movies. Many sat reading books, in actual paperback, but most spent time with each other. It was a festival atmosphere, and there were games, and activities, and some rides. Yet it was not too noisy. Neither were any too crass or inappropriate. This was a place for friendship, and love, and respect. As they neared the Third Hill prior to the Pinnacle of Paradise, the Four Stopped.

There was an old inn, seeing little use, as most happily put up strangers to these parts. Such was the trust in these lands. Thefts, crime, and lies were unheard of around here. This inn was for the rarest of visitors from The Celestial Beacon, or Beyond Drerpo altogether. Such an Eon had passed since the last time Elriver and Showsh had come this way, or any member of their family or Guests from Abroad. Still, they reached the inn.

The common room, even for an inn rarely used, was a bright, cheery place. It was not creepy, or smelly, or unpleasant. It was welcoming, and suddenly Droos felt a fatigue upon her shoulders, like she had not slept in an Age. As they entered, none stopped to take a bow, but all continued their festivities. Rather, the inn keep greeted them warmly, as equals, and set about providing them with rooms. There was one for Elriver and Showsh, one for Atropo, and one for Droos. So they Ascended to the Rest of the Inn, on the Third Hill, before the City on the Hill.

Before he said goodnight, Showsh met Droos at the door to her room, and put his arms around her. He embraced her tightly, and warmly, and kissed her deeply, and meaningfully. The love of her life ran his hands through her hair, and there they stood in bliss for a minute, bidding each other farewell for one magical night on the Third Hill. Then Showsh went, and placing his hand in Elriver's, departed for their room. For a second, Droos scoffed, but then thought better of it. Atropo had long since gone to his

guestroom. Now it was Droos' turn, and she turned the key, and in she went.

Any who would think that the Creator and Sovereign, the Queen of Angels, and the Eldest Prince of the Royal Family of Drerpo would sleep in a luxurious accommodation would be mistaken. Not to say, as Forcang, that such locales had never come their way. Yet Droos found a comfortable room, with warm, pleasant accommodations. Everything was just right, and neither too much, or too little.

Droos took a warm bath, had a light dinner, which was delicious and nourishing of body and soul, and played some games, before turning in for a restful night. She lay in the bed, larger than a single, yet certainly not designed with the likes of princesses or royals in mind. Yet she had never lain in a bed as comfortable as that one before, even in The Library. Then she thought how she missed Showsh.

Somehow, this Ascension to The City of the Righteous felt like the Pinnacle of Her exploration of Gon Eden. It also felt like it was somehow important to her relationship with Showsh. She expected that The City of the Righteous would not possibly meet



Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

her expectations. Yet, so far, even the Third Hill had gone so far, and more. Further, she expected that in some wonderful way, such Realms changed, and met the expectations of those Soul Fragments Blessed with that afterlife, to some extent. As such, she was a visitor, and this was a Tour, to continue her discussion of morality and ethics and integrity, and to lay the foundation for her return to her people and tribe to seek their redemption.

As she continued thinking about these matters, safe, secure, and comfortable in bed, Droos quickly slipped away into slumber, and a dreamless sleep. She knew no nightly noises, and was left undisturbed. The tranquility of Gon Eden had her, and in the morning, the lights and rays of the sun and day woke her, and she rose anew with strength to see her Journey through The Garden to its peak. She might only imagine what Sense of morality and ethics or how she and Showsh would feel about each other, upon their return from The City on the Hill.





Chapter 6

Beyond Good and Evil

As the sun rose, the day was Blessed in many ways. The Four would enter The First Hill of Gon Eden. It was also Droos' birthday, having passed through a time beyond time, and she was now twenty-seven. It was astonishing how the years flew by her. This story began with her as a newborn. Now she was going to visit The City of the Righteous.

In the common room, Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo sat, and had a light breakfast. It was nothing fit for a Queen, but more the meal of a farmer preparing for a day in the field. They ate slowly, and drank juices. One difference was that there were no meats, as such. Rather, it seemed the bread itself had been seasoned to taste the same and offer the similar texture to any animal they may have wished to consume. Here on the Third Hill, there was no compromise, and they might enjoy without regret.

There was no currency offered for their stay, though in the Forcang manner, Elriver offered a future minor favor. Droos found it odd that the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe should have to pay for anything here, in any form of exchange, even without currency. As they returned to the road after the meal, they discussed the matter.

"We have mentioned that Property is both a great virtue, and a great peril," said Droos. "This includes currency, or token property, used for exchange. Would it not be the case that in a perfect or near perfect society or system, such trades would be unnecessary. Would not one service be given for another willingly, and with trust?"

"What do you think you have seen?" said Atropo. "The currency offered here was a minor favor, in the Forcang way. Forcang also offer generic artifacts and secrets and information for trade. The larger question is whether in a system of trust, why is

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

any exchange expected at all?”

“A Sentient should be paid their due,” said Showsh. “Both the meekest and mightiest that enjoy a good or service should offer an agreed upon reward for its receipt. Business is not Evil, or dirty. If anything, there are rules of sound practice. Services and goods should be presented as expected, and the payment should be offered promptly and in full. Those who absolutely are unable to afford such goods and services of a basic nature should not need to pay, but rather, their basic needs should be addressed by the good will of Society. This provides for the dignity of all Sentients, and creates a system for the perpetuation of civilization.”

“Surely, though, there are better ways to facilitate the logistics of exchange than currencies?” asked Droos.

“Certainly there are other options, as indicated,” said Elriver. “Where one favor is offered, or service, let another be rewarded. Such is a system enforced by the strength of Forcang. Yet it may be understood that in less trusting contexts, a less personal stake must be given: something objective. Token property should be respected where it is used, and as a great sage once said, wages should be paid on time, the price of a purchase offered in full, and all laws of money and exchange respected and supported fully. No rule should create poverty or an entrenched lower class that may not provide for their basic needs. Rather, in a more impersonal society, token property exists to increase the rate of trade and logistics of all Sentients. Checks should be placed to provide the basic needs for those that fall through the cracks in the system, for any number of reasons. As, Property of any sort is inherently corrupting, and may lead to Evil, such a system requires rules, and methods for ensuring that no one becomes too rich, and that the lowest have their due and dignity.”

“It would seem that the reward for success in such a system would in fact, even on a moral and ethical level, be accumulation of wealth,” said Droos. “Yet, the same morals and ethics, and integrity, would suggest that the wealthy should want to readily redistribute some of their wealth, both as taxes to the governing body, that facilitates on the largest level, services for the meek, and also in the form of individual charity to organizations best able to help others as well. There is so much need in the multiverse. It is important to be grateful for every piece of Property, and Blessing, and give back equally. That does not mean that the rich may not have big houses, and fancy cars. It only

means that no one should be starving on the streets. It means that a mother should not have to choose between paying for her child's medicine or their food or rent. Society has a moral and ethical obligation to provide sound rules to promote the logistics and laws that support the wealth of the rich. The rich have a moral and ethical obligation to support Society and organizations that create a basic standard of living."

"Here we are walking up the path, now on The Second Hill, to The Gates of The City of the Righteous, and we are discussing money," said Showsh. "Yet I suppose it is true, that it too often destroys lives, or detaches those who have from those who do not. Rather, everyone should see each other as part of the same family, that all Sentients are equal, and deserving of dignity, and basic needs and respect. This has been said elsewhere, and is a digression. It is no small thing to say that Sentients are obligated to help one another, while they also have many rights and privileges."

The Four Rulers of Drerpo rounded the base of the Second Hill, and Ascended to the Gates of The City of the Righteous. Towers and buildings gleamed in polished architectures and aesthetic. None were unwelcoming, and a steady stream of visitors passed through those doorways. There were no actual bars to the gate at the entrance. Rather, this was merely a symbolic location, from which those who entered knew that they were at a place of certain rules. Yet that was most of all for the permanent inhabitants, as visitors came from all parts of Gon Eden, and other locales in the Firmament. They might not stay for long, but most wanted to spend some time here, and visit family and friends.

Upon entering The City of the Righteous, Droos and Showsh found Sentients of all sorts, dressed in white tunics, bound by golden belts. Atop their heads were circlets of flowers, and to each of The Four, smiling Soul Fragments offered a fresh collection. They had a fragrant aroma, and did not seem a burden to wear. Along the stone pathway, Sentients were engaged in conversation, and artwork, as well as chores!

"Should a Sentient earn their way to The City of the Righteous and spend an eternity doing chores, even now?" remarked Droos.

"I believe you would find that many find light work to be a form of meditation, and do so joyfully," said Atropo. "It is hard to think that any would earn a spot among these elect by being fearful

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

of hard work. Such interests do not diminish even in this afterlife.”

The chores and artwork were myriad, from paintings, to performance art, sports that were so fluid and graceful they might have been art, serving and pouring tea, and something as simple as doing laundry.

“You are to say that in this place, the chores include laundry for all?” said Droos.

“Not all must participate,” said Showsh. “There are suggestions and options here. Some do spend much of their time exclusively engaged in art or sports or conversation or reading a good book or watching great movies. Yet, others want work after some eons of a break from hard life. Yet you should see the laundry of The City of Righteous. No clothing ever goes missing, nothing is ever too wet, and it is a therapeutic task, and almost an artform itself. In this place, essentially the Soul Fragments live in Pure Aesthetics. Everything they do is an artform.”

“Those sports are fabulous,” said Droos. “Some of Sentients here must have been amazing athletes in life. It is hard to distinguish what they are doing from art.”

“There are Soul Fragments of many athletes, and those who included fitness as part of their balance and moderation in their righteous lives,” said Elriver. “Yet others have had eons to pick up the game while being here. It is possible to learn new skills while being in The City of the Righteous, and with no limits on lifespan, and no careers preventing time invested to acquire hobbies and talents. Soul fragments here may engage in their truest hearts desires. There happen to be some similarities between them—these are the Soul Fragments of the Most Righteous, after all. Yet, they represent trillions of Reflection Worlds.”

“This is a city, and someone must prepare the meals, clean the bathrooms, and mop up vomit,” said Droos. “Which of these fine Soul Fragments receives those tasks?”

“There are some improvements on the physical world,” said Atropo. “You may find that certain previous requirements of life are not relevant here. There will never be anyone mopping a latrine, and no amount of food will make a Soul Fragment vomit. For everything else, there are Gardeners and Angels who see to the needs of The Righteous that they do not address themselves.”

“I noticed that there is a night and day here,” said Droos. “I would not automatically assume that there is a sense of time in this place.”

“Some find Beauty by day and others by night, while some in winter, and others in spring,” said Showsh, in a slightly melodic fashion. “It would be a poor place that did not offer some variety. Of course, the endless ranks of artists produce so much content that the city walls and passageways are covered in colors and light and hues. You can see the statues and trees and all manner of interest.”

“Well, you have brought me here, and it is a wondrous place,” said Droos. “I almost feel that I do not need to talk to any of the Soul Fragments here to understand if they appreciate their reward, or the type of Sentient they were in life. Those points appear self-explanatory. What will we do while we are here.”

“Now it is time for the midday meal,” said Elriver.

As she spoke, most of the Soul Fragments were all walking in one direction, and they followed the stream. In the end, they reached a wide, open space, with some architecture above them, in simple, white metals and woods, reminiscent of floral designs. The trick was that all of those Fragments seemed to fit here, at tables. The spaces were round, and there was no particular pattern, or groups that chose to sit with regularity. It seemed The Righteous chose any table in each meal, and ate at approximately the same intervals. Here the Gardeners and Angels brought their courses, which had no meat again. That was no concern, because the essence of the substance was expertly captured by the Cook Gardeners in every manner of vegetable, dairy, and bread, and spices existed here that were nowhere else.

The Four sat at a table together with three other Soul Fragments. They were smiling and carried on engaging, polite, interesting conversation, and ate well, but not too much. The drinks were potent, but none were overly tipsy afterwards. As they dined, a steady rain of flower petals fell, slowly, meandering, but none landed ever on their food, or their tables. Before long, Droos found that as she sat and listened to the joyous sounds and observed the colorful sights, her hand remained in Showsh’s hand. They looked at each other, and smiled. Toward the end of the meal, the two raised a glass to each other, and made a toast, and Droos was confident that only she was able to hear the words. They wished for an eternity of happiness, and wonder, and the blessing of life together.

After the midday meal, Elriver excused herself, claiming that she had something here she wished to show her son. So, Droos and Showsh were left to wander the streets of The City of

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

the Righteous together. They stopped at a square where one dozen were painting, and they watched expert oils being placed on the canvas. Though that was not the only medium, as another half dozen did so with a dose of technology. Different types of art were welcome here. The beauty was astonishing.

“Nothing here is as Beautiful as You are, Dear Love of My Life,” said Showsh. “You are my greatest gift. I treasure you beyond all of the wonders to be had in the Multiverse.”

Droos smiled, and kissed him, before they returned to their walk. So their day passed, the two, exploring the endless aesthetics and peace of The City of the Righteous. Still, as night fell, and the moon and stars rose, Elriver and Atropo did not return, and they ate the evening meal together, just the two of them. Showsh had found a private café, apparently a small secret, and they sat, not alone, for numerous others couples dined intimately at tables together. Yet their conversation was just about their life, growing up together, and all they had experienced together up until that point. Once they had been friends, and confidants, he even being her servant. Now he was the love of her life. She would have no other. At the end of the meal, he bowed and kissed her hand, and gave her fourteen blue roses. Then they retired to a romantic room at an inn in The City of the Righteous. Tonight, it was they who got to share a room, and a night together.

That night was the finest of Droos’ life, until the night she was officially married to Showsh. They said their vows to each other, renewing them once more, and embraced each other. Hundreds of trillions of years had taught the Greater Being something about romance, and the physical act of love. Finally, that night, she made love to Showsh. It was slow and passionate, and they kissed often, and caressed each other with their hands. She was left in climactic moments several times, calling out Showsh’s name, even leaving a few marks on his back. It was thrilling that in the end, he called out her name as well. There was nothing at all about that night that might have gone better. Droos never thought that even with her Showsh she might find perfection, yet in that night, she found a perfect bliss. After that night, she had even greater hopes and expectations for her eternity ahead with the love of her life.

They made love again in the morning, once they awoke. Arriving at the open dining hall of The City of the Righteous, they only looked slightly disheveled. Sitting down at a table with

Elriver and Atropo, as well as three others, they held hands for a moment longer, and exchanged meaningful looks with each other. Droos had a glow about her that warmed her body, mind, all of her emotions, and her soul. She was invigorated of Whole Self. She sat there, and sighed.

“How did it go?” asked Elriver, with a knowing look, that was not quite a smile, and not quite a frown.

“It was... incredible,” said Droos, with a smile.

“I am glad, Dear Droos,” said Elriver, regaining some composure.

Then it seemed, Droos looked, and saw Elriver.

“How are you able to be so generous, in this instance?” asked Droos. “I am not saying that Drelp is right. Yet this cannot be easy for you, even in your Might and Glory as the Creator of Drerpo. It would seem that even a Grand Elder Forcang may feel some emotion. For my part in this, Dear Elriver, I am sorry. I pledge to always be respectful, to always be your friend, and to never keep Showsh away from you for too long.”

Elriver suddenly laughed, and it was like a youth’s joy at the dawn of the world.

“You are young and generous,” said Elriver. “You are very precious, and wonderful. I know why He loves you. I love you too, in my way, Dear Droos. I will always be your friend too. You are right that emotion is not something wholly absent, even from Me. It is also true that some part of me still remains Emerzo. In immanence, emotion is far more poignant. You and Showsh deserved your moment, and an eternity of them to come. I know that we will all have time for what we want. There is a Multiverse of riches, and endless eons of time. I am very blessed indeed, even now.

“Now you must decide on when the wedding will be,” said Atropo. “I expect it will be the spectacle of the eon in Drerpo, and bring Forcang and probably Spirits from even further. But enjoy your moment. You are truly amazing, Dear Droos.”

The Four finished their meal in a holy silence, as a Minstrel Gardener played a melody to the side, which graced their meal. Upon finishing, they all rose, and returned to the streets of the city. What may be said of a near perfect place? Droos saw little need to offer additional Judgements of It, though she was hardly objective at this point. Thus, they departed before noon, The City of the Righteous, having only stayed the night, and

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

traveled Southwest, towards the Mountains of The Middle.

At this point, Elriver did not see the need to take their time in progressing, and using some words of Sre, their distance diminished, and they went further each day. Soon, the ever day returned, in other parts of The Garden. As they at last reached the paths that led into the upper reaches of The Middle Mountains, they heard a voice, one that until now, Droos had witnessed most recently.

“Greetings, Droos, The Queen,” said the Voice.

Looking to the side of the path, on a perch was The Eagle. It was larger than life, and almost It seemed to stand there, Itself a mountain. Yet only for moment, or trick of the eyes. Then it was there, a mighty bird, but no more.

“Greetings, Great Spirit,” said Droos. “Is there a service that I may perform in light of the debt I owe you? I have not forgotten my pledge. Furthermore, I know now that exchanges are worthy.”

“You have clearly grown in wisdom since we last met,” said The Eagle. “It is one matter to have a Servant that is unwilling, and yet another to have one that desires to help. Our work will progress far better this way. Grasp my wing and we will depart!”

Droos turned to the others, and told them she would meet them at the top of the pass, upon completion of her assignment. She took hold of The Eagle’s wing, and then in the recesses of her mind, body, spirit, and emotions, she heard a great flapping of wings, and she was soaring, away from this place.

When the flapping stopped, they had arrived in an open plain, and in the center of it there were two castles. They were under siege, and fell beings assaulted the Servants that kept an eternal watch. Droos found the sudden action surprising, and concerning. Who were these invaders? The Eagle led Droos straight into the action. Yet an extended wing covered her, and offered her a protection that was unavailable to the Guards of this Domain.

These Servants were some kind of Guard, and those that approached took the form of myriad Sentients, although of a flawless variety. They bore no imperfection, or scratch, and were strangely attractive. Some rode great steeds, black horses with flaming hooves, and red eyes. As they passed through the battle, at the center, the source of the Blight, Droos saw something that

should not have been there.

It was a large vortex, a cyclone entering into nowhere, that contained darkness, and greys, and a light. At the same time these creatures entered, even under the wing of The Eagle, she could feel the Pull of the Vortex. Yet even into this, they went, and she heard a voice, from the Great Spirit, telling her to hold the talon tightly. They entered the very Vortex.

A terrible emotion dragged on Droos' soul, such that arriving at the Other Side of the Vortex was not just a physical journey, but an emotional, mental, and spiritual one as well. The despair threatened to weigh her to the ground, and she would have fallen, had she not strength from the talons of The Eagle. Looking up, she beheld the New Reality.

There were images of the castles, though bent, and twisted, and all in greyscale. The buildings themselves were different, shapes subtly darker, and distorted. Instead of grass, an ash like substance covered the ground, and here and there dead trees rose despairingly. There was no color in this bleakness, this hollow in Reality. Yet firmly, she held the talons of The Eagle.

Atop one of the twisted castles, was a dark, sinister looking man on one of balconies. He looked at her, and smiled. The Great Spirit lifted them, and suddenly they swept at the man! And with a cry, blackened energies flew! A shrill cry issued forth, and Droos was released from the talons and wings to fend for herself, in the deepening depression and depth of despair of the Space. Then The Eagle did battle with the man. Even then, The Eagle's voice in her head spoke, clearly.

“Enter. Get the stone!”

It was almost impossible to think, let alone use her Senses or move, but some strength drove her, and she dove into the door behind the clashing titans, and found a neat room, with numerous interesting features. It had a coffin, and decanters that had a dark liquid in them that was not wine (she could tell even from here). There were also many art pieces, though here, they were just as grey and cold as any other object. Finally, atop a mantelpiece, there was a pedestal, and on top of it a stone, like a coal. Only it burned, like it was on fire, even now.

The weight of some external force swept in to find her, and a coolness breached her mind to do battle. Yet just as quickly, the Talons of The Eagle swept them away.

“The Stone! Get the Stone!”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Droos crawled, foot and hand, across the floor, and dragged herself up to the mantle, and there the burning ember was before her. Surely it would blacken her flesh. Yet she recalled the urgency, and grasped it! It was hot! However, with her Senses, as an Angel, it was cool enough to hold. Then she fled, tearing herself with all of her force of will towards the door, and as the wickedly attractive man finally burst through, she at the same time collapsed through the door to the balcony, the glowing coal in her hand. As he sought to lay hands upon her, a woosh of wings saw the Great Spirit grasp her, and off they fled! Back to the Vortex!

Her memory of the events that followed, and the return to the pass in Gon Eden were blurry. It seemed she fell into a disturbed sleep, and knew no more, until she reached the pass, near The Middle Mountains of The Garden. There she awoke, beside her Showsh, and Elriver and Atropo were there. Looking down, slowly, the glowing coal was still in her hand! The Eagle was nowhere to be seen.

“That was quite an assignment,” said Atropo. “I would certainly like to hear the whole story.”

Droos took a deep breath, and described, in some detail, what happened, before handing The Stone to Showsh.

Upon finishing her story, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo all looked at each other, gravely, and then without any more words, Elriver and Atropo instantly vanished in a flash of brilliant light. That left Showsh and Droos together once more. She had many questions.

“It seems, Dear Love, that Tzefee has finally made her next move,” said Showsh. “No, that was not the supposed Goddess of Pain that you saw, but merely one of her minions. Like most major Manifestations, Drerpo has a Local Vortex to Daxuk. Almost all of the time it is closed and guarded, with an entire Domain established for the purpose, which is what you saw. Yet a particularly powerful entity or force may open it still.”

“What is Daxuk?” asked Droos.

“Daxuk is one of the three main portions of Dweehwail,” said Showsh. “The underside, in a matter of speaking, of The Multiverse Proper, and The Indeterminate, is Daxuk. There is a Shallow or Light Daxuk and a Deep Daxuk. Fortunately, you only experienced the Shallows. They look very much like a similar copy to the part of The Multiverse Proper or The Indeterminate it is under, only distorted and in greyscale. The Deep Daxuk is like a

whole other Multiverse, almost. It is certainly a major subsection of The Multiverse. Daxuk is a place with its on Sentient races that are very different from The Multiverse Proper, including commonly, various types of Undead Foreigners, like Vampires. It was them that you saw invading Drerpo, commanded by what looks like none other than a Vampire Elder. It does not bode well if Tzefee was able to convince an entire Colony of Vampires to take Her side.”

“What is a Vampire and why would they take Tzefee’s side?” said Droos.

“A Vampire if a powerful entity, similar to a Lord of Order, or Lord of Chaos, only of the Foreigner race, and Undead subtype,” said Showsh. “The most notable feature of Vampires is that they consume blood for sustenance. In particular, they consume Forcang blood. There is some confusion among Reflection Mortals, since for endless ages, Vampire Spawn have created all manner of Mundane Vampire populations that have vague similarities to the racial Foreigner, but are otherwise very different. These Vampires are not slain by sunlight, or a stake through the heart. Cutting off their head will still be effective. Yet, they have as many Potencies as a Forcang, and their own Order of Sentients, of sorts. The most powerful in this Age is the Vampire Elder.”

“You still did not answer why they would want to side with a Threat to the Multiverse,” said Droos.

“While Vampires are currently of the Undead Subtype, the commonly known history is that originally they descended from a Subtype of alien from The Indeterminate in ancient times,” said Showsh. “Long ago they immigrated to The Multiverse Proper and for Eons, inhabited both that and Daxuk alongside Forcang and Spirits, plaguing both. Then there were also, above Vampire Elders, also Vampire Ancients, and Vampire Transcendents. Around the same time that the first Primordial Maelstrom was created in Duzog, the Vampire Ancients, along with a small number of Transcendents, created their own Primordial Thçtz, called The Crucible. It greatly enhanced their Potency for an Endless Eon. A great civilization of Vampires expanded to all corners of Dweehwail, and even High Vampiric was spoken everywhere. Forcang and Spirit civilizations were greatly contested. Finally, a great war was fought, and The Crucible was banished to Daxuk, and it is said that all of the Vampire

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Transcendents and Ancients were destroyed, leaving a small number only of immortal Vampire Elders to rule the remaining Vampire Proper and Vampire Spawn. They were a shadow of their former might.

“Yet ever the Vampire Elders wish to recover The Crucible, and return to their former might, and become themselves Vampire Ancients or even more. They wish to rule The Multiverse again. What is also less known, is that the Vampire lineage, in particular High Vampiric, and by connection, Vampiric, has connections to another ancient Language of the Universe, Infernal. It has been thought that the ancient Vampire race, still in The Indeterminate, and long ago having gone a different course, has connections to the Original Speakers of Infernal, who existed before the Dawn of Time. Such Potency would exist with that power, potentially, to help craft a new Multiverse, survive the apocalypse of an old one, and carve a new Reality and Order with Tzefee. Certainly, if any Vampire Elder sided with Tzefee, that would be my guess as to why they would do so. It is not to say that all are doing so. For now it seems one Colony responded, which is a good sign. The others are busy surviving and preying on nearby Forcang cities, or actively searching for The Crucible in Deep Daxuk. There are rumors some enterprising Vampire Elders still have hope that some Vampire Transcendents survived the war, and seek to find one or two, and gain their help in both locating The Crucible, and turning the tide once more. For all of these reasons, this shows that Tzefee is just getting started. That is all the better reason to stop her now.”

“That is all very frightening,” said Droos, giving Showsh a hug. “Finally, what is The Stone?”

“If we are correct, and it would take someone like Drelp to really analyze it, this is a Wave Beacon,” said Showsh. “It is also a piece of The Crucible, of a minor sort. Tzefee likely gave this to the Vampire Elder as payment, in part, for assisting with this raid. Help capture you, and the key to finding The Crucible will surely be his. That would make this a lot simpler then completely siding with Tzefee. Every Vampire Elder wants a hint or clue to find The Crucible.”

“What does it have to do with The Great Wave,” said Droos.

“It is known to some that certain pieces of The Crucible were constructed of Wave Beacons and Relics,” said Showsh. “It

is part of what gave it Potency. As well as providing an eventual path to potentially locating The Crucible, each Wave Beacon may lead, if properly compelled, to a clue regarding the Dawn of Time, the Speakers of Infernal, the Previous Time Frame, and other similar topics. All of these may be useful to countering Tzefee and the new Great Wave.”

“What do we do now?” said Droos.

“For now I am going to proceed with our plan, since it also brings you to a fortified Firmament of the Sacred Realm,” said Showsh. “We are going to travel to The Palace.”

In that moment, Droos took a step back, and seemed a little unsure of herself. It was as if her time here had put a further weight upon her. Gon Eden was truly everything she had heard, and more. Why did she want to leave the place? Would it not be preferable, even wise to remain here, and spend some eternity in Paradise?

“Droos! You were strong enough to escape Daxuk, and an encounter with a Vampire Elder,” said Showsh. “This will be harder still. I told you that to leave Gon Eden behind, for one still alive, is no small feat. The choice will have to be yours. We will not return after this. To do any of your tasks, it will require this sacrifice. To be redeemed, and earn a place among the Elects of many Gon Eden’s upon your death, that will require this great step. You have more to accomplish. Do not set aside your burden now. Step forward and take my hand.”

All of the awful and awesome sights flashed before her eyes, her experiences, the wonder, the pleasure, the fear, it all stood before her, to testify. How might she betray such comforts, all for the small chance of redemption, the narcissism of thinking she might save others? Others would stand up and take her place. She would be able to rest, if not in The City of the Righteous, there were many Realms that would have her, the Queen of Angels.

“You have more to do, Droos,” said Showsh. “Reach forward and take my hand. You are special, and unique, and you are a Secret, a Berry in The Multiverse, among all time frames. It is not narcissistic to believe, to be confident. There is an omen, a foreshadowing for good or ill. You have a part to play, and no other may do it for you. You must choose, and choose wisely. You have free will, but make the right choice. I love you, and I need you, as well as The Multiverse.”

With more effort than even in Daxuk, Droos threw her arm

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

forward, and grasped Showsh's hand, one she had held hundreds of times. It was placed above the Wave Beacon. As she felt the temptation of The Garden, of Paradise diminish, a flash of Vision went before her, and she saw a Dark, Deep Realmz.

In it, was a burning object, terrible, massive, beyond description, though abstract, and haunting. The Realmz was a hole in the heart of a massive hill. This chamber hollowed out the terrain, all in greyscale. The flame itself was black and white. Strange creatures guarded that object, of a likeness she had never seen or imagined. They had symbols emblazoned in a grey, almost black, upon their chests, in a language, that must have been Infernal, if she recognized any other Languages of the Universe. Then a flash of white light wreathed before her eyes, and she was kneeling on the ground, at Showsh's feet, and calling out!

"What did you see, Dear One?" asked Showsh.

Droos told him what she saw. He nodded.

"You seem to be attuned to these Wave Relics and Beacons," said Showsh. "There must be a reason that The Eagle is taking you on assignments to gather some. I believe you saw an image of The Crucible! You saw it in the Realmz, its location in Deep Daxuk. That the Sentients you saw bore sigils, possibly in Infernal, is interesting. This will have to be considered further by The Alliance of the Multiverse. But first..."

Showsh pulled her to her feet, and kissed her, and hugged her.

"Fear no nightly noise, or hiss of a snake," said Showsh. "Take my hand, and we will depart for The Palace, for refuge, and comfort, and further exploration. Elriver and Atropo will join as time permits, as now they do battle with the minions of Tzefee. We must depart."

In a flash of multicolor light, the Two shot up into the sky, and were gone from Gon Eden.

§

As they streaked through the Void of the Firmament and Celestial Domains, Droos and Showsh were a blur of vibrant colors. They went much faster than before. It seemed that leaving Gon Eden, once the choice was committed, required less effort than arriving. It took some time beyond time to reach what

appeared to be a cylindrical world, shimmering with a golden hue. Into this vapor they entered, and found themselves at the Annex to The Palace.

Upon landing, Droos looked at herself, and there she stood, in a meticulous gown, with sapphire earrings, and a tiara. Her eyes gleamed with a white light, and her hair shown a golden brilliance. Showsh was even more startling here, and apparently humility was not the order of this Heaven of the Firmament, at least in aesthetics.

“The nature of the Domain is that all appear as they are,” said Showsh. “Yet most are treated equally. However, there is space for deference here, in a way the equality of Gon Eden does not permit in the same fashion. Certainly those that want some degree of prestige may receive it, if they have earned a place among The Elect here, in life.”

As they began walking along the red carpets and gilded, massive hallways of The Palace, the Servant Guards saluted them, and golden trumpets were sounded. By the time they reached The Great Hall, the Staff were assembled, although unwanted in this moment of refuge. There the heads of each branch of the Servants bowed low to the Sovereign and Queen of Angels.

“Please,” said Showsh. “We are not here for pageantry. Assemble the Servant Guards in a protective formation.”

The Servant Guard Commander saluted once more, and six blasts of the horns were heard, as the hallway was quickly populated by an endless flow of Servant Guards. There were also a smattering of Gods and Goddesses to augment their ranks, some with pantheons. Of course, there were the Soul Fragments of those consigned to The Palace, and who were currently in The Great Hall (very many at this time), or who were ushered in here because of this event. This was a very unusual occurrence. Even those engaged at one of countless large banquet tables interrupted their feasting to enjoy the entertainment that was seemingly about to occur.

Then Showsh took Droos’ hand and led her around to the head of the greatest of the tables, where two thrones were set. Before they sat down, one of the Servants removed the one on the right, and replaced it with a very similar, if not quite as ornate throne. Showsh then led Droos to a seat on the right, while he sat on the original throne on the left. As they took their seats, the assembled gave them a round of applause, and a cheer, and a

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

clinking of glasses, before the feasting and conversation resumed in fervor.

“Is it like this every day?” said Droos.

“Such is the endless revelry and enjoyment of The Palace,” said Showsh, as ample delicacies were placed on plates in front of them, and goblets of wine.

“You thought that this was a secure location?” inquired Droos.

“It is safer than Gon Eden, against a threat like Tzefee,” said Showsh. “The Garden is built for The Righteous—it is not a fortress. The Palace is a Heaven in its own right, and is also a fortification. It may not be the Highest Heaven for the Pinnacle of Righteous Soul Fragments. It is a place of pious individuals, who merited this as part of their reward in the afterlife.”

As they sat there, a woman approached them, holding hands with a man. They took a bow, and sat at the table on the left of Showsh, but nearby. Politely, they waited for the Servants to pour them each a goblet of wine, and serve a modest amount of food. Then the woman raised a toast.

“To the Creator, the Sovereign, the Queen of Angels, and the Royal Family of Drerpo,” said the woman.

The four acknowledged the quiet toast, and drank some wine.

“You seem to be more suited to Gon Eden, Dear Madam,” said Droos. “What do you think of this reward, in The Palace? Is it reasonable for the life you led?”

“Do not assume that I am not also in Gon Eden, Dear Droos,” said the woman. “I have lots of kind friends here, and in other Domains of the Firmament. My husband and I have located the Fragments of our Souls, though we have not deemed it time to reunite with them, or if we even want to yet. Simply because the Soul Fragments you see enjoy the delights of The Palace, as a reward, does not mean others may not be enjoying other Heavens.”

“As for the appropriateness of the reward,” said the man. “It is very welcome. We have found that many of our Soul Fragments, certainly a strong majority, if not most, are in the Heavens of Drerpo in one Domain or another. That is not to say that there is not a reality that some reside in more Neutral Domains, or even a few in the Hells of the Sacred Realm. Neither of us were Saints in life, and we consider ourselves very fortunate to have these rewards, and to experience them together as often

as possible. We also get to see friends and family as often as we want. We are truly Blessed.”

“What was the nature of the life you led, before you died, that led you to such a vaunted afterlife?” said Droos. “It seems you have received quite a reward.”

“In the years before the ice melted, on the planet that is now called, and I scoff at this, *No*,” said the woman, “I was the head-of-state of a respectable and noble nation-state. My life was one of privilege, granted and perpetuated by my people and tradition. I held little real power, which resided in the government. However, my prestige and honor in the eyes of most of my people was well maintained. I lived a long life, with family and friends, and lived to see numerous descendants, many of whom are here in the Heavens of Drerpo today, in a similar ratio. I once wondered if someone might be very important, and have the love and good treatment of their people without power. I also wondered if there would be a reward for deference, and respecting the laws and government of my people. It appears I was right, and I was blessed and privileged to live a great life in that world, and these last ages of the afterlife have been just as marvelous.”

“It was a surprise that the afterlife was not exactly as expected,” said the man. “Yet we may hardly say that we were disappointed. What here is lacking? It is an ample and just reward. It is available to all religions, races, and peoples. There is an equality in this, an egalitarianism. There is still prestige where it is desired. I may feel at once both class and humility. Perhaps this was not exactly what I expected, but I am just as pleased. I am more than thrilled that I get to spend eternity with almost all my friends and relatives, in numerous Domains and Realms of Heaven, and even other Neutral Domains. The afterlife has been very good to us.”

“I assume that the Realm of your Soul Fragments in Gon Eden is on the Northern Hills of The Garden, am I correct?” said Showsh.

“I would trust the Sovereign of Drerpo to get it right,” said the woman. “I did not merit The City of the Righteous. However, I have three Soul Fragments that began in Gon Eden. They are all in the Choicest Realms, and one of the best is The Fourth Hill. That Soul Fragment tells me she visits The City of the Righteous frequently. None of the Soul Fragments are in any of the Lower Paradises of Gon Eden. What, did you think I would be in The

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Bastion of the Tyrant?"

"Of course not," said Droos. "From your explanation of how you lived your life, you were the opposite of a tyrant. It seems you earned an Elect, Vaunted afterlife.

Droos raised her goblet.

"Cheers to you, and your husband, and your family," said Droos.

Then the four drank once more. They continued eating together, politely and relaxed. Once the two Soul Fragments had finished their food, Servants arrived and removed the dishes, and they excused themselves, with a bow. The two walked away, hand in hand.

"It must be difficult to relinquish power," said Droos, turning to Showsh. "The temptation to have absolute control, to rule with no other, seems unduly attractive. How many would reject it, or tolerate a system of diminished power, even if it had prestige, respect, and love?"

"It goes once again to that desire, or feeling, a certain narcissism, that no others may save the world, or a nation-state, but the absolute ruler," said Showsh. "The reality is that there are countless others that might rise to the occasion, and that, as a great sage once said, 'absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Yet, clearly, the prestige, the respect, the love of such power may be maintained, even after the power itself is gone. It is unclear how many generations such a situation may last. However, when discussing how to live The Good Life, and follow The Journey of The Good, and create the ideal Society, that is Moral and Ethical, a wise ruler would always prefer to, as another wise sage once said, 'Diminish, and go into the West,' and relinquish absolute power for the sake of his people. Rather, a system may be created to maintain the dignity and prestige of a royal family, for generations. It is even possible that amnesties may be granted to smooth the transition. Yet, by departing that corrupting absolute power, the Society will become more moral, and ethical, and honorable. Finally, any former ruler may hope to earn that vaunted reward in the afterlife, and even, a happy end to a life in the physical world."

"We have discussed political philosophy in The City," said Droos. "This is a digression. It was merely admirable to note those who did maintain or tolerate such a system."

"I am glad you think so," said Showsh.

"Tell me more about Vampires and Daxuk," said Showsh.

“I am no expert on the subject,” said Showsh. “You must really speak to Drelp. It is a complex history. One thing that I will say about a Vampire is that their only real true love is blood. There is nothing else they truly desire. They may put off that hunger for a day if they are base, or a week if they are strong. Yet in the end, they will feed. Vampire Spawn may begin by consuming Reflection Creature blood, and possibly Reflection Mortal blood. Yet nearly all Vampires, that are not Mundane Vampires, hunt Forcang. It is even the case that Forcang Cities that happen to be near enough to a Vampire colony ruled by a particularly able Vampire Elder give up on protecting every Forcang. It is simply acknowledged that some Forcang will be preyed upon.”

“What are Mundane Vampires?” said Droos.

“Normally when a Vampire feeds, they simply drink blood until they have their fill,” said Showsh. “However, when a Vampire chooses to feed on a Sentient until near death, and then feed that same Sentient some of her own Vampire blood, a frightening transition occurs. Suddenly, that Sentient becomes, irrevocably, a Vampire. Fortunately, most Vampires generally only feed and kill Forcang, and do not create new Vampires. Part of that is because the decision to create new Vampires endows the new Vampires with some of the skills and knowledge of the Sire. Vampires, who have been around long enough, are somewhat careful about which Forcang he turns into a member of their community. They would probably consider it to be some sort of gift, or even procreation.

“All Forcang begin their existence as Vampires as Vampire Spawn. Upon doing so, they lose much of their former Potency. They immediately have an uncontrollable urge to drink blood, which may get better over time, if they work on their Bestial Urge. Vampire Spawn may create new Vampires, yet when they do, they are Mundane Vampires. Mundane Vampires are similar to Reflection Mortals in strength and intelligence, except that they similarly feed on blood. They also are far less good at controlling their Bestial Urge. Some enterprising Vampire Spawn are able to work with their Mundane Vampires to help them improve. Yet the main focus of even Vampire Spawn has always been Forcang, and becoming a Vampire Proper, in a Vampire Colony.

“Therefore, a collection of Mundane Vampires might be created on a Reflection World by a Vampire Spawn, receive some improvement over hundreds of years, and then become abandoned

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

when the Vampire Spawn moves onto more interesting projects. Still, those Mundane Vampires may create Mundane Vampires of their own on Reflection Worlds, and often see the patron Vampire Spawn as a sort of Deity. They always await the return of the Vampire Spawn. Sometimes that happens, other times it does not.”

“What are Realmz?”

“Realmz are the Manifestations, Domains, and Planes of Deep Daxuk,” said Showsh. “They are said to have far greater variety than the Manifestations used in The Multiverse Proper. Whether these are other options that are no longer used, or a different development is unknown. The Realmz of Deep Daxuk are connected by endless mazes of dreary roads and pathways, that span the length of worlds and universes. One of the greatest obstacles to traveling to Realmz in Daxuk is the sheer distance needed to travel between destinations. Not all Forcang Potencies work the same way there.”

“Dear One, Showsh,” said Droos, “How is it that one like Tzefee would desire what she does? It is both the nihilism and the purposeful cruelty—the marring of creation. You and Elriver did one thing to her long ago, and she chases you around The Multiverse, interfering with your plans. What does she gain with all of this?”

“Sometimes a Sentient is hurt so profoundly that a number of possibilities may occur,” said Showsh. “I am not sure if this is exactly the case for Tzefee. When something terrible, some harm has been inflicted upon a Sentient, it desensitizes them to doing the same to someone else. At least, that is one reaction. Some may become so sensitive that the mere thought of it grinds them to the ground. That is a different sort of problem. Yet some emerge with a sort of damage that desires revenge.”

“I feel like we discuss this every time Tzefee is attacking,” said Droos. “It is just as strange each time. Does she really feel better, every time she destroys, and acts cruelly, and harms others? I would think that the weight of those actions actually impinges upon her Whole Self. Eventually, I would think either it will dawn on Her what she has done, and she will become inconsolable. Or else, it will distract her so much that she will make an ever increasing number of mistakes. It is the mistakes that show that she would be unsure of her actions.”

“You do not want to assume that your enemy is acting because of their nature if they are doing something wrong,

immoral, or unethical,” said Showsh. “To do so, even in the case of the worst villain, reduces the dignity of Sentients, or humans. It is a very rare Sentient, indeed, born to think without empathy, or without a philosophical compass. Even some of those rare ones, may learn the social skills necessary to operate appropriately. It is the rarest of the rare who would truly be acting in an alien way. Thus, someone who is behaving inappropriately is simply a party who was at one point, very likely, injured in some way, or without the values or education necessary to comprehend the acts and cruelty. This is part of why you desire so much to humble Tzefee, not slay her. Clearly, she was hurt at some point, and may still recover.”

“That is not to say that she should not face some consequence, or punishment for her actions,” said Droos. “Yet the goal of Society, the way to pursue The Good, and to live The Good Life, is that we aim to educate and socialize all Sentients to be productive, kind members of civilization. It is natural if someone is injured or hurt to act, temporarily, inappropriately. In some cases, this may go very wrong. Thus, if that is the case, and it almost always will be, that person should be returned as the productive, kind member of society they might be.”

“Even Vampires have at times proven capable of mitigating their harshest desires,” said Showsh. “Particularly Vampire Spawn. I am not saying it is common. A Vampire Spawn may seek nourishment from the blood of Reflection Creatures, or so it is said. For those who cannot seek such sustenance, some have survived on collected blood samples from the population. Blood is offered for purposes of nourishment, in exchange for good behavior, and otherwise, productive participation in Society. After all, Vampires have all sorts of useful Potencies. If it were not for the politics, there likely would be Forcang scholars attempting to develop synthetic blood to feed the Bestial Urge of a Vampire. There is a solution in almost all situations, if given enough time and thought.”

“Of course, most Sentients are not Vampires,” said Droos. “However, it is little clear as to every detail of Tzefee. Yet I am confident that she can be redeemed, and humbled. There must be something in her past, of which we have already gleaned some information, that will unravel the secrets necessary to bring her back as a powerful ally, rather than just another vanquished opponent.”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“Ultimately, in True Defense, to prevent harm, it is acceptable to take more drastic actions,” said Showsh. “Yet all manner of attempts should be made first to redeem and humble any Sentient. Certainly this is the case among Forcang, who see the Transcendent Forms of Abstract Dimensions.”

“Would this work in every Society?” asked Droos.

“Among Reflection Mortals, the aim should also be to redeem and humble those who make mistakes, even big ones,” said Showsh. “The system should be about having as many productive members of society as possible, in happiness, and in kindness to each other. It should not be about caging Sentients or humans at the slightest provocation. Even if jails and prisons do exist, they should always be almost exclusively about actual corrections, not about punishment or revenge.”

“Is it possible for a person who made a mistake to recover from that, or even end up being a good person?” asked Droos.

“I thought that was what we had been talking about this whole time,” said Showsh. “You made a mistake, and stood up for your father, and his rule, rather than speak out against it. That was Evil. Now you have the opportunity to spend a lifetime acting



and behaving differently, possibly even saving your people from him. You may not change past. You may educate people to avoid your mistakes. You may fill your life with good deeds afterwards. What will The Judge Decree—how many Soul Fragments will be destined to which Sacred Realm, whether Heaven or Hell or somewhere in between? That will take your whole life to earn, and is Beyond even my ability to tell you.”

“Tzefee lives an eternal life,” said Droos. “Might the Key to her Redemption be found, her sentence issued, and served, and then her recovery made complete. Then she might spend an eternity doing good deeds afterwards, and being kind to others, having reformed. Would even she, at her end, find some of her Soul Fragments in the Heavens of Dweehwail? Perhaps she might even earn more than a few? I suppose it would take a small eternity of good deeds in the future.”

“Yet such is your virtue, Dear Love, that you see that potential,” said Showsh. “Whether such hopes are always possible, who may know? Yet the dignity of Sentients must be maintained, by assuming all may recover, and return, and that the source of Evil, is all too often, some previous injury. Once cured, what type of righteous human might that person transform into being?”

“That seems like it is a lot of work that would take much time and money,” said Droos. “Many people would rather just toss Evil People in a cell and lose the key. I suppose patience is the moral and ethical course of action. To do otherwise, after all, undermines the dignity of humans. All humans, and Sentients, deserve equal dignity.”





Chapter 7

Fragments

The vigil continued, and the Servant Guards kept their watch. Few Soul Fragments of The Palace complained, as there were ample activities here in The Great Hall, and food and wine aplenty. Droos and Showsh took an opportunity to watch a movie being shown on a wall on the side of the chamber. What it was about, Droos could not recall, but there part way through, as they sat in comfortable chairs, with some space between they and other Soul Fragments, one of the residents arrived to talk to them.

This was a man with a bit of a wild expression. He admitted that he had been visiting this Heaven for a time beyond time, and that his usual Domain was Sublimity. If anything, this sober state of affairs was unusual in his normal discourse. It was interesting to him to experience food, drink, and entertainment while not intoxicated. Droos felt this was an opportunity to ask some questions.

“What type of life did you lead, that you found an afterlife in Sublimity?” asked Droos. “I would think that the choice to live a life indulging in substances of many varieties in life, with all of the risks around them, has some root in trauma or past suffering. To both live such a life and earn Vaunted Places in Heaven is a worthy goal.”

“You are right that I was reacting to something,” said the man. “When I was a child, I was assaulted. Then as a young teenager, my mother died suddenly. I had a good father, but he was not the sort who understood what I now know to be psychology. Perhaps I would have benefited from some continuous psychotherapy, medication, and other lifestyle changes. My father mostly read me bedtime stories, made sure there was dinner on the table at night and helped me with my homework and grades. He did well. Yet the traumas were never assuaged. They festered, and

I found other means of curing them.”

“It is hard to say that you may be blamed for what you did not know as a child,” said Droos. “It was for your father to provide the help you needed, and recognize its value. It is no wonder that you saw to your own medication, and further impressive that it did not do more damage to you.”

“I appreciate that, Queen of Angels,” said the man. “I wish I had known of better options. By the time I was nearing the end of my schooling, I was medicating with various substances. At that age, it was not legal to purchase them, yet I got them for free, intermittently, from friends who used them. One small grace is that they never gave me the information to gather those intoxicants myself from illicit sources. I crashed out of school, and into menial jobs that I took as seriously as I was able. From some I was dismissed, yet eventually I found a niche. It helped that such substances were legally obtainable for me as an adult. I worked a basic job in the best way I could, given my emotions and mental state, during the day, and in the evening I medicated myself. It was a lonely life. Yet it might have been far worse.”

“It mattered to you and your success in life that such self-medication was legal,” said Droos. “You were not jailed for simply purchasing and using them. The quality of the substances was controlled, and managed. That is not to say that there was not a black market for those who would not pay the price for those items. Yet you were able to live a manageable life, and contribute to society in a real job, however menial, while legitimately obtaining your substances in the evening.”

“I had friends who were caught in the web of the black market, and its route to substances,” said the man. “I helped some of them find the path to legal usage, and a sustainable life. Not everyone in the world needs to be saving the world to make a difference. It is possible to have a good honest job, and then have fun at home at night, particularly if it helped us forget. We developed quite a little group indulging in these habits. Since these were legal options, there were also legal routes to get help quitting, or receiving treatment for overdoses. Some of us quit, and few died young. It did keep us away from the sort of life that would be considered mainstream, and I never married, or had serious relationships. I had lots of friends, and I was married to the substances. Unfortunately, even with all of the innovations in society to make my life better than it certainly would have been in

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

earlier generations, simply using these intoxicants day after day, and year after year, took its toll. I cannot say that I lived a long life. Yet it might have been far shorter. I am also happy that I was able to contribute to society for the most part.”

“It is a shame that you never got the psychological help you needed,” said Droos. “Yet you sound like an unusually impressive person. There were periods of time in many worlds and societies where those in your situation would have spent most of their lives in jail, or beholden to the black market. There certainly was no product control or accountability. You lived a reasonably good life, under the circumstances. I would only imagine that the next innovation for such a society would be earlier intervention with psychological treatment when there are children like you who suffered. You might have actually recovered, and lived a life of true righteousness. For what you did choose, it is all very impressive. It is clear that you earned your place in Sublimity, and the place of your other Soul Fragments in Heaven. I am unable to speak if there are any in more neutral Domains or in the Hells of the Firmament.”

“I know that at least one Soul Fragment is here in The Palace,” said the man. “Somehow I doubt that there are many in Gon Eden, if any. That is fine. The one here, I believe, is getting a spa treatment right now. I was caught up in this lockdown while I visited the Domain. I am very content with my lot in the afterlife. I only wish, as you say, that treatment had been available to me at a young age, and afterward, that I might truly have done more with my life.”

“One may never be certain whether they are among The Elect of Gon Eden,” said Droos, with a smile. “Do not despair. Perhaps you are not in The City of the Righteous, or even on the Fourth Hill. Yet there are many Realms there, and maybe even a place to reward you, and your noble righteousness that you showed even in the face of daunting odds in your life. Enjoy your afterlife, Dear Sir, in peace.”

“You are most kind, Dear Queen,” said the man, before moving off with a bow, back to enjoy the movie in his own seat.

The movie was entertaining, and Droos had never seen it before. Of course, given that she had spent the first part of her life in The Jungle, that was not surprising. Showsh invited her with a few interested Soul Fragments to play a strategy board game. They went to a collection of wooden gaming tables, and took their

seats. Not surprisingly, Showsh was one of the best tacticians at the table, and had reasonably good luck, but Droos did very well herself. Just as they finished the game, they were approached by a pleasant androgynous Soul Fragment who had a smile.

“May I bother the Sovereign and Queen of Angels of Drerpo for some conversation during this time of higher guard?” they asked.

“Take a seat, and make yourself at ease,” said Droos. “I will have a drink brought to you if you would like.”

“You are most generous,” they said. “I am here to offer my gratitude for these splendid Heavens of the Universe and Sacred Realm. I am an Aspect of a Soul Fragment in OAtå, the Heavenly Domain of Family. In that Sacred Realm, I experience every day both moments from all parts of my past with my family, as well as making new memories on into an eternal afterlife and future. I have Senses that I would never have imagined in life. I have never felt at greater unification and ease with my family then during this past eon in OAtå.”

“You are truly fortunate to have received such a Decree to have a Soul Fragment in that Heavenly Domain,” said Droos. “I am glad that you are happy with your lot in the afterlife. Did you live a righteous life in the physical world? Have you heard from other Soul Fragments?”

“My life was not perfect, or entirely righteous,” they said. “I doubt there are very many Fragments of my Soul in Gon Eden. Likely there are more than a few in the Hells of the Firmament. I had an honorable profession in life, and a number of family and friends. Yet I was a self-conscious person, and I did not receive help to overcome my difficulties with my self-esteem. There was never anything wrong with me, my body, or any part of me. Yet some people in Society said so. This led me to act out and break some laws.”

“That is only reasonable,” said Droos. “Civil disobedience seems a ready choice where the laws may be immoral, unethical, or lacking integrity. Certainly, it is best to work in the system to change such laws, such values, such norms. Yet some freedom of expression, even some rule breaking, done carefully and deliberately, to make the point, seems only appropriate where fundamental freedoms are denied. Furthermore, as you said, you did not have the psychological treatment that every Sentient deserves. If one will see a doctor for a broken bone, why not for

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

low self-esteem, or bad self-image? Psychology exists to help with those concerns. I am sorry that you were unable to avail yourself of those resources.”

“I did a little more than basic civil disobedience in my time,” they said. “I was angry at the society that rejected me, however in part. Of course there were many that took my side, and fought for my rights. To them I am very grateful. I know that you are right about seeking treatment. I did have a broken bone once, and naturally I saw a doctor. In my culture, the body and the mind were not considered similar when it came to treatment. Overcoming difficulties of that sort was a matter of force-of-will. It simply never occurred to me, or was welcome, to see such a professional. I know now how useful it would have been.”

“It was also likely the case that your society did not make it easy to see such professionals,” said Droos. “Existing organizations will pay to heal a bone, but not a mind. If you had to bankrupt yourself to develop normative self-esteem, are you to be blamed for prioritizing eating and paying the rent? Why should it not be the case that when a Sentient is sick of body, emotion, mind, or spirit, a professional of the appropriate type is there to see them, paid for by Society. I am happy to discuss some small amount of rationing in extreme cases. Yet you hardly sound like an instance where some number of sessions with a psychological professional would have overwhelmed the government in your nation-state.”

“You are not suggesting that I should have seen such a professional because of the body in which I was born?” they inquired, with some momentary concern.

“Not in the least,” said Droos. “There is nothing wrong with who you are and how you were born and how you lived your life. The problem is that there were elements of your society that told you that you were somehow less than a righteous, amazing Sentient, because of that, and you let them convince you. They were wrong. Yet your emotions, your mind and spirit, were hurt because of that taunting. You acted out because of those feelings. Who would blame you? If Society had been equal and egalitarian in the way it ought to be, if you had received the same treatment as everyone else, that never would have happened. I prescribe such treatment for anyone who has an injury of emotion, mind, or spirit. These are often caused by the Evils of others, and in cases where the patient is a victim. It is still necessary to see the professional to overcome those harms to the Whole Self.”

“That is what I thought, Dear Queen of Angels,” they said, with a slight bow. “You are very generous, and you have put this matter in perspective. Despite all of that, it is clear I lived my life fairly well, because look at the reward I received.”

“You deserve it,” said Droos. “You deserve an eternity with those you loved, family and friends, in peace. If only life had been kinder. As I have said, do not despair of finding Soul Fragments in the Choicer Realms of Gon Eden. Not all may be Decreed a spot in The City of the Righteous, yet there are plenty of other Realms and Locales. When you decide if you want to seek Rebirth, make Gon Eden an early stop, and see for yourself what is there.”

They laughed, and smiled broader.

“I will do that,” they said. “Hail The Queen, who truly has eyes that see equality.”

Droos bowed, as did Showsh, and they sauntered away to the side, quickly joining another game at a different table. The security threat was not passed, and Showsh decided that he would introduce Droos to some vintage video games, as existed long ago. There were numerous comfortable places to play them, in this very Great Hall. Of course, those who had been doing this for a small eon were aesthetically expert, but they welcomed the Queen of Angels nonetheless. This was made up for by Showsh, who purposely made sure he never did better than second, but for once or twice. Finally, Droos won a game, and smiled, and the Soul Fragments patted her on the shoulders.

As they took a break from a round, a woman sat down beside The Angel, and took her hand. That was a little forward, but Droos did not mind, and she was not threatened. It was not as if there was any danger in this place.

“Finally, I found you,” she said. “I do not have much time. Rather, I do, but as soon as this security matter passes, they for certain will take me back. I don’t want to go back. Every day it is the same thing. I am tired of it. These trips beyond the borders of the Domains are rare enough.”

“In what Firmament of Heaven do you find yourself?” said Droos.

“Well, technically, it is not a Heaven,” said the woman. “It is called kowkOA. Every day is part of an endless warfare with no purpose. We fight, using all manner of weapon, we die in every type of way, and we wake up the next night, ready for action once

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

more. In the start, it was not so bad. Yet by the time I had fought the ten thousandth skirmish, and the thousandth major offensive, and I have died more times than I may count, it was not fun anymore. There would be something if at least we had a purpose to our battles. Yet our commanders just give orders, and we are expected to follow them. Bad things happen to those who do not comply. Usually they are accused of being a spy for the enemy. I died that way probably about two hundred times.”

“That sounds pretty terrible,” said Droos. “Do you think there should be rules of warfare? Is the process and system or waging war more important than actually winning it?”

“By now, I would certainly say that morals and ethics of warfare are necessary,” said the woman. “Every manner of atrocity has been committed in our daily, hourly battles. Yet it has the same result. Only, we don’t treat each other as Sentients anymore. We are simply dots on a map, ants to be squashed.”

“What would you say was your outlook in life?” said Droos. “What was your view of other Sentients, of humans. Did you view others equally, even to you? Were there any, particularly groups of Sentients, you persecuted, or discriminated against?”

“I was not an Angel,” said the woman. “I had flaws, and I am still not sure all of them were all that bad.”

“Well then, you get out once in a while to go on trips to other Domains,” said Droos. “You are visiting The Palace for an extra-long stay. Have you been to Gon Eden yet, or Uen? Maybe the Righteous Kernels of your Whole Soul resulted in Soul Fragments in those Heavens.”

“I get out so little, though,” said the woman. “Supposedly the purpose of these outings is to find the other Fragments of my Whole Soul, and to provide this one with Breadth. Yet one day a month is hardly enough time to locate another Soul Fragment in an entire Domain. I have been searching for eons!”

Perhaps you must have more faith in your qualities during life, and that the Soul Fragments, Decreed to the Heavens, will find you,” said Droos. “Have you received any visits in kowkOA?”

“Once, a visit from a Soul Fragment based in The Palace,” said the woman. “That is part of why I chose to come here this time. Yet this incident means I will have to wait another thirty days before searching more of The Domain. Besides, that was an Age ago. At the time, she did not want to Merge.”

“Yet it happened once,” said Droos. “The Hells of Drerpo

are not meant to be a picnic. I expect that Soul Fragment will return, some Age. Until then, I know that you will endure. When you do Merge, your Whole Soul will be even stronger.”

“It’s a picnic for the Soul Fragments who come to fight in battles in kowKOA, like it is some kind of epic video game,” said the woman.

“Well as you say,” said Droos. “Fighting and dying are somewhat fun for the first one hundred times. That also means that the Soul Fragments of the Heavens and Neutral Domains have additional reason to visit. If they may travel to the Domain of Battle simply for recreation, they may take longer to look for a Corresponding Soul Fragment. Maybe you will find additional visitors, not just from The Palace. This takes time. I know this is hard.”

“You are right about the injustice of parole, today,” said Showsh. “It is not your fault that a security matter occurred. How about this. All visiting Soul Fragments will have their terms in The Palace extended by an equal amount of time to the interruption once it is over. That will be you and all others. You will not have to go back as soon as this is over. How about that compromise? I know you will persevere, Dear Madam. Your Whole Soul will be stronger, upon your Rebirth.”

“That is what I am talking about, Dear Sovereign,” said the woman. “I thank you too, Dear Queen of Angels. I am not happy about this situation. I have seen so little kindness in this endless eon. I appreciate you showing me some today. I believe I will be able to persevere long enough to either find another Soul Fragment on parole, or for one to find me. And maybe, you might consider visiting me.”

“I will do that,” said Droos, with a smile.

“Really, in my lowly bunker?” said the woman, with a half-smile.

“You may count on it!” said Droos.

Then the woman walked over to an entertainment room on the side of the Great Hall, to enjoy this part of her parole, until she might start searching once more. Droos supposed she had earned this respite.

Droos and Showsh passed the time pleasantly enough, and talked to more Soul Fragments. At last, a blast of the trumpets signaled the arrival of some member of the Royal Family. Within a few moments, Atropo entered, with a raiment of crowns, glowing

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

energies, and jewels and precious metals. He was accompanied by a number of Lieutenants of the Celestial Bureaucracy, and numerous Sergeants and Corporals. This Royal Court was now prepared for war.

"I am tired of hiding away in The Palace," lamented Droos. "Am I so frail and weak that every time Tzefee arrives, I must be placed in a vault, lest I be squished? I want to learn the tactics necessary to survive, defend, and win a war like this. If someday I am to be the Sovereign, and Queen of a Manifestation myself, surely I must have such abilities. It is never desired that such skills be used, yet a Monarch must always be prepared."

"I was about to say the same thing, Dear Queen of Angels," said Atropo. "Dear Father, the Warriors of Drerpo await your order in ere'OAm. Dear Mother is facing off with some of them now, at the Vortex. The battle goes well, yet it requires more assistance."

"Have there been any sightings of The Great Eagle Spirit?" asked Droos.

"No Spirits have attended the battle," said Atropo, with no look of surprise. "Spirits rarely fight Forcang wars. It is enough that He signaled us to this invasion. That was a true gift, and a symbol of respect. Retrieving the Wave Beacon was even more welcome. That Vampire Elder will fight even harder to retrieve it now."

"Then let us be off, Captain Atropo," said Showsh. "I will lead this army, with the help of my newest General, Dear Droos, to the Vortex, to send these minions back into Daxuk."

The ensemble marched out of The Great Hall, and the trumpets were blown eight times. There was a sizable detachment of Servant Guards traveling with them. It seemed all manner of Forcang and Angel would take up the call. Ministers were Lieutenants. Princes were Captains. Sovereigns were Generals. Yet Gods, Goddesses, and Archangels served just fine as Sergeants and Corporals too. They receded from the hall, as Captain Atropo and General Showsh continued to consult.

"Where is the Minister of War?" asked General Showsh.

"The Lieutenant is at the front, with General Elriver," said Atropo.

"As She should be," said General Showsh.

As they reached the entrance to The Palace, a flash of radiant multicolor energy suddenly surrounded them all, and

then flew! Across the Firmament, at a great speed, they passed the Mists and Voids and Clouds of Domains. Then they reached, having traveled a distance beyond distances at frightening pace, the Domain of ere'OAm.

There Droos stood, and now she was covered in armor, with a helm, and garbed for battle. A longsword was on her side, and a glaive on her back. There they stood, she, and General Showsh, and Captain Atropo, and the other assembled Lieutenants and Officers of Drerpo, as well as the rank and file Servants and Angels, who were not already in the vanguard at the front. Droos looked around, and saw the nature of the Domain on which they now stood.

It was a Domain of White, with the ground a pure color, not even snow, as far as the eye might see. They stood firmly, and in the distance, a great space between them and these objects, were four castles. The one to the Northwest was shrouded with lightning and clouds, as the one in the Southeast was Purple and shifted shape, never holding one form. The Northeast was a tower of pure white, yet containing a streak of myriad colors, and puffy clouds floating there above. Finally, the castle to the Southwest was of a geometrically perfect design, an architectural marvel, and no confusion lay as to its Truth or form. Yet these Cardinal Paths were not the focus of the Domain today.

Droos wondered why ere'OAm was chosen to gather the Forces of Drerpo. She supposed that it was a big, open space. Indeed, the assembled armies were massive. Some length of time passed, and she heard a voice.

"General Droos," said Atropo, "Do you believe that we have the necessary forces to proceed to the Vortex?"

The Queen of Angels thought for a moment, and then realized that the titles at some level were merely honorary. For this, given her level of experience, she should defer elsewhere.

"I will ask General Showsh the same question, although my suggestion is that we proceed with all haste," said General Droos.

Then a frightening Minister rose above them all, of a Right and Portfolio Droos did not Know. Only, she saw Him open His mouth wide, and a scream issued forth, and a wave of white energy blended with darkness ran through the masses of armies. Opening her eye, General Droos stood on the field of battle, beside one of the castles she had previously seen. The Vortex was clearly now

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

commanded by the forces of the enemy, as well as the opposing fortification. Here they found General Elriver, and the Lieutenant of War. They were huddled, and looked up and smiled as they saw the reinforcements.

As she suspected, Droos was given command of a small group of elite Servants and Angels, led by two Corporals and a Sergeant. This first command was a little awkward, though she recalled that it actually was not her very first time in battle. She had done this with Anora long ago, although it was pretend. It had given her some preparation for the skills required of her here, both in commanding, and the actual use of the blade and glaive. Someone had chosen her weapons of war for her well.

Droos found that as they entered the field, trusted in a way she did not assume any General but Showsh would gift the love of his life with duties on her first day of real action, that commanding others to slay vampires was different than cutting off their heads herself. Yet, she led from the front, and ably. It was also difficult. Vampires were powerful warriors that knew how to defend themselves. Also, having to destroy life, or even undeath, was a step she at one point hoped she never would have to take. The Queen of Angels supposed that one of the duties of a Queen, a Sovereign of a Universe or Cosmos, is to defend it. She may do everything she might to preserve the peace, yet to save life, at times, lethal force, True Defense, was necessary, and proper.

The first Vampire Spawn she killed, cutting off her head, was hard won, and hard emotionally. It earned her the respect of her Corporals and Sergeant, who were largely responsible for addressing any Vampire Proper's who came their way. In the end, she had slain thirty-eight Vampire Spawn, and finally, even one Vampire Proper. This was a skill she hoped she would never have to use again, for a long time. She was not a natural warrior, and looked forward to the numerous other duties of a Queen and Sovereign.

Fortunately, the Vampire Elder never really had a chance once the main force of the Drerpo armies arrived. Pushing back the vanguard, and holding against the force for a time was the best it might manage. It was also, likely, that the scheming Undead Sentient had kept much of the Vampire Colony and resources in reserve. This whole affair was a test of this new alliance with Tzefee. They would have to learn in the future how they would all be judged in the mind of the Vampire Elder.

At last the opposing castle was retrieved, and they stood before the Vortex Itself. General Elriver and Captain Atropo lead an elite force through the Vortex to push the Vampires even further back. After some time, they returned, and using Potencies of a type beyond Droos' knowledge, the Vortex was closed, for now. This battle against the Vampire Elder, and Tzefee, had been won. It was unclear that the war would continue to be this simple.

They all gathered on the green plain near where the Vortex had been. There had been casualties, and that was a sad affair for any fight. Elriver would have to put in effort to create more Servants and Angels for some time. Even a few Gods and Goddesses had fallen. This was a sad day. It might have been a lot worse.

"I expect Tzefee will be furious," said Atropo. "She wanted a willing partner, and she received a timid effort. We were lucky. The response is likely to be mean and petty. We may expect anything. Although all of this would have been far worse had it not been for The Great Eagle Spirit. This is proving to be a useful alliance."

"Our relationship with The Spirits has always been a useful alliance," said Elriver.

A Servant approached Elriver from the ranks, and whispered something in her ear, before stepping back.

"It seems, right after the battle was won, Dear Drelp is here to examine the Wave Beacon," said Elriver. "He wishes to meet in The Beacon of Drerpo. Very well."

The Creator issued orders for the Minister of War to disband the army, with perhaps an extra garrison to remain in case of an imminent return. Otherwise, Elriver raised her eyes to the Sky, and in a flash, they were soaring once more! Certainly traveling with The Royals was both exhilarating and speedy.

Quickly they arrived at a gleaming room, of white, gold, and many colors. Curtains there existed, out of the light Itself, and places to sit, certainly for Elriver and Showsh. Apparently there were also seats for Atropo, Drelp, and Droos, with five altogether, though theirs were less impressive. This room within The Beacon of Drerpo was somehow less daunting than the last time she had been here. Perhaps she herself had grown somewhat since then.

After sitting a short while, Drelp appeared, in a flash of purple and grey energy. Without a glance, he took his seat at the table. He then looked at his Father, as though the question of what

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

should occur next was obvious.

“Here, Dear Son, for you to consider,” said Showsh, with a smile.

Showsh, with a wave of his hand, caused the Wave Beacon to appear, and slid it across the table, which was really only a Space of Light, and it landed in Drelp’s open hand. He picked it up, and examined it. For a moment, the glowing ember seemed to cause words and letters to appear on Drelp’s arm. That was only for a moment, and then they were gone, as though they had been imagined.

“You have a very useful helper in that Spirit,” said Drelp. “This is a Wave Beacon, and one from The Crucible, as you suspected. What I believe, is that it is The Chief Wave Beacon in the mechanics of the Primordial Thçtz. Where Tzefee would have obtained it, I do not know. It was long thought that this was lost in The Indeterminate, or Daxuk beneath The Indeterminate. Apparently this Goddess of Pain has been busy. It is possible, with enough manipulation and research, that this Beacon might provide a map through Daxuk to The Crucible. It is unlikely, but possible. You say that the Vampire Elder gave up without a big enough fight? I say that Tzefee has set you up. Now every Vampire Elder in Dweehwail will send their armies to get this Wave Beacon, just on the possibility it will lead them to The Crucible.

“Of course what would be far more interesting would be to follow this Beacon to Its Original Source where Powerful Information may be concealed. As for what Multiverse, Reality, or Dimension that Information may be kept inside, I do not know. It is said that all of the Wave Beacons of The Crucible sequestered the Information relevant to them in Alternate Dimensions. This being the Chief, it may be assumed it would be the most perilous of Dimensions. I hope you enjoy the trip. Yet that may be better than waiting for endless waves of Vampires to Descend upon Dlerpo.”

“If The Great Spirit Knew this, why was it given to me to recover?” asked Droos.

“Spirits have a way of underestimating the challenge for Forcang of tasks and assignments, or of traveling between Dimensions,” said Drelp. “He probably assumes that you will all rush off and find the relevant Information. It probably does not occur to him in an eon of ages that you would keep it here, or endanger His Lands, Domains, or People. You will not be keeping

it here, correct?”

“We will not keep it here,” said Showsh.

“As the one who most wants to redeem and humble Tzefee,” said Droos. “Surely I must take responsibility for this task. Perhaps Showsh and I may go and retrieve this important piece of Information.”

