

THE SYMPHONY OF AGES

ELIZABETH HAYDON

THE RHAPSODY TRILOGY:

RHAPSODY: CHILD OF BLOOD (1999)

PROPHECY: CHILD OF EARTH (2000)

DESTINY: CHILD OF THE SKY (2001)

REQUIEM FOR THE SUN (2002)

ELEGY FOR A LOST STAR (2003)

The Symphony of Ages is written as a history in which the eras of time in the universe are recounted in seven distinct ages. The debut trilogy, *Rhapsody*, *Prophecy*, and *Destiny*, and the subsequent sequels, are set at the end of the Fifth Age, the age of Schism, and the beginning of the Sixth Age, the age of Twilight.

A giant tree stands at each of the places, known as the birthplaces of Time, where the five primordial elements—air, fire, water, earth, and ether—first appeared in the world. The oldest of these World Trees is Sagia, which grows on the Island of Serendair, the birthplace of ether. It is through the interconnected roots of Sagia that three people, all half-breeds, running from different pursuers, escape the cataclysm that destroys the Island and find themselves on the other side of the world, sixteen centuries later.

The three companions are initially antagonistic. Rhapsody, a woman of mixed human and Lirin blood, is a Namer, a student of lore and music who has learned the science of manipulating the vibrations that constitute life. She is on the run from an old nemesis, and is grudgingly rescued from his henchmen by two men. The Brother is an irritable and hideously ugly assassin with a bloodgift that makes him able to identify and track the heartbeats of any victim. His only friend, Grunthor, is a giant Firbolg Sergeant-Major with tusks, an impressive weapons collection, and a fondness for singing bawdy marching cadences. The two men are fleeing the demon of elemental fire who has control of the Brother's true name. Rhapsody accidentally changes the Brother's name to Achmed the Snake, breaking the control the demon has over him, and making his escape possible. The three make the trek along the roots of the World Trees through the belly of the Earth, passing through the fire at the center with the help of Rhapsody's ability to manipulate names. In the process, the distrustful adversaries become grudging friends. When they emerge on the other side they find themselves transformed; time appears to have stopped for them. In addition, they discover the story of their homeland's destruction and that refugees from Serendair, alerted to the impending cataclysm by a king's vision, traveled across the world to the place they have emerged, built a new civilization and destroyed it in war in the intervening centuries. Now the people from their homeland, known as Cymrians, are hiding or quiet about their ancestry. It becomes clear to the three companions that a demon known as a F'dor accompanied the refugees away from the

Island, and is clinging to an unknown host, biding its time and sowing the seeds of destruction. *Rhapsody* chronicles the journey of the Three as they cope with the loss of their world and build a new life in this new land, and the rise of the Firbolg, the demi-human nomads whom they eventually come to make a life with, and Achmed comes to rule, in the kingdom of Ylorc, the ruins of the Cymrian civilization carved into forbidding mountains. In *Prophecy*, the discovery of a dragon's claw in the ancient library of Ylorc leads Rhapsody to travel overland with Ashe, a man who hides his face, to find the dragon Elynsynos and return the claw before she destroys the Bolg in revenge. More of the F'dor's plot is uncovered, though its identity remains a mystery. Achmed discovers a child of living earth that slumbers endlessly in the ruins of a colony of Dhracians, tended to by the Grandmother, the only survivor of the colony. He realizes that the F'dor is seeking this Sleeping Child because her rib, made of Living Stone, would form a key like the one with which he opened Sagia—but in the demon's hand would be used to unlock the Vault of the Underworld and loose the remaining fire demons, who only seek destruction and chaos. *Destiny* follows the tale to its conclusion, the unmasking of the demon, the battle that ensues, and the re-formation of the Cymrian alliance.

The sequels, *Requiem* and *Elegy*, pick up the story three years later, and show the factors that eventually led to intercontinental war. With each new book, more of the history is laid bare, more of the secrets revealed, and more of the tale told in the style of a musical rhapsody.

The novella in this anthology is set in the Third Age, and chronicles the destruction of Serendair, telling the story of those who remained behind after the exodus.

THRESHOLD

ELIZABETH HAYDON

Two Ages ago, the doomed island of Serendair survived one cataclysm, when the burning star that came to be known as the Sleeping Child fell from the sky into the sea, taking much of the coastline, but sparing the middle lands. This time, as the Child that has slept beneath the waves for centuries signals its awakening, the earth and sea prepare for it to rise, and Gwylliam, the prescient king of the Island, foresees Serendair's obliteration in a vision of a second cataclysm.

Nearly everyone has left, the Nain of the northern mountains, the Lirin of the central forests and plains, and the humans, following their king in three great fleets to rebuild their civilization on another continent. The unbelieving, the foolish, the stubborn, the resigned, and a few truly abandoned souls remain, awaiting the end.

By the command of the king, a small detail of guards remains as well, to maintain order and protect those that stayed behind, and to keep some shred of the king's authority intact, just in case there is no second cataclysm. Condemned as they are, there is no way they could foresee what can happen when one pauses on the threshold between life and death.

This is their story, otherwise lost to history.

Hot vapor covered the sea, making it appear as calm and still as a misty morning.

There is more steam above the northern islands today, Hector thought, shielding his eyes from the stinging glare of the midday sun that blazed in rippling waves off the water, blinding in its intensity. *Most definitely.*

He glanced to his right, where Anais stood, staring into the impenetrable fog. The expression in his friend's silver eyes was calm, contemplative, as always; it had rarely varied since childhood. Hector knew he had made note of the thickening as well.

He watched a moment longer as the plumes of mist ascended, then stood and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his sleeve, his gaze still affixed on the rising steam.

“Still unable to make out the increase, Seviryum?” he asked facetiously. He already knew the young soldier's answer.

“I see no difference from yesterday,” Seviryum replied rotely. “Or the day before.”

Jarmon, older than the other men by twice over, took his hand down from his eyes as well and exhaled in annoyance.

“And so he will continue to insist, until the waves fill his mouth and the sea closes over his head,” he said. “His eyes work perfectly, but he is blind as a mole nevertheless. Do not ask him any more, Hector. It sorely tries what is left of my patience.”

Seviryum spat into the sea and rose to follow Hector, who had turned and now ambled away from the abandoned dock.

“I am not under false illusions, despite what you believe, Jarmon,” he muttered. “I just see no need to accept the inevitability of doom. Perhaps the king's vision was wrong, or he misinterpreted it. Or perhaps the Sleeping Child is destined to rise, but the sea won't consume the entire island; that didn't even happen when the star fell to Earth in the first place. Certainly we will lose some coastline, but if we go to higher ground, as we have been telling all the others to do—”

“I pray thee, cease,” Cantha said.

The raspy dryness of her voice sliced through the wind, causing Seviryum to fall immediately silent. Cantha used words sparingly, as if doing so pained her. It was difficult not to obey whatever she said.

Hector stopped, turning to look carefully for the first time in as long as he could remember at his companions, four completely different souls with one thing in common: they had each willingly sacrificed whatever remaining time life would have given them to stay behind on the Island, assisting in his futile mission.

He was surprised by how much they had changed physically since the exodus of the Fleets, but was even more shocked by the fact that he had failed until now to notice. Jarmon's beard, a famous shade of burnt red all his life, had gone gray enough to blend into the fog in which he stood; Cantha's body, always thin and dark as a shadow, had withered to little more than a whisper on the wind. Her eyes stared unflinchingly back at him from the haze; the strength of her will was such that it held the space her physical presence had once taken in the air.

Seviryum was staring at the ground, the sting of Cantha's words evident in his expression. Little more than

a boy when he had rashly thrown his lot in with Hector, he had aged a score of years in the last five months, still maintaining an intermittent idealism that drove Jarmon to distraction. With each disappointment, each rebuke from an elder, the life seemed to seep a little more out of him, leaving him visibly older.

Hector inhaled slowly, then caught the look of understanding aimed at him by Anais as if it were a ball tossed to him. His closest friend, a brother in all but blood, Anais had always understood his thoughts without needing to hear them spoken aloud; perhaps it was their shared Lirin heritage that made their minds one while granting them opposite physical traits. Anais had been born with the traditional features of the Liringlas race, the silver eyes, the rosy skin, and smooth hair that reflected the sun; Hector had favored his mother's kin, dark of eye and hair, the crown of curls atop his head reaching only to Anais's brow. Now they looked remarkably similar—both had faded, their features dulled to gray colorlessness by circumstance and exhaustion and the heat of the boiling sea.

He watched for a moment more, still in the thrall of the silence that Cantha had commanded, unable to feel anything about the changes he had noticed. Then he signaled wordlessly for them to head out.

That silence held sway for the duration of the walk along the rocky shore until the group reached the spot where the horses waited, oblivious to the changes in the morning wind. Then Anais cuffed Seviryum across the back of the head.

"I discern the reasons for your reluctance now!" he joked. "You wish to get out of sandbag duty."

Seviryum mustered a slight smile. "Can you blame me?"

"Certainly not," Anais said agreeably. "I just might form an alliance with you, Seviryum; we can mutiny and call for abandoning this mind-numbing task."

Hector chuckled as he mounted his roan. "A waste of time, that would be. The destruction of the Island may not be forgone, but sandbag duty remains as inevitable as death."

"You are decorating the wind, Hector," Jarmon said sourly. "But if it occupies your mind while we wait, I suppose there is nothing to be said against it."

Anais pulled himself into the saddle. "Speak for yourself. *I'll* gainsay it. If I had known this is how you were going to put us to use, I would not have stayed. It's one thing to agree to face certain death with one's best friend. It is altogether another to have one's carefully cleaned fingernails *ruined* playing in the dirt in the never-ending pursuit of useless sandbag fortifications. It is too onerous to be borne. You owe me a night of very expensive drinking, Hector."