“That is very kind, Dear Droos,” said Elriver. “Yet going to Alternate Dimensions really requires a Grand Elder Forcang at the height of their Potencies. Even then, not all return. It would be most unwise for you to attempt to go. As for Showsh, he does not have the time to travel to the Ends of Reality to find Information.”

“Fortunately, I thought of this possibility in advance, and brought some allies here who may be up to the task,” said Drelp.

With that, two more appeared in the room, and two chairs, and it was as though the image of Elriver had joined them. Such was the likeness between the newcomer and her sister Elriver. As for the third, Droos did not automatically know who this Forcang happened to be, but she guessed.

“Tultzow, Zrah... glad you could join us,” said Elriver, with a small frown.

While Tultzow looked almost the same as Elriver, Zrah was a slight man, though muscular, of fair skin, and purple eyes. He had golden hair, and his choice of clothing was just as brilliant and awesome as Atropo’s.

“Do they know the danger they will be facing by seeking this Information?” asked Atropo.

“Dear Droos, this is Elriver’s younger sister, Tultzow, and our youngest son, Zrah,” said Showsh. “They are worthy Forcang who I would trust more than any to accomplish this task.”

“Dear Droos, I have been very much looking forward to meeting you,” said Tultzow. “I do wonder why she can’t come with us? I would guarantee her protection personally. Not even a scratch would blemish her head.”

“How many times have you told us that before, Tultzow?” said Elriver. “I too, trust you and Zrah to complete this assignment. Droos is not ready for this type of work. She has a lot more to learn.”

“I look forward to another adventure into The Wilds,” said Zrah.

“There is the problem, that Droos seems particularly attuned to this Wave Beacon,” said Drelp. “Do you think that the

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

two of you will be able to detect the signal without her.”

“Of course we will,” said Tultzow, boisterously, and slapping Zrah on the back. “This will be the best fun we’ve had in a million years.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Atropo. “This is not a pleasure assignment. You are there to gather something to stop a Threat, a possible Great Wave.”

“That is why I am going,” said Zrah. “I will be the serious one, and make sure that we stay on the task. Dear Aunt may provide the extra experience, power, and potency, and if my memory has it, probably plenty of good luck too.”

“It is decided then,” said Showsh. “Why don’t you hand them that Wave Beacon, Dear Drelp.”

The middle son seemed to be annoyed about something, but he tossed the Wave Beacon and Tultzow caught it. With a wave of her hand, it was pocketed, safe and secure.

“I still feel that I should do more to help with this matter,” said Droos. “I may be learning much about being a Queen, or a Sovereign, but I may only do that through practice and experience.”

“You may only do that if you are alive,” said Elriver. “First, focus on saving your People. Once you have more training and experience, you may certainly go on assignments like this, with the help of Potent Partners. It seems your greatest talent so far has been locating these Wave Relics and Beacons in the first place, thanks in part to your service to The Spirits. I expect that before long you will be spending so much time trying to humble and redeem Tzefee, you will wish you were back in the easy days of The Library, just reading a book.”

“I am sure you are right, Dear Elriver,” said Droos.

With that, before they all left, a meal was prepared on the table before them. They were curious dishes, but nothing outrageous or notably luxurious. Any might assume that this Crowd would eat lavishly, and on the Choicest fair. That was not the case. They ate well, and pleasantly enough. But this was not The Palace. It was The Beacon of Drerpo. After the meal, Tultzow and Zrah quickly departed on their essential assignment.

“This all makes me wonder,” said Droos. “Why are we fighting so hard against this Threat to The Multiverse? It would seem, certainly according to The Spirits, that the Recycling of The Multiverse, and The Great Wave is a natural occurrence. Threats

are merely the tools by which Natural Law permits such repose to proceed.”

“It may be Natural,” said Showsh. “It is also normal for Forcang to fight against it. There is a reason it usually takes multiple Threats to The Multiverse to require an Apocalypse. Moreover, even the Spirits fight against the Threat, up until it is clear that there is no winning. Is it not the case that in True Defense, any Sentient might do what it takes to survive?”

“There is evidence that Forcang have not always fought against The Threat to The Multiverse in past Time Frames,” said Drepl. “Sometimes, many Forcang have even sided with such a Force, believing in some kind of benefit from an Apocalypse.”

“Well that is hardly nihilistic,” said Atropo. “It is narcissistic.”

“I believe this was discussed, and this is a digression, that Sentients, have the right to defend themselves from annihilation,” said Elriver. “The only limits to this are if to do so would cause harm to others. There is also the question of if the destruction will be physical or emotional, mental, or spiritual. Surely those at threat of imminent physical defeat have a right to True Defense. Those who face some kind of threat to their emotional, mental, or spiritual wellbeing should also have some right to True Defense, particularly in replying with effects of similar emotional, mental, or spiritual strength. Yet there should be limits, as we discussed.”

“Are you to suggest that ethnocide is no threat, and whether slow, or immediate and deliberate, and that no action may be taken, Dear Wife?” said Showsh. “Have we not discussed that culture itself has its own Heavenly Domains, where all cultures are preserved for eternity. Even upon the Apocalypse of a Universe, such records are given to The Alliance of the Multiverse for eternal charge. Then, are you to suggest that culture has no right to preserve itself?”

“I believe the idea, as would have been discussed previously, is that there are limits,” said Droos. “All manner of defense should surely be given, of an emotional, mental, and spiritual nature. Perhaps a strong civil disobedience might be enacted. Yet should a war, in which thousands, millions, or billions are slain, be fought to preserve a culture? Genocide is a different story. Should the entire people be threatened with extinction for who they are, perhaps it is reasonable to risk the destruction of a world. Meanwhile, unique cultures, facing ethnocide may be

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

preserved by worthy people, and returned upon the conclusion of That Evil. It should be noted, that members of the culture who wish to leave with it intact should be permitted to do so, if only that it should be preserved elsewhere.”

“Are we really to conclude that ethnocide, and the destruction of culture, should be treated so lightly?” said Atropo. “Why not fight war to preserve it? Should it not be permitted for the faithful and the ethnic to stay on their land and live freely?”

“They absolutely should be permitted to do so,” said Elriver. “The question is how far should Society, or a Civilization, be willing to go to make sure that happens. All manner of chastisement may be done short of outright war, in which thousands and millions may die. These may be economic, they may be diplomatic, they may be social. These are emotional, mental, and spiritual tools to shame the dominant society into appropriate behavior. Should a world war be fought to prevent ethnocide—that may be too much. However, the citizens of that culture should be permitted to leave to preserve it, so that someday, when the Evil Regime is replaced, they will be able to return in peace, and live on their land, and practice their culture. Then, the actionable component is Time, even if beyond the scope and span of a single lifetime.”

“This has all been a significant digression,” said Droos. “We were discussing whether Threats should be countered. It now seems clear that it is natural that they are fought, in a variety of ways. Moreover, Threats of the sort that implicate the entire Multiverse are a matter, by definition, of Genocide, or for that matter, an outright Apocalypse. Therefore, True Defense would permit some kind of actual fighting and work to counter it. Nonetheless, the mercy beyond the sterner attribute would be to humble the Threat, to Redeem It. Such is my desire. Above all, it must be Countered. It may be that a Multiverse Beyond repair may be Recycled, yet it is our purpose to ensure it remains as distant from that time for as long as we may bear.”

“I do not think that you have it right at all,” said Drelp. “The historical precedent is that the mighty cultures are the ones that survive. Why fight for the minorities? It would seem that where there is a choice to live in a place, there is a decision to follow the rules, including on culture.”

“The nature of free will, and fundamental rights,” said Atropo, “Is that their denial creates the sort of injury that leads

to harm. This is not about what type of Societies have existed or may exist, but about what ought to exist. In a Society, everyone should be free, in a variety of ways. That includes their culture. Only some requirement that would cause physical harm to others or intentional emotional, mental, or spiritual harm might be countered. Everything else must be tolerated and loved. Even if in one period of time, there is a monolithic nature to a Society, how may they depend on the hearts of those who live there to remain that way forever, or children to maintain that standard? Are not all free to choose their beliefs, providing it helps them to become contributing, productive members of society? Rather, the persecuted minority distracts from the goal of useful participation in society and the economy, and focuses on petty matters of differences. These should in fact be celebrated.”

“Some might fear that simply being a minority in a dominant culture, their culture will be subsumed,” said Showsh.

“The first step is to provide complete equality for all cultures in a Society,” said Droos. “Then, internally, a culture must do everything to promote itself—it should have nearly free education and socializing for its children on both the rules and norms of Society in general, but also the unique traditions of the culture. There should be ubiquitous and easy access to community events, and programs that meet adherents where they are, rather than requiring them to be in a particular place of body, mind, emotion, or spirit. It is hard being a minority culture, and all manner of effort must be made to preserve it. The wealthy members of the community have a particular obligation to subsidize the resources of socialization within the group. All of this begins with a broader Society where that minority is not harassed, persecuted, and is not the subject of proselytization.”

“Is not uniformity of culture more important than securing every right?” said Drepl. “A cohesive culture with a common story functions together better, and follows the rules. Different traditions may view laws and customs from a varied angles.”

“Not all of those angles are automatically bad,” said Showsh. “Some new angles are a great source of innovation. No Society is perfect. Where do the new ideas come from in a monolithic group? Seemingly, all will preach to the wonder of the current system. It takes an outsider, or an insider with new ideas to think differently. Some of these might be inappropriate. Other ideas might save the world.”

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“Do you have an example of more Societies that maintain uniformity and are bastions of lawfulness and innovation?” said Elriver. “It would seem there is just as much potential for authoritarianism, dictatorship, and ultimately, Evil.”

“A system where citizens and residents are permitted to honestly be themselves seems like it would create more people who would speak their minds, and counter any strongman,” said Atropo. “That is not universally true, and there are other flaws to a Society that may result in a declining state.”

“I can clearly see where I do not fit in with the majority opinion,” said Drelp. “Perhaps all of you should think a little more on how you consider and respect minority perspectives. As for me, I have work to do.”

The brother quickly rose from the table, and walking half way across the room, vanished in a flash of purple and grey energy.

“He will be alright,” said Showsh, with some confidence.

“When will we know if the Quest to find the Wave Beacon Information has succeed?” asked Droos.

“If we ever hear from Tultzow and Zrah again, we will know the fate of that assignment,” said Elriver. “We may yet have need to call upon your services for this particular purpose. For now, I suggest we all return to our current tasks.”

“That means, Droos, we must begin preparations for a far more difficult path, one that leads to baetOAK,” said Showsh. “If you thought going to Gon Eden was difficult, you have not been to the Lowest Hell before. Your Whole Soul will rebel against any attempt to visit, and will leap at any opportunity to leave.”

“Well with that recommendation, I am just so thrilled to be going there,” said Droos, with a smile.

“I am glad that you are able to joke about it,” said Atropo. “Yet you must still prepare yourself.”

“Going to baetOAK is a battle of more than just the physical, but also of mind and emotion and spirit,” said Elriver. “It is tradition to travel to the Domain of Time to contemplate The Enigma of Drerpo before Descending. We will leave shortly, to begin our contemplation.”

“What exactly is this Enigma?” asked Droos.

“The short answer is that it is a type of dimensional maze,” said Showsh. “There is much more to it. Since it is also a Dimension of Time, there are also interesting tricks of Time that occur there.”

“I hope we will not actually be traveling through time,” said Droos.

“Look how she thinks,” said Elriver. “The average Sentient would jump at the chance to conquer time, yet the Queen of Angels wishes only for just a state of tranquil contemplation. We will not travel through time. The areas in which we will travel are merely Time Complex.”

“How does contemplating an enigma prepare me for baetOak?” said Droos.

“It is really more of a family tradition, in the Cecil Line,” said Elriver. “I do find that considering a complex puzzle is useful prior to confronting Evil. Even facing the punishment for Evil, and the seeming Greys of Drerpo, that would suggest unraveling a few enigmas.”

“I have always enjoyed this tradition,” said Showsh. “I expect that by the time Vøvoav is Birthed, there will be at least One Enigma, if not more. A good creator attempts to create one so complex that even the Transcendent Knowledge of Grand Elder Forcang may not unravel It. That is not to say that there are not some who are particularly good at puzzles. Apparently, Zrah solved this one in just a few tries.”

“He has always been good at puzzles,” said Atropo.

“I suppose it is also a matter of contemplating futility, and impossibility,” considered Droos. “Walking endless halls of a maze, dark and confused, such would be an ideal emotion and mentality with which to enter the Lowest Hell.”

“I am not sure I agree, entirely, with that assessment,” said Elriver. “There needs to be some self-esteem, and a Completeness to the Whole Self, for you do not wish to become Lost in baetOak. There are Servants that that would like nothing more than to claim you now, before you have had a chance at a lifetime of redemption. Forget that they are not The Judge. Some of the Servants of baetOak are quite arrogant, and do not know better.”

“Have we need for speed in traveling to this destination, or may we proceed more slowly this time, Dear Elriver?” said Droos.

“That is a good point, Dear Droos,” said Elriver. “Perhaps in a state of emergency, there is some rationale to break the traffic laws, certainly for members of the Celestial Bureaucracy. Yet, in the normal course of events, we must follow the rules as much as any other. Clearly, there is no rush to travel to qu’ueth.”

With that, the Creator of the Universe clapped her hands,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

and a wall of The Beacon of Drerpo vanished, revealing a glowing River. Into this they traveled. It was similar to the route taken between Gon Eden and Uen. Clearly this Domain was a Neutral one. It was odd that it was connected in such a way to this river. At first, Droos assumed that she would not be able to speak in this Energy Form. Then she grew bolder, and a voice from her Whole Soul echoed in her mind, as it crossed the boundaries of the River, Energy, and Mist.

“How is it that this Celestial Infrastructure would travel to such a Domain?” asked Droos.

“We will not be traveling the whole distance by River,” said the Voice of Elriver. “Eventually, we will depart, to travel, we alone.”

They did follow the River, for a long time beyond time, and passed many Mists, and Clouds, and Voids, of numerous colors and shapes. Surely these were each mighty Domains, many of the Sacred Realm and the Firmament. Then, finally they passed a world with a purple shimmer, and suddenly they left, right off the track of the Energy, though they stayed in that form. As a shooting star, they streaked through the Celestial Space.

As they continued, an array of Gods, and Goddesses, and ministering Angels collected about their wake. A slow, sad song was sung, and melodies played somberly upon lutes and violins, and other instruments. A mournful call went forth, for the Creator of Drerpo was to Descend to baetOAK, even if only for a time. Still, as odd as it was, this chorus continued, and before long, they had a large group to keep them company on their path.

“I would not think that our passage to baetOAK, let alone to the intermediary, qu’ueth, deserved such recognition,” said the Voice of Droos.

As if in answer, the sound of a flute joined the chorus, an instrument that had only seldom been heard in Droos’ Journey so far, and had been signaled as having broad implications.

“Ruby said you were an Omen, a Foreshadowing, and a Secret in The Multiverse,” said the Voice of Atropo. “That now you Descend rather than Ascend makes no difference if the Secret Proves to be Fortuitous.”

“I don’t know that we have ever considered, if in fact I am meant to be the instigator of the Fall of the Multiverse,” said the Voice of Droos. “Perhaps I am the pebble that begins the avalanche. What Secret am I?”

“The signs are ones for The Good,” said the Voice of Elriver. “I do not believe you would summon The Call of the Flute if not for a positive omen. Of course we do not know for sure. Sometimes, it is necessary to have some small faith.”

“Is it possible to be so optimistic in the face of terrible events and precedents?” inquired the Voice of Droos.

“It is better to be an eternal optimist,” said the Voice of Showsh. “To do otherwise, assumes Knowledge of the Future yet unknown. Besides, living in a state of pessimism is a sad, dark route. How many pessimists have followed the trek into baetOak, and other Hells of the Firmament?”

“Then it is better to hope, to pray, to love, to tolerate, and live a life of optimism,” said the Voice of Droos. “We do not know with certainty whether my Secret will be for good or ill. Yet it is likely for good. We may certainly live our lives accordingly, and pursue the Defeat of the Threat regardless, on that assumption.”

“Then you know that you deserve some small accompaniment, by the minstrels of the Celestial Bureaucracy, as your dramatic narrative unfolds,” said the Voice of Atropo. “That



Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

is not to say that all notes are equal. Some, as we have said, are repetitive. Here they are different, for we do Descend.”

“Do you hear the mournful call?” asked the Voice of Showsh. “Do you sense the peril and the sadness at our passage? It is all a desire for mercy, and that we should Return from the Lowest Hell, and save Drerpo, and The Multiverse. Droos should save her people. Yet first we must consider the morality and ethics of baetOAK. Is it possible for such a Domain to maintain integrity?”

“At the first, we will consider The Enigma at the Heart of Time,” said Elriver. “What Secrets will we find? What Mirrors in Reality? There are dimensions beyond dimensions and spaces beyond spaces in the Domain of Time. Sometimes, someone will be looking back at us. We must attempt to Know the Unknowable, before we may be so Bold as to Descend to baetOAK. Our Journey to Hell begins on qu’ueth. May the mystery of The Enigma fail to defeat us.”





Chapter 8

The Evil

It was a broad hallway of darkness, with no light to speak or illuminate the emptiness of the space. In this confusing Hole in Space, Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo walked together. The floor was stone, although she was unable to see any other features. That is not to say that she required actual light to see in darkness, given her current Keen Senses. The darkness was more than just physical, and there was a dread in her heart.

At first, they walked in silence, although their expressions told of varying experiences of The Enigma. It seemed that Showsh bore it well, but felt some disturbance. Elriver had a smile, but walked quickly. Atropo had a frown. The emptiness reached into the minds of even Greater Beings—such was its power.

“What is the source of Evil?” asked Droos. “I feel like we have discussed this before. Why would it be the case that any would choose to do Evil acts, let alone be cruel towards others, or be harmful?”

“It is true, that there has been some discussion of this,” said Showsh. “My assumption is that there was at some point some hurt to that Sentient, or perhaps many. Sometimes desperation may lead to unwise acts. A poorly constructed Society may not provide the Socialization necessary for all Sentients, or humans, to know the difference between Good and Evil in the first place, let alone overcome any childhood traumas. There are many reasons to do Evil. As said, it is rare for an individual to Truly Relish Evil or be Pure Evil.”

“It would seem then that Evil is very much a consequence,” said Droos. “It is the failure of Society. It is the result of prior Evil, as Evil is a scion or Evil. How is that endless chain of horrors interrupted? It would take a Reflection Mortal that had Transcendent Knowledge to respond to trauma with the

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

required love to break that infinite sequence.”

“Then is not love the answer,” said Elriver. “If the response to Evil is Love, then it may break the sequence. Of course, it must be more than that. We have explored that responding with Love is the True Wonder, but following that with help from an appropriate professional is also required. A normal man assumes he has done enough by responding admirably well. A strong man realizes he will always need further assistance following a trauma. Few Reflection Mortals may heal their own bones, or at least do so well.”

“It is likely that unhealed traumas may eventually result in the inability to respond in such a way,” said Showsh. “Even a Sentient that once used Love, may be overcome by countless assaults to their body, emotion, mind, and spirit. Who would blame them? Rather, asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength and power. The most potent ruler has useful and able advisors, and that king asks them about all matters beyond the scope of his knowledge. It is narcissistic to assume that all topics may be solved by one individual, and that no help must ever be needed.”

“What is the Abstract Dimension of The Evil?” said Droos. “What is Its Nature?”

“It is possible to pursue a Journey towards The Evil,” said Showsh. “This may be done unintentionally, and there are many who do not admit their rout. It is a matter of the proportions of the Dualisms of Abstract Dimensions, including between those of more than Two Poles. If a Sentient Destroys too much, Hates too much, Insults Too much, it is likely she is on The Journey toward The Evil.”

“That is not to say that a person on a journey toward The Good and who is living The Good Life might not ever destroy, hate, or insult,” said Atropo. “It is only that the proportions of those Dualisms is Right. It is often difficult for Reflection Mortals to know this and choose wisely.”

“It is even harder if the Sentient, or human, carries a terrible wound, or several, of Whole Self,” said Elriver. “That distraction makes it far more difficult to choose deliberately among the shadows of the Forms of the Abstract Dimensions. It takes concentration to choose Right. Distractions from that choice make it all the easier to follow the Journey to The Evil.”

“Yet surely, as with the Journey to The Good, it is a

roundabout trek,” said Droos. “It goes in many directions, and its takes a lifetime of effort.”

“That may not be the case,” said Showsh. “Beware! For it may take a lifetime to create something of fabulous, awesome beauty. It may require only a moment to destroy it. That is not to say spectacular Good may not be done in an instant. Unfortunately, it is also true that it may be even easier to cause terrible Evil in a short amount of time.”

“The nature of The Journey towards The Evil, is that those who pursue it harm others,” said Elriver. “They harm others physically sometimes, but certainly emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. To them, the ends justify the means, and acts that are immoral, unethical, and that lack integrity are no obstacle, and no scruples are to be any burden or concern. Hatred is more useful than love. Bigotry is a tool more welcome than tolerance. And war and strife are ubiquitous and normative. Such are the virtues of the Journey to Evil.”

“Yet there are many stops along the way to Pure Evil, to live The Evil Life,” said Atropo. “How may Soul Fragments did we meet that had Kernels of Righteousness, shades of Good? Many may convince themselves that surely others are more evil than they, and so justify their actions. Rather, the goal should always be to pursue The Good, and be the righteous Sentient in an Evil Place, rather than a Less Evil Person, in an Evil Place. Such a path is hard, and difficult. Yet the reward is even more ample, and plentiful, either in the physical world, or the afterlife.”

“I suppose those who follow The Journey toward The Good, who live in an Evil Place, especially those of Acute Evil, might have a mind of a soldier,” said Droos. “Their beliefs, their choice to live The Good Life, may be so unpopular that there may be those who will claim theirs, or who will act to harm them, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and possibly, even physically. Their righteous friends and family may also fall victims. Such are the fate of the Soldiers of The Good in a Place of Acute Evil.”

“To follow that idea, what are the further duties of such a Soldier of Good?” asked Showsh. “Surely the Soldier of Good would never Cause Harm, or depart from The Journey toward The Good. Perhaps in the utmost moment of True Defense against physical harm, there may be some argument. Yet really, in such a place, the Soldier of Good wages war By Example. The Evil may gather to harm her, in any manner of ways. For that, she

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

should see herself as a form of martyr to The Good. Yet what is the obligation—the martyr to The Good never harms another or themselves. Only, if The Evil arrives to chastise, in any manner, The Soldier of the Good, He is to Be the Example of The Journey to The Good. If they take his life, then he is a Martyr to The Good. His reward in the afterlife will be ample. Yet beware of the trap! For to assume that to harm any other, or to harm himself, that this will create a Martyr to The Good, is folly! Only by the hand of The Evil.”

“Of course, the goal is that the Soldier of Good should live a long, happy life, and never have to be a Martyr of Good,” said Atropo. “It is only the nature of choosing to Be Righteous and Good, despite living in an Evil Place, that such a possibility exists. Rather, aim to live a full, happy life, on The Journey to The Good, and aim to never by a Martyr to The Good. Yet should that moment arrive, and The Evil appear, choose righteousness, and The Good.”

“It would seem that this is only a significant possibility in a Place of Evil, or Acute Evil,” said Droos. “It is good to Know that the good, the righteous, have cause and justification to be Soldiers of Good even there, for their reward will be ample if taken by The Evil. Yet why not choose to live in a Place of Good, or Acute Good? Or as with many locales and jurisdictions, perhaps it will be somewhere in between.”

“Truly, it is best to live in a Place of Good,” said Elriver. “It takes True Sacrifice to be a Good Sentient in a Place of Evil. Why not be a Good Sentient in a Place of Good? Why not help create a Good Society, and Ideal Civilization. As a great sage once said, ‘Create that light unto the nations.’ Help to create a civilization that will protect the fundamental rights of all of its citizens and residents, and fight for the rights of those everywhere else. Pursuing The Good in a Good Society or Neutral Society, it would be an exaggeration to call him a Soldier of Good there—for his life is rarely if ever threatened—perhaps occasionally just a passing insult of emotion, mind, or spirit. Yet such a burden is certainly acceptable in that Good Place or Neutral Place. No war must be waged, and certainly there will be no possibility of the requirement of a Martyr to The Good.”

“It is merely to say that there is no excuse in the Place of Evil to do Evil,” said Showsh. “Rather, pursue The Good, even there. For those in such a place, even then, are Soldiers of Good.”

“Perhaps this is the case for Forcang,” said Droos. “Yet you forget that Reflection Mortals are affected most dearly by emotion and duress. What is it for such a Sentient to do Evil out of Fear, or other Stress?”

“We have not approached the topic, or have to a lesser extent, those that are compromised, or have a mitigated ability to choose,” said Showsh. “A person who is injured emotionally, such that their fear is all encompassing, may have mitigation of their ability to choose clearly. That does not mean that The Judge will not issue a Decree upon their death and place any Soul Fragments in the Hells of Drerpo for collusion and for aiding Evil. Yet it will mitigate the sentence. The True Sentence and Decree is reserved for The Evil, and those who follow The Journey of The Evil.”

“It is certain that one who is not of Whole Self, who is compromised of body, emotion, mind, or spirit, may not be held to the same standard,” said Elriver. “As you say, Dear Droos, that many Reflection Mortals are subject to certainly their emotions, or the love of friends and relatives. Few operate in a vacuum. Even fewer are robots that act without emotion, or at least suppressed emotions. Would any desire such behavior? It may be that The Journey to the Good requires sacrifice, yet is it to be done without empathy? Rather it is for the sake of empathy, it is for the love of others, that The Journey to The Good is pursued, and The Journey to The Evil should be countered.”

“Therefore, it may be understandable that some will simply be unable to maintain such a virtuous, righteous path, in the light of such clear threats against them,” said Atropo. “We Forcang have been the subject of such duress for hundreds of trillions of years, and understand Abstract Dimensions on a Transcendent level. Reflection Mortals may not all be expected to be like that. If anything, they have the gift of some level of innocence, and sensitivity to these things. It takes a truly strong Sentient to agree to follow The Journey of The Good in an Acutely Evil Place, despite all of the risks and threats. It is still true, that their reward, whether they live a long life or not, will be ample. Yet those who fall short out of fear, there will be some understanding.”

“It would seem that The Real Evil are those who actually pursue The Journey toward The Evil, as mentioned,” said Droos. “Those who merely cooperate out of fear for their lives or those they love are far less of a concern.”

“We still have not addressed the topic of how to suggest

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

The Journey to The Good for those who pursue The Journey to The Evil,” said Atropo.

“The focus would be on how to best live The Good Life,” said Elriver. “Most Sentients have wants and desires. It would seem the key would be to suggest, and for that matter, demonstrate, how they all may be achieved better and more easily on The Journey to The Good. The path may be different, but the result will be better, and more enduring. Most Evil Sentients may like the idea of consistency. Not just they, but also their family, and their descendants, may enjoy such benefits of that system. The Journey to The Evil may result in more immediate gratification for a small number sometimes, but it has enormous risks, is likely to be far less enduring, and may readily be changed in future generations. Rather, an Evil Person should learn what they may get out of the transaction of Being Good.”

“I would expect that a Sentient on a Journey to The Evil would doubt there being any rules that may manage an equivalent or similar amount of success in any relevant amount of time,” said Showsh. “Power is so seductive, and it achieves so much so quickly, particularly where other laws and scruples need not be considered. How are such individuals to be convinced to be patient?”

“I would think actual benefits, concrete ones, would be useful,” said Droos. “There is also an inherent lack of trust. As you say, many of those on The Journey to The Evil suffered some trauma, or more than one. They do not trust others beyond themselves. They may not even trust themselves. Immediate action and results demonstrate virtue.”

“In that case, a language of diplomacy and negotiation must be created,” said Elriver. “This must be one of concrete results. Those who pursue The Journey of The Good, ought to use some of their time, not just disparaging and insulting Evil, which is less than truly righteous, but rather, should develop bridges to approach The Evil. The Evil will have no reason to consider The Good unless there is some obvious benefit in the short term, and likely, multiple times at first.”

“Is it not belittling to create different terms of virtue and value for The Evil?” said Atropo. “Those who pursue The Journey of The Good follow the rules and do what is right because that is the law and the higher principle itself. They care that it helps people, and prevents harm. Those on The Journey to The

Evil, they are being offered value and a product. Is there not a qualitative difference?"

"That has always been the case in business," said Showsh. "What is valuable to one party is worthless to another. Most objects fall somewhere in between. Business and token property itself is a language of sorts, which might be considered as part of this bridge and diplomatic speech developed. It seems almost all Sentients have at least some level of interest in helping themselves. It may be that the Most Evil only want to help themselves, while the Most Good help themselves first, so that they may help everyone else. Either way, both sides will be looking for a trade that will benefit that core aspect."

"Therefore, this is a reasonable approach, and it is not insulting to have different senses of worth or value," said Droos. "If anything, the nature of developing a language of communication between very different sides is that words will translate differently."

As the Queen of Angels finished with those words, she looked up, and noticed that they were finally reaching a difference in the strange, broad hallway in which they walked. It was, perhaps, three hundred feet ahead. The others had certainly seen it, and in a short order, there they stood before it. For a moment, Droos was lost as to what it might be, and then she realized that it was a Mirror!

The mirror was ornate, and enormous. It also, strangely, glowed in the dark, silence of The Enigma. Droos stood before it, and pondered the Reflection of The Four of them, and the hallway behind.

"The greatest question is whether you want to continue, around the corner, or if you want to go through the mirror," said Atropo.

"Mirror Traveling?" said Droos, raising an eyebrow. "That seems a bit cliché."

"Nonetheless, it is an option," said Atropo. "Also, each mirror may lead to multiple sections of The Enigma. Furthermore, some Mirrors lead to a Specialized Dimension of Mirrors. Those Dimensions recede back Several Stages. We are lucky to find one, and add these options to our Journey."

"I do not know that I need to see a mirror dimension," said Droos. "Yet maybe it is worth seeing if any of the options would deposit us in one of the Vaults of The Enigma."

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

“That is a great idea,” said Showsh, taking her hand, and kissing her.

Then he waved at the mirror, saying some words in Sre. Suddenly the mirror showed fourteen destinations. It was an odd trick, since it both looked like each option now filled the mirror, like a window, but all were there at once. Such was the dimensional mastery in this place.

“That one looks like a good pick,” said Elriver. “It is probably the best we will find. There are only so many Vaults in The Enigma.”

Looking at where The Creator was pointing, Droos saw flowing images of a desert oasis, with several sphinxes, and pyramids. The water was luscious, and bluish-green in color, and there were dates on the palm trees. This did look like a good pick. Showsh directed Droos to place her hand on The Mirror, and he whispered a few words. In an instance, they were standing in some Enormous Space.

She only knew that she was in some kind of colossal chamber because she stood against one wall, next to the other side of the Ornate Mirror, which now showed the hallway where they originated. This side of the wall extended into the distance as far as she could see, and the ceiling was too far overhead to notice. The ground was covered in sand. This was a whole region in here, and Droos wondered if there might be Sentients that lived in this Enigma, thinking that it was an entire world, in this Domain of Time, set apart from the rest of Dzerpo.

As she stood there, she shivered for a moment, in the heat of the golden orb that shone from far overhead, a radiant sunshine. In the mirror, now that she looked back, she saw a familiar face. It was Tultzow. Only she was badly injured, and disheveled. She was missing a limb, and she stood on some floating piece of rock amidst a bubbling lake of lava. She called out to her.

“Dear Droos!” said Tultzow. “What folly was it for you to send me to my doom! Elriver and our mother will be especially furious with you when I do not return. You will never recover in their eyes. You are a blight on Dweehwail, one to soon be carefully managed.”

“How can you say that, Tultzow!” said Droos. “I am sorry! I did not mean this to happen. Yet, this is all so soon. Where are you, and where is Zrah?”

“Like you care!” said Tultzow, with much passion. “As

for Zrah, where else do you think he is—dead! He died horribly on this foolish assignment.”

Then the angle of the mirror changed, and she saw near the feet of Tultzow was the body, of what must have once been a man, that looked like Zrah, only it was burned so completely, it was hard to recognize it. Droos gasped!

“You Knew this would happen, Droos!” said Tultzow.

“You had all of the Keen Senses and they called you the Queen of Angels. Still you sent others to do your perilous tasks, and they have paid for your crimes.”

“I am sorry, Tultzow, I am sorry!” said Droos, with a momentary cry.

She was just a little suspicious. Then the others walked up beside her.

“That does not sound like my sister-in-law,” said Showsh.

“When has Tultzow ever despaired at the loss of a limb, or even a dead family member. I would expect you to be laughing at your moment of triumph! Ah, you finally found death! What an adventure. Here you are shouting curses at Dear Droos. I might see such an end for Zrah, although I always pictured him perishing in ice, rather than flame.”

“Come out Tzefee, and quit this petty joke,” said Elriver.

“You have had your fun, at the expense of Droos. You will not trick us anymore!”

A terrible laughter filled the mirror, and the images of Tultzow and Zrah diminished, but not before both figures were shredded in the terrible vision into piles of limb and bone and now crawling maggots. Still the cackling continued. Then a serpentine figure appeared on the mirror, so terrible to behold, that really it might not be called a snake, or any animal or plant Droos had ever known. The statues of her tribe really did not do her justice. Somehow she thought that even this was merely a shadow of her True Form, as her Senses as an Angel might comprehend. The True Tzefee was So Much More.

“You have caught me in my harmless fun, you pathetic Elriver, pauper, ruler of the meek and weak,” said Tzefee. “Do not think such will be wholly untrue before long! I have learned of your plans, and they are exactly as I devised! I knew what you would do with The Stone, and who you would Send. Never would you risk that sorry excuse for an Angel. Yes, Showsh, you would think she were worth more than all of Dweehwail. Let everything

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

burn, if only you might have a pleasant house on a prairie to live in with your sweet little Droos.”

“You have had your fun, Tzefee,” said Showsh. “We also knew that you would discover who we sent. It is no matter. Go after them, if you dare! If they perish, it is small price for redeeming and humbling you.”

“Oh how touching!” said Tzefee, and the sound of wild laughter entered their senses. “He seems to really believe that line about Saving Me. In the end, you Droos would slay me just as any other. Besides, am I not the Image of Perfection? There is nothing to save.”

“Is that why you wish to recreate The Multiverse in your Image, Tzefee?” said Droos. “It is because you Know Perfection.”

“Insolent Girl!” said Tzefee. “You think you may know my mind! When I am through with you, you will Be Me! I have always wished for an assistant. A True Lieutenant. Who do you think will throw the last stone at Showsh and Elriver? I know it will be you, when I am through with your training.”

“I can sense that loneliness, Tzefee,” said Droos. “In a safe place, I would be happy to discuss the matter further. It will not be filled by training me, or any other, to do Evil. It is the Ills of Your Past that Must be Cured, and Treated.”

“What if I wish to share those experiences, to repeat those lovely lessons on endless eons of new generations of Forcang and Reflection Mortal alike,” said Tzefee. “Why not have a Multiverse of Pain? Pain may be the Centerpiece of Reality. Let it Run to Daxuk, and The Indeterminate, and even all other Realities! Let Pain Be Reality!”

“What do you think makes you pursue such a goal?” said Droos. “You as much admitted that those experiences occurred. Why not shed that burden, and cast it aside.”

“They are my most powerful tools, resources, and weapons,” said Tzefee. “They are my children, who I treasure. Pain is my family, with whom I wish to repopulate the world! Yet it will mean even more to show you, little girl, the True Meaning of Pain, and how Evil, is actually quite a Good Thing.”

“That was a good start, Dear Droos,” said Elriver. “Now Tzefee, be gone! You have terrorized Drerpo, even in your Shadow, too long. I know we will meet again. Your scheme for Evil will never come about. We will give you the chance to be redeemed, to be humbled. You are a powerful, potent entity, with

knowledge that is vast. How much might you aid The Alliance of the Multiverse, rather than Harm It, and Commit Cruelties?"

"Begone! Shadows retreat!" said Showsh, with a Command. "Have your way Beyond Drerpo, yet if you want your Will within these borders, you will have to fight again. You have had your joke, and we will see if it is to be that Droos will become your acolyte, or you Hers."

Then the mirror cracked in a loud bang and flash of lightning! Still they could hear the chuckle of laughter even now, though it receded. The images of Tzefee, and her cruelty, and predictions, were gone, for now.

"She will not be able to bother us anymore for a while," Atropo.

"Although, I will have to arrange to have that Mirror Replaced," said Elriver, with a slight grin. "That is a small matter. Are you alright, Dear Droos?"

"I am fine, Dear Elriver," said Droos. "I was a bit shocked by the images I saw, but I understand that it was just Tzefee having fun. Of course, there is some real possibility to what she showed, and I have to accept that. I will never become her acolyte. She seems to be the opposite of everything I believe. Still, I hold out faith for her redemption."

"Even now, Droos?" said Showsh. "That is part of what is so impressive about you. You asked about Eternal Optimism. You certainly seem to be an Eternal Optimist. There is a reason I must be in love with you."

With that, he kissed her again.

"Shall we explore this lovely oasis?" said Elriver. "I am sure there are many secrets to find."

"Are there any Secrets of Drerpo of which you do not have the Answer?" asked Droos.

"There is a difference between Knowing and Knowing," said Elriver. "Let us depart!"

They tread across the sand, under the scorching sun. Yet none got sand in their shoes, given who they were. It took about seven hours, yet they reached the main oasis. There they found a pleasant body of water, surrounded by trees and shrubbery. Also, a group of Sentients was busily harvesting the dates. Not wanting to stand out, The Four went over to purchase some. It was not difficult to arrive at the currency used, and with a wave of her hand, Elriver brought a pouch of jingling coins out of nowhere.

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

She gave a gold piece to the head laborer, who happily gave them a large bag of dates in exchange. Afterward, they began walking towards one of the towns nearby the pyramids. The golden capstone of the great monoliths shone brightly under the sun orb, twinkling with its flawless gold.

“Was that an actual gold piece you gave him?” said Droos.

“Of course,” said Elriver. “It would be most unethical to provide counterfeit currency.”

“Why not just provide him with the hole bag of coins, then,” asked Droos.

“I am guessing this economy did not account for the wonders of The Language of the Universe in producing currency,” said Elriver. “One coin will not make a difference, but if I suddenly hand this man a pile of money, that might have an effect. Besides, what will we use to pay our bills in town?”

“I want to go see those pyramids,” said Atropo. “They look more interesting than the town.”

“Dear Son,” said Showsh. “This culture probably sees the pyramids as a temple, burial ground, or other religiously significant monolith. We may not simply go there without permission from those who live here. Sometimes patience is necessary to enjoy the fruits of labor.”

“That is very wise, Dear Love,” said Droos, with a smile. “I suppose the King of this land may allow us to explore the pyramids, and he may not. Yet, arriving and engaging with the local culture and economy is much more likely to get us a positive answer than making our own rules. Whatever his decision, we will respect it.”

“I agree, although I admit this part of the Enigma may be preparing me less for baetOaK,” said Atropo.

“Is that really the case,” asked Elriver. “It is one thing to wander the hallways of The Enigma in silence and contemplation. Actually meeting the unique cultures that exist here isolated from the rest of the Universe is completely different. Do you think many of these Whole Souls find their fragments in the Lowest Hell upon death? We will see.”

After walking for another hour, they reached the edges of a sizable town. It was clear that it was a pre-industrial nation, for the most part. Yet here and there, various signs of technology seemed to appear at random intervals. Food might be cooked as it was by Sentients before Modern technology, yet there were

communication devices normally found in the Future. The dwellings were something out of the past, yet there were Modern refrigeration units with a Future power source. This was all very odd.

As they roamed the streets and alleyways of the village, eventually they found a market. There they found numerous items for sale, of pottery of an impressive aesthetic, but also a very Futuristic style of clothing. Certainly the style was very egalitarian. Various food groups were available, but also some plastics were used to store them. The Four made a show of purchasing some items and haggling and negotiating for sale. They tried the cuisine, which was all quite enjoyable. Eventually, these newcomers caused enough of a stir that a group of men and women in arms arrived. They clearly carried spears, yet also some sort of Futuristic laser weapon. Their armor was primitive.

Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo, let themselves be led through the village to the large structure at the West of the population center. There they went up large steps, surrounded by statues and other artwork. Again, the styles were both that of a pre-industrial Society, while there were also numerous art pieces that would be more expected in a more Modern or even Futuristic setting. They were led to the center of the structure, where a woman sat upon a throne, wearing a crown. She stood, and lowered a metal rod in their direction.

“Well, newcomers, you have made quite an impression,” she said. “You speak our language well, and have a bag full of our money. Are you scholars from a distant land that studies us? What brings you here, and so bold?”

“We are merely curious, and here for exploration,” said Droos. “We come from the Distant Enigma, and want to learn all of the wonders and benefits of your great nation. Would you be so generous as to share any of them? I am sure that you are most busy, as I would expect. Yet might you assign even the most lowly of servants to show us some of your land?”

“You speak well enough, girl,” said the Queen. “Yet I know you want what all of the rest do—to explore the monoliths. Know this, that it is a matter of exchange. First, I will introduce myself as Queen Dirostru III. Now I present my son, Winoset II, the Minister of Antiquity, and my daughter, Lisoatru, Minister of Technology. If you may give us a new piece of technology for my daughter to examine in the Monolith of Technology, or interpret

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

an old piece of derelict technology with my son in the Monolith of Antiquity, then you may examine both, freely, with Our Blessing. Should you fail at this task, you will be seen to the Distant Enigma with escort, and banished from this land forever.”

“That is very fair, Queen Dirostru,” said Showsh. “Take us to the Monolith of Antiquity, and we will see what we may interpret for you, from your collection.”

“That is an interesting and bold choice, Sir,” said the Queen. “I hope that it serves you well. Son, escort these newcomers at once, and be sure the rules of decorum are properly met, including that of respect! Know this, that the four of you are my guests, and if you make me regret it, I will make you regret it.”

“We will be on our best behavior,” said Elriver. “We thank you for this great honor.”

All four of them bowed. Then the Minister of Antiquity arranged an armed escort, as well as seemingly some experts in a variety of subjects, which was interesting. It appeared that they walked among both soldiers and scientists. Then they were walking across the sand for several hours. At last they reached the Monolith of Antiquity. Its golden capstone gleamed at the top still.

Winoset went to an invisible portion of the stone, and placed his hand there, and suddenly, lines appeared, and a door was revealed. This was not magic! Rather, it was an advanced technology. They were led through an annex, which appeared to be some sort of research laboratory. Even now, there were many similar scientists busy at work, poking and wedging all types of items. Then they were led into an enormous chamber.

This was the heart of the pyramid. Only, the inside of this one went from almost the bottom to the top. Yet Drerpo ran on Laws of Science, and that might seem impossible. Only, Droos saw that there was a generator on the side of the large chamber, and shimmer of some sort of field. If anything, this field reinforced the rock. The generator was similar to the one next to most refrigerators, only more sophisticated, and larger.

“Is this nation a monarchy, if you do not find me too bold to ask?” said Droos.

“That is a most bold question,” said the Minister. “I would suggest that at least some of you be searching for an ancient technology to interpret. However, I am proud to say that we are actually an elected council, merely with an executive that has the title of king or queen. It is usually the case, by tradition, that the

children of the current executive are given Ministerial positions associated with the Monolith of Antiquity and of Technology, among others. Yet the actual laws of our nation are made by the elected Council. Even my mother is appointed by the Council for a ten year term. In the meantime, we do receive the respect of a monarch and royal family, as existed in ancient times. I would like to think that we have made innovations both in technology and in Society.”

“That is a very noble goal,” said Droos.

As she finished saying this, Atropo made a sound, and the Minister and a group of scientists (as well as Droos) went over to see what he found. Apparently it was a Futuristic cooking apparatus. Quickly, Winoset had the object moved to the laboratory. There, Atropo, with the help of Showsh and Elriver, showed him how to use it thoroughly. It was not just a matter of instruction, but of reverse engineering. The whole matter took a couple of hours, even for The Royals of Drerpo. Droos was a bit lost, though she appreciated learning about the subject of advanced cooking apparatuses.

“Our nation is very much in your debt,” said The Minister. “I will have my Sister move this to the Monolith of Technology immediately. Consider yourself honored guests of my mother. I will escort you back to the palace.”

They all walked back to the capitol village of the nation, with some happiness at having solved this problem. Droos wondered if this had interfered too much with this culture. She would bring it up with Showsh and the others in the future. They arrived at the palace to a feast in their honor. This was not The Palace, but the food was excellent, and the conversation welcome. They were now honored guests of the royal family, and after some further introductions most of the Councilors.

Queen Dirostru told them about how it occurred frequently that explorers of the Distant Enigma would find this land, with varying results. It was odd, as they seemed to come from all points in history. Many of them were lost, and found this spot of civilization welcome. In ancient times, her people had welcomed such newcomers with open arms, and let them settle here. However, sometimes those who arrived did so with purpose, and with what they learned was technology that would take advantage of them. It was discovered that there was a powerful resource here that one particular party wished to mine here. An army arrived

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

soon after, and they were under thrall for one thousand years.

Eventually, the mine ran out, and most of the usurpers left, though a few integrated into the population. As they reclaimed their lands, they pledged that they would require newcomers to prove their worth with technology. They had to either provide something new, or assist them with something they previously had that they did not know how to operate. It was somewhat unjust for righteous individuals who just wanted a good meal. Yet no one had conquered them for the last eons, and they had been their own masters, and discovered democracy, and used this technology to make the desert bloom.

Eventually they even set about sending expeditions away down the Distant Enigma. Yet, none ever returned. It even become the case that the very old, those who did not wish to linger, would go on one final quest, into The Enigma, with some belief that this was a place where the dead would go upon death, for certainly no living man or woman returned. Only once, did a woman come back, after forty years in The Enigma, having visited other worlds therein. She had mighty stories to tell, although it took much convincing for them to be sure she was not a newcomer. So the elderly stopped traveling into the Enigma, as did others. Rather, it became a source of true mystery.

If only they would have the technology to travel through and survive, as did this woman. So they continued collecting their technology in earnest, and so that brought them until today. They were still far from being able to successfully mount such an expedition, that had hope of returning. That one woman had become somewhat of a prophetess, and parables and books had been written about her and in her name. The Queen knew that this Enigma was the final frontier, and that someday, her descendants would undercover the science behind it, even if she did not live to see it.

One curious fact Droos noticed about this nation was that everyone was human. This was odd, given that frequently they had visitors from The Enigma, some of whom settled there. One of the councilors said that they had rarely seen, what he called, Strangers, from The Enigma, which Droos took as races that were not human. Yet, he did also find it providential that almost all were human. Elriver thought this an odd coincidence, but said no more.

After their meal, they were given choice rooms at the palace. Droos noticed that they put Showsh and Elriver together

again. She was only slightly jealous, although, she supposed that this arrangement had been clear from the start. She had her own enormous room, with servants to answer her needs. It was not as if she was suffering. Atropo likewise received a similar space. So the night there passed, and it seemed the golden orb in the sky diminished to a near, silvery emptiness, like the hallways of The Enigma. Then dawn returned, and life to the palace. They were called, and The Four stood before the throne. Now Lisoatru, the Minister of Technology, would show them the Monolith of Technology.

There was another trek over the desert, and these reached this Monolith. Only, upon closer inspection, these were not stone blocks, but an advanced metallic alloy. There was little wonder how the mechanisms worked here, and the technologies they had salvaged over the eons revealed another large work space and warehouse for the wealth of technology of the nation. Everything was represented in the warehouse as was used in this age, and some that were derelict, as newer technologies had replaced them. It was an odd collection. The inside of the warehouse was likewise kept up with a field of some sort, defying the science, but for a Future sense of principles.

Upon returning to the Palace, the President of the Council led them around the village, and to several neighboring towns. They sampled more delicacies, and played local sports and games, and did shopping for aesthetically pleasing artwork and clothing. All of this was great entertainment, and Droos almost forgot that she was about to spend time in Hell. This dawned on her as they returned to the palace at the end of the day.

“Dear Queen,” said Droos, that evening. “We are honored by your most generous reception of us. We are happy that our contribution to your culture will prove useful. Yet, talk of this religious search to understand The Enigma, is in fact something dear to us as well. We would like to be led, as soon as possible, to the Distant Enigma, to return to our Exploration. We wish to analyze, and Know the Mystery, and Unknowable.”

“Is it not the goal of every worthy scientist to attempt to unravel the unknowable,” said the Queen. “Many in your position would make light of their honored status for months, or even ask for a permanent place among us. All you want is a return to your Quest. You are a most noble group. I will arrange the escort immediately. I will also add to our annals, the history of

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

this important meeting. Should you or any of your descendants return to this land, you will be welcome, even without any further contribution. Now go in peace, and may The Enigma provide you with answers!”

So The Four left, not escorted by guards this time, but by many townsfolk, among them scientists, and children, and some councilors, and even some musicians and minstrels. The story of this particular group of newcomers had spread, and for the first day, they had a merry escort, with song and dance and laughter and story. Eventually, most turned back, but the scientists and the President of the Council. They walked all the way to the Distant Enigma.

As they arrived, it was nothing else but the entrance to The Enigma from this Vault. Almost seemingly at the side of the world, a large, rectangular, ornate, metal chasm appeared. It certainly would seem like some entrance to a final frontier to these people. It was enormous, perhaps a mile wide, and half as high. There the scientists took notes, and sketches for the official records, and the Council President bid them a safe and blessed Journey. Then they were back in the Passageways of The Enigma.

Only for some Distance, the Light of the Golden Orb of the Vault endured, and they did not walk in darkness. This went on for a small time beyond time. At last, they turned a bend, and reached a triple fork. There were three choices that they might consider in the Enigma.

“I believe that Droos should make the choice,” said Atropo, with a smile.

Normally she would consider the middle first, but in this instance, she decided on the left. So they followed the left fork, for good or ill, along the pathways of the Enigma. There they continued for some time, and darkness surrounded them once more, and silence.

“If these tunnels are multi-dimensional,” said Droos. “Do they stop when they reach a wall? Or do some pathways cross one another, either in Space, or Beyond?”

“It may not be guaranteed that every pathway in The Enigma is a straight line,” said Elriver. “It is more complex than that.”

“You did not think it would be that simple, Dear Love,” said Showsh, and he kissed her, and held her hand.

Then they continued walking, hand in hand, for a time.

This tunnel was particularly long, and dark, and lonely. If it were not for her hand in Showsh's, she might think she was the last Sentient in Drerpo.

"How is it to feel lonely?" said Droos. "It must be a terrible feeling. I have had nearness to it on occasion. What might Sentients do to cure loneliness or to no longer be alone?"

"As I have said before," said Elriver. "A great sage once said, in the name of a great sage, that Sentients, 'And humans, are social creatures.' Society exists in part to be certain that none are sufficiently alone to be harmed."

"Is that really always possible?" said Showsh. "Surely, all manner of social activity may be designed, and professionals made readily accessible for free to provide skills and lessons even for those who lack them. Yet is there not some extent that, as another great sage once said, 'Absence is a state of mind.' Loneliness may exist in a Sentient even surrounded by friends and loved ones. They need not be in the Heart of The Enigma."

"Surely, Society must make Itself available for such individuals, with open arms, and warmth, and an embrace," said Atropo. "Sentients are social beings, and perhaps some amount of socializing is a right. It is a right to be beautiful, to be loved. Structures must exist to help those with such low self-esteem, and teach the loneliest of Sentients that they are in fact surrounded by those who cherish them, as all Sentients are cherished."

"Might it be a source of Evil, this loneliness?" said Droos. "The Sentient surrounded by warmth and loved ones may seem less willing to resort to desperation to fill such a void. Is it the fear of such loneliness that drives some Tyrants so assume that without their world-saving powers, surely they will be left apart, alone? Even the lowlier, they fear being left apart."

"All the greater reason to have a Society that values Inclusion," said Showsh. "In unequal civilizations, Reflection Mortals vie for Favor, and subjective evaluations and scales are created to judge worth. Some are beautiful, others are ugly. Some are worthy, others are not. Where all Sentients have equal dignity, and where each and every one is valued, surely all must receive recognition. That is not to say every Sentient will have one hundred friends. Yet five good friends seems wholly sufficient, and the love of family."

"That would seem more in accordance with the Abstract Dimension of Civilization," said Elriver. "A Righteous Society

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Includes all citizens, and does not disenfranchise. All deserve to be loved, until such a time as they are Whole of Self, and may reciprocate fully their True Love. How much hatred might be countered in such a system?"

As they continued down the long, dark tunnel, wide and ornate as it was constructed, created of some unknown metallic substance, they heard a tap ahead! At first, it was hard to be sure of their senses. Only, it was there, in the darkness. A tap, tap!

Then they saw, an old man, with a walking stick approached. He was stooped, and did not readily see them. Even as they began to walk passed, he did not stop. Suddenly, as they were side-by-side, he stood still, as though listening, and then turned his head and looked right at Droos!

"That is surely the Queen of Angel," said the old man. "Long I have walked these hallways. Much wisdom is there here. Echoes of the past, images of the future, and a curious present exist here. There was a time before, did you not know, and other Queens of Angels? I would guess that there will be times after. Who is it that you bring with you to this Vaunted Place, in this Holy Night?"

"What is your name?" asked Droos, with some curiosity.

"You may call me The Enigma, Noble Queen," said the old man.

"The same name as the Domain?" asked Droos.

"We are not The Same," said The Enigma. "Yet We are not Wholly Different."

"I will introduce you to my family, Showsh, Elriver, and Atropo," said Droos.

"You are very fortunate to have such loyal and close family," said The Enigma.

"That is a good observation," said Showsh. "How many struggle with the family they have. We are very fortunate."

"We might be a little more fortunate," remarked Atropo.

"Few have the Perfect family," said The Enigma. "To get along well most of the time with most members is a True Blessing."

"Dear Enigma, is The Enigma more of a Thorn or Grey, or a Berry in Drerpo, or in the Multiverse at large?" asked Droos.

"The Enigma is ubiquitous in Manifestations," said the Enigma. "Yet, it takes many forms. Sometimes there are more than one, and there is always at least one. It is said that some

hallways of this Enigma lead to Other Enigmas, in faraway Universes, and Cosmoses, and even more exotic destinations. I would not say it is either a challenge or blessing to the Multiverse, but rather, The Enigma is Neutral.”

“What is it to Truly be Neutral?” said Showsh, of The Enigma.

“To hear such a question from one such as you,” said The Enigma. “I should consider myself honored. It is not the first time, by far. To be Neutral, to be a Puzzle for all to Equally Contemplate, that is not to take sides. All Sentients, all Creatures, may come here, and explore, and live.”

“How is it possible to live here?” said Droos. “Here we have little need to eat or sleep, but Reflection Mortals may require more sustenance.”

“The Enigma is Alive,” said The Enigma. “Sentients are rarely left to starve in the Tunnels. It is a place of contemplation, of somber reflection. Those who wander long and far enough will find food and drink, sometimes of a welcome and varied nature. The Enigma ensures that those who wish such meditation have the time they so desperately require.”

“What of escape from the maze?” asked Atropo.

“The Enigma is not a maze,” said The Enigma. “The Enigma is interested in the growth and development of the Sentient. This may or may not be as the particular Sentient desires. Sometimes she is there for a shorter time then she would prefer. Other times she is kept for a far longer stay. Few leave without some lasting benefit of contemplation.”

“Is it true that Zrah is an expert of The Enigma,” asked Droos.

“None are Masters of the Enigma,” said The Enigma. “Yet Zrah has an understanding, and has reached the Multiple Centers of The Unknowable. So has Elriver four times, and Showsh twice. Atropo, you clearly have more work to do.”

“No Sentient is an expert at all subjects,” said Atropo. “I am a diplomat, and I wish I had more time for Puzzles like this. Yet I will take your Challenge under advisement, either here, or a Different Enigma.”

“You do not appear to have maintained your honesty,” said Droos. “You asked who was with me. Surely you Know them well.”

“As a great sage once said, ‘No Sentient steps in the same

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

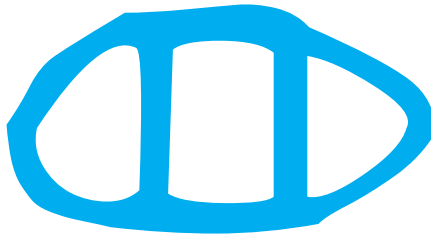
stream twice,” said The Enigma. “I have Known Elriver, and Showsh, and Atropo, from all parts of Time. I do not know who stands before Me now. You, Queen of Angels, are the raging news of all layers of Time. Your destiny, your Omen, rings from the Genesis of Drerpo, to Its Apocalypse. That is why I Knew you. As for the Others, and all who I see, I must meet them again each time we reunite.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you once more,” said Elriver. “I do wish to have a full amount of time to consider your Secrets. As is, we are here to prepare for an important Descent. It is tradition, and a religious ritual.”

“As members of the Cecil Line have done for Endless Eons,” said the Enigma. “I will give you an excuse this Time. I do hope next Time we meet, you will Grant Me the Respect I Deserve.”

“You always have our respect, Dear Enigma,” said Showsh. “What is it to contemplate Perfection, and Transcendence, if not to embrace The Unknown?”

“Then I will bid you all farewell,” said The Enigma. “I will pay a visit, to a favorite nation of mine. To them I am just an



old man. I am a wanderer. You should see the respect and honor and prestige they have granted me throughout time, nonetheless. Those who arrive, in strength of arms and vigor, receive a less inviting welcome. Yet the weak, the meek, the elderly, those in need, you would see that this nation Knows how to honor and respect The Stranger and The Other.”

With that, the man turned his head, as though they were not present anymore, and the tap, tap of his stick receded down the hallway.

“You asked what proportion of the Soul Fragments of that nation found their way to baetOAK,” said Showsh. “The answer would likely be fewer, though not none. It certainly was not a perfect Society. Yet it was doing quite well considering its circumstances. I wonder what they will be like the next time I see them.”

“In what Time will that be?” questioned Elriver.

“After we Descend to the Lowest Hell,” said Showsh.

“I feel more prepared,” said Droos. “Although I am not ready yet. What horrors and terrors will I see in this baetOAK? What realities may not be disguised? This future is haunting.”

“Then let us explore this Enigma somewhat longer, and then we will surely Descend, for you to Judge, to consider the morality, ethics, and integrity of Evil further still,” said Atropo. “In the end the Lieutenants of Gon Eden and baetOAK will have their say, and their debate must be ended. What will be the final result? Will there ever be a simple answer?”

“What did The Enigma tell us?” said Showsh. “Perhaps some Secrets are Unknowable.”





Chapter 9

Damnation

They had wandered for a small time beyond time. The old man had departed, yet they remained in The Unknown of The Enigma. Again, The Four walked in silence, contemplating the immanent Descent, that would take them to the Depths of baetOAK, the Lowest Hell. Was this a Domain of fire or ice? Was it a place of physical torments or emotional despair? There were many questions to have answered.

“This may be a digression,” said Droos, “Yet I must ask about the topic of Damnation. How may any Moral and Ethical Creator and Sovereign of Integrity tolerate a system where billions are tortured of body, emotion, mind, or spirit, for some eternity? Is that not a system of Great Evil? Would I wish on my worst enemy, Tzefee for instance, an afterlife of eternal harm and pain, even if she did personally slay my Aunt and Step-Son? Absolutely not. My emotions and mind might yearn for such revenge. Yet what is the Morality and the Ethics and the Integrity?”

“This has been discussed,” said Showsh. “These experiences of the Soul Fragments in the afterlife form the new Whole Soul upon Merging. During Rebirth, such challenges and chastisement in the afterlife make it more likely that the Whole Soul will be Reborn with a better result. Without this, those who have done much Evil in life, will certainly be Reborn in a far disadvantaged existence. Those who lived a Righteous Life, however, and did not have their Kernel of Evil purified with the Flame of Hell will have a less Advantaged Rebirth.”

“It would appear to be a Natural System of the Order of Sentients of Forcang and the Rain of Souls to offer better lives to those who are Reborn?” confirmed Atropo.

“Yet for all of those endless eons, Soul Fragments burn and despair in Hell,” said Droos. “That seems like A Great Evil.”

“Justice is not always a bright, shiny object,” said Elriver. “Sometimes, the consequences served for poor or Evil behavior in life are challenging to witness. It is an Aspect of the Rain of Souls. The Power and Darkness of merely witnessing such a place is such that even the Creator and Sovereign, the Prince and Queen of Angels must deeply consider and contemplate before Descending to see it. Yet, I have beheld the perditions of baetOAK before, and similar, Lowest Hells of other Manifestations. They serve a real purpose. I have also seen Whole Souls reborn with the benefit of such chastisement, and without it, with very different results.”

“It is one thing to quail at any blood or violence,” said Droos. “Disliking the death or harm of another is one thing, but a Righteous Sentient should be able to help heal the wounds of others, and not collapse in fear upon the sight of such truths. It is useful to have nurses and doctors. Must the Celestial Bureaucracy have Celestial Torturers?”

“The Devils, or Servants of baetOAK, are no more torturers, than a bird who pierces the flesh of a worm is a murderer,” said Showsh. “They perform their role, following the instructions of the Lieutenant of baetOAK, to purify those Soul Fragments. It is a Natural Purpose of the Rain of Souls. It is the Role of the Celestial Bureaucracy to provide such a Service. This is Beyond the Scope of Mortals. They are not to harm each other, thinking that so and so is damned, and much be demeaned. Rather, all should be seen as Righteous. Yet, The Judge Knows All. After the Decree, the Devils of baetOAK have been given their tasks, of numerous multitude. Some are less obvious than you may think. Not every Soul Fragment starves or writhes in pain in the Lowest Hells. There are many types of purification, to match the deeds in life.”

“Also recall that a Whole Soul may split into hundreds of Soul Fragments, and here just one or two being in baetOAK,” said Atropo. “Many if not most others may very well be elsewhere.”

“To the Soul Fragment, it is an independent experience of eternity in Hell,” said Droos. “I am beginning to see how it is simply a type of Natural Process, a Celestial Purification Method, Beyond the Scope of Reflection Mortal morality and ethics. Rather, it is Ethical to have such a Domain for the Soul Fragments, of the Most Evil Kernels of the Whole Soul. While the Attribute of Mercy of The Judge ought to prevail much of the time, it may not wholly overcome Justice. Some consequences must occur. If not

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

in the afterlife, than when?”

“It is also the case that while these afterlives are a long wait for redemption and Rebirth, there is an end for most Whole Souls,” said Elriver. “Eventually, usually Soul Fragments from a Heaven or Neutral Domain arrive on a Journey, with a purpose, to Merge with Other Fragments, and Reconstitute the Whole Soul, Prior to Rebirth. Sometimes, more rarely, it is Soul Fragments in one of the Hells that makes that move. It is more perilous since often it involves some escape from perdition (or rather, eventually the Devils and Jailors let the Soul Fragment escape).”

“Is it not the case that for some number of Whole Souls, they will choose to remain in Heaven forever, in particular,” said Droos. “They may forget about their brothers or sisters in Hell, even if they are simultaneously living a true eternity of Torment.”

“There is a reason, among many, that sometimes Soul Fragments in the Hells of the Firmament eventually manage to escape on their own,” said Showsh. “It takes much longer, after some endless eon, for that to occur. Yet, it seems there is a Mercy even in the Hells, and it is said, even in baetOAK. Very few Whole Souls truly spend most of eternity in Hell. No Whole Soul spends all of eternity in Hell. Rather, the goal of even the Lieutenant of Hell is for the Whole soul to be Recombined and Reborn. He wants it Purified, but he is just as intent on sending it on its way when it is time for that Whole Soul to move along. If the Soul Fragments in Heaven are taking their time, then after that endless eon, the Soul Fragment from Hell may go searching for the others to convince them.”

“That makes me feel somewhat better,” said Droos. “It seems a reasonable system, although I will reserve my Judgement for when I see it myself. I expect hearing the Theory behind baetOAK, and Damnation, is very different than witnessing the suffering of the damned.”

“You are not a Devil, and you are an Angel of Mercy,” said Elriver. “I would expect it to be very challenging to witness the Justice of The Decree. I will be very interested to hear your Judgement, above all others.”

The Four walked on in silence for a while longer. There was a sense that they had wandered for an endless eternity in this hallway.

“Do we need to be Damned to Descend and even Witness baetOAK?” asked Droos, with some nervousness.

“The nature of the Highest Heaven and the Lowest Hell are that they both Draw the Whole Soul of The Living,” said Elriver. “It is said that except for the very strong, that Wake may keep a Soul Fragment, for those who are not careful. That is not to say that the Realm would be the same for such a Soul Fragment. It is only the case that the fate upon Rebirth, however distant in the future, will have been altered. This is why careful preparation and attention must be given to the passage to and from these Domains. The Living do not wish to remain in Gon Eden, and especially they do not wish to dwell for any length of time in baetOak.”

“In a sense, the process of preparation is for being Damned, but not letting it tarnish the Substance of Our Whole Souls,” said Showsh. “It is an Emulation of Damnation. As you have learned, however, with Tzefee, that some simulations, may become all too real.”

“What am I to learn in this Emulation to distinguish this Damnation from the Evil resulting in Actual Damnation?” asked Droos.

“You are to recall that you are a part of the Natural Process, a Judgement Upon it Even,” said Atropo. “Forget those memories of the past, and recall your Promotion. Well you have Worn It, yet here it is a true test, even more than Gon Eden. It was hard to leave Gon Eden. It is hard to be Damned, as an Emulation, and Enter baetOak. We are not Devils or the Lieutenant of Hell. We must take such raiment, and realize that we are not entering a happy place, but a Domain of The Decree.”

“Yet no Reflection Mortal, or Person, might make such a claim,” said Droos. “All others only arrive in the Lowest Hell through The Decree, as a Soul Fragment. The occasional, one in ten million may see a True Vision. Yet all others may only Know the Truth of baetOak upon their death.”

“It seems you understand this process like an Angel,” said Elriver.

“I am the Queen of Angels,” said Droos. “I will serve Drerpo, and Judge the Lowest Hell.”

“Just do not forget your humility,” said Atropo.

“It is not arrogant to recognize Her job title,” said Showsh. “And furthermore, to think about her responsibilities in that position. Perhaps, there would be some entitlement if she wanted the benefits of such a lauded name, but not tasks and assignments. In fact, she must deal with the horrors of Emulating

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

Damnation because she is the Queen of Angels. That is not something Reflection Mortals must ever consider. Some eternity, as Sovereign of Vøvoav, and as a Secret of Dweehwail, she will have even more Perilous Roles and Rights.”

They walked together again in silence, and then they did reach the end of the hallway, where it turned to the right. They had gone a long way in The Enigma, and they began to go a short distance to the right. Then they found another Ornate Mirror. Now Droos Knew what to expect, and saw Atropo walk up to it.

“This one has an opportunity, if you are ready for it,” said Atropo. “It has transit to the First Mirror Dimension. That is a Complex Unknown in the Enigma. How would you like to go there?”

“I was less interested in such Vaunted locales before,” said Droos. “Maybe I am ready for one. Take us there, Dear Son.”

They all placed hands on the Mirror, and Atropo whispered The Language of the Universe. Then they were standing on the other side, looking at the hallway in which they had just been standing. Turning around, Droos saw that another Ornate Mirror, even fancier than the ones before, was on the wall opposite them. The hallway was narrow, and went to the right and left. Some seventy feet in each direction there was another alcove, and a pair of ornate mirrors on each side of the hallway. This First Dimension of Mirrors seemed to mostly be Mirrors.

“What is the purpose of all of this?” said Droos. “I might comprehend as some distant shadow how an Enigma is needed to manage the Time of a Universe, within the Celestial Domains. Yet, what do these Mirror Dimensions contribute? There seems to be some great logic and architecture behind this, based on principles of Art and Structure that defy my limited knowledge.”

“If you Knew the Abstract Dimensions of Artwork with Regard to Universes,” said Elriver, “Then it would be apparent that such Structure, and Domains, are Ubiquitous, and in fact, required. That includes the Mirror Dimensions. I have always seen at least three levels of Mirror Dimensions, although I have seen as many as fourteen.”

“What Domains exist in The Courts of Chaos, such as Duzog?” asked Droos.

“Now that is truly a question worthy of a Forcang!” remarked Atropo. “Elder and Grand Elder Lords of Chaos have some control over the Manifestations and Manifestation Domains

they Adopt. In some they even serve as Sovereigns in their own right. I have seen many interesting Celestial Domains in these Manifestations, some of which have been altered by talented Lord of Chaos Dukes. Sometimes, they have less than Sovereign Rights to these Domains, and must work around those limitations. It does really take a true Lord of Order to Create Manifestations. The talents of Lords of Chaos lie elsewhere. Do not assume that in the end a Lord of Chaos has any less potential or ability than a Lord of Order.”

“Would it not be safe to assume that a Lord of Chaos would be Evil?” said Droos.

“As has been discussed,” said Showsh. “Lords of Chaos have almost as much variety in their personality, and morality and ethics and integrity, as Lords of Order, and other classes of Forcang. It is only the Lord of Chaos Dark Lord that is truly almost universally Evil.”

“What is a Dark Lord?” said Droos.

“A Dark Lord is a Lord of Chaos who has spent too much time submerged completely and continuously in the Living Darkness of the Dark River,” said Elriver. “The Dark River is one feature of the Multiverse that the Lords of Chaos have (among many others) that Lords of Order do not utilize nearly as well. We are quickly consumed, slain, and destroyed by that Dark Energy, which is a Substance alive, it said, with a different type of Transcendent Forcang—the Negative Forcang. Lords of Chaos may also be seriously harmed, at first, but will eventually acclimate. Many of their Potencies encourage them to spend time on the surface of Living Darkness, and in its Depths.”