Hector chuckled again and spurred the roan to a canter.

They rode without speaking down the northwestern shoreline to the outskirts of the abandoned fishing village and dismounted, to begin combing through what remained of the thatched huts and broken docks. Little effort had been needed to evacuate this place; fishermen knew the sea, and had been among the first to realize what was coming.

The five walked in silence through the packed-sand and crushed-shell streets, leading their mounts, the only sound the whine of the coastal wind, the cracking of thatch or the groaning of wood, the skittering of dock rats and the occasional snorting of the horses.

At the remains of each building one of the group peeled off from the others and poked through the fragments; little was left, as fishermen were practical people and had harvested whatever was usable in

their village before packing their vessels and heading out in one of the earliest flotillas to the northern continent, the nearest haven.

On two earlier occasions they had found squatters, wild-eyed men, women, and children who had come from places inland, seeking passage off the Island after the Fleets had already gone. These lost souls had taken shelter in the shells of the huts that remained, praying for miracles or wandering in aimless dementia. Luck had it that places for them could be found on the few remaining rescue ships that came in the wake of the exodus of the Fleets. Hector himself prayed that he would never again have to tell a living soul that the time had passed when escape was possible; the wailing that resulted was too reminiscent of the sobbing he had heard upon breaking other such news.

As always, his mind wandered to Talthea and the children. If he closed his eyes he could almost see her, her belly great with child, her hand on the shoulder of his son—

“Body,” Cantha called from within the ruins of the old salting shed.

Jarmon and Anais made their way over the litter of tin lantern shells and rusted iron hinges in the sand and opened the door. Cantha stood just over the threshold, her arms crossed, staring at the corpse, that of an old man who had curled up beneath what at one time had been the skinning table, its longboard missing. Flies swarmed in the heat.

“Wasn’t here the last time we passed through—that was less than a fortnight ago, was it not, Hector?” Anais asked.

Hector only nodded, pulling forth his tinderbox as the others stepped out of the shed. He struck the flint against the steel and set the spark to the fragment of brittle twigs that remained in the roofing bundles.

“Whoever you are, I commit your body to the wind and your soul to the care of God, the One, the All,” he said blandly, a chant he had intoned many times in the last few weeks. It was a Namer’s benediction, but without a name.

Cantha, Kith by birth and thus a child of the aforementioned wind, blew gently on the sparks as she passed. They glowed brighter, then kindled, igniting a moment later into a thin flame.

When the remnants of the shed began to fill with smoke, and the flames had started to consume the roof, the group turned away and continued their task. Finding no one else in the empty village, they mounted again and rode south, not looking back at the billowing smoke and flames behind them.

The cobbled streets of Kingston, the great port city that lay south along the coast of the fishing village, introduced the element of noise back into the journey as the horses’ hooves clattered loudly over the stones, echoing off the empty alleyways leading to the town square.

The stoicism that had beset the faces of the travelers seemed to wane somewhat whenever they returned to the capital city of the westlands, resolving into a quiet communal dismay. With each turn of the cycle, the shining jewel of the western seacoast looked more shabby, more broken, a desolate haven for ghosts and vermin that had once been a glistening city built by a visionary king centuries before.

Upon reaching the dry fountain in the square, the group dismounted. Seviryum’s feet landed on the cobblestones first, followed by the muffled thuds from the others’ boots.

“Damnation,” he murmured, looking up at the place where the statue of that long-dead king riding a hippogriff had once towered over the mosaic inlaid in the fountain’s bed. The figure had been battered

savagely, the formerly outstretched wings of the king's mount shattered into marble shards that lay scattered in the dry basin. The statue's stone head had been smashed from its shoulders and now lay in the street just outside the capstones, the pupil-less eyes staring blindly at the hazy sky.

Jarmon had given a lifetime's service to the descendants of that king. He waded through the dust and gravel to the statue's base and numbly brushed the grit from the inscription:

AN EMPIRE BUILT BY SLAVES CRUMBLES IN THE DESPOT'S LIFETIME;
ACITY BUILT IN FREEDOM STANDS A THOUSAND YEARS.

"Fell short by half, Your Majesty," the elderly guard said softly, running his callused finger over the letters.

"What was the purpose in this?" demanded Seviryum of no one in particular. "What was the need? Did they not have enough to concern them that they had time for *this* ? Is there not enough destruction coming that they needed more? Bloody *animals* ."

"Peace," said Hector quietly. "It is but a statue. It doesn't matter now. The ideal remains."

Seviryum choked back a bitter laugh and seized the reins of his mount, leading the animal away from the dusty fountain.

"Must be hard on you westlanders, riding this continuous loop," Anais said after a moment, once Jarmon and Cantha had followed Seviryum away from the town square and were now combing through the remains of their assigned streets. "At least those of us who dwelt to the east beyond the Great River are spared watching the gradual destruction of our homelands."

Hector said nothing but clicked to his roan. He and Anais fell into routine, joining the others in their search through the empty city.

He walked numbly past the abandoned shops where as a child he had delighted to linger, maneuvering his horse around the mounds of broken glass and grit that had once been the window of the Confectionery; the shop had produced baked goods so exceptional that the populace believed them to be imbued with magic. He allowed himself to linger again, one last time, trying to recall the scent of the flaky pastries, the sight of the castles rendered entirely in cookies and sweetmeats, the chocolate carvings of winged horses and dragons with strawberry scales, but he could only see the hollowed shell of the building with patches of light on the floor sinking in from the holes in the roof, could smell only the odor of pitch and oil and destruction.

How long he had stood, staring futilely back into the past, he did not know, but when Anais's voice finally reached his consciousness, it was like a bell rousing him from a deep sleep.

"Nothing save for some stray dogs and a murder of crows that has taken refuge in the eaves of the old prelate's office."

"A murder of crows?"

Anais adopted an aspect of mock seriousness. "Aye, big uglies, too. One of them may have been the prelate's wife."

Hector smiled. "She certainly had quite a caw to her, but alas, none of the birds could be she. May God the One, the All, help my father—she sailed on his ship."

Anais shook his head in sympathy. "Poor MacQuieth. As if he did not have enough to contend with."

Hector nodded, abandoning the attempt to summon better memories of the Confectionery. “My father’s greatest burden in the last days before the exodus was the irony of it all. He spent his youth fighting the Seren War to spare the Island from the fires of the Underworld, to keep the demons born of that fire from destroying Serendair. And now that the F’dor are defeated, the last of their kind sealed forever in the Vault of the Underworld, the Island is going to succumb to fire after all—fire from the sky long lodged in the sea.”

“Somehow I doubt that the irony was your father’s greatest burden,” Anais said, kicking the broken storefront sign away from the cobbled street.

“Did you look in on the stable?”

“Aye.”

“Are any of the horses still alive?”

“Remarkably, all of them are, the poor beasts. Most have withered to skin and bones. Cantha is feeding them the last of the hay.”

Hector loosed a deep sigh. “I think we should deviate from our regular route, Anais. Before we leave here, let’s take them out of the city to the fields at the crossroads and turn them loose. Surely it is kinder than leaving them in their paddocks, to be fed only when we come through. They can find grass and water there.”

“Agreed,” Anais said. “The human population is gone now. What’s a delay in a route that guards no one, anyway?”

Hector looked back over his shoulder up the main street that led at its terminus to the entrance of the Gated City in the north of Kingston.

“Not all of the human population is gone,” he objected quietly. “Only those who were free to leave.”

Anais followed his gaze, then exhaled deeply.

As the sea wind blew through Kingston’s desolate streets, whipping sand into their eyes, both men thought back to earlier days, after the exodus of the Fleets but before the rescue ships from other lands had stopped coming to Serendair. The young king, Gwylliam, newly crowned and the architect of the evacuation that had saved most of his subjects from death in the cataclysm that was still to come, had sailed on the last ship of the last Fleet, and so believed that every Seren citizen who wanted to leave had done so.

He had forgotten completely about the Gated City.

It was really not surprising that the City had been missed in the inventory of Gwylliam’s conscious thought. Though it occupied geographical space in his realm, it was a world unto itself, a former penal colony of petty thieves and cutpurses that had evolved into its own entity, a dark and colorful society with layers of governance and threat that were incomprehensible to any but those who lived within its locked gates.

Despite the appearance of being contained, the Gated City clearly had as many tunnels out into the world beyond its fortifications as a beaver dam or a nest of rats. Even in the days prior to the Seren War that had ended two hundred years before, the City had been divided into the Outer Ring and the Inner Ring. The Outer Ring contained a flourishing market of exotic goods and eccentric services that citizens of the outside world could visit as long as they were checked through the gates.

They entered on the middle day of the week, known as Market Day, at the sound of the great brass bell, to shop in the bazaar, clutching the token that would allow them passage back out of the City again when the bell sounded at closing time, buying perfumes that could transport the mind to places beyond the horizons of reality, linens and silks of indescribable colors, jewels and potions and soothing balms and myriad other wares from the far corners of the earth. The mere existence of these exotic goods was a broad hint at how porous the thick walls of the Gated City really were.

The Inner Ring was even more mysterious, a dark place to which none but the permanent residents of the City had access. Within its windowless buildings, in its shadowy alleys, another sort of business was conducted that those who lived outside the Gated City could only imagine in the course of their nightmares.

When Hector and his companions first realized that the Gated City had been overlooked, they had sought to offer its residents refuge on the first of the ships that had come in the wake of the exodus. He had gone to the City himself—its massive gates no longer were guarded from the outside. He had sprung the lock and thrown the gates open wide, issuing an invitation to the startled population he found on the other side to flee, to save themselves from the destruction that was surely to come when the Sleeping Child awakened and rose, taking the Island of Serendair back beneath the waves of the sea with it, as the king had prophesied it soon would.