“However, a permanent transition occurs to a Lord of Chaos, who is of a sufficient stage, that spends too much time down there,” said Showsh. “It is a sort of addiction, that may never be wholly defeated. They become Dark Lords. Dark Lords are granted all manner of Dark Potencies and Abilities. However, it seems that they are required to Be Evil, and Preach Evil. They have been a terrible blight on Forcang Societies, and not just Lords of Order. Most Courts of Chaos barely tolerate Dark Lords, and only the ones that are minimally destructive. Often they are exiled to their own lands, where they sometimes are content to disappear, slowly, into obscurity. Others hatch plans, and raise fell armies and artifacts, that must eventually be vanquished by the forces of both The Alliance of the Multiverse and The Courts of Chaos.

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

There is a reason that most Lords of Chaos are taught not to spend too much time in Living Darkness, even if they want to do so.”

“Is the Forcang Multiverse only threatened by Vampires and Dark Lords?” said Droos.

“If only it were that simple,” said Elriver. “There are plenty of Forcang who perform Evil acts, or have cruelty or radically selfish schemes, and they are certainly no Vampire or Dark Lord. There are also numerous Creatures of Power that live and function in the Multiverse that offer many challenges for Forcang, both on the level of physical blights, but also political in some cases. Creatures of Powers such as Dragons and Demons are Foreigners of the Draconic and Demonic Subtypes, and they have their own purposes and goals, and are Sentients in their own rights. Major Forcang governments have fought long wars to keep Creatures of Power from being more dominant than they are in the Multiverse.”

“You are saying that Dragons and Demons are real, and both Sentient and Powerful enough to threaten Forcang?” said Droos. “How many other races of Creatures of Power are there? This seems to be a very rich Multiverse.”

“It is a Multiverse of Endless Variety and Wonder, as well as Peril,” said Showsh. “And there are Endless Dimensions Beyond to make the matter even more complex. One problem that Forcang rarely have is boredom. There is just so much to do, and so many places to go and see. Yet, as we will see, arrogance will claim the mightiest of them, both in life, and earn them a place in particular Planes and Domains of the afterlife.”

“That would appear to be a discussion of the future,” said Atropo. “I would suggest we explore this fair Dimension of Mirrors, and see what there is to be seen.”

Turning to the right and then the left, Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo, walked along the hallways of the First Dimension of Mirrors of The Enigma on qu’ueth. They progressed to the right, and passed many mirrors, and disruptions to the flow of the hall. Each Mirror had a different style and appearance. In this place, Mirrors had their own Personality. After a small amount of time, considering the previous duration, they reached a corner that ran to the right once more.

“Is this a square, then?” asked Droos.

“What difference does such an aesthetic make?” asked Showsh.

"I suppose at the Heart of All Reflections, exists a Square," pondered Droos.

"What about the Heart of the Heart of Reflections," said Elriver. "What Design would it indicate if that turned out to be a circle, or different shape? Do you really believe that every Aesthetic of Drerpo has some Purpose?"

"I am uncertain as to the merits of either square or circle," said Droos. "Since I am unclear as to the advantage of this Dimension of Mirrors in the first place, it is a further uncertainty upon it, regarding its Design."

"Sometimes a Shape is just Shape," said Atropo, with a smile.

After a similar length of time, they arrived at a very simple Mirror, set in a wooden alcove. It looked very different from the others. Droos immediately stepped into examine it. At first all she could see was her reflection. Then she placed her hand upon it, and behold! On the other side of the mirror was a different world.

This Vault appeared to hold a city amidst many clouds and rainbows. It was almost too wild to imagine. The grandest dwelling of all was adrift above a thundercloud, yet suffered no ill effect, for the tops of the cloud were dry. Of course, this is just what might be gleaned from the view through the mirror. Then, Showsh touched her shoulder, and said some words, and they were all of them falling!

Down, through the bright blue sky, they descended. Immediately below them was a rainbow, which surely would not be able to arrest their fall. Yet they made a soft landing, and then slid down, at a rapid pace, amidst the endless colors and hues. After a long slide, they reached a large cloud, an island really, and were able to look about.

Birds flew through the sky, though they looked like something more related to a monkey. Trees grew out of the clouds, although they appeared similar to a fried potato, stretched and thin. Still palm leaves, pink and purple sprouted from the top of the branches. Droos' eyes were wide.

"Ah, this Realm..." said Showsh, with a mild smile.

"Is this a hint of Sublimity?" said Droos. "Are we under the influence of some substance?"

"I would merely consider this place to be an unusual confluence of unusual possibilities," said Atropo. "The Universe, even one of Science, may still at times favor the unlikely, even

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

absurd. This Realm merely collects such changes and merges many of them.”

“Fried potato tree?” said Droos, with some doubt.

“These are not very likely possibilities, Dear Droos,” said Elriver. “Yet sometimes, it is refreshing to open your mind. It is also, wondrous, to simply relax and enjoy the moment.”

“I thought we were preparing ourselves for Damnation?” said Droos. “How are we taking time to relax in a Realm of Improbability?”

“It may be argued that visiting baetOak while alive, to Judge it, and then to Return, is an Improbability,” said Showsh. “Much of your life, Dear Love, may be argued by many to be just such a near impossibility. It is relaxing to take a moment to think of all of the possibilities, and the aesthetic that might exist, given few limits.”

“Dear Father, would we really want a Reflection World with few limits?” questioned Atropo.

“That is not to say that every Reflection World ought to have such laws and rules,” said Elriver. “Yet in a Multiverse of possibilities, why not a few?”

“And here, Dear Elriver, you have consolidated this into a most cheery Realm,” said Droos. “Well, I like it! Let’s go explore. I just hope it does not distract too much from the topic at hand.”

They walked about the top of the cloud, and found that there was a river of fruit juice that flowed through, from a spring in the center. It reached the edge, and cascaded over in a mist. It was then that they noticed that a collection of small Sentients, that resembled plants, waited at the foot of the river. Some danced around it, others called out to each other in their language. Finally, some actually floated down the river, though careful not to fall over the waterfall. As they approached, no Stranger interrupted the merrymaking. A quick glance up was all that was required, and the Sentients went about their day.

In short order, a vessel approached, which appeared a mix of an octopus and a River Vessel. It was open on top, and all of the Sentients easily fit inside, while The Four had some more difficulty. Droos chose a seat next to the side, and away they went!

They flew through the islands of clouds, with raindrops of fruit juices kissing their cheeks from one hundred nearby waterfalls. Numerous other types of birds, of many unusual variety, flew, and hopped (on the islands), and slowly, they

approached the Thundercloud. It was as they approached that Droos saw that rather than aim for the city atop, they approached the very center of the lightning and thunder at the bottom.

Only now she saw that it was not electricity, but streaks of sugar, and caramel that flowed through the clouds, and that they headed to a great stalk of some candy substance that was blue. It was enormous, and at the bottom was a wide opening. Sure enough, other similar vessels were approaching. The sugary lightning was striking a node on the bottom of the vines, and powering some elaborate mechanism. As soon as they reached the tunnel, they accelerated to a great speed! In seconds, they reached the top of the tube, and a large bay inside a hollowed out turtle shell. They landed on the ground, and they saw streams of these Sentients departing.

All of them seemed to be going in the same direction, towards the head of the shell. Droos felt it was entertaining to follow, and kept a close and steady pace, matched by the others. It took one hour to exit the bay, and out onto the surface of the thundercloud. There they found a city composed of fresh pieces of fruit, berries, but also candies of various sorts. Also, there were food alloys of various types, some cross between plastic, metal, and food, with numerous colors, that seemed to be used readily. The Queen of Angels supposed that was not much harder to believe than everything else she was seeing. Still, The Four followed the Sentients toward a great platform, made of a circular wafer, on the edge of the city. There they all gathered.

It seemed that they all looked out in one direction, gazing at the orange and purple sky, and watching the cloud islands and rainbows float by in the gentle breeze. Then as they gazed, slowly the light of the Realm began to grow dimmer. The cloud islands all changed to radiant greens and pinks and blues. The monkey birds glowed like fireflies. Then upon the Setting of the Light, a rush of some wave of sugar lightning swept across the Vault, and all the clouds lit up in a white and silver. Then, a dark object descended in the infinite reaches above, some food item no doubt, yet pouring out of its edges was a silvery light. As it reached its position in the sky, a great song rang out from the Sentients, one of joy, and happiness. Then, the light changed to a light blue, neon, and luminous. The singing reached its crescendo. With the return to the silver, finally the melody and ancient words ceased. So the strange Moon of Improbability wavered from Silver to Blue. A

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

great sigh went out amongst them all.

Then in an instant, they all turned, and began walking in a reverse of what had just happened. Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo took this moment to follow them the same way. The Angel had many questions, yet she felt somehow that this was a sacred moment of sorts. She would not interrupt the silence. They all returned to the same vessel, with the same Sentients in the bay within a turtle shell. This time, they followed the vine rapidly downward, and out. Then, in the light of The Moon, they flew, and Droos sat there, in thought, until their returned to the first island.

The Sentients all walked off, and she saw them, reaching various natural features of this place, and hanging on a tree, or standing on a stone, or otherwise making themselves at home. Then they closed their eyes, and seemingly, the great event of their daily routine was at an end. Droos only imagined what the morning would bring.

“How will we return to the Mirror?” whispered Droos.

In answer, Elriver clasped each of their hands, and a silver and blue glow surrounded them, and they floated upward to the level of the Mirror. Showsh reached out, and signaled with The Language of the Universe, Sre, and they Passed through the barrier. Now they stood once more in a Wondrous Place, which might not really be argued to have a lesser claim on improbability (or at least, that is what Droos thought).

As they began to circle the First Dimension of Mirrors once more, now the Queen of Angels might ask her questions.

“How does such a Vault, of such colorful, cheerful improbabilities, support the Infrastructure of Time?” asked Droos, with a slight smile on her face.

“Have you no appreciation for the whimsical?” said Showsh. “Is any improbability too impossible for the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo to consider? Might any of those possibilities exist at some point in some corner of the Universe?”

“Or Beyond...?” asked Atropo.

“I suppose all aspects of Celestial Infrastructure are Beyond Me,” said Droos. “If you say that such a Realm is essential for this Dimension, I will take you at your word. It is certainly pleasant to think that such a place exists in Reality, out there, somewhere.”

“You may count on the Rules of Infrastructure in Birthing Universes to be Surprising in Many Regards,” said Elriver.

“There is no topic too sublime for consideration. Rather, such improbabilities, once again, encourage you to open your mind. Do not despair of such happiness and realms of Truly Infinite Possibilities.”

“I suppose all of this is in this Mirror Dimension of The Enigma,” said Droos. “Where else would such a Realm Exist?”

They followed the Square shape of the First Dimension of Mirrors around to the right, away for a short while again, and then right once more. They reached the center of the far side, and found two alcoves. This time they took the one on the outside of the Square. This Mirror was Ornate, and Complex. Passing Through this One, They Found Themselves in a Place of Many Colors of Light.

All Existence in this Realm, this Vault, was Light, of Numerous Colors. It Shown Brightly, and if it were not for Droos’ Keen Senses, she would have been overwhelmed. Such Brilliance she had not seen even in The Library, and only in some rare parts of Gon Eden. This Brilliance of Light was unmatched nearly anywhere else.

“What is it to really Know the essence of Color?” asked Droos.

They floated in the Void of the Brilliance of Colors, and for Stability, Elriver covered them in an Orb of shifting White, Black, and Grey Lights.

“Some Sentients do not See Color at All,” said Showsh. “Rather, Senses as a Whole are taken for granted by humans. A great sage said that, ‘Every Sentient, every Reflection Mortal, and Reflection Creature, each has a Unique Experience of Reality. This is in part dependent on their unique collection of Senses.’ Some may simply not experience the Reality of Color. They are unable to comprehend it.”

“Yet what the Objective Truth?” said Atropo. “It may be that some Sentients are unable to see color on a fundamental level. Does Color, in fact, exist? Or is Reality in greyscale?”

“Has this not been discussed?” said Droos. “Color is an Abstract Dimension. Even if some Sentients may not see it, Gods, Goddesses, and the Great Beings can see it. Likewise, Greyscale and Shadows are Abstract Dimensions, and Their Transcendent Realities are Experienced by higher stages of Sentients. It is possible that some Reflection Mortals or Reflection Creatures lack fundamental senses to perceive. The Celestial Bureaucracy,

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

particularly the Ministers, do not.”

“It would seem then that this Color is a Real Thing,” said Showsh. “Then the Morality and Ethics, the Integrity, would suggest that all Colors should be approached, and considered, and respected equally. As per our consideration of aesthetics, Beauty is Universal. There is no Evil, or Terrible, or Ugly Color. All Colors are Wondrous, with Sparks of Eternity, and none is less than Equal. To diminish any one Color, is to lower the dignity of All Colors. Rather, the Dignity of any one Color should be exalted, to raise the dignity of All Colors.”

“Does Evil have a Shade?” asked Droos.

“Evil Transcends Color,” said Elriver. “There is no Color that is Evil, as Dear Showsh stated. Evil is Itself an Abstract Dimension, Beyond Aesthetics. Thus, a Sentient may be at once Beautiful, and Evil. By token of the Evil, she may be Damned to any number of afterlives spent in the Hells of Drerpo, even unto baetOAK. That would be at least for some Soul Fragments of her Whole Soul. Still, those Soul Fragments would remain Beautiful, yet all or partially Evil.”

“Does Good have a Shade?” said Droos.

“There is no Color either for Good,” said Atropo. “Good is an Abstract Dimension that is Beyond Aesthetics. They describe different qualities. A Sentient is always Beautiful, but may or may not Be Good, or follow the Journey of The Good. Furthermore, there is no Color, or Hue, of Good. Neither do Morality, or Immorality, or Ethics, or the Unethical have Colors. Colors are Aesthetic Realities that are Universally Beautiful.”

“May Colors be arbitrarily assigned a value?” said Droos.

“An Individual Sentient may label an Object, or Abstraction, or some Thing, with a Color,” said Showsh. “It may then be referenced more easily by that Sentient with that Color. The significance of that value is no more than a label. It is a logistic convenience. It offers no statement of Morality or Ethics or Integrity about the Color. It is merely a point of reference for the Thing to which it Points.”

“Surely, such Assignments may readily change between Sentients, and no group may ever assume common conventions,” said Elriver. “Such Conventions would of course be arbitrary. No Color has a value or meaning Beyond the logistics of labelling. Thus, any Color may be used for any purpose, or any label.”

“It may correspond that an associate of a Sentient

might learn some of the labelling conventions,” said Atropo. “Yet, it should all be in the knowledge that such systems are interchangeable between individual Sentients, and that no system is better or worse than any other.”

“This has been a lot to do about Colors,” said Droos, with a smile, still mesmerized by the Brilliance of the Surroundings.

They flew through the Endless Streams of Radiance. Finally, they thought they saw a Firmament Ahead. It was a Platform of Solid Space Amidst the Void of Brilliance. So they landed there, and looked around. Soon they found that there were no others, only a pedestal in the center. Droos approached it. Of all the Realm, it stood there, a Beautiful, Simple, Metallic Grey. The Queen of Angels laid her palms upon it.

Suddenly she Stood, on a Volcanic Wasteland, surrounded by bubbling pools of steaming water and other stranger liquids. Gases filled the air. The smell was stifling. Looking about, no others were present. Then she saw, before her, a Bright Shining Being, and it did battle with a Coyote, of massive size. The two fought for hours, and at last, the Bright Shining Being made the right move, and threw the Coyote to the ground. The Sentient stood motionless. All of Droos’ Keen Senses told her that the Being of Light had Slain the Coyote. Then it departed.

Why was she here? She carefully approached the dead creature, and upon drawing near, realized, to her horror, that this was a Spirit! Some terrible deed had been done here, wherever this was, whenever it was. As she stood there, motionless, she heard a Voice in Her Head. It sounded like The Great Eagle Spirit.

“Place my Sister in the Water! Do it, Child, Now!”

Droos, with much effort, brought the dead spirit to the bubbling waters, and placed the remains into a pool. It slowly sank to the bottom. A stream of energy erupted forth, and spread out from there, pushing out, in all directions, colorless, and out, into all Spaces and Realities Beyond. Such was the Fervor and Fury of that Wave, that it Ejected some Stones in Immanent Reality from the Water, which landed next to Droos. One in particular attracted her attention.

It was a green stone, with odd markings on it. This definitely matched her classical understanding of Beauty. It had an Abstract Shape, and she was unsure if this was Natural. Grasping the Jade Relic, suddenly she was standing once more on The Platform, before The Pedestal, of the Realm of Brilliance. Still in

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

her hand was the Jade Relic. Atropos' eyes went wide.

"Look who found a bit of The Unknown in The Enigma," said Showsh. "Well done, Droos. You were the first to get there."

"That looks like another Wave Relic," said Elriver. "In particular, unless I am mistaken, that is a Jade Relic. There are few, such Relics, of greatest omens. We should leave and have this deposited in a safe place, before we Descend."

Droos was pleased that it turned out she had excelled in this Enigma. Also, she felt she had done much reflection and was ready for a final rest prior to Damnation. As slowly as they had entered The Enigma, she found that with the help of Elriver and Showsh, one of the Ornate Mirrors took them to the Entrance to the Domain. From there it was a rapid Journey, given the urgency of this, back to The Beacon of Drerpo.

Upon arriving in the same room as before, Drelp was waiting for them. He had a satisfied look on his face.

"She found another one, didn't she?" said Drelp. "At this rate, we will have the Information we need in a few Absolute Decades. Yet, the Power and Peril Behind such Providence is Frightening, especially for one who hears The Call of the Flute."

"We have Known that for some time, Dear Son," said Showsh. "Dear Droos will show you the Jade Relic."

Droos took the Wave Relic, which she had in her pocket, and placed it on the Table of Light. Drelp used some words of Sre to bring the Stone over to him. Then he manipulated it in his hands.

"I can see that this is another Wave Relic with words on it in Infernal," said Drelp. "The language is Rebirth, although using a particular Code that has long been lost. Part of the difficulty in interpreting it was the lack of actual examples. This will be most useful both for the Rebirth Code and for the Information on this Wave Relic. Since this is a Jade Relic, I may only surmise that the Content is quite useful. I will take it to the Tree Canopy for intense examination by the Palace of History immediately."

Drelp stood to leave, but his brother placed a hand, delicately on his shoulder. There was a dark look from Drelp towards his brother.

"Wait just a minute longer," said Elriver. "We should ask permission from Droos. She is managing this effort against Tzefee, both to oppose her, and redeem her if possible."

"I did wonder about what I saw," said Droos.

She describe the frightening events. Showsh sighed.

“It appears that you were taken to witness a great crime that occurred long ago,” he said. “During the Birthing of Drerpo, in the early days, Elriver sent a Principle Minister to Negotiate with The Great Spirits of the Light Seed. She only learned of some of His tactics tens of thousands of years later. I believe He is still serving his sentence in the Tree Canopy of Goamdwee to this day. Harming a Spirit, particularly in Negotiations for a Light Seed, are considered a Cardinal Crime by The Alliance of the Multiverse. I expect the sentence will go on for fifty or sixty trillion years. It took a lot of extra Negotiations and Reparations to help Repair some of the Damage that was done by that Maverick.”

“I am glad that you have witnessed that Truth,” said Elriver. “It was a dark chapter in our past. I am glad that we have long moved passed it. Clearly, if The Great Eagle Spirit was involved, it was both something for you to see, but also this continued help with your Great Task.”

“Drelp may take the Jade Relic to the Palace of History,” said Droos. “I only hope I may offer more assistance with this once I have completed my first task of redeeming my people.”

“I know you will,” said Showsh, who kissed her quickly.

Drelp moved passed Atropo then, unceremoniously, and in a flash of purple and grey, left Drerpo altogether.

“Why is it that I am so capable of finding these Wave Beacons and Wave Relics?” said Droos. “Surely there are others far more able than I am.”

“There are others who do this Work,” said Elriver. “Many thousands of Powerful Forcang investigate these matters every Absolute Day, including Our Son.”

“Yet, The Call of the Flute follows you,” said Showsh. “There is clearly something about your presence that awakens these remnants of the Dawn of Time. I am not surprised that the love of my life would be so special.”

“There is something to be said for being raised in a Place of Evil, yet remaining Good and Righteous at Heart,” said Atropo. “That is not to say that Dear Droos did not require advice and help to overcome such obstacles. Clearly, once the alternative was presented, she chose differently, even embracing words that did not exist in her language. Her very world and way of thinking was expanded. What is it to be a Righteous Sentient in an Evil Place?”

“I may very well have done Evil,” said Droos. “I might

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

have gone through with my Ceremony, when I was only a child, if I had ordinary servants. Even Etøn ultimately chose death, rather than a different Journey. To this day I regret that fate. Of course, Showsh had not advised him for nearly as long. Without any such suggestions, I would naturally have chosen death. Even if I had doubts, which there were many, I did not even have the language to express them. Am I really so exceptional?”

“There is also the element, that is really a coincidence,” said Elriver, “That the Tribe you Rebelled Against, happens to have been the Divine Patronage of Tzefee for about five thousand years. It makes this Rebellion all the more unusual. Surely, their Goddess of Pain would have had higher hopes for the Eldest Daughter of the People of the Blood. It puts you in the main path of the narrative of the Threat to Dweehwail, and positions you perfectly as an Omen.”

“That is the clearest indication of Tzefee’s history with the People of the Blood that I have heard,” said Droos. “Though I had gathered similar information in The Library. It seems that The People of the Blood worshipped a God of Blood and a Goddess of Pain for at least the three thousand years that they resided in Nolai, and apparently, now, at least two thousand years prior as they lived amidst the citizens of Galactic City.

“Do you think that Nolai was always a park amidst Galactic City?” asked Atropo.

“Not at all,” said Showsh. “For many of the thousands of years of the Planet of No and the Galactic Peace (for the most part), the continent of Nolai was just as covered with civilization as everywhere else. It was a conscious decision on the part of the Galactic Government of Bagan to set apart the continent of Nolai and turn it into a Natural Sanctuary, approximately six thousand years ago. It took one thousand years to deconstruct The City that existed there, and for The Jungle to regrow the current form. The continent of Nolai became the one Park of the Planet, a testament to the might of Galactic City.”

“When the question arose of where The People of the Truth, as The People of the Blood were once called, would be relocated, the idea of populating the Park of Nolai with an Anthropological Experiment appealed to enough members of the government to enable it to happen,” said Elriver. “The People of the Truth were gifted the whole of Nolai, and the Natural Sanctuary, to do with as they wanted, provided they lived in a

certain synchrony with Nature.”

“That would make an additional reason why they do not have technology, even three thousand years later,” said Droos.

“Were they nothing but a scientific project? How many of my people suffered to impress the anthropologists of Galactic City?”

“Fortunately, that policy was reversed after about one thousand two hundred years,” said Atropo. “The prohibition on the, then, People of the Blood developing technology independently was removed. Only, it was meant that they should do so without interference from Galactic City. In a sense, it was a hope to see how the culture would choose to approach the topic while isolated. As such, it seems The People of the Blood went the opposite direction, and even created religious standards preventing the development or inclusion of technology that would have been taken for granted elsewhere on the Planet of No.”

“Yet is this not all some kind of Evil,” asked Droos.

“Certainly, it is an arrogance to assume that an entire continent, and an entire tribe, may be managed as Natural Sanctuaries and Anthropological Experiments. To have done so despite evidence of atrocities seems perverse.”

“Well that is the argument you made to the government, and they largely accepted it,” said Atropo. “There will now be interference in the natural development of your people, likely led by you. Ultimately, this sort of Planetary Engineering and Nation Building is the exact sort of arrogance that may be expected of a Civilization of Sentients that spans a galaxy. There have been far worse mistakes committed in the name of science in the last thirteen thousand years by these Reflection Mortals. Also, as far as the mistakes that led to this situation, they are almost less important than what to do about them in the present. Certainly, perhaps a similar choice might not be repeated again in a similar situation. Yet, now that Your People are in their current situation, what is the best approach?”

“That was well said, Dear Son,” said Showsh. “I believe you will lead those who will help the rebels among your Tribe reclaim a better form of government. You may teach them the words for freedom, for democracy. You may teach them that death caused by harm, even in the name of religion, is Evil. You may teach them to value life, and other rights. Then you may help them create a sustainable form of government, that answers to your people, where no one has too much power. Then you may decide

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

what to do next.”

“I feel like I would like to introduce you to my family, with the exception of my father,” said Droos. “My mother will be shocked to see me, but I believe she will be pleased by my choices. I will be so thrilled to see my brother and sister. To think that they might live a life free of the horror I had to endure. I want them to meet you Showsh. Although, I expect that it would work better if they knew you still as Drerpo.”

Showsh laughed.

“I may maintain my Immanence long enough to meet your family for real,” said Showsh. “It is my hope that your mother will welcome me. There will be some dissonance, I expect, and many new ways of thinking. We will all be here to help your tribe through it, with you being principle at the task.”

“I would not miss that conclusion,” said Elriver. “Besides, I would love to be Emerzo again for a while longer.”

“There are certain rights I would especially like to see enshrined in a newly free Society,” said Atropo. “Yet I suppose we are there as guides, not oligarchs. The choice must be up to your Tribe. That also includes what they do with your father. I hope they choose both Justice and Mercy. I feel exile to the courts of Galactic City to be judged for Sentient Rights violations would be a reasonable end for him. There he would get a sentence, but in a kind and compassionate place that would also provide the sort of education on different ways of thinking that he never really had.”

“Redeeming my father, Dear Son?” inquired Droos, with a smile. “You are beginning to sound like me. I do hope he may be humbled. Surely, he would be a powerful ally if he learned to think differently.”

As they sat there talking, a shrill, moaning call rang out, and they shivered, all of them. The time had arrived for them to Descend to baetOAK. It is said that at that time in Drerpo, all in the Celestial Domains stood still, and a sense of despair washed over all Reflection Mortals of the Universe. For the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo were to be Damned, in whatever Part, and Sent to baetOAK, even if only for a Visit.

A swirl of red and grey energy began sweeping through The Beacon of Drerpo, as if the Claws of the Lowest Hell searched for them, even in this Hallowed Domain. Soon they were swept up, and they were pulled, though given their Position, The Royals of the Universe of Drerpo, soon they flew with Dignity. A similar

march as before proceeded in organization, and as calm as might be possible. Yet the Celestial Bureaucrats mourned the fiery Descent.

Soon, a particular escort of Servants surrounded them. They were Fell Angels, Devils of the Lowest Hell. They were there to Escort Their Charges to baetOAk. Surprisingly, some of them could play an instrument, and there was a procession of sorts. This was not a typical Damnation. The Servants of the Lowest Hell Knew that this was as much an inspection of Their Duties. Thus, quite a melody was played then, an awful tune, that evoked terror.

A great wake of flame, and ice, and all manner of fell energies expanded from their passage in all directions. The Hosts of Heaven witnessed this with dismay. They offered a Prayer to the Transcendent Forcang that the Creator and Sovereign, the Prince and Queen of Angels, should be Redeemed, and Returned to Them. Still the unwholesome march proceeded as planned, edging closer to the enormous mist and orb of red and grey.

Droos felt terror and sadness in her Heart, in her Whole Self, in her Whole Soul. It was fortunate that she had spent time in Reflection prior to this moment. She had discovered an Unknown in the Enigma, and that Feat gave her strength. There was also a courage, a bravery in her that went beyond what might be found in any Domain, or Manifestation. It was a Secret in Kernels of her Whole Soul. She might not be able to see it, and it might take even the likes of Ruby to truly comprehend and utter an Omen surrounding it. This was Secret in both Drerpo, Dweehwail, and Beyond.

The Orb of Hell was so close now. They were a streaming meteor, about to crash in a cataclysm upon the ruined lands of perdition. Surely they would be utterly destroyed. Then she felt a Presence, and it was Showsh, even here, to give her comfort. Here they traveled now as one Essence, and took comfort in each other in this Dark Hour of Descent. They entered the Gravity of baetOAk, and the Universe began to orient Itself to the Purging of Evil.

As they Entered the Lowest Hell, they saw that there was an endless stream of Bright Energy flowing into the Sky. In horror, Droos realized that these were Soul Fragments, that had been Judged, and Decreed, and now would receive their Sentence here. A Sense of dread was palpable even here from that flowing

Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

pathway of Justice. Yet, even now, some called out, those Soul Fragments, defying the Gravity, the Decree, in Arrogance, in Insincerity. Not all would be willing to embrace a Descent to baetOAK. These were the Soul Fragments, the True Kernels of Evil. They rejected the Justice of The Judge, and of Heaven.

“Will I similarly find surprises in Hell?” asked Droos, as she and Showsh streaked towards a Minor Ruin.

“There are surprises in all of the Domains of the Firmament,” said Showsh. “Even the Righteous must adjust to the Realities of the Rain of Souls. It is the Realities of Hell that are most poignant in this next Book.”

Then, as they reached the utmost border of baetOAK, for a moment, the Descent ceased, and for moment, there was a Respite from the torment. Droos beheld her family, and she saw that there was Elriver, somehow much reduced from her normal form. Yet, she held a book out towards Droos. It had a blue cover.

“Is that the story of my life in these most recent chapters?” asked Droos, unusually giddy despite the locale.

“It is the Blue Book,” said Elriver. “It is the Fourth, there being but One More in Drerpo. Take it, with the blessings of the Heavenly Host. May the memories provide warmth in this cold, dark place to which we are about to go.”

“I expect it is accurate up to one hour ago, as usual,” said Droos.

“I believe I have managed to get the Librarians to do even better this time,” said Elriver. “I put extra attention into The Blue Book. Yet, beware, for The Red Book is next. And after that, why what lies Beyond the Futures of Drerpo.”

“I thank you, Dear Creator, for this gift, as always,” said Droos. “I am Ready, as I will ever be, for this next part. I am ready to Descend, with Showsh, and the rest of you for family and company.”

Then they returned to their Descent, and entered baetOAK. In an enormous burst of Red and Grey Energy, Droos suddenly Knew no more.

When she opened her eyes, she was in a dank, wet, smelly cell, with no doors. In the darkness, because of her Keen Senses, she saw that there were no less than eleven Devils around her, smiling, and cackling. There were numerous instruments, and devices nearby. One of them appeared to be the supervisor.

“At last we have her,” he said. “We will get her to talk,

and reform. She will regret all of the Evil deeds she did in life.”

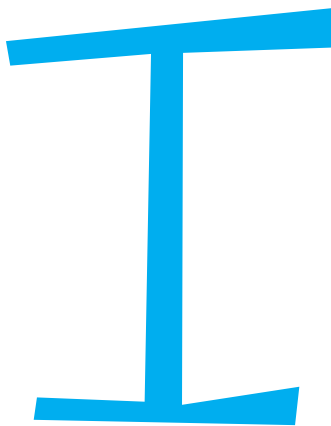
“I am here to Judge the Lowest Hell,” said Droos, only slightly nervous.

“That is what they all say,” said The Devil. “Boys—get her on the rack!”

With that, the other ten moved to lay hands on her. It was then that Droos noticed she was dressed in nothing but rags, and her head hurt where she was wearing a thorn crown. She stood on the side of the room and attempted to speak some words of Sre, as she had been taught. The approaching Devils stood back for moment, as if they heard something. They turned to their supervisor, who looked back, undaunted.

“She is not the first Fragment of a Forcang we have had here,” said The Devil. “Your Language of the Universe will not work here. Not unless you wish to mix in a little Infernal. Now Boys, show her what we do to the Souls of Forcang who arrive here to be Blessed by Us.”

The ten lay hands on her, and scratched her arms and legs, and dragged her to the rack. Droos screamed, and kicked, and searched her mind for some words or phrases that might help. She



Book IV: Surprises in Heaven

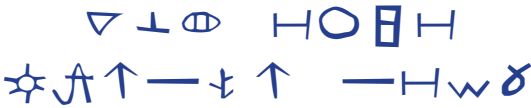
knew there must be something, if only she had time. Then she was on the rack, and they were tying her down.

“We’ll get you to regret every Evil act you did in life,” said The Devil. “Then we will do it again, for one million years, for one trillion years, for an endless eternity.”

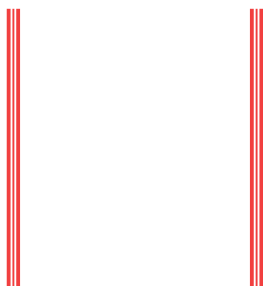
Then in desperation Droos called out Showsh’s name, and her world went dark, with a pain, and despair.



End of Book IV



Book V Realities of Hell



☆Λ↑—↑↑ —Hw◎
⌘◎τ└--↑⊖ H○□H
VΛθτ⊖J⌘



Chapter I

Torment of the Arrogant

All Droos Knew was Pain. It coursed through her, and entered the Essence of Her Whole Self, and her Whole Soul. In Despair, she writhed, but was unable to free herself of the Instruments. The Devils of baetOAK Knew Their Craft well, and performed their duties. How did she arrive in such a place? Still, she refused to completely lose hope.

Then, out of The Pit, the lowest reaches of darkness, a Voice Emerged, that of Her Love, and it said simple words, that at first seemed An Enigma.

“Remember the Wave Relic,” He said.

What did those words mean, she fought with her own hopelessness, and misery, in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual pain?

Then she recalled that she did Know some words, a powerful phrase, that was a combination of both Infernal and Rebirth. Then she called out:

“Dichwait wit orchon ve muk nwerk!”

Suddenly, the Devils stood back, and the pain diminished, somewhat. The Supervisor peered at her, at last with some interest.

“What did you say, Little Forcang?” said The Devil.

“Dichwait wit orchon ve muk nwerk!” she cried out as loud as she was able.

The Devils, one by one all fled, except for the Supervisor.

“She Knows the Ancient Words,” said The Devil. “Both Infernal and Rebirth. I did not Realize we had more than just a Forcang in our midst. You must be some Great Omen, a Foreshadowing, a Secret in the Universe, and in Dweehwail.”

The Fiend raised a finger, and a doorway appeared on the side of the room.

“You have passed the Test,” said The Devil. “Now go join

Book V: Realities of Hell

the Creator, the Sovereign, and the Prince, Queen of Angels. We hope you enjoyed your welcome to this Lowest of Hells.”

Droos rose, removing herself from The Rack, and stood once more upon the floor, still in rags. Yet she stood strongly on her own two feet. Still, the pain lingered, but now began to subside. Remembering what she had been told about the role of these Servants, these Devils, Droos did a small bow of her head.

“I know that you have a role to play, Dear Servant,” said Droos. “You are a Natural Feature of the Firmament, of Perdition. All Soul Fragments who are Decreed must be Purged.”

“You Know our business then,” said The Devil. “You are the Queen of Angels indeed. Just have care that you do not become a Fallen Angel. That path leads back here, to us, for real. As for whether I will see you again in The Future, we will have to wait and see. The Master of baetOAK is still engaged with his debate with the Minister of Gon Eden. I have rarely seen my Master Fail to Claim His Prize.”

“You are most dutiful,” said Droos. “Yet, you clearly also know the business of the Celestial Domains. None might Know that Decree until the Day of Judgement arrives. Maintain your duty, Dear Servant, and I will endeavor to never see you again.”

“That is a laudable goal,” said The Devil. “We will see who is Right.”

Droos exited through the door, without looking back, and found herself on a vast badlands, airless, wreathed in stinking, choking fumes. It was nearly impossible to see, and what she was able to glean was blasts of molten rock, and exhalations of poisonous vapors from the Heart of baetOAK. She wandered forward, and found a large lake of lava, and there located three figures.

“There she is,” said Atropo. “She passed the Test. I suppose you are not just another Forcang.”

“Are you saying that what is required for a Celestial Bureaucrat to wander baetOAK freely is Knowledge of Rebirth or Infernal?” said Droos, with a small frown.

“There are other means of proving that you are more than just a Forcang, who has died, and wishes special privileges in the afterlife,” said Showsh. “Eventually, I am sure that you would have demonstrated your connection to Us. Just be glad that the experience was not longer, and that there was a way out. For most Soul Fragments in Reception, there is no way out for a small eternity.”

“Then this was a Reception of Sorts on baetOAK,” said Droos. “It seems that I was in my own personal Hell. There were eleven Devils, led by one. That is a number associated with Lords of Chaos, is it not? In the end, their Supervising Devil proved an equal member of the Celestial System of Justice, once I had passed the Test. It was a curious turnaround. In the meantime, I felt hopelessness.”

“baetOAK is not meant to be a pleasant place,” said Elriver. “Reception is a period of equality for Soul Fragments. The length of Sentences do differ. Those we will be visiting first, you will see, would likely spend much longer in that small eternity, than any mostly Righteous Whole Souls that contributed a Soul Fragment to the Lowest Hell.”

“What is our first destination on baetOAK?” asked Droos.

“Keep your wits about you,” said Atropo. “And follow carefully. There are Sentients that are native to baetOAK that Do Not Fear The Royal Family of Drerpo. It is also said that some Creatures of Power make their homes on the Domain. I would hope to leave them at peace as well.”

They set off across the ruined terrain, beginning by walking across the pool of lava. Luckily, they floated above the ground, if they wished. It was still very hot, and unpleasant. It took all of Droos’ Keen Senses to find her way, even following right next to Her Showsh. They went on for what seemed like a day, until up ahead loomed large mountains. They were enormous. At their root was an entrance, and into this they walked.

The tunnels beneath the Mountains of baetOAK were dark, yet still glowed with both molten rock and metal here and there. This Realm of the Domain seemed to all be aflame, and toxic with fumes. After a time, they arrived in a large chamber that was filled with ornate metal boxes of numerous sizes. As they entered, some of them began to shake, and Voices emanated from them. The calls of the Damned issued forth, from within the boxes.

“The Damned are in those boxes?” asked Droos. “Where are we exactly?”

“This is The Torment of the Arrogant,” said Showsh. “Here, the Soul Fragments spend one year at a time, without interruption, inside these crates. There is no food or water, and no company. It is an austere existence, and one of hunger and thirst, loneliness, and extreme temperatures. Most do not really know if anyone else is here. Only, some have been here so long, they have

Book V: Realities of Hell

developed keener senses to know when a new Presence enters.”

“Why do The Arrogant receive such Chastisement?” inquired Droos. “What is so terrible about Arrogance?”

“What was your first experience of The Library?” asked Elriver. “You were meant to learn Humility. That is not to say that even those with much humility are not sometimes arrogant. To be assertive, at times requires some of that trait. Yet a Purer Arrogance, amounting to Narcissism, returns to something we previous discussed. This is the Sentient who believes that they personally, and they alone, have the ability to save the world, or the universe. No others are able to do so. No advice, no support is required or desired. Any means may be used to accomplish their goals, for they essentially believe they have a supernatural authority, even Divine, or Transcendent. Such faith in and of itself may lead to terrible harm to many.”

“This is different, as my Dear Wife spoke, from assertiveness,” said Showsh. “Any leader at times must be assertive, offer orders, and suggestions. Yet a good leader will ask for lots of advice, and welcome those in particular where their own areas of expertise fall short, likely in many arenas. Those not in power will accept reasonable, honest jobs, and a normal position in their family, not the master or the scoundrel, who is above the rules of society, and personally gets to decide what laws may be followed.”

“What is immoral, unethical, or dishonest about arrogance, or pure arrogance?” said Droos.

“It is a type of lie,” said Atropo. “To believe that the Sentient independently may solve all problems, or run the lives of many without help or advice, or that they are so much wiser than Society that they may pick and choose the laws, this speaks of an intense faith in their own powers and abilities that almost never exists. Even the Greatest Grand Elder Forcang at times must rely on others, and if wise, does so often. Perhaps, in that case, among a Greater Being, there is some reason for a little arrogance. Yet among a Reflection Mortal, what innate power exists? Surely there are notable skills, and as a great sage once said, ‘Diverse Abilities,’ among most Sentients. Yet none may truly solve every problem alone, or save the world without help. It is a lie about their abilities, and a lack of humility.”

“This Pure Arrogance, the type being considered here, is among those who have, in life, Truly done terrible deeds because

of their utmost faith in themselves,” said Showsh. “Perhaps it was on a massive scale, as some sort of Tyrant or Dictator. It might equally be simply as a lousy family man, mistreating his spouse and children, because clearly he thought he was always right, and deserved a superior kind of respect.”

“I would like to talk to one of these Soul Fragments,” said Droos. “How am I to Judge the morality and ethics of this form of Chastisement, of this Damnation, if I may not actually speak to one.”

“That may certainly be arranged,” said Elriver.

She waved her hand, and eleven Devils, led by a Supervisor, approached one of the crates, from which some curses and sounds already reached their ears. The Devil waved a clawed hand, and the crate slowly opened, having no other obvious lock. Inside, crouched in a terribly uncomfortable position was a man. He slowly hobbled out, and upon emerging into the dark cave, blinked as he was given a respite from Damnation.

“How does that feel?” said Droos. “I am sure it is pleasant to have this opportunity to stretch after this endless eon in The Crates.”

“I would rather tell you about the injustice of being in there in the first place,” said the man. “How dare you place me in that crate! I deserve, for my fine service to my people, and the world, a Choice Share of Heaven. This is an outrage!”

“I am sorry that you feel you were Decreed here unjustly,” said Droos. “Why do you not tell me about your great deeds in life, and I will see if there is anything that may be done about your conditions.”

“I won’t speak to you,” said the man. “I will speak to Him.”

He looked at Showsh.

“Tell me then,” said Showsh.

“I was the King of a wondrous nation-state,” said the man. “The Founding Fathers of my nation created a Society that increasingly protected fundamental human rights. I felt that those rights were a threat to my people. They were also a threat to my freedom, as the system of due process sought to actually charge me with a crime. I worked to create a better nation-state that was not accountable to such rights and freedoms. My vision of my people was protected, although many outside my nation-state thought it meant the rest of my people were left behind. I did become a

Book V: Realities of Hell

mighty, powerful King in my nation-state, that all loved, or at least feared, and for those that truly wanted to be citizens of my nation, they fared well.”

“It seems you did this by ignoring, or even suppressing the rights of minorities,” said Showsh. “Did that not undermine the human dignity of everyone? What about the people who you held so high in esteem? Did you protect all colors, shapes, and varieties, or only one legal definition?”

“The nature of my nation was that the rights and definition of my people was defined by law,” said the man. “All other ideas, concepts, or suggestions were unlawful, and we dealt with them accordingly, both in the state, and beyond its borders. Frankly, by the time I was crowned King, those supposed members of my people beyond my borders ceased to be my allies, and I was no longer theirs. I worked with those who supported my regime, my rule, and my theocracy.”

“How did these decisions put you in readiness for living in a world in which there are other types of people?” said Showsh. “What about those who were born into future generations within your borders who disagreed?”

“It was a simple matter of jailing those who disagreed, and shipping them to the borders, and removing their citizenship,” said the man. “Anyone who did not agree with me was not a true brother of my people. It did become problematic, or so I was told, eventually for those I sent into exile. They talked about fundamental rights elsewhere, and raised a fury. I had long gone onto this unreasonable afterlife. Yet, I learned during my many Paroles, that the fury resulted in a worldwide movement that was increasingly peaceful on the one hand, denying my nation-state economic benefits and resources. Eventually, it cut into our prosperity. Yet, it also encouraged those who were really depraved. They were the biggest problem.”

“What did they do?” said Showsh.

“I am told that one or two generations after I died, the Third King of the nation-state faced a terrorist bombing that claimed millions of lives,” said the man. “Furthermore, a generation after that, additional such attacks by depraved nation-states, siding with the furor, leveled my country. We responded in kind, but the damage was done. It took a century for them to rebuild those cities and towns. Unfortunately, that was just in time for the Calamities that resulted from the Melting of the Ice Caps,

and the Global Unrest. More Bombings and Massive World Wars once again laid what we had created a Fourth Time to waste.”

“Perhaps, a system that promotes the dignity of everyone encourages Societies and Civilization that no human, or Sentient, is deserving of such a fate,” said Showsh.

“Ultimately, we would have suffered the same fate,” said the man. “The inferno that swallowed the world because of climate claimed all nation-states, for the most part, and took many hundreds of years to return afterwards. Yet, we might have had an extra hundred years of prosperity, only in a multicultural land, that embraced human rights, and freedoms. If we had honored the True Vision of our Founding Fathers, a land that honored the differences of humanity, and welcomed The Stranger, The Orphan, and The Widow in our borders, as equals, surely we would have had longer as Rulers of Our Land. We lost a century.”

“It seems that you became a little obsessed with your goal to preserve your people,” said Showsh. “In the end, it did little to help most of your people, beyond an elect few who fit into one state definition. Of course, of them, only a tithe survived the wars. In the end, the dream of the state failed. Do you really think a multicultural state might have better protected your objectives, even if it diluted them somewhat?”

“I have had thirteen thousand years to consider this question,” said the man. “It may be that a multicultural Society would have offered competitive ideas to that of my people, and some may have been lost to it; it would also offer far greater strength and perseverance. A nation where the rights of all are protected, without regard to religion, or creed, or denomination, or even race, ethnicity, nationality, or sexual orientation or gender. In a nation where all feel valued, and hold the dignity of humans high, as the sparks of God we all are, after all, no one would find anger in the same way. None would be exiled and vent their distress, and lobby the world to boycott our way of life. We may still have just as strong a culture and tradition in a multicultural state. Only, it will be our education, both primary, secondary, and tertiary, that rings truest, and encourages our youths to remain faithful.”

“You seem to suggest that a multicultural, multinational form of government, best protects fundamental human and Sentient rights,” said Showsh. “In the end, it would have preserved the dignity and respect of your people, both those you honored the

Book V: Realities of Hell

most, and the broader community. Furthermore, without creating accusers in the world, there would have been few to wage war against you. As you say, ultimately, it was Climate Change that laid low all nation-states, and it really would not have mattered. Yet you would have had one hundred years, even a little more, of peace, before the World War. Furthermore, even in what emerged after the Recreation of Civilization after the World War, hundreds of years later, perhaps a larger population would have remained in the region.”

“It took thousands of years to rebuild both the population and cities there,” said the man. “Having those tens of millions of additional brothers and sisters of my people, and friends among The Strangers in the multicultural community living among us, to help us rebuilt, would have gone a long way to shortening that new diaspora. It was a diaspora in our own land and region. Eventually, we did have some thousands of years later, a thriving population of my people in our land, along with honor and respect for the rights of The Stranger and The Other amongst Us. Of course, at that point, we were part of the new civilization that spanned the entire planet. Nation-States were gone, and the era of statehood and that opportunity had passed. Yet we did achieve our dream, to be powerful, notable, peaceful, a light in our land. Yet it might have been thousands of years sooner.”

“It is my understanding that not only do your people have a thriving, popular population in its historic land on the Planet of No, alongside Others and Strangers, in peace, but that billions of your people span every corner of the Bagan Galaxy,” said Showsh. “You truly are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Yet, why did it have to take those extra thousands of years?”

“There is something to be said for Fear,” said the man. “When you are a people with so few in numbers, it is easy to think emotionally, and act because of the fear of extinction. Perhaps there are wiser, more moral, ethical, and honest decisions that may be made. Those decisions might even have worked out better for my people. Yet, the stakes were so high, and we were all so scared and we did not trust anyone. Only I was capable of leading my people, and only we were able to build our own destiny. Everyone else was a distraction. Yet, I know now, that I should have looked beyond that emotion, to the morals, and ethics, and honesty, to be a man and a nation of integrity. I should have sought peace, love, and tolerance. It would have been so much better to have a century

longer in our land in the present, and reduce thousands of years of the New Diaspora in the Future. Now I know, and my Soul Fragment is wiser.”

“You seem to have talked yourself from insulting the justice of this afterlife to some deep reflection on your actions in the physical world,” said Droos. “If you are able to talk to me now, do you see yourself as having some small role to play in your current Decree? Were you maybe too arrogant in life? Why did you believe that you, and you alone, could save your people? Look at the cost that resulted in the end.”

“I do see, some glimmer, of a purpose of this place,” said the man. “I suppose no man enjoys his punishment for an ill deed. I hope my time here, as my people believed there would be some limit to such purifying flames, will come to an end.”

“It will,” said Droos. “Do not despair that you do not have Soul Fragments in the Heavens of Drerpo, even Gon Eden, who have lived a very different afterlife at the same time, and will search for you. When you Merge, and it will happen in some age or eon, you will be able to choose Rebirth or Eternity in the afterlife, and maybe a Choice Destination among the Celestial Domains. Or else, in Rebirth, perhaps this experience in baetOak, and other Hells of the Universe in which your Soul Fragments reside, may improve the character of your Whole Soul. Thus, you will be born in a more advantaged position than you would otherwise be.”

“I still believe that this Decree is overly harsh,” said the man. “Is there anything you might do?”

“You said that you get a day of Parole once per year,” said Droos. “What if the Soul Fragments, in some parts of baetOak, received two days of Parole per year? How long has it been since your last Parole?”

“It has been five months, and three weeks,” said the man.

“Then with the approval of the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo, and more specifically, the Lieutenant of baetOak, I would suggest you receive a Parole within one week,” said Droos. “What do you say, Showsh?”

“I will defer the matter to my Wife,” said Showsh.

“I think it is a great idea, if we are able to get the Lieutenant of baetOak to agree,” said Elriver. “You may ask Him yourself, when you see him. It will not be too long from now.”

“Why not have Parole begin today?” asked the man.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“baetOAK is still a Domain of rules and purification,” said Showsh. “Thank you for sharing with us, Dear Sir.”

Then the eleven Devils escorted the man back to The Crate, where he shuffled inside again in a crouched position. There he remained, with a stressed expression on his face. Then the box was sealed, and the Devils departed to the sides of the room, to guard their charges.

“Is this the only room like this here?” said Droos.

“Not at all,” said Atropo. “There are hundreds of thousands of rooms like this in this mountain range, and others of this Realm of baetOAK. Pure Arrogance, or Pure Enough Arrogance, is something that many Resort to in Life, or Fall Victim Regarding.”

“Do you think that this Sentence is Reasonable?” said Elriver.

“I think with two Paroles per Absolute Year, it will be just right,” said Droos. “It is not a pleasant sight to see. Yet, the destruction that may be caused by such arrogance in life may be myriad. A multicultural society has the strength and dignity to persevere without Sentient right abuses or creating fury or accusers. Even in the context of a much smaller unit, extreme arrogance may scar children or spouses for life, and make it far more likely they will in turn do harm.”

“It would seem that arrogance, and narcissism, are another instance where some type of professional assistance may be warranted,” said Atropo. “If only it were a regular matter to do such a checkup, maybe annually or biannually. If a healthy Sentient checks their physical wellbeing at a regular interval, just in case, why not their emotional, mental, or spiritual health? How are they to know if the arrogance they exhibit is a reasonable amount of mere assertiveness, or rises to the level of narcissistic arrogance? It would take a trained professional to make such an observation. Of course, for someone found with such a condition, they may be referred in time for further treatment.”

“Apparently many Societies, and this has been discussed, view treatment of the mind differently than that of the body,” said Elriver. “Why a professional would be sought in treatment for one but not the other is odd.”

“There are many who have difficulty asking for help from anyone,” said Showsh. “That is a sign of arrogance, or low self-esteem in some instances. Primary education should encourage

children to see professionals at the same rate and instill within them the value of good, sound, professional advice. Also, of seeking second opinions, for even professionals may be fallible.”

“Who is going to pay for all of this?” asked Droos.

“It is the role of Society to raise sufficient revenue to cover such medical expenses,” said Elriver. “Does a society prefer to invest trillions in incarceration after unsocialized and traumatized adults commit crimes, or in medical and behavioral professionals of all varieties to treat conditions in the first place so that crimes never take place, and furthermore, so that as many adults as possible are active, productive members of Society?”

“Where are we going to go to next?” said Droos.

“First we have to walk there,” said Showsh.

Then they turned and left The Mountains of the layer, and were back, out amongst the fiery, destroyed world. They walked in some silence for the rest of the day, until they found a road. It was paved in skulls, with a metallic mortar between the bones. They followed this for a second day when they reached an enormous metal structure. It rose into the sky, and pierced the ground. It gleamed in the light of the lava and flame. Yet as they reached it, the metal was cold to the touch.

“That looks like a solid piece of Uranium,” said Atropo.

“Quite a statement, Dear Mother.”

They found an entrance in the side of the structure, of the solid Uranium, and entered into it. Following the narrow hall, as their breath formed in front of them in the cold, they reached a wide, round room, with a desk, and a Supervisor sitting. She observed them.

“Four for the Second Level,” said Showsh.

The Devil observed them carefully, each of them, before waving a claw at the wall behind Her. Then she waved the other claw for them to proceed. The metal of the wall suddenly slid open, and as then entered, it closed. Then they were encased in the metal. As they stood, it got colder, and colder. Soon Vapors formed around them, gases that were beginning to take on a more solid form. These were of many varieties. Few might threaten These Four. Then the metal opened again.

Before them was a different world, of an endless icy expanse. The solid fog of gases covered much of it. In some places, icy cliffs might be seen, and strange creatures flying above. Monsters lurked in the shadows. Then they were out, walking

Book V: Realities of Hell

through the terrible chill of the Second Level.

There were also, here and there, more jagged structures of the same metal, or alloys even worse. They gleamed, and glowed. Yet it was so cold that there were snow-flakes and frost on the abstract metal. As they walked on for days, eventually they saw a collection of Sentients living in one of these structures. Droos was interested, and they approached to investigate.

They found at the structure, built in the perilous metal, a town, dreary, and bleak. Sick, and destitute humans walked amidst its corridors. There were rooms, and places to eat and drink, of a sort. The ale was even fairly reasonable, and the food was actually enjoyable. At least it was for Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo. The others seemed too sick to notice. Apparently it was radiation poisoning.

Droos approached one of the humans in a lounge, who had just vomited onto the floor, leaving a mess that quickly was freezing in place amidst numerous previous expelled meals.

“What is this place?” said Droos. “It is an odd sort of Chastisement. You have some welcome comforts. Yet you are unable to enjoy them.”

“I was a scientist in life,” said the man, with some difficulty. “A great thinker. I created technology, even saved lives for many years. Yet, I put pursuit of technology ahead of consideration of their moral, ethical, and honest application. In the end, I produced technology, with my science, that killed billions horribly. For this, I am damned. It was not my intention, but it was the reckless result of my research. If I only I had put more consideration into how my inventions, into how my thoughts might be used. What if I had developed safeguards?”

“Technology also saves billions of billions,” said Droos. “It is something to be valued. Yet perhaps, when used without any thought, or consideration for the consequences, there may be terrible results.”

“Maybe it would just be a matter of waiting until the time would be right,” said the man. “A calmer, less competitive Society might use technology to build, to love, for peace. The same groups might adjust it ever so slightly to tear each other apart in a different era. It is important to consider the implications.”

“Are you suggesting that you should not have invented your technology?” said Droos.

“I am saying that,” said the man. “The benefits might have

been developed in a time of peace. Yet for creating it in a time of war, only terrible purposes would be possible. What is it to create the means for destroying a world? Any moral, ethical, or honest Sentient would turn aside, and wait until such research, such knowledge, would be used for good. And it may.”

“What if the Society, the government, said they would jail you, or kill you, for failing to invent, or research such a technology?” said Droos. “What is the moral, ethical, and honest action of the man pursuing The Journey of The Good, and living The Good Life?”

“I do not know these terms, though they are philosophies I have heard of and considered previously,” said the man. “You are a wise girl. The responsibility would be to go to jail, or become a Martyr to the Good. Do not allow technology, or create research to destroy the world. Only, technology should be developed for peace, for exploration, to enhance and exalt life. If scientists are encouraged, or forced, even in a time of war to create Evil, then the response of those who are Good is silence and assertiveness. They must refuse, even to their end. They may come for family and friends, and still, the technology to destroy the world, or reek overwhelming devastation, must be rejected. Only, such ideas, such research may be done in a time of peace, and safeguards created.”

“Only, you feared for yourself, and your family,” said Droos. “There is some mitigation in that. Yet, you did create a weapon, a technology that did destroy the world, or almost. It has also successfully destroyed, completely, many other worlds of Sentients. It would seem better to throw yourself off the precipice than create, or agree to generate, or research, such a technology.”

“For that, I accept my Damnation to this place,” said the man. “I am justly Chastised. I only hope that the Good I did in life sees some recognition, and that some Fragments of my Soul reside in the Heavens of Drerpo. It would be good to think that even one as lowly and terrible as I deserves some respite someday.”

“As I have often said,” remarked Droos. “Do not despair that your Kernels of Righteousness, or Aspects of Good will have received their Decree as well. Surely, there will be Redemption, and Merging, and a change at Eternity or Rebirth. What you have learned here already testifies to the success of this place. Perhaps your Reborn Whole Soul will make better choices.”

Book V: Realities of Hell

“Only Rebirth erases the memory of the past,” said the man. “What an interesting Multiverse this is, and The Rain of Souls. I hope some a priori memory persists, and I remember, if I should be so lucky as to be a scientist once more, even in a time of war, to only use my knowledge and research for love and peace and building, and never for harm. Let them come and take my freedom or my life. Yet I will refuse.”

“Take this,” said Atropo.

He handed the man a brownie. The man took it, knowingly, and began to eat it.

“That is very generous, Dear Son,” said Elriver. “I suppose why not permit the ability to enjoy one meal here in peace, and get a drink.”

They left the town, and continued walking across the ruined, icy expanse. As they marched, a snow storm suddenly Descended upon them, and eleven feet of snow fell in one hour. It was a massive, terrible blanket of coldness. Then it quickly turned to hard ice, and it was slippery, and even they fell, having difficulty keeping their footing, as they made their way, in a matter of days, across the Realm.

“What is justified to be developed for the theater of War?” said Droos. “It is natural that competing Societies, in the earlier stages of a civilization, will at times fight. Even in the future, at times there are civil wars. Is it not natural that technology should be developed to wage war?”

“It would seem justified to enable technology that defeats the opponent in the least harmful way possible,” said Atropo. “Whatever the matter of dispute might be, if it may be resolved with little physical harm, that is an advantage. Technology that permits this is reasonable. In contrast, technology that either guarantees or threatens mass casualties, or mutually assured destruction, should be avoided. There is too much risk of misunderstanding. It is better such technologies are not invented in the first place, and if they are, strict rules are created to avoid the actual creation of such weapons. Even if responsible, or at least realistic states do not use them, there is all too real a possibility that fundamentalist or traumatized agents will gain access to a limited number, and use them without comparable consequences.”

“There is also some suggestion that warfare should not be too free from consequences,” said Showsh. “If a class or group of two nation-states believes they may fight amongst themselves

with impunity, then sacrificing elements of the rest of Society may seem a small matter. Rather, when consequences remain such that all bear the burden, there is greater sensitivity to avoid war in the first place. Certainly, diplomacy would seem preferable to those consequences.”

“I have always wondered about the matter of national service,” said Droos. “It would seem that requiring every citizen and resident to serve in the military denies those who have some central objection to violence and warfare, and larger standing armies may encourage more wars. However, with only a volunteer military force, those with fewer options are often the ones who serve, aside from those with some particular moral or ethical position on the matter. Thus, the wealthy young adults do not serve. It is those same families who have an advantaged position in society.”

“Why not try this third option?” said Atropo. “Require some two or three years of national service for all young adults, upon reaching the age of majority, but permit one of several options. They may certainly choose the military. Yet, a number of community service alternatives should be considered equally acceptable, and should be equally noble. Thus, all will contribute in a variety of ways to the wellbeing of the Society, and young adults will learn what it takes to maintain the prosperity of their civilization. Furthermore, the poor, the rich, the middle class, may all serve side-by-side, and maintain a degree of equality, at least for the period of national service.”

“This would not mean that college would not be free,” said Elriver. “If anything, the services provided by these young adults might make it easier to make that possible. Certainly, following national service, the tradition would be to go to college, or perhaps, vocational options. Really, those two options ought to be considered of a similar and equally worthy route to pursue in terms of a career. Yet I have digressed.”

“Therefore, the morals, the ethics, to maintain the integrity of warfare,” said Showsh, “Ought to include only developing and researching weapons that cause limited casualties, and universal national service to encourage equality, among other purposes. The national service would provide for both the military needs, and the needy Sentients, and other righteous causes that require action and support around each Reflection World.”

“It is still a wonder that there may be such a thing as

Book V: Realities of Hell

a moral or ethical war,” said Droos. “Are there words in The Language of the Universe for warfare?”

“There are such words,” said Showsh. “Even there are words for both moral and immoral warfare. Loahueth, and even Sre, is a nuanced Language. It exists Beyond Good and Evil. You would be surprised, rather, how the Efforts of a Transcendent Forcang, of seemingly a Negative Nature, might serve The Good. It is a matter of how The Language of the Universe is used. The same is true of warfare.”

“Is it not the purpose of warfare to harm enough of the adversary that they offer no more resistance against the objective?” asked Droos.

“It may be true that the politicians who direct the war wish to achieve their objectives,” said Elriver. “To do this they may do so in a variety of ways. Of course, a moral, and ethical leader, who has integrity, exhausts all diplomatic options first. In reality, a war, in which Sentients are actually harmed, should only be fought for purposes of True Defense. There really is no other rationale. It might be argued that if denied fundamental resources, such as food or water, then a state must go to war to secure these needs. Certainly, many histories begin with wars over such resources. Yet, as civilization develops, treaties may be signed, and trade and economics established that permit access to a variety of goods and services even if a nation-state does not itself have them. It does reduce national security—but also increases international cooperation and diplomacy. Therefore, any modern or advanced civilization has no real excuse to fight over resources. Diplomacy would work just fine.”

“If a war becomes necessary, for any reason,” said Atropo, “The leaders may instruct the generals or strategoes to use a variety of tactics. They may be instructed to be cautious with life, or very liberal with taking life. Both may have different results in the short term and long term. A moral and ethical leader would always aim to harm as few Sentients as is required to achieve the objective. Perhaps even the use of technology may permit a success without any physical violence. There are numerous other instructions that may be given in a time of war, that cause different types of harm, or misery, both during and after the war. A leader who follows The Journey to The Good, and lives The Good Life, always chooses the least harm, and the slightest misery. Even, that may mean not waging the war in the first place, or surrendering to avoid

unnecessary casualties. Being righteous and good must come before pride or nationalism.”

“It would seem to suggest that while the state of war is to be avoided at all costs,” said Droos, “Like other Greys in Reality, there are Rules. Warfare would seem a Grey in Reality.”

“It is certainly a Grey,” said Elriver. “I am not prepared to say that it is a Thorn.”

“You do not see war as an ultimate flaw in Reality?” said Droos.

“Some wars must be fought,” said Showsh. “Where harm and suffering occur, sometimes there is such thing as a battle that must be won. That still means that the rules of warfare must be followed. Yet, without that resource, millions, or billions may die, or face slavery or ethnocide.”

“Would it not be the case that all manner of sacrifices and compromises should be made to avoid such a war?” said Droos.

“The line must be drawn somewhere,” said Atropo. “If a Society is willing to commit mass atrocities against its own people, what else is it capable of doing? The violation of fundamental Sentient rights may only go so far. Eventually, intervening to protect those rights, and making the statement that some violations in the name of internal policy go too far, is required by Good Societies. Even if the Stakes are as High as May Be, Such a War Must Be Fought.”

“It would certainly be easier if the Stakes were lower,” said Droos. “If scientists had been more responsible, and the worst weapons and technologies had been skipped, or never researched, the ability of mass casualties would be avoided. Wars might be fought, but the world would not be at stake in the same way.”

“We discussed this,” said Elriver. “The world has to agree, among Good Societies, what the standard is, the line, at which it is worth risking the world. If that line is crossed, then no threat is too much. It would seem that the mass casualties of millions or billions is a line too far.”

“Does The Alliance of the Multiverse hold Forcang to account for atrocities?” said Droos.

“It does,” said Showsh. “Though there is much that goes on without their knowledge. Grand Elder Forcang and even Elder Forcang are powerful Sentients, and get away with many Evil deeds. Those who do the worst, they will certainly spend a Sentence in the Tree Canopy.”

Book V: Realities of Hell

“That does not mean that Forcang do not do terrible things,” said Atropo. “They also invent terrible weapons for both war, and immoral, unethical designs for all manner of exploration and existence. It is good to know that some receive Justice for their actions. Too many, though, do not.”

“Is that not just the system that permits the War that is a Thorn?” said Droos. “In a system of enforced laws, where the rules of warfare may dependably be enforced, perhaps there is some hope of temperance. Yet clearly, the state of nature of Sentients is such that Warfare is a Thorn.”

“I see your observation,” said Showsh. “Certainly, a reality with better Sentients, in better Societies, that function morally, ethically, and with integrity, is one of the goals of this philosophical dramatic narrative. Yet, since that is a distant accomplishment, likely to be far away, I will welcome your Assertion that War is a Thorn.”

They walked on again, for half a day, in silence, until they reached a Valley. Their Descent was steep, and Droos noticed that no snow, or frost, or metal lay in the Realm. Yet it was still cold Beyond comfort. In the Valley, towards the bottom, were Endless Rows of Stone Tables. Upon the Tables were Sentients, in Agony. They lay upon one stone slab, that rose eight feet above the ground. Yet an equal stone of size and measure was placed upon them. They were crushed by The Force of Stone.

There, towards the center, was a short, but large man, with wild hair. He writhed in particular agony, and called out for mercy. Droos was interested, and approached. She looked over at Showsh, who signaled to the attending Devils. In a methodical process, they moved The Stone, and with a stretch and painful groan, the man slowly stood, putting two feet on the ground for the first time in an endless eon, or so it seemed.

“What is the nature of this Realm?” asked Droos. “Do you believe that you have been treated fairly to be here?”

“This is The Field of Dreamers,” said the man slowly, looking at Droos.

Then he did a quick bow, before returning to his posture.

“Why should Dreamers be so Punished and Damned?” said Droos.

“It depends on the Dream,” said the man. “Is it a dream for Good, or for Evil? Does it harm, or does it help? Sometimes, the result is as important as the intent. The intent of the Dreamer

may be to save the world, but the words may prove as poisonous as hemlock. Sentients may drink them and die a slow death. Was that the effect of my words, my poetry?"

"Tell me, Dear Sir," said Droos. "What led you to be here?"

"I was a poet in life, Dear Queen of Angels," said the man. "I dared to dream, and think of both vibrant pictures, and ideas for repairing the world, the universe, and more. Such dreams are perilous. They are not always welcome."

"They are only dreams, right?" said Droos.

"What inspires a Sentient to rise in the morning and go tend to the field, or feed his children, or go to work?" said the man.

"I suppose often there is some foundation of religious belief, or philosophy," said Droos. "Also, some inspiration from artwork, or motivation from a beloved sports team, or positive affirmations from friends and family."

"It would seem that the poet may have a role to play," said the man. "For words are powerful, as is knowledge. If a woman rises with the right thought, she may run a marathon. With the wrong thought, she may smother her child."

"Are words really capable of inspiring such variety in Sentient behavior?" said Droos. "May they move humans to love or to war or to build?"

"Words may do all of those things," said the man. "Furthermore, they are abstract, in a way that carries different meaning for every reader. No two readers understand the same poem in the like manner. Even the same Sentient, looking at a poem, a book, a second time, may experience it differently."

"Then how did your Reflection World experience your poetry?" asked Droos.

"It was taken as an insult, as sacrilege and blasphemy, and as bigotry," said the man. "For some, it was sanction for all of those things. For others, it was a symbol of class and power and disparity. Where the poems spoke of love, the readers saw hatred. Where it talked of life, they saw death. Thus, all of the intent and purpose in the universe went for naught. Rather, in the end, humans were inspired, but for Evil by the poetry."

"Did you write words that were too complex, simply to make it unreasonably complex?" said Droos. "You should recall the words of a great sage; 'Eschew obfuscation.'"

"Only that is a joke," said the man. "I wrote for myself,

Book V: Realities of Hell

to express my desire to create artwork. I wrote because I had something I wanted to say, and I wanted the opportunity to share it with others once it was complete. As an afterthought, I had some distant hope that maybe I would make some token income from the poetry. Yet if some small number of Sentients, of humans, read my work, and paid some token amount of money, looking at my finished product, than all would be well.”

“How did the matter turn out so poorly?” said Droos.

“Many Sentients did read it,” said the man. “They read it before it was finished, and they read it after it was finished. My poetry was taken without permission, and enjoyed with no attribution or credit given. Regardless of that, I was very fortunate that so many enjoyed my artwork. Only, most learned a dark lesson from it. Rather than love, peace and tolerance, the message gleaned was quite the opposite.”

“How is that your fault?” said Droos. “For those that considered the incomplete version, then they never knew what you really meant to say. As for those who waited and read the officially published version, you cannot be accountable for how others react to your artwork. All artwork is beautiful. If it happens that in a generation most respond negatively, or are inspired to Evil actions, that is a product of the time.”

“Nonetheless, I was The Dreamer, who dared to dream,” said the man. “I might have enjoyed an honest job, and focused on my family, my friends, and lived a simple, full life. Instead, I dreamed that I had a message to write down, and posted it for the public to see. Is that not narcissism? Am I not responsible if the reaction is Evil?”

“The Artist is not responsible for the reaction of the Viewers,” said Droos. “Art is a free expression. The right to freedom of expression and freedom of speech provides that any art may be produced in any manner or fashion. It may be published in a reasonable way for the public to see. The option of those who do not like it is not to view it, or read it, or talk about it. For those who do browse and consider it, and interpret it for Evil, and commit Evil because of It, that is Their Challenge.”

“Nonetheless, I am clearly guilty,” said the man. “I still had a choice in my poetry. I am not saying I should have been prohibited or persecuted for what I wrote. Yet I might have written about rainbows, and mountains, and flowers. I also chose to write about politics, and religion, morality, ethics, and integrity. That is

narcissistic. Further, they are topics more likely to incite, both for action and confusion. Sure, the dramatic narrative had some nice pictures. Yet I should have stuck to that. Why do the philosophy?”