The Gated City was teeming with people then. They stared at him as if he were mad, then turned away, averting their eyes, and went about their business as if he were not there.

The next day, when he returned to entreat them once again to reconsider, to explain once more the cataclysm that was coming, he found the gates closed again. A polite note was pinned to the outside, declining his offer with thanks and wishing him well.

The thought of the thousands of souls on the other side of those gates had haunted Hector for weeks afterward, as he and the others carefully packed the remaining stragglers that came from the lands east of the Great River, or had somehow missed the exodus, onto the last of the rescue ships. Ofttimes he found himself walking outside the City's walls, wishing he had a way to make whatever governing force was within them change its mind and spare its people.

After a while the point became moot. The ships stopped coming as the temperature of the sea over the gravesite of the Sleeping Child grew increasingly warmer, causing bilgewater to boil in the heat and some of the ships to burst at the seams. Hector no longer could summon the strength to think about those who might still be on the other side of the wall, condemned now to remaining on the Island to the end, just as the populations east of the Great River who had chosen to stay were condemned.

Just as he and his four companions were condemned.

It was far too late to worry about it now.

Hector blinked; the afternoon sun had shifted, blinding him. He shaded his brow and looked over at Anais, who nodded toward the docks.

"Come," his Liringlas friend said, his silver eyes glinting in the light.

Without a word, Hector clicked to his horse and followed.

Bonfires burned along the wharf, the ashes mixing with the steam from the sea. Cantha, Jarmon, and

Sevirym must have found more bodies, human or otherwise, Hector knew, or something festering that warranted the spending of precious fuel in making the pyres.

The irony of the infernos no longer choked him. In the weeks since the last ship had come and departed, there had been many such bonfires along the route they traveled, a long south–north loop of the lands to the west of the Great River. They had only ventured into the eastern territories once—that wide expanse of land held the subkingdoms that had chosen to stay, either because they did not believe the king’s vision, or, even in accepting it, preferred to remain in their birthlands to the end. Because the final departure of the Third Fleet had been launched from the port of Kingston, it was to the westlands that the stragglers had come late, and so it was this part of the realm that Hector had seen fit to guard, to maintain a futile sense of order in the last days. The rioting and looting had dwindled as starvation and disease had set in, and the western coast burned with cleansing pyres that would have made marvelous signal fires, beacons of distress, had there been any ship out on the sea to answer them.

The clouds of smoke swirled and danced, buffeted by the inconstant sea winds. Hector could see the black shadows of his friends moving silently in the haze, raking the ashes over, tossing driftwood onto the pyres.

On the docks a shade that must have been Anais beckoned to him.

Hector walked through the acidic mist, his eyes stinging from the smoke, to the end of the pier where his childhood friend waited and stood beside him, staring off into the lapping sea and the impenetrable fog. It was a ritual they both had observed many times since the Second Fleet had departed, this silent vigil. In standing there, together, as they had stood on that horrific day when together they bound over their wives and children into the hands of MacQuieth for safekeeping, for a moment there was a connection, a link back in Time, to the last place where life still held meaning for them.

“I no longer dream of them,” Anais said, gazing into the steam. His voice was muffled by the whine of the wind.

“No?”

“No. You?”

Hector inhaled deeply, breathing in the salt and the heavy scent of ash, thinking of Talthea and their son, and their unborn child. “Yes. Each night.” He broke his gaze away and looked down through the mist at the waves cresting under the pier. “Of nothing else.” It was the only thing that made the day bearable, the knowledge that the night would come, bringing such dreams.

Anais nodded thoughtfully. “When awake, I can summon their faces if I try,” he said, “but at night I dream of the World Tree.”

Hector blinked and turned to face his friend. “Sagia?”

Anais nodded again. “And the forest Yliessan where I was born.”

In the heat of the afternoon sun, Hector felt suddenly cold at his friend’s mention of the great tree; it was the sacred entity of Anais’s people, the Lirin, the children of the sky. Sagia was one of the five birthplaces of Time, where the element of Ether was born, and its power was the heart’s blood of the Island.

“What do you see in these dreams, Anais?”

Anais inclined his head as if to facilitate recall of the vision. “I am standing in Yliessan at the base of the

Tree, staring up its massive trunk to the lowest limbs that stretch out over the canopy of the other trees in the forest. Its silver bark is gleaming. Around the Tree are lines of Lirin of all strains, Lirindarc, the forest dwellers; Lirined, the In-between, the nomads who live in both forest and field, making their home in neither; the Lirinpan from the cities—they are all waiting. The Liringlas, my own people, the skysingers, are at the end of the line, weaving flower garlands as they wait.

“One by one, they climb into the lowest branches, then higher, building shelters of sorts, nests, for lack of a better word. The Liringlas are adorning the trunk of Sagia with the floral garlands.” Anais closed his eyes, concentrating on the vision. “They are singing. The Lirin are taking refuge in Sagia, awaiting the end in Her arms.”

Sevirym’s voice shattered the stillness of the docks.

“Hector! Hector! Ship! A ship is coming into port!”

The men at the dock’s end turned in surprise and stared harder into the mist.

At the outer reaches of their vision they could see it after a moment, sails spilling wind as it approached the lower landing at the southern tip of the main jetty. Hector ran back down the pier, followed a moment later by Anais, where they met up with the other three.

Jarmon was shaking his head. “Fools,” he muttered, watching the vessel as it disappeared into the steam rising off the seawall. “Must be lost. Can’t be a ship’s captain in the world who doesn’t know the peril at this point.”

Cantha shook her head too. “Not lost. Deliberate in its movements.”

“Hoay!” Sevirym called, jogging toward the jetty and waving his arm in the swirls of floating black ash from the bonfires. “Hoay! Here!”

Nothing but the sea wind answered them.

They stood in the heavy mist for what seemed a half hour or more, until finally Anais spotted a dim light making its way over the waves in their direction, bobbing up and down near the water’s surface.

“They’ve launched a longboat,” he said, pointing out the approaching glow. “A lantern lights its prow, low to the water.”

“The ship’s a two- or three-masted schooner,” Jarmon reported. “Brigantine, mayhap—I can’t make it out. Big monster, she is. Must have dropped anchor just outside the seawall. Can’t say as I blame her. Wouldn’t want to navigate this harbor in the fog now that the light towers have gone dark.”

“Sevirym, light a brand and wave it,” Hector called as he walked to the end of the jetty. He strained to see through the smoke and mist, but caught only occasional sight of the tiny lantern that bobbed nearer on the wide bay.

“Madness,” Jarmon muttered under his breath as Sevirym climbed to the top of the massive wall of sandbags that they had erected along the coastline and held the firebrand aloft for light. “It has been more than two full turns of the moon since the last one—why is a ship coming now? Can they not see the rising steam? It must reach well into the sky; how can they miss that from the open sea?”

“Perhaps they have the same sort of eyes as Sevirym,” Anais suggested. “Let us wait and see.”

They watched in impatient silence for a long while, then simultaneously made their way down the long

pier through the brightness of the fog that had swallowed Hector, who waited at its end.

The light from the lantern on the longboat's prow was now in close sight, its radiance diffused by the glow of the sun in the steam that blanketed the coast. Over the sound of the waves slapping the pier they heard a ragged voice calling.

“Hoay!”

Farther out in the harbor, a score of voices picked up the hoarse cry.

“Hoay! Anyone there? Hoay!”

Before the eyes of the five companions, twinkling lights appeared, spread in an arrowpoint formation behind the first beacon. A longboat guided by a boatswain and steered by four rowers emerged from the fog, followed a moment later by five others that followed it.

In the first boat a man was standing; they could see his shadow begin to take on form and definition as the longboat neared the pier.

“Hoay! I am looking for Sir Hector Monodiere! Be any of you he?”

“I am he,” Hector said, grasping the pylon and leaning out over the end of the pier to get a better look at the man in the longboat through the hazy light. “Why have you come here?”

The man shielded his eyes. “I am Petaris Flynt, captain of the *Stormrider*, sailing under the flag of Marincaer. I bear news; toss me a line.”

Jarmon and Anais set about mooring the lead longboat, while Cantha went back to assist Sevirym in guiding the remaining ones to the pier with the firebrand. Hector offered the captain his hand and discovered upon pulling the man onto the dock how weak his grip had become, how much flesh had been lost from his arm.

The captain was a burly man, stout and barrel-chested, with a full gray beard and eyes as black as the depths of the sea. He looked up at Hector, half a head taller, then allowed his eyes to wander to the others and beyond to the empty wharf. He shook his head and sighed.

“Who could ever have imagined the great light tower of Kingston would go dark in my lifetime?” he mused. “I had thought the rising of the sun was more in doubt than the presence of that beacon. Alas and alack.” He signaled to the sailors in the longboat to be at ease, then met Hector's eye again.

“We are here to take one last load, Sir Hector—whatever stragglers remain, whoever may have missed the last ship out—this truly *is* the final chance they will have. The sea above the Northern Isles is roiling in the heat; the bilge in any ship now boils within ten leagues of Balatron. We don't know if we will make it out ourselves—we sail with the tide at sunset, heading southwest as fast as the wind will carry us until we hit the Icefields, then looping back to the north. Anyone on board at sunset can come with us. All others remain—no exceptions.”

“May God the One, the All, forgive my ingratitude, but why did you come here?” Hector asked incredulously. “The shipping lanes have been closed to this place for more than two months now. The exodus was completed three months before that; the Third Fleet left in midspring. There is no one left to save—everyone who was willing to leave is already gone.”