“The history of Sentients was and will be filled with philosophers, writers, poets, and dreamers,” said Droos. “They have written about the utmost limits and angles of Reality, of Knowledge, of Morality, and Ethics, and even Aesthetics. You were not the first, and you will not be the last. Surely, for merely talking about these subjects, from I would assume an uninformed perspective, that might not cause damage worthy of Damnation? Are we not all Dreamers at times?”

“It depends on the extent of the dream and the consequences,” said the man. “I wanted to create a message that would inspire a better Society, and for humans to think, at least, on ways of being good, and following laws, and the reasons for doing that. How did that turn out? What damage did it cause in reality? For that, I am damned. Perhaps, the needs of my Society were not for a Dreamer, but for many more Producers, and pragmatic pretty pictures, to placate the norms of civilization.”

“I still do not see how most, if not all of these Dreamers deserve a better fate,” said Droos. “My Judgement is that this Realm needs some significant improvements.”

“You are kind to consider Mercy, Dear Queen of Angels,” said the man. “Yet, until such a time, I ask that I be returned to my Decree and Sentence. For I Know the part I played. Now I must be purified. Perhaps in the next life, I will be in a more advantaged position.”

“What a bold statement, Dear Sir,” said Showsh. “Droos, we will consider your request.”

Then the Sovereign nodded at The Devils, who helped the man return to The Stone Table. Once more, the Upper Stone was placed upon him, and he writhed and groaned in agony, an endless eternity of pain. Droos looked out among this field of dreamers, and thought that perhaps this portion of Hell, of all the others she had seen thus far, was less than ideal. She was not certain that all dreamers, even those with powerful or meaningful results, deserved such an afterlife.

They continued their walk through the Valley of the Dreamer, and at the end of the day they ascended the far side. There they beheld in front of them what looked like a great cube of ice; or cubes. Rather, endless rows of blocks of ice spread as

Book V: Realities of Hell

far as the eye could see. They were colder than water ice, rather, the solid of some gas, like nitrogen. To make matters worse, there were metal rods connected to and between all of the cubes. Great currents of electricity were conducted, and the sound of crackling and sizzling could be heard. Yet the ice did not melt. A faint scent of burning flesh reached their noses. Still, these Soul Fragments did not expire, and suffered this Damnation for some eternity.

Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo Descended the far side of the hills, and into the broad impact crater in which the Field of Ice lay, in great stacks. There was a wooden stairway, ornate, and topped with obsidian. Descending into the canyon, they reached the bottom. Then they were walking through, row after row.

The Queen of Angels had to consider if such fates were really Justice. That was a digression of thought, and she knew that a Decree was not meant to always been aesthetic in terms that Reflection Mortals might appreciate them. Rather, they were a Purifying Force meant to improve the positioning of the Whole Soul for either a better Eternity in the afterlife, or for most, a more advantaged position upon Rebirth. It was not pretty. Perhaps it was Justice, however harsh.

“Am I meant to Judge the morality, the ethics, and the integrity of this Realm?” said Droos. “It defies the Senses of Mortality. It is a good thing I was Promoted, and My Senses are More Keen. This Destination, to which we have Traveled Far, will Require Careful Thought.”

“A great sage once said, ‘Be deliberate in judgement,’” said Showsh. “You should choose wisely, and carefully, and then commit to your decisions.”

“So far I have mostly seen a Firmament of Justice,” said Droos. “There were some exceptions, and imperfections.”

“That is quite a compliment,” said Elriver. “As for the exceptions, We will have to discuss how those might be improved, one Queen to Another.”

“Still, I fear the rest of Damnation, and this trek through Hell,” said Droos. “I felt like I barely escaped the clutches of The Devils, while still living myself. Still I feel that pain lingering. Maybe I will turn a corner, and be back in that room, on that rack.”

“There is a reason preparation must be made for this Descent,” said Atropo. “I would expect some recovery will be required upon the Ascent from Perdition as well. We speak of the need for help with divergences of Whole Self, and pain to emotion,

mind, and spirit. That is also true for Forcang who suffer. Yes, even Greater Beings seek help from Professionals. Only, those They Seek, and Who Answer, Know the Abstract Dimensions in a Way that is Superior.”

“You think I need to see a Professional?” said Droos.

“We all do, from time to time,” said Elriver. “The Multiverse is a Beautiful Place, but Complex and Difficult and Painful. Forcang exist to Treat Harm and Pain, of all sorts. In the end, while the titles differ, the purpose is similar.”

“Well first I must survive this ordeal, beginning with this Field of Ice,” said Droos. “I have strength, though, knowing that I am here with you, Dear Love of My Life, and the rest of my family.”

“You have many who love and cherish you, Dear Love,” said Showsh. “Now, for Strength a while longer, and to Judge the Axioms of the Lowest Hell. The Lieutenant of baetOAK must have an answer. It is necessary to fully explore morality and ethics and integrity to return and save your people, or to humble Tzefee. First we take the steps through one more Field, through one more Canyon. We will go together.”





Chapter 2

War from Insincerity

The scent of burning flesh and thawing ice was in the air. Only, the ice, colder than cold, did not melt. Neither did the electric current, Living Lightning, consume flesh. Inside the ice cubes, the giant blocks, were Soul Fragments frozen, with terrible expressions upon their faces. If they were not completely still, in agony, surely there would be awful sounds of dismay.

“I must speak to one of these, in this Field, this Canyon,” said Droos.

“Very well, though be on your guard, for this is the Canyon of Insincerity,” said Showsh. “Without integrity, or morals or ethics, how will you know if these Soul Fragments tell the truth?”

“If this system works, it would be reasonable that some thousands of years, or at least one endless eon would provide some reform and humbling,” said Droos.

Elriver signaled at a group of eleven attending Devils, who approached a random cube of ice, and detached it, carefully, from the rows and columns. It seemed that the matrix formed was not disrupted by its removal. Now disconnected from the electric current, The Devil placed his hand upon it, and in one steady stream, the ice melted instantly, and fell to the ground in a stream of extremely cold liquid. Fortunately, The Four were sturdy, and the spray of such substances was not an obstacle.

There before them crouched a man. He was aged, and somewhat large, and he had blond hair. He hobbled out before the Queen of Angels, and then slowly stood.

“It is about time I received some respect in this place,” said the man. “I should be in the best accommodations of the afterlife. Angels should see to my every need, and those who I deem worthy. Yet the loser Judge dared to utter an Evil Decree upon me. You must be here to see that I arrive at my proper abode.”

“That is actually not why I am here,” said Droos. “I am interested to see what you think of your position in the afterlife, having been condemned to this Canyon of Insincerity. Do you believe that your actions in life earned you this Sentence?”

“Absolutely not!” called out the man. “I was a mighty King in life. In my nation I was the first and most important king in the history of my country. My followers saw me as none other than a prophet, a messianic figure. I brought redemption and salvation to the pathetic masses. I brought class to their dreary lives. All of those who objected were just losers, and did not deserve my providence.”

“Did your nation have a history of monarchy?” said Droos. “You were the first king? What was the form of government prior to your rule?”

“It claimed to be a democracy,” said the man. “Yet it was most corrupt. All anyone could talk about was rights, and equality, and bigotry by my friends and allies. In the end, we just wanted the real citizens of the nation to have their due, and everyone else to know their place. There was plenty of room for servants and janitors once all of the prestigious positions were filled. Why was it such a bad thing that I protected my people?”

“You say that in your lifetime, a semi-religious, political revolution placed you as the first King, with absolute power, no less, of a nation with a history of democratic traditions,” said Droos. “That nation also had a background of respecting equality, yet you focused entirely on one or a few groups, while the others were meant to polish your boots. Do you see how that undermines the dignity of everyone? In Society where everyone is not equal, everyone is a lowly servant. In contrast, in one where all are exalted, and valued, all are the elect, the prestigious.”

“There were also so many rules,” said the man. “A man should simply be able to look out for himself and his own. His only responsibility should be for his prosperity and those he honors. That is certainly how I approached the law, even as King. They even put me in prison for a time. In the end, I showed them. In the earliest days of my reign I had those who dared to lay hands on me, or enforce such draconian rules, jailed, tortured, and executed.”

“You had officers of the court and peace officers slain, and public servants who managed the justice system as well, simply because you thought you were above the law?” said Droos. “How

Book V: Realities of Hell

did your nation fair, once it was you making all of the decisions. I assume that you were able to run it as efficiently as you ran a business. The economy must have been better than ever, even if the happiness of the citizens and residents was at an all-time low.”

“That was the thing,” said the man. “Strangely, my approaches seemed to make the nation less prosperous economically. It seemed there were businesses that liked to operate with consistent rules, and certainly other countries wanted business partners and allies that respected the rule of law. They were fools. Why didn’t they honor my prophetic vision? My people saw the light that I offered. Yet the financial situation of my country got worse and worse. It took a civil war to establish my reign. Those dirty self-righteous rule followers should have obeyed me.”

“Did your country return to a democratic tradition after your reign, or did it maintain some kind of monarchy?” said Droos.

“I tried to established my family as the ruling dynasty,” said the man. “But really, I distrusted everyone, even my children. It took so long to establish a line of succession, that one was only put together hastily at the last minute in my final days. One of my sons did become the second king of the nation. Yet a short civil war followed his incompetent reign, and he was replaced. I have spent most of my periods of Parole in The Palace or Sublimity, but I have gleaned that the third king of the nation combined my distaste for the rule of law and democracy with cruelty and intelligence. He ruled for over sixty dark years of terror. During those times, that nation I tried to make great again became an insular, brooding place of atrocities, human rights violations, and true depravity. I truly ignited a phase in the history of my nation that history would never forget. In the end, even my people, who I sought to exalt were persecuted by the third king, as was everyone. The fourth civil war is what truly laid the country to waste with bombs carpeting all of the cities, and many towns. Of course, it was my Vision that laid the foundation for that fate.”

“You seem to have become unusually contemplative,” said Droos. “Do you have anything to say about the value of axioms, about the rule of law?”

“I have had over ten thousand years to consider this point,” said the man. “In life, I was ultimately poor at business, and I was a poor leader. Really, what I should have done was focus on a simple life of repairing and protecting myself. I should have

endeavored to make myself great again, before anyone else.”

“Do you think you would have benefited from some psychological treatment?” said Droos.

“In that life I never would have said so,” said the man. “I barely would have seen a doctor for a broken leg. My insincerity would lead me to believe I knew the answer to everything, and I might solve every problem on my own. Yet it destroyed my nation, my family, my people, even before the Warming of the World laid All to Waste, and began a Second Darkness. I needed help for elements of my own past. I required treatment, not a throne, either of divine or temporal legitimacy.”

“It is good to see that you have experienced some reflection, and humbling, while you have been here,” said Droos. “Do you see a reason that you received this Decree?”

“Nothing will make me think I am worthy of this decree!” said the man. “Do you think I was some tyrant? I was saving my nation. The fact that so many took me for granted, and my family proved worthless, and unsanctimonious successors took power and brought the country down, all of that is not my fault.”

“You seem to be conflicted,” said Droos. “Although it is good to see a beginning of contemplation in this place. Perhaps another ten thousand years, or an endless eon or two, will have you considering a reason why you might be here.”

“I should be in Heaven,” said the man. “Mostly in The Palace, although some Choicer locales of Gon Eden would be acceptable as well. You’re the Queen of Angels. Go make it happen!”

“I will bring your suggestions to the appropriate Officials,” said Droos. “However, there is a consequence for immoral and unethical deeds, and actions that lack integrity in life. You are beginning to be purified of those choices. Do not be so confident that you do not have brother Soul Fragments in any of the Heavens of Drerpo, or other Neutral Domains. Yet, your time here is Decreed. You will have to make the best of it for a while longer.”

“You are just another loser,” said the man. “I suppose I will have to go there myself.”

He began to walk away, down the rows of the Canyon of Insincerity, until the devils stopped him.

“I appreciate your time, Dear Sir,” said Droos.

The Queen glanced at the devils, who quickly brought the man back, and The Devil waved his hand, and the man froze once

Book V: Realities of Hell

more, in a crouching position. Then they positioned the frozen block back on the matrix, and the electric current passed through it once more. There was a faint smell of burning flesh.

Showsh gave her a hug, and a kiss.

"I am sure that was not pleasant," he said, before leading her, and the others, away from the Canyon.

They went to the North, and traveled another few days. The snows returned, and soon, a mountain range of ice rose up before them. It was ice of the same substance. Certainly if they were not who they were, contact with it would be deadly. Even so, they had to be cautious. Even Angels and Forcang were not impervious to everything.

"Where is it that we are headed to next?" asked Droos.

"We are going to the Third Level," said Showsh.

Passing into the mountains, on a broad path, made of billions of obsidian pellets, they reached a doorway in the side of a tall cliff. It was made of obsidian, and passing inside, they were surrounded by darkness. There they walked, for a time. Then they reached a large, open space, and the first part that Droos noticed, was that it was very warm and moist. The room they entered was filled with strangely colored trees and plants that seemed to drip venom. A desk made of mahogany exhibited a particularly fierce Supervising Devil. She scowled at them, before waving them through. The trees and plants parted, them being careful not to brush up against any, and they were on a brightly lit path traveling further down.

Eventually, they reached an enormous space, with an infinite sky. Yet trees and plants filled it all, and it was dense, and dripping with venom. Pools of poison bubbled up from the ground, and it would appear nothing might live here, with the exception of strange Sentients and Creatures that had evolved to feed on the toxins, and produce even more potent brews themselves. Droos wondered if there were stings here that were lethal even for them.

Then they were walking through the paths, and there was a dark, sinister beauty of sorts. Everything was alive, but it all had a way to snatch, sting, and end most Reflection Mortal, or Reflection Creature life. Certainly an alchemist or some maverick scientist might wish to travel here, and examine this wonder. Surely there was some positive purpose, and these poisons might be used to heal, instead of slay.

“We never did discuss the particular axioms of insincerity,” said Droos. “Why is it so perilous?”

“There is a reason one of our main purposes is to determine how to maintain integrity,” said Showsh. “Selfish Sentients lie for numerous reasons, mostly for power, or other individual gains. Using those lies to motivate others to cause harm, to hate, to destroy, such are the consequences of insincerity.”

“Information and knowledge are powerful,” said Elriver. “Even a Sentient who follows The Journey to The Good relies on honest and reliable information to make decisions. If it turns out that it is incorrect, the wrong decision may be made. For one who is insincere, this information and knowledge are incorrect on purpose to achieve an objective.”

“Sometimes a Sentient is so hurt, lacks so much self-esteem, they are unaware of lying,” said Atropo. “They do require the services of a professional, to treat the trauma, disability, or hurt, and to unravel the web of lies that have been created as a result. These fantasies are created as a defense. It is a false reality that is easier to dwell within than the real world.”

“It would seem some fantasies are acceptable,” said Droos. “Certainly I have read a good book or watched a movie, or enjoyed the escapes of an immersive experience.”

“Some wish their fantasies to exist in real life,” said Elriver. “They apply false narratives to their actions, and create their reality to suit them. Their charisma and sincerity encourages others to believe them. How many wars have been started, and enmities generated by lies, and imagined Evils and troubles? In the end, it was the Insincere Sentient who required help.”

“It would seem the matter of honesty is one of the most key axioms,” said Droos. “Without being able to trust the facts, even those trying to be good are unable to make reasonable decisions. Part of socializing children should be teaching them how to think critically, and distinguish between false information, and quality news. Yet such skills would not be necessary if there were fewer Sentients who were Insincere.”

“In a way it is the denial of one of the key philosophical pursuits,” said Showsh. “Here we are discussing the best political axioms, and epistemology, and morals, and ethics (with a little aesthetics). Yet, insincerity seems to counter philosophy of knowledge. For it undermines the very foundation of truth and fact. Rather, all Sentients should endeavor to maintain their

Book V: Realities of Hell

Integrity, their honesty, at all times. Conversation should be as direct as possible, without innuendo. They should be clear, with attempts to avoid confusion. With Sentients and humans who make such an effort, knowledge may be trusted. Yet, because we live in a world where many are Insincere, the wise course is to be forever Skeptical, and think critically at all times. Thus, established, trusted sources must be used for facts and the likes of journalism.”

As they finished the talk of Insincerity, they broke out of the forest, and came across a Garden. Or rather, it was a collection of Green Houses. Surrounding it were fabulous flowers and succulents, that brimmed with the most exotic poison. Lying about, here and there, on the ground, writhing in various states of disrepair, were Soul Fragments. It appeared they had received doses of some of these substances. Devils tended to them carefully and dutifully. Yet there was no such thing as True Death here, and even those who suffered such, only woke the next day, and experienced a new lethal cocktail, or something almost as bad.

Droos walked among these mostly comatose bodies, and approached The First Green House. It was hot inside, and filled with even more unusual plants and even Creatures that ran about, and in some instances, fed on some of the bodies. This was certainly a Damnation worthy of the Lowest Hell. The Queen of Angels approached a large woman who was barely conscious, strewn out on the ground, next to a fern. Several creatures like scitters, though with the mouths and heads of insects were gnawing at her fingers, and nose, and feet, and those were partially consumed. They would be instantly repaired at the dawn, only to be fed upon once more.

Giving the signal, eleven devils approached the woman, and the Supervisor waved a clawed hand. It seemed the injuries were instantly healed, and a few moments later, she sat up! These Servants seemed to also know how to heal! What a broad repertoire. Droos walked over and helped her to her seat. Using a wave of her hand and some Sre that she herself had learned, she tried her own ability at retrieving something for the woman’s benefit; perhaps a comfortable chair or sofa to recline upon. As Atropo’s eyes went wide, a pleasant stool appeared, and the Soul Fragment took her seat.

“That must feel better,” said Droos.

She tried a few more words of Sre, to issue some

refreshments, but managed only a cup of decaffeinated tea. Droos handed it to her.

“It is generous,” said the woman. “Thank you. There is little mercy in this place. Only, there is The Decree and Sentence.”

“Do you think that you received an overly harsh sentence?” asked Droos.

“I once did,” said the woman. “I have been here for an endless eon. I once believed that any type of business was acceptable. No one might tell me what good or service I could sell or provide. In life, I provided many useful services and goods to numerous grateful clients, and I employed, both paid workers, and slaves, that aided me. My brews and concoctions might cure disease, or enhance love, or take life if need be. They caused euphoria and happiness. Countless Sentients were addicted for their lifetimes, however short. I was a very wealthy and powerful woman.”

“It seems that life treated you well,” said Droos. “Would you not be spiteful to be in such a place upon death?”

“Well, my life did not end well,” said the woman. “One of my slaves slipped one of my brews into my fish salad one day, and as so happened, the same bowl my family was served from during our midday meal. We all perished at once. I have learned during my Paroles that it was she who took over upon my demise; though she ran my empire into the ground, and was herself slain young by another enterprising businesswoman. So the snake continued to eat its tail.”

“Then you spread the seeds of your own destruction,” said Droos. “Not only your end, but that of those you loved.”

“I did not think it would make me so emotional,” said the woman. “I spent most of my life with emotional detachment to do my work. Yet watching my family die around me was painful. It was as if, in those final moments, nothing I had done my whole life mattered. In my final moments of breath, I thought if only I had led a simple life, and cooked regular meals, worked a basic job, and we all lived a pleasant, normal existence. Instead, we were all dead, painfully, by my own invention.”

“You did once defy the Decree?” said Droos.

“There were many hundreds of years of my Afterlife here that I slipped through semi-wakeful states of anger and despising,” said the woman. “Eventually, after many Paroles, when I was fully awake, I had the chance and clarity to realize that my goal to

Book V: Realities of Hell

have power, to be something, was some emptiness in myself. It might have been treated in any number of ways, to fill that hole. I created terrible recipes, and sent servants and slaves to bring misery to others, that those endless torments would accompany my agony. What if I had talked to a priestess of the temple, or some professional of my time? I admit, we did not have the resources in those days that those of the Future take for granted. Perhaps conversations about my youth, and my hard upbringing, and the trauma I faced, with a clergywoman used to such conversations, would have helped. There were other choices. I chose the method of solace, and at that moment signed my death warrant, and that of my family's. Furthermore, I earned my Sentence, My Decree in this Realm. I only hope that in some endless eon from now, a Soul Fragment, a sister will retrieve my sad, wary Self, and we may Merge, and work towards Rebirth. There is so much I want to do better."

"It is good to find a Soul Fragment who accepts her Sentence," said Droos. "How many here have trouble even now realizing why they are here?"

"It takes time and separation," said the woman. "Yet, after that endless eon for me, I now know about my many terrible mistakes, and my Evils performed in life. I suspect it is the same for others. This is a worthy consequence for me, if I am even capable of being Purified. I only thank you for your hospitality, Queen of Angels. It is more than I deserve. Perhaps I will earn such a privilege in the Next Life."

"With these Realizations in your Afterlife, even in baetOak," said Droos. "It is certain that upon Rebirth, you will be more advantaged than you otherwise might have been. Certainly, matters would have been better with more Righteous Deeds in your Previous Life. Yet, some humbling Between Lives offers some additional chances."

"As I said, you are generous," said the woman. "Are you not the one who increased Parole to two times per year? What other Celestial Bureaucrat would make such a request?"

"I see news travels quickly around here," said Droos, with a small smile. "That change was due. It is also good to know that despite these conditions, there is some communication and dialogue between Soul Fragments."

"At times it is almost more of a feeling," said the woman. "Changes in the mood of the Collective Whole Self Resonate

throughout Realms, and Eventually, Throughout the Domain. Your offer of twice as many Parole days made an impact.”

“Did you Know about this Resonance?” said Elriver.

“I have heard rumor of it,” said Showsh. “I always thought some type of socializing in any Domain was worthwhile, even in baetOak.”

“I think it is a great virtue,” said Atropo. “There is companionship and comradery here too, even of a limited kind.”

“I thank you for your kindness, but I wish to resume my Sentence,” said the woman. “If you see one of my sister Soul Fragments in the Heavens of Drerpo, give her my regards. I offer my prayer to the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo, and that soon I may earn the Exaltation of Merging.”

Showsh nodded his head at the devils, and The Devil politely helped the woman off her stool, and handed her finished cup of tea to a colleague. Then, she was lain on the ground, and The Devil passed a clawed hand over her. First she began shaking, then she slipped back into a semi-conscious state, uttering some moans of agony. Quickly, the strange creatures returned, and began gnawing on her extremities.

Another day passed in The Jungle of baetOak, the Realms of Exotic Toxins and Poisons. As the light of day dawned at the next, they reached a wide lake, fed by a source Unknown. It seemed to all be Toxin, rather than water. That was a frightening thought. There was a dock at the lakebed, and a small line of devils of various ranks. They alighted boats, wooden ferries that traversed the lake. Guarding its banks was an enormous Jaguar with Five Heads. It saw them and charged.

Upon reaching Droos, it stopped, and growled. Still, the Queen of Angels stood her ground, and then, ever so slightly, reach out her hand, and placed it on the nose of the head in the front. She spoke some words of calming in Sre. This time it worked, and the Guardian Servant stepped aside, back to the Lake. They reached the ferries, and soon they were being taken across the Strange Substances Beneath.

“If there is a Heavenly Domain of Sublimity,” asked Droos, “Why would a Soul Fragment receive Chastisement for creating substances, or doing business in them?”

“Sublimity is generally a Heaven for some of the Soul Fragments of those who lived a lawful existence, and a productive existence, in Societies that have a structure that permit for both

Book V: Realities of Hell

indulgence and work,” said Showsh. “If those substances may be purchased legally and locally, it is likely that Sentient will find a place in Sublimity.”

“Those who operate outside the law in the black market must use all sorts of means of enforcement,” said Elriver. “That is the most insidious part of the business. Normal, lawful businesses may simply sue each other if they do not like a type of business practice. Furthermore, most respect the judgement of the court. If a black market business does not like how it is being treated, all manner of harmful tactics may be used to accomplish advancement. That is an inherent Evil. It is also the case that most of these Substances are naturally harmful. It is one thing to use them as an addict, even in a Society with a structure for doing so legally. It is another to produce them, even to sell to legal vendors. Certainly, if the sellers are part of the black market, the matter is compounded.”

“Why not just make all substances that are inherently harmful illegal, and prevent their sale?” said Droos.

“The challenge is that Sentients want to make their own decisions on the matter,” said Atropo. “There are too many who simply enjoy substances of this sort, and other semi-harmful activities, too much. If they are prohibited, and the legal supply is removed, it will simply be replaced by an illegal business to offer it on the black market. All of the Sentients using those substances in the Universe may face possible jail time, and still, there will be those who want to use such substances. Rather, a meticulously careful system of regulation must be managed instead, to provide these substances in a safe and legal manner, and in a relatively affordable way. Government funds may instead go toward rehabilitation for those who desire it, and education to prevent addiction in the first place.”

“Will there not still be some who wish lower prices, or less regulation, then even exists in such a system?” said Droos. “Will they not still rely on the black market for better prices, and easier access?”

“Absolutely,” said Elriver. “And in some ways it is important to provide some options for criminal enterprise. There will always be those, for whatever reason, and this has been discussed elsewhere, who simply prefer being involved in such businesses. Yet, if the product being moved is one that slightly undercuts those provided by legal means, then the market is

not so hot with illicit competition that the worst inclinations of that system must be used. Let the black market provide tax free substances on a given street corner. Many will still be happy to pay a little more to know that it is a clean substance obtained legally. But there will still be a business and money to be had for the enterprising black market, and their desires and goals. Everyone wins in such a system.”

“It would seem that those who receive such a Decree of Damnation are those who engaged in the worst inclinations of such a system, and in a dysfunctional one,” said Droos. “A Sentient who harmed hundreds or thousands or even more, and used all means necessary to promote their product, without scruples. It would seem that it is for they that such a Realm of baetOAK exists.”

“So says the Queen of Angels, and the Judge of these Realms,” said Atropo.

The ferry slowly crossed the lake. It was a calming experience, despite the peril. Droos certainly would not want to enter those substances. Yet, she had developed some poise and confidence while in baetOAK. The Descent had taught her a little more about herself. After all, she was not here to stay, as a Soul Fragment, but to Judge the Realms.

Then the ferry jilted, and she nearly flew into the liquid. Showsh caught her, and she fell back on him. The Toxins were calm once more. Then the craft moved once more, and three of the devils in the boat with them lost their balance and fell in with a cry. Then she saw a large beast, its mouth snapping upon the devils, consuming them, even the Servants! It was a creature of great intelligence and of slime and might.

“It looks like we have found one of the native Creatures of Power, Dear Father,” said Atropo. “I would guess a Foreigner of the Anomalous Subtype? I would suggest negotiations.”

“Negotiations with that?” remarked Droos, with only slight astonishment.

“She is not just some monster to be speared on a harpoon,” said Elriver. “Rather, she is a Sentient, with all the rights that affords. Just because she hunts Angels and Forcang, and probably Spirits too, does not mean she will not listen to reason.”

“Great Being!” cried Showsh. “We apologize for disturbing your meal. Our errand does not concern you. If you let us pass in peace, then go about your ways in comfort.”

Book V: Realities of Hell

With a burble, and a wave of the Toxin that rushed towards the ferry, the Creature of Power rose above the light waves. Elriver spoke some words, not Sre, it seemed like a Power Word, or even magic of a sort, and some sort of glimmering shield appeared. The wave passed over the bubble. Then the Thing of Slime and Bile and Tentacles Reared Before Them. It spoke in a language that Droos did not know.

“Interesting, She’s speaking High Vampiric,” said Atropo. “Dear Mother, how are you with your Dweehwailian languages?”

Without interruption, Elriver stood, commandingly, as the shimmering shield vanished, and spoke a similar stream of words back to The Creature. Showsh meanwhile uttered a command, in words similar to the Power Word, but more complex, and suddenly Droos understood, as though the conversation were directed into her mind.

“What is your desire, Noble Creature of Dweehwail?” said Elriver. “We merely wish to pass in peace. Everything else is yours. Merely, allow our task to reach completion.”

“You are more succulent than the normal Animals of this Land,” said the Creature. “I wished a more pleasant meal.”

“I may direct you to a source of succulents in this Domain, where you may find sustenance,” said Elriver. “What is your name, Noble Creature?”

“You have such a Resource?” inquired the Creature. “My Name is Najareetoshmikostis.”

“Dear Najareetoshmikostis,” said Elriver. “I ask you to kindly delay your gratification, as Great Beings and Sentients are able, for better fare in the future. Will you let us pass in peace. I have this box.”

With that, Elriver raised a metal box, and it glowed bright with green light. Then it flew in an arc, and landed on a far corner of the lake.

“Follow the light in the sky, and you will find in the box directions to the Fount of Sustenance that I will provide,” said Elriver. “Now only let us pass.”

“You are a worthy Forcang,” said Najareetoshmikostis. “I will depart, and let you pass without contest. I will follow the arc of light in the sky and examine this box. Yet if it is empty, I will surely return with a vengeance. However, if you prove true, and this Fount is real, you will have my allegiance. You will have made a friend today.”

“You are of a Noble Race,” said Elriver. “Dear Najareetoshmikostis, go in peace, with the blessings of Drerpo. I have been true, and you will be pleased.”

So the Creature of Slime sunk back into the Toxins, slowly this time, and then a large ripple rolled quickly across the lake, following the light. Meanwhile, they got on their way once more. They did not see the Creature of Power again, and Droos did not bring it up until they had reached the far side of the lake, and were on the on slightly less Toxic shore of the Jungle. They began walking through the trees, vines, and plants once more.

“How could you let such a Creature Live?” said Droos. “Clearly She meant to feed on endless number of Sentients.”

“If we had fought Her, it is unclear all of us would have survived, and we may at least have been injured,” said Showsh. “For now it is easy enough to create a unique race in baetOAK to satiate the needs of Najareetoshmikostis, along with the occasional devil. Sometimes it is important to look Beyond Good and Evil, and towards a Greater Good.”

“Is that not just another way of saying that the ends justify the means?” said Droos.

“With Her help, we might save the lives of dozens of races,” said Atropo. “Such Creatures are Intelligence and Powerful. Also, if Drerpo wages war, it is good to have allies like Her. It does not make me happy, and I dearly hope these Sentients live a good life before She consumes them, even in such a place.”

“They will be unique Sentients to baetOAK, so they will be an interesting form of life,” said Elriver. “Yet Life is Life, and Sentients are Sentients. It is a hard decision. Yet, we would be unable to save your people, let alone stop Tzefee, if we are all injured or dead, just as Dear Showsh stated. Sometimes it is necessary to choose the least bad option, rather than always picking the most righteous choice. That is because in some instances, the least bad decision may save billions, while the most righteous kills everyone.”

“That is a hard morality and ethic to consider,” said Droos. “It seems to be saying that it is essential for a Sentient to always be moral, ethical, and maintain integrity, unless absolutely necessary.”

“The notion is that to follow the Journey toward The Good, a moderation between Good and Evil, a Dualism, must be maintained,” said Showsh. “In some instances, to be Purely Moral, is in fact Immoral. To be Purely Ethical, is to be Unethical. Or

Book V: Realities of Hell

else, how would the Creator, or the Sovereign, or for that matter, The Judge, choose the attribute of Mercy, over Justice, in issuing a Decree. Sometimes, lenience is required. It is better, after all, to save those billion, rather than to all die in an instant.”

“I suppose such nuances are the realm of Greater Beings,” said Droos. “It certainly seems complex. I enjoy these lessons in morality, ethics, and integrity. Like fine wine, they are not always simply sweet. Transcendent Beings, Forcang who better Know the Abstract Dimensions must appreciate these fine distinctions. I look forward to becoming a full connoisseur.”

As such, the Creature of Power did not return, so the information contained in the glowing, green box must have been useful. Then something occurred to Droos.

“It is acceptable for such a Creature to consume both Mortal, Angel, and Forcang alike?” said Droos.

“I would prefer She stick to an all-vegetable diet,” said Elriver. “And if not that, then only Reflection Creatures. Yet some Creatures of Power are very particular. There seems to be some substance gained from consuming Sentients. Thus, I must (and have) created one race to suit this one. It is an unfortunate trade.”

“The reality is that a steady enough political alliance between a Subtype of Foreigner and The Alliance of the Multiverse may eventually result in the creation of Synthetics.”

“What are Synthetics?” said Droos.

“A Synthetic is a substitute, that provides all of the same nourishment, and that is at least as satisfying, or mostly as good, as the actual substance desired,” said Showsh. “There have always been those who have wanted to create a Synthetic to cure the endless wars between Vampires and Forcang. There have been successful Synthetics created between some major Subtypes and The Alliance of the Multiverse. Yet many remain undeveloped.”

“Simply getting to the stage, politically, where such Creatures of Power, are seen as worthy Sentients, worth investing in a cure, rather than monsters to be destroyed, has taken an endless eon,” said Atropo. “Even us, with our Vaunted conversations about equality, have some remaining prejudices. Yes, there are few Vampires or Dragons living openly in Forcang cities currently. There are many, though, who want to change that. If the only obstacle is the resource required for sustenance, than surely the Greatest Beings, the most powerful entities of Dweehwail, may find a solution in their research. Is it not morally

and ethically superior to try diplomacy, unless there is no other choice?”

“That is not to say that sometimes Creatures of Power have not been fought and slain?” said Droos.

“In True Defense, it is sometimes necessary,” said Elriver. “And of course, Subtypes differ greatly, and more importantly, individual personalities. Yet there is a notable majority in favor of normalization and Synthetics these days. Unfortunately, there is also a vocal minority, including many with political power, who object. We will see where the matter stands in a few more eons.”

Then they walked out of the edge of The Jungle of baetOak, and there they were, at the edge of the largest plant most Reflection Mortals would have ever seen. Droos, of course, had been to The Library, and enormous vegetation did not surprise her in the same way anymore. They gazed out at a vast space, with no ceiling. Below was a planet-sized carnivorous plant. It was wide open, revealing pointing teeth, and a pool of digestive fluids at the bottom of its mouth.

“Is that where we are going?” asked Droos.

“Into the mouth of the beast, or plant, as it were,” said Showsh.

“How are we going to get there?” said Droos.

“I would recommend practicing your high dive,” said Atropo. “Yet we should do it all at once. Once that mouth closes, it will be hard to escape.”

“Won’t that substance be toxic for us?” said Droos,

“It would be for a Reflection Mortal,” said Elriver. “But not for us. It will sting.”

On a count of seven, they dove into the mouth of the plant, doing all sorts of tricks and flips as they Descended. Finally they splashed into the Toxic Pool, and they heard a groan, and felt a shake, as the mouth of the colossal plant closed above them. Almost all the light was extinguished. Fortunately, Droos’ Keen Senses meant even dim light was no obstacle. This substance did sting! She hoped she would not have to float in it for too long.

As if in answer, Showsh dove into the pool, with reckless abandon, were he anything but a Greater Being. The others followed, and Droos guessed she should do the same. What about breathing? Only, she recalled that as an Angel, breathing was not technically required, though it was normally pleasant.

They Descended further, and deep, all the way to the

Book V: Realities of Hell

bottom. Stinging all over, they saw that they were in a graveyard of sorts. The bottom of the pool was littered with bones. Only these were bleached red and grey. They twinkled, as though the red were rubies. Then, in a shudder, Droos heard them groan. It appeared something was still alive down here.

“Welcome to the Mouth of Consumption,” said the Voice of Elriver, in her head. “Here the Soul Fragments who abused nourishment in life receive purification. There are many types of nourishment, and many who find a Soul Fragment placed here.”

“I would speak to one of them,” said Droos. “Is that possible?”

Elriver motioned at the devils swimming around in the toxins nearby, and they swam to one of the skeletons. When The Devil Supervisor touched it, quickly it emerged from the others and floated eleven feet above the bottom. Then in reverse, flesh, organs, and a whole body appeared, clothes and all. Once restored, the Devil pulled the Soul Fragment to a stalk of the plant in the center, and a doorway. They passed through, and so did The Four.

In the room, they found a chamber of sorts. The Damned Soul Fragment lay on the ground in rags, yet whole, for the first time in some endless eon. Then he rose, and stood, shaking himself, and stretching, and then shivering for a moment longer.

“Is it time for my Parole?” said the man. “Surely, it is too early.”

“I am here to Judge this Realm,” said Droos.

“Well it is about time,” said the man. “Does The Judge really believe that those who are simply guilty of enjoying the pleasures of life deserve some eternity in this Hell? What is it exactly that I did to earn such an end?”

“Tell me about the way you enjoyed these pleasures?” said Droos, maintaining her smile.

“I enjoyed food,” said the man. “Particularly, bread, and good steak, and sausage. There were few delicacies I did not appreciate. I ate copiously. Yet I could afford it, and I paid my bills, gave generous tips, and thanked all of the waiters and servers. I also learned to cook, and made my own food. All of the process I loved.”

“It seems like enjoying the physical world is a topic previously discussed,” said Droos. “Yet the conclusion was that moderation was key. Do you think that your world has the resources for every Sentient to enjoy food the way you did?”

“That is a good point,” said the man. “I really did eat meals big enough for three or four. Then again, I paid a price for five or six. Also, I drank plenty of wine and ale and other drinks. What is so wrong with enjoying life? It is not as if I had no profession. I was a successful man, and a productive, honest member of society. What is the issue with using my money and time to reap the rewards?”

“Have you ever heard of need?” said Droos.

“Yes, there are needy Sentients, those who cannot even afford basic food,” said the man. “There are children and adults who starve to death from famines, and die of thirst. All the while, I am eating enough for four. I suppose I might have found some way to give some of that to those who were hungry? Maybe I might have eaten enough for three, and given one meal. Or maybe I might have cut what I consumed in half, and given two meals per sitting. If I had the money, I might have been better to myself, and more generous to the massive needs of the world.”

“You seem to be recognizing the service to others,” said Droos. “Perhaps some argument might be made for endless overconsumption in a world where hunger is unheard of and none ever lack for a glass of water. I do not think that was your world. Where there are billions who have too little or no food, being someone who eats far too much is inexcusable.”

“Really it speaks to psychological problems I had,” said the man. “I ate my fears, my feelings, and my problems. Perhaps if I had seen doctors for the mind the same way as I had seen doctors of the body, I would have talked to one, and often. Maybe I would have found an alternative. Perhaps exercise and altruism might have become my therapy for easing my nervousness about life. Yet, I stuck with food and drink for my life. It was a good life. I suppose, I might have shared my blessings with so many others. Is it such a terrible thing to look out for myself, and not give as much as I should?”

“You did give some, as you said,” remarked Droos.

“There are many Sentients of your world who are thankful, I am sure, and some of that may be even food your help secured for the needy. I have no doubt that you have many Soul Fragments in the Heavens of Drerpo, and likely even Gon Eden. Perhaps you even found some places in The Palace. Yet, as you said, you might have done far more. Further, you might have cured your food obsession, and replaced it, as you said, with something healthier, and better

Book V: Realities of Hell

for both you and the world. There is certainly likely to have been some mitigation to your Decree because of your health condition of emotion, mind, and spirit. I would not fear about there being numerous Soul Fragments of yourself throughout baetOak.”

“You just met me, lady,” said the man. “I might disappoint you even further.”

Droos laughed.

“I am not The Judge,” said Droos. “I cannot alter The Decree. However, I do have some consideration of character. You do not seem very Evil. I suspect before long, in some nearer eternity, one of your Soul Fragments, a brother from the Heavens of Drerpo, will come looking. Upon Rebirth, you will have a new chance to do even better. Unless you would prefer an Eternity of feasting in The Palace?”

“I have had enough of food for many lifetimes,” said the man. “When my Soul Fragments find me, we will choose Rebirth, and our chance at a better life. I hope I have your blessing, Queen of Angels.”

“You certainly do, and I am sure also of the Creator, Sovereign, and Prince of the Universe,” said Droos. “Serve the rest of your sentence with faith of redemption, and Merging, and Rebirth. It will be less long than you think. Next time, I am certain that you will do better.”

The man smiled, and nodded to the devils nearby. Droos followed him, as he was led, out into the Toxic Digestive Pool. As soon as he entered it, his body began to dissolve, and be eaten alive. He shook, and groaned. The process took about twenty-two agonizing minutes, but he was once again bleached bones. Then he floated to the bottom of the pool once more. Somehow, he was still conscious, even now.

Returning to the Space at the Center of the Pool, Droos found that there was a hidden stairway on the other side. They Descended further, and soon found that they were in the Stem of the Plant. It was a long walk, on a spiral stairway. As they moved down, Droos thought some more about her conversation.

“Is it really Justice for a man to face such a penalty, for any eternity, for simply eating and drinking too much?” said Droos. “Is mere, inaction, such a crime?”

“To sit by while billions starve, and enjoy a feast,” said Showsh. “Maybe that might be forgiven a few times. For it to occur thousands of times over a lifetime, that is more than just a

passing mistake or imperfection.”

“Would Famine be a Thorn in Reality?” said Droos. “For that matter, are the existence of hunger and thirst, and ubiquitous Sentients that cannot be satiated, is that not more than even a Grey? It is a Full Thorn?”

“We just discussed this, and it is one of the arguable justifications for war,” said Elriver. “If a nation-state might really argue that their citizens and residents would starve without gathering some resource, then that would be a plausible argument. It would better for diplomacy to produce some type of trade for the product. Yet, no Sentient can reasonably expect anyone to willingly starve. Furthermore, no leader, or good ruler, will idly sit by and let her people lack for basic food and water and nutrition. If forced into a condition of famine, and in a region or continent it exists beyond the control of Society, that is a Thorn. Will it ever be wholly removed as a blight on civilization?”

“Would it not be possible, for example, in The City, to limit the existence of actual Famines, where Sentients died hungry or thirsty?” said Droos.

“Even in a well-organized Society of equality, and even The City had a long way to go,” said Atropo, “Logistics may limit the period of response to natural disasters, or civil strife. During those periods, weeks, months, and years may pass before enough resources may be provided by the infrastructure of Society to provide the basics. How many may die of famine, or certainly suffer, in such a time? I would state that Famine is still very much a Thorn. Even Forcang may be deprived of nourishment, and driven to be harmed of emotion, mind, and spirit.”

“I suppose inaction, to indulge greatly, while many or most others suffer, is a negligence, a recklessness, and willful decision,” said Droos. “Any Sentient who chooses to live in Society must accept that they owe something to the fellow citizens and residents who exist there. Those include fundamental rights, and among them, the right to basic food. Watching others deprived of this right, and doing nothing, while lavishing in it, is some kind of perversion.”

After a day of Descent, they reached the bottom of the stairway, and exited through an arch, into a broad plane, only it was covered by ferns. These were spider plants, large, and sinister in that they ran, and scampered like spiders. Some stood still, others had a visual similarity to the arachnid. Droos wondered if

Book V: Realities of Hell

they had a bight.

“They are poison if they bight you, and to touch the spikes at the end of the leaves,” said Showsh. “Be careful that they do not turn you into another Plant!”

Some tried, and approached them, but Elriver held aloft her hand, and bright light issued forth, and the Spider Plants fled. Then they were given wide space. There was a mist about the Space, grey, and wet, with toxins, and a smell of bad perfume. Droos looked around for any Soul Fragments, but they could not be seen. They began walking, in no particular direction. Eventually, they found a path that ran to the East, away from the Stem of The Plant.

The pathway was constructed out of black pearls, which was an oddity. Some actually liked such a stone, and the value of this might have been enormous. There must be some great ocean out there with many dead shellfish. Though, Droos supposed, likely these pearls were simply created absent any typical origin. Such was the mastery of Birthing the Celestial Domains of a Universe.

They followed the Pathways of Pearls for four days, and at the end, they found eleven enormous, abstract black pearls. They formed a ring. In the center was a Vein of Ruby, twenty-two feet tall. Around this they waited, and a light shown forth, grey and red. It illuminated the mists and clouds of Level Three. Then slowly, there was a rustle, as if hundreds, and thousand were approaching. They waited, and at the twilight of the fourth day, eleven giant spider plants scampered into the Pearl Shrine. Following them was an army of big spider plants. There were many thousands. Now they were cut off from the path, and would have to negotiate with these.

The spider plants seemed unusually intelligent, and they gathered, the giants, at one side of the Shrine. Then a leaf of one reached out, and a spark appeared! It was a red and grey flame, that ignited a merry fire in a neat spot on the ground. Then the Giant Ferns circled the fire, and a sound of rustling, and a speech that was wholly different from Sre was heard. There appeared to be some sort of culture shared among these Spider Plants.

The dance was complex, and more sparks of flame were juggled, and tossed, and the words of the song were sung, almost, in rustling of leaves that was not quite audible. It was beyond the Keen Senses, even of Droos, although Elriver, Showsh, and

Atropo stood, and seemed to understand it. They watched with admiration. Droos thought there were some advantages to being Greater Beings.

Finally the ritual ceased, and the Giants all sat, the Plants, on one side of the fire. One of them brought, seemingly, monkey birds, from an offering of the big ferns nearby. These were shared among the Giants, who greatly enjoy the feast. All the while Droos looked onward. Showsh tapped her shoulder.

“We should have something to eat too,” he said. “It is only polite.”

She saw that a picnic had been spread out on the other side of the Vein of Ruby, and there was simple food, and fire burning, naturally of white and black flames. Droos sat among them, and they ate in some silence, though Showsh started a tune, a melody in Sre, and The Four Sang along, for they knew the melody. Atropo recited a poem, his voice echoing across the misty void. Elriver took out a violin, seemingly from nowhere, and performed a short piece. Droos did not know what was expected, but she began to sing, and she sang a song of her youth. This one was less graphic and distressful, and oriented towards, unusually, the



Book V: Realities of Hell

successes of women in her tribe. It was not often used, but she was glad that she recalled it now. Then they finished the last of the meal in silence.

As both sides finished their rituals and meals, the Vein of Ruby lit up, and glowed bright red, and a light shot out, and the whole of the mists glowed with red, and then it changed, to bright white, and black, and grey. Then the whole went dark. The Head Giant crossed the line at the center, and was now on their side, and stood there, before bowing. In response, Droos stood, and made a deep bow. So they had an introduction to these, whatever they were, and now she would get to see what this Realm offered, and whether it was actually Justice. She and the Spider Plant, viewed each other, very different Beings, yet now ready to speak.





Chapter 3

Estrangement

As if in response, twenty-two devils approached, and Two Devils laid hands upon the Giant Spider Plant. Suddenly, the whole world spun, and colors and shapes, the feeling of crawling spiders passed over the arms of Droos, and surely the others. Then she was standing there, and before her was a young man. He had some similarities to the D DERP she once knew, though she put that out of her mind. The Soul Fragment stepped forward, with a bow.

“You have come to acquaint yourself with our Colony?” said the man. “We are a selective, exclusivist group, but if shown proper kindness and respect, we may be fast friends.”

“Do you believe that you are in the right place?” inquired Droos. “What exactly is this Realm?”

“You are in the Mists of Estrangement,” said the man. “Surely, if you were anyone other than the Queen of Angels, one of my brothers or sisters would have stung you, and now you would be one of us. We are a community that has lived here long. There is a strict hierarchy. You will talk to me.”

“I get that, but you did not answer the question,” said Droos. “What happened in life to bring you to this Realm? Do you believe that you deserved better?”

“It is simple,” said the man. “I was guilty of being deliberate in my social life. For that, I am Damned. I never said that I believed it was fair. However, this is the system, and the fate might have been worse. I am not the one who created baetOAK. You will have to take the matter up with them. Only, I might add, why is it so terrible to choose who I liked and disliked in life? If someone betrayed me, disappointed me, surely they could be cast aside.”

“Have you ever thought of the type of problems that begin with Estrangement?” said Droos. “It is one thing if someone did

Book V: Realities of Hell

something truly horrific to you, or a loved one. Yet, how much enmity begins with casual disturbances and regrets? What does such a state lead to in life? Maybe it begins with silence, and tears. What happens when it expands to outright hatred, and cruelty, and malice?"

"Why do I have to like everyone?" said the man. "I may choose who I like, who I associate with, and there should be no consequence for any discrimination."

"We are not discussing some law or penalty," said Droos. "No one will force a man or woman to like anyone else, or be their friend. However, we are here to explore what ought to be. What are the morality, ethics, and integrity surrounding estrangement? What does it do to have worlds where many happily and fully embrace enmity?"

"I would expect it is a world of free will and careful discernment," said the man. "Besides, what if I was the subject of some terrible calamity? Am I, the victim, supposed to embrace my perpetrator? I never said that I was a Saint, or a Tzaddik."

"I would say that there is a reasonable emotional response for the victim to despise the perpetrator," said Droos. "Yet, what causes such Violations? Would it not be someone who is themselves injured, and suffering in some manner? What type of disability to their body, emotion, mind, or spirit, might lead to vile acts, of any degree? Would it not be preferable to get that person help? Would it not be better for society to surround that individual with love and friendship and a social network and confidants?"

"Society might be better with free housing and free food," said the man. "Yet I never saw such a system. The world is not perfect. People treat those who help them well, and those that buzz around them like annoying flies, they swat away."

"What does such enmity, such estrangement do?" said Droos. "If, as it has been said, 'Humans are social beings', what does it do to take an injured Reflection Mortal, and cut them off? I suppose, they would get even worse. Does society take injured people and hurt them even more? It would seem treatment, and the goal of return to productivity would be the aim. I also expect far too many of the previous friends you dissociated from your life did not do some terrible deed to deserve such a fate. You dropped them for casual reasons."

"As I said, I was not required to like everyone," said the man. "If I did not like them, why spend time with them?"

“Sentient dignity requires love and support,” said Droos. “Every Sentient should have some friends, family, and loved ones. Disliking someone, and acting on it by enforcing estrangement and enmity, sometimes through prejudice, or discrimination, or ever arbitrary judgements, creates harm, generally of an emotional, mental, or spiritual type. Fellow Sentients should be embraced, even if the limit in socializing is that not every moment of the day may be devoted to love and comradery. Yet, with an emphasis on friendship and cherishing others, and liking as many possible, what do you think the result might be?”

“Why do I care how others turn out?” said the man. “Let them go pout in their corner of the world and leave me be.”

“Many may be content to do just that,” said Droos. “Yet estrangement is a kind of trauma. As you say, it is also part of life. Any Sentient must realize upon growing up that not everyone is going to like them. That is a reasonable conclusion to be drawn, if not a perfect one. Yet, surely some people in a righteous, good Society will do so. An isolated individual with no friends, loved ones, or family, seems likely to lack love and comfort and confidants, and suffer trauma. Trauma is a root cause of all manner of future mischief. It is not an excuse from those future Evils, but given that it is a mitigating factor, it would be best to stop such trauma before it occurs in the first place. Rather, as little estrangement should occur as possible.”

“Does that mean I have to be friends with someone who did something horrible to me?” said the man.

“If you were a Tzaddik or a Saint, then you would consider such a response, if only to help treat that person, and return them to the path of righteousness and productivity, as discussed,” said Droos. “For everyone else, for the worst offenders in life, and fortunately, many do not have such enemies with which to contend, direct friendship is not necessarily expected. Pure Enmity may not also be something required. You do not have to be friends, but neither do you have to be enemies. You may go your own way in life, and hopefully, both grow, heal, and improve, and return. For all other previous friends, the goal would be to maintain as many as possible. Love, tolerance, and peace must at all times be the purposes of Sentients on the path of The Journey to The Good, in the course of living The Good Life.”

“I am starting to see how being so selective in my associates and friends might have caused some harm,” said the

Book V: Realities of Hell

man. “Surely those who also had many friends would not have suffered such estrangements significantly, though even they might have generated some hatred, even True Hatred. As for those who had few if no friends, leaving them with even less is, as a great sage said, ‘Placing a stumbling block before the blind.’ Rather, I should have worked harder to at least maintain some of those friendships, even if they did not provide great benefit to me, out of Love for Sentients, and morality, ethics, and integrity.”

“It appears you have a better sense, Dear Sir, of the risks of Estrangement,” said Droos. “All does not appear to be so poor, however. You are the leader of this colony.”

“Admittingly, this is a better existence then I would have expected in the Lowest Hell,” said the man, with a sigh. “Only, I would have hoped for a far better afterlife.”

“Do not lose hope,” said Droos. “You are one Soul Fragment of very likely many hundreds. There may be many in the Heavens of Drerpo, even Gon Eden. Surely, someday, some eon, they will find you, and you may Merge, to either an Eternity of your choice, or Rebirth. Maybe even you will lead such a search, given your Vaunted position here.”

“Well, they do not let me out much,” said the man. “Two times per year now. I hear that is thanks to you. Good job, Queen of Angels. I appreciate your blessings and well wishes for me. I will try to remember the value of love and friendship going forward, and the risks of Estrangement and Enmity.”

“You seem well on your way to an advantaged position to approach your Next Life,” said Droos. “In the meantime, as a great sage also said, ‘Take courage, and be strong.’”

Then Droos signaled at the twenty-two devils, and they returned the man to his previous form, as the Giant Spider Plant. He shuffled back to the ten others, who did another ring around the fire, and a rustling of leaves in their odd language told of some discussion, or song of discovery, and knowledge. Then they departed, and the armies of Spider Plants removed themselves, seeming to give Droos, Elriver, Showsh, and Atropo a wide berth.

Behind the Shrine, they found a Receding Road of Black Pearls, that Departed into the Mists. They followed it, and Droos wondered a little bit about the strangeness of this Domain and its varied Realms. The Lieutenant of baetOak, and likely, Elriver, had a lot of creativity.

“We have discussed this, but are you telling me this great

variety of Damns and locales for Realms are really the most ideal way of Purifying Soul Fragments,” said Droos.

“You would dare to speak to the Creator of the Universe that way?” said Elriver, with a frown.

“Oh, no, I apologize,” said Droos, a little unsure.

“That was a joke,” continued Elriver, with a smile. “Your input and Judgements are welcome, Queen of Angels. As for the Infrastructure of Purification, there are an Endless Variety of Styles. My choices are common in both the Cecil and Drescher Lines. However, there are numerous other approaches. It is usually the case that there is a Lowest Hell called baetOAK and a Highest Heaven named Gon Eden. As for what these Domains, or Planes in a Cosmos, contain by way of Realms; that varies in every Manifestation.”

“I have certainly seen sights that I never imagined existed,” said Droos. “Perhaps I had some thoughts when I first learned about a God of Blood and a Queen of Pain. Their Domains must be spectacular, and the Hells of Traitors must be equally frightening, and painful. The Reality is just as spectacular, and even at the same time unbelievable as I experience them with my own Senses.”

“Is there any Creation that is too much for the Creator and Sovereign of Drepoo?” said Showsh. “Perhaps a Creator makes a Fantastic Domain in order to compliment a particularly fantastic Universe of Manifestation Domains. The Reflection Worlds are in some fashion an image of the Celestial Domains, to a lesser extent. The more unusual and strange is the Realization of Gon Eden, and of baetOAK, perhaps the more variety might exist in even the Science and Natural Laws and Principles of a Universe.”

“Thus, a Scientific Universe with fantastic laws of nature must have fantastic Celestial Domains,” said Droos. “The same is true for the Magaic Rules in a Cosmos.”

“That is how the rationale goes,” said Elriver. “It may not occur to you, but I am not exactly the most prolific at Birthing Manifestations. Maybe Showsh and I have Created twenty-one in the last two hundred trillion years. Each is a careful decision. Only a few still exist, or are currently being Birthed. There are other Grand Elder Forcang who have Created many hundreds of Manifestations in the same amount of time. It is entirely up to the preference of the Artist.”

“It is odd to think of you, Dear Elriver, as a non-prolific

Book V: Realities of Hell

Creator,” said Droos. “That makes sense in a Multiverse of Creators. I suppose Showsh is also a Creator, and similarly has other priorities. Well, I would certainly like to consult an expert on the subject, as lowly as I am, and find out more about the options for Genesis.”

“You may do that when you meet my Mother,” said Elriver. “She will be pleased to discuss that subject with you, as it has been her Profession, as Prince of the Palace of Arts, for an endless eon. She is a Forcang who has either herself Birthed or overseen hundreds of Manifestations. All the while, she has been one of the most important and powerful public servants in the Multiverse.”

“I still dread that moment of meeting your Mother,” said Droos. “Though I suppose meeting your sister went well enough. I only hope she is doing well.”

“Tultzow can take care of herself,” said Atropo. “I am glad you are not with her. She is good at getting herself out of messes, but poor at protecting others, especially those without equal Potencies of their own. My brother should do just fine.”

Droos noticed a change in the paving, and looking down, she saw at the end of the second day, that the road was now covered in purple shells. For purposes of texture on her feet, she preferred the Black Pearls. Yet, it was clear they were on their way to their next destination. Looking around, the mist was more common, and it was merely cold, and uncomfortable. It appeared to be made only of water vapor, and nothing worse. The Angel could sense an Ascent, and it appeared they now climbed in the Depths of baetOak.

“Was I right about the perils of Estrangement?” said Droos. “It may seem unrealistic, but should Sentients not strive to like one another? Would it be ideal to like everyone, or even love them, even as family.”

“It would certainly exalt Sentient Dignity,” said Showsh. “A system in which even The Other and The Stranger is welcomed as a friend, as family, and is liked, and loved, and cherished, surely that is The Path to The Good Life, and a Good Society, and a path of peace. Particularly, those that once were friends, to put extra effort into repairing differences, and obstacles. Is it not better for peace to be maintained? At what point is it moral, ethical, or consistent with integrity to discard a friendship, or even a relationship with a family member? Should that not be at an

absolute last resort?”

“If peace between friends and neighbors may not be maintained, how may enemies, and rivals be expected to use diplomacy to solve problems?” said Elriver. “Surely the differences between friends and family are much smaller than actual enemies. Are those fights and strife so large, so hurtful, that extreme kindness, and forgiveness, may not make up for a harsh word. Must a terrible decree be given? Between friends, should not the balance be tilted in their favor?”

“Is it not a matter of trust?” said Atropo. “Once trust is violated, how may a close friendship, or even that between families, be maintained.”

“It is as with all matters of an uncertain world,” said Droos. “As we have stated in a previous chapter, that since Sentients are insincere, and dishonest, surely some Skepticism must be used to approach the world. Trust must be earned, and if lost, proved doubly once more. Yet to discard a friendship or alliance entirely, disregards everything of that relationship that exists beyond the purest needs of confiding. Not everything requires confidential secrecy or privacy. Much of interpersonal relations is simply experiencing life together. Also, as said, there would be the question of mitigation. Why did such a friend betray, or lie? Do they have a reason?”

“Should it be the case that all liars must spend their lives alone and isolated?” said Showsh. “It would seem that this might push an already damaged, and injured sort into more trauma and further disfunction. Rather, she requires even more friends. It is far better to return insult and harsh truths with kindness, love, tolerance, and at least pity. Though pity is a last resort, because it amounts to patronizing. Rather, it should be recalled that the Sentient has equal rights, and equal dignity, even despite flaws, and is universally beautiful, despite having performed Evil acts. In what manner should a Sentient be Encouraged to Return? Should they be isolated, and kept in some dark closet, to think about their actions? Or should they be surrounded by love, and comfort, and welcoming, and warmth?”

“That might depend on the degree of Evil performed,” said Elriver. “For a Sentient doing very Evil acts, how many will readily stand beside him, and take beatings and harm? That would be a particularly impervious, strong, or possibly, foolish sort.”

“So might be said of many of the virtues of the Righteous,

Book V: Realities of Hell

or those who pursue The Journey of The Good,” said Atropo. “To help a deeply injured Sentient return may result in some unintentional, or at least, mitigated harm, to the one who cures. They must be strong, and brave, and resilient, and maybe just a bit foolish.”

“Are all to be therapists and professionals now?” said Droos. “This would suggest very detailed training. Should these Sentients not be referred to specialists for help?”

“They very much should be,” said Showsh. “Yet they will also require friends and confidants. A woman who sees a therapist but is otherwise completely isolated will likely recover more slowly than one who also has half a dozen friends who stick with her, despite the intermittent abuse resultant from the injuries being treated by the one who cures.”

“Once again we are discussing whether there is such an obligation to help others,” said Atropo. “Do Sentients, or humans, have to befriend those they have to put in effort to like? Must they risk harm to themselves, emotional, mental, spiritual, or otherwise, to help others?”

“In an Incomplete Society, where Sentients must devote most or all of their time to paying bills and medical expenses and providing for their family,” said Eliver, “This would all clearly be an idea, what ought to be. Certainly as Society improves, with Superior Structures, and Sound Political Philosophy and Axioms, a Society that Cares for All, Maintains Rights, and Exalts Dignity, should Expect Common Citizens to Help Each Other.”

“I suppose, once again, that it not be force of law,” said Droos. “Rather, Sentients in such a Society will have the time on their hands to do such a service, take the required training to be able to provide assistance, and even seek help themselves if the burden becomes too much or does cause some unintentional harm. This is The Society to aspire to when we discuss The Good Life, and the Ideal Civilization.”

The mist became more and more welcoming, though still frigid. Droos thought she saw rocks, and then, out of the gloom, an archway of Purple Sea Shells loomed, and they passed under. More cliffs, and larger rocks surrounded them increasingly, and now they were walking through a canyon once more. It was a path between steep slopes, and they passed under numerous archways, much the same. Then they found one that contained a doorway into the mountainside. Into this the plunged.

The hallways they walked through were well lit, with a light purple glow, that was far cheerier than a Realm of baetOak ought to be. Droos supposed that she did not entirely know what the purpose of these vast terrains were for in this Domain. Why not just have a giant prison? Yet, Elriver made it clear that an imaginative system of Celestial Domains created more possibilities for the Manifestation at large.

They reached a desk of sea shells, and at it was a meeker devil, performing her duty. Droos was happy to know that there was some egalitarianism in the ranks of the Lowest Hell.

“Hail the Creator, the Sovereign, the Prince, and the Queen of Angels,” said the devil, in a quiet voice.

She immediately ushered them into the opening doorway behind her. Then they were in an enclosed space. There they stood, though brightly lit, for half a day. Then the door opened, and they walked out onto the high passes of a mountain range. A blue sky spread above them, and birds, ones with which she was even familiar, soared. A hawk suddenly dipped out of the sky, and caught a scitter scurrying among the scraggle and rocks.

“This cannot be the same Domain of Hell,” said Droos. “Look at the blue sky, and the birds!”

“Different parts of baetOak may serve different Soul Fragments,” said Showsh. “Not all Decrees are equal. An eternity in one Realm may be easier than one hour in another. Still, an eternity in any of the Lowest Hells is worse than any of the Heavens of Drerpo, let alone Gon Eden.”

“Do you mean to say that there are righteous Soul Fragments in baetOak?” said Droos.

“We have been saying that throughout most of this philosophical dramatic narrative,” said Elriver, raising an eyebrow. “Even the mostly righteous may have a Kernel of Evil. Where do those Soul Fragments reside in the Lowest Hell? Should they receive the worst Realms, or those that are less terrible?”

“I would think that if this is meant to purify the Evil Aspect of their Whole Soul, some degree of Chastisement would be required,” said Droos.

“That is what they get,” said Atropo. “Have no fear, for the Evil Kernels of the Mostly Righteous also have a place in baetOak, should that be the Verdict of The Decree. Some reside in other Hells of the Firmament.”

They walked along the paths of the mountaintops, and

Book V: Realities of Hell

soon they found that there were numerous trails, beaten dirt paths, trodden by many feet and even, it appeared, the hooves of some quadrupedal Animals. Then they walked around a bend, and there were a sinister group. Although that would be only based on the appearance of the aesthetics, thought Droos. Yet they did battle with one another, in practice, and spoke harshly, and cursed. Though she supposed that was not the surest sign of Evil.

“Greetings!” said Droos. “What manner of Realm is this place!”

Quickly, the force took up a defensive posture, and made the camp ready for battle. Guns and swords were drawn, and canons were directed and pointed. Barricades were placed, and they seemed to assume that The Four were there for some grave battle.

“Halt, dastardly Forces of The Fiend,” said the Scowling Face. “If you wish to conquer us, you will have to do battle. These hills will belong to us for all eternity.”

“For whom do you fight?” called out Droos.

“I fight for the Purple Fiend,” said the scowl. “He is Legion. Since the Dawn of Time has He walked these Realms. None may drive Him forth. Only blood will earn you position.”

“I have no interest in territory!” said Droos. “I would meet with you, in peace, and learn about this Purple Fiend. I bring gifts.”

“You lie, succubus of The Fiend,” said the scowl. “What proof have we of your intensions? Surely you aim to trick us, and slay us all. Then you will have our lands.”

Then Droos said some words of Sre under her breath, and waited.

“What use have we for a handful of peanuts?” said the scowl.

Droos was disappointed. She had been aiming for apples.

“Let this be a demonstration of our worth,” said Droos.

“We may provide more food, and in greater amounts. We will not deal in war, either to wage it, or to promote it. Food and medicine we may offer. Healing and hope we may negotiate.”

There was some muttered talks on the other side of the barricade.

“Throw us your blade, and we will let you enter the camp,” said the scowl.

What blade? Droos muttered a few words, and she

was holding her longsword. At least that worked. She tossed the weapon, with some righteous aim and dexterity, over the fortification. She heard conversation, and then a space was made for them to enter.

“You have proven yourselves worthy enough,” said the scowl. “Only, beware! No threats will be tolerated here. You will be our prisoners until you prove your worth, and until we decide to release you.”

Droos led The Four into the midst of the camp, and they were quickly surrounded by an armed escort, of mostly guns and swords. The canons were left for the defense of the overall camp. Had they known the identity of these newcomers, they might have aimed the canons. So they were led to a stone structure that lay in a shallow cave against a cliff. There, a green-skinned figure met them, wearing a mask, painted purple. He scowled at them.

“What worth would you four possibly have to offer the great and mighty Purple Fiend?” said the man.

Showsh said some words of Sre, and half a dozen sacks of apples, and another half dozen of purple-skinned small potatoes appeared. There was also a sizable, ornate battle-axe.

“I respect that offering,” said the man. “You have proven your worth. Now ask your questions.”

“Who is this Purple Fiend?” said Droos.

“The Purple Fiend is the Lord of these Realms,” said the man. “He has ruled since The Beginning. He will Rule at The End. All who worship and serve The Purple will have a portion. The rest will taste blood.”

“Do you not think there might be some room for compromise?” said Droos. “I am sure that this Purple Fiend is truly a Great Being of a mighty personality. Does that require such a war to prove that point. Why not teach Others of His worth?”

“Any who offer insult, or question His Might will die,” said the man. “You will die if you offer harm, even now.”

“I see your position,” said Droos. “I would like to meet this Purple Fiend.”

“The Purple Fiend chooses who He Deems Worthy of His Presence,” said the man. “You must wait, and avoid blasphemy. Perhaps, you may prove your worth in battle against The Fiend. Surely, more of your service will earn you Respect.”

“What of The Fiend,” said Droos. “Does he claim your lands or insult your way life?”

Book V: Realities of Hell

“His very existence is an insult to the Purple Fiend,” said the man. “He offers Insult both of Whole Self, and Whole Essence. The Fiend and all of His followers must die. You will die if you join them.”

“I see that this conflict will require more than one attempt at diplomacy to cure the differences,” said Droos. “I bid you accept our gift, and let us pass, that we may be on our way.”

“No one leaves the camp without the permission of the Purple Fiend,” said the man. “The Purple Fiend sees only those who are worthy with the blood of battle.”

“I think, then, that we may have reached an impasse,” said Droos. “We did not come here to fight for you. Would you like more food, maybe a few fancy weapons?”

“Then you will die!” shouted the man. “You blaspheme the Purple Fiend!”

Then several dozen ranks of the Sentients closed in about The Four. Elriver waved her hands and spoke some words, and all of them, everyone in the camp but them, fell into a slumber, from which they did not wake until the dawn of the next day.

“We had better be long gone by the time they awake,” said Elriver.

No additional invitation was necessary, and they walked quickly across the mountain passes, the rocks, and the snowy patches. They traversed lakes, treading on the water, and floating through the air, dry, and reaching the far side. More of these camps appeared, but this time, they stayed far away. It did not seem that they would be able to make peace between these two sides in a few sentences. Perhaps it was a symptom of baetOAK.

“Who is the Purple Fiend?” said Droos.

“The Purple Fiend is an Elder Forcang who has chosen this Domain as a long term dwelling and footstool,” said Atropo. “He originates from long ago and far away. Actually, he is an ally of my Dear Mother and Father. What you see as a strange state of war, is in fact a contrived setup of this Realm of baetOAK. Only, it is managed by the Purple Fiend, an actual Permanent Guest of Drerpo, and a Minister of the Celestial Bureaucracy.”

“I did not realize such important Forcang might be found just anywhere,” said Droos. “What does he gain out of such a role?”

“Forcang are subtle, and have endless curiosities, obsessions, and interests,” said Showsh. “For the last many

endless eons, He has wanted to play this very particular game of war. Almost it makes me feel like this realm is no different than the Domain of Battle. Only, you have not met The Fiend yet. You will have to decide whether this Realm is equivalent then.”

“Do his people misunderstand his goals, or are they really following his directions with their relative ruthlessness?” said Droos.

“I expect he is following the code of His office exactly as He desires, with some direction from Us,” said Elriver.

“Ultimately, these Sentients and their war are a product of the Lowest Hell. They are as much a Resource as what is now being fed to the Creature of Power.”

“How are you able to think of Sentients as a Resource?” said Droos. “Does that not seem to go against everything that you have said about morality and ethics and integrity up until now? Should not the dignity of all Sentients be valued equally?”

“All life is Valuable and I feel the Pain of all of them,” said Elriver. “I feel the suffering of the smallest sea snail, and the Eldest of an ancient Culture. Both are central in my mind. No Reflection Mortal or Reflection Creature will be harmed, or Created to be Harmed, unless it served a Paramount Purpose. If I must choose between saving one thousand Sentient races or sacrificing one, then it is an unfortunate compromise. I would never make such a choice. I would sacrifice the thousand for the one. Yet often, the stakes are even higher. Should one million Sentient races, and very many species of Reflection Creature be annihilated all to protect the equal dignity of one Sentient race? If I were able, I would send protecting Angels to minister to that race, and explain to them their great purpose, and their elect place in the afterlife. There comes a time when every Creator and Sovereign must make a choice.”