Flynt's brow furrowed. “I came by the order of the king of Marincaer, who was asked to send me by Stephastion, one of the barons of Manosse.”

“Manosse?” Hector glanced at Jarmon and Anais, who shrugged. Manosse was a great nation half a world away on the eastern coast of the Northern Continent, far from the lands to which the refugees who had refused to sail with the Fleets had fled.

“Aye,” said Flynt. “It is from Manosse that the news comes as well. Your father’s fleet landed there.”

“In Manosse?” Hector asked in concern. “Why? What happened? That is not to where they were bound.”

“Apparently they were beset by a great storm,” Flynt replied, speaking rapidly. “Sundered at the Prime Meridian. Many ships were lost. Part of the surviving flotilla landed at Gaematria, the Isle of the Sea Mages, though it is a forbidden place to most. Your father led the remainder of the fleet back to Manosse, probably because he knew the weakened ships would not survive the rest of the voyage east to the Wyrmlands, where they were originally headed. They plan to stay there, I’m told.”

Hector nodded. “What of the First Fleet? And the Third?”

The captain shook his head. “No word. But if they were going to the Wyrmlands, I fear there will never be word from them again. That place is not part of the Known World for a reason.” He glanced around nervously.

“Do you have word of my family?” Hector asked.

“I am told your wife and son are safe in Manosse. And your daughter as well—your child has been born, safe and healthy, I am to tell you.”

“Do you know what name she was given?”

“No, but your wife apparently said that you do.”

“And my father—he is well? And his ship?”

Flynt looked away. “He survived the trip. His ship remained intact, I am told.”

Hector and Anais exchanged a glance of relief; the news boded well for Anais’s family, who had traveled with Hector’s, though it was clear the captain was leaving something out.

“Tell me of my father, whatever it is you have not said,” Hector asked. “Is he ill?”

“Not to my knowledge.” The sea captain gestured nervously to the crew of his longboat, who took up oars and rowed toward the shore, then turned his attention back to the young man.

“Your father stands vigil in the sea, Sir Hector. Once what remained of the Second Fleet was docked, and his duty discharged, he went to the peninsula of Sithgraid, the southernmost tip of Manosse, and waded into the surf. It is said that he stands there, night into day into night again, refusing sustenance and company from any but your wife and son. When the baron asked your wife what he is doing, she merely said that he is waiting.”

Hector absorbed the words in silence, gazing off to the eastern horizon. “Thank you.”

Impatience won its battle for control of the sea captain. “All right, then, Sir Hector; I’ve delivered my news. As I have told you, I have come to take the last souls who wish to leave before the Island succumbs. Gather them.”

As if hearing the words for the first time, Hector turned and looked intently at Flynt, then nodded.

“Very well.”

“Open the gate, Seviryum.”

The young soldier looked doubtful as his gaze ran up the massive entranceway to the empty guard towers on either side. He stared at the wall that encircled the Gated City, and, noting no one walking atop it, grasped hold of the rusted handle and pulled with all his strength.

The heavy wooden gate, bound in brass, swung open silently.

“Would you look at that,” Jarmon muttered bitterly. “For four hundred years it took three men to spring those brass locks, seven to open that gate into this nest of thieves. Now it swings open like my mother’s kitchen door. Truly I have lived too long.”

Hector stepped through the entranceway past the thick walls reinforced internally with iron bars, trying to absorb the sight beyond them.

The Gated City was empty.

Or perhaps it only appeared that way. From every street corner, every boarded window and alleyway, he could sense the presence of shadows, could feel the weight of eyes on him, even though there was no one visible.

Through the silent thoroughfares they walked, stepping over the detritus of the bazaar that littered the streets, shreds of cloth and broken market carts, sparkling glass fragments and streaks of soot from long-cold roasting fires. At each street corner Hector stopped and peered into the recesses of the Outer Ring, but saw nothing; called, but received no answer.

Finally they came to the great well at the center of the Gated City, a place that a revered historian had described in his writings as the “upspout of a warren of Downworlders, people who lived entirely in the darkness beneath city streets, in lairs with more tunnels than a queendom of ants.” Hector didn’t know if he believed the lore of those mythical human rats, and didn’t care; he only knew that sound in the well would reverberate throughout the city. He leaned over the edge and shouted.

“Hullo! Come out now, all you within the sound of my voice! I command you, in the name of Gwylliam, High King of Serendair, quit this place at once! The last ship that will ever come waits in the harbor, and sails with the tide at sunset. Come! The Sleeping Child rises in the northwest—save yourselves!”

His words resounded off the stones of the alleyways, echoed down the well and through the streets. Hector waited.

There was no answer.

“Anais,” Hector said without turning, maintaining his watch on the streets and alleys before him, “go back to the gate and ring the Market Day bell.”

“Are you certain it is there still?” Anais asked doubtfully. “Most of Kingston’s bells were melted down for ship fittings when the exodus began.”

“That bell was within the Gated City, which was overlooked in the planning of the exodus. It was too large to be taken by those who have already scurried out of here through whatever holes there may be in the walls. Keep ringing it until the walls start to give way.”

Unconsciously the other three moved into a circle with their backs to Hector, watching at the compass points for signs of response. Aside from a shifting of shadows and a flutter here and there in the darkness, there were none.

They stood thus, crossbows nocked but pointed at the cobblestones, still as those stones, even as the great bell sounded loudly from atop the wall at the gate.

Waves of harsh brass sound rippled through the empty streets as Anais struck again and again. A wild flapping rose from the eaves of a boarded mudbrick building near the well; a flock of roosting pigeons started and took to the sky, squawking angrily.

For fifteen long minutes the great bell kept sounding, the clanging trailing off into silence after a few sustained moments, only to resume in its earsplitting furor again and again. Hector continued to stare into the darkened alleyways, enduring the cacophony without wincing, until finally a dark outline of a man appeared at the end of a street near the well. The man waited until Anais paused in his pounding of the bell, then shouted down the empty street.

“Have him stop immediately, or I will order him shot.”

“It would be an unwise order to give,” Hector shouted back, as the three who surrounded him leveled their crossbows, “and your last.”

A ragged chuckle came from the bony figure, and the man at the alley’s end came forward, limping slightly into the afternoon light as the bell began to crash once more.

“Hold, Anais,” Hector yelled as the thin man stepped into the square the same moment the ringing paused again. He watched impatiently as the man leaned on his walking stick and turned his head to the south to scan the distant wall. The others did not lower their weapons.

“What, pray tell, do you think you are doing?” the ragged man asked in a mixture of annoyance and inquisitiveness. “Besides disturbing the pigeons and my afternoon nap.”

“A final rescue ship has come into the harbor. I am here to make one last attempt to save what remains of the king’s people.”

The bony man broke into a wide smile graced intermittently by teeth.

“Ah,” he said smugly, running a thin hand over the gray stubble on his face. “Now the source of our misunderstanding is clear. You are merely confused.” His tone turned conciliatory, with a hint of exaggerated condescension, as if he were speaking to children. “You see, these are not the king’s people; they never were. The king forgot about this place long ago, just as his father and his grandfather before him did. I am king of this place now—well, they call me the Despot, actually—now that anyone with actual power has long ago left. These are *my* people. *I* say whether they come or go, live or die.” He leaned forward on his walking stick, his patchy smile growing brighter. “And I say they are staying. So go about your business, sir knight; run along and board your ship. We do thank you for your kind offer, but respectfully, as king of those who remain, I decline.”

“You are king of nothing,” Jarmon shouted scornfully.

The Despot laughed. “Well, I have something in common with Gwylliam, then. How repulsive. I am more king than he ever was, he who frightened the people with his visions, his predictions of cataclysm, and then left them, a king who abandoned his birthright to save his own hide. At least I stayed with my people—held my post. Unlike Gwylliam, I am not a coward.”

Jarmon's expression blackened and he raised his bow sight to his eye.

"Give the word, Hector," the old guard said angrily. "I want this one."

"There is no time for your games, your foolishness," Hector said tersely to the Despot, raising a cautionary hand to Jarmon.

"Then stop wasting what time you have left here," the Despot said, his tone flattening. "Do you not know the origins of this place? What is there here worth saving?"

Before answering, Hector sized him up. He had always been told that the city beyond the gates was full of tricks, but the scrawny man before him had no weapons he could detect, and he saw no open doors or windows that might conceal bowmen. He could not be certain that Anais's position was clear a block or so down.

"Them," he said simply, gesturing into the dark streets and alleyways. "Anyone who did not have the chance to choose life; anyone who was condemned as an afterthought. One man. One woman. One child. Any and all that want to leave, whatever their crimes, whatever their innocence. In the name of Gwylliam, the king, I am here to offer them that chance. Now, move aside! We have no time for this! We stand on the threshold of death."

The eyes of the Despot darkened as well, revealing a soulless depth.

"By all means, step over, then," he said icily. "It's rude to hover in doorways."

"After you, Your Majesty," Hector replied.

He dropped his hand.

Three bolts were unleashed simultaneously, piercing the ragged man in the eye, heart, and forehead, tearing through him as if he were parchment. The Despot fell back onto the broken cobblestones of the square with a thud, sending another bevy of pigeons skyward. The noise of his fall and their rise echoed through the empty streets, followed by a deafening silence.

"Anais, ring the bell thrice more," Hector called over his shoulder.

The metallic crashing resumed, then ceased, dying away slowly.

"Now, come!" Hector shouted into the Outer Ring. "Come with us if you want to live!"

For a long moment nothing answered him. Then, at the outer edges of his sight in the dark alleyways, Hector saw the shadows thicken a bit, then move.

Slowly, one and two at a time, figures began to move into the light of the square, like ghosts in the haze of the sun, squinting as if in pain. Thin men, emaciated women, and a few tattered children came forward, hovering close to one another, their eyes hollow and downcast. Hector loosed his breath; until this moment, he could not have been certain that there was anyone in the dark city left to save.

"Sevirym," he said to the young soldier, "lead these people to the pier and get them aboard the ship. Send Anais back when you pass through the gate; we will go quickly house to house, and into the Inner Ring."

Sevirym nodded curtly at the mention of the dark interior of the Gated City, then turned and gestured excitedly to the two dozen or so human shadows wandering slowly toward the gates.

“Come,” he shouted. “Follow me to the ship—and to a chance at living another day.”

Street after street, building after mudbrick building revealed no one living, only broken remains. There were decidedly more bodies in the Gated City than they had found elsewhere in the westlands, too many to burn or even pray over.

As they ran from lintel to lintel, from post to pillar, they called into the empty corridors and banged on the walls and stairs to rouse anyone in the upper floors or lofts, but only managed to disturb nests of rats, roosting birds, and packs of feral cats ripping out what little they could scrounge from the charnel.

Finally Anais, who had clambered from rooftop to rooftop through much of the city, climbed down and stood in the middle of the street before an interior wall that ran perpendicular to the rest of the buildings, sealing the Outer Ring from the dark streets that lay beyond it. A black wrought-iron gate shaped like a giant keyhole was broken off its hinges, the metal twisted with a savage ferocity. Anais bent over at the waist, panting from exertion and frustration.

“The Inner Ring must begin here,” he said between breaths. “You are going to want to go in, aren’t you, Hector?”

“Yes.”

Anais sighed. “Of course. A waste of valuable air to have asked in the first place. Be so good as to allow me a moment to catch my breath. I am growing too old for this nonsense.”

Hector said nothing. *What I would give if only you had the chance to grow old, Anais,* he thought.

“Sun’s descending,” Cantha said, shading her eyes with her long-fingered hand and staring into the all-but-impenetrable mist. “Two hours and ’twill be beyond the horizon.”

“Right; thirty minutes’ more search at most, then,” Hector said, nodding his head at Jarmon to pull the twisted portal open. “And let us stay together in here. This was, in its day, a largely evil enclave, the closest place to the Vault of the Underworld that existed on this Island; we don’t want to make a misstep.”

Quickly they pulled themselves through the portal, avoiding the jagged metal, and stepped for the first time in any of their lives into the streets of the Inner Ring.

It was stunning in its dullness.

The buildings in what had once been one of the darkest corners of the world were no different than they had been in the Outer Ring, or even in the more populated parts of the westlands, for that matter. The streets here were, if possible, even quieter than they had been in the outside world, even more devoid of anything valuable left behind. The buildings stood, unmolested, appearing for all the world as pedestrian as the buildings of Kingston’s residential area. The only discernible difference was the proximity of them; they crowded each other for space, squeezing next to each other on narrow streets. Ropes hung intermittently from windows, tying the streets closely together in the air above the ground as well.

Hector pulled aside a half door that hung from only one hinge and peered into the recesses of a dilapidated shop.

“My father walked these streets many times,” he mused aloud. “He said there was a darkness that hung over the place, that was present in the very air itself. It must have been extant in the nefarious population

that lived here; it appears they took it with them when they left.”

“Good,” Jarmon muttered. “Perhaps it obscured their path on the sea and they sank without a trace.”

They combed each street, each alley, calling rotely as they had in the Outer Ring, but within this smaller, closer section of the Gated City their words were swallowed in the devouring silence that reigned here.

At one street corner halfway in, Cantha stopped and turned down the thoroughfare; the others followed her past a stand of dark buildings to a place where one appeared to be missing. A gray hole of cold ash held its place amid the otherwise unscathed structures, like a missing tooth in a dull smile.

The Kith woman inclined her head into the wind and inhaled.

“The Poisoner’s,” she said. It was the only building in the Inner Ring that had been razed.

“They took their secrets with them as well,” said Anais.

“There’s no one here, Hector,” Jarmon called impatiently from farther up the street, his voice muted.

“Can we quit this place now? We have searched as well as God, the One, the All, could possibly ask; let us be out of here before we set off a trap or discover some other sign of contempt left behind for the forces of His Majesty.”

Hector glanced around at the desolate streets, the hollow buildings, silent witnesses to acts that would have defied description even if their stones could talk. *Another trove of mystery enters the annals of Time*, he thought bemusedly, then turned back to the others who watched him intently from farther up the street.

“Yes,” he said at last. “We’ve searched enough. Let’s be off.”

The second longboat was preparing to depart when Hector and the others returned to the pier in Kingston’s harbor.

Sevirym waved for the boatswain to wait and jogged back up the dock, looking behind his friends in the mist.

“Anyone else?”

“No one,” Hector said flatly. “The City is empty.”

The captain of the *Stormrider* came forward hastily out of the fog.

“We are not even two-fifths laden with this boatload,” he said somberly. “Surely this is not all?”

“I’m afraid it is.”

“Hardly worth the risk, the effort,” Petaris Flynt muttered. “A score of ragged human rats—for this we chanced boiling and splitting?”

Hector’s brow darkened in the dimming light of the setting sun.

“If you rescue but one soul, it will have been worth the effort,” he said bitterly. “Would that I had the chance to do so. Take to your ship, captain, and set sail. Hurry home to whomever you love, bearing your human cargo. Quit this place while you can.”

The captain nodded sharply. “Very well. Climb aboard, then, Sir Hector, and we’ll be off for the Icefields.”

Five pairs of eyes stared at him stonily through the mist.

“You misunderstand,” Anais said finally after a long and awkward moment. “We are not leaving.”

“I am sworn to stay here,” Hector interrupted, waving Anais into silence. “By command of my king and lord, I am to remain to keep order in the last days, and hold the line of succession.”

“Madness!” puffed Flynt. “The king is gone, Sir Hector; the exodus has passed, and passed successfully. There is nothing left to guard. Surely your king did not mean for you to remain to your death, now that your duty is fully discharged! Come aboard.”

“I thank you, but I cannot.”

“By the king’s command?”

“By the king’s command, yes.”

“Then your king was a fool,” said the sea captain contemptuously. “If there is nothing left to guard, to what end does a sovereign condemn good men to certain death standing watch over *nothing* ? What sort of man, what sort of king, would do that?”

“My king,” growled Jarmon, his eyes blazing in fury as he elbowed his way between Anais and Hector, stopping a hairsbreadth from the captain’s face. “Our king. And you would be well advised not to gainsay him again, if you do not wish to face certain death yourself.”

“Think of your family, man,” the captain said desperately, ignoring the old guard and turning to Hector once more.

Hector leaned closer. “I do, with each breath,” he said, gently pulling Jarmon back. “But I am sworn to my king, and they”—he nodded at the other four—“are sworn to me. I thank you for your concern, Captain Flynt, and for your heroic efforts on behalf of the remaining population of this land. But only one of us will be going with you.”

The captain blinked; the tension that had run in the air like steel bands a moment before vanished, replaced with shock as the four others looked askance at each other, bewilderment on their faces.

Hector turned and signaled to his companions, nodding down the pier. Together they walked halfway back to the dock, shaking their heads, exchanging glances of confusion, until Hector stopped out of earshot of the captain, and pointed through the mist to shore, where the dark mountain of sandbags loomed.

“Cantha, Jarmon, walk on,” he said softly. “You too, Anais.”

“*Me?*” Seviryum shouted, too overwrought to catch the words before they exploded from his lips. “You are sending *me* away? No, Hector. I’ll not leave.”

Hector signaled again to his puzzled friends, urging them away from the pier.

“Yes, Seviryum,” he said quietly, laying a hand on Seviryum’s arm. The young soldier shrugged it off angrily. “Yes, you will.”

“Why? Has my loyalty to you been any less than theirs? Have I dishonored you, failed you—”

“Never,” Hector interrupted him, taking his arm again. “Hear me, Seviryum; time is short and words should be used sparingly, so that their meaning is undiluted. No man could have asked for a more loyal companion and a better friend than you have been to me, to the others—to this dying land. But I need you to go with the captain now, to guard the refugees, and to make certain they are not combative.” Involuntarily he winced at the sight of the pain on his friend’s face.

“I want to remain here, Hector.”

Hector sighed. “Well, that makes one of us, Seviryum. I do not—but what I want is not at issue. Nor is what you want. We are both prisoners of what needs to be done, as decided by the one who commands us.” His tone softened. “You are fulfilling the same order of the king that the rest of us are—’keep my people safe in the last days.’ These ragged refugees—they are the king’s subjects as much as you or I. They need our protection. Get them out of here, Seviryum. Take them to safety.”

Seviryum dropped his eyes, unable to maintain a calm mien anymore.

“You are commanding me to do this, against my will and my vow?” he said, his voice choked with anguish.

“Only if you force me to,” Hector replied gently. “Rather, I am asking you to do this for me, as my friend and brother. You swore to stand by me, to help me in this task that was commanded of me. In leaving with the ship, you are helping me far more than by staying.”

For a long moment, Seviryum continued to stare at the rotting planks of the pier, listening to the splash of the waves beneath the mist. Then finally he nodded.

In turn Hector nodded to the three standing on the docks and turned to walk with Seviryum back to the end of the pier. Anais raised his hand; Seviryum lifted his halfheartedly in return. Jarmon bowed his head, then turned away. Only Cantha remained still, her eyes staring sharply through the fog, her face expressionless.

“I am abandoning them, and you,” Seviryum muttered as they walked back to where the longboats and the ship’s captain waited. “I may live, but you are sentencing me to life as a coward.”