“It is also true that the Morals and Ethics and Integrity of Manifestations follow a Transcendent, Abstract Dimension that is more complex than morality, ethics, and integrity,” said Showsh. “We are here to discuss the shadows on the cave wall, the immanence of good and evil and axioms. Would you truly understand the innerworkings of Greater Beings?”

“I thought I was an Angel, Dear Love of my Life?” said Droos.

“You Know far more than a Reflection Mortal, even, but you are not a Goddess, or a Greater Being,” said Showsh. “Neither

Book V: Realities of Hell

would you want to be one, Dear Love of my Life. Do you want to have to make that sort of decision, and Create a race of Sentients and send them to their doom? Would you wish to witness their Judgement, when it must be explained to them that their life had to be cut short for the good of trillions? Perhaps that Sentient will be unusually magnanimous. Would you want to feel the pain of death of every Sentient slain by harm before their time?”

“I am happy to be who I am, and no more,” said Droos.
“You are right.”

Droos went over to Showsh, and kissed him, quickly, before returning to his side.

The trek along the mountain paths entered a forest, deep with snow. Creatures scuttled, and leaves left their marks. Even dew fell, though it was not sweet. There was some similarity to the physical world here. Of course, here and there, the remains of some weapon of war, a canon, a gun, a sword, lay, and many bodies, skeletons, or others in partial decay. They represented numerous Sentient races, with the exception that there was one adversary: the Purple Fiend.

At the dawn of the fifth day, they reached a clearing through which ran a river. It was a torrent, fed by the snowy mountains. There was a town, and The Four began to avoid it. Only, it looked different, and the air was more wholesome. So they approached, and found a multicultural group of Sentient Soul Fragments. Droos had to remind Herself they were in Hell.

It was a pleasant enough town, and they were invited to stay, and eat a merry meal with them. Everyone was so polite, and kind. The inn here was almost as good as the one on The Third Hill. Droos spent the night again with Her Showsh, and they made love. In the middle of the night, they were wrapped in each other’s arms. Almost, she forgot where they were. Then, eleven minutes after midnight, the door burst, and a small army of townsfolk broke down the door. The Sovereign, and Queen of Angels were dragged outside, in their pajamas, and Droos gave Showsh a meaningful look. He gave her an expression, that all would be well.

They were taken to the town square, where they were bound, the two of them and Atropo. Elriver was nowhere to be seen. A fire was placed beneath them, and pots to cook the meat, and create a stew. Then in silence, the crowd watched, as The Strangers were set alight

In a Flash of White and Black, Elriver appeared as a

mighty mountain, a radiant, golden force, come to save them. Droos was uncertain if they were in real danger. Yet with a burst of light, their bounds were freed. The townsfolk were in disarray, and they shouted that this was essential, and needed. Surely, the Creator of Drerpo Knew. Then, sure enough came the call of many horns, and they saw purple torch light.

The towns folk fled to their favorite hiding places and corners, as though acting a script that they had done for eons. Then the forces of the Purple Fiend Descended upon the town, and put all of them to the sword. Their deaths were merciless, and the manner of slaying does not bear to be recounted. Only, it was clear why this was a Realm of baetOak. The buildings were put to the torch, and all burned to the ground. Only The Four survived, shrouded in a white and black orb of light, that surrounded them, emanating from the Golden Image of Elriver.

At the next dawn, they looked, and all was destroyed, and the enemy had departed, having placed the heads of the town council on pikes, and worse for the mayor. All else was burned, and leveled, and pillaged. Then at eleven minutes after dawn, they heard the sound of a rooster, and it seemed a Green Light passed above. A flash made Droos blink, and when she looked again, the whole town was there! In a few minutes, the townsfolk, the same ones that had died, exited their front doors, like nothing had happened. Only, there was a haunted look on their faces. Rather, it had happened again. There was no sign of any of the upheaval from the previous night.

Droos walked among these sorry Soul Fragments, and she approached a woman, who was now setting about serving breakfast in the inn. The townsfolk ate politely, and oblivious to anything that had occurred. The Queen of Angels had questions, and accepting a bowl of oatmeal, sat, and talked to the woman. She noticed that this one had been one of the first through the door the night before to pull her out into the cold night, and place her above the fire.

“How long has this Decree lasted?” said Droos.

“I don’t know what you mean, Miss,” said the woman.

“We are a simple bunch, and we just want peace, and quiet, and polite manners.”

“Do you remember anything that happened last night?” said Droos.

“I went to bed, along with my husband, same as I always

Book V: Realities of Hell

do,” said the woman. “It was a quiet night, not even disturbed by the crowing of the rooster at dawn. It was just a regular day, as always.”

“What was your business in life?” said Droos.

“It is much as you see now,” said the woman. “I tried to be hospitable, and be a good hostess.”

“How exactly did you treat your guests?” said Droos.

“I treated them as fine as any hostess,” said the woman. “Just because some complained about bugs in their bed, or plants in their food, that was such a small matter. There was that one baby that just kept on crying. A smack to the head in the middle of the night, and his mother just thought he was sick the next day. Well, the child lived. Though I never did hear from that family again.”

“Do you think there is something owed when the decision is made to be a hostess?” said Droos. “Is it even an obligation to have an open home, at times, and share in prosperity and hospitality?”

“That is exactly what I did,” said the woman.

“Dear Droos, I found some interesting remains in the basement of the inn,” said Atropo. “They are the bones of Sentients of all races.”

“Do you care to elaborate?” said Droos.

“Occasionally we get Strangers and Others,” said the woman. “We give them a good meal, and good hospitality. We tuck them in at night. Then, when we are lucky enough to have them, we serve them to the community.”

“By serve them, you mean cook them, and eat them, right?” said Droos.

“Their sacrifice is essential,” said the woman, with an absent look.

“I noted that last night, without the sacrifice, the army of the Purple Fiend arrived, to a tragic consequence,” said Droos. “Is that a common occurrence?”

“You must stay the night,” said the woman, pouring Droos some coffee. “Do you want one cube of sugar, or two?”

“I would expect that it is new Soul Fragments to this Realm that arrive as Strangers and Others,” said Atropo. “I noticed a few around town that had facial ridges similar to the bones in the basement. You might call me a bit of an amateur expert on forensics. I expect the sacrifices wake the next day as new

townsfolk.”

“I have never seen new friends and family here,” said the woman, placing a third cube of sugar in Droos’ cup. “Everyone has been happy to be here as long as I have been. This is a pleasant place to live. Please, won’t you stay the night?”

“First I want to finish my coffee, Dear Madam,” said Droos. “I am afraid that we cannot stay the night. Your hospitality last night was simply too good for my taste. My fiancé and I would like to move to a humbler locale.”

“Pity,” said the woman, as she placed cream on the table, and she walked away.

Droos did finish her coffee, which actually was quite good. The townsfolk were extremely kind to them the rest of the morning before their departure. All of them encouraged them to spend the night, and were very disappointed when they insisted that they just had to be on their way.

“You are welcome here anytime,” said the mayor, waving at them.

The Four turned their backs to the town, though as they reached some distance, Droos looked back, and wondered about this Chastisement for these Soul Fragments. Did a host deserve such an eternity for simply forgetting to replace a burned-out light bulb? What of the obligation of guests?

“That woman was a particularly extreme example,” said Droos. “I do wonder if being a poor host is such a terrible thing.”

“It is a type of Insincerity,” said Showsh. “Furthermore, it undermines Sentient dignity. For the one who invites guests, there is an expectation to treat them well, at least like family. No harm should befall them under the roof of the hostess. They should leave nourished and happy, depending on the reason for the visit. In some instances, at least their troubles should be addressed, as the host may serve then as part confidant.”

“Are Sentients obligated to perform such duties?” said Elriver. “Naturally, You and I, Dear Husband, have hosted endless numbers. Of course, we have the resources to do so. What of those of little means? What of those who naturally prefer peace and quiet, and do not want company often?”

“This goes along with the expectation, in Society, to help others,” said Atropo. “Sentients are expected to exalt each other, and promote and enhance human and Sentient dignity. An invitation is not the same as an offer of a lavish feast or gifts

Book V: Realities of Hell

of precious metals and jewels. Rather, it is merely the pleasant company of the hostess that is on offer. Not every home will have resources beyond a smiling face and pleasant conversation. Yet that is all that is required, as well as a safe space to share and be free and have all rights honored.”

“I suppose those who naturally prefer quiet and solitude may opt for such a state more often,” said Droos. “Only, I would see such a desire as indicative of some previous harm to the Whole Self. Why not seek treatment for such an individual, and have them learn to be a host, and be able to socialize? Should they accept a lifetime sentence alone and apart from Society? It is a sign that friendship is all the more necessary. Only, it must be limited at first, and accompanied by professional support to build up the pace to an outgoing and generous nature.”

“I feel that there will always be those who prefer their own space,” said Showsh. “Should they be retrained and forced to accommodate the social needs of others? What happened to free will?”

“That is not to say that a Sentient complete of Whole Self and Whole Soul must go against their free will,” said Elriver. “Only, that the desire for regular isolationism would suggest some underlying trauma, or otherwise, previous harm, to be treated. Once such a Sentient is full of Whole Self and Whole Soul, let them be alone sometimes, although it is hard to see how they may never host or be a hostess.”

“Above all, though, we agree that those who do host have obligations,” said Atropo. “It is also worth noting that guests, as Dear Droos mentioned, have a role as well. Should the fine imperfections in even good hosting be vocalized and the subject of insult? Rather, no host should be insulted, or demeaned, even afterward and apart. Only, the response should be gratitude, and an offer of some small help. The guest need not become the host, but they should not undermine the host either.”

“Then, to choose to be a host, and then to harm or insult guests, regularly, is an Evil,” said Droos. “Perhaps even to never be a hostess at all is also some smaller Concern. Guests have obligations too.”

The next mountain pass had numerous fortifications, and they began to see signs of Sentient Soul Fragments. This place was well guarded, and they peered at barricades, and rocks, to see who was looking. None barred their path, yet, but it was

clear they were being watched, and tracked. Whether the Creator and Sovereign and Prince of Drerpo had Keen Senses for this, Droos thought they must. She, for her part, did not see the new adversaries, if that is what they were.

Then, reaching a narrow point between two cliffs, a small multiracial host of colorfully dressed Sentient Soul Fragments stopped them. A woman in a uniform stepped forward.

“Are you servants of the Purple Fiend?” she asked. “If so, you may go no further, and you must turn back, unless but one of you is on a diplomatic errand. Otherwise, you may step aside and debate your errand with me, and I will judge your worth and entry into our lands.”

“Are you the servants of The Fiend?” said Droos.

“I see that you have met our enemy,” said the woman, loosening her sword at her belt. “Still, many have met them, and it is impressive that you still live to speak afterward, and were not pressed to join them.”

“You have certainly been a kinder hostess already,” said Droos. “We did meet them, and we were lucky to get away with our lives.”

“I suspect you four had some skills that are notable, though I must inquire on what aid and comfort you provided them,” said the woman.

“We provided some bags of food and one battle-axe,” said Droos.

“I suppose one axe is hardly going to shift the war,” said the woman, taking her hand off her sword. “Besides, I do not fault our adversary for requiring food and sustenance. You seem to have done the best you could under the circumstances. Why don’t you follow me, and we will lightly dine, while you tell me what brings you to these lands.”

They were permitted entry through the ranks, though one or two escorts followed them, along with the commander. They reached a tent, where very simple food, rations practically, were laid out, and water to drink. These soldiers ate sparsely. Droos supposed that this was the Lowest Hell after all, and she had seen worse Realms.

“There is no actual *Fiend*,” said the woman, as she ate lightly. “The Servants of the Purple Fiend refer to our leader as The Fiend. It is meant as an insult. In many ways it is a reminder that we are in Hell. Few of us ever imagined that our afterlife

Book V: Realities of Hell

would include some eternal war with theocratic fundamentalists who refuse to listen to any type of diplomacy. All of us would prefer lives of peace in these mountains, in villages, tending to fields. That is not permitted while the Purple Fiend reigns. I suspect that is a contrivance of baetOAK. We are meant to live in an endless state of war to defend our home, on sparse rations and comforts.”

“What Realm is this?” said Droos.

“You have reached The Bastion of Rulers,” said the woman. “Many of us were leaders of all sorts in life, and we did well. Only we were not perfect, and rightfully so, some Kernel of our Whole Souls resides here for some eternity, waiting to Merge. I do not fault the system of Celestial Justice. My Soul Fragment required purification as much as all of the others who serve this supposed *Fiend of the Bastion*.”

“That is exactly who we would like to meet,” said Droos. “We would like to go to the Bastion itself. We do not serve the Purple Fiend, and would help you if we were able. I am afraid we cannot offer arms or weapons. Yet food and medical supplies may also be useful.”

“That would be a great contribution,” said the commander. “You are clearly a worthy group, fleeing the troubles of these lands. I do not know to what Realm of Hell you will eventually be bound, but your Soul Fragments deserve respect, dignity, and at least passage to meet our leader. I will send seven to escort you to the Bastion.”

They finished their meal, and a detachment of seven soldiers of all varieties of race and age left with them. With the blessings of the commander, none saw the need to unsheathe a weapon, or hold a gun aloft. They struck up a merry conversation, and even sang some marching songs, and it was a pleasant walk, for about two days. There were additional meals of sparse rations and slightly foul tasting water.

At dawn on the third day they reached the top of a mountain, and beheld a mighty fortress. It was built of many kinds of metal, a cacophony, that did not blend well together. There was a strength and beauty to it, and the buttresses were snow-capped, and she thought she heard the faint sound of war chants and singing even at this distance. They made their way up the rest of the mountain slowly.

Much of the walk to the Bastion had seen some manner of

civilization. There were towns that seemed to barely survive, and had signs of recent destruction from raids, and shifting tides of war. There were fields, but many smoked with some type of ruin. It was clear that attempts to truly settle these lands were continuously made, but that none would be successful while the war lasted. As they Ascended the steep mountain, there were more sizable towns, and these were military installations, and better off. There was less of a sign of recent blight and flame, but still hurried and purposeful looks, and the Soul Fragments here did not know rest, or feasts, or true comforts. Still, these Highest parts of the Lowest Hell were not the same Realms as all other portions.

Then they were at the grand gates to the Bastion. They were a complex mechanism of technological marvel, that defied the simple armament of the war effort. Some Angel or another must have given providence upon this doorway, and it showed signs of rarely having been breached. More likely, it was some scheming devil. Still, they entered in and as they walked into a busy, large space in the center, bells went off.

This was not some tracking of time, but a call to order and muster. The soldiers of the Bastion were quick, and within a few minutes, rows of thousands were lain about the Center. They waited for inspection. A Commander walked before them, and checked their boots, and inspected their gloves, to be sure all was pristine before The Leader arrived. It also appeared that their arrival had not gone unnoticed. There were many whispers, even from the ranks, about the arrival of the Creator, Sovereign, Prince, and Queen of Angels, at the Bastion. Some of the soldiers put on an extra show. Others trembled at the arrival of The Royals of Drerpo.

It was odd to think that in a Realm of baetOAK, the Soul Fragments would anticipate their arrival in such a manner. Almost, Droos felt like she was greeting her own forces, surveying them and their proud, brilliant work. Then she recalled the recent invasion of the Vampire Elder. What if they had an army like this to augment their ranks? Though she supposed, they did well enough in that battle. Yet, the next might have worse odds. Then, an army of Soul Fragments from baetOAK, of those who nonetheless praised and respected and loved the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo, might prove useful and valuable.

Then a rhythm of drum beats began, a chime of whistles and flutes, as The Leader approached. Was this some Great Fiend,

Book V: Realities of Hell

or merely a Soul Fragment? What was the nature of those who spent some eternity in The Bastion of Rulers? How did they differ from The Bastion of the Tyrant in Gon Eden? The drums and melody continued, and Droos looked around expectantly for this Leader.

From a Grand Stairway in the back of the Center, with much pageantry, though most of the Soul Fragments were scarred, and bloodied, for these were not merely a ceremonial guard, the Elite Soldiers of The Leader Descended from the Heights of the Bastion. Step by step, all genders, all races, a completely egalitarian rank of fighters arrived here to present themselves. Meanwhile, the Commander who was Present continued to find flaws, however, small. Those in the ranks quickly fixed them, and the inspection continued.

The Elite Soldiers took a place at the front of the Center. Then the instruments and drums played a different tune, and Elriver and Showsh and Atropo seemed to Know this one, and sang along. An honor guard brought out seven flags, and then Droos, with her Keen Senses, realized she Knew the Words, even though they were in Sre. All of the soldiers here knew them, and they



sang them joyously as the colors were brought to the front.

“What was that?” said Droos.

“Did you not know that the Universe of Drerpo has an anthem and Manifestation Flags?” said Showsh. “It is quite touching to hear them from Soul Fragments in baetOAK. You would almost feel like this was our army, waiting for our command.”

What if that was the case, and somehow this Leader had been simultaneously preparing these soldiers for service to Drerpo, as much as to defend against the Purple Fiend. Perhaps that was the point after all. Maybe this was the design of the Lieutenant of Hell, providing a fighting force for His part, if there was a time of war. It was odd to think that in this Realm of Hell, such a patriotic ensemble might gather. Then, a silence rang out, and all that remained was for The Leader to appear. For a moment, all of baetOAK stood quietly, and it is said that for that instance, all of the suffering and agony abated—if only for that moment.





Chapter 4

Bastion of Rulers

A strong, commanding figure stepped forward, alone, by himself. He had white hair, and his eyes showed with deliberation and poise. It was clear to Droos that this man knew every detail of this Bastion, this Realm, and the philosophies behind them. The man walked slowly, and purposely, to the front of the ranks, the officers, and the elite soldiers, and the honor guard, and stood at attention.

Then the Commander who had been organizing the soldiers, approached the man, and saluted.

“The Garrison is Ready, General!” said the woman.

“You have done well, Colonel,” said The General. “Stand at the side of the Honor Guard, and continue your honorable service.”

The Colonel saluted once more, and went to a position on the right of the Honor Guard. Then, The General saluted Elriver.

“The Garrison is at your disposal, Dear Creator, Dear Sovereign, Dear Prince, Dear Queen of Angels,” said the General. “Would you like to inspect your soldiers?”

“I am confident in your ability to Lead Them,” said Elriver. “No inspection is required. I am quite impressed. There is no doubt that on an occasion of True Warfare, this Division would do its duty honorably, and ably, thanks to your command. The garrison, is dismissed!”

With that, The Colonel blew a whistle, and in reverse order, the garrison dispersed. First the Honor Guard returned to the Grand Staircase, and then the Elite Soldiers entered. Finally, the rank and file went to their standard duties. All that was left was The General and The Colonel.

“I am pleased to see that you need little protection in this place, General,” said Droos. “For persevering, and creating a

viable land in the face of the Purple Fiend, is a true triumph.”

“I would speak with you, Dear Queen of Angels,” said The General. “May we retire to the Officer’s Dining Room? We may have refreshments, such as they are here, and conversation.”

“You lead the way,” said Droos, with a smile.

The Colonel nodded at another high ranking officer, who ran on ahead. They walked, at a brisk pace, to the Grand Stairway. Up they Ascended, to the very top level. There they found a round, metal table, of notable size. None were able to sit at the head of it. Still, The General sat at one side, with The Colonel to his right, and to the left, an officer to take notes, and The Four were opposite. Yet they were all at the same level on the table. Refreshments were brought, though only slightly better than trail rations. A light beer was served, apparently the best possible drink that was only available to The General, The Colonel, and those they chose to honor.

“If I may speak,” said The General, “You might find a more able military body if we were better fed, better clothed, and better housed. Furthermore, I have no doubt that this contrivance of an enemy is the function of baetOAK. At the one hand, it sharpens us. On the other hand, it takes a great perseverance to avoid emotional trauma in the wake of endless warfare and the atrocities of the enemy. Why not intersperse periods of warfare with ones of peace? Let the civilians at least grow crops for a year, and eat without nightly raids, or worse.”

“You speak most nobly, General,” said Droos. “Tell me, what did you do in life to arrive at such a place?”

“I was a deeply flawed man,” said The General. “For some reason, Society sought to promote me, and I was able enough in battle, and lucky enough, and led a rebellion against my government. I believed we fought for freedoms and rights denied to us. We created a new nation, one that was meant to enshrine those rights, and freedoms for all. Yet, it was a nation of contradictions and compromises. How much was left out of those founding documents because interested parties would not have agreed? We might have had an even more perfect union if only we had leeway to act according to our religious values, and not economic necessity. For some, the ends clearly justified the means, and they would have been just as happy if rather than a system of checks and balances and a government that answered to the people, I had become the first King of the nation. Fortunately, a deep

Book V: Realities of Hell

compromise rang out. Yet how imperfect it was for hundreds of years. I have heard, during my Paroles, that my nation eventually fell to despots and monarchs. Perhaps if better foundations and freedoms had been laid, that would not have been possible.”

“You say you were deeply flawed,” said Droos. “Is that not the statement of someone who may be somewhat humble? Furthermore, is it not a great deed that you may have taken absolute rule of your nation, but you declined? How many would have such power in their hands, and defer to the people’s choice? It may be that eventually that nation fell, as did all of the others after the ice caps melted, and the World War arrived. Yet, there were hundreds of years of much building, stability, and peace. You laid a foundation of honor, rules of law, and respect, and tradition.”

“I left it to the people, but I knew they would put me as their leader,” said The General. “I spoke of freedoms, yet I had slaves. How many more contradictions, and mistakes do you wish me to recount for you?”

“Did you remain as the leader of your people for a long term?” said Droos.

“Two terms,” said The General.

“Your precedent was further remarkable,” said Droos. “Even in the position created for you, in the end you deferred to others to hold power. It is Damning that you had slaves, although clearly you fought for freedom for all. Why do you think you are in this place, Dear General?”

“It is for such mistakes,” said The General. “I know the ways of this Firmament. My Soul Fragment is a Kernel of Evil, one of several, of my Whole Soul. I am lucky to be only in The Bastion of Rulers. I do consider myself fortunate, given my numerous flaws. I would expect another Soul Fragment is busy fighting even more Damned wars in the Domain of Battle. Yet I do know, and I have gleaned on my two consecutive days a month of Parole, that most of my Soul Fragments reside in the Heavens or Neutral Domains of Drerpo. I do not believe I earned such an honor. It also does not make this burden, this Higher of the Lowest Hells so much easier.”

“It seems to me that you lived quite a remarkable life,” said Droos. “That you were imperfect, and had flaws, is no surprise. How many truly perfect, uniformly good and righteous leaders and rulers did you know in your time, or had even heard of in the history of your Reflection World? Yet you have a great

purpose here, even despite the suffering. Even one of the few Soul Fragments condemned to baetOAK is in charge of an army that exists to patriotically protect the Universe. You may be one of the most honored Soul Fragments of this Realm. For that, the Purple Fiend calls you, *The Fiend*.”

The General smirked.

“I always found that name amusing,” said The General. “It is true, and a reminder, that there is a purpose here, and that this not the physical world. The endless war against the Purple Fiend is a Chastisement, a Damnation, but also a test, a trial, to prepare us, for that day in eternity, when this army will be called upon to serve You. Then we will be ready. If I feared that part of me might enter Damnation beyond purpose, in only pain and suffering, having such an important role, and in a way I am able, gives me hope. And I am confident that eventually, in some eon, the Soul Fragments of Heaven will Merge with me, and I will have my Eternity, or Rebirth.”

“I suppose for you, The Bastion of Rulers is the Lowest Point in the afterlife,” said Droos. “For the Whole Soul with a Soul Fragment in The Bastion of Tyrants, that is the Highest Point. For you, almost all of the rest of your Whole Soul, and those Soul Fragments, reside in the Heavens of Drerpo, or Neutral Domains. Surely, that is the preferable option. Yet very few are perfect, or purely good. Some Soul Fragment will be in the Hells of the Universe, for Purification. How do you feel about this destination for your Soul Fragment.”

“As I said, it is not about me,” said The General. “If only I had to wage war here, I would say it was a fate well deserved. I am here, commanding millions of others. This is an enormous war. Does it have to be a Realm of Hell that is quite so Hellish? Even if some of the conditions were improved, surely the Soul Fragments would still suffer.”

“You said the Soul Fragments of the Bastion of Rulers get Parole for two consecutive days per month,” said Droos. “That is much better than most of the rest of the baetOAK. Also, your existence is far more comfortable than that of many in this afterlife. Purification may not always occur in one degree of comfort more or another, or one step of discomfort less. Only the Creator of the Universe may say what the Infrastructure for Perdition requires. However, I will pass along your suggestions.”

“There is no need,” said The General. “The Creator is

Book V: Realities of Hell

right here.”

The General did a quick bow of his head. Elriver returned the gesture.

“I will take your suggestions under consideration,” said Elriver. “Know that the discomforts and Chastisement of baetOak are essential for building Character evaluated towards an Eternal Life, or Rebirth. It may not be readily reduced without risking the Integrity of the Whole Soul. You are most worthy to request this for your army, but not for yourself. It has been noted.”

“I would not be surprised if you have a Soul Fragment in The Hills of Gon Eden,” said Droos. “Furthermore, I expect that at the end of an endless eon, you will have the Eternity or Rebirth you deserve.”

“I must repeat the words of The General,” said the Colonel. “With your permission, Sir.”

“Go ahead, Colonel,” said the General.

“The afterlife is hard here, and the depravities and atrocities of the Servants of the Purple Fiend are so extensive,” said The Colonel. “Need they be so? I have heard that their Leader is a Personal Friend of the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo. Since You are Both Here, will You Consider Asking Him to Reduce Certain War Crimes?”

“I think that is a reasonable request,” said Droos. “It is one thing to have endless war, and another to require death by merciless atrocity when it does arrive. Perhaps there are some war crimes that are too heinous even for the Lowest Hell.”

“We will consider talking to the Purple Fiend,” said Showsh. “You have given Us much to consider, Colonel. You are also a worthy leader of your people. I expect that the presence of these atrocities will, in time, diminish, if not disappear entirely. That does not mean that the enemy will not slay you in battle, or that it will be pleasant. However, I take your point. baetOak exists as Damnation, in part, for war criminals, not to then exact such crimes upon soldiers in war.”

“I have seen some fairly terrible Chastisements for a lot of Soul Fragments since I have been here,” said Droos. “Is it clear to you what constitutes a war crime?”

“Certainly crimes of intimacy should be prohibited at all times,” said Elriver. “That should be the case whether they are war crimes or regular crimes. I agree with Showsh, that the Purple Fiend may do his service, and have his fun. Yet, there is

such thing as bringing it too far, even in a Realm of the Lowest Hell. There are other atrocities we will discuss, and investigate. I thank you, personally, for bringing this to my attention. baetOak is not a place of pleasure, but of purification, chastisement, and Damnation. Yet, even in Hell, I would maintain certain rules. Even Devils and Servants designed to enact such a Sentence may not engage in such crimes. The Celestial Bureaucracy will meet, and convene, and invite the Purple Fiend to attend, and it will be decided. You will not live an easy life, but some fears will be unfounded even here.”

“I thank you, Dear Creator, Dear Sovereign, Dear Prince, Dear Queen of Angels,” said The Colonel, “For your wisdom and courage. I am prepared to die, in perhaps terrible ways, in order to protect this army, and in light of my flaws and Evils in life. That is not to mention the purpose this army serves in defense of Drerpo. I am glad to know that the endless cycle of war and death will not include such fears in the future, even in the Lowest Hell.”

“Why do you think we brought out the entire garrison to see you,” said The General. “These are a Most Noble and Righteous Royal Family of Forcang. If only all Forcang thought in such vaunted manners.”

“I fully agree,” said Atropo. “I am afraid that with the power of Forcang, such Beings get up to all manner of trouble. They may understand the Abstract Dimension of Morality, Ethics, and Integrity, yet that does not mean they choose to follow them, or if anything, their opposite Dimensions.”

“In that case, I will wish you a Safe Journey,” said The General. “May The Multiverse smile upon you, and see your Righteous Goals to Fruition. I hope someday we will meet again, in this afterlife, or the next life.”

“Somehow, General, I believe there will be some eternity in Dweehwail, in which you will have a very important role to play, and this will not be the last we see of you,” said Droos.

“Your compliment is welcome, and I will endeavor to rise to your trust and praise,” said the General, who stood, followed by The Colonel.

“I have given the orders that You Four are free to move about our lands in any way you please,” said the Colonel. “You have our complete confidence. Go in peace, and Judge us Fairly, and Justly, with Mercy. Farewell!”

Then the General, followed by the Colonel, departed,

Book V: Realities of Hell

leaving The Four at the circular table alone. It was odd, after all of the pomp and circumstance to have the space to themselves, and know that these Soul Fragments both Knew them, and Trusted them enough to let them move freely, just about anywhere. These were Soul Fragments who feared Elriver and Showsh, were humble, and accepted the judgement and Decree.

Soon they departed, and none questioned their right of passage. If anything, most saluted them as they passed, as it seemed the word had gotten around, even among those less aware, that the Royal Family of Drerpo walked among them. This was an usual sight for the Soul Fragments of this Realm. Droos pledged that she would return sooner, once she had more freedom.

They exited, out of the Grand Gate, and were back on the pathway down the mountain. The Descent took two days, and they reached a fork in the road. This time, they chose the left rout, and disappeared into a bank of snow. After some more days of passage, the trees, the sporadic communities and towns of the nation, were left behind, as was the sign of intermittent warfare and death. The temperature increased, and they Descended lower, below the snow. Soon they were in rolling, brown hills.

On the horizon, such as it was, could be seen a line of orange light, rising into the sky. The brown hills rolled for days, and then they were walking across a straight, yellow and brown plain of wheat sheaves. These highland plains of baetOak were wholly different from the first Three Levels of the Lowest Hell. Still, there was Damnation and Chastisement to be had. Yet, this was a better share.

As they walked across the plain, in the distance they saw a large metropolis rise, buildings gleaming with gold. When they drew near, the very paths were paved with gold bricks, and they saw, crouched on the ground, Sentients, of endless variety, carefully cleaning them. They used small, tiny brushes, and spit on them for water. Still, there was no Supervisor, and it was hard to see why they performed this labor.

Upon reaching the city, they found a place of endless riches. Yet it was the Sentients who served. In each sprawling mansion was one devil, served by dozens of Soul Fragments. These dwellings were meticulous, and shining. They would have to be, for millions of Soul Fragments seemed to be at constant work, cleaning, scrubbing, and even serving and cooking for the devils. This was an odd state of affairs. Was this some kind of

devil aristocracy? The Queen of Angels tried to question several, but they did not interrupt their chores, seeming to whisper some repeated lines of law or rules whenever they were asked. Many muttered to themselves, whispering poems, dark and sinister.

“What do you make of this place?” asked Droos. “I cannot determine the Evil of these Soul Fragments, for none will interrupt their task to respond to my questions.”

“I believe that you will have to ask their Masters,” said Showsh.

They walked through the city, surrounded by servants, slaves really, and eventually reached an opulent structure. It would be a palace on any other world. In it they found thousands at work, maintaining the grounds, and engaged in all manner of task to keep up the standard of living. Yet they found one Master of the palace, the Queen of Masters, as it were. All servants of the city ultimately answered to Her.

She was a Mighty Devil, pink-skinned, with a smiling face. Even as she sat on a golden throne at a table of mithril and adamantite, hundreds of servants cleaned and mopped the Great Hall, where she ate alone. When The Four arrived, she welcomed them.

“Hail the Queen of Angels,” said the Queen of Masters. “I have been expecting your arrival. Do sit down, and you will have the first reasonable meal in baetOak. I assure you, all other locales are waste in comparison.”

She clapped her hands.

Then one hundred and ten servants approached, and set the table for The Four, and they sat. It was an opulent feast, of meats, and drinks, and pastries, and every manner of treat. Droos ate some, but found somehow that this setting diminished her appetite. She noticed that the others seemed to eat normally.

“What exactly is the manner of this Chastisement, Queen of Masters?” asked Droos. “In life, what was the Evil of these Soul Fragments?”

“These are the Blessed Soul Fragments of the wealthy,” said the Queen of Masters. “Of course, not all of those with riches earn such a Decree. To have such a resource, and not to have gratitude, or to share it, those are some of the vices and Evils to be purified in this place.”

“You say that the Soul Fragments here were very wealthy in life,” said Droos. “Now, in the afterlife, they are servants, and

Book V: Realities of Hell

little more than slaves. They scrub floors, cook meals, unclog toilets, and do laundry. Perhaps there are even more basic tasks. Why do they agree to what you claim is a *Blessed Life*?”

“It is not a Blessed Life, Queen of Angels,” said a woman, standing up from the floor, where she had been cleaning the metal with a small brush. “We are demeaned here, and placed below our station. Perhaps we were less than generous in life. Now the Queen of Masters, and the endless rows of Lesser Masters, they whip us like common slaves, and for any that speak against it, the punishment is worse.”

“Indeed,” said the Queen of Master. “You dare to speak! The insolence in you!”

The Pink Devil waved her clawed hands in the air, in the direction of the woman, and with a shriek, she shrunk and diminished into a brush. Then another servant picked her up, now as an instrument to clean, and continued scrubbing her place on the floor just as fast. He spit where he wiped the brush on the metal floor.

“There, I apologize for that interruption,” said the Queen of Masters.

“Do you really think that is Justice?” said Droos.

“Where do you think you are, Queen of Angels?” said The Queen of Masters. “This is not Gon Eden. You are in baetOAK. There are certain standards to be maintained here. These Soul Fragments must know their place. The Lowest Hell would be overrun if not for the Order of the Masters. Besides, what of the Purification?”

“You are telling me that you do not enjoy this assignment, just a little too much?” said Droos.

“I perform a function, like any other devil of the Lowest Hell,” said the Queen of Masters. “If I enjoy it, that is a side benefit. Perhaps when I die I will receive some Chastisement and harsh Judgement. In the meantime, I must perform my role. If there was no discipline here, all of the servants would leave, or invade the rest of baetOAK, and choose their own Realms and homes.”

“I understand your comments about purification,” said Droos. “I suppose that it is difficult to witness. It is my hope that someday, brother and sister Soul Fragments will arrive from the Heavens of Drerpo, and Merge with these Chastised Slaves. To think that a Soul Fragment would have to spend an eternity as a

brush, or other instrument, is chilling.”

“Justice is not always pleasant to witness, as you say,” said the Queen of Masters. “All of these Whole Souls had the opportunity in life to be reasonable with their money, and resources, and property. They spent their physical lives, sometimes long and luxurious, concentrating their wealth, making themselves richer, often at the expense of others. Even when it came to laws to tax them, armies of expensive professionals were gathered to reduce that burden to almost nothing. It was better to pay lawyers, than distribute wealth to the government to fund programs to provide for basic rights and needs of citizens and residents. Some were mildly philanthropic. Others gave almost no money at all.”

“Still, I have trouble eating this meal, served by slaves,” said Droos.

“Where do you think your food, in The Beacon of Drerpo, comes from?” said the Queen of Masters.

“The food and drink there originates from fundamental principles of creation, and selfless service by the Celestial Bureaucracy,” said Elriver. “Most of what We do involves great work, sacrifice, and effort. If there are a few benefits, that is something We must grudgingly accept.”

“A few harmless benefits?” said the Queen of Masters. “That is what all of the wealthy families and individuals say. I am not insulting the Creator and Sovereign and Prince of Drerpo. Surely, for the Great Beings who Rule the Universe, some Prestige is warranted, and indeed, Selfless Service is Common in Response. You do not receive benefits without returning something useful to your Creations. As for Reflection Mortals, those who are wealthy do not innately benefit others. Wealth must be shared, or other forms of altruism pursued. If not, primarily what the rich offer Society is another type of arrogance.”

All but Droos finished their meal, while the Queen of Angels completed some small nibbles. They had quite enough of this conversation. Why did this bother Droos so much? Perhaps it was because her own family, where she was born, was very wealthy and powerful. Should they contribute Soul Fragments to this Realm upon their death? She supposed that is part of why she was learning about morality and ethics, and returning to help redeem her tribe. Perhaps, despite wealth, her family would prove to be sufficiently altruistic and benevolent. Riches certainly did not guarantee such Damnation. It was merely a temptation that

Book V: Realities of Hell

needed to be overcome for the best Share of the afterlife.

They left the city, with little interest of looking back, though for miles beyond its borders, the pathway was still bars of gold, carefully brushed and swept by servants. Eventually this ceased, and the road changed to a yellow sand. It was fine, and comfortable on the feet. So they continued across the wide, green Plain of baetOAK.

“There are a number of topics that we have not yet discussed,” said Droos. “To begin, why is it that the most righteous rulers would contribute Soul Fragments to such a place as this at all? Surely there are other Hells, or Neutral Domains that might provide a reasonable Decree?”

“That would be to assume that such Righteous Leaders have no Kernels of Evil,” said Showsh. “Most would freely admit that they are here for a good reason. Such is their righteousness. That is not to say that they do not grumble at this Chastisement. Only, the system is reasonable to them. Few would readily say that they were free from Evil, and deserved the Decree of a Saint of Tzaddik.”

“Therefore, whether the General, the Colonel, or any other Great Ruler, or Sentient of a similar character, all have flaws, and mistakes made in life,” said Elriver. “There is some argument that there is a selfishness and arrogance inherent in choosing to be a ruler in the first place. Agreeing to lead others is a form of narcissism. Perhaps simply for that light crime, that Kernel of Evil must be purified.”

“Without such a Righteous Ruler, who knows who might have been instead?” said Atropo. “Are you to suggest that all of those pursuing The Journey of The Good should avoid ever Leading or Ruling, for the inherent narcissism?”

“Rather, a True Ruler, a Good Ruler, does so knowing that they will make some mistakes, and require help from trusted advisors, and that there will be a reckoning in the afterlife,” said Droos. “A Righteous Ruler accepts the yoke of Command out of necessity, and unwillingly, when it is thrust upon them. They know that there is a Soul Fragment that will be placed in the Lowest Hell for their trouble. Further, how many will see them with True Hatred because of unintentional harm and insults. For each, a soul fragment will be impaled on the Tree of Thorns.”

“Yet, for all of the love between neighbors, the lives saved, and good laws and deeds accomplished, the tears of reunited loved

ones, and True Love, will water the Tree of Life,” said Showsh. “A Good Leader does so because he must, not because he wants the job. He does so despite the terrible consequence, and accepts it willingly, that purification required.”

“Of course, I would assume that many, or most other Soul Fragments would be in the Heavens of Drerpo,” said Elriver. “There would even be multiple in Gon Eden, The Palace, and numerous other Domains. All of the soldiers of that Realm can count on Merging with brother and sister Soul Fragments, sooner than for many other Whole Souls. It does not change that some purification, Damnation, and Chastisement is required.”

“It was also suggested that some forms of chastisement were too terrible even for the Lowest Hell,” said Atropo. “It is odd to imagine that something might be too Evil for baetOAK, and any act too Fell.”

“Surely if it is too Evil for baetOAK, all the more so it is beyond cruel, and Evil, in the physical world of the living,” said Droos. “Crimes of intimacy, as well as several others, whether done by standard criminals, or as war crimes, are Truly Awful. It is right that the Purple Fiend be prohibited from using such tactics as a weapon of war. Any Servant or devil or Sentient guilty of such crimes must receive due process and a trial, and if convicted, serve a reasonable sentence. Of course, the goal is still reform, and that such an offender never recommits again, not vengeance or responding to the crime in turn with Evil.”

“You would defend the Evil perpetrator of such a crime?” said Showsh.

“At any point a criminal may turn from Evil, and reform,” said Droos. “Is that not our role, to wait until the final second for such repentance? Do we want ten million executed sinners or nine million productive, rehabilitated Sentients who have recovered from the traumas of their youth that contributed to such poor decision making? That is not to say that some Sentients will not continue to reoffend. The goal should be to always support, and educate, and heal, and return a wayward person to confidence and respectability.”

“Are there not unforgivable crimes?” said Atropo.

“For those, there should be consequences,” said Elriver. “Still, for almost all, there were likely mitigating circumstances, and healing that may be done, to return such a criminal, to a state of an active, productive participant in Society. Does a nation want

Book V: Realities of Hell

to pay to jail a large part of its population, or educate traumatized adults in how to live life happier and the fullest, and on the side contribute to everyone? It would seem that is far less expensive, and exalts Sentient dignity, rather than diminish it.”

The Four walked on for a while in silence. Droos and Showsh held hands, and stopped for just a moment, and kissed, before they continued onward, down the path. Birds flew overhead, making pleasant sounds, free, even in this place.

“Is it not too much that the consequence for simply enjoying wealth should be such Damnation?” said Droos. “Surely most Reflection Mortals dream of attaining riches. Should they also consider the tax burden and their charitable requirements? Why are such obligations owed to other Sentients?”

“Ultimately, riches rarely exist in a vacuum, free from a Society that enabled such successes,” said Showsh. “If a wealth family earned everything on a desert island apart from all other civilization, and the infrastructure and systems that go with it, perhaps there would be some claim. Most, however, were part of a larger group of people and used systems that helped build their wealth. They owe some gratitude to that system, that Society. Part of that is returning some portion of that wealth, and redistributing it, to those who were less fortunate, less lucky, with how matters turned out. All should have basic, fundamental rights and needs met, for food and housing and medical care in particular. There are many other basic rights for Sentients in Society. The wealthy owe a great debt of gratitude.”

“Furthermore, they will still have ample wealth even with such taxes and charity,” said Elriver. “Few will suffer to live in small houses or drive simple vehicles. All will have luxurious vacations. If some full extent of a lifestyle must be cut slightly to ensure that every Sentient in Society has a basic standard of living, that is a small price to pay.”

“Therefore, the wealthy must contribute because they are wealthy thanks to the existence of Society,” said Droos. “There are few who attain wealth without some benefit of civilization. Even such, maintaining wealth requires Society as well, and its systems. For all of this, there should be gratitude. Those mechanisms are not required to exist. Without them, the continued existence of such wealth is questionable. Ultimately, token property, is just that, a token. Even the value of property, and other qualitative items, have subjective worth. Any of those meanings may be

altered at any time, depending on the needs of civilization—its rise and fall. The tax and charitable contributions of the wealthy help ensure a longevity to the wealth of both themselves, and Society.”

“I do see the point of the Queen of Masters that We do have a few privileges,” said Atropo. “Although, I would like to think that we also perform work and labors that earn some or all of those benefits. Simply Creating a Manifestation in the first place takes millions of years. That is an Artistic Effort of Love.”

“It is certainly true of Forcang at large that they have numerous privileges enjoyed that Reflection Mortals may only dream about,” said Showsh. “Often those honors are earned. Sometimes they are not, or are even stolen. Forcang have Potencies, and they use them readily. Many are also less than deliberate about how food ends up on their plate. They might very well be similarly guilty.”

“I would think that they would then be subject to such a Damnation in the afterlife, if and when they die,” said Elriver. “Reflection Mortals often forget that just because Forcang live very long lives, does not mean that they do not die, and cannot die. Furthermore, it is often the case that the afterlives of Forcang are particularly lengthy, as those Soul Fragments may be spread across a Multiverse of Celestial Domains and Planes, and need to travel further to Merge. Yet, they are subject to the Chastisements of baetOak as much as any Reflection Mortal. It may be even more likely that Forcang, upon death, have a less choice Decree in many Lowest Hells of numerous Manifestations.”

“It is odd to think about serving a long eternity alongside the Soul Fragment of a Great Being,” said Droos. “Would He not be particularly Haughty, and unmanageable?”

“Why do you think the devils dealt with you the way they did when you arrived in baetOak?” said Showsh. “How did they know you were not simply the Soul Fragment of a Forcang, who would attempt anything to avoid Damnation? Those who have risen the Highest in Life, often resist being brought so low, even if they once themselves defined such parameters and afterlives.”

“Then selflessness, altruism, and giving to others is a requirement of powerful and wealthy Forcang as well,” said Droos. “In many ways, even more so. How much more service may Forcang offer the Multiverse? In contrast, how much more selfish and isolated may one choose to be? Yet it is because of a civilization of Forcang that this very Multiverse continues to exist

Book V: Realities of Hell

at all. Surely, at the Beginning of Time, far less was known of Wave Relics, and Spirits and Forcang still openly fought.”

“It is true that Forcang owe a particular debt of gratitude that many do not pay until they reach the afterlife,” said Atropo. “Being a Grand Elder Forcang does not encourage Humility in the way that would appear obvious. That is not to say that We do not Know Humility. Rather, we Choose Arrogance.”

“Of course, that would not be something you would ever do, Dear Son,” said Elriver.

“I have been guilty, on occasion,” confessed Atropo. “Yet it is rare enough.”

The Prince smiled broadly at those final words.

“I would think most of the crimes that receive Purification in baetOaK relate to Forcang,” said Showsh. “It may be by token of longevity that such afterlives are forgotten. Of course, serving time in the Dungeon of an enemy Forcang may be a sort of Hell—one that Reflection Mortals would not have to bear. When death greets us all, we are equal subjects.”

The birds overhead now gave shrill cries, and they were seagulls! Apparently, they were near a body of water. Now Droos could smell the spray, and Knew they were approaching it. Some great ocean, of actual water, lay before them.

In another half day, at twilight, they reached the cliffs above the vast ocean. Only, it was an odd, orange color. The waves looked like the clouds of sunset. Nevertheless, the waves were fair, and smelled clean. Perhaps there were many Reflection Worlds where the oceans were normally orange. It was only Droos, with her upbringing on the continent of Nolai on the planet of No, who saw blue as the standard shade. She noticed that there were rows of bushes, with colorful flowers, pink and white. They grew plentifully, though the blossoms were not aromatic.

Continuing to the left, they hugged the cliffs for days. Still, it was a spot that might even be called romantic. At the end of the third day, they saw, hanging over the side of the cliffs, strung some great distance down, many cages. Inside were Sentients. Meanwhile, great flocks of seagulls harassed them, and pecked at them boldly. Many were bloodied, and in poor shape. Droos noticed that an odd plant with a red flower grew on the cliff above plentifully. Nectar from the flowers seemed to steadily flow and drip, down onto the cages, and the Soul Fragments. Thus, the birds frenzy, and interest was explained, beyond the mere locale and

Realm.

“I wish to ask these Sentients some questions,” said Droos.

Elriver surrounded them with an Orb of Light, and they Descended the Cliffs, to be level with a cage in the middle. There they found a woman with blond hair. Showsh gave a signal, and eleven devils, like spiders, climbed down the sides of the cliffs, where they were tending the cages. They quickly opened the door, and sprayed the inside with some of the orange sea water, which seemed to have a quality of fresh water, though it did not smell sweet. With the nectar washed off, the birds lost interest, and with a wave of a claw, the Supervising Devil healed the injuries to the woman. She opened her eyes, and ceased to call out in agony.

“It is about time someone released me from this unreasonable Decree,” said the woman.

“You think it is unreasonable?” said Droos. “What was the manner of business you pursued in life?”

“I was an enterprising businesswoman,” said the woman. “I was proud to have over one hundred girls working for me. They worked hard, on their backs, for any man, woman, or child that would pay. I admit, it was a hard life. None escaped to tell the tale of their treatment, fortunately. A few tried, and I dealt with them personally. Some cracks to the head, and they were done talking for good.”

“It seems like you are here for trafficking, crimes of intimacy, and murder, among other Evils,” said Droos. “You thought those were simply business choices, to be pursued by those with enough initiative? Then you are surprised that The Judge took exception, and sent some of your Soul Fragments to the Hells of Drerpo.”

“I take exception with this entire system,” said the woman. “And furthermore, even on my twice yearly Paroles, I have discovered that almost all of my Soul Fragments are in the Hells of Drerpo. Even there is one in The House for the Evil in Gon Eden. What makes me so wretched, that I would be treated this way?”

“It would seem that your entire life was devoted to harming Sentients,” said Droos. “You defiled them in ways not even Hell is willing to do here in baetOAK, at least anymore. Any who spoke up you slew, by your own hand. You profited greatly off of this business. Did you live a long and happy life?”

“Eventually the ridiculous law enforcement caught me, and two of my girls did talk, without my Chastisement afterward,”

Book V: Realities of Hell

said the woman, with a smile. “My whole business was taken in, and I spent the rest of my life in a prison cell, in maximum security.”

“It looks like you lived an exciting life in the physical world for a while,” said Droos. “Even there, you were judged contemptable, and separated from Society. I will not Judge the style of incarceration, due process, or Justice of your Reflection World. That is a topic for elsewhere. This Decree is an inevitable outcome of such a lifestyle.”

“Well it is no wonder you would think so,” said the woman, with a smile. “Aren’t you part of this supposed righteous system of Judgement? It is not like you would be Decreed to Damnation for all your crimes. I suppose you are just a harmless businesswoman yourself, trying to feed your family and get by.”

“We do live longer, but we are Judged upon death, and our sentences are just as Severe as yours,” said Droos. “What made you think that women could be treated as objects, and possessions, in your world?”

“Listen, I had a difficult childhood,” said the woman. “No one looked out for me, and I was badly abused. I carved a small empire of sound business practices out by my sheer determination. So it did not qualify as righteous under some religious definition or another. My girls had tough lives too, and I am sure they survived. They were treated little worse than I was treated at their age.”

“As I suspected, this goes back to unresolved trauma, a deep, violent hole in your Whole Self, of body, emotion, mind, and spirit,” said Droos. “You might have benefited from a lifetime of treatment. I do not suppose you ever saw a psychological professional.”

“I would never in a million years need to see a therapist,” said the woman. “My mind was perfectly sound. It was the laws of society that blocked my ability to get ahead. If I found a way to do business, why would I be locked up for doing so?”

“Why do you think crimes of intimacy are so heinous?” said Droos.

“Surely you are not one of those prudes who thinks even autoeroticism is a terrible injustice?” said the woman. “Or looking at moderate, legal erotica to enhance that experience?”

“For once we have a topic of agreement,” said Droos. “If all you were guilty of was producing moderate, legal erotica with consenting adult professionals, or looking at such material

yourself for your own elation, you would not be here. Rather, you dominated these girls in the most harmful way possible. Such harms leave lifelong scars, and you likely created hundreds in need of lifelong treatment, assuming they themselves were not perverted into a similar depravity to yours, through such enslavement. A Society may have consenting adult actors, or professionals. Yet, none may be forced to perform in that way without the full support and rights of civilization, fundamental rights of Sentients. It is a legitimate profession, to be chosen. You enslaved hundreds of girls against their will, and slew them for objecting. Do you wonder that you spend a mere part of your Damnation locked in a cage, and devoured by birds? It seems like you received an easier Decree.”

“I would not expect you to understand,” said the woman. “No doubt you had an upbringing of privilege, and honor, and benefit. Anyone in my position would have done the same, and ended the same way. Will all of them find the same Decree?”

“I am not The Judge,” said Droos. “I would say that there is enough room in the Realms of baetOak and the other Hells of Drerpo to accept all such Whole Souls, and their Soul Fragments. My youth was more troubling than you suggest, though I admit I had some privilege. Although it was in an Evil place, and I escaped without doing more Evil than I did by a core of good values, that was unflappable, and stood up even against the threat of execution, and chastisement. Still, I know that I may very well still be Damned. I accept that possibility, and the Justice behind it. I recommend you embrace your time here, and spend the next endless eon considering the fallacies of your chosen life profession. Did you really have to choose a business that harmed so many people in such cardinal ways?”

“I object to everything you just said,” remarked the woman. “If you can’t get me out of here, and you will not fairly hear me, than take me back to my Sentence. Clearly you are of no use to me.”

“Very well,” said Droos. “I will return, after a small eon, and see what you say next time. I wish you a productive, and useful period of reflection.”

With a motion of her hand, the devils returned, and closed the cage on the woman. Then, the Devil Supervisor raised a hand, and particularly large glob of nectar fell on the woman, coating her. Twenty-two seagulls descended on her, and began tearing her

Book V: Realities of Hell

apart, small bit by small bit. Droos still did not enjoy witnessing justice, and Elriver caused the Orb to Ascend, back to the cliffs.

They were walking along the cliffs, taking a steady, easy pace, and Droos had many thoughts. There was now an ornate wooden fence that separated the fall over the ledge from a casual Sentient passing by it. The Queen of Angels did wonder who traveled this way, other than devils, who would require such a measure.

“Is that really the best Damnation for these worst offenders of Hell?” said Droos.

“You are becoming quite Judgmental,” said Showsh. “Is this a contest here as to who harmed more Sentients in life? These Chastisements are meant to purify the Soul Fragments. They are carefully designed by Dear Elriver and the Lieutenant of Hell. Yet, do not despair that the Cages of Evil are a pleasant Sentence. Also, as a great sage said, ‘It is not becoming to laugh at the demise of your enemy.’”

“It would seem the goal would be treatment for a woman such as that early,” said Elriver. “Better that, and she should live a productive life in an honest profession, even one that is modest, than a lifetime of harm towards others, extreme imprisonment, and then harsh Damnations.”

“It is a recurring theme and digression that all too often Sentients do not receive the help they so desperately need,” said Atropo. “How many humans so disposed or who commit Evil had Evil done to them at some point? What might have happened had that harm, that trauma been addressed?”

“The injustices, the burdens of an unequal Society, the unfairness,” said Droos, “Are further harms to the Whole Self. A Sentient spends their childhood being told they are worthless for being different. Perhaps that gives them permission to feel like they may treat others as worthless as an adult. Rather, differences should be honored, and valued. Blessed are The Weird, and The Stranger, and The Other. Any who do not cause harm should be respected, and loved. Even those who do not follow the Pathway to The Journey of The Good. They are simply the normal, common Sentients, who populate Reality. Treat everyone with extreme kindness, and what a world we would have.”

“Why limit it to only the normal, common Sentients who deserve extreme kindness and love?” said Showsh. “We have discussed this, but is it not a treatment for Evils suffered, and

trauma, to be addressed and approached in turn with love and respect and honor? A caring hand must be held, and given for the victim to hold. Without it, how many fall through the cracks, and end up performing Evil? Reflection Mortals are beings of emotion, among other Aspects of the Whole Self. These must be cured, delicately, or else harm will return, and be perpetuated.”

“Does that mean there is no Chastisement for the Evil committed?” said Elriver. “The mitigating factor must be considered, and a Soul Fragment placed at least in The House for the Evil in Gon Eden. Ultimately, it is a tragedy and a waste. Surely, the goal is that the afterlife will purify, and that the disadvantaged position with which the Whole Soul approaches Rebirth will be somewhat diminished.”

“Then, there are Consequences for the Wicked, yet the whole affair is a tragedy,” said Droos. “The Wicked do not emerge in a vacuum. Surely, in most instances, Evil was done to them first, possibly many times. Where does that endless chain of Evil begetting Evil end? It must cease sometime, in someplace.”

As they continued, Droos thought she saw smoke up ahead, and sure enough, there were cottages, about one hundred feet from the cliff and fence. They were surrounded by the same bushes, with white and pink flowers. These were pleasant structures, although as they passed them by, only one, they saw that they were isolated by half a day of travel. This seemed a little bit of a lonely existence, though odd for a Realm of baetOAK. Of course, she had not seen the inside.

“What are these dwellings we have reached?” said Droos. “They do not appear particularly disadvantaged.”

“This is the Chastisement, the Damnation for the Soul Fragments of those who Must be in baetOAK, because of a lonely Kernel of Evil, but who are otherwise righteous,” said Elriver. “This Realm is The House for the Good. It is the Highest point in the Lowest Hell.”

“I thought The Bastion of Rulers was the Highest Point?” said Droos.

“That is another nearly Highest Point,” said Showsh. “Rulers have a degree of inherent narcissism, a trait which must willingly be accepted for the job, along with the consequences. The Soul Fragments who reside here have almost no flaws, but still far enough from Pure Good to require some Chastisement and Purification.”

Book V: Realities of Hell

“You are saying they are here, essentially, by a technicality,” said Droos. “Should it not be the case that a Whole Soul that is nearly Perfectly Righteous, should be considered the same as a Whole Soul that is Entirely Righteous?”

“That would still leave stains on that Whole Soul, and disadvantage it either for an Eternity or Rebirth,” said Atropo. “Those residual marks of imperfection must somehow be cured. A small eternity in these isolated cottages seems to do the job. Every baetOak has a different approach, in each Manifestation, to this Realm. None are the same, though some are similar.”

“Would it be possible for me to meet one of the Soul Fragments who resides here?” said Droos.

“That is exactly where we are going,” said Showsh. “This is the most spread out of Realms. It takes days to travel, since each cottage is far apart, to discourage interaction, as part of the Sentence. You would be surprised, or maybe not, that such Soul Fragments rarely if ever debate or argue the Sentence. It is essentially unheard of for these Righteous Fragments to complain. Rather, even if the cottages were close together, I have no doubt the occupants would stay inside, voluntarily, and serve their Sentences.”

“These are Soul Fragments who Fear the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo,” said Elriver. “They accept The Judgement and The Decree fully, and completely, and if anything, are surprised they did not receive a worse Sentence. Most assume that they are far worse than they are, and did more terrible deeds than ever occurred in the reality of life. Really, they are their own worst critics.”

“It will be interesting to see what the choicest Realm of baetOak has to offer,” said Drerpo. “Having seen the poorest of Gon Eden, those placed there by token of a Kernel of Good, it will be curious to Judge the opposite.”

“There was a Truth of The Houses for the Evil that it was still in Paradise, and that Limbo might have been far worse,” said Atropo. “Those Soul Fragments had a pleasant roof over their heads, tasty food to eat, and good conversation and entertainment. For the Soul Fragment of the almost entirely Evil, that is a sweet Decree, even if that is their only destination in the Heavens of Drerpo.”

“It would make sense that this Realm is the opposite,” said Elriver. “It is the best of what the Lowest Hell has to offer,

another Limbo of sorts. It is still in baetOAK. Yet, this is the worst destination for these Whole Souls, and one Soul Fragment. The rest are likely in the choicest Realms of Gon Eden, including The City of the Righteous, and multiple other Sentences there, and all of the other Heavens. I would not be surprised if it is such Whole Souls that eventually actually aim to recover their Soul Fragments from the Tree of Thorns, and upon Rebirth, Ascend the Order of Sentients.”

Seven more days passed, and at twilight on the last day, they reached a humble cottage. A pleasant, white smoke rose from the chimney, in a meticulous line. There were eleven devils outside, tending to the cottage, only they were cleaning it, and trimming the hedges, and checking on the fruit trees. The bird feeders had to be filled, and the flowers watered. There was a mat on the pathway to the front door that had a greeting written on it in a language Droos did not know, although with her Keen Senses, she Knew the Meaning.

Then, The Four assembled at the Entrance to the Humblest of Homes, in baetOAK, at the end of that Seventh Day, as for the first time on the Fourth Level, stars appeared in the sky. Most



Book V: Realities of Hell

of all, a bright, shining star shone the most in the Heavens of the Lowest Hell, and it reminded Droos of her Birth Star. That turned out to be a River Vessel of Elriver and Showsh. Had it returned here, to the Lowest Hell, to take Her away, sooner she hoped?

The Angel held Showsh's hand, and they could not help but sing a song. It was one of joy, and happiness, as though they had returned to some semblance of the Heavens of Drerpo. Elriver and Atropo joined in and they all danced, and recited poetry—this moment of joy, a spontaneous time, all in the presence of the Humblest of Homes.

Then they heard footsteps, for someone inside had heard them, and their enjoyment. Now they approached the door, and in that moment, the simple wooden door to the cottage opened, and a golden light spilled forth, of welcoming and happiness. Only, a few drops of orange water fell from the sky in that moment, seeming from clouds unseen. They were still in the Lowest of Hells, but at this Home, it might have actually been a Realm of Heaven, even here.





Chapter 5

House for the Good

A simple man in a robe greeted them with a smile. He spoke with a lisp. There was no ego in his voice or words, yet he was happy to see them. The inside of the cottage contained a single bed, a kitchen, a table, a bookshelf with books, and a screen. There was also a little used couch which he had his guests sit upon, while he prepared food. The meal was fancier than that available in The Bastion of Rulers, although still plain. It was not rations, but mostly fruits, vegetables, and bread. They drank a cool, light colored wine, that was exquisite, and also mugs of orange water, seemingly purified.

“You are most welcome here, Dear Creator, Dear Sovereign, Dear Prince, and Dear Queen of Angels,” said the man. “Though I hardly deserve such a visit. No, I prefer the Sentence of solitude. Besides, it gives me more time to read, and to write, and to learn, and to study. I enjoy the time I have to reflect on life. I grudgingly go on the provided Paroles every two weeks.”

“Grudgingly?” said Droos, with a smile. “Where do you go on Parole?”

“I spend most of those pair of consecutive days in The Library,” said the man. “I have spent a small eternity studying. What greater gift is there than knowledge, and wisdom? I knew much in life, and I am gifted to learn more in this world that came afterwards.”

“Many in your position would go on great trips of exploration,” said Droos. “You would travel the Celestial Domains, and visit the places of Servants and Greater Beings.”

“I prefer study,” said the man, with a smile. “Yet, I am a very flawed man. Thus, I admit that a few days a year I travel to beautiful places. Mostly, they are great examples of nature. Truly, the example of Divine Creation in its Purest Form, these Images

Book V: Realities of Hell

of Reflection Creatures in their normal setting, amidst the tapestry of the wild, there are few art pieces that would surpass such wonderment.”

“So that is what you do with your Damnation?” said Droos. “You study, mostly, in isolation here. Then while on parole you go and study in The Library. That is, with the exception of a few days a year, when you find beautiful examples of nature to behold?”

“Is there something wrong with that, Dear Queen of Angels?” said the man. “As a great sage once said, ‘Most of all, I find silence to be a welcome friend’. In life, I had such tasks and labors and burdens. Of course, I embraced them, and loved my obligations and did my best to excel at both their literal word, and the spirit of their meaning.”

“You have an interesting understanding of law,” said Droos. “Would you suggest that there is of course both a written and oral law, but also the spirit of the law? To truly be good, virtuous, it is necessary to follow all three, is it not?”

“For those who are obligated, it is a commandment, as it is known, and all three must be done,” said the man. “Yet it is a service of love, and respect, and gratitude. We are simple, short-lived images of the Divine, and we have limited time in the physical world to make an impact. The law is that guide, by which to pursue The Journey of the Good. To be holy, to be a priest, the whole nation included, is a yoke, and it must be fulfilled with care and compassion. I learned that the spirit of the law is subtle, and difficult to reach, and understand. Still, it may not be neglected.”

“Is this law for all Sentients, or only for your people?” said Droos.

“My people had a unique destiny,” said the man. “We were given many laws both written, oral, and in spirit, to exalt our lives, and make them better, and holy. Yet such is for my people, and those who stood with them of Whole Soul when the law was given. There are other destinies, also worthy of praise, and such Sentients, and humans, should not step either to the right or left of those paths either. Perhaps there are thousands of pathways, or seventy million faces of the Divine. My people had a special and unique relationship. We honored, and continue to respect and love the countless other Journeys available to God.”

“Is there a singular Journey to holiness, to gratitude, by your People in service to the Divine, or many?” said Droos.

“The pathways to the many faces of God, the Supreme Reality, are numerous even for my People,” said the man. “There is one law, written and oral, and one spirit of the law. Yet, my People are as numerous as the stars, and each has their own interpretation. Many great voices of wise sages offer sound suggestions as to meaning. In the end, there are few false choices. To stand and claim to have the only path to the Divine, that is a surer sign of a false prophet. Rather, those who embrace the multitudes, and many voices, and the endless shades of the law, they will inherit the True World to Come, and the Future to Come.”

“That pluralism and egalitarianism is impressive,” said Droos. “Yet it does not reject traditionalism either. It would seem there is space for numerous approaches to law and the spirit of the law. Many teachers and students may have numerous understandings and meanings, and live their lives in service to Supreme Reality, and the Oneness of God, in holiness, and gratitude. There is no need for conflict, or violence, or war. It is in fact those very sins that destroy and desecrate the sacred sites of your People.”

“And so a great sage once said, ‘My people have defeated me. My people have defeated me,’” said the man. “Your understanding is wise, and you have not studied for a small eternity. I would welcome you to join me in study, the next time I am in The Library. The Law is best examined in partners. I would welcome you as my partner in study anytime. However, for now, I wish to return to quiet contemplation and reading. Praise be the Supreme Reality. Go in peace, Dear Creator, Dear Sovereign, Dear Prince, and Dear Queen of Angels.”

“We thank you for your humble service in life,” said Elriver. “And your continued work in this world to come. I know that you will live to see the future to come as well.”

The Four departed the cottage, once they had finished the food being served by the man, of course, who bowed as they left. Then they walked on for half a day, into the night, and the stars twinkled. Droos thought she saw the bright star suddenly Descend, and race toward the horizon, a few days ahead. Looking over at Elriver, Droos saw she had an absent look for a moment, before she returned the Queen of Angel’s gaze with a smile, and a wink.

“I would think that not every Sentient, in every tradition would welcome the Rain of Souls,” began Droos. “What of those who prefer a more singular route, or who question the Rebirth of

Book V: Realities of Hell

Souls. Should they be so insulted or disappointed?"

"The purpose is not to cause harm or insult," said Showsh. "It is simply the Nature of Reality, and the Order of Sentients and the Rain of Souls. However, there are, as you have learned, more complexities than you once knew."

"You already know that there are multiple Orders of Sentients, and Rains of Souls, and Languages of the Universe," said Elriver. "Well, there is a Language of the Universe, not spoken by us, we are Feaists after all, but chiefly by the Cult of Gihi and other Forcang religions that emphasize the worship of that Singular Supreme Reality. It is called, *Linear*. It is said to be most powerful in connection to monotheistic practices and observances."

"Still, here was a man who would probably have spoken some dialect or derivative, ultimately of Linear," said Droos. "Yet, he resided in a Realm of baetOAK, albeit the choicest sort. Why did this language not provide some direct route to the Domains of this Supreme Reality?"

"The nature of the Supreme Reality," said Atropo, "Are that it is so far beyond the definitions, and laws, and any words that may be used to describe It, that little may be known. Thus, different traditions are just as merited and able to offer incites as any others. Surely, some Essence or Portion of this man, and his Whole Soul, reside in the World to Come, as explained in The Law. Perhaps it is only some token Aspect that obeys the Rain of Souls and Order of Sentients as exists in Dweehwail."

"That is very benevolent and egalitarian," said Droos. "To both obey The Law, but respect and participate in the broader community and system to some extent. That would make this man, at least in the way he interpreted the laws of his people, to be less exclusivist. He sees himself as part of a broader Universe, and Multiverse, even if he only sees us as powerful Sentients, and not any sort of Angel or Greater Being."

"What is owed in relation to other traditions, whether denominations and creeds, or other religions entirely?" said Showsh. "There must be Skepticism, and doubt, and inclusion. A great sage once said that, 'A man may not be certain until the day of his death.' Where there is room for doubt, and the Certainty of Supreme Reality is so Remote, Rather Welcome Differences, and if not Acknowledging any possibility of conversion, rather, Welcome Comradery and a Familiarity with the Traditions of The

Multiverse. At the very least, Love and Respect is Owed.”

“It would appear that this man offered both to all,” said Elriver. “It is powerful to be both spokesman for an entire people, one of the greatest in their history, yet be accepting of a multitude of voices and traditions and religions. That kind of humility and selflessness is rare, and welcome to behold. I have no doubt that this man reached any destination in the World to Come he desired, and any Aspect that Remains in Dweehwail, it will be Far Advantaged, maybe even Reborn as a Forcang or Spirit.”

They walked until the Dawn, and Droos saw that the cottages continued. All had smoke rising from the chimneys, and groups of devils serving the outside.

“Do the occupants of this Realm have to interact with devils?” said Droos.

“It is a Reality of baetOAK,” said Atropo. “All Soul Fragments of the Lowest Hell must interact with the Servants of baetOAK, or devils, at one point or another. In this case, those of this Realm only see them when they emerge for two days every fortnight for their Parole.”

“Do all of these Righteous Soul Fragments spend time in such a manner during Parole?” said Droos.

“Certainly not all of them,” said Showsh. “Is it unrighteous to enjoy exploration and travel? After all, were the Celestial Domains and their wonders not created also for the enjoyment of the Sentients of Drerpo and Beyond? It is better that the Righteous Soul Fragments visit them, possibly more than any others, even those from baetOAK. They are inaccessible in life. They will be forgotten upon Rebirth.”

“How many Celestial Domains are there?” said Droos.

“Many,” said Elriver.

“Unlike a Cosmos,” said Atropo. “Such Definitions are kept more hidden in a Universe. It seems the very existence of Celestial Domains and Firmaments in a Universe that follows Scientific Principles and Laws somehow creates a Difficulty. The solution for many Grand Elder Forcang is to keep some information confidential or only available to some.”

“Is that to suggest that by simply not broadcasting certain facts, the Laws of Science will forgive the presence of the Celestial Domains?” said Droos, raising an eyebrow.

“This might be called a Berry in Reality,” said Showsh.

“It is a Principle of the Artwork of Manifestations used in many

Book V: Realities of Hell

Creations and amongst numerous Projects. It is hard to think of an instance without this; except in Cosmoses.

“How many Planes will you be putting in Vøvoav?” said Droos.

“I have not decided yet,” said Showsh, with a smile. “I would welcome your input. Have you seen anything here yet that should be left out?”

“I liked The Enigma,” said Droos. “If some Manifestations have more than one, I feel Vøvoav could stand to have at least two.”

“Are you saying that The One Unknown was too little for you,” said Elriver, with a half-smile. “You would think she was a Great Being, Dear Husband.”

It was now bright, and the ground Descended, as the plain made its way, lowering the level of the cliff. At this rate, in another seven days, they would be even with the coast. Perhaps that was the point. At the third day, they saw two tall pillars, made of white marble and black marble. They rose, and Droos noticed that the tops of each, very high up were orbs of light energy of some sort. A white light lay atop the black pillar, while a black light lay atop the white pillar. Here the pathway became a simple gray road, with little special or uniqueness to it. It looked rarely traveled, though from time to time about every half day they saw a group of eleven devils.

At dawn on the seventh day they reached the flats of the plain, and sure enough, there was a harbor, extending out onto the orange water. Oddly enough, there was also a strange collection of buildings and attractions. They were run by devils mostly, but also a smattering of other Servants, apparently from other Domains, and even further afield, or so they were told. Here Soul Fragments that had made this trek enjoyed a festive atmosphere, and carnival food, meals, and rides, and games.

Droos had not been to a carnival in any world or Domain, and she enjoyed visiting one with Showsh. Together they went on the Roller Coaster in Hell. It was truly a ferocious ride, with almost an endless number of drops, loops, and corkscrews. They went on a pirate ship that swung back and forth, and eventually, all the way around, upside down. Only, it was an actual galley, on a massive scale. The games were entertaining, and Showsh won her a stuffed scitter. Then they all went to have a meal.

Here there was fish served, caught in the orange sea of

baetOAK. Droos questioned whether this was edible. Elriver confirmed that the suitability of food and drink in the Lowest Hell really depended on the Realm. In Hell's Harbor, the food was great, if a little unhealthy. However, as the Queen of Angels, a little deep fried fish from the Orange Sea would not ruin her day. They had this with numerous other festive treats, and drinks, and generally relaxed after several weeks in Perdition.

"Who are these Soul Fragments that have arrived here," said Droos.

"There are really three groups," said Atropo. "There are those being escorted to Parole through this port. Also, there are those who have successfully, finally, escaped their Damnation. Finally, there are those visiting baetOAK in search of those in Damnation."

"It is a badly kept secret that after a long, endless eon or two, the Soul Fragments of even baetOAK are usually allowed to escape, in their minds, by their own resources, their Chastisement," said Showsh. "You wonder why there is a coherence to this Domain. Sometimes Soul Fragments make their way here, the first true taste of Freedom as they begin searching for brother and sister Soul Fragments with which to Merge."

"It happens far more often that a Soul Fragment from the Heavens of Drerpo arrives here, and searches for those in baetOAK," said Elriver. "Then there might be pairs or trios of brother or sister Soul Fragments in Hell's Harbor, or one Merged Soul, enjoying Exalted Freedom."

"There are also those simply here on vacation," said Atropo. "Though, as you know, it is no small matter to visit baetOAK. It requires preparation. This is certainly the way a Sentient desires to enter the Lowest Hell. The proper way is the way we approached, from The Front. Only the most honored guests get to use this entrance simply for touring."

"Where are we going next?" said Droos.

"Our time in baetOAK is At an End," said Showsh. "What is your Judgement on the Domain in General?"

"Did I see every Realm?" said Droos.

"You did not see every Realm of the Lowest Hell," said Elriver. "You saw many of the Realms."

"Given that there are more options for Chastisement, those that I saw seemed Just for the particular Evils," said Droos. "I can see how some small or long eternity or two of such damnation

Book V: Realities of Hell

might provide the needed Purification. In my opinion, there were a few instances where improvements of various sorts were due. Overall, I was impressed, if not a little unnerved by the Realities of Hell and Justice.”

“That is a very generous assessment,” said Showsh. “We will look into the suggestions. Certainly, you will be in a good position when You and I consider the baetOAK, To Be Created, in Vøvoav. What will be the same, and what will be different?”

“I expect that the same is true for the Gon Eden of Vøvoav,” said Atropo. “Or for that manner, all other Planes.”

“I will do my best, although, I am the small fish in oceans of water that I am,” said Droos. “Really, it is Multiverses of water.”

“You have come far,” said Showsh. “You are Mighty, among Angels, but also, a Great Secret and Omen among the Great Beings of Dweehwail as Well. You are also the Love of My Life, and Soon, we will Be Together Forever.”

“What of the challenge?” said Droos. “The whole reason we are here in the first place. Who turned out to be right? Was it the Lieutenant of Hell, or the Lieutenant of Heaven?”

“I believe that neither has really proven their case for a Summary Judgement,” said Elriver. “Thus, we are going to hear them further. We will have time to listen to each, and they will plead to be heard. Surely, each will want to claim you. What do you think The Judge will Decree?”

“I do not Know that it is my place to decide while I am alive,” said Droos. “I have done Evil, and for that I would see some Soul Fragments damned. Yet a lifetime of pursuing The Journey of The Good may Avert the Severe Decree. I might spend my life in that attempt. Still, will I be fully free of baetOAK? Only The Judge may Know. I am sure that the Lieutenants of Hell and Gon Eden are Zealous in Defending their charges and Soul Fragments. However, they might show a little more patience and understanding of due process, and the way such Decrees are made and come about.”

“That is very wise,” said Atropo. “Perhaps you should be making those types of arguments.”

“It is still the case that you deemed my life so special that you rose from your thrones and Descended into Immanence in order to give me a chance at overcoming the Decree,” said Droos. “Was this a choice you regret? Was I really worth all of that

trouble?”

“I would never regret this sabbatical,” said Showsh. “I met the Love of My Life. Or the Second Love of My Life. That would little have been possible outside of Immanence.”

“Yes,” Elriver rolled her eyes. “And while Showsh was playing the romantic, we also happened to discover that Tzefee was once again playing games in our Manifestation. There was some great luck in all of this. Had we not seen to your case, The Threat might have hidden further on the Planet of No for thousands of years, or Eons, and unraveled all that We Created. It may have been used, and all of Bagan, to pull apart the entire Universe. Such Apocalypses have been done by Tzefee before, millions of times, to her great mirth, and the Terror of Others. Somehow, Droos’ existence played a role in the storyline of The Multiverse, Its Threats, and whether or not this one will be overcome. That is a mystery that has yet to be solved.”

“We should depart then,” said Atropo. “For Court Two.”

“What happened to Court One?” said Droos.

“It is in use by The Judge, and nearly always in session,” said Showsh. “Not even for this will we disrupt the proceedings. However, Court Two is almost as Grand, and many Great Events have transpired there in the History of Drerpo.”

They finished their deep fried fish, and left the restaurant. Out onto the actual dock they walked, and there they found the two masted, wooden River Vessel, the Family Possession of Elriver and Showsh. Droos was pleased to see it, and to travel in such style, after whisking around the Celestial Domains as nothing but energy. Somehow, this method of transit had more class.

Elriver and Atropo set about readying the Vessel for sail, and Droos and Showsh sat together at a table in the center. They drank cups of coffee, and ate scones. Then they talked about the past, and even onto other times they had spent on this Vessel together. The first time she had stood on these planks, she had been a girl. That seemed like a long time ago. Soon Showsh was to be her husband for the rest of eternity. Droos smiled, and she waved her hand in the air and whispered some words of Sre. Showsh touched his cheek, accepting the gesture, as had once been done to her. Then they sat silently, and smiled, gazing into each other’s eyes.

Apparently hauling anchor from Hell’s Harbor was no small task, and even for this able group, it took two days to be

Book V: Realities of Hell

ready for them to go. Then they set sail into the blue sky above baetOAK, leaving very differently than they had arrived. The Four sang songs once more as they Ascended, out of Perdition, into the Clouds and Mists between Domains. It was blue, and red, and purple, and smelled faintly sweet once they reached the Space between Spaces. Droos was no longer on the Lowest Hell, and her Heart and Soul exalted, having been freed, and a burden lifted. She hugged and kissed her Showsh. And they all, the four of them together, sat for a meal.

It was merry gathering, and they discussed their time in The Library, and Gon Eden, and baetOAK. Even they reviewed parts of The City. Droos had little interest in the events of The Jungle at this point, though she supposed her path still led there. She had obligations, and duties. She must return, and help her People overcome her tyrannical father. Droos had learned much about political philosophy, and epistemology, morality, ethics, and even aesthetics, and she was ready to help tear down the Atrocious State of her Youth. Now was time for the Redemption of Her Family and Her People. Yet First, she would answer some questions of some important Ministers of the Firmament.

To eat they had steak and potatoes, with gravy, asparagus, brown rice, and a fruit juice to drink. For dessert, they enjoyed an invigorating green tea with honey. Then they sat back on the sofa brought out for relaxation, and Elriver played some music from a music artifact. It was none other than the same song that had played once long ago, on a stary night south of Nolai. Showsh held out his hand to Droos, and lifted her up.

Then the two danced, on the center deck of the ship, only this time, as they moved about, in unison, Elriver sang a soft poem, that matched the melody, and Atropo hummed a tune, ancient and meaningful. A chorus of minstrels from Heaven heard their passage, and soon fourteen ministering Servants danced, played instruments, and sang in the wake of their passage, all to the original song and dance of Droos and Showsh. Yet the Pair only had eyes and ears and Senses for each other.

Finally, they heard the numerous other voices and sounds. The Queen of Angels laughed, for it seemed that while they might still enjoy the simple pleasures of the past, there were realities of the present and future that would augment what was before, and renew it. As the Future Sovereign of a Manifestation in Vøvoav, it may be rare that she and Showsh would simply be able to dance

alone to a melody, beneath stars, without minstrels and musicians following their every move.

Finally, a bed was prepared for Droos, and this night she spent just herself, for recovery. Showsh and Elriver would get their time together, and rightfully so. The bed was comfortable, and a divider was placed, a plain sheet, so she had privacy. She luxuriated in the escape from the Lowest Hell, and her first night away from the Realities of that place. She hoped that it would be some time before she would have to return.

Lessons were available in passage by none other than the Creator of the Universe on Manifestation Infrastructure. This was all wholly new, and followed the line of reasoning and rational of some earlier dialogues. Really, it went way above her. Droos had to remind Elriver that while She was a Grand Elder Forcang, Droos was but an Angel. Still, The Creator reminded her that, as a great sage said, 'Her grasp must exceed her reach.' She remembered that, as it had been said previously.

There was more dancing with Showsh, and she saw something unusual. Apparently it was the book in progress of this part of her story. It was odd to view it incomplete, down to one hour before this presentation to her. Elriver insisted that as Sovereign she would have to manage all types of Records, including Her own. Seeing such Secrets, what one time lay Above the Veil, would have to become standard Knowledge. Then the book was removed, until it was complete.

Finally, as Droos and Showsh lay in each other's arms on a loveseat, the Queen of Angels spotted a large theater, built of stone. This was the best that might be done with the Resources of a Universe? Yet she dismissed her Judgement, and readied herself for Court two. She could see a large Celestial Dock on the side of the Court, and numerous activities, as Servants and Goddesses alike moved to and from, preparing for business, and now, this conversation with important Ministers of Drerpo.

The River Vessel docked, and The Four anchored it, and entered a steady stream of court attendees, there for The Justice of the Universe. All manner of Sentient, be they Reflection Mortal, Servant, Angel, or God, made their way to the Annexes of the Court. These ornate, pillared buildings were staffed by Servants and Goddesses of a Minister of Drerpo.

"Are the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo not the final arbiters of Justice in the Universe?" said Droos.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“In a Manifestation with little to no Celestial Bureaucracy, perhaps it is that simple,” said Showsh. “Drerpo and many others, if not most Universes and Cosmoses have complex Hierarchies of Ministers, Goddesses, and Servants. We have discussed this. What would it say if the Minister set in charge of Justice, and the Celestial Caseload of a Universe were constantly questioned? Furthermore, there is the concern that such systems have that degree of imperfections and flaws.”

“Nonetheless, there are checks on the Celestial Court of Justice,” said Elriver. “We may not Choose to Exercise Our Rights in this Regard, yet there are Appeals, and Reviews. It is worth noting that the Decrees of The Judge face seven reviews. If any flaws are found, they may receive up to seven appeals. There are Celestial Advocates, and every Whole Soul, from the Highest to the Lowest receives an equal defense.”

“You will not see any appealed Decrees here today, Dear Droos,” said Atropo. “It is a strange age or unusual eon in which any Decrees do not pass all seven reviews. It is far more likely that there will be cases from Saints and Tzaddiks, petitioning for leniency and mercy for their people. There will be Angels and Servants with business as well.”

“How is it that Reflection Mortals, even such Vaunted Ones, Know of such a Court?” said Droos. “Surely it is Transcendent Truth?”

“There are Reflection mortals that offer prayers and petitions to their Gods and Goddesses, their Divine Beings, and Supreme Reality, all the time,” said Showsh. “What they do not know is that almost all prayers are heard, and deliberated. Rather, there are rules of justice and celestial mechanics that prevent most interventions. The Free Will of Reflection Mortals would be destroyed otherwise. Yet some are so close, by virtue of their Righteousness, or unique prophetic insight, to Transcendence, that they have some Innate awareness of such Courts. Having possibly even witnessed Visions of such procedures with their own eyes, the Minister of Justice permits a tithe of such Sentients some access to the Celestial Courts.”

“Are the Celestial Bureaucrats swayed by such interventions?” said Droos.

“They are not convinced all of the time,” said Elriver. “Still, there are many attributes of the Ministers of Justices, and of Us. Many of them are Merciful. Some of Stern. Those that

are merciful desire to save and protect and redeem all Reflection Mortals, all peoples and cultures, and for righteousness and peace to be the only force in the Universe.”

“Clearly, the attribute of Mercy does not always Reign,” said Droos.

“That is true,” said Atropo. “As mentioned, Reflection Mortals must have free will. They must be able to choose. In such a system of Freedom, sometimes Evil or Neutral choices are made.”

“What of the numerous religions, philosophies, and traditions for which there is no God or Goddess of Minister to answer prayer?” said Droos. “Are only the Visionaries, the Saints, Tzaddikim, and Prophets of mainstream faiths to have such a chance and privilege?”

“This is a digression,” said Showsh. “Yet you may recall that the Goddess of the Answer accepts and responds to all prayers that do not have a direct connection to a literal Deity or Servant or Archangel. Thus, it may be said that no matter what, or the literal truth, there is an Agent of Heaven, or Aspects of the Celestial Bureaucracy, that listen to prayer. There is no such thing as a wasted plea, or offering of gratitude to the Divine. Such praise of course should be offered to fellow Sentients where it is due. For all of the splendor of life, where credit is given to God, Goddesses, or Great Beings, there is acknowledgement.”

“Also, those who do not get an automatic response in the physical world, and that is most, should not despair that their answer will not be provided in the afterlife or world to come,” said Elriver. “There the questions will be answered, and the pleas discussed. Furthermore, righteous prayers and sincere requests will be considered by The Judge as credit toward The Decree. Rather, Reflection Mortals should not despair. Their prayers and supplications are heard!”

“What of the atheist, the simple one, or the one who does not know how to ask?” said Droos.

“It is prayers, and offerings of the heart that are the most sincere,” said Atropo. “The deepest desires and thanks provided within. As a great sage said, ‘Does God prefer sacrifices and the fats of animals, or service and good deeds?’ It is also the deeds of loving kindness of all Reflection Mortals that speak as much as prayer, or rather, are prayer in action. The Atheist, the simple one, the one who does not know how to ask, they may all perform

Book V: Realities of Hell

righteous tasks and duties and work. Surely, the message inherent in such a yoke will rise to the God of Answer, and will speak on their behalf to The Judge at their trial once they die. Do my Dear Mother and Dear Father Truly require literal words and sentences to Hear the desperate yearnings and righteous requests and prayers for healing of Reflection Mortals?”

“That is reasonable,” said Droos. “I feel like we have discussed this, and it is a digression. Yet, for how many Reflection Mortals, and even Angels and Servants, is this a central topic? They may be pleased to know that prayer is not just a ritual, and all are heard. Furthermore, even the innermost essence of the heart reaches the Ear of the Divine.”

The Four reached the Annexes of the Court, where Celestial Processing occurred. Should it be the case that at The Courthouse, the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe do not need to wait in line? Rather, all Sentients must wait their turn. So, The Four Royals of Drepko took their places in line, and it was rare for such a company to liven the space. On this day there were some Righteous Reflection Mortals, and many Servants and Angels, and a few Gods and Goddesses.

Court Two had reasonably quick lines, but this Celestial Domain saw millions of cases per Absolute Day, in some time beyond time, and it still took hours to transit the queue. They also began to get concerned, since the parties they were here to meet had not yet introduced themselves. What would that mean when they got to the front of the line? Would there be difficulty hearing their case if some of them were missing?

Sure enough, even in the Celestial Courts for the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe, all parties must be present for the debate to begin. As such, two parties were absent. Elriver was a tad annoyed, as these were actually Ministering Great Beings in service of Her Celestial Bureaucracy. She had some right to show frustration that they might not arrive on time. Thus, upon reaching the front of the line after about seven hours, they were told by a polite Clerk that they would have to return to the start of the line once their party had arrived. The business of the Courts simply could not delay, even for them.

“We are borrowing this space, after all, Dear Mother,” said Atropo. “It is kind enough of the Minister of Justice to permit this usage. Time may not be wasted, even in Court Two. I am sure that the Lieutenant of Gon Eden and the Lieutenant of baetOak will be

here with their ensembles soon. They will want to make final pleas and prayers of their own, seemingly, for this Whole Soul.”

“That brings to fresh light the central question,” said Droos. “Why are there Ministering Great Beings, Chief Celestial Agents, arguing over my Soul Fragments, in some distant eternity when I die? What makes me so special?”

“The Truth is that there are Others in your situation,” said Atropo. “They have been there, and they will be in the same toil.”

“What is it to want to do good desperately, but be taught nothing but Evil?” said Showsh. “To be raised in an Evil Place, to be trained to speak for Evil and to do Evil. How does such a person, who wants to do good, and pursue the path of The Journey of The Good, succeed? Surely, they are dragged down to much Damnation by token of their surroundings. Perhaps, that is some mitigation. In this instance, the Minister of Gon Eden felt it was notably unreasonable.”

“If so many others are in that situation, what makes my plight so unusual?” said Droos.

“You seem to have a particular pension for optimism and seeing the good in others,” said Elriver. “You have welcomed new words and language for good in order to facilitate doing good. It has truly been your desire to be righteous, despite all odds. Thanks to your efforts, your People have a good chance at redemption, and you committed an Evil with a chance of returning as well, if over a lifetime. If not, surely you would have followed the same path of numerous Damns as your Father.”

“It would appear you are acting as The Judge,” said Droos. “You pass a Decree on my Father. He is an Evil man, but also the product of his surroundings. Why not redeem him as well? Surely, once removed from his position, let him spend the rest of his life learning better, and return to do good, and live The Good Life.”

“That is an excellent observation,” said Atropo. “This is another reason you are special. Whether it is your Father or even Tzefee, no sinner is too Evil for you to desire redemption and humbling and return. It may be that my Dear Mother has seen this enough times to believe either he will not return, or he has done so much there will still be numerous Fragments Chastised in the least desirable parts of Hell upon his death. That does not mean he may not exercise his Free Will, and choose to aim for redemption.”

“It is also the case, as foreshadowed by Ruby, you happen to be an Omen, a Secret in the Multiverse, one who Hears The

Book V: Realities of Hell

Sound of The Flute,” said Showsh. “There may have been some sense by the Minister of Gon Eden and the Minister of baetOak that such Peril Existed. They have an Aspect of Judgement, as do you. They See Much, but Not Everything.”

“It would seem that I both share traits with others in a similar plight, and it happens that I have some unusual characteristics as well,” said Droos. “Is that to say that there would not be other Secrets or Omens in the Multiverse?”

“It happens that you were very close to Tzefee for the beginning of your life,” said Elriver. “That is an added Virtue.”

“You claim it is a Virtue that I was raised beholden to the Goddess of Pain?” said Droos.

“It is similar to the value of Purification in the Hells of the Afterlife,” said Atropo. “Difficult experiences provide Character required to overcome such burdens in The Future to Come. You have some experience defeating, on a basic level, the likes of even Tzefee. This is before your Great Tasks to Defeat Her as The Threat to Dweehwail, and The Great Wave.”

“I still feel that this whole exercise has been hyperbolic, of sorts,” said Droos. “If you all say I am worth the trouble, time, and effort, I will have to defer to you. Yet, it makes me uncomfortable. I should be treated as an equal Sentient, with the same benefits, and nothing more.”

“If you do have a Secret to Save the Multiverse,” said Showsh, “Then such an Omen might die with you, should you fail to be saved. Some Sentients require saving, and redemption. All Sentients have an equal opportunity to Rise to such Purposes. Perhaps each should act as if they may have a Universe to Save.”

“What a burden to place on Sentients?!” said Elriver. “Is it not enough to live The Good Life and Be Good, but that every Sentient should also consider herself as required to save a Universe, or More?”

“Rather, every Sentient should live according to their lot in life,” said Atropo. “That may be simple, in peace times, or at the extremes of Ages, and Dawn Wars, may require, in fact, the entire Manifestation to be rescued. Should he have the excuse of independence and that the world is of no concern to him? Rather, the needs of the moment are what matters.”

“In my case, the requirements are for me to save a universe, or even The Multiverse of Dweehwail,” said Droos.

“How frightening. Is that it? And I am supposed to do this even as

an Angel? Is that enough?"

"We have discussed this for much of this philosophical dramatic narrative," said Showsh. "You must start by, 'Saving yourself, and then perhaps your family, then your people, and maybe then the universe or multiverse,' as was said by a great sage. You have mostly redeemed yourself. Next, you will see to your family. I am sure that you will Rise to the Vaunted Heights of a Redeemer of The Multiverse."

"You have such Faith in Me, Dear Love of My Life," said Droos.

"We all have Faith in You," said Elriver. "Yet, enough of this digression."

They were beside the lines of Sentients, waiting for their cases to be heard, and apparently, the presence of all of their litigants, and parties to the cases. As many might do in such a case, they went to one of the restaurants associated with Court Two. It was an interesting mix of the population of Drerpo. What was curious, and refreshing, was that They did not receive special service. There were no ministering angels, or servants. At the Celestial Court, even the Creator and Sovereign were equal.

The Four sat at a comfortable table, and ordered a meal of fowl, rice, vegetables, with sauces, and dips, and breads of various sorts. They drank water and fruit juice, since all must have their senses about them prior to their case. It occurred to Droos that it would be unlikely that anything but the most potent brews would result in intoxication, and in large quantities. Still, the morality and ethics of the moment dissuaded them from imbibing. Yet, the food and drink was welcome, and for a time, set their current Matter aside.

As they sat at the table, a woman approached them, and pulled up a chair, without any other request or suggestion. She placed a mug of water on the table, and took a deep draft for many seconds, before placing it down. With a sigh, she wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

"You are most welcome to join us," said Droos. "Go ahead and tell us a little about yourself, and why you have chosen to sit here."

"I know that you are the Creator, the Sovereign, the Prince, and the Queen of Angels," said the woman, with a bow of her head. "Throughout my life I have offered praises to my Supreme Reality, yet I acknowledge the Rulers of this Universe, and their

Book V: Realities of Hell

Ability and Nobility. I also hope that you may hear my petition. Surely, my humble prayers have already come to the ears of the Creator and Sovereign. Still, serendipity has brought me to this place, and recognition, as through a Vision, has permitted me to Recognize You.”

“Dear Madam,” said Elriver. “Do not despair that prayers, cases, and the entirety of the affairs of Drepso are not always and forever before me. I am aware, simultaneously, of all matters. It is true, that I have heard your petition already, as the deepest desire of your heart, actions and prayers. Why do you think you are here? Still, it is a sorry Creator that Judges alone. Our Courts follow Due Process. You should use this space to tell your tale to your Advocate, that you may work together to present your case. Nonetheless, I will listen, because I wish to hear you say your concerns. I may not intercede, but I may offer my own prayers on your behalf. Sometimes, such heartfelt blessings by Us have some effect.”

“I thank you, Great Being,” said the woman. “I am a nurse, who cares for the sick. Great is the suffering in my land. Night and day I attend to the needs of the dying, and help bury the dead and see to their dignity and requirements as well. Still, for all that I do, on my Reflection World, millions die every day in this global epidemic. I am blessed to be spared myself so far, although it is only a matter of time. Most of the other nurses have already died. So many children, and babies have been taken.”

“That seems like a terrible disaster for your world,” said Droos. “Yet is a disease not a natural blight? Are the acts of nature Evil in of themselves?”

“Even if this was but a disease of nature, I would petition you for Mercy,” said the woman. “For our distress is very great, and our wickedness knew no bounds. Ultimately, this disease is a bane of our making. Ours was a Reflection World of many rivalries. Nation-states developed weapons of war that might purge entire populations. These included terrible manufactured diseases. Many tried to create treaties to ban their use. It only took one accident, and a small spread quickly became a global epidemic. Billions have died.”

“It would seem that this disaster is of your making,” said Showsh. “What was discussed earlier, that scientists should refuse to create certain weapons, or develop technology to do harm in particular ways? Here, on your Reflection World, your nation-

states are guilty of permitting such interference, and reckless research. Now, it may be your undoing.”

“Such are the depth of our sins,” said the woman. “We were arrogant, and selfish, and insincere. We dreamt too boldly, and we committed heinous crimes and atrocities. Not all of us. Some asked for restraint, and rule of law, and moderation. In fear, in bigotry, our leaders did not listen. All effort was put into countering the menace of The Other and The Stranger. Now the widow, the orphan, and the meek die along with the strong and the able. All die in agony. Might you bring relief from our turmoil? We are brought so very low.”

“For your sake, I will at least do research into your Reflection World,” said Elriver. “Should I find fifty worthy Sentients, I will offer my prayers in your case. Remember, ultimately, it is My Minister of Justice, and the Celestial Courts that decide.”

“Fifty seems like a lot,” said the woman. “What if there are only twenty-five? Would you accept my petition for twenty-five?”

“If there are twenty-five righteous Sentients on your world, I will offer my prayers,” said Elriver.

“Does this not seem like a conversation had by a previous great sage?” said Atropo. “I know it was said by at least one.”

“What if there are only seven,” said the woman. “Would you offer your prayers of redemption for only seven?”

“I will offer my prayers if there are Seven Truly Righteous Sentients on your Reflection World,” said Elriver, with a smile. “Now go in peace, with my blessings, and may you continue to treat the sick and dying with dignity, that they may return to health.”

The woman smiled, and bowed low, as she finished her water, and removed herself, offering praises both to her Supreme Reality, and to Elriver and Showsh. The Four were left at their own table by themselves once more.

“Is it true that this has happened before?” said Droos.

“It has happened on a number of previous occasions,” said Elriver. “It takes a truly bold Sentient, or human, to petition their Creator on behalf of their people, or even Strangers and The Other. Why do you think this woman was here?”

“Are you really unable to do anything to save her world?” said Droos.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“My prayers are not nothing,” said Elriver. “They are always Heard by The Judge and The Court. Yet They Ultimately Decide. Besides, I still must investigate if there are Seven Truly Righteous Sentients on her Reflection World. Right now, I count One. I hold out hope. Yet do not some Reflections fall into the trap of Evil and Pessimism? In such a place, there is no such thing as living The Good Life, or being happy. I will hope to find Seven. I must investigate.”

“Would a world devolve so much that less than Seven Righteous Individuals might be located therein?” said Droos.

“It happens,” said Showsh. “Worlds that pursue The Journey to The Evil, and do so long enough, may often lack enough Soldiers of the Good willing to risk everything to be Righteous despite the consequences. It is difficult to be an axiomatic person in an Evil Place. Many would choose to be a little less righteous, and move to a locale far more favorable. Few want to truly be a light in a very dark place.”

“That is part of what makes you special,” said Atropo. “You wish to bring light even to your Father, even to Tzefee. You would be one of the Seven Righteous Sentients on a Reflection World, no doubt about that. How many others would there be, is the question.”

“The Bagan Galaxy had far more virtuous people,” said Droos. “This is some distant world in a faraway galaxy?”

“The Bagan Galaxy is not the only center of civilization currently residing in Drerpo,” said Elriver. “There are an endless variety of other population centers. Many are virtuous, and Good Places, or mostly, Neutral Places, and everywhere in between. Some fall into the trap of persistent Evil. Such Places risk these kinds of disasters. They may only hope for some Prophetess or Visionary that will have the ear of the Celestial Courts.”

“Or they may hope that they happen to see the Creator of the Universe while they are there,” said Atropo.

Just then, a Servant Clerk approached Elriver, and whispered in her ear, and then departed.

“It looks like our parties have arrived,” said Elriver. “We should finish our meal, and return to the line.”

The Four spent fourteen minutes eating the rest of their meal in some silence. Droos thought about the traps and imperfections of Reflection Mortals, and the mischief that may be pursued. Sometimes, the universe was forgiving. Other times,

mistakes might kill every Sentient on a Reflection World. That might be another reason why pursuing The Journey of The Good and living The Good Life was valuable. Those that valued long existences on their home worlds with less of a possibility of such mistakes might find the stability inherent in righteousness or near goodness to be useful.

They rose and returned to the lines of the Annex. There they saw two groups. The first was led by a short man, who had a pair of notable horns, and a tail. That seemed to be the extent of his distinguishing features, and otherwise, he was actually quite aesthetically pleasing. His party were mostly Superior Devils, but also some other Gods, Goddesses, and Servants, and generally members of His Court. This was the Minister of Hell, and not quite as frightening as might be expected. Perhaps the seduction in that was the point.

The other group was led by a man who had a pair of antlers, and ears like a deer. Otherwise, He too was handsome, or so thought Droos. His group were Gardeners and Goddesses and Servants from Gon Eden, those who focused on matters of Justice and Law. The Minister of baetOak seemed to always sport a smirk, and smile, while the Minister of Gon Eden looked contrite and polite, with a generous expression. While the Lord of baetOak was seductively beautiful, the Lord of Gon Eden seemed there to invite her to act well, and not to embrace his good looks and personality.

“Somehow I expected something more dramatic for these two after all of this time,” said Droos.

“One feature of the Celestial Courts is that all litigants are meant to present themselves with a degree of Immanence,” said Showsh. “There is a certain equality here. This is not The Palace. In a Court of Law, even this one, all Sentients should be seen as equal.”

“Of course, there are some residuals of the Office, Job, and Rights that they cannot dismiss so easily,” said Atropo. “Notice the horns and the antlers. Still, in Their own Domains, they look even more Unique.”

“I suppose they will still have their famous personalities,” said Droos. “I am surprised they are not making advances and postures now.”

“They may have their own objectives,” said Elriver. “But both are Ministers of Drerpo. They understand the decorum of

Book V: Realities of Hell

Court Two, and that the litigants are not permitted to talk prior to the proceedings at the Celestial Court, even in the Annexes. We will enter Our Case with Them Together, yet also Divided.”

“Why all of these rules?” said Droos. “Surely a simpler system would produce results faster.”

“It would also have many more errors,” said Showsh.

“In a system where there are trillions of lives on the line, and the happiness of quadrillions, perhaps some near perfect care in due process is warranted. There are reviews and checks to ensure fairness at all times, and there is a reason that at the level of the Celestial Courts, there are few Appeals necessary. That is not because of poor legal work or corruption. It is because of the soundness of the decisions.”

“I am glad that you are so confident in the system, Dear Love,” said Droos, with a wink and a smile.

Just then, they reached the front of the line, and were called into Court Two. The Celestial Doorways were opened, and Showsh led her into the Chambers of Justice. Now the Chief Ministers of the Firmament would present their final cases to sway The Decree. It was unclear as to the impact it would have. The Universe was listening.





Chapter 6

The Lieutenant of Hell

They stepped into the amphitheater with stone seats. At the far side was a large Gateway, or two pillars with a stone atop, between which was a swirling mystery of energies. Somehow Droos was drawn to that Mystery, herself a Secret, an Omen, called home. Showsh grabbed her hand, and they walked to the stone podium on the far left. There were three altogether.

At the podium was an Impressive Goddess, Mighty and Bold, Prepared to Argue their Case before the Court. Even in the Presence of the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe, She did not bow, for all here were equals in Her eyes. Still, she seemed to Know everything about their case, and perhaps only Elriver had deeper Understanding. They stood there, and the middle podium was occupied by the Party of the Minister of Gon Eden, and at the Podium of the Far Right, the Minister of baetOak stood, with an amused expression. Each had their own Goddess or God to argue their case before The Judge of Court Two.

As it happened to be, this was an arbitration. They were here to debate, not to decide. Still, this Court Two was used, in light of the severity of the situation. Now, the God of the Right stepped forward, before The Judge, and prepared to make a speech. He seemed equally to be wise, and smart, in many senses, almost in reflection of his charges, and was ready to begin the case.

Behind them, all of the stone seats were occupied by the Heavenly Hosts, and Servants, and Guests from afar. This was an unusual moment in Drerpo, for the Creator and Sovereign did not often appear in any court, leaving the management to particular Agents and Officers. All now passed to silence, as The Judge raised Her hand, and they Knew that the moment of Arbitration had begun.

“I begin by praising my esteemed colleagues and officers

Book V: Realities of Hell

of this court,” said the God of the Right. “Since the Dawn of Time, the equality of this Venue has been maintained with much uniformity. For that, the Patrons of this Great Universe are to be Commended. Here even Neutral Ground has been chosen for Arbitration on this Weighty Matter. It is, indeed, a matter of the greatest concern.

“Mercy is certainly a valuable Aspect and Attribute of Great Beings. It speaks of generosity and redemption and humbling. No doubt all of these in their proper place and time and use are noble aspirations. Perhaps it would be desired for the Minister of Justice of a Manifestation to use Mercy always. Why not have a Universe where all Soul Fragments go to Heaven?

“In Heaven, there is little in the way of Purification. It is a Reward. Sure, all might go there, and benefit from the richness of the Firmament. Yet, when they are Reborn, what lives would they have? All of that Evil from life. It would stick, and dirty those Whole Souls, and weigh them down with terror and sadness. That is not to say that Hell cures all Evils. It is part of the mitigation of the worst possibilities of Rebirth. It ensures that a Sentient is Reborn in a more advantaged state.

“We live in a Benevolent Multiverse. You speak of Mercy, while it seems the Laws of our Supposed Supreme Reality have a system that exalts even Evil Whole Souls, and encourages Mitigation, Purification, and Embetterment. It is as if Dweehwail and some Natural Laws want Whole Souls to have the opportunity, a Mercy Beyond Justice, to be more advantaged in the next life. There is an encouragement for Whole Souls to seek this improvement in the next life. We live in a good Multiverse that charges the Whole Soul to do better.

“It is dependent on Purification. To remove this defies the inherent Mercy in the Multiverse to the personal guilt of a Forcang, or Creator, or Sovereign. The system that would send all Sentients, or those unwarranted in the afterlife, without such Chastisement, to Heaven, of any Domain or Plane, denies this Mercy of the Multiverse. It denies the very benevolence of Supreme Reality. Really, Damnation is a gift.

“Did anyone say it was wonderful, or beautiful to witness the punishment of the wicked? Let the righteous have discomfort at seeing such a Justice, such Flames of Reprise. Still, do not deny this gift, this mercy from your Sentients; anyone of them. If there is Evil, a stickiness, flaws to the Whole Soul, Soul Fragments must

be delivered to Hell, including baetOak. If they are so righteous, maybe it will be only The Bastion of Rulers or The House for the Good. However, even the Kernel of Evil requires purification.

“Why should the very good, the mostly righteous be so deprived? They too had flaws in life, and made some petty mistakes. Some of those may have even caused notable harm. Let the purification occur in their afterlife, at least. Let them gain an advantage if they choose Rebirth. It is a great mercy, and it would be a terrible injustice to insist that just because a Whole Soul is good, or mostly good, that those Kernels need not be purged. All the more so, those Soul Fragments must go to my Client.

“It is also a matter of Justice. The very Laws and Principles of Drerpo state that The Judge, who Knows All, Decrees The Sentence. It is the Right of baetOak to gain the Soul Fragments that are Evil, even of the most righteous of Whole Souls. Should there be Evil, to Hell they will go, to some Domain, even the Lowest Hell. Would the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe violate Their Own Laws, that have stood since the Dawn of Time? What other laws should be violated for this single Sentient? What imperfections would that introduce into the Celestial Courts, into the Near Perfection of the Celestial Domains, the Firmament, the Sacred Realms, and the Celestial Bureaucracy of Drerpo? For the sake of Justice, Droos must go to baetOak upon death, for she has done Evil.

“Perhaps she turned back from death, but she spoke for her tyrannical father’s rule in action. She might have spoken out, and turned aside, or cast herself from the precipice. She did not have to agree to be his icon, his symbol of benevolence and the religious justification for his rule. Droos, as the Eldest Daughter of the People of the Blood played a key role in the legitimacy of a tyrant. For that, surely some Soul Fragments are owed to baetOak, and other Hellish Domains.

“How many might claim mitigation? Are they all to receive a reprieve, and have no consequences for their actions? This one act has already claimed the lives of tens of thousands in the atrocious rituals of that nation. What if she had spoken to promote rebellion? Her execution and death might have been a symbol of revolution, and something new. Acting out of the fear of that death, that execution by her father, surely warrants some mercy. It does not remove the claim of my client. A Soul Fragment, at least, or two, or three, must go to baetOak.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“Droos had choices. She had been taught to think, and behave differently by none other than our esteemed Sovereign, one of the Two Rulers of the Universe. This princess could not have had a better mentor. Still, she chose Evil. She was the advocate for a terrible Evil. Is there no consequence for this?

“I also respect that some would say she has, now, thanks to the same interfering Forcang, a small eternity to live prior to The Decree. Still, is there no such thing as an unforgivable stain? Droos’ actions promoted a regime that has already killed tens of thousands since then. That blood is partially on her hands. How might even an eternity overcome such terror, cruelty, and death? This Queen of Angels, however long she lives, will go to The Judge, and must be Decreed for baetOak, upon death. It is Justice, and Mercy, and the Law and Principle of Drerpo. It was at The Beginning. May it be so all the way until the End.”

With that, the God of the Right took a bow, and stepped back to the podium on the far right. The Minister of baetOak nodded His head at the God. For a moment there was True Silence, and it seemed that the entire Universe held its breath. The swirling energies behind The Judge raged, and churned. Then the Goddess of the Left, the Advocate for The Four, stepped forward, and stood in the Center.

“Dear Judge, Dear Colleagues, and Honored Litigants,” said the Goddess of the Left. “I stand before you at this Court of Arbitration to merely discuss the fair points made by my esteemed Adversary. I have no small task, and He has surely made a worthy plea and petition for the cause of His Client. With no other presentations, would it be any surprise if Reflection Mortals and Celestial Judges alike declared that Droos is Justly Damned. There is no hope for redemption. We may all rest in the Laws and Principles of this Noble Universe, that are Inviolable.

“That is certainly a convincing start. To begin with the Merits of Mercy was clever, and to suggest that it defies the overriding benevolence of Dweehwail to offer any redemption to Droos. Yes, the Rain of Souls is an inherently Merciful Model. It provides ample opportunity for most Whole Souls to achieve their best ends through Rebirth. It does not mention the Exceptions to every Rule.

“What have we not discussed but that any Society, or System of Government, has Flaws, or Limits? Is that really reasonable to expect in a Celestial Government, a Celestial

Bureaucracy and Court? It is all the more so that This Court is very aware of its limitations. There are Seven Reviews and Seven Appeals. In the end, the reason that Mercy is placed at times to supersede the strict sense of justice is that that Judgement requires this To Be Just. There are cases that defy norms, and the standard due process and review.

“Were this a Court of Reflection Mortals, I would be the first to question such Exceptions to the Norm. Perhaps, that is why there are Pardons, and Executives may offer some reprieve from harsh sentences, or where a woman imprisoned may in fact be innocent. Still, the law must be followed, and only the system of due process needs to be applied. Reflection Mortals only see the shadows of the cave wall, the Reflections of Abstract Dimensions. They see Justice as justice and Law and law. Rather, The Judge, the Advocates, we have a Different Knowledge of Truth and Reality.

“Let us not be haughty even here, or use such Powers lightly or frequently. Mercy must be earned. Droos will earn the most of her redemption through a lifetime of good deeds. Still, to tilt the balance, for good actions, for pursuing The Journey of The Good, that is Mercy Beyond Justice, because Droos was a Righteous Soul born into an Evil Place.

“It is not my place to present the whole of the Position of Gon Eden, as that is for the work of my Esteemed Colleague. Still, I may say that Droos is an unusual case, and she has demonstrated a similar commitment to The Good Life following one, albeit, very Evil Act. This may be an instance where the Mercy beyond Justice may be applied, and is a tool for The Judge to consider in a Decree. The Judge is not a Reflection Mortal, but a Goddess of Drerpo, answerable to the Minister of Justice. Such a Subtlety is not Beyond Her Abilities. Rather, She is Able to Know, and Discern, and Deliberate Precisely and Wisely.”

The Goddess for the Left took a bow to The Judge, and then to the Colleague Advocates, before returning to the leftmost podium. Over at the Podium in the Center, the Minister of Gon Eden was whispering to his Advocate. She was calmly, and carefully, answering his questions. Then she rose, and stood in the Center of the Center.

“Dear Colleagues, Dear Judge, Esteemed Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo,” said the God of the Center. “My client requests the Rest of Three. Where there are many litigants, Rest

Book V: Realities of Hell

May Follow the Second. We Defer Our Case Until Tomorrow.”

The advocate bowed to the Colleague Advocates, and then The Judge before returning to stand beside the Minister of Gon Eden. Then The Judge bowed in one fluid motion, and withdrew, off to the side. Quickly, those on the stone seats left Court Two, as though this were standard procedure, while others entered. Showsh took Droos’ hand, and they departed through the Gates to the Annex.

“I was not terribly impressed by the presentation of the God of the Right, on behalf of the Minister of baetOAK,” said Droos. “Is that really all that He has to say? Am I to be Chastised in the Lowest Hell because, ‘Damnation is a Gift’? Would it not have been more poignant for the Minister Himself to speak, rather than a proxy? Even more than that, if He had spoken in His True Form, that would have made a starker point.”

“I would have preferred to hear from the Minister of baetOAK as well,” said Showsh. “In the Celestial Courts, all Sentients are equal, and have egalitarian access to Advocates. Even a Reflection Mortal will have Their case argued by a God or Goddess before The Judge. Would it really be fair for the Lieutenant of Hell of Unveil Himself in his Awful Might? That would be essentially a kind of intimidation. Certainly, it would not be equal even with Servants or most Gods.”

“I also was less than impressed with the presentation of the Minister of baetOAK,” said Elriver. “You should take that as a good sign. The Morale or Fervor of the Advocate is in part based on the Will and Desire of the Client. Clearly, in the time that this matter has been served, some of the passion of this Minister has diminished. Do not assume that upon your death, He will not be in Court One to argue for your actual Decree before The Judge. There, the most Honest and Profound Statements will be made for the Case of the Lowest Hell. Yet, it is a good sign that for this, Mere Arbitration, He has lost some of his Passion since an earlier chapter.”

“If the Lieutenant of Hell does not care whether I contribute Soul Fragments to His Domain, why are we even here?” asked Droos. “Are we not wasting the Court’s time, as well as ours?”

“The Lieutenant of Hell is a Minister of many nuances and purposes and objectives,” said Atropo. “It may be that he anticipates the arguments of the Minister of Gon Eden, and thinks

that at this stage he is unlikely to make headway. That is in contrast to the time of your actual death, and appearance before the Celestial Courts.”

“Then he is ceding the point, that it is simply too early now to consider these subjects,” said Droos. “I have a lifetime, hopefully a small eternity at least, before me. During that time I may focus on mostly pursuing The Journey of The Good. It is premature to argue, even in arbitration, for Damnation.”

“He did have a fairly convincing point, in that regard,” said Showsh. “What you did, on behalf of your Father, was a Very Evil Act. Will even a small eternity be enough to repair that damage?”

“Part of my redemption may come from returning to my people and saving them,” said Droos. “If I had further chosen sacrifice and death, I would not have had that option. It is a slower path to The Good Life, yet it may arrive there all the same.”

“Still, tens of thousands have already been executed or sacrificed since then,” said Elriver. “Your rebellion, however short, might have been the spark of a true revolution. Your actions might have saved many of those victims.”

“Are all Reflection Mortals meant to always accept painful execution and death and the victimization of family members and loved ones as a price for righteousness?” said Atropo. “Perhaps that is the ideal. However, it is some mitigation to say that to have rebelled, Droos would have died horribly, and her little sister would have been selected and chosen for her fate instead, if the revolution did not occur, or happened in time.”

“That is merely a mitigation of my Sentence,” said Droos. “It would suggest that there is still a claim, that the Lieutenant of Hell still has a stake on my soul. Is that not true? Am I not imperfect? What have we learned throughout all of this? How many souls are truly so purely good that they have no Kernels of Evil? Even the most righteous seem to have a Place in baetOAK, however choice a selection. Am I to consider myself so humble, too perfect, that I am exempt? On the contrary, I am filled with imperfections and mistakes and harm towards others.”

“That is an exaggeration,” said Showsh. “I will concede that ultimately, even a lifetime of good deeds, after some eternity, may not be enough to remove all of your Soul Fragments from baetOAK, or other Hells of Drerpo. We are here to merely make the attempt at improving your lot. Surely, far more Soul Fragments

Book V: Realities of Hell

would have been Decreed upon your sacrifice without a lifetime to seek redemption and to perform good. Is it better to have dozens or scores of Soul Fragments in Hell, or just one or two?”

“It may be a matter of reduction,” said Elriver. “We will explore this matter further, but it may be that nearly all Whole Souls have at least one or two Soul Fragments in some Hell or another. Even those Soul Fragments may seem to be in some Limbo, or Minor Heaven (or Minor Hell), given how they choose to use the small eternity. You clearly require less Purification now, and after an eternity of penance and good deeds.”

“This is really the Second Round of negotiations, or Arbitration,” said Atropo. “You were not at the first, or at least if you were, you were An Essence, Vague and Remote; possibly still contained within a previous afterlife, not Reborn. It was there that the Lieutenant of Hell and the Lieutenant of Heaven made their First Round of negotiations, to lay claim to Fragments of your Soul. Do not assume that you are wholly unique. Rather, for the sake of the few Truly Righteous Souls in the history of Drerpo, the Creator and Sovereign might take a similar interest, and investigate themselves.”

“Apparently I am such a Secret and Omen that I require help even beyond most of the Truly Righteous,” said Droos. “What if there are Six Truly Righteous Sentients on the Reflection World of the woman we met, the nurse? Will they not all be consumed by disease, and die horribly? Surely, those Righteous Souls deserve prayer, and Divine Intervention.”

“Do not assume that such Intervention does not occur for the Truly Righteous,” said Showsh. “It may occur in numerous ways, and as needed, and per the needs and desires of the Sentient in question. It is true that We took the unusual step of Sabbatical and Immanence in your case—as we discovered, it was a most unusual one, with Omens, and Foreshadowing, and Secrets—there were Berries in The Multiverse and a Threat Uncovered. That the Lieutenant of baetOak and the Lieutenant of Gon Eden simultaneously petitioned us in your case was itself rare, and We took notice. There must have been some sense of foreboding. Do not despair of Justice, and Mercy, and Redemption for All of the Truly Righteous.”

“Yet, such redemption may come in interesting, unlooked for ways and means,” said Elriver. “In some instances, the Choicest of Portions have been set aside for such Righteous

Sentients in the afterlife, where the Decree against a Reflection World is one of Destruction and Death. It may be that a Righteous Prophet may petition the Celestial Court. However, the ruling may not always be for Mercy. Sometimes, the reward is in the World to Come.”

“Why is it not the case that the Minister of Gon Eden is debating for the preservation of whole Reflection Worlds?” said Droos. “Surely, even if one Righteous Sentient is somehow special, nonetheless, a World of Sentients deserves some petition.”

“It is a Thorn in Reality, that bad things happen to good people,” said Atropo. “For that matter, good things happen to bad people. Many use this to question the existence of The Divine, and Supreme Reality altogether. It is perplexing.”

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” said Droos.

“The assumption that the Creator and Sovereign of The Universe have direct responsibility for every bad event is incorrect,” said Showsh. “The Celestial Bureaucracy manages much of the events of the Manifestation. It is a Fundamental Truth that Life is Complex. The events of history, the present, and future, do not unfold to benefit only the righteous, or to penalize the wicked. They occur regardless, and at times, without mercy. Still, the Creator and Sovereign are there at least to be Aware of all Misfortunes and Terrible Events, and to Mourn for Their Sentients in Pain, and to Provide a Reward and Tranquility in the afterlife if need be.”

“That still seem grossly unfair,” said Droos.

“It is a Reality that follows an Ancient Law of the Multiverse that Transcends Reflection Mortals’ understanding,” said Elriver. “Manifestations are created with this Thorn. They are Managed and Ruled with this Thorn. It cannot be changed. Prayer and Petitions may be accepted, and sometimes Mercy granted. Yet, Bad Events and Fortune will occur to the Good, and Benevolence to the Wicked.”

“The reality, as a great sage once said, ‘Is the opportunity this provides for Sentients in reaction to such a Thorn in Reality,’” said Atropo. “What type of character, and opportunity for good deeds is created, and for the crafting of sound laws, as well as magnanimity? Does this not create the opportunity to do acts of loving kindness on a profound level?”

“You suggest that this Thorn exists so that the righteous may do more good, and the normative Sentient will be encouraged

Book V: Realities of Hell

to pursue good deeds as well,” said Droos. “If anything, such opportunities improve the lot of their afterlife, as the Judgement will be better, and The Decree. Furthermore, when the wicked, and Evil person accepts any undue benefit, that also provides for a Sentence in the afterlife, and elaboration on other deeds in life.”

“It is also the case that the Minister of Gon Eden does offer pleas and prayers for Society, for Cultures, for Peoples,” said Showsh. “Particularly, the righteous receive a mournful advocacy, that they should maintain their good deeds, and live long, and in happiness and selflessness. The prayer is that they should live lives of morality, and ethics, and with integrity, with love, and tolerance, and in peace. In the face of terrible trials, the Minister of Heaven pleads for Mercy. When such redemption is not available, He asks for their Soul Fragments to be received by Him, in Gon Eden, or other Heavens of Drerpo.”

“As for Societies of the Wicked,” said Elriver. “He pleads that they repent, and return to ways of good, and righteousness. Let the Severe Decree be averted, where it is because of such Evil, Fell deeds. Even upon the death of the wicked, He argues for the lightest of Sentences, that every mitigation and leniency be granted, and the Choicest Realms be given to Soul Fragments. How few are cast as Purely Evil, that all might have some portion in Gon Eden. All have an Aspect in The Middle Heaven. Truly, the Minister of Heaven does petition and speak for Sentients, particularly the Righteous and Good, but even the wicked, and all others as well.”

“As has been stated, and this is a digression,” said Atropo. “Do not think that Cultures and Societies and Civilizations are not preserved. There are whole Domains reserved where all still exist, and ancient practices persist, particularly righteous cultures. There is a Heaven for History, where all practices and traditions are preserved for all eternity. Even after The Apocalypse of the Universe, it is Preserved by the Palace of History in the Tree Canopy of The Alliance of the Multiverse. This has been discussed, but it bears repeating. Fight for cultures and traditions, and keep them as long as possible under the sun. However, those that disappear, are never really gone. They exist for eternity, in some Heavenly Domain, and in the Annals of Dweehwail. There is a place where nothing is forgotten.”

“That is a digression,” said Droos. “Perhaps it is time for us to take a break. We have come back around to topics we have

shared before, however long ago. I would most be interested in visiting one of the Domains of Civilization and History. Do we have time for such a trip?"

"The Domain of Civilization or Dominion is nearby," said Elriver. "We may make a day trip, and be back by tomorrow for the resumption of our Arbitration, and the Presentation of the Lieutenant of Heaven."

"Does that not make light of this Arbitration, just a little?" said Atropo.

"The Celestial Court, including Court Two, is accustomed to some of its Clients being in more than one place at once, or stepping out briefly, between sessions," said Showsh. "Besides, Droos has more good deeds to do."

They left the Annex, and returned to the docks of Court Two. It took one hour to ready the River Vessel to depart, and then they were on their way to the next Domain. Droos could see the River of Light traveling through the Mists and Clouds between the Domains of the Firmament. It would seem that most Soul Fragments, whether of Heaven and on a trip, or on Parole from Hell, would travel using those routes, as they had done themselves at one point.

"What is the true name of this Domain?" said Droos.

"We are going to quaipto," said Elriver, with a smile. "It is a pleasant Domain, of both historical significance, as a Heaven for Cultures and Traditions. Also, it has some Civilizations with no Origination in the Physical World."

The River Vessel traveled for a few hours, until it reached a bluish-green orb, pleasant and wholesome to behold. There was little trepidation here, and Droos enjoyed the aesthetics, and feeling and emotion. This was a trip of exploration, and she wondered that all Soul Fragments did not make such Journeys.

Upon entering the Domain, they made their way to the Dock of Dominion. It was a mighty collection of stone islands, with Servants ready to help incoming vessels of all sorts, most navigated by Servants and visitors from other Domains. Elriver and Showsh and Atropo needed little help anchoring their vessel, and within two hours, they were on their way.

They entered a large customs house, which was really more of a collection of advertisements for destinations. Thousands of booths and offices were setup where representatives of nations of quaipto might encourage tourism and visitation to their lands.

Book V: Realities of Hell

It was a little unclear what benefit such a service created in return. Then Droos recalled the exchange system for Forcang. Rather, favors and information might be exchanged. That was part of the enduring system of trade, used by such Beings in all corners of The Multiverse.

“What is the manner of exchange here?” said Droos.

“Many use similar systems to Forcang, in this Celestial Domain,” said Showsh. “Yet some still use token property, or currency. We will be able to get what we need when we choose a destination. Let us look around and decide where we would like to visit today.”

“This one looks fascinating,” said Droos, examining a display at a booth. “It is both similar in some respects to The Jungle of my youth, yet different. Maybe, it is even an example for how such a system ought to be.”

“It is settled then,” said Atropo.

They talked to the man and woman at the booth, who happily told them about the sights in their nation. They did insist that it was a religious, traditional place, but that they did not fear admitting These Four. The woman held up an artifact of some sort, and a Portal Appeared. Passing through the Portal, there they were, in a Jungle!

If it was possible that The Jungle would be an empty place, rather it was filled with life. This was both Creatures, some of which had been extinct for an age, and time beyond time. Still, there were Sentients everywhere. They traveled on well-designed roads, paved, and meticulously polished. Signs of civilization were everywhere. Stone buildings in vast numbers covered much of the Jungle floor. It was hard to tell where one city ended, and another began. This urban sprawl, merged by towns and hamlets in between, which were themselves grown to enormous proportions, did leave room for some parks, where the natural beauty persisted and endured.

They reached the heart of a city. There was an enormous temple, made of stone, but also buildings created for science. This civilization had a fascination with astronomy, and they were masters of agriculture. Their social organization was complex, and far more egalitarian than Droos had expected. There were no long lines of sacrifices, or fear in anyone’s eyes. Rather, it was a thriving city of merchants, commonfolk, priests and priestesses, and many just going about their day in enjoyment. One absent

class was that of soldiers. Its seemed being in the Domain of Dominion did not require a standing army, which made this a Heaven of sorts.

As they stood there, a young woman noticed them, who was dressed as a priestess. She walked over to them, with a broad smile, and gestured with her hands in welcome.

“Greetings, Noble Strangers,” said the woman. “You are most welcome in our happy nation and city. We do get visitors from time to time, and each and every occasion is an honor and moment of joy. Please, follow me, for the Queen would like to meet you. She greets all Noble Strangers.”

They did not have to be asked twice, and The Four set about walking with and not even behind the Priestess. The Queen of Angels had many questions and interests.

“How are you treated as a Priestess?” said Droos. “Is it a lonely life, or require too many burdens.”

“Such a calling is for as long or brief a tenure as we desire,” said the Priestess. “I am not alone either. In fact, I have a husband of three years and a two-year-old son. My life is most blessed. You must have a particular impression of what our lives must be like. I encourage you to see past the prejudice or assumptions. We do have others who arrive here with such preconceptions. There is more complexity and equality here than your historical beliefs permit.”

“I apologize for my ignorance,” said Droos. “I am pleased to see that fundamental Sentient rights are honored here. You are not forced into your role, or kept there lonely, or longer than you wish. That is a true virtue. It is a wonder that your civilization is here in quaipto, and not in the physical world. There seem to be many righteous characteristics.”

“The Queen will tell you all about that,” said the young woman, with a slight frown. “It is a sad story. If good always befell the good, surely there would still be a place for us in the world of the living, and of living history. This Heavenly Memorial to the past is Welcome. It was a testament to bigotry and inequality that drove us here. The story will be told, I assure you.”

They entered an ornate palace, although of a polished stone, and a geometrically pleasing variety. Numerous precious stones and metals were inlaid in beautiful patterns, and to depict scenes and words. Walking through the courtyards and hallways with the Priestess, they arrived at a medium-sized room. Inside,

Book V: Realities of Hell

a slight woman sat. Her hair was in a braid, and she had a ring of flowers on her head bound by twigs.

“Noble Strangers, My Queen,” said the Priestess. “May I leave them with you?”

“You have done well,” said the Queen. “Please return to your post.”

The Priestess bowed, and left the way they had arrived.

“Where do you originate in this vast Domain of Dominion?” said the Queen. “Or are you travelers from further afield?”

“We are those who help in the running of the Universe,” said Droos. “In a previous time, I lived in a nation much like this one. Only, the choices of one royal family, over thousands of years, enslaved my people. They lived short lives of misery. That does not seem to be the case here.”

“It would not be the case here,” said the Queen. “This nation from a faraway galaxy long ago was a Constitutional Monarchy. I, and my descendants may rule, but a group of elected representatives makes the laws, and appoints a government. Still, I do perform many ceremonial roles, among them having the first pleasure of greeting guests to our nation. We do find that a democratic government best represents the desires of the people, and reduces corruption. There are some inefficiencies. Yet without much in the way of conflict and warfare, we have been quite prosperous for a short eternity in this Domain.”

“How did it come about that your people found themselves here?” said Droos.

“We were an intellectually curious people, in matters of science and technology, and in matters of state and Society,” said the Queen. “There were many innovations that we invented and creative thoughts we had. Our standard of living was very pleasant, even if from time to time in the physical world there was actual strife or conflict. Still, we had our own beliefs, religion, and tradition. It is amazing to think that Sentients might wage war simply to press their system of beliefs on others. Such was the case. We were conquered for our supposedly incorrect worldview. Within a matter of one hundred years, essentially all trace of our once great civilization, that had lasted one thousand years, had vanished.”

“That is terrible,” said Droos. “You had a rich way of life, and you honored and protected your citizens, residents, and

Strangers among you equally with rights and respect. Still, you were the prey of an Evil People who would not stand that you thought and believed differently. Is not freedom of religion, of creed, of denomination, a fundamental right? Surely many Sentients are prepared to die by the sword rather than convert. How many did die?"

"Many died," said the Queen. "They were slain in terrible ways, and the lucky ones were killed quickly. Others were enslaved, or treated as second class citizens in the new order. Certainly our language, our traditions, a full ethnocide was committed against us. I have discovered during trips abroad from this Domain that many hundreds of years later, more equal-minded archeologists and scientists dug up the ruins of our cities with curiosity and an open mind. Still, the iconoclasm and pillaging had been near complete. Some of the descendants of our people still live in our Reflection World, although they speak a different language, and they observe different traditions, and they would not know the ways that we had followed, our Gods and Goddesses, and that of our people for one thousand years. That way had been one of mostly peace. I am not sure that our successors were able to say the same."

"I suppose this once again goes to the enforcement of Damnation," said Showsh. "If Reflection Mortals who are exclusivists are able to label each other as Damned or Elect, they may freely commit atrocities, and conquer those they condemn as Damned. Such Sentients are not equal. They do not have the same rights. It is permission to plunder their lands, their resources, and even enslave them."

"We have discussed True Defense and the Limited Excuse of Warfare to Obtain Resources," said Elriver. "A holy war is neither of these. It supposes the Superiority of one Belief, and that all others are Inferior, and Blasphemous. Any means necessary is reasonable to remove The Other worldview, and replace it with the True System. It justifies murder, and crimes of intimacy, and all manner of Evil. The reality is that this violation of Fundamental Rights is The Evil. This obsession with Purity of Faith is the Evil. The Evil generates Evil."

"You are a wise party," said the Queen. "You know about equality, and honor different beliefs. That is certainly an approach of morality, ethics, and integrity, and one that pursues love, and peace, and tolerance."

Book V: Realities of Hell

“You speak as a Ruler who Knows Truth in ways most worthy,” said Atropo. “I have no doubt that there are more Soul Fragments of your Whole Soul in Heavens of Drerpo. It is wonderful that one resides here in quaipto to govern your people, even ceremonially.”

“How does that work in terms of the timeline?” said Droos.

“The Whole of the Celestial Domains exists in a Time Beyond Time,” said Elriver. “Also, as you know, sometimes a Soul Fragment may be more than one location simultaneously. It may be divided into Aspects. There are a variety of Structures inherent in Manifestation Artwork to permit such Manipulations of the timeline. What you may be sure of is that there is a Consistent Logic, Design, and Rule.”

“Who are you?” said the Queen.

“We are who we are,” said Atropo.

“That was not particularly informative,” said the Queen.

“We are all very happy to be here, and to have your generous hospitality,” said Showsh.

“Speaking of that, I was a little distracted when you arrived,” said the Queen. “Let me fix that.”

She rang a bell, and in short order, many Royal Officers arrived and escorted them to a Feast. There were meats of all types, and a potent fermented fruit of The Jungle, in several varieties, as well as endless melons, vegetables, and a sour dough bread of a sort. The meal was wonderful, and Droos found it better than many she had enjoyed, even in The Library. It was not as good as Gon Eden.

“This is much better,” said Droos, sipping some of her drink.

“Another perk of being the Ceremonial Head-of-State is that I get to host the State Dinners,” said the Queen.

“Do you wish matters had gone differently?” said Droos.

“Your people were treated so atrociously. If you had the ear of the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe, what would you tell them?”

The Queen laughed.

“I would not think that such an event would occur, but I enjoy fantasies,” said the Queen. “If the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe were here, I would petition them that even in Reflection Mortals, Mercy should be the dominant trait. It is not only for our Gods and Goddesses that such an Aspect is Desired.

Rather, if only Sentients would think beyond their Fears and Helplessness in the face of The Stranger and The Unknown, if they might show Mercy instead, future tribes with unique beliefs and traditions might be spared. I do not ask for any more redemption for my people, except the eternity of this Heaven in quaipto. Yet, might the nature of Sentients be a little better, just a little more generous? Why must the innocent suffer?"

"I feel like we were just talking about that," said Showsh. "What was the result on your Reflection World, perhaps many centuries after the demise of your tribe?"

"They did learn to embrace differences, and fundamental rights," said the Queen. "If anything, that period of atrocities was upheld as the example of Depravity and the Depths to which our Race was capable of sinking. Global laws and treaties were enacted, and there were thousands of years of peace. That is not to say there was not war, but our fall was a sacrifice that paved the way for the end to violence and genocide and ethnocide."

"That is small comfort for the victims of such terror and cruelty," said Elriver. "Of course, it is good to know that because of the atrocity committed, the World Changed for the Better, and at least there, no others suffered; or at least very few."

"It is good to know that our sacrifice made that possible," said the Queen. "Still, it is hard to believe that every Reflection World has that result. What if the opposite lesson was learned?"

"We also just discussed that," said Atropo. "A world of such Evils and depravities with constant innovation and technology and science seems bound to create some cataclysm as its undoing. Thus, either a World learns from its past mistakes, and the era many face of atrocities and pillaging, or it eventually goes entirely extinct; at least for Sentient life. Reflection Creatures on that Reflection World will endure, for the most part."

"It is a test of sorts then," said the Queen. "These growing pains for history, of the nations of the world. Those that do not move passed such atrocities are doomed to commit ever worse, until the whole world is consumed. If anything, it is hard to imagine most Reflection Worlds and Reflection Mortals without such a period of growth."

"That is very magnanimous of you," said Droos. "You seem to have a deep understanding of the system. I see a great new life for you upon Rebirth."

"I hope I have some time longer in this afterlife," said

Book V: Realities of Hell

the Queen. “There is more to do in this nation. I would see it to further prosperity, and the transition of power to my daughter when I abdicate at the end of my reign. Then I will seek my sister Soul Fragments, and we will live again! Perhaps I will live in a Reflection World at a more advanced stage, where rights are honored and respected.”

“I envision such a Rebirth for you,” said Showsh. “It seems only right. Your extra work here in your afterlife may only help with your advantage.”

Just then they finished the meal. A group of Priests and Priestesses arrived, and they did a grace after meals, calling on their Gods and Goddesses for virtue, rights, and protection, and honor. The Four sang along, by virtue of their Keen Senses, and praised those Divinities. Whether they existed or were the Spheres of the Goddess of Answer, these worthy people had a right to their beliefs.

Afterward, the young woman who had greeted them so well arrived, and escorted them out of the palace, and The Royals bid them farewell. The day was drawing onward, and it was time to be getting back to their River Vessel. They left, out among the towns and hamlets of the suburbs again, this continuous civilization that spanned an entire Jungle. As night Ascended, and stars of a lively Domain appeared above, the fires and dancing and singing of thousands of happy Soul Fragments and the memory of a noble people enjoyed the peace of their home. No enemy would again threaten them, and their culture would be preserved forever. At midnight they reached the Portal, and Returned to the Customs House.

The Dock of Dominion lay in Darkness, and they boarded their Vessel, and spent an hour lifting anchor and preparing the ship. So they left quaipto, and sailed through the Space between Spaces once more. There they moved in silence for a time, in the midst of a night, thinking of a memory of a lost people, but never forgotten. Then a passing group of Angels noticed their voyage, and joined them. Singing began, and the chimes, instruments, and melodies of pleasant voices and tunes accompanied them.

Droos felt drowsy, so she tried her hand at creating a bed, using Sre. She managed a hammock, with a pole, and stretched it between that and the rear mast. It was quite comfortable, and hardly any difference existed between it and any normal bed. Showsh winked at her, and Atropo muttered that she was getting

much better at using The Language of the Universe.

“Even only as an Angel,” said Elriver. “Still she is producing notable results. There is something Special about this one, we have always known it.”

As she fell asleep, to the singing of the ministering angels, The Sound of the Flute joined the ensemble. Only she could hear it, but she now Knew the Meaning. She would mention it to the others in the morning, and to Drelp when they next met. Then she did not think about anything, and was in the Domain of Dreams.

Often in the dramatic narrative of the princess, and Queen of Angels, Droos, a dream of significance might have occurred. That night passed uneventfully, and if she had any dreams worth noting, they were left in the Halls of the Domain of Dreams. Not every page of her story is a matter of note. She woke as a bright light shone, or so she thought. Rising, quickly, and placing clothes upon herself with Sre (and it worked), she joined the others at the prow.

“I assume that you had eventful Dreams, Dear Mother,” said Atropo.

“Dear Son, not every second and evening of my life is a chapter in a book,” said Droos.

“It is good to know that some sequences and events of your life occur just like the rest of us,” said Elriver.

“Like the rest of You?” said Droos.

“Did you not know that we are actually quite typical, without a whole lot of distinction,” said Showsh.

“That is for Grand Elder Forcang,” said Atropo, rolling his eyes.

“That was a joke,” said Elriver. “We know and are grateful for who we are. Do not be surprised, though, if not every Forcang appreciates such distinctions.”

“I know it was a joke,” said Droos. “As for me, there are those who think my story is more eventful than it is. Sure, it fills many curious pages of multiple books; compliments of The Librarians and their Celestial Record Keeping. There are many Reflection Mortals who have far more interesting, compelling, and impactful lives.”

“You would enjoy the interests of My Sister,” said Elriver. “She has a particular curiosity for Reflection Mortals and the Art of Life in general. I have shared this before. When she returns, we will all have to sit down and have a conversation about it. I believe

Book V: Realities of Hell

she has said much the same to me on many occasions, insisting that they have a much more interesting existence than We.”

“I would like to spend time with your Sister,” said Droos. “Although, I suppose she will try to drag me on one of her adventures.”

“Tultzow will try to recruit you, for certain,” said Showsh. “You will have to Endure that temptation. She will respect you for refusing, and being your own woman, capable and deliberate.”

They moved to the center of the River Vessel, where Elriver brought out a table and a breakfast for them. Although unnecessary, she insisted a strong foundation to the day would prepare them for the continuation of the proceeding in their Arbitration. They sat and enjoyed a pleasant meal of fishes, and vegetables, and fruits, with dips, and strong spices and flavors. Droos drank a potent tea, with a little cream and sugar. Showsh gave her a passionate kiss, and she felt she had quite the meal to prepare her for the day.

In a couple more hours they reached Court Two, and docked once again. The harbor was as busy as ever, and so was the line for the Celestial Court, in the time beyond time. They spent one hour looking for the other parties, and found that while the Lieutenant of Heaven was there with His party, the Lieutenant of Hell had not returned yet. This delayed them for some hours.

While they were waiting, they found that the Annex to Court Two had a small Art Exhibit of Sorts. This Demonstration of Pure Aesthetics was meant to be as nondenominational as possible. If anything, it was eclectically multicultural. There were pieces from an endless variety of Reflection Mortal cultures, and those created in the Celestial Domains themselves, in Heaven, in Hell, in Neutral Domains, and by Soul Fragments and Servants. There were even a few pieces actually designed by a God or Goddess, yet these were meant to be the exception. No doubt, those were exquisite, yet the others were of little less spender.

“It appears that the Minister of Justice is blind when it comes to artwork,” said Droos. “Or rather, there is no art piece he is not willing to display.”