Hector stopped suddenly, dragging Seviryum to a harsh halt by the arm.

“Damn your tongue if it utters such a thing again,” he said sharply. “And damn your mind if it believes it. What I ask of you requires more bravery than staying behind, Seviryum; I am asking you to live. Dying is easy; any fool can do it—it’s living that requires courage. Now get on that damned ship and do your duty to the king, to me, and to yourself.”

After a moment Seviryum lifted his eyes and met Hector’s. “Why me?” he asked softly. “I go, Hector, but I just want to know why you chose me, and not Anais, or Jarmon, or Cantha.”

Hector exhaled. “Because you have never really believed that you were going to die, Seviryum. Unlike the rest of us, you kept hoping that the Island could be spared, that death was not inevitable—and perhaps that is a sign from God, the One, the All, that for you it is not.”

Seviryum continued to stare at him for a long time, then finally nodded, acceptance in his eyes.

“I will find Talthea and your children, Hector, and guard them until my last breath.”

Hector embraced him. “Thank you, my friend. Tell Talthea that they were in my thoughts until the last, and what happened here. Everything, Seviryum, tell her everything; do not spare her. She is stronger than

any of us.” His grip tightened. “I will say this to you, Seviryum, and it is something I have not said, nor will I say, to any other living soul.” He leaned closer and whispered into his friend’s ear.

“None of us should have had to stay.”

Seviryum, unable to form words, nodded again.

They walked to the end of the pier, swathed in impenetrable vapor. The shade of the captain was waiting still. Hector watched as the boatswain lifted the lamp from the prow of the longboat to light Seviryum’s way aboard, then raised a hand in final salute.

In the misty glow of the longboat’s lantern, Seviryum held up his hand in return.

Hector stared, trying to keep his eyes focused until the shadow had slipped away into the sea mist, then turned to the captain again.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Is that all, then?” Petaris Flynt said regretfully. “I cannot change your mind, Sir Hector?”

“That is all,” Hector answered. “Can you take some of the horses from the livery? Those mounts served the king with their lives as well; if you have room for them, it would gladden my heart to see you spare them.”

Flynt nodded dully. “Such a waste,” he muttered. “A handful of human rats, some skeletal horses, and one soldier, while good men stay behind to their doom. Proffer my apologies for my insult to your elderly friend, Sir Hector; any king who inspires so much loyalty and devotion in such obviously true men must have been a very great king indeed.”

Hector exhaled evenly. “He was our king,” he said simply.

“I understand,” said Flynt. He glanced toward the setting sun. “Have your companions round up those animals and get them into the longboats—we can only make one last trip back to the ship before we sail.” The captain prepared to descend into the closest of the five remaining longboats.

Hector stopped him. “I have found that each life I spare saves my own a little bit,” he said, shaking the man’s hand. “Thank you for helping me in this way, Captain Flynt.”

The captain nodded. “I’m sorry I won’t have the chance to know you longer, Sir Hector,” he said. Then he stepped into the longboat, shouted orders to the crew, and disappeared into the devouring fog.

As the sun slipped below the horizon, the four remaining companions stood atop the ramparts of sandbags, watching the dark masts of the *Stormrider* become part of the twilight beyond the heavy mist, listening to the crashing of the waves and the howling of the sea wind.

“That be it, then,” said Jarmon finally when night took hold, casting the last of the light from the sky.

The others said nothing. Anais climbed down from the sandbag wall, handed Jarmon the firebrand, and jogged to the end of the pier, letting the fog swallow him. When he reached the edge he peered out into the blackness but saw nothing.

“Godspeed, Seviryum,” he shouted into the wind. “Mind the ice!”

Hector descended from the wall as well. “I suppose we should put an hour or so into reinforcing the sandbags,” he said, brushing the grit from his hands. “The burlap is long gone, but we can continue spading and packing around the base of the—” His words choked off as his eyes came to rest on the two shadows that hovered at the edge of the darkness behind them.

A woman was standing at the far end of the wharf that bordered the town, clutching the remains of a tattered shawl around her thin shoulders. More wraith than human, she said nothing, but stared out into the fog with hollow eyes.

Beside her was a child, a boy, it appeared, long of hair and slight, young enough to still warrant the holding of his hand, though he stood alone. Like his mother his eyes were large and appeared dark in the light of the brand, but unlike her he still showed signs of life behind those eyes.

The firelight flashed for a moment as Jarmon’s hand quivered.

“Aw,*no*, ” he muttered. “No.”

For a moment the only sound at the edge of the pier was the ever-present howling of the wind. A spattering of icy rain blew across the deserted wharf, stinging as it fell. Then Hector turned to the others, angrily brushing the hair from his eyes.

“Jarmon, Cantha—find me a longboat. There must be something still around here, a rowboat, a fisherman’s skiff, something—”

“Hector—” Anais said quietly.

“Give me the brand,” said Hector frantically, motioning to Jarmon. “I’ll row them out quickly. The ship will see the light—”

“Stop it, Hector,” Anais said more firmly.

The young knight’s eyes held the bright gleam of desperation in the fire shadows.

“For God’s sake, find me a bloody *boat* —”

“Cease,” said Cantha. Her voice cut through the wind. The others turned to see her face impassive, her eyes glinting either from sympathy or, more likely, from the rivulets of cold water that were now insistently strafing her eyelashes. “Get them out of the rain.”

The companions watched their leader silently, intently, oblivious to their increasingly sodden clothes and heads. Hector bent over at the waist and put his hands on his knees, as if suddenly winded. He stood thus for a long moment, then nodded, gulping for air.

“We will take shelter in the livery stable until the storm passes,” Anais said, squeezing Hector’s shoulder as he passed on his way to the woman and the child. “It’s the only building left with most of a roof.”

Hector nodded, still bent over.

“We will take them with us to the inn at the crossroads for the night,” he said when he could speak again.

The woman did not move as Anais approached, but the child’s eyes widened in fear and he dashed behind her. The Liringlas soldier stopped, then turned back to the others.

“Hector, you had best deal with this,” he said, his voice flat in the wind. “I don’t think he has seen one of my race before.”

Hector straightened and shook the rain from his shoulders and head.

“I am part Liringlas too, Anais.”

Anais gestured impatiently. “Aye, but you look more human, because you *are* . Come over here.”

Hector exhaled deeply, then walked quickly to Anais’s side. “Come with us,” he said to the woman, but she did not appear to be listening; if she was not standing erect, he would have believed that the life had already fled her body. He crouched down and put out his hand to the child.

“Come with me,” he said in the same tone he had used to coax his own son, only a year or so older than this one. “We will take you where it is dry.”

The child stared out from behind the woman, water dripping from his hair.

Hector beckoned to him with his hand. “Come along,” he said again.

The boy considered a moment more, then took the woman’s hand and led her, still clutching her now sodden shawl, to where the men stood.

With a sizzle, the brand in Jarmon’s hand extinguished in the rain.

The child slept all the way to the crossroads, leaning against Hector, sitting before him in the saddle. The woman, who rode behind Anais, slept as well, or at least seemed to; her hollow eyes remained open, glassy, and unfocused, but her breathing took on a more even rhythm after a mile or so.

Neither had spoken a word the entire time the six people had huddled in the livery. The insistent rainshower had given way quickly to a full-blown storm, tempestuous and drenching; the sheets of rain rattled what remained of the stable’s roof and poured in small waterfalls through the openings.

“Well, at least the horses got out,” Jarmon had observed sourly, shifting to avoid a new leak.

“Something to be grateful for,” Anais had said. Hector had said nothing.

After the worst of the storm had passed, leaving great clouds of mist blanketing the cold ground, the travelers had taken to the road leading east out of Kingston, through the broken city archway that had once been an architectural marvel but now lay in pieces in the roadway. In the dark the destruction was not as apparent as it was by day, and once the city was behind them there was little indication that anything at all was wrong with the world on this rainy night. The horses trotted easily over the muddy roadway, seemingly invigorated, perhaps relieved to be away from the cleansing pyres and out in the cool mist of rolling fields again.

An hour’s ride put them at the crossroads, where the legendary inn stood, abandoned and empty of most of its furnishings. The Crossroads Inn had been a place of historical impact beyond any a building should have a right to possess; a critical meeting place and refuge of blessed ground in the Seren War two centuries before and even after it, famous for its hospitality, safety, and the vast stone hearth where the fire was never extinguished. Now it was dark, hollow as the woman’s eyes. Its door, once gilded with a golden griffin and said to be the talisman by which the inn remained untouched even in the times when enemies occupied the westlands, was missing, taken over the sea with the First Fleet. Its entrance yawned open like a dark cave.

The inn’s hospitality may have been intrinsic, because it remained in the place even now, shell that it was.

It was their favorite resting place, a refuge still, even in the absence of innkeeper, barkeep, household spirits, or door.

Jarmon dismounted, lit a brand, and went inside, scouting to ascertain whether anything had come to call since the last time they had been here. While he quickly checked the empty tavern and rooms, Cantha assisted Hector and Anais from their horses with their human cargo.

“Where did they come from?” Hector asked as the boy sleepily wound his thin arms around the knight’s neck.

“From the market, I’d wager,” said Anais, helping the woman down from the saddle.

“How could we have missed them?”

His friend shrugged. “I don’t know that we did. They might have walked from east of the Great River, or a village along the river itself. We can’t save everyone, Hector, though you certainly insist upon trying. Surely you must know that by now.”

Hector passed his hand gently over the sleeping boy’s back, thinking of another child like him. “I do, Anais.”

Cantha strode off into the darkness; both men took note of her passing but did not comment. They had become accustomed to her nightly disappearances as she went to commune, as all members of her race did, with the wind.

“Clear inside,” Jarmon called from within the flickering light of the inn.

“Good. Get a fire going, Jarmon. Anais, go below to the stores and bring up victuals if there are any left.” He stepped through the dark opening and into the cold tavern.

Anais, following behind, nodded. “There should be, unless the vermin got to them. Seviryam laid in an estimable supply down there.” He led the woman inside, then released her hand and crossed to the stairway, starting down to the hidden passage where the food was kept, chuckling softly. He turned in the dark on the stairs, his silver eyes twinkling. “Remember how he’d say that there was no point in surviving a cataclysm only to starve to death?”

Hector smiled slightly in return. “Yes.”

“It was a good thing you did, sending him with the *Stormrider*, Hector,” Anais called over his shoulder as he headed down the steps.

“I’m glad you think so, Anais,” said Hector.

“Aye,” agreed Jarmon sourly as he blew on the sparks of the hearth flame. “Now we can at least die in peace.”

The boy woke when the tendrils of smoke that carried the scent of ham reached his nostrils; he was eating greedily in the flickering firelight by the time Cantha returned.

Anais ceased chewing long enough to prod her.

“Well, what does the wind have to say this night, Cantha?” he asked jokingly, pushing the plate they had saved for her nearer on the heavy table board. He waited for the withering stare that he alone in the group relished.

“Much,” Cantha replied flatly, tossing her vest onto the hearth to dry and sitting down beside it. “None of it clear.”

The eyes of the three men locked onto her as she picked up her plate and settled in to eating. They waited in pensive, almost tense silence to hear her elaborate, but the Kith woman merely finished her supper and took a deep draught of Seviryum’s prized cider.

For a long time the only sound in the cavernous inn was that of the crackling fire. Finally Hector handed the boy his mother’s untouched supper and silently urged him to convince her to eat.

“Cantha,” he said, watching the woman take a piece of hard cheese from her plate and stare at it in her hand, “what did the winds say?”

Backlit by the hearth fire, Cantha’s eyes were blacker than the darkness that surrounded them. The chestnut skin of her thin face glowed orange in the reflected light of the flames.

“Something comes,” she said simply.

“What?” demanded Jarmon. “What comes?”

Cantha shook her head. “When the winds speak, most times they speak as one,” she said, her raspy voice clear.

Then it changed, scratching against all of their ears. In it was the howling of many toneless voices, a cacophony of shrieks, rising and falling in intermittent discord.

“Now, they do not,” she said, speaking in the discordant sound of the wind. “They moan wildly, as if in terror. What they say is like a maelstrom; unclear. But whatever is coming, the winds fear it.”

The men exchanged a glance. In Cantha’s voice they could hear the wail of sea winds, the rumblings of thunder, the nightmarish cadence of destruction as gusts in a gale battered buildings to their ruin. It was almost like the sound of battle, the confusion, the shouting, the utter sense of being lost in the fury of war. The wind was foretelling something dire, but that was not unexpected.

Anais wanted her to give voice to it anyway.

“So what, then, do you believe is coming?” he asked.

“The end,” Cantha said.

Once the chill of emptiness had been driven from the great rooms of the inn by the steady hearth fire, the travelers began dropping off to sleep one by one. Jarmon first; as a lifelong member of the King’s Guard, he had learned to stay awake and watchful for days on end, and thereby had learned to take his repose the instant it was offered him. His bedroll lay behind what had once been the tavernkeeper’s bar as a courtesy to the others; Anais had once complained that Jarmon’s prodigious snoring was causing his bow to warp and his sword to rust.

The woman, who still had not responded to a single salutation, had drifted off into unconsciousness soon after Jarmon. The boy had played a merry game of mumblety-peg with Anais and had spent more than an hour on Hector’s lap, taking turns making shadow puppets on the wall in the firelight before finally curling up beside her under Hector’s cloak.

Cantha eventually took her place near the open doorway where the wind could wash over her in her slumber, standing a watch of a sort, though there was little chance that even the brigands that still remained in the doomed land would approach the inn. Its reputation as a refuge of good and a bastion of those who defended it had survived the evacuation into these latter days.

After the others had fallen asleep, the two childhood friends passed a skin of wine between them, musing in mutual silence. Finally Anais looked up at Hector, who was staring pensively into the fire, and leaned forward, his silver eyes bright but solemn.

“A girl, then,” he said softly.

Hector nodded.

“The twins must be happy with that,” Anais said, thinking of his own daughters. “They were a mite put out when your Aidan turned out to be a boy.”

“The three of them made fine playmates nonetheless,” Hector said, leaning back and crossing his feet on the hearthstones. “It gives me comfort to know that our friendship has been passed along to another generation.”

“What is her name? Flynt said you would know it.”

Hector nodded again. “We agreed if the child were to be born a girl, and Talthea did not sense after seeing her that it was a misnomer, she would be named Elsynore.”

Anais took another swig from the wineskin.

“A fine namesake,” he said, lifting the skin in a comical toast in the direction of the fire. “Elsynore of Briarwood. A fine Seren role model.”

“Yes, but that is not the only thought behind the name,” said Hector, watching the flames dance and pulse over gleaming coals in the old hearth. “The wurm who opened her lands to the king and the refugees—”

“Ah, of course, Elynsynos, yes? You named your daughter to honor her.”

“With the aid of a Liringlas Namer. We gave the child both names we had chosen, male and female, so that it could be named before birth.”

Anais chuckled. “Were you expecting that giving her a name similar to the wurm’s own would give the dragon pause about eating her?”

Hector’s eyes lost their warmth and he turned away, watching the shadows twist and writhe in the darkness behind them. He stared at the dark form of Cantha, sleeping on the open threshold, then glanced over to where the child and his mother slept. He could not see Jarmon, but the grinding snore that rose and fell in regular rhythm, almost like a marching cadence, signaled that he slept still.

“I confess that learning my father and the Second Fleet had been diverted to Manosse was heartening news for me,” he said finally. “Manosse is an ocean away from the Wyrmlands; it is a long-civilized nation with a healthy shipping trade, an army, a mercantile—all signs that it is a stable place. Binding them over to his care when we all believed they would end up in uncharted lands beyond the known world, lands that are ruled by an ancient dragon whose hospitality is only attested to by Merithyn, was possibly the hardest thing I have ever had to do. Now at least I know they will be safe.”

“As long as they stay in Manosse,” Anais said seriously. “Each refugee pledged fealty to the king on the

horn as they boarded, remember? They are charged with the duty to come should the horn ever sound, generation unto generation. If Gwylliam calls, they will have no choice but to set sail again for the Wyrmlands.” He saw his friend’s shoulders sag somewhat. “But it should reassure you that Merithyn believes the place to be a safe and bountiful paradise. When he set out with the king’s other explorers to find a place for our people to emigrate to, no one had ever broached the Wyrmlands and lived to tell about it. As he was the only one of Gwylliam’s explorers to return, and with a generous offer of asylum at that, I would hazard he knows about which he speaks.”

“Who knows?” Hector said dully. “Who knows whether any of them made it to the Wyrmlands? Flynt said there had been no word whatsoever from the First and Third Fleets. Who knows? But God, the One, the All, has granted us a sweet boon in our final days. We know at least that our own families are safe in Manosse. When they left, I never expected to hear word of them again. And now, as Jarmon is so fond of saying, I can die in peace.”

Anais rose from the hearth and stretched lazily. “Yes, but most likely not tonight,” he said. “What are the plans now, Hector? Is there any reason to go back to our guard route? If, as Cantha believes, the end is what is coming, why not spend it here? There is food, and firewood, and shelter, and, above all else, ale. Seems like a good place to spend one’s final days.”

“Yes,” Hector agreed. “I think there is wisdom in that, even though I suspect your love of fine ale might have more than a little to do with the suggestion.” He glanced over at the woman and the boy. “And it would be folly to attempt to ride our regular watch with them. The woman is a walking corpse, and cannot properly care for the child alone. We may as well make them, and ourselves, as comfortable as we can.” He shook out his own camp blanket and laid it, and himself, down before the hearth to sleep.

“And besides, we are close enough to town to do two shifts of sandbag duty daily.”

Anais groaned and rolled over toward the fire.

And so they remained, wrapped in dreams of the World Tree and of faces they would never see again, still asleep before the coals, until the stillness was broken by the harsh metal sound of Cantha unsheathing her sword.

In one fluid movement that belied her age, the ancient Kith soldier rose, drew, and crossed the threshold to the doorstep of the inn, where foredawn had turned the sky to the smoky gray that signals morning is nigh.

“Halt and declare,” she called sharply into the gloom.

The men were behind her a moment later. They peered through the doorway, drawn as she was, searching the semidarkness for the sound that had summoned her attention.

At the crossroads a horse stood, dancing exhaustedly in place. Atop it a rider, bent with strain, was struggling to remain upright in the saddle.

“Help me,” called an old man’s voice. “I am Brann, from the village of Dry Cove on the northern seacoast at Kyrilan de la Mar. I seek the soldiers of the king.”

“Jarmon, bring me a lantern,” Hector ordered.

He stepped out into the cold gray air, watching closely as the rider slid from his mount, took a wobbly step, then collapsed in the center of the roadway. As the rider dropped, the horse took several steps

away from him, which Hector took to be a sign of its poor training or the rider's lack of skill. Once he had the lantern in his hand, he signaled to Anais to wait with the boy and the woman, then beckoned to Cantha and Jarmon to follow him.

"What do you want?" he called as he approached.

"I—I seek the soldiers of—the king," the old man wheezed again.

Hector held up the lantern to better illuminate the man in the roadway. He was human, by the look of him in the shadows, and aged, with white hair that hung around his wrinkled face like dry leaves hanging from a dormant tree.