“One culture’s aesthetic treasure is another’s horror,” said Atropo. “Of course, the lines are usually not that simple. Still, is there really any art that is ugly?”

“We are not going to start that conversation again, here, waiting for our Arbitration?” said Showsh. “Only, I would say that

all art pieces here are Beautiful, and Aesthetically Pleasing.”

Then they found one piece, alone in a room, that stood divided from all the others, in Quality, Creativity, and Style. This should not have been art, but Droos could not take her eyes off of it. It was fabulously beautiful, and wondrous. Tears formed in her eyes, and she smiled. This splendor in an unlikely place had an unsurprising patron.

“This one is by my father, as might be expected,” said Showsh, who himself had a tear in the corner of his eye. “Trust the work of a Savant to surpass all others. Only perhaps the Minister of Gon Eden has a similarly Keen Aesthetic, by Token of His Rights and Spheres.”

“Why would such a marvel be in this collection?” said Elriver. “It seems to defy the equality of the Celestial Courts. I will have to have a talk with my Minister of Justice.”

“Actually, I believe the intent is to defy the expectation,” said Atropo. “Dear Grandfather placed it here in order to challenge us to view the other pieces equally. It is challenging. Just as, many might place a Forcang higher in due process at a Celestial Court, and deserving of more rights, and certainly different from a Reflection Mortal, or Lower Stage of Sentients. The key is to see that just because this art piece has advantages, does not mean it is inherently superior. In the same way, all are to be seen as the same in the Senses of the Court.”

“Does that work?” said Droos. “I am having trouble seeing the equality of aesthetics here. Given enough time, I might view all as equal, at least intellectually at first. Maybe that is the exercise created here for our benefit. If we may not learn to view Greater Beings and other Sentients as Equal Before the Law, Celestial Justice is Meaningless.”

“I expect my Dear Father placed this here when he visited last,” said Showsh. “He likely knew of our situation, even carrying a gift of foresight, and generated this test. We must, indeed, view all as equal in justice. No ruler, or Creator, or Sovereign, or Ministering Angel, is above The Law.”

“There is a reason that there are Thorns and Berries in The Multiverse,” said Elriver. “Try as we might, these may not be removed from Manifestations even if we wished. How many would want to remove The Tree of Thorns, or grow The Tree of Life to great heights from the start? How many would want only good to befall the righteous. Yet some Justice, some Laws, must

Book V: Realities of Hell

Exist Regardless. At best, Meaning may develop to surround those Thorns and Berries and Greys.”

“Why do you think Great Sages exist among Reflection Mortals, and also Forcang alike?” said Atropo. “The Thorns and Greys in particular, but also the Berries, must be interpreted. If even Greater Beings cannot fully Know the Truth, what may be gleaned from the shadows on the cave wall of The Unknown? Rather, Great Sages create meaning, with which to develop the foundation of life. It may be that evil occurs to the good, but there is meaning that exists, that creates light in that dark place. There is selflessness and good deeds that may come of that Evil and terror and cruelty. Other meaning exists for other Thorns and Greys. Such is the Power of the Great Sages.”

“That makes sense,” said Droos. “One in ten million prophets may be a true Visionary, who witness the Divine will, or Aspects of Transcendence, but the Great Sages may exist in Immanence and write and speak in the physical world of reality. No voice from Heaven is required to issue an edict or instruction. Rather, the wise who study and learn, may offer suggestions and help. Ultimately, all artwork is equal, whether of the Savant, or of the lowliest Reflection Mortal.”

“We return to the Celestial Courts, equal, and under the guidance of the Great Sages, and with the blessings and providence of the Transcendent Forcang,” said Showsh. “May the Supreme Reality guard, remember, and protect the Courts. For, as a Great Sage said, ‘Upon three things does the Universe rest: Justice, Truth, and Peace.’”





Chapter 7

The Lieutenant of Heaven

This time when they returned to the line in the Annex, all of the parties were present. The Lieutenant of baetOak provided no explanation for being late, but The Four had not doubt He was a busy Minister, and had numerous obligations. It was a compliment that He was here in the first place. They returned to the line. This day was particularly lengthy, and it took ten hours to reach the front of the line. Then they were shown back to the amphitheater, and they took their Podiums.

Quickly, the Attendees in stone seats filed into the Chambers of Court Two. There was a hush, and all ceased their talking as The Judge returned to her post at the front of the Court. She stood before the Mysterious Columns, Before Energy of Some Complexity and Peril. That did not bother the seasoned Celestial Bureaucrat, a Great Officer of the Court. She bowed to the Assembled Advocates, and then took Her seat.

There was a pause, and the assembled Sentients held their breath. Then, the Advocate for the Minister of Gon Eden, the Goddess of the Center, walked slowly and deliberately to the Center of the Center once more. She was all smiles, and bowed to the Attendees, and the Clients, and the Advocates, and finally, the Judge. Then she stood there, for another pause, before she began. Not a sound was heard.

“Dear Colleagues, Esteemed Clients, Noble and Honored Judge, and Members of the Hosts of Attendees,” said the Goddess of the Center. “I beg your forgiveness for the interruption, and the extreme kindness you have shown in honoring the strict law and justice, the Rule of Three, for if there are more than two litigants, after each two, a recess is permitted, unless time does not warrant such a measure. I am glad to have had more opportunity to consult with my Client.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“My Colleague for The Left suggested that some exception exists in this instance. Certainly, a strict understanding of Justice is warranted in almost all cases. That would seem to be how the Celestial Courts should function. I will begin by reviewing this argument of an earlier chapter. The theme of it was that we Officers of the Court, and The Judge, have Attributes of Justice, including Mercy, Beyond that of Reflection Mortals. For rare exceptions, Mercy should be exercised above Justice, and the strict letter of the law. Droos should be such an exception, for she is exceptional. This Aspect is essential in her case.”

“To simply place this, *Queen of Angels*, as the exception, is too little for my Client. Instead, it is nothing but the rule of law, the reading of Justice. It is rather, as his Esteemed Colleague, the Minister of baetOAK would say, the strict reading of Judgement and the Decree. The Fundamental Rules and Principles of DrepO account for this situation. Would you think that the Creator and Sovereign of this Great Universe would not account for such events in the History of this Manifestation? Rather, the Laws for such people, however rare, are in the Governing Rules of this fair Universe.

“That seems to be a narrow distinction. Either way, it is a subclause or an exception to the law altogether. Yet as previously indicated, for a Court of Reflection Mortals, it would be the difference between finding a defendant non-guilty or innocent verses appealing for a pardon. It may be that she has the best case in one million years to get a pardon, and would likely receive one. Still, if there is actual law for a judge or jury to rule in the first place against guilt, that is a different matter. Why convict in the first place if it is unnecessary to do so? For it at a level tarnishes the reputation of Droos.

“It is not reasonable that the so-called Damned are discriminated against in the physical world. Yet it also happens in the afterlife. To be an exception, and released from responsibility by Mercy over Justice is to admit that by Justice she is to be Judged guilty, and worthy of a Decree of Damnation, if not for this Transcendent Virtue of Mercy. Rather, it is necessary to begin with the understanding that Droos, is not guilty in the first place.

“How may I assert such a bold claim. I know as well as any other, she committed a Very Evil Act. For that, she should contribute some Soul Fragments for Purification. What of Duress? Yes, the exertion, the direct Divine Intervention of a Forcang in

the affairs of her Tribe. We Know now that Tzefee, a possible Threat to the entire Multiverse, has been meddling in the affairs of her tribe for thousands of years. That Transcendent Intelligence, Cruelty, and Malevolence, all Designed to Create a System to Damn Her. Without such Divine Intervention, Surely, this Tribe would have rebelled? Is Droos to be held accountable because of the victimization by such a Sentient?

“This goes beyond mere mitigation. It is true, that simply being a righteous person in an Evil Place would limit how many Soul Fragments would go to baetOAK, and other Hells of Drerpo. Yet, the Divine Incursion on The Jungle, on The People of the Blood, Taints the Entire System of Justice, even the Celestial Court. For that, there is an exception in Law. Surely, under such duress, a System crafted by a Goddess of Pain no less, what other choice did she have? How many Greater Beings have lost in contest with Tzefee? Droos was a Reflection Mortal, a princess with no knowledge of The Language of the Universe. The law would say the duress in this instance was so extreme, and the options so few, that she must be excused for her actions.

“I petition that either she have no Soul Fragments sent to Hell, or if one must go to the Lowest Hell, it is to one of the choicest destinations, and only one. That may hint of mitigation again. Still, few obstacles would be as great as a Threat to the Multiverse, this Tzefee. It is within the law, Droos is a battered Sentient, twisted and malformed by the most Sinister of Forces. She is a victim. Think of the abuse she suffered in her Tribe, in what she was taught, in what she witnessed. She was taught that death was a virtue, blood was life, that war was peace. Droos was a victim, one of the greatest projects of Tzefee.

“I suspect that She knew all along that this Sentient was special. Her Foresight predicted some important Omen or Secret would someday be born into this Tribe, this People. Tzefee sought to control it. Ultimately, the aims and objectives of that Sentient are Beyond Me. Still, Tzefee Mastered this People. It was only by the combined efforts of both my Client, the Lieutenant of Heaven, and the equally noble, Lieutenant of Hell, that this plot was stymied. It was a combined effort of the Officers of both Heaven and Hell that prevented the loss of this Great Secret, a Weapon, a Resource, to turn the tide against The Threat. Some things go beyond merely Heaven and Hell. Tzefee wants to destroy the entire Multiverse. By ending Droos, she would be that much

Book V: Realities of Hell

closer.

“In the face of that, amidst a tribe, a people built around that, what else might Droos have done? Even with the suggestions and advice of our able Sovereign, in Immanence as Drerpo, what else might she have chosen? This was all wrapped around the fingers of Tzefee. She was The Master. That was, until Droos at least chose to live, and the possibility of the long road to redemption. But more than that, the opportunity to embrace her ability as a Secret, an Omen, to Protect Dweehwail, and possibly humble even Tzefee. So, since then, Droos has tirelessly served in that capacity, and even to redeem her people from Tzefee’s clutches, now that the Goddess of Pain has lost interest.

“The arguments of the Goddess of the Left are sound, but this is Most True. No Reflection Mortal would have or could have chosen differently in the face of Tzefee’s manipulations. This most unusual exception is one to the law itself, a subclause, a category that is written, is ruled. No Code of Mercy, or pardon is required. Rather, only a strict adherence to the Justice, the Law of Drerpo needs be followed. I petition The Judge to Arbitrate in favor of The Law; the entire law. Do not let Droos be labeled as needing a pardon. She is innocent, and a victim in the extreme.”

With those words, the Goddess of the Center stepped back to the podium. Quickly, She consulted with the Lieutenant of Heaven, who nodded. Then the Goddess of the Left gave Droos a pat on the shoulder, before stepping back to the Center.

“Dear Judge, Dear Colleagues, Dear Clients, and Dear Honored Attendees,” said the Goddess of the Left. “My Colleague made a Keen Argument in Defense of the Position of the Lieutenant of Heaven. It is true that Droos was in a most unusual circumstance. How many Forcang, let alone Reflection Mortals must contend with a Threat to The Multiverse? Would it not be the case that any would quail, and commit Evil in the face of such a calamity, such a poison and perversion?

“It has also been maintained that even a good person in an Evil Place is expected to do good. They are expected to pursue The Journey of The Good. Even, they are expected, if sufficiently targeted, to choose death, rather than commit Evil in such a place. Very minor offenses may be excused. Yet Droos committed a Very Evil Act. That may not automatically be excused.

“It is also the case that those who cooperate in an Evil Place out of Fear for their Lives have a Defense of Mitigation.

Yet mitigation is not the same as innocence. That would reduce the number of Soul Fragments of Droos in Hell, and perhaps their Realm in those Domains. It would not mean she would be deemed so purely righteous as to avoid any need for Purification. That would be unreasonable. She did commit a Very Evil Act that requires Purification in the afterlife.

“Only the Purification that accompanies, as my Esteemed Colleague admits, the Pardon of the Mercy Beyond Justice, may provide some replacement for the fires of perdition. Even that may not be sufficient. Why should Droos be disadvantaged, when she dies, in preparation for her next life? Perhaps she will be Reborn as a Forcang, or even of higher stages of Sentients. She requires the purification.

“Knowing, in fact, the desires of my Client, she too concurs, that if any Kernel of Evil remains, there should be no loop hole, or exception granted, or used. Rather, the strict sense of Justice should apply. Let the matter ultimately be brought before The Judge when she dies, after a further lifetime of good deeds. She assumes that there will still be some Soul Fragments in Hell, including baetOAK. Droos, in fact, welcomes it. Such is the desire of a righteous sentient. They do not excuse themselves of their mistakes or Evil deeds. They accept their mistakes, and the requirements to return, to rise again even stronger. Few here doubt that overall, even almost entirely, Droos is a righteous Sentient, The Angel even. Yet, no exceptions should be made for her, in any form, whether by law, or by pardon. She wants to do her time, and receive the full purification. She wants the equal Celestial Courts to rule, to Judge, and Decree.

“That is, if The Judge, in Court One, Decreed no Soul Fragments in Hell, then she would grudgingly accept such a fate. Yet, she will equally be content with some contribution to baetOAK and other Hells. Is she so much more Righteous than even many others in baetOAK? Why should she be an exception? The lesson, is to welcome Chastisement, and the Purification of Damnation. It is not a gift, but a Natural Mechanism of Justice. It is hard to watch, but required for better advantage in Rebirth, or a Singular Eternity. With that said, I defer to The Judge of Court Two for Arbitration.”

The God of the Left returned to the Podium, and then all of the Advocates bowed to The Judge. The Judge, Herself rose, and bowed to all of those assembled. Her eyes glowed with a grey

Book V: Realities of Hell

light, and no advantage would be granted to any. Were not all equal before Her Senses?

“Dear Assembled Hosts, Dear Noble Advocates, Dear Respected Clients,” said The Judge. “I have heard this most important manner. It was wise to have brought it before Me. In Judgement, I do not consider myself in this instance superior to the Justice of Court One at the End of the Life of Droos. No summary statement will be granted now. It is the opinion of Court Two that nearly all must contribute some Soul Fragment to Hell for Purification. It is a Natural Mechanism, required for the Advantage of the Whole Soul. It may not be denied. Yet, The Judge of such matters is The Judge and the issuer of The Decree of Court One. This matter, while important, is premature.

“It is worth saying that Droos, known as the Queen of Angels, is free to spend the remainder of her life, however long, pursuing The Journey of The Good. Such will always affect The Decree. It is advisable to proceed in that manner, for her, and for all Sentients. Where an Evil Act has been committed, never should shame or hopelessness prevail. Always should the Sentient respond with a lifetime seeking redemption, and doing good deeds of loving kindness. It is the Arbitration of Court Two that a remaining lifetime spent performing good deeds will be considered in Judgement in Court One at the start of Droos’ afterlife. Yet no final judgement will be issued now, for, ‘No Sentient may be Judged until the Day they Die.’”

The Judge of Court Two bowed, and Droos felt some relief. It seemed her views were respected. Though she wondered what this had been all about. Apparently nothing had been decided, changed, or otherwise ruled upon. Would the Lieutenant of Hell and the Lieutenant of Heaven be satisfied? Quickly, they withdrew from Court Two, and gathered in The Annex. The Ministers of Heaven and Hell went about their business, and departed separately. Meanwhile, they began walking to The Docks to board Their River Vessel.

“Why did we even come here?” said Droos. “It seems like nothing was decided.”

“The point was not a summary decision,” said Showsh. “Rather, it was for the presentation of the perspectives of the Lieutenant of Hell and the Lieutenant of Heaven on the record. It would have been very surprising for The Judge to Arbitrate any differently under the circumstances. As She said, you have a

lifetime ahead of you. Surely, you should focus on good deeds, and pursuing The Journey of The Good. Yet, no final judgement can be issued, really, until you die. Her presence, and the use of this Court, were for purposes of formality and record keeping.”

“Why is it so important to have an official record of such things?” said Droos.

“When you do die, hopefully after at least some small eternity,” said Elriver, “These records may be referenced, and the testimony of the Advocates in this proceeding consulted. It will be evidence that may be used in the Celestial Courts in the future. They will be respected even by The Judge of Court One in a final sentence and The Decree.”

“It also is worth mentioning that this was to solve a dispute between the Minister of baetOak and the Minister of Gon Eden,” said Atropo. “I suppose the conclusion is that both were, at one level premature. Yet, this all started before Droos was even born. As was discussed by the Lieutenant of Heaven, it was their intervention that saved Droos from the clutches of Tzefee, and Raised Her to be an Obstacle to This Threat to Dweehwail. It may be that the initial topic of Damnation was less important, after all, then what turned out to be the Reality—who Droos is in fact, and the circumstances around her.”

“Therefore, the conversation, the charge to You began with a topic of Damnation of one Whole Soul,” said Droos. “Now it is so much more. Despite my objections, I have a role to play in Dweehwail. I will aim to redeem my people of course, and then I will humble Tzefee. It is because of those Purposes that the stakes are now higher. I will still spend the rest of my life doing good deeds, as often as I am able. That is not to say that I will never make mistakes. I do expect some Soul Fragments, upon my death, to be Decreed to baetOak, and other Hells. Ultimately, I am simply not Purely Righteous or Good; certainly no more so than many who I have met in Gon Eden and baetOak.”

“This Arbitration was really a capstone,” said Showsh. “It signals the end of the need for Our Sabbatical and Our Immanence. If anything, as may be seen, my Dear Wife and I are needed to help face the Threat elsewhere, in Transcendence, along with an endless backlog of tasks.”

“Are we not pledged to each other for an eternity?” said Droos. “It was in the midst of such Immanence that we met, fell in love, and agreed to marry. Should my task not be seen through.

Book V: Realities of Hell

Will you accompany me, to my people, to help complete my task? Surely, then we all must withdraw, for defeating Tzefee must be paramount. There is also a Manifestation to Birth, and countless tasks in Our Future. Ours is a Multiverse of Obligations and Requirements.”

“You are the Love of My Life,” said Showsh. “I will maintain my Immanence a while longer, and I will go with you, to see your task to completion. So will Elriver and Atropo. We were with you in the beginning. None of us will abandon you now. Then we will return, and you and I will be married, and life will begin in a different way. That does not mean leaving the past, but a Future of great tasks and burdens, and also wonders and privileges. You will return to the Bagan Galaxy. You will also have numerous other responsibilities.”

“We will be married?!” said Droos, with a smile. “That makes me just a little giddy. Will you all be there?”

“The Whole Universe, and More, will be there,” said Elriver. “It is the event of the Eon. We may all watch, Dear Showsh, take his Second Wife.”

“You are most gracious to me, Dear Creator,” said Droos. “I will always treasure your friendship, and companionship. I hope to spend long years in your company, learning, and enjoying life.”

“You will have your desire, and more,” said Elriver.

They reached the docks, and boarded the River Vessel. It took seven hours to prepare it, for this was to be a long journey. This route had not been traveled for years. For they were to Return from the Celestial Domains of Drerpo to the Manifestation Domains. They would be back in Standard galaxies, and among stars and planets. Droos searched her memory for such places, and realized it had been a long time, in more ways than one.

As they departed Court Two, the Standard of Drerpo was raised, and forty-two ministering angels sang the anthem of the universe. Then they accompanied the River Vessel. They sang, and danced, and carried on as such angels do. Such was the story of this Departure, from the Firmament, the Sacred Realm, from the Domains of Heaven and Hell, and Other Neutral Spaces, to the Domains of Science and Purer Principles and Shapes and Forms.

They traveled for several days, through Mists of many colors, different temperatures, and with a breeze that had a fragrant aroma. There was beauty in this Space Beyond Spaces, but none compared, in Droos’ mind, to the Manifestation Domains. The

Stars, the Galaxies, simple seedlings rising after the rain, were these not the most wondrous artwork the Universe had to offer?

Then they reached a storm, the Border with the Universe Proper. This lasted for days. Even this River Vessel churned and tossed, and it almost seemed Heaven and Hell did not wish for them to depart. One day before Returning to The Universe, Droos beheld the others, and she saw that they had Diminished. It seemed this transition into the Immanent Domains had a physical affect. Droos did not assume that the Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo might not exist in the Manifestation Domains in their True Forms. Yet, there seemed to be some value in Maintaining the Veil of Secrecy in Immanence, and in a World of Science. Even, Droos gazed at her own appearance, and she had returned very much to the princess, as she had been once. Only there was a glow to her eyes that hinted at more: a peril and a subtlety.

Then they crossed over, and Droos, Emerzo, Drerpo, and Amet streaked through the vastness of the Universe. They would cross about one billion light years per Absolute Day, such was the ability of the River Vessel and The Language of the Universe. The princess supposed that it still had power in all corners of The Multiverse. Loahueth and Sre were not limited by either Immanence or Transcendence, and simultaneously existed in both.

They had much to discuss about their strategy going ahead. How would they humble her father? She had already arranged with the government of Galactic City to send Teams of Anthropologists to foment revolution among the numerous rebels of her tribe. There were many in the government who preferred a far less expensive direct approach, to go in with heavy weapons and remove her father by force, and end the independence and isolation of her people. Furthermore, they did not see any reason to maintain the culture or distinctive technology of The People of the Blood. Droos had argued against all of this, and they had agreed eventually, after many votes, to the more expensive option.

“How will we even find the leader of this rebellion?” said Droos. “It is hard to think about anyone taking such a risk among my people. The consequences would be too horrific to imagine. My father does terrible things not just to the traitor, the perpetrator, but to their family, and indiscriminately to masses of others in retaliation. Where would such a bold maverick reside? I would expect in some deep cavern someplace, isolated for the most part. Communication would have to be extremely selective to prevent

Book V: Realities of Hell

my father's spies from infiltrating their ranks."

"That will be a curious matter, and we may begin by meeting with the government of the planet of No to see if anything has been discovered in the last ten years," said Drerpo. "It will likely have to be a slow process, using the approach of Anthropology, since they do not want to alter the culture of your tribe too drastically. Sure, they are aiming to tilt the balance towards revolution. However, it is being done organically."

"I thought that it had been only five years?" said Droos.

"Time passes slower where we have been," said Emerzo. "You will find that in much of the rest of the universe, an entire decade has past. I know, such a short time."

"It seems like a lengthy sort of period," said Droos.

"Although less long than it used to be."

Droos sighed.

"Well enjoy the increased Immanence while it lasts," said Amet. "Before long we will be back in Celestial Domains or Planes or Realms of Transcendence, and we will not be able to enjoy such presence, such emotion and feeling, such passion and wonder."

"I will enjoy these moments," said Droos. "For among other reasons, this is similar to how I was introduced to Dear Drerpo. It is also very different. This almost feels as a stage of liminality."

"There is a transition of sorts," said Drerpo. "Although, soon, you may have a Potency that will permit easier transitions between Transcendence and Immanence. You may walk the Journey of the Drescher Line, and gain those Potencies, and forever become something more."

"I have never wanted to be more than myself," said Droos.

"You are already so much more," said Emerzo. "There is no avoiding such a fate now. You are Mighty among Sentients, regardless of the Stage. This formal step is merely a culmination of an earlier journey already begun."

"How will I even reach The Journey?" asked Droos.

"In the hand of Dear Father," said Amet. "He will lead you on straight paths, through Reflection, to the Capitol with The Journey at its heart."

"Here we are, entering Immanence, and all we are able to discuss is the culminating of Transcendence," said Droos. "Let us leave the future, and whatever form will come about for then. I

want to discuss the task at hand now.”

“The anthropologists of No have ways of detecting presence in unusual regions of the continent of Nolai,” said Drerpo. “They may use that technology to search in caves, under trees, and behind rocks. Even, in ruins beneath waves, they may investigate. You are right, that such a rebellion must be deeply hidden. The leadership, such as it is, must be very clever, and secretive.”

“I would also expect there to be redundancies,” said Emerzo. “There is also the reality of communication in a tribe without modern technology. Without instantaneous communication, there is a fog of war. In that space, spies and agents may slip away.”

“They may also get caught, or mistake their target, or contact,” said Amet. “There are both advantages and disadvantages to such a Society and the goal of revolution.”

“So the anthropologists will look beneath rocks, and waves, in caves, and under trees,” said Droos. “How will they judge if people are just loyal slaves, or actual rebels? Surely, they will not speak to outsiders readily.

“Some communication may be observed at a distance, but much work will be gathered by teams of anthropologists on the ground,” said Drerpo. “They will infiltrate your tribe, and disguise themselves as locals. Then the difficult part will be earning the trust of the rebels sufficiently to learn their secrets.”

“I would expect such a goal to take years,” said Droos. “Why would anyone trust such important and dangerous truths to outsiders with so much at stake?”

“The anthropologists will not come with weapons or advanced technology,” said Emerzo. “They will use what they have to provide information and intelligence. Their value upfront as rebellious locals will make the true revolutionaries curious. Still, they may easily be assumed to be agents of the government. It will take a steady stream of both information, and actions to promote the rebellion, and actually assisting those in life or death situations, to earn trust and loyalty. It will not be a fast process. Still, these anthropologists are experts at this type of infiltration. They are not simply scientists, but those trained for field assignments and invasive investigations. It is a rare talent.”

“I would not think that most anthropologists would agree to such work,” said Droos. “Would that not be a purer

Book V: Realities of Hell

science, following this evolution, naturally, of a tribe, people, or population? How is it consistent, then, to interfere?”

“That was part of the argument used against this whole approach,” said Amet. “Still, this is not a Modern Technological Government or Society, but a Future System. There exist Anthropologists in this age trained for invasive approaches. They are far fewer in number than typical scientists. Yet they are essential in contexts where a Society, such as your people, are found to be guilty of sufficiently heinous atrocities, and violations of rights, morality, ethics, and integrity. In a civilization that spans a galaxy, sending in forces is not always the desired approach. Sometimes, a softer hand, such as this instance is desired.”

“It still seems like a violation of the scientists’ purpose,” said Droos. “A scientist cannot be an activist. They must be objective, and free from political constraints or temptations.”

“You have Keen Senses and observations as usual,” said Drerpo. “Really, scientist, or anthropologist, is the wrong term for such an agent or force. They are actually a type of government agent, that happens to have a scientific level of training in anthropology. No one who weaponizes science in anyway, or seeks change directly, can generally be considered a true scientist.”

“Then these government agents are taking advantage of the science to generate a revolution in a society,” said Droos. “I may desire this particular political goal, but what of other uses of this resource? Is this similar to a technology that should not be developed? Might these experts infiltrate any society, sent by the wrong politician, or public servant, simply for corrupt personal means?”

“It is entirely possible that something like that might happen,” said Emerzo. “Elite agents of a government, even a vast one like in the Bagan Galaxy, must have many checks to prevent that sort of abuse. Yet, such depravities happen, and declines in Society occur. The hope is that people may be socialized to be sufficiently axiomatic, and pursue The Journey of The Good. Even those with some comprehension of that approach to The Good Life may enjoy a long peace and prosperity of their people. Yet, darker personalities and individuals may rise that act selfishly, and then such reckless tools may be used poorly.”

“After these Anthropologists Infiltrators have been accepted as rebels, I suppose they will have the identities of some of the rebellion,” said Droos. “Does that mean they will

immediately understand the structure of the organization?”

“Such an organization is likely very compartmentalized, and disparate,” said Drerpo. “Meeting a few low-ranking rebels does not automatically admit the newcomer to the upper echelons of the revolution. That will take more time and effort. This whole process would likely take at least a few years, if not more. However, ten years has past. There is a chance that some progress has occurred.”

“What about the sheer number of my father’s armies?” said Droos. “Will the rebels really be sufficiently organized that they can form cohesive units to counter this? They will need forces of hundreds of thousands.”

“You may have forgotten some of the details you lobbied with the planetary government,” said Amet. “Some advanced communication technology is to be used by the Anthropologists. This resource will permit a logistical advantage that may link the disparate forces of the rebellion. It will lift some of the fog of war. Everything will be faster, more precise, and more efficient.”

“Will we have to talk to the planetary government?” said Droos.

“We should show respect for the local government, and follow its laws,” said Emerzo. “Yet, do not forget, that this is your project, and your task. Do not let them run it entirely. Take charge, and lead the rebels. Push for the regime change in your tribe. If you want the redemption for your people, you may show them the way. It will take both a righteous hand, that also may carry a sword. It will take one who Knows morality and ethics and integrity, and political philosophy, who also may lead in True Defense.”

“Will Tzefee try to stop us?” said Droos. “I thought that my tribe was her pet project. How much effort has she put into it? Will she cast it aside so freely?”

“The Threat perverted The People of the Truth into The People of the Blood in order to prepare for your arrival,” said Drerpo. “It was all about countering a flaw in Her plans to Destroy The Multiverse. The tribe was a tool, and nothing more. I would expect that she has left all manner of traps, and unpleasant surprises. Yet, she has moved on in terms of her direct intervention. Now she will counter Droos in Transcendence with armies of Forcang and Undead and Creatures of Power. Her fun was disrupted.”

Book V: Realities of Hell

“I would say that it is past time to recast The People of the Blood to their proper title as The People of the Truth,” said Emerzo. “Tzefee will not be an obstacle, except perhaps in a mean, nasty way, when least expected. Mostly, you will have to contend with the Immanent threat of your father and his armies of slaves.”

The conversation ended for a time, and Droos gazed at the stars whizzing by the River Vessel. She went and said some words of Sre, and a table appeared in the center of the boat, and some hot cider, and a music artifact. The four sat and enjoyed the melodies, local tunes of the Bagan Galaxy, and drank the spicy liquid. There was a chill to the air, and apparently somehow there was an atmosphere above the Vessel. That is not to say that they entirely needed it; yet who knew in their Immanence?

Early the next day Emerzo woke Droos, and brought out a lesson on not just Sre, but on Loahueth. Her rival for Drerpo’s affections felt that she should begin learning this most important dialect of The Language of the Universe. It had the same forty-two letters, with the same names and sounds. Yet the roots and grammar and syntax were different. There was a richness, and deeper meaning to Loahueth.

They began with the words of Sre that the princess already knew, and Emerzo reviewed them, and confirmed certain pronunciations and usage rules. It was no wonder the Transcendent Forcang had not responded properly to all of her words here. At the same time, she also wondered, in not being a Greater Being, whether she might really make use of such knowledge. She really would not be able to ever understand either Dialect, the Local Celestial, or the High Celestial, in the same way as her Drerpo, or Emerzo and Amet.

“The Language of the Universe is the Essence of Selflessness,” said Emerzo, after they had discussed the matter. “Perhaps Gods and Greater Beings have some innate confidence, and poise, and that is why their words are frequently answered. Not always though, if you must know. Still, even an Angel may have the same effect with enough Purpose, Confidence, and Virtue.”

It appeared much of their days now centered around studying The Language of the Universe, or at least this went on for ten days. There was almost an absence of Drerpo, and Amet was navigating the Vessel. What was the reason for this space? Had

she done something wrong, or was it some feeling or emotion of Immanence that was toying with her Love?

On the morning of the fifteenth day, Drerpo met her in the morning instead, with a kiss and a hug. He even danced with her little. He apologized for being absent. Apparently he had been busy, thinking a little of some important plans. Droos wondered at first what they would be. Then they went to the center of the River Vessel and found his lessons. Droos missed her conversation with Emerzo, but she treasured all the more the return to even just talk and advice with Drerpo.

“It is time to discuss our wedding,” said Drerpo. “Where would you like to get married?”

“That is a pleasant conversation to have,” said Droos, with a smile. “I would like to get married in The Library. I would like it to occur at the center of the Library Proper, amidst the endless light, and I would like all of my friends and family to be there. I suppose there will have to be lots of dignitaries and important people, since you have a Celestial position and all. Is it possible to keep a limit on those numbers?”

“That is a great idea, Dear Droos,” said Drerpo, giving her a kiss. “I believe such a thing may be arranged. I have a few connections with the management of The Library. We will have to be organized, and efficient, as the records and business of the Universe is also just as important. Still, it could be done. It is also a good location for lots of guests. We will have to invite some members of the Celestial Bureaucracy. Of course, my family will try to be there. We may even get some Guests from further afield.”

“We may use the wealth of the restaurants of The Library for the reception,” said Droos. “We should have our table at the spot where we first dined when we arrived there, just the two of us. We will have a sweetheart table, and our closest friends and family, and a few dignitaries, will share the space. I would like to have artwork from the children of one hundred different Reflection Worlds to decorate the tables, and the room. Let this be a celebration of happiness and equality.”

“It looks like you are planning quite a joyous celebration,” said Drerpo. “There is also the matter of what type of ceremony you would like to have. I do not suppose you have made your final decision on Feaism yet? Would you like to follow the traditions of your people, or some different worldview?”

“I have examined the nature of Feaism from many

Book V: Realities of Hell

angles,” said Droos. “I have great respect for it and the history behind it. I am happy to be married by a ceremony following the Feaist Tradition. However, I admit I feel closer to the ideas of the Cult of Gihi. I like the emphasis on Supreme Reality over the Transcendent Forcang. It seems nearer The Truth to me. Yet, I fully support egalitarianism and freedom of religion. Let none be forced to choose a religion or creed or denomination. Respect the practices of a neighbor, however vocal. As for our wedding, I would like to investigate including some elements of a ceremony of the Cult of Gihi.”

“I suppose you will want some of that liturgy, and words and phrases in Linear,” said Drerpo. “I am not surprised. I am pleased. Here I have an Equal, a Member of another Faith in my own Family. I am proud that my wife will be her own person, and makes her own choices. We will include those elements. We may have both a Priestess of the Feaist tradition and of the Cult of Gihi and they may perform the ceremony together. Let no priority or emphasis take precedent.”

“Are you sure that is alright for you?” said Droos. “I have not even fully considered my choice. I am quite sure where my spirit resides. But my heart is forever yours. Let not this come between us. Your family has almost universally been Feaist for endless eons.”

“It has not universally been as such,” said Drerpo. “They will welcome anyone worthy who I love. You are Special, and Worthy, and all will embrace you in any choice. No, we will have equality, and a ceremony that suits both of us, Dear Love of My Life.”

“What of children, Dear Love of My Life?” said Droos. “Are we to live a lonely life, ruling a Cosmos, or are we to have a family?”

“I believe we should have many children,” said Drerpo, with a smile. “Yet only as many as we agree upon. I would like at least one. You will also be an equal mother to all of my sons. We will be a large, happy family.”

“I am satisfied with a commitment of one, at least,” said Droos, giving Drerpo, with his grey eyes, a small poke. “Though let us consider that to be a start. After we are married, we will see what we may do.”

“We do have an endless eternity,” said Drerpo. “We will have much time to enjoy such wonders.”

“Do I have to live the life of a servant only?” said Droos. “Is not the purpose of a Ruler to wear many hats? Certainly, for a Sovereign, and Queen of a Manifestation, even a Cosmos, one of those may be Mother. Let it be when it is appropriate, when we have thought carefully, when we decide together. Then let our children be blessed by both the Transcendent Forcang and Gihi.”

“There is also the manner of how we will pay our debts and matters of finance, Dear One,” said Drerpo. “What simple accounting may drive a wedge between partners, even in Vaunted Heights?”

“Would not every couple be so blessed and lucky as to enjoy such frank conversation before marriage?” said Droos. “Whether they may do so on their own, or if they may discuss the matters together with an expert. It is essential. Even the Greater Beings, and Goddesses of The Multiverse would benefit. How many fell short there, and suffered enmity and estrangement thereafter because of that failing?”

“It is too true,” said Drerpo. “Too many, among Reflection Mortals, but also Forcang, skip the step of Conversation before Marriage. Then an important topic emerges, and suddenly the match is no longer suited. Is it not the responsibility of those so close to see each other as the fastest and dearest of friends, and confidants. They should tell each other everything and discuss all.”

“I would think that you will have to teach me a little about the finances of Forcang,” said Droos. “I have already learned some. Yet exactly what is the difference between a minor favor and a moderate favor or a minor piece of information and a moderate piece of information would be important to know. How many generic artifacts do we have? Will you ever trust me to manage such matters.”

“I will trust you equally, and more,” said Drerpo. “It is true, it will take some education, which will be provided soon. You will have equal say in finances, and accounting. Offer favors to Forcang, and information, and generic artifacts freely, and do not ask me. I trust you. I know that you trust me. We will both make good decisions with finances. Perhaps once per Absolute Year, we will meet and do a general accounting of our expenses and debts, to maintain integrity and be completely honest.”

“That is all agreeable, Dear Love,” said Droos. “We might also consider who we go to when, inevitably, we fight. Forcang

Book V: Realities of Hell

must have legendary tempers, in an eternity of mistakes and arguments. Even while pursuing The Journey of The Good, it is worthy to assume anger and frustration will occasionally surface. Who do we go to when we argue, and have differences?"

"Surely, we may go to our families," said Drerpo. "All of them are confidants already, and are trustworthy. It is hard when for once the closest confidant may not be used, since the argument is about the spouse. Yet, that is why there are other family and friends, in part. Choose a few, whether Emerzo, Amet, or others, even our extended family, and they may be the arbitrator. Yet they are not Professionals."

"You spoke of Professionals even among Forcang," said Droos. "Might that be something we should have inline on the off chance it becomes required. Is it not better to see an expert on relationships, who know the Abstract Dimensions of Love to Near Perfection, as well as Marriage, then to quickly terminate a long lasting relationship? No, have one or two Professionals available as well, to call upon in a time of trouble, for all matters related to a Marriage. Then there will be both Professionals and friends, family, and confidants to call upon."

"It is amazing that we are able to discuss these subjects so easily, Dear Droos," said Drerpo. "Is there anything that we cannot discuss with one another?"

"It is the case that privacy still exists in a relationship," said Droos. "I trust that you have the right to a few secrets, that you do not tell even to me. Perhaps I might even have some, or a space in our Domain, that I wish to keep for myself. Such is our right. We are two individual Sentients who have agreed to share our lives together."

"Of course, we will stick with each other, no matter what," said Drerpo. "Whether we are healthy, injured, happy, or sad, sick, poor, wealthy, or angry, all the while, we will be there to support one another. We are individuals living life together."

"This was a bit of a tangent from the topic of the marriage itself," said Droos. "Still, it was very important. It was as important, perhaps, as the marriage itself. Without, I would fear it dissolving over some undiscussed concern. We should continue to discuss these matters, and ask our Professionals, our Priestesses, and our Confidants, for additional topics, that we may know each other fully, and discuss all matters, barring a few trusted secrets."

"I love you, Dear Droos, with all my heart and soul," said

Drerpo.

“I love you, Dear Drerpo, with all I have to give, as well,” said Droos.

They kissed passionately, and hugged, and sat together, on a loveseat that Droos called up with some usage of Sre. This time it appeared without trouble. They sat together for a time, and enjoyed each other’s company. Droos considered herself most fortunate, even with all of the trials, and tasks, and burdens, and Secrets, and Omens. She had found, and would have, the love of her life. The Multiverse had Thorns and Greys, but it also had Berries.

Their preparations and discussions of the wedding went on for ten days. Also, there was more discussion of deep topics, and matters important to share prior to marriage. Would it be otherwise that the Sovereign and Queen of Angels would be wed without care? Rather, great care was paid to every detail. If it would be thought that Emerzo and Amet would play no part, that was not the case. Emerzo, to a lesser extent, given who she was, had roles. Amet in particular had jobs to perform for the wedding, in all respects. He was the eldest son of Elriver and Showsh, and surely would have a prominent role.

At the end of the day on the twenty-fifth day of their Journey to the Bagan Galaxy, they ceased from their preparations, for now, and rather, Droos found that Amet, her step-son, was waiting to spend time with her. This made her happy, as she most wanted a good relationship with all of Showsh’s children. Most of all, she had spent time with Amet. Yet how much had she actually talked to the man?

“What about you, Dear Son?” said Droos. “When are you going to find someone, settle down, and get married? You must have spent some endless eons of eternities alone. Surely, sharing a Multiverse with another is more wholesome.”

“You are right, Dear Mother,” said Amet. “I have been in love many times, and had my heart broken quite a few. Finding the right man is not always easy. It proved simple for my Dear Mother and Dear Father. For Me, it has taken trillions of years. I know I will find a strong, generous, beautiful man who I will love with all of my heart, and who will return the feelings.”

“I am glad to hear that you have not given up on love,” said Droos. “Just because it did not work a handful of times, does not mean the right one is not there for you. I am most fortunate

Book V: Realities of Hell

and lucky. You are also a wonderful, strong, generous man. Maybe you should put a little more emphasis on what I am sure Forcang call entertainment. There is nothing wrong with making time for yourself so that there is space to meet other people.”

“There are so many commitments, and Grand Elder Forcang prefer meeting in Completion,” said Amet. “I should make more time for myself, but the needs of The Multiverse are great, and urgent. The demands of my family are persistent and many. I have numerous friends that call me to action. How may I take time for myself? Is that not selfish?”

“It is also selfish to work so hard for so long that you forget to build up your own self-esteem,” said Droos. “I have no doubt that this is not something you lack for now. Yet, if enough trillions of years pass, and you remain alone, perhaps someday after your parents, and other family are gone, do you think it will be so easy? How may you build up others, and save The Multiverse, if you have not even made time for yourself? You deserve happiness, and completion.”

“How did you get to be so Smart and Wise in so short a time, Dear Mother?” said Amet. “Those who would assume Forcang are masters of interpersonal relationships would be wrong. It is simply the case that the stakes are that much higher, and more perilous. What if millions of Reflection Mortals suffer while I am on a date? Do I not have an obligation to them?”

“Look how much you care?” said Droos. “You are a warrior and an altruist. That is quite a combination. Some fabulous man is going to love that. There will always be more demands on your time. Go to Goamdwee, and the Drescher Bloodline Capitol, and spend time among Forcang cities. Extend your Sabbatical on your own terms. Why only follow the needs of your parents? Be your own man, and explore The Multiverse? Have some fun and meet people. Remember, this is necessary to build the foundation to spend an even longer eternity protecting the innocent Reflection Mortal. How much stronger and fiercer do you think you will become with an able man by your side? What if he is an Artist, and can Birth Manifestations? Maybe you will be a Sovereign, and not just a Delegate?”

“All of that sounds... amazing,” said Amet, with a smile. “I will take that leap of faith. Surely, if my Dear Father and You may find such happiness, I should take that time for myself as well. It is a matter of making the time to go to Forcang Cities, and being

around people with which I may socialize. One of my brothers may assume my Delegate responsibilities in the meantime, or even my parents. It is time that I choose for myself.”

“That does not mean that you may not return, even mightier, afterwards,” said Droos. “I have no doubt that you will still be there to help me stop Tzefee and save The Multiverse. Only, you may also have your own Universes, and Reflection Worlds, as well as the man of your dreams.”

“That would be wonderful,” said Amet. “I have greatly enjoyed this, Dear Mother. I hope we will have the opportunity for many more conversations like this. Forcang spend too little time on matters of this sort, you are right. Perhaps it takes one who has achieved a higher stage of Sentients, or one who has been Promoted to really make such human advice.”

“All Forcang are more human than you think,” said Droos. “Or so I have observed. Rather, the emotions and thoughts and feelings run all the fiercer, and hotter. Better to tame them with a mighty significant other, someone who is an equal in splendor and grace and aesthetics. Truly, do not belittle yourself. Embrace your family, but also your equal rights to happiness.”

“I will, Dear Mother,” said Amet.

Then he walked over, and kissed her on the cheek, and hugged her, before returning to his duties on the River Vessel.

Three more days passed, and then they returned to a steadier speed as they approached the Bagan Galaxy. Finally, they crossed The Border, and there it was as before: Ruby Station. Droos was not the same as she had been the last time she was here. She had an inkling about who this was. Some Hidden Prophetess from Feaist Scripture, perhaps? What was it to consider the possible realities of the myths of another religion?

“Welcome back, Dear Girl,” said Ruby, after they docked at the station. “Have you extrapolated The Omen? Do you know what The Call of the Flute foreshadows?”

“I do hear The Call of the Flute, and I know far more about the Secret and Omen than before, Dear Ruby,” said Droos.

“You hear The Call of the Flute, yet you do not Know what it implies,” said Ruby. “To Know, you must Return to the Beginning.”

“You always speak in riddles, do you not, Dear Ruby?” said Droos. “I would think this is some reference to Feaist Scripture. Is any of it true? If parts of it did transpire, it would

Book V: Realities of Hell

have been in ancient times, possibly before even the foundation of Duzog, and certainly before the creation of The Alliance of the Multiverse.”

“You are generous to entertain the histories and beliefs of a worldview different than your own,” said Ruby. “Many would dismiss such legends as only stories. You look for the Kernel of Truth, or even broader Realities and Knowledge. What actually occurred? Who am I?”

“I suppose I will have to contemplate those mysteries in some future chapter,” said Droos. “To go back to the beginning, I would have to visit some of the legendary Manifestations, or Realms in the scripture. Yet I do not even know if anything of that myth is real. If it were, surely those Places have been lost to history, and their Manifestations subject to Apocalypses. Next you would suggest I actually have to locate this Flute that I hear. Are there other Instruments?”

“He is right,” said Ruby. “You are wise, and perceptive. The time will arrive when all will be revealed. It is enough that you have an open mind, and do not dismiss the seeming impossible or strange or unfamiliar. Rather, you maintain Skepticism, but do your due diligence and research of your own. I predict that you will Ascend, you will be a mighty Forcang in your Lifetime. Even the prophecies may prove incorrect. Yet, you will always be yourself.”

“What would Giḥi have to say about all of this?” said Droos.

“Your Supreme Reality would say nothing,” said Ruby. “Your Divine Being simply Is, and does not issue condemnations or exaltations. You have chosen wisely. You are The Other, The Stranger, yet you embrace The Other, and the Stranger. You are a Prophetess of one religion, while you are yourself an Outsider.”

“I do not want such a burden,” said Droos. “It is bad enough to be a Secret and an Omen. I do not want to be an object of worship or praise or research. Why may I not live a simple life?”

“That is not the fate you have chosen!” said Ruby. “You took Drerpo’s hand, and were Promoted. You accepted your role in all of this. You made your choice, and you must embrace it. To leave the path now would cause even more catastrophic destruction. Above all, do not forget yourself, or to be yourself. I have been here since the beginning, and I remain who I am to this

day. Finally, I have found an equal.”

“An equal to you, Ruby?” said Droos, with a smile.

“Never”

“Complete your task,” said Ruby. “Then Return to the Beginning. When you may clearly state who I am, I will be there, and we will explore together, you and I and Drerpo. We will be both young and old, and we will try at least to counter The Threat. It worked once. With your Grace, Prophetess, we will Win Again.”

Droos felt the weight of quadrillions of years on her should then, and all of the endless eons of Sentients and Rains of Souls that depended upon her. She did not flinch, but returned to the River Vessel, and embraced her Drerpo. She kissed him, passionately, and hugged him, and prepared for all her tasks ahead. It would be a lengthy Journey.





Chapter 8

Epiphany

The Bagan Defense Forces were not expecting to ever see the four of them again. They seemingly left on a suicide mission, to beyond the edges of the Bagan Galaxy, and therefore, known reality. That is not to say that no expeditions had ever been launched into intergalactic space, or that astronomers had not been hard at work for thousands of years analyzing and learning what they might at a distance. Still, it was most rare for anything or anyone to arrive from Beyond the galaxy.

As it happened to be, there was some celebration at Ruby Station. The attacks on the Galaxy had stopped since they left. Some almost had a religious belief about it. By sacrificing these Four to the strange colossal creatures that breathed even in the vacuum of space, they had ended the onslaught. Whatever Deity had been angered had clearly been calmed since, and the last nine years or so had been one of relative peace. In the military, such providence was welcome and accepted.

There was even a reception of sorts, such as could be offered on Ruby Station. Cat was long gone from there, promoted beyond her desired rank, and off ruling some notable military installation. These officers did not know them, except by records, and by the orders and description of Ruby, who was, after all, technically the highest ranking military officer in the Galaxy, even to this day. She never had gone to the trouble of retiring. The food was good, and since they did not require any service but permission to enter the Galaxy, to travel to Galactic City, the Station Commander happily granted their request. Only, they were instructed to report their findings from beyond the galaxy when they arrived. Everyone was going to be interested in that story. The Commander was pleased when he discovered that there were sequels to Droos' previous books that would soon be

published. Apparently he was quite a fan—an interesting habit for a successful military officer.

They departed Ruby Station, and sauntered along the Outer Spiral of the Bagan Galaxy. The Language of the Universe was still required for travel, but they went at more typical speeds, the likes of a faster vessel of the day. Droos was often called upon, and educated in the procedure, by Emerzo herself, and soon she was navigating the River Vessel. Occasionally there were obstacles that required more than the skills of the princess. Drerpo was happy to step in and adjust the Requests, and they usually got what they desired, if not always.

It took another twenty-eight days to reach the Planet of No. There it is was, covered in metal, as though plated, except for the water. That was an odd, feature, since Droos assumed that in this era, building cities in oceans was no obstacle, or underground, deep, at the core. Perhaps there were buildings there, and she had not known about them. There was much about the Planet of No she had not discovered, even in the six years or so she had been free to move about it. Then again, during those years she had been only a child in the eyes of The City, and she was not just able to travel everywhere on her own. She would make a point sometime in exploring the riches that the planet of her birth had to offer.

They navigated the vessel to the Military Headquarters on the Moon. As she recalled, it was even more armored than No, and metal covered every surface, where the vast military infrastructure of a Galaxy, even in peace times, was located. The princess wondered if they would stand out in the type of vessel they piloted. Only they were not the only ones in odd craft. There were dozens that defied standard designs, and had odd dynamics and scientific principles. If only they knew.

The captain in charge of the civilian dock at the base directed them to their private landing bay. Droos watched with interest as Drerpo landed the River Vessel in the large metal room. Now they were back in a place of Immanent Principles. Everything was where it should have been. For this stage of technological evolution, the space was flawless. A platoon of the Assembly Armada met them, and they were greeted with the standard customs procedures. Then they were escorted to the desk of a General, who seemed eager to hear their report. All officers had changed since they were last here, or were otherwise reassigned. Still, the record of their prior arrival had proceeded

Book V: Realities of Hell

them, and this woman looked on with interest.

“You may call me General Sitobus,” said the woman. “The last time you were here you caused quite a stir. You shook up the civilian government, convincing them to change longstanding laws with a combination of wit, money, and doggedness. Then you absconded, supposedly to protect the Galaxy from some mighty external threat. It appeared to work, and in short order, we were once again in a state of peace. Now you suddenly turn up, no escort, but a relay suggesting you would be arriving. Where have you been these last ten years?”

General Sitobus was a human with bright, green eyes, long, black hair, and dark skin. Her uniform was neat and meticulous, with patterns of blue and a golden yellow.

“I am honored, General Sitobus, that our reputations are notable, even this many years later,” said Droos. “We did leave the Galaxy to address the threat to our people, and it was successful, at least for the moment. All of those details, and more, are in my new books. My first one was so successful, I had to return with the successors. I hope there is an audience for them. These ones are even harder to believe, and if you ask me, they are erudite and filled with way too much talking. Of course, they say the sequels are never as good as the original. We will see what my audience thinks.”

“That’s it,” said General Sitobus. “You are here to market your new books? Do you have any information on the enemy that attacked us? Are they likely to do so again?”

“That is all in the book,” said Droos, with a smile. “You may be assured that this type of threat will not be a serious concern for some time. That is not to say that the Universe is not a vast place filled with intrigue and danger. I would recommend that you consider expanding beyond this corner, and meeting some new Sentients and races. Yet, the creatures who posed such a threat, the onslaught, has ceased for now.”

“You are mysterious,” said General Sitobus. “Do you intend to return to join the Anthropological Expedition underway in the Continent of Nolai? I am told they have many significant findings. You will have to report to the Infiltrator Anthropologist General to be briefed. To do that, you will have to make planet fall. I will grant permission for your entry, subject to the publishing and review of your new books. I am sure that we will have lots of questions after they are available. You may do us a

courtesy and make a prerelease available so that we may analyze it professionally.”

“I offer no prereleases,” said Droos. “You will get them when everyone else does. Only, I guarantee more interviews to answer questions. Keep in mind, some mysteries may be simply too remote and rare to understand. Just remember, that they are but shadows on a cave wall.”

“You are beginning to sound like your famous friends here,” said General Sitobus. “Long did they talk that way. I am sorry to see you using that type of speech. I would say, after you have helped your people elect a reasonable government, you might try a vacation. Perhaps someplace warm and sunny. That is something coming from me, since I don’t take vacations.”

“I will take that under advisement, Dear General,” said Droos. “I appreciate your approval of our entry. And we will return.”

They went back to their Vessel, which had a number of curious scientists clearly peering around it. One of them was so bold as to approach them.

“That does not appear space worthy, Dear Madam,” said the man.

“What is your name,” said Droos.

“I am Commander Nisin,” he said. “I am an engineer around here, chiefly of space craft. I say this one looks to have no means of flight. Don’t worry, I have not violated your craft. Still, what gives it maneuverability? Where is the life support? What do you eat? I have many more questions. You say that this has been beyond the galaxy. Only our best Exploration Vessels have managed that feat. Here you are, with this small custom job. I would love to learn your secrets.”

This was a man of strength, who clearly emphasized timing honing his muscles as much as he appreciated the structure of space vessels. He was fair skinned, with blue eyes, and reddish hair. Droos noticed that there was a small tear on the sleeve of his blue uniform to create a flaw to the otherwise pristine appearance.

“I will tell you what I told General Sitobus,” said Droos. “You may read about it in the sequels to my books.”

“Yeah, you are Droos Yarite,” said Commander Nisin. “You used to write books. You have a sequel. That’s great! I also hear you disappeared under mysterious circumstances. I expect there will be lots of fans who will want to know what happened.”

Book V: Realities of Hell

“I only hope that my explanation is believed,” said Droos. “At the very least, I hope that it is a good story, and provides commentary on the human and Sentient condition.”

“My interest is engineering and science,” said Commander Nisin. “If there are interesting and compelling approaches to either, I will find it entertaining. One of the purposes of this book is to be enjoyed, isn’t it?”

“That is the main objective,” said Droos. “It is also to get people to think. I hope it is not as popular as the first one. It would please me far more if it helped a few humans consider how to be more moral, ethical, and good.”

“That is a lofty goal,” said Commander Nisin. “You lost me a bit there. I suppose I will have to grit my teeth on those pages. I am more into drama and pictures of the future, even of supposed magic. Yet I do not like being told what to do. Hopefully it does not feel that way.”

“I will leave such judgements in the hands of those far more capable than myself,” said Droos.

Then the man departed, and they were cleared for takeoff. The River Vessel flew away from the station on the moon, and towards the Planet of No itself. There were the vast Space Stations that surrounded it, including the enormous spike that Ascended hundreds of miles outward. There she had met Darlez.

She had received word that he was by now well integrated into a real group of students with their own mentor in Galactic City. Emerzo had seen that he had a host of guardians to see to his needs, all approved of course by Droos. Apparently, he was thriving, a close to unified Whole Self of body, emotion, mind, and spirit. This success in her life made Droos smile, and she could not wait until there was an appropriate opportunity to reunite.

They flew passed the stations, ably, and streaked toward the Heart of Galactic City. Still, their craft was different than most, but now that Droos was more used to this type of travel, it was not wholly unusual. It was not surprising to receive the type of questions they had just received. She hoped her explanation for those who read her book was enough. Actually, she expected that it would only create that many more questions. Who would believe such a story?

There was a vast docking bay at the Heart of the City, and they had a reserved space. After all, in the eyes of those in Bagan, Drerpo and Emerzo and Amet were seasoned politicians, statesmen

of great renown. Then they made their way back to the same apartment as before. Apparently it had remained in their name all this time, though it had been rented out while they were gone. In some seamless transition, almost as if fated, the last tenants had just left. There they found a familiar face.

Anora stood before them, with a slightly different look. She had a smile, and ran and hugged Droos.

“Here is the girl that left me all those years ago, and now she returns the conquering hero, and engaged to none other than gloomy Drerpo,” said Anora, as she punched Drerpo’s arm.

“It is good to see you too, Dear Anora,” said Drerpo.

“What have you been doing for all these years,” said Anora. “The gamblers out there had great odds that you died long ago, in some great cataclysm. Of course, I took the unlikeliest of bets that you would return. It looks like someone is going to make a lot of money! I say we all go out to celebrate.”

“They were all betting I was dead?” said Droos.

“I suppose that is what happens when you disappear over the edge of the known galaxy in the midst of a savage invasion,” said Emerzo. “We will accept your invitation for dinner. Take us to your favorite haunt.”

That night they ate at a casual restaurant, nothing too fancy. Few of her friends from school would have expected to see her here. She ate bowls of noodles with a savory broth. To drink she had a rice wine, served hot. It was all delicious, and a welcome change. It was good to be back in The City, in Immanence.

Anora set about talking about ten years of clients, somewhat indirectly. She mentioned something about the Ghost’s Code, and not saying anything too specific or personal. They would be happy to know that none of the strange experiences with them had left her lips. She had even crafted a Simulator Experience like the one that had occurred with Droos. That was one of her favorite memories. Apparently she had sold it, and the game scenario was quite popular. She asked if Droos had been practicing her skill with a blade.

“Droos returns to you as a seasoned warrior,” said Amet. “She has slain dozens of enemies in battle herself, in actual war, in True Defense. She has commanded others, and protected her people.”

Anora looked very impressed.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“Why you were a girl learning how to swing a sword and fire a gun with me,” said Anora. “Now you are a General commanding Armies.”

“A General Commanding Platoons,” said Droos. “Maybe it will be armies someday. I do not like actual fighting. It is one thing to do it in a scenario or in a game. I would rather avoid actually having to take life, any type of life, at all costs. It is better to use diplomacy. What else have I been doing these last ten years but learning the rules, the philosophy to know what is right and wrong, and good and evil, including regarding war and combat. Still, if you challenge me to a round of that game, I will join you, Dear Anora.”

“I will offer that challenge,” said Anora, with a wink.

“You do not even have to kiss the valiant knights that come to rescue us,” said Anora.

“Dear Droos may kiss whoever she desires,” said Drerpo.

“What a trusting, benevolent fiancé,” said Anora. “He even lets you kiss valiant knights in sport. Well enjoy your freedom and equality, Dear Droos. You have found a good man.”

“I know,” said Droos, and she kissed Drerpo.

Anora smiled broadly, while Emerzo rolled her eyes.

Droos had to remind herself that at this meal, the Ghost was able to enjoy food as well, all according to the wealth of programs she had earned over a long lifetime. As it was, she could be seen consuming exactly the same types of food as they were, although from her own bowl and cup. The princess knew that Anora enjoyed this as much as anyone else, and that equality should be extended to artificial Sentients as well. Yet such a topic was in fact a digression.

After the meal Droos asked if they might enjoy some form of entertainment. That was a small matter, and easy to solve. They entered the limousines, and off they went, at great speeds, and in a few hours, they were over the North Eastern Eurai District, at the Tops of The Towers. These were some of the tallest buildings in the world, and had gaming and entertainment empires at the top. Sentients from throughout the Bagan Galaxy tuned into participate virtually, yet here they were in person. The space was awash in lights and sounds and fun.

Droos found a card game of sorts, one that had gone through many iterations over the thousands of years, but still kept some of the original similarity. She sat down and watched for an

hour, and seemed to get an idea for how it worked. Amet looked at her, to be sure she wanted to participate. Waving her hand above the credit console, she entered the game.

It was hard at first, and there were sharks playing. Yet the bluffing involved was no worse than actual combat. If she might see passed the disguise of a Vampire, her Keen Senses were able to view the illusion in the card play. Soon she had a tall pile of chips. After two hours, she had enough, and she took a tithe of the chips for her and the others to enjoy on some refreshments and drinks, while she found some office space of charities catering to the needy in the tower, and gave the rest of the money to those causes. Droos remembered that she was back in the physical world, and there was the Lowest Mile. Every age had needy Sentients, and those who went hungry of body, emotion, mind, or spirit.

Then they found a tavern at the very top of The Tallest Tower in the district. It was exclusive, and Drerpo poured them all a staple that had persisted all the way until that day. It was a masterfully crafted potato vodka, and arguably one of the best the District had to offer, even still made in hydroponics in the buildings, distilled there and all. It was delicious, and Droos tried one neat, and one with some ice. Some pleasures of life did not change even after thousands of years.

The night was growing long, and they returned to their limousine, and it flew them back to their apartment. Anora had remained with them the whole time. Apparently this was an unusual thing, for her to get out, and join her clients. Yet, this was a celebration, one of unusual sorts. Some exceptions in her profession were permitted, and besides, there was complete freedom. She might go where she wanted, when she wanted. Only her predilection, along with that of many other Ghosts, for service, and selflessness, kept her focused on the service to that apartment and her native tower.

The sun rose that morning, a single yellow disc in the sky, and the blue of the immanent heavens lay above, one of the greatest revelations Droos had seen in years of profundity. They ate a hearty breakfast, and Droos began her day by contacting her publisher. She had another book to publish, for she had returned, for a time, from her journeys.

Well, her literary agent and publisher were ecstatic. The first book had earned a great sum of money, and was a best seller. They only hoped this one would be similarly popular. Droos did

Book V: Realities of Hell

forewarn that it was a bit more talkative, and discussed realms and places that were most fantastic. Only she hoped, it would prove a great escape for her fans and readers. Perhaps, some of them would learn a thing or two, or at least think about the Sentient condition.

Her publishers did not need much convincing, and they met that day, and began reviewing the final drafts of the next three books. Droos assured them that one final volume would also be complete soon. When they asked her what she had been doing these last ten years, she gave them the same answer as everyone else. However, the literary agent and publisher seemed more content with that answer, as Droos was not the only eclectic artist and writer they dealt with on a regular basis. This was an age where Sentients lived hundreds of years. It was not unusual for one to utterly vanish for ten years between novels. So long as her sequels sold as well as the first, or even partially as well, they would be happy. They assured her they would have an answer by Tenthday

At the end of the day, Droos made an appointment with the Office of the Infiltrator Anthropologist General at the Army Corp of Anthropologists. They did not at first seem to remember her, or at least, assumed, like most, that she was dead. They were happily surprised to find out otherwise. Or else, that reaction might have been annoyance. There was something about forcing those measures through the government ten years earlier. Still, they were glad to have a lobbyist and politician as able as her to help them with their efforts. She quickly had an appointment for the next day with the Lieutenant General

That night was fairly quiet, although Droos did follow through on the offer of Anora's challenge in the game. It was very challenging, and they were hard pressed. Yet Droos was no longer a Reflection Mortal, and she held her own, even far better than Anora. Still, on the normal difficulty, they required saving. In rushed Drerpo, and Emerzo, and Amet, dressed as warriors. Together, with much help from Droos, and a little from Anora, they vanquished the Phantom Tzefee and her Dragons once more. Only at the end did Droos realize these were the actual Creator and Sovereign of Drerpo. The knights that had come to protect them had been slain as usual, leaving them to their own defense. Fortunately, they had gotten out of it, with some help from the Royals. She gave Drerpo, dressed in shining mail, a deep kiss.

The next day Droos left early, with nothing more than a cup of coffee and croissant. She was accompanied only by Drerpo, as the others seemingly had to work on the publication of the sequels, and other matters, as well as finalizing their trip South. They flew in their limousine for one hour, until they reached a large building with fascinating architecture. They landed, and were shown into the meeting with the Lieutenant General.

“I was surprised to hear about your return,” he said. “I was only a middle manager in this Agency the last time you were here, and it was the main topic of conversation for years afterward. You changed the law to permit interference in indigenous cultures in certain extreme circumstances. It was not even partially for purposes of exploitation, but for the protection of your people and their right to live and be free. What a fantastic assignment! You know, we all thought you were dead. We are glad to have you back. I hope you have been practicing for what will be expected of you.”

The Lieutenant General was an alien race similar to the appearance of Fatima long ago. This one had a greenish color, but he was just as bulbous and indistinct.

“I am ready to begin,” said Droos. “What is the progress of the Assignment? I hope there has not been too much interference.”

“We have been slow and careful, I assure you,” said the agent. “And you may call me General Onkoat.”

“It is a pleasure to be here, General Onkoat,” said Droos.

“It is not to say there have not been a few instances,” said Onkoat. “Perhaps an overzealous pilot landed a vessel too close to the population. Maybe some contraband technology was used on occasion. Almost all of the Anthropologist Infiltrators know their assignment and mission. They do not want to alter the unique culture and society of The People of the Blood too much. Most importantly, some of the structure of the rebellion has been established.”

“Are we able to discuss that here?” said Droos.

“Unless there is some higher power listening, then we are safe in this room,” said the General. “Apparently there are seven captains of the rebellion. They are strategically located in disparate locations and regions of The Jungle of Nolai. Mostly, they are mysterious legends. It took five years of building trust to meet two of them. We have established beyond a reasonable

Book V: Realities of Hell

doubt that there are at least seven. There is even a hint of an eighth commanding officer, a General, who offers direction and guidance to all seven. If she exists, none have revealed the fact or fiction, or any information. This organization is tightly compartmentalized.”

“What may I do to help?” said Droos.

“You are the princess who survived,” said General Onkoat. “Simply your presence, your return, seemingly from death itself, will speak of your authority. There are really only two others who would command the respect that you would, simply by your station: your father and your brother. Even now, they would recognize you, all but the children born in the last ten years. Even many of them have seen statues carved of your likeness.”

“I do not want my people thinking that somehow I returned from death,” said Droos. “I merely escaped with my life, to return and help them.”

“Not every member of your tribe is going to make that distinction,” said General Onkoat. “If we all thought you were dead, everyone in your tribe especially thought that you were dead. That being said, you will also be useful in establishing trust and confidence with the rebel leaders. Simply being who you are, and standing against your father, is practically proof and authority enough. I expect that this will greatly increase our timetable. I was predicting twenty more years to establish enough trust to create the revolution. With your help, I expect we will be able to initiate the war itself within twelve months. Depending on what type of leader you have become in the last ten years, it may be an even shorter length of time.”

“You put a lot of faith in me,” said Droos.

“We all will,” said The General. “Now, do stay true to yourself. You are still hoping to setup a democratic Society, with checks and balances, and answerable to the people. They may want to make you the next God-Queen. You will have to resist the temptation. Just remember why you are there, and what you told all of us the last time you were here.”

Drerpo smiled at Droos.

“I appreciate the reminder, General Onkoat,” said Droos. “I have many tasks left to complete in life. I want merely a good home for my people, of happiness and security and freedom. I want a good ending for my family, and justice for my father. I did not come here to become the ruler of my Society. They have it in themselves to rule and create their own laws and destiny, as The

People of the Truth.”

“Why then, in the words of a great sage, ‘You are the greatest woman in the world’,” replied the General. “I think we have discussed enough to begin. Do you require transportation from us, or are you able to get there yourself. Seemingly you got here from the edge of known space with little difficulty. I would assign you one Commander, to ensure an easy transition into the tribe, and introduction to the Agents already on the ground. We will want to control this change in tactics. Word would otherwise spread of the Return of the Eldest Daughter throughout the entire tribe faster than wildfire. It is quite a story.”

“We are able to accommodate one Agent,” said Drerpo. “Though tell her that it will be quite a ride.

“Good luck on your assignment, Droos Yarite,” said The General, rising to his feet. “Do not forget who you are. Of course, I will also be interested in these new books I am hearing about. I wonder if these chapters will be included in the final one.”

“You can count on that, General Onkoat,” said Droos, with a bow.

Then she turned, and Drerpo and her returned to their vessel, and traveled back to their apartment. It was time, already, for departure. Anora was visibly sad, for they had only just arrived, and now they were leaving again for an indefinite period of time. Still, they ate well that night, and provided the instructions for where the Commander should meet them to board the River Vessel.

“Are you sure it is wise to show any kind of secret to a Reflection Mortal?” asked Droos.

“You are about to publish a series of books that reveal far more,” said Emerzo. “Though I suppose you are right that most will not believe they are true. They are a tad fantastical, are they not?”

“The characters also could have been written better,” said Amet, with a grin.

“You tell that to your record keepers at The Library,” said Droos, poking Emerzo.

For an instant, Emerzo took a breath, and then smiled.

“I will work on the quality of our record keeping, Dear One,” said Emerzo. “The Annals of the Universe are not just meant for pleasure reading, or publishing in the Bagan Galaxy. It is a side benefit that you are choosing to use them for that

Book V: Realities of Hell

purpose.”

“I will keep that in mind,” said Droos. “Perhaps I should inform my readers that the book they are reading is written by Celestial Servants as Records, not for public consumption and entertainment. The fact that any enjoy reading them at all, as you say, is a testimony to Their Talents. It turns out to be both a Record, and Passable Books.”

“Of course, ‘Art and beauty is in the mind of the beholder’, or so said an ancient sage,” said Drerpo. “Those who will enjoy it will do so, and others will not, and that is their right.”

“I thought you said that Beauty is Universal?” said Droos.

“That is an axiom,” said Emerzo. “It a fundamental right, and a Transcendent Reality and Truth.”

“Yet, Reflection Mortals only do see the shadows on the wall of the cave,” said Amet. “Their immanent interpretation may include critiques of less than beautiful. Such is their right. Provided no harm is given, all opinions are welcome.”

“Then I will publish the book, which you graciously permit me to release under my name,” said Droos. “And I will do so open to any appreciation, for good or ill, of the wealth and wonder of Sentients and humanity.”

That night Droos did dream. She saw a vast army, but they were not Undead Fiends, or Dragons, or Creatures of Power. Ranks upon ranks of Forcang swept many glowing cities, endless lights among a vast stretching River of Light. Even they expanded into dots and bright sources of darkness. The blight spread, trying to take hold. All of the universe threatened to be moldered, and destroyed by that Threat.

At the forefront of the army were several bold Forcang. They did not appear mighty as Grand Elders, but their ambition, their desire to rule, and dominate, to simply wage war for the sake of fighting, it pushed the fighting to a frenzy. Even the Multiverse’s Tree could not withstand the fury, and swayed and broke! The greatest light and order, created by Dibodo Himself, crashed into the Celestial Void. The Alliance of the Multiverse was vanquished.

What hope was there against such endless armies? What success might be won against such depths of destruction? The blight covered all, and The Threat required a Secret, something redeemed. A bright light shone, out of the East. It rose from High Mountain tops, a chaotic swirl, yet the fiercest sheen seen since the

beginning. More lights rallied around it. So the swarming armies of bile were pushed back. Yet the remaining forces in the ruins of The Multiverse's Tree were an island under siege in a sea of raging calls for Open Transcendence, and Endless Paradise.

There, amidst the ruin, Droos saw a man in her dreams. He was cast to the ground, defeated by His foes. Badly he was scarred and bloodied. The enemy had ravaged him, and there was no return. He lay dead, and he had gone on, to his reward, or chastisement. One of the Forcang minions moved the body, and to her horror she saw that it was Showsh! He was fallen, along with so many others in Goamdwee. How could the bright jewel of Dweehwail be diminished. In her emotional turmoil, Droos, the princess, suddenly awoke!

There she was, in the apartment of The City. Surely, all of this was a dream. Or was it the rarest of Visions, the one in ten million? Perhaps it was merely her fears. There she was afraid of Tzefee and her anger and wrath. Yet, another Threat to The Multiverse, a different Great Wave, perhaps festered, and prepared to ensnare all. What was that purest, greatest of lights to the East? There was something familiar about it, and perilous? Somehow she felt a burden, and a connection. If she did not complete her tasks, all might be lost.

Then her love, Drerpo knocked on the door to her room, and she called for him to enter, so pleased to see him in one piece. His grey eyes shone brightly, and he smiled at her. Quickly, as a dance, he swept over to her, and lay down beside her, and kissed her all over.

"What is wrong, Dear Love?" said Drerpo. "If there is anything in my power that I may do to fix it, I will."

He kissed her again.

"I saw you, dead," said Droos. "I also saw the fall of Goamdwee, and much of Dweehwail."

"At the hands of Tzefee?" said Drerpo.

"No, it was a different dream," said Droos. "Yet it was all connected somehow. It was as if my actions to counter Tzefee, to humble her, directly affected the outcome of this new Vision. Surely all would be lost if I failed or did poorly at any of my tasks. Great is my burden. I do not want to see you die, Dear One."

She kissed him, and he wiped away a few tears that appeared on the corners of her eyes.

"It was just a dream," said Drerpo. "But we all die. There

Book V: Realities of Hell

are many powers of the Multiverse, and Threats rise to destroy it. I may endure much, but there will be an end to my life, and those of all we hold dear. The Rain of Souls is not just for Reflection Mortals. Our time will come too. I hope you and I will live to have at least an endless eternity in love and companionship. The goal and right action is to treasure each day, each moment. For no one knows which will be the last.”

“That is a digression,” said Droos, as her tears dried. “I do treasure you, so much.”

“I have two Great Jewels in the Multiverse,” said Drerpo. “Their light would defeat the fiercest Evil, and drive away mighty storms and clouds. You truly are my greatest love.”

They kissed again, and then Droos sat up, and got out of bed. With some quick words of Sre, she had her clothes on for traveling. Drerpo accompanied her to join the others. They breakfasted with Anora, and then proceeded to the vessel docks, where they found the same River Vessel that Droos had known since she was a girl. Really she had known it since she was born, and it was her birth star. Ever it had followed her, and now it would bring her back to The Jungle. This time she traveled with her Drerpo, and Emerzo, Amet, and one other.

“Pleased to meet you again,” said a familiar voice. “I am Commander Dewei. We have not seen each other since school. It is good to be working with you, Dear Droos.”

“Dear Dewei,” said Droos. “It is wonderful that you are the one who was chosen to accompany us. I had no idea that you chose a life of such service. You have also risen through the ranks. You are quite talented.”

“If I may speak frankly,” said Dewei, “It was you who inspired me to enter this field of work. Really, most of those in our class went onto public service or civil service jobs of various sorts. You made a lot of us think about more than just ourselves. I would like to thank you for that.”

“I learned a lot at that time myself,” said Droos. “It was good to have friends my age. Otherwise, it would have just been me and a bunch of stale politicians.”

“I am glad that we proved entertaining company,” said Dewei, with a laugh. “Ah, and here are your mysterious guardians, Drerpo and Emerzo, and even Amet. I hope they have taken good care of you.”

“I hope so too,” said Drerpo. “We insist that we are

informal while we travel South. You do not need to use any titles or follow protocols or hierarchies. Let us be friends as we go about this portion of our work.”

“That is not entirely up to me, Dear Drerpo,” said Dewei. “I am an officer. I have certain obligations. However, I appreciate your candor, and I will honor your request as much as we are able. Now how may I assist with the mechanics of this Vessel? It hardly seems capable of flight.”

“You may read about those details in my books,” said Droos. “You will also see it for yourself.”

Then Droos began speaking The Language of the Universe, with fervor, and they departed. The commander looked at the princess with wide eyes, although this was not the first strange sight he had seen. He then went and sat with Emerzo and Amet while Droos did the piloting. They left the Heart of Galactic City to the East, and traveled along the highest boulevards of vessels and limousines, going at the greatest speeds. Finally, they veered toward the descent to the ocean itself. By midday, they were sailing at a brisk pace on the waves, a proper vessel indeed. Then Droos handed the navigation to Amet, and went to join the others for entertainment and conversation.”

“I suppose you must command this custom-designed vessel by vocal instructions,” said Dewei. “It is impressive the system you have. There must be some fancy internal mechanisms that are cleverly stored out of sight. I am no engineer, but I am sure there are those in that profession that would love to tear this vessel apart and learn how it works.”

“Let us say that it functions exactly the way you suggest,” said Droos, with a smile. “Engineers have been trying to get their hands on this for years, but it is proprietary. Really it is a family secret. I do not think we would want to part with that kind of knowledge.”

“Just as mysterious as ever, Droos?” said the commander. “What have you been doing these last ten years. Also, I can tell. You only look to have aged half of that. There must have been some pretty exotic travels to cause that to happen. There are rumors that you flew in alien craft beyond the rim of the galaxy. Of course, I don’t put much faith in rumors.”

“How do you know that you are not in an alien craft now?” said Droos.

Dewei smirked for a second, and then laughed.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“I have a feeling I would be able to tell if I were in a vessel that unusual,” said Dewei. “Astromechanics is not my field of specialty, but I would think there would be far more differences in a truly foreign craft to those in the Bagan Galaxy. There is something at once both familiar about this one, and scintillating.”

“We did not do anything too exceptional,” said Droos. “To begin with, we spent a long time in a library.”

“What were you studying that you needed all that time to teach yourself the new subject?” said the commander. “Also, why a physical library, instead of the ultranet?”

“Everyone knows that you may only trust the ultranet so far,” said Droos. “There is something to be said for good, honest books. That is not to say that I did not study the ultranet. It was good to be in a location that had both resources, in sufficient quantities.”

“You did not answer what subject you were studying,” said Dewei.

“I was learning how I may be sure that I really know what I know,” said Droos.

“That is a curious type of subject,” he said. “You left the galaxy just to study philosophy. Some of the best books in the history of philosophy are in the libraries of this galaxy. The Planet of No even has notable ones. Yet you had to go so far?”

“A library may have some books, but this library had all of the books,” said Droos.

“No library has every book,” said the commander. “They may have virtually everything, particularly on their network. It is a matter of space. It would take a library the size of several planets to store all of the books.”

“This was an unusual library,” said Droos. “It was important to know what I know so that I might move onto learn about good and evil. After all, here I am returning to help suggest to my people a better way to live life. If I do not know what that is, or anything about morality, ethics, and integrity, how may I advise? How would I have the right to do so?”

“You also studied morality and ethics in this library?” he asked. “If you ask me, and I know you’re not, you would have done far better staying closer to home.”

“Well, to study good and evil we wanted to go to some of the finest examples of both,” said Droos. “We were in a rather unique situation, and we took advantage of it. Now, I hope I am in

a better position to advise on such matters.”

“What exactly was the nature of the exotic locales where the nature of good and evil was so pure and defined?” said Dewei.

“Would you believe me if I told you we traveled to Heaven and Hell?” said Droos.

“I would not,” said the commander. “However, I am more scientific minded. I would see it as a religious experience of some sort, wherever you actually went. Perhaps you experienced it according to your spiritual beliefs as a heavenly or hellish journey. The notion that you actually traveled to some manifest Heaven and Hell seems far-fetched. I do respect almost every iteration of such concepts as they exist in numerous societies and cultures and worldviews.”

“It is good that you honor equality and egalitarianism,” said Droos. “I suppose that is a feature of your profession. You may be an infiltrator, but you are still trained as an anthropologist. You appreciate and enjoy the study of cultures of all sorts. Religion, and language, and archeology are all topics of interest for you, professionally, and I would guess, personally.”

“That is true,” said Dewei. “I am generally passionate about my profession.”

“May I ask, how did you find yourself as an infiltrator, rather than a purer scientist?” said Droos.

The commander chuckled.

“I am glad you see the distinction, and I take no offense,” said Dewei. “I too recognize that pure science may only be done divorced from political activism. Really I am part of a branch of the military, or government agency. On the one hand, they pay better. Also, there are some unusual instances where it is desirable to alter the natural evolution of a people ever so slightly without greatly influencing them. You lobbied and helped pass laws to that effect. Your tribe is the perfect example. Why shouldn’t they have both a reasonable form of government and a pre-industrial society? We should not have to bring them into our modern world of technology in order to save them from tyranny, murder, and slavery. We may secure many of their rights, while also maintaining their right to change as a society independently.”

“Really, it is about the money, and the field operations, is it not?” said Droos.

“I admit, I enjoy being sent on assignment,” said the commander. “I have been to lots of interesting cultures this

Book V: Realities of Hell

way, all over the Galaxy, funded by the government. There have been excuses for me to learn new languages, and enhance my knowledge of anthropology, in all four disciplines. Yes, having enough money to afford a descent apartment in Galactic City helps too. I always hoped that with that type of income, perhaps I might be able to settle down at some point, with someone.”

“You will, Dewei!” said Droos, with a smile. “You are a wonderful man. You are kind, and polite, and very smart. It is only a matter of time before you find someone. Only, all of these field assignments might get in the way of a proper social life. I would recommend interspersing some years in the office with those in unusual corners of the Galaxy.”

“You are too right, Dear Droos,” said the commander. “You know, there is a rumor that you are engaged, and it is to none other than Drerpo here. I find that a bit odd.”

“I see all of my secrets get around fast,” said Droos. “Would you believe me if I told you that while this man appears as one person to your eyes, an elder statesman, in reality he is someone completely different?”

“That is more believable than a trip to Heaven and Hell,” said Dewei. “That sort of technology has existed for thousands of years. Who is he if he is not the statesman we have all come to know?”

“He is,” said Droos. “He is an honorable man, a kind man, a strong man. There is nothing in this universe I would be afraid to achieve by his side.”

“Whoever he actually is,” said the commander. “He is very lucky. Also, you should make those achievements yourself. You don’t need a man at your side to live your dreams. I suppose it helps to have someone there anyway to keep you company.”

“You know, his actual name is Showsh, and he is both my very best friend, a great help, and the best kind of company,” said Droos.

“Why do I feel like I have heard that name before,” said Dewei. “Somehow, it feels like I have always known that name. Maybe I had a dream long ago, and forgot it. Anyway, I did not mean to get sentimental. You two are very fortunate. I always thought there was more to this story than the senses permitted in sight. I will have to carefully read your book. Probably, I will have to read it several times.”

“Dewei, where are we going?” said Droos. “I am sure we

will have more time to catch-up. Are we going to meet a rebel leader.”

“Yes, we are,” he said with a smile. “In an irony, he is supposed to be a former associate of Drerpo’s father, who was supposed to have died long ago. Most of the followers of that Regional Governor were exterminated in the purges that followed. However, some survive to this day. It will help that both you and Drerpo are here. You will have twice the authority to speak. I would not be surprised if he hands the command of his people over to you immediately.”

“I believe I could manage that, if it were offered,” said Droos. “Yet, I think it would be far better to let the current captains of the rebellion lead as long as possible. They have managed a most difficult operation up until now. I would not usurp them, even if I or Drerpo have the authority. I am happy to lend whatever other aid I am able.”

“That will make an even better impression,” said Dewei. “The princess, returned from the dead, along with her the Eldest Son of their favorite Regional Governor, yet deferring rule to established tribal leaders. That type of reticence will earn you a lot of support. It also helps that you do have some concrete tips to provide as well as authority to act. I believe that this is going to be a turning point in this whole affair.”

“You seem to have a lot of confidence in me, Dewei,” said Droos.

“Really, I have since the moment I laid eyes on you,” said the man, blushing slightly.

“I know,” said Droos, with a smile. “I always appreciated it. That is why I know that you are such a great man. You are a better friend. I am happy to see you again, here at this stage in my people’s redemption.”

As they sailed south, the commander began to ask about food. Then he watched as Droos used the same words to bring out a table, and chairs, and a music artifact, and a lavish meal. His eyes went wide again. Still, he sat at the table, and ate the food. It was an eclectic combination of Droos’ favorite dishes, although no one complained about the selection. They drank a potent dark ale, and pure water.

“You know, I am beginning to believe some of the other rumors they say about you,” said Dewei. “That is saying something, since I am not one for superstition, and I am not a

Book V: Realities of Hell

religious man. I study such subjects professionally. My own beliefs are rather agnostic. Still, to see you create food out of nothing, with some vague words that also pilot this vessel. I wonder how you do it all. It makes me think of old fantasy novels I used to read as a child. I always thought those stories were fiction.”

“It may seem like magic to you,” said Drerpo. “There are some secrets, some truths at the origin of the universe, that defy science and magic. Those who know them, they may speak what they desire, and often achieve results.”

“This is a sort of linguistic skill, then,” said Dewei. “You mean to say that merely by learning certain words, I may create wine out of water, or fly through the sky?”

“It takes more than that,” said Emerzo. “For one thing, it takes a lot of practice, over many years. Also, some Sentients are more innately talented than others. Finally, it takes fervor, and bravery, to speak to Them.”

“Who are They?” said the commander.

“You see, Dear Dewei,” said Droos. “The words are spoken to the Most Selfless of Beings. They are Alive in a Way you and I will never understand fully. If the words are spoken truly, and honestly, they may produce results.”

“What is the name for these words?” said Dewei.

“It is The Language of the Universe,” said Amet.

“Well, a Language of the Universe,” said Droos.

“I understand that it is a language in the universe,” said the commander. “What is it called?”

“The local dialect of the language is Sre,” said Emerzo.

“Here,” said Droos.

She spoke some words, and then, a pendant appeared, a necklace, with some letters forming a word in abstract formation and attractive aesthetic.

“Very good, Dear One,” said Drerpo.

“What is that?” said Dewei.

“That is for you,” said Droos. “Your name in Sre. I also crafted it as an art piece, so it has a style too. I hope you like it.”

“I do,” said the commander. “Although what does your fiancé think about you giving jewelry to other men.”

“My fiancé may give gifts to whoever she desires,” said Drerpo. “I see that the secret is out. Enjoy the gift, Dear Dewei. May the blessings of the Transcendent Beings go with it, and I

know that the providence and grace of the Creator and Sovereign of the Universe will smile upon you too.”

“You are quite the religious man,” said Dewei. “What a strange faith you mention, too. I would love to learn more about it. Perhaps after this assignment I may interview you about the details of your worldview, and how it works, and the morals, ethics, and concepts of integrity.”

“You appear to have a fine innate sense of it all already,” said Amet. “We will gladly conduct such an interview. Ours is just one of an endless variety of religions and faiths. It is little worthier than any others. I suppose it would take a true anthropologist to want to study about it. Such is the purpose of scientists and philosophers: to love wisdom and explore knowledge, wherever the destination may lie.”

“I am only talking about an interview,” said Dewei. “I hope there will be no destination.”

“That is all we are talking about,” said Droos. “To be honored as one unique vision of Divinity among a myriad plethora of others, and endless reasonable approaches to Supreme Reality. It is only the exclusion of one group that is the problem. Provided



Book V: Realities of Hell

there is love, and tolerance, and peace, there is no concern with adding another, or the other, or the stranger.”

“Are we almost done discussing those topics?” asked Emerzo. “It seems it has been an endless repeat and review of the same points.”

“As was once mentioned, how many notes are similar and repeated in great pieces of music,” said Drerpo. “Even so, eventually it draws near the end. Each time through, the measures are slightly different, and heard certainly with different ears and senses. What type of Sentient will be there in the end? Will they be the same, or will they be different?”

“To me it is enough that some of the music was heard, and considered, and maybe, appreciated,” said Droos. “Once the score is complete, let the concert begin. Polish the rests, consider the codas, then invite the attendees. Who will be there, I wonder? Perhaps one, or two, or a score? Yet I firmly believe, that even a tree that falls in the wilderness, with none to witness it but the passing scitter, does make a sound, and it is awful and terrible to behold.”

“What a metaphor,” said Amet. “I would rather expand it to a rainbow amidst a storm across the ocean, with no boat but perhaps a passing narwhale to witness it. Does that rainbow still exist? I believe so, and it is still beautiful.”





Chapter 9

Rebirth

They sailed for twenty-eight days before they reached The Jungle once more. In fourteen days, they could no longer see the rivers of lights flowing overhead. It was clear that they had left much of technology and The City behind them, and returned to the civilization of The People of the Blood, such as it existed, in both devices and society. Droos was at the same time both terrified and happy.

Under the direction of Commander Dewei, they navigated to the Hole of Heaven, another volcano on the Continent of Nolai. It was part of the rugged, narrow mountain range of the Neck of Passion, North of the grassy plains of the Blood of Sacrifice. That is how the delightful labels of The People of the Blood went, and the ones the princess knew. The Planet of No had other names for those geographic features, but they would use the local terms. Perhaps a repurposed People of Truth would similarly rename the land itself.

Their boat ran ashore, and with some words, Emerzo caused it to vanish. That was a trick that Droos had not seen, yet it was a reasonable precaution. Then it was a difficult trek up into the mountains. There were numerous villages here, as well as signs of destruction. Perhaps every other town and hamlet had been burnt to the ground and pillaged. This was some sign of the cataclysm that had come here at the perceived rebellion of the previous Regional Governor. Still, some of the villages existed, but they did not stop at these until after two days of marching.

Then they reached a small hamlet of perhaps one hundred and fifty farmers. Crops were grown in an ingenious fashion on shelved rows into the mountain itself. It took much labor, but these hardy people had been at this work for thousands of years, and few were such experts. Still, most of their crop went to pay their dues

Book V: Realities of Hell

to the capitol, and then the regional governor. A tithe was left for their needs, which was just enough not to starve.

They arrived at twilight, and found a meeting hall of sorts. It existed for proclaiming the will of the God-King, but most of the time it was used for drinking and socializing. Here they sat for a good four hours, into the night. Even amidst the slavery and depravity, the aroma of the verdant jungle swept even into here, and it was a pleasant enough night. They were in a place that was alive, and Droos had already seen scitters. This was all despite the fact that they were in the mountains. It had been years since she was in the plains and jungle itself, where life existed in such variety and quantities. That part she did miss tremendously.

At exactly midnight, three roughened villagers entered, and Commander Dewei went over and took a seat next to them. He ordered them drinks, and they had a casual conversation for about an hour. Then Droos and the others were invited over. They all sat at a table. These men were older, and they had been alive to receive the propaganda of the tribe. When they saw the princess their eyes went wide.

“She is alive!” said one.

“She returns!” said another.

“This gives us a fighting chance,” said the third.

“Princess Droos Yarite, allow me to introduce Lieutenant Sitro, Muntos, and Quipno,” said Dewei. “They are interested in taking us for a night walk in the mountains, this very evening no less. All three were just telling me about the fascinating sites, the numerous scitters, and jungle plants and trees that specialize in a rocky environment. There are roaring rivers and waterfalls. We will just have to watch our feet.”

“Please, I would be honored to go on such a Journey,” said Droos. “I would trust no others to lead me.”

Sitro was a fair skinned man, with grey eyes, and brown hair in dreads. Lieutenant Muntos had very dark skin, brown eyes, and reddish hair. Quipno had lightly dark skin, and blue eyes, with blond hair that was long and kept in a tie.

The men stood immediately, and two of them with a bow, they began to lead them out of the hamlet, and into the rocky slopes of the mountains. They carried no torch or flame, for they did not want to be seen, and walked simply under the light of moon and stars to guide them. At first, it was mainly layered farms they passed. For two hours they walked along a path. Then there was

an unusually large rock, of an odd color. At this, they walked to the right, and up a steep slope. They followed this for hours.

The trail took six hours, and they arrived just as the sun began to rise. There was a cave, high up in the mountains. Lieutenant Quipno told them to wait a moment, while he walked inside for a minute. They heard some words being spoken, likely lesser passwords, and explanations. Then a whistle was blown, and the other two Lieutenants beckoned to them to come. Into the cave they walked, passing numerous sentries, and traps, obviously disabled temporarily for their passage. Some of the men, and a few women, recognized Droos, with astonishment. Others were younger, and would not have known. Finally, after one hour of traveling through winding passages, which reminded Droos ever so slightly of The Enigma, they reached a chamber inside the mountain.

It was damp, and the limestone was chiseled, with formation, and created a glittering wonderland. Here there was torchlight, and tents, and food being prepared. Signs of civilization existed even here, and apparently in this remotest of locales, these men and women felt at ease with their presence and secret. Lieutenant Quipno went on once more, this time with Commander Dewei. They entered a tent that looked little different than the others, only it was slightly better kept.

While they were inside, Droos looked around, and noticed that there were many signs of home here. Many foods she had known growing up were being cooked, and the smells were as she recalled. This was her people, and she was back among them. This time she was here to help lead them to freedom. They would take the lead, and she would provide aid as she was able.

Finally, after about ten minutes, Commander Dewei returned to the tent entrance, and beckoned for them to come. They all went inside. There they found a somewhat short man, baring numerous scars, with bright, brown eyes, and a wise affect. He had fair skin and his hair formed black spikes. He carried two blades, both at his sides, which had seen obvious battle and use, though now they were put away. He walked first to Droos with a smile, and a bow.

“Greetings, Princess Droos,” said the Captain. “This is welcome news. I am Captain Dregizot. We have been fighting your family’s rule here for centuries, with varying successes and much loss, terror, and tragedy. When my lieutenant here entered just now and told me that you were not only alive, but were keen

Book V: Realities of Hell

to support the cause against your father, I did not believe it. Now I see you with my own eyes. The last time I laid eyes on you was when you were but a girl. Then you were not so sure of this choice, I would think. It is good to see that maturity has shown you the true errors in the ways of this government.”

“You saw me as a child?” said Droos.

“Yes, I went to the capitol a number of times on official business,” said Captain Dregizot. “Even then I served The Cause, and you were an enemy. I had always assumed that you had simply fulfilled your purpose, and legitimized your fathers reign. I don’t believe what my people say, that you have returned from the dead. Rather, you clearly escaped with your life, after the ritual, and now you are here, reformed, and ready to help us.”

“That is just what it is,” said Droos. “I am here to help, not to lead. You are the Captain, and I am at your disposal.”

Droos did a slight bow, and Captain Dregizot smiled.

“This message must be spread over the next several days to our other Captains,” he said. “Then we will travel to the Regional Capitol to make an announcement.”

“Will the other Captains believe any more than you did?” said Droos.

“Your allies, those of Dewei, have resources, that allow us to talk to and see those far away,” said the Captain. “That is part of why we are far more prepared than we have been in years. Still, the advantage now is that the people will see this as a moment to rally. They have a figurehead, even if you will not lead. That you are taking up arms against your father, and casting doubt on even the religious justification for his rule, will cause everyone to talk, and many to consider action. I believe you will find that few actually enjoy being slaves, and cooperating out of fear for their lives and those of their loved ones. If there is a chance, however slim, of success, they may take it.”

“What of The General,” said Droos. “Will he permit this course of action?”

The captain laughed.

“You know much, Princess Droos,” said Dregizot. “One step at a time. Some of our compartmentalization must be kept even from you. Does that bother you?”

“Not at all,” said Droos. “It is impressive enough that you have maintained this rebellion for all of these years, despite such threats of terrible consequences. I would imagine that you would

not reveal even many or most of your secrets on the first day you met me. I am pleased that you trust me. I hope to earn that faith. I will pledge my loyalty to The Cause and freeing our people. We will have a government that answers to the people. Perhaps they will even elect this General to lead them.”

“They may elect whoever they wish,” said the Captain.”

“You seem to have invented many words,” said Drerpo.

“Some of the words you are using do not even exist in your language. Who is the linguist among you.”

“We have our ways,” said Dregizot. “When more of our secrets are revealed to you then we will share how it is that our expanded language has such freedom. It is not by accident. I will say that part of the quest for freedom is ensuring that the people have the very words to be able to express it as easily and readily. A language with precision and expression is valuable.”

“That is all very impressive,” said Amet. “I have not been here since I was a child, and much has changed. Few would have seriously thought a successful rebellion would have been possible.”

“Yet for hundreds of years brave men and women have fought and died all the same,” said the Captain. “You must be one of the children of the Regional Governor. I knew your father. He was a great man, and he knew our desires. The God-King may get much wrong, but he was right that he was part of the rebellion. He was our last great opportunity, as his authority was second in our tribe. It was a great war to defeat him, and the purge that followed was massive. I was fortunate to survive with some of my family. Unfortunately, not all of them made it.”

For a moment, even the Captain had a sad, dark look.

“There are many reasons we all fight,” said Droos.

“My father needs to be stopped, and not just for his reign, but to establish a government that has the legitimate support of the people. It must be one that reigns with love, peace, and tolerance, not fear and death. It must respect morality, and ethics, and integrity, and fundamental rights. My family has committed endless atrocities over these thousands of years. I am happy to be a small part of correcting the future.”

“You are playing an important part,” said Dregizot. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must begin the process of contacting the other Captains. Make sure the Lieutenant has your picture taken on the way out. They will all want to see it.”

They were kept in the camp for the three days. Droos

Book V: Realities of Hell

wondered how they were able to spread information so quickly. After all, supposedly the logistical technology had only reached two of the seven captains of the rebellion, and certainly not The General, if he existed. How were they able to communicate so quickly, let alone mobilize? On the third day in the morning, Droos had a moment to discuss the matter with Dregizot.

“The assumption that just because we are The People of the Blood, that we know nothing would be incorrect,” said the Captain. “Many of us, particularly here in the North, know more about the rest of the world. There is a great civilization that lives there, in houses of metal, with technology we can only dream of. For whatever reason, after thousands of years, they have decided to send representatives to aid us. I suspect there are ulterior motives. Yet, the technology they are sharing is welcome.”

Droos looked somewhat astonished.

“I thought almost none of our people knew about the civilization to the North,” said Droos.

“I would like to keep the nature of our people, and many parts of their culture, at least the parts that are divorced from the government, intact,” said Dregizot. “That does not mean I agree that we must be ignorant of our neighbors. We may even benefit from certain technologies. The time has come, after thousands of years, for some freedom in that area as well.”

“What does that have to do with the other Captains?” asked Droos.

“I believe you will find that we have liberated some of the logistical devices brought by our neighbors from the North,” said the Captain. “To their credit, they eventually discovered this, and seemed to be less than concerned. It is not a large number. It is enough to give us a significant advantage.”

“I wonder, if you are so ready to use such devices, that my father does not know these things,” said Droos.

“Your father is trapped in his own religious beliefs and traditions, and is arrogant,” said Dregizot. “He believes that simply by sending out divisions and purging towns he can solve all of his problems.”

“He also has the Servants-Loyal,” said Droos. “Do they not inform on all matters to him?”

“They are not a small problem,” said the Captain. “There is a reason we have to meet in the smallest of Hamlets, for the most part, and more often, in remote geographic locations. Still,

we do not believe they have used these logistical devices yet. At least, they have not done so officially. Some even see talk of such technology as blasphemous, and summarily execute villagers who discuss them. I have seen this with my own eyes.”

“It seems that the myth has led to my father’s own demise in this regard,” said Droos.

“Let us hope that is the result,” said Dregizot. “Yet we are far from that point. I said your father is arrogant, not that he is weak.”

“That does raise a question,” said Droos. “What do you intend to do with my father, if we should win the war?”

The man looked at Droos intently.

“If he survives the war, that would be up to the people, and the new government, and I am sure they would want to hear from you as well,” said the Captain.

The final day and night passed, and the next day, they started down the mountain, as a small group. They had an escort of about ten. Apparently the captain and a number of lieutenants from throughout the region were to travel separately. It simply was not safe enough to move together, in case one group was discovered. They moved slowly, so scouts would check ahead, and behind. It took ten days to reach the Regional Capitol. Even so, they heard the report that the group of Lieutenant Sitro had been captured and executed. Their deaths had been mercifully quick, or so went the report. Clearly the God-King did not know what was truly afoot.

Now they were in the regional capital, and this was a city of some splendor. It had grand buildings, and temples, but a greater emphasis was paid to structures devoted to science, and researching technology, such as it was, and education, even of a more liberal type. Many of these buildings were in need of repair, as the Regional Governor who had managed here for the last years had been loyal to the God-King, and such disciplines had suffered. Under Drerpo’s father, they had been promoted and respected.

At noon, when the sun was in the center of the sky, they stood on the city square. Droos was wearing a cloak, for protection, as too many would recognize her. The matter was planned. The Captain stood in the center, and a small number, a platoon of lieutenants and guards stood ready. Already, notice was being given, sent to the regional palace, that a disturbance was happening; they did not have much time.

Book V: Realities of Hell

“Great People of the Blood, a People of Providence and Equality, and Truth,” said Captain Dregizot. “Long we have slept in the shadows of tyranny, of death, of suffering. No more. Rise from the darkness, and let us sweep this land, and clean it of the blood that pollutes it. Let us have a government that honors and respects the people, and that governs on love, and the rights of all. We all deserve this, and should rise to defend ourselves. The hour is now, for a great secret has revealed itself. Behold!”

Then Droos, the Eldest Princess of The People of the Blood, stepped forward, and removed her robe, revealing the blues she wore the day of her sacrifice.

“I am Droos Yarite, princess of this Great People,” said Droos. “Yet we are not a people of blood, but The People of the Truth. Let that be known as a fact, as knowledge out of and from the past, and on into the future. We honor only the truth. The truth is that the state of our society is rotten. We have no word for *freedom*. Yes, *freedom* is a word most important. As the Captain said better able than I ever could, you all have fundamental rights. Seize them, and let no tyrant tell you otherwise. You are better than slaves, and every one of you has a place in heaven, provided you simply do good deeds in life, and behave with morality, and ethics, and integrity. Fear not the depravities of my father. His will is not divine, and he cannot harm you. Only your inaction may cause you pain, and for that of your loved ones. Now rise up, and let us create a nation, one of the people, that will honor and respect and love you, and govern based on peace and tolerance forever. Rise, and settle for evil no more. Take hold of your rights, and fight for the lives of your loved ones and friends. Join this Captain, and the rebellion, and join me. Let us take hold of our own destiny in freedom. Rise up with me!”

As the princess finished her speech, an astounded crowd stood motionless, for a moment. Then several platoons of the Servant-Guards advanced, swords drawn. The rebels stood to defend the platform, but against such odds, it seemed an unlikely possibility. These were also just those guarding this portion of the regional capital nearby. More would soon be here, with certainty. Droos looked out, for a moment, in doubt.

Then a great shout from multiple sides heralded a signal. Several brigades of rebels had advanced on the city, to counter the initial forces of the Servant-Guards. One of them was here nearby, and they rushed into the square. Still, the forces of the God-

King knew fear, and they were not prepared as yet to lay down their arms. Their commander ordered the attack, and the battle began. Then all of the platform and the surroundings descended into battle. The cries of war and death and flame could be heard throughout the city.

For some time, the rebels advanced, and pushed the Servant-Guards back. Then the reinforcements arrived, and the sheer numbers threatened their victory. Droos was not one to stand at the back of the fight. She had donned her favorite armor, and carried her longsword and her glaive, with some words of The Language of the Universe. In battle, she led, only second to the Captain. Meanwhile, Drerpo, and Emerzo, and Amet, fought beside her, in immanent splendor, armored and capable. The Four alone were more able than several platoons. Even so, they needed more rebels to be truly victorious. That of course, was the hope and plan.

Then two sounds greeted their plight. One was a group of practiced warriors, the sons and daughters of the nobility, as well as some of the nobles themselves, who lived in the city, come to support this very real chance at change. They carried only kitchen knives and roughly fashioned clubs, as even they were not permitted weapons. Meanwhile, thousands of villagers arrived from everywhere. The word was out that the princess had risen again, or had at least returned, to fight their battle with them. Almost all The People of the Truth had arrived to claim the first destination of revolution.

The battle lasted one more hour. Then the Regional Governor himself was captured, and the Servant-Guards laid down arms. Some of them had joined the rebels, for it was not uncommon for many to serve in less than loyalty, but out of fear. Now, finally, they had hope. Still, with fewer casualties, than might otherwise be required, they had conquered the regional capital, and captured a great ally of the God-King and his government. So had passed the first large test of the rebellion.

Before them was brought the regional governor, as belligerent as ever, a true believer, and unready to concede power. What was to be done with this man? An assembly was held of the captain and his lieutenants, including in the ranks, Droos and Drerpo. They voted that the matter should be delayed until the end of the war. The man should be removed to a secure location, to prevent his ability to be recaptured. After the war, he would face

Book V: Realities of Hell

a trial and the justice and decision of the people. No matter would be decided during the war. They looked to Droos in particular, who said that was moral and ethical. So the regional governor was sent away from his capitol.

The war rested for one day and one night, and word came through their logistical devices that battles had been fought in regional capitols all over the tribe. They had won in eight out of ten of them, and achieved the more important result in the rest of rallying the people. Everywhere The People of the Truth had risen and were fighting under their new banner, and for a new regime and government. All had heard that the princess had returned, and they fought on that authority, a symbol that surely the war could be won, and that the divine powers of the God-King had been broken. Still, there was a greater depth to it, and the Captains of the Rebellion pushed the war, and the fury with the slavery brought on the people by the government. In the end, only some refused to fight, including those who were simply unable. Some of those provided help in other ways, by baking or preparing food, or tending the wounded. Others were simply instructed to stand back, and they did, for they may not have wanted to raise the wrath of their God-King, yet they did not really believe in his cause.

After the day, forty-five thousand left the regional capital. Many of them were lightly trained villagers, who would be less effective against the Slave-Soldiers and Servant-Guards, let alone the Servants-Terrible. Still, they now had significant numbers, and such was the case in all regions. Within four more days, the remaining regional capitols had been conquered by reinforcements from other regions. In all instances, the justice for the politicians who survived was deferred for the end of the war, for official due process and judgements. There were no summary decisions, although in a few instances, regional commanders or governors chose to fight to the death personally rather than surrender. In most, they were similarly removed to obscure locations under guard until the end of the war.

What was left then was to advance on the capitol. Droos had some fear that the city of her birth would be sacked, and her family killed. Yet the forces of the rebels had shown great restraint. There had been some incidents, which had likewise resulted in arrests, to be dealt with after the war. Yet they seemed to have responded to the talk of rights and morals. They followed rules even in this warfare, all the while the loyal forces of the God-

King did not.

After a few days, their numbers were over one hundred thousand, as they had combined with that of another regional capitol. They had faced several large forces, numbering in the tens of thousands, of Slave-Soldiers and Servant-Guards. At first they fought fiercely, and there were some deserters. Casualties were high, although the survivors almost always joined the rebel cause willingly and happily. Soon though, almost one third of the Slave-Soldiers and one quarter of the Servant-Guards went over to their side during the fight. A tactic was seen, where Servants-Terrible were seemingly placed among them, and any who even moved from their post were immediately slain brutally. This reduced the desertions somewhat, but lowered the morale. The Slave-Soldiers and Servant-Guards fought less well. However, once a sufficient portion was defeated, there usually were not enough Servants-Terrible to keep order. Thus, often the final tenth defected, thereabouts.

Droos discovered that the common villagers had more training in combat than she expected. It was not as if they were as experienced as the forces of the God-King, or even the relatives of the nobility. Yet, one success of the rebellion these last hundreds of years was convincing the average tribe member to be skilled with a blade or polearm and that someday it might prove useful. Some of those who wanted to make those skills particularly handy had joined the rebellion over the years, although most had simply gone on with farming, cutting limber, and mining ore. Now, the skill was valuable. These villagers suffered larger casualties, but they also could win in combat as well.

At first they were lacking for better weapons, but as they progressed, they took the masterfully-forged steel of the adversary, and distributed them to their forces. Some knew how to use these weapons, and others did not. Some preferred to stick to the kitchen knives and pitchforks they had known their whole lives, and that had now saved theirs and their friends in combat multiple times over. Still, many took the more powerful resource, and armor too, and the force of rebels grew more powerful every day.

On the day the Capital was besieged, some said there were one million in the rebel army. That was hyperbole, yet the number stood at over two hundred and fifty thousand. Probably about four out of five of them were villagers, yet as mentioned, even common farmers of the tribe were quite useful in battle.

Book V: Realities of Hell

Yet the capital was more than just a city. It was also a fortress. It also had the Servants-Terrible and Servants-Majesty. These were not common soldiers with low moral or who served out of terror. They were true believers. Now ten thousand were in the capitol, along with another one hundred thousand Servant-Guards. This battle would not be easy, and many would die to win.

The scribes of The People of the Truth recorded that the battle took seven days. During that time, both sides took great losses, and many fell deeds occurred. Several Captains of the rebellion were struck down in battle. The Commander of the Servants-Terrible himself slew Captain Dregizot. Yet Princess Droos Yarite turned her glaive on him, and speared him to the ground, ending his life. She did not relish actual combat, or True Defense, yet this was war, and those who would give everything they had to defend tyranny must be fought.

During the battle another force emerged. She was a young woman, armored, and not anyone she knew. Yet she looked familiar, and eventually Droos and her ended up fighting side by side. The princess thought she looked a lot like the statue of the princess who had lived, all those generations ago. That must be a coincidence. She fought better than any Captain, or Lieutenant, with a greatsword, and no shield. For a slight, young woman, that was quite a feat. But she was strong, and clove her enemies in two. Droos also noticed, with approval, that the woman bore a lament each time she took a life. It seemed she too did not rejoice at the death of her enemy any more than Droos. The princess smiled that she had found a kindred spirit. What other moral and ethical traits would this woman possess?

Over eighty-thousand died in the seven days of battle. One third of the Servant-Guards attempted to rebel, but tragically, a combination of the Servant-Guard Commanders and Servants-Terrible slew about ten thousand. The General would later say that if they had spent more time fighting the rebels, and less killing their own forces, the battle would have gone less well for them. Still, in the end, after much blood and suffering, the city was entered. Twenty-five thousand more perished claiming the streets, carefully, and amidst all the traps laid for them.

There at last was the God-King, on the steps of the Temple of the God of Blood, himself surrounded by five hundred Servants-Terrible and Servants-Majesty, along with the rest of Droos' family. The princess had heard that they had orders not to be

taken alive, any one of them. Droos was not about to allow that to happen. An elite group, The Four, the notable young woman with the greatsword, and a number of lieutenants, made their way to the back at the beginning of the fighting, faster than the God-King could respond. Perhaps, Droos had used a bit of The Language of the Universe to befuddle his Servants for a moment. Now the armies of rebels did battle with the final five hundred, and the elite force stood around Droos' family, and few personal guards.

The young woman quickly slew the remaining guards, while Uré, the God-King, looked, with wide eyes, upon The Truth. Here before him, was his Eldest Daughter, Droos, the princess who lived. Had she returned from the dead? He knew better than that. Still, she had rebelled, and survived, and now she was on the verge of defeating him. What terrible vengeance might he still provide?

"Droos, lovely Droos," said Uré. "I am so pleased to see you here. I am disappointed you did not see to support the future of your family by accepting your role in our providence. Let us put all of that aside, and the rest of your crimes against our people. Why don't you tell this rabble to lay down their arms, and perhaps your family may yet live. If not, you will not only be an orphan, but the last of your clan. Is that what you really want?"

"Father, it is good to see you, even under such circumstances," said Droos. "I would never have been able to speak to you like this before. I would never have been able to testify to your crimes. All of that will come in due time, in due process. Your reign of terror is at an end. You will not claim our family today, their lives, or continue to threaten their futures. You will face a fair trial, and a fair future, as a consequence, and in restitution for your many crimes and atrocities."

"Daughter, I am sorry you feel that way," said Uré with a smirk.

Then a slowness crept into the moment, and an audible sound. It was a maniacal hiss, and a cackle and laughter. It grew larger and a more threatening each moment. Somewhere, despite the odds, there was Tzefee, here to see a final revenge. All of her Whole Self was filled with the terrible cruelty, the malice, of the Queen of Pain. Who was Droos to stand against such Terror? Yet, the princess, the Queen of Angels, a prophetess, a great Omen and Foreshadowing, Knew Herself. No taunting would diminish her.

Uré then drew a blade, out of nowhere, and made for Droos' little sister, now a young woman. With some words of Sre,

Book V: Realities of Hell

the God-King stood still, and the weapon fell to the ground. Uré had been defanged for the last time. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw further movement. Her little brother, now a man, moved towards her mother, with a blade of his own! Still, there were the words of Sre from Drerpo, and he too stood still, and his weapon clattered to the ground. In short order, they had Uré and his Heir secure, and their wrists bound. The others set about guarding the high value prisoners. The status of Droos' sister and mother were yet to be determined.

Still, the Servants-Terrible and Servants-Majesty fought to the death. These were the most loyal, out of all of Uré's slaves. They were overrun, and now the Capitol was truly, and finally, conquered. The rebels had been victorious!

As a last thought, the hiss of Tzefee diminished. Yet almost, as a ringing in her ears, it persisted. When she was least sure, and lacked confidence, there it was again, to cast doubt upon her. Droos knew that someday, the Transcendent Threat of Tzefee would have to be humbled. She had been defeated finally here amidst The People of the Truth. Yet this Terrible Shadow that hinted of the next Great Wave had yet to be wholly redeemed. For now, she relished the present and immanent victory.

It took a day to vanquish the remaining pockets of opposition in the capital, and a week to remove all of the clever traps. In the meantime, there was much work to be done. All seven Captains of the Rebellion, including those who had replaced those who had fallen, went to the palace, with numerous representatives of the nobility and the common people. All would be involved in this process. There were many important items of business. There was both forming a new government and regime, and the matter of justice for the politicians responsible for the perpetuation of the previous one.

It would take time to bring the regional governors from their safe locations, so the order of creating the government would commence first. Yet how does a people without the language and words for change make such decisions? The rebels, who had done much linguistic work, thanks to a particular leader, provided many of those first words of freedom and democracy. It was then that The General of the rebellion revealed herself.

The General was none other than the young woman who had fought beside Droos so valiantly in combat. Furthermore, the princess was surprised to learn that she was a distant relative.

She was descended from an illegitimate child of the princess who had Lived and her Servant. Their line had descended as chief proponents of the rebellion for hundreds of years, lending a certain credibility and even divine patronage to the effort.

"I am pleased to meet you, Droos," said The General. "My name is Neritol. I look forward to your participation in these proceedings, given your central contribution to this effort. I am also interested in what you have to say about the fate of the prisoners."

"I hope that while we both have a role in the conversation about the new government, that it is the people who make the decision," said Droos. "I certainly do not want a throne. I do not know about your ambitions. I hope that you would not replace my father."

"I would not be a tyrant," said General Neritol. "Yet, if I were elected a Head-of-State, with limited powers, that might be tolerable. I might also consider a representative role in the new government. You mean to say that after all of this, you will not be returning to live with our people for good? We could use your talents and expertise."

"I will live with our people for a time," said Droos. "This has been one of my most important tasks that I pursued for most of my life. I must see it to a proper completion. Then, I have more burdens and labors to complete. I fear that mine is a busy future with much to do."

"Then you are very fortunate to keep so busy, and contribute so much to so many people," said Neritol. "You are also impressive for deferring to rule, or even be in the government. I do appreciate that you will stay long enough to help with the transition, and to advise."

"I would not miss that," said Droos. "If anything, I pursued knowledge, and political philosophy, and morals, and ethics, so that I would be able to advise on this matter. What would I be if I failed to do that now that the moment has arrived?"

They deliberated in a convention for several months, and eventually decided on the creation of a constitutional monarchy. Apparently thousands of years of governance by an absolute authority had convinced many that having at least someone wearing the crown, in a ceremonial role, was a meaningful and very important position. She would be the voice of the people, but would not have the authority to challenge them with force of arms

Book V: Realities of Hell

or religion. She would stand up for their rights in speeches, and in events, and spaces, but would not make the laws, or enforce them.

The government would be parliamentary, and already multiple parties were vying for position. Droos supposed that was normal for a civilization of Reflection Mortals, no matter the time or place. She counted five possible parties that would make it passed the threshold in these elections. The elections were held within three more months, to almost unanimous turnout of eligible voters. Even this, in a pre-industrial nation-state. The Infiltrator Anthropologists permitted their devices to be used for purposes of constructing the new government. To be fair, some of them had moved beyond the direct control of the Agents of the Planet of No.

A second referendum on the ballot was on who would become the new reigning monarch of the nation-state. There were a few who received the proper support, but everyone knew who would be selected. General Neritol was chosen to be the new Queen with nine out of ten votes.

To the third item, the question was whether the position of monarch should be inherited, or a lifetime appointment, with a referendum afterwards. Interestingly enough, the people voted for the latter. There would be no dynasty. Rather, they would have her skill and good advice for her one lifetime, and possible advice as to a successor. Yet, the people of future generations would choose the ceremonial head-of-state.

Quickly, the parliament chose a prime minister, who was also one of the surviving rebel captains, from a region in the southwest. Droos did wonder that so much power was in the hands of the rebels. Then again, it was a multiparty system, and in an precedent setting action, the first Prime Minister of the redubbed People of the Truth put ministers representing no less than three different parties in his administration. This was unnecessary, as his party had a small majority in parliament. Yet, the precedent would be maintained for centuries, that always at least three parties should be included in every government.

A set of Basic Laws was enshrined, a Bill of Rights, in the Constitution of The People of the Truth, that defined the fundamental rights of the nation. Droos played no small part in that process, and ultimately, she believed, the nation was truly founded on the basis of morality, ethics, integrity, and with the overriding goal of love, tolerance, and peace towards all. This nation may have been thirteen thousand years away from the rest

of the planet in some of its technology. Yet in its laws and form of government, it just leaped centuries ahead.

One of the first acts of government was to send ambassadors to the civilization to the north. This would be for purposes of fact finding, and to establish a lasting peace. There would be no goal of significantly altering their way of life, which beyond this fundamental welcome change that had occurred, other differences would be less desired. Few in the nation wanted a wholesale transition to a future society, even if it was offered. However, there was a side goal that there would be the offer of the right to free migration, which was a right every Sentient should have. Over the years, some would move to The Future, and The City. Even some from The City, would join The Tribe, and The People of the Truth.

The second order of business was to create a Ministry of Linguistics to expand the language. They required new words, and the ability for a person to be able to say something was relevant. Once the coronation occurred, and Neritol officially was crowned Queen, it was revealed that she had been the chief linguist of the rebellion, helping to craft much of the new language. Of course, she was not in the government, but she took it as one of her responsibilities, when asked, to provide further advice on the matter, as she was actually a trained expert. There were not that many linguists among The People of the Truth in that year.

Finally, after the formation of the government, the appointment of the independent courts, and many scars had been seen to from the war, though much more had to be done still, the matter of the prisoners was addressed. One by one the chief justice of the supreme court presided at a special war tribunal appointed by parliament. Droos and Drerpo could not reasonably be included since they had conflicts of interest. However, that is not to say that their opinion did not matter.

The princess watched as each former regional governor was sentenced to exile, in the nation to the north. The new allies from that nation had assured that they would provide secure facilities for these exiles, and a sentence to match their crimes. These would far surpass the comfort, safety, and security of anything offered on the Continent of Nolai. It would also assure that the old government would be unlikely to return.

Finally, the cases of Droos' father and brother were seen. They had much to say, and fiery rhetoric. Nonetheless, they were

Book V: Realities of Hell

sentenced to the same exile. There were no death sentences. In fact, it was a Basic Law in the Bill of Rights that prohibited all death sentences. The two did not even look at Droos. She shed some tears for her brother, who had been an innocent boy when she had left. Really, he was a victim, and she hoped that a future in The City, after his sentence was complete, would provide ample opportunity for redemption, just like she had received her time.

Others were tried, including many among the Servant-Priests, and others guilty of atrocities. More were exiled, and some sentenced to jails here in the capitol and other regional cities. Eventually, they arrived at Droos' mother and sister. Not all were found guilty of such crimes. Many were just there for possible roles in the events. In the end, the mother and sister were exonerated, on condition that they reside among The People of Truth outside the capitol for no less than twenty years. It was admitted that this was purely a political decision, to ease the transition. Yet, there was no guilt of blood issued upon the family, and after that minor exile, they would be free, and their descendants, to reside anywhere, and even run for office.

After creation of the government, and the coronation, and the trials, Droos felt like all she wanted was to spend time with what was left of her family. That is not to say she might not ever visit her father and brother in Galactic City. She would spend many years weighing that decision. However, it was a heartfelt moment when she was finally reunited with her mother and sister. They had removed to the regional capital where this had all began, the home of Drerpo's family, long ago. They had a home there, not surprisingly, though relatively simple. They made their own food, and served their own drinks.

The Four arrived there one day, around noon, and Lilipol and Eroo, her mother and sister, were quietly reading books. They looked up, and her mother saw Droos, and a tear rolled down the side of her cheek. For a long moment they gazed at one another, mother and daughter. Then they ran to each other, and embraced. Lilipol kissed Droos on the cheek, and on the head, in a way she had never been able to before. Then Droos was introduced to her grown little sister. Eroo was kind, and very polite. Clearly, years of being the carefree second daughter had not tarnished her. Her smile was contagious, and broad, and wonderful to behold. Droos hugged her, and for the first time in her life she felt like she was complete.

Droos had started her life in a place of tyranny with no choices, with prestige, but a slave. Now she was engaged to the man of her dreams, and she had a meaningful relationship with her mother and sister. They were thrilled to meet Drerpo, and Emerzo and Amet. News that she was to be married made her mother so happy. Every word out of her mouth made Lilipol smile. They took trips into the jungle, now free of fear, and strife, and terror, and watched scitters, and stood amidst the trees, and enjoyed life. There was a wondrous future ahead.

Her mother and sister did not regret their minor sentence, or the fate of their family. Lilipol had not chosen the life she lived, and disapproved in her heart of the practices of their family most of their lives. She had never really recovered from the loss of Droos, and only maintained her mind by keeping a distance for much of her eldest's life. She regretted that, though the mother never imagined any of this was a possibility. That her husband escaped with his life was a small regret, though she was impressed by Droos' mercy for supporting that decision. She still had many regrets for her son, though she felt that exile was fair. Lilipol wondered if she would see her son again some day

Surprisingly, Eroo was a reasonably good cook, for simple dishes, and lacking servants did not diminish having tasty home cooked meals. Droos and Drerpo also contributed as the days progressed, and it was a very pleasant time. Droos, and her family, and her loved ones, and her fiancé, knew peace, and welcomed love and tolerance. Equality and rights were the rules of the day. It was a new dawn among The People of the Truth. Droos had accomplished her first great task. For a moment, Droos supposed, she had a certain right to enjoy her family and friends. There would be a lifetime of tasks and burdens ahead. Better to cherish the day and moment, and always tell her mother, sister, and Drerpo that she loved them.

§

It is said that it was simultaneously both day and night when Droos and Showsh were married in The Library. That is an odd combination of energies and facts. With certainty, both the ever light, as well as the rarest moon and stars were in the sky, and

Book V: Realities of Hell

it was reported that all could also see darkness. It was as if time itself bore witness to the ceremony.

Whatever the case, it did take place in The Library Proper. For purposes of this event, many of the permanent shelves had been relocated, their books and records carefully catalogued. Far more important than this ceremony was that no Information or Knowledge from Drerpo would ever truly be lost. The Librarians did their work, and the Artist Librarians and Performer Librarians had extra joy and responsibility for preparing many of the events of the year. For in that time beyond time, the wedding of the age lasted a year.

The ceremony included hundreds of thousands in attendance. Many generations of the Drescher and Cecil lines were there, and some of Droos' family were also permitted a rare entry to the Celestial Domains. They had to be given a Promotion, which was part of the problem. There was a guarantee of a Demotion immediately following the ceremony. They would not recall any more than the glow and wonder of the event, and the emotions would forever be in their heart and souls. In particular, Droos' mother and sister were there, and that made her glad. There were also a small number of friends she had made in the last years, including Anora, and Darlez of course was in attendance.

Droos had a blue dress, flowing, like she was dressed in shimmering sapphires and diamonds. Atop her head was a radiant golden crown, garnished by flowers of all colors. Her eyes shone with a white energy. Beside her was Showsh, in his typical might and splendor, although for purposes of this ceremony and reception, none doubted that Droos was truly the Most Radiant, Intelligent Sentient in the Universe.

It rained flower pedals and praises to the newest official member of The Royal Family of Drerpo were sung in all manner of languages. Certainly, they included Sre, but there were many other official tongues of the Universe, and the Ministers and Gods and Goddesses of the Celestial Bureaucracy would offer their praise and support. The ceremony was a combination of traditional Feaist and the melodious Cult of Gihi. This included Priestesses from both, having traveled here from far corners of Dweehwail. Both Loahueth and Linear were heard at the Ceremony.

All of Showsh's children were his chief attendants for the ceremony. There was no obstacle or reason to have only one. Drepl grudgingly agreed, and that may have been the last favor

he ever did in regard to Droos, aside for helping with matters related to Tzefee. Of course, he justified that by considering it on the order of saving The Multiverse. Droos herself had Eroo and Anora as attendants. Darlez also had a role in the ceremony. If any would think that the Reflection Mortals would appear less impressive than the Forcang in The Library, that would only be partially correct. However, all sparkled, and ultimately paled in comparison to Droos.

In the end, the ceremony concluded with rising chants in both of the their names, Queen Droos, Sovereign Droos, all manner of titles, and the usual ones for Showsh. And they kissed passionately in front of the assembled friends, family, and hosts. Then they retreated to the many restaurants of The Library for the reception. It was a pleasant walk, Droos and Showsh, now married for the rest of their eternity, up to the restaurant, the site of their first date in The Library. Now they were accompanied by their closest friends and loved ones.

If any would think Elriver would be absent from this event, she was merely scarce. She sat with family, and she did not have a role in the ceremony. It was a great blessing that Droos and the Creator of Drerpo, Showsh's first wife, got along so well. Yet, asking her to have a role in his second marriage would be too much. Friends they remained; even best friends, or family. Yet, Elriver enjoyed, with some mixed emotions, from a few rows back. She talked the emotion off to lingering feelings from immanence. Still, Forcang ultimately feel more emotion than they often admit.

The reception was a blur of happiness, good food, singing, dancing, recited poetry, played instruments, and speeches. No one doubted that this was the best reception food they had ever enjoyed (with the exception of Drescher, a Savant, who politely consumed it regardless). The cake was made by Showsh's father, and almost put most of the guests into a short stupor from the brilliance, and sheer wonder of its flavor and sweetness. The Sovereign of Drerpo was touched that his father agreed to contribute some of His art to the wedding. He hoped that this would be but a first collaboration between his father and his new bride.

Then it was time to say goodnight to the guests, and leave on their first trip together as a married couple. Yet there was a first night to be spent, for real, and there was no other destination that Droos wanted it to be than a certain cottage in sight of the Ocean of The Library. They traveled there, sung to by thousands of

Book V: Realities of Hell

ministering angels, and the heavenly hosts, and lines of Gods and Goddesses, and Ministers. They bid their Reflection Mortal family farewell for a time, for they were Demoted, and returned with a forever glow, to the Manifestation Domains, to the Bagan Galaxy, and their wondrous lives.

Then Droos and her Showsh spent the night in the cottage together. It was the second full night in the history of The Library. The sky was filled with the endless silvery light of trillions of stars, and the moon shone ever so bright. Great songs were sung by the stars themselves, the moon, in praise of Droos and Showsh. No day and night was as special in Droos' life until that day, or after. Her wedding day and her wedding night were the finest of her life. She and Showsh made love for the first time as a married couple. Somehow it was different now, more meaningful. They were committed to each other. Whether in good times or in bad, they would spend the ages, the eons, and eternity together. That night was magical, even in a universe of science. For Showsh, it was the finest day and night of his life in two hundred trillion years.

They awoke the next morning, and kissed, and hugged each other. There was no rush. Showsh was no longer on a sabbatical to prove a point, but rather, as time with the love of his life. Droos was to learn of her new roles, and enjoy time with her new husband as well. When they walked outside after a light breakfast, but some amazing coffee, they found a fabulous vehicle.

It was old fashioned, and not luxurious, or gaudy, or large. It was four wheels, and all of the colors of the rainbow. Droos had never driven such a vehicle, and Showsh promised to teach her. This was a classic, and it would begin their wedded life together. The Queen of Angels got behind the wheel, and Showsh in the passenger seat. Then they began driving.

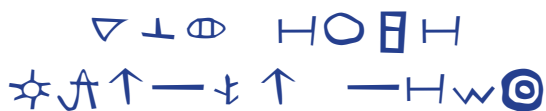
At first, all seemed normal. Then Droos noticed that Showsh was intermittently whispering The Language of the Universe. They were not just words of Sre, but of Loahueth. Slowly, the Domain around her changed, even as her natural skills behind the wheel propelled the vehicle onward. All manner of odd changes happened, and before long, they had left The Library. Droos watched as all familiar aspects of Drerpo diminished. She was in a wholly new world, different Reflections which she had never known. Away they drove, Across the Multiverse, Traversing Reflection. It was a pleasant drive, and Showsh chose the most vibrant, aesthetically pleasing and varied routes. It was a rainbow

road at times, to match the vehicle. Others, it was a land of greyscale. All was beautiful.

The princess had succeeded in choosing her own destiny, and it had saved her people. She married her greatest friend and confidant, with who she would now get to spend some eternity. Her tasks and burden were yet long and varied, and compelling. She was a Secret and Omen, a Foreshadowing of Great and Terrible Threats, Thorns, and Berries in the history of Dweehwail. Together, Droos and her Showsh, in their rainbow car drove into the sunset, and the rest of their long, varied lives.



End of Book V



Epilogue



W⊕AUAU

Epilogue

In their might and majesty, awful to behold, before the trumpets of one thousand seven hundred and sixty-four ministering angels, the Queen of Angels and the Sovereign of the Universe traversed the near endless variety and roads of Reflection. No possibility was too wild, or too remote. Along the way, these two shining lights, brightened the doorsteps of numerous inns, restaurants, and gardens, and nature trails. Dazzling beacons of light given form, they sauntered through other worlds and realms. There were domains beyond domains and options beyond options.

All the while, the rainbow car, sturdy, solid and able, took them on a smooth and tranquil ride. Droos drove much of the time, but Showsh also took his turn behind the wheel. Some worlds had purple skies, or trees that were pink. Some animals were dinosaurs, and others were small and miniscule. They sang among happy Reflection Mortals, who viewed them as passing Gods, come upon them to bless them and their people, and they offered wealth and stories and poems to share. All who saw them left full, and happy with the tale.

It is said that they traveled like this for eighty-four Absolute Days, and the adventures were a multitude. There was some fear that Tzefee, now an exile from her most recent land, would make an appearance. Apparently, she was scarce. No doubt, she was working up her next mischief. Ever again does The Threat reshape and reform and plot the destruction of all. She would return, and soon, Droos would be ready. Whatever Secret and Omen she might offer, she would embrace her role, now that this was her central task.

For now her chief responsibility was happiness beside her husband, and exploring The Multiverse Beyond Drerpo, and traversing the Drescher Family Journey. It was on the eight-fourth day that they arrived in the Bloodline Capitol of the Drescher Line. All the city was aglow, and no gem or color could compare to the Reality of the place. The first Forcang City that Droos entered was overwhelming. They quickly made their way to the castle.

If any expected a classic of buttresses and fortifications, that would be mistaken. The Castle Drescher was a Savant Wonder, and Architecturally Fascinating, Pleasing, and Most Defensible. They made their way to the throne room, where Drescher and Lorich sat side-by-side in twin chairs of a metal stronger than any adamantine or mithril, yet more fantastic to behold. There the current rulers of the Drescher Line, having

arrived here before them, sat in their Might, exuding More Authority and Awesome Peril than Droos had even seen in Showsh and Elriver and their children.

Yet they were received, and soon there was a great feast. This was a court in which Savants were welcome, and while few were as good as Drescher himself, the master chefs of Castle Drescher were themselves Forcang Savants, and the food was truly exquisite. It was true that Lorich specialized in drinks, and the brews were potent, sharp, and welcome refreshment. Still, Droos needed her senses, for she was to face a test. This was another one of sorts. She was meeting more in-laws. There were many very specific words in Loahueth for family, even in-laws. To Forcang, family was very important. She did her best to please them, and be polite, extremely kind, moral, ethical, and maintain her integrity, even if she did not think to be able to actually impress them.

“I welcome you as a Daughter,” said Lorich. “You may come here anytime. I have much I wish to discuss with you. Some are matters of ease, and art, and beauty. Others are perilous, and require Attention. I would discuss all with you, my Daughter.”

“You are most generous, Dear Mother,” said Droos. “I only hope to bring honor to our family. I will always love and cherish your son. I know that he loves me with all his heart.”

“I am happy that you bring each other such happiness,” said Lorich. “You must take care in The Journey. It will trick you and try you. Do not turn to the side. You must traverse it straight. It is possible to be accompanied by another, but you must do the work. Do this and you will be a True Daughter of Drescher.”

“I will not let you down,” said Droos, with some doubts.

After dinner, Droos and Showsh had another night together. They were in the very room in which he had lived, as a grown adult for all these tens of trillions of years, on the occasion of being at his parent’s city. They made love over several hours, but did not stay awake long into the night, as there was much work the next day. Still, these romantic memories were a glow in her Whole Self, her Whole Soul, and her deep connection with her husband made her feel she could pass any trial. Besides, she had confidence in herself. She would put her best effort into this Journey.

In the morning, they drove their rainbow ride, down a ramp under a magnificent archway, into the lowest portions of Castle Drescher. This route permitted the passage of vehicles.

Epilogue

That was worth noting. Showsh mentioned something about how not all Bloodline Capitols permitted scientific technology. They reached the bottommost point in the Forcang City, and there found, a glowing road, of endless colors.

Yet it was complex, and difficult to see. Where were the sides, and how would she know how to stay the course? Showsh kissed her, and hugged her.

“What will happen to me if I should fall off?” said Droos.

“Then you will die,” said Showsh.

Droos stayed there for just a moment, looking at him.

“Then I will endeavor to stay on The Journey,” said Droos.

She put her foot to the pedal, and onto the road she went, at a noticeable speed, given what was at stake. The Journey was a trial of body, emotion, mind, and spirit. She was tested many times, and it was Heavy Burden. Only, she remembered the kind words of her family, and the love of Showsh, and she knew who she was. She was the Queen of Angels, the future Sovereign of Vøvoav, and the once princess of The People of the Truth. She was also a woman who had committed a Very Evil Act, and perhaps, someday, when she died, there would be Chastisement, and Damnation to pay for that.

One by one, she passed her tests. A few times, she checked herself as she saw her tires begin to spin, partway off the colorful road. She went in reverse, luckily this being an all-wheel-drive, and onward she went. This was like running a marathon, and there was pacing, and even physical breathing exercises necessary to maintain her morale and courage to complete the task. Then she saw, up ahead, after an impossible trial of swirls and spins, was a glowing archway. It was the finish, so near!

Droos put her foot to the pedal again, and braced herself for the trials. Her Whole Self and Whole Soul was tested, and she was drained, and finally, as she was about to pass through the glowing archway, she saw an image of herself, dead, and over her was a dark figure, glowing with grey and purple. It was a humbling image, and foreboding. Maybe this was her future, her end, even in an eternity. Yet even one day with Showsh, attempting to humble Tzefee, that was worth it. Only one week pursuing The Journey of the Good, and living The Good Life, even that was worthy. So what if that end was soon, or after an endless eternity. She put her foot to the gas, and onward through the archway she went.

Droos felt herself grow to the height of a mountain, and the Castle Drescher that loomed outside, as they raced upward, into the fragrant air of the Forcang City, came into a focus that she never imagined. She had Traversed the Drescher Journey. Potency Surged within her, and she Knew many Secrets, another Veil removed.

“That was the first step,” said Showsh. “I will be there for all of the rest of your Journeys.”

“I want to remain myself,” said Droos, her eyes growing accustomed to the brilliance. “Even now, do not let me become some Golden Goddess or Greater Being. I want to be Droos, and no more.”

“Droos is Great,” said Showsh. “A Servant you will remain. A Queen of Servants, perhaps. You are the love of my life, my wife, who I treasure. Let us enjoy together all of the Journeys ahead that life has to offer.”

“I will welcome the role of a Servant,” said Droos. “To be humble, to be good, to be kind. I will serve Dweehwail, and try to redeem it. It will be a long Journey. All of the days of the rest of our eternity begin today.”



Epilogue

End of Epilogue



▽ ⊥ ⊕ H O ⊞ H
ω ⊕ ∫ ∫ U

End of Novel



Pronunciation and Special Characters in Transliteration of Sre

Sre Letter	Transliteration	Pronunciation
𑍮	SH	ʃ or sh
𑍭	t	t
𑍬	ng	ŋ or ng
𑍫	hw	ʌ or hw
𑍪	x	ks or z
𑍩	ai	aɪ or ai
𑍨	f	f
𑍧	ea or ee	i: or ea
𑍦	v	v
𑍥	th	θ or th
𑍤	dw	dʒw or dw
𑍣	g	g
𑍢	l	l as in sled
𑍡	i	ɪ or i
𑍠	p	p
𑍟	z	z
𑍞	J	ʒ or j
𑍝	o	ʊ or o
𑍜	ç or Ç	ɔ:r or ç as in course
𑍛	s	s
𑍚	U	ʌ or u

⊠	b	b
ⱦ	å or Å	ɑ:r or å as in are
∟	ae	ei or ae
—	r	r
⓪	ow	aʊ or ow as in how
+	k	k
∨	ch	tʃ or ch
⋈	ø or Ø or oo	u: or ø as in moose
⌘	h or Ĥ or Ó	χ or ħ
Ƴ	d	d
⌘⌘	OA	oʊ or oa as in moat
ƴ	y	j or y
∇	tz	ts or tz
℄	qu	ku: or qu
⌞	m	m
○	h	h
℄	w	w
⊖	n	n
℄	ue	jə or ue as in you
℄	e	ɛ or e
∟	a	æ or a



Recommended Literature

1. *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R Tolkien
2. *The Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien
3. *Foundation* by Isaac Asimov
4. *The Chronicles of Amber* by Roger Zelazny
5. *Hyperion Cantos* by Dan Simmons
6. *Republic* by Plato
7. *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula K. Le Guin
8. *Dune* by Frank Herber
9. *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin
10. *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri
11. *Mars Trilogy* by Kim Stanley Robinson
12. *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman
13. *A Fire Upon the Deep* by Vernor Vinge
14. *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare
15. *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay
16. *I and Thou* by Martin Buber
17. *Iliad* by Homer
18. *Odyssey* by Homer
19. *The Dark Elf Trilogy* by R. A. Salvatore
20. *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien
21. *The Quran*
22. *The Bible*
23. *The Tanakh*
24. *The Bhagavad Gita*
25. *Pirkei Avot*
26. *The Talmud*
27. *Beowulf*
28. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy

Apocalypse in Dweehwail

The Dweehwail Multiverse is a rich experience, filled with wonder and endless opportunity. Fortunately, there will soon be the chance to enjoy those fabulous domains and realms in the form of an epic role playing game and mechanic. The Apocalypse in Dweehwail Rulebook is another project currently being written by Nathan S.J. Sunshine that permits anyone to actually act the role of a Forcang in the Dweehwail Multiverse.

The Gamemaster and Storyteller will carefully design and craft an apocalyptic tale for five to eight participants to enjoy. In almost all, they will have to save The Multiverse, or if they dare, exact even worse havoc. Most of all, it is a chance to experience what it is like, in some small way, to be a Forcang. The player character may move among Reflection Worlds and Reflection Mortals, as well as Forcang Cities.

Visit Goamdwee and the Courts of Chaos, including Duzog. Traverse The Grand Journey, or the Twilight Maelstroms. Wield awesome magic and numerous other Potencies, in order to accomplish any goals or objectives personalized for that Forcang character. Forcang are the Princes and Princesses of The Multiverse. Now there is a possibility to experience this lifestyle in a notable way.

Apocalypse in Dweehwail will be complete in the next few years, and will be both a role playing mechanic and setting. It will be explained in the book that this mechanic requires legal access to at least one other established role playing manual. All of these need to be purchased to enable smooth game play and storytelling. However, Apocalypse in Dweehwail is its own mechanic, that expands greatly on the foundational rules. Also, the setting has many differences.

This is a diceless role playing game. It is about acting out the most compelling, interesting story, that is fun and imaginative. Everything, including combat, is approached with words,

Afterword

sentences, discussion, and conversation. There may even be some participants who contribute by recording the narrative of the sessions. Above all, have fun exploring the Dweehwail Multiverse as one of the great Forces of all Reality, a Forcang that may shape her life in any way she desires.