"I am Hector Monodiere, in the service of His Majesty, Gwylliam, High King of Serendair. What do you seek from me?"

"Your assistance, sir knight," the man croaked, waving away the water flask that Jarmon held out to him. "The Sleeping Child is awakening."

"I well know it. What would you have me do about it?"

The old man's eyes, bloodshot with exhaustion, held a desperate light that was visible even in the gray foredawn. "There may be a way to contain it—or at least to stem part of the flooding that is sure to come in its wake."

The three companions exchanged a glance, then Jarmon spat on the ground.

"Madness," he muttered as Hector reached behind the man's shoulder and helped him rise. "You rode all the way from the northern coast to tell us this? Why did you not flee with the rest to high ground in the east, or into the High Reaches?"

In the lantern light they could better make out the man's features. As they had seen a moment before, he was human, dark-eyed and aged, though much of that aging had clearly come from the hardship of life in the northern clime, a rough seascape of rocky beach and heavy surf where only the stoutest of heart continued to ply the rough waters near the Great River's mouth. He was dressed in the tattered oilcloth garb of a fisherman. Rot and decay clung to his clothing and breath, much as it did to the rest of the population they had encountered after the Fleets had left; it was beginning to cling to their own clothing and breath now as well. The man's malodor was particularly strong, coupled with the stale, fishy smell of a life on the sea that never completely washed clean of a fisherman's hands and clothes.

"My people are old," he said. "What you ask may seem simple, and perhaps it would be to those younger, haler of body. But we have lived at the sea's edge for a very long time, Sir Hector. We are frail. Fleeing would be an arduous undertaking, something many of us would not survive. If the Awakening is to determine our fate, we are ready to meet it."

"Then why have you come here?" Jarmon asked crossly. "There are others like you all across this doomed island—Liringlas, Bolg, Bengard, Gwadd, human—all who chose, for reasons of their own, to disregard the king's vision and stay behind. We cannot help you now. You were offered passage, all of you. You refused it. You have already sealed your own fate."

"Peace, Jarmon," said Hector quietly. He turned to the old man whose arm he was still supporting. "Come inside and warm yourself. We have food and drink that we are happy to share with you."

The old man shook his head. "No, no, Sir Hector. There is no time. You must help me—I—I believe—we have found a way—"

“Cantha, summon Anais,” Hector said. He waited until the Liringlas soldier was within earshot, then asked again, “What would you have me do?”

From the center of the pool of illumination cast by the lantern, Brann pointed into the darkness to the southeast where the horizon was beginning to lighten.

“Go to the castle Elysian,” he said, his voice stronger. “I know you guard the symbol of the king—his scepter, Sir Hector. I—have need of it.”

Jarmon’s arm shot out and grasped the man by the shirt, pulling him off the ground with little more resistance than the wind.

“Impudent *dog*,” he snarled into the old man’s face, his fury straining the limits of its bridle. “We stand on the brink of the death of this nation; we gave up all we had to stay behind with the imbeciles and the unbelievers who chose death over the life offered you by your king, and now you actually believe we would dishonor ourselves by yielding something like that to the likes of *you*?”

“Release him, Jarmon,” Hector commanded angrily. “Get hold of yourself.” The guard dropped the old man to the ground contemptuously. Hector crouched down next to the fisherman, who was now quivering in fright, and steadied the man by the shoulder. “What need? I ask you again, what is it you would have me do?”

For a moment the man’s eyes darted around at the faces staring down at him. Finally he focused on Hector’s, and seemed to be calmed by what he saw in it.

“From the highest point of our village, one has always been able to see across the strait that covers the grave of the Sleeping Child to the northern isles, on clear days, at any matter,” he said haltingly. His words faltered; Hector nodded silent encouragement. “The sea now boils; much of the coastline has receded as the star awakens, gathering heat and power to itself. What was once the tidal basin of Dry Cove is now sand, sir knight. And as the sea has receded for the moment, it has revealed something vast, something dating back to another age of Time.”

“What?” Anais asked.

The old man swallowed as his eyes went to the Liringlas soldier, then focused on Hector again.

“It appears to be an ancient mine, Sir Hector—silver, who knows, though in the First Age, the Day of the Gods, before the star fell to earth, there were mines of every sort delving into the crust of the world, where men of ancient races drew forth riches the way men now draw forth fish from the sea. This one’s vastness cannot be described in words, at least not in my words, except to say that we can see the ridges and depressions that define some of its edges, but not all of them, revealed now by the drawing of water away from the tidal areas of the sea as the Child prepares to awaken. Those ridges and depressions stretch for as far as the eye can see.”

Hector shrugged. “I still do not see what this has to do with me, or with the king’s scepter.”

The man named Brann spoke slowly, cautiously, his eyes nervously moving from soldier to soldier.

“It is said that in the days before the end of the First Age, much of what now rests beneath the sea was dry land. When the falling star Melita, now known as the Sleeping Child, struck Serendair from the sky, it took much of the Island with it, Sir Hector. What are now the northern isles, Balatron, Briala, and Querel, were mountaintops then; almost half of the tillable fields of the realm went into the sea in the flooding that ensued. For centuries Serendair was known as Halfland, so much of it was consumed by

the ocean in the wake of the impact.

“In those days, before the first cataclysm, this mine, if that’s what it is, once it was expended was probably locked by whatever king ruled the ancient race that quarried it. A mine of that size would be a hazard because of its vastness alone, but it may have been for other reasons as well—mines that are expended run with rivers of acid, and burn with fires that can only be extinguished by time; they contain treacherous precipices, deep shafts. One this size would have been an extremely dangerous place, and so it was shut, its great doors sealed and locked, seemingly forever.” The old man’s voice, hoarse from exertion, dropped low, and he leaned forward to be certain Hector could hear him. “We believe we have found those doors, Sir Hector.”

“And you believe the king’s scepter would unlock them?”

“Yes,” said Brann, his dark eyes kindling with excitement. “In the hand of the king—or he who stands in his place. It could be the key—certainly it is the last remaining vestige of the king’s authority here, the only symbol of his dominion that he did not take with him. Those doors face the Child’s gravesite, and are bound more by a king’s command than by a physical lock. Perhaps, as the king’s regent, you could exercise his authority to bid them open. If you can throw open the doors before the Awakening, perhaps—and only perhaps—the mine can act as a natural levee of sorts, a dam, a dike—it is a mammoth underground cave at the sea’s edge. Surely it is reasonable to think that some of the destruction may be averted if the swell of the sea is contained, or at least limited, by this great hole in the earth.” The man fell silent, watching the knights intently as they stepped away from him to confer.

“Ridiculous,” Jarmon muttered under his breath. “You can’t hold back the sea with a hole in the ground any more than you can with a teacup.”

“That’s not necessarily so,” said Anais, considering. “The fisherman is right in that what spared the Island the first time was the natural levees—mountains, reefs, low-lying areas—that ringed the larger Serendair. The sea took some of the coastline, but not all of it.”

“You sound like Seviryam,” Jarmon scoffed. “Please tell me, Anais, that the rigors of sandbag duty have not addled your brain that much.” He turned to Hector to see their leader lost in thought. “You as well, Hector. This is folly—utter nonsense.”

“What if it isn’t, Jarmon?” Hector interjected. “What if, in these final days, God, the One, the All, has provided us with an answer? Is it so hard to believe, to hope, that we might be spared, or partially spared, by His grace?”

“Do you now doubt the king’s vision?” Jarmon demanded, his voice agitated.

“The *king himself* doubted it,” said Hector softly. “Had he been more assured that the cataclysm he foresaw on the day of his coronation meant the complete destruction of the Island, he would never have left us—left *me*—behind to maintain his line of succession on the throne.” He looked to Cantha, whose eyes were narrow with suspicion. “Is that not correct, Cantha? I stand in the shadow of the king. I am of his line, and his regent, named so that his power over the land would hold sway. Should the Island survive the Awakening, because I remained here, in Gwylliam’s name, his line of succession will have remained unbroken. He can return and reclaim the throne without contest.”

“Aye,” Cantha said curtly.

“So if the king himself entertained the possibility that complete destruction was not inevitable, is it so far beyond reasonability that we entertain it, too?”

Anais touched Hector's elbow. "Is it also possible that you are only now more willing to hope for it because of those who missed the *Stormrider*?" he asked in the Liringlas tongue.

Hector fell silent for a moment, then shrugged. "I no longer know my own motivations," he said bluntly. "I am not even able to ascertain what my father would do in these circumstances, and that has always been my touchstone, my guide. Like the wind that Cantha described last night, my senses are lost in a maelstrom of confusion. I have very little clarity anymore, Anais. I can only tell you that this possibility rings with promise in my head, probably because, if nothing else, it is doing *something*. As comfortable as spending the last days supping and imbibing in the inn might be, the thought does not sit well with me. The glory is in the trying. I would rather go to my death doing something futile, trying, than miss the chance to have saved what I could."

The other three fell silent, contemplating. Finally Anais spoke.

"Well, even in your confusion, you are still our leader, to whom we are sworn, Hector. If you wish to make the attempt, we are with you." He glanced at Cantha and Jarmon. "Are we not?"

"We are," Jarmon said. Cantha nodded imperceptibly.

Hector considered for a moment longer, then turned to the old man in the middle of the road.

"I will do as you ask," he said finally. "But let us be clear—the scepter does not leave my hand."

The man's face crumpled in relief. "Understood. None of my people would wish it any other way. And know, sir knight, that whether or not you are successful, the people of my homeland will be eternally grateful for whatever you attempt on our behalf."

Even Cantha, suspicious by nature, could hear the undeniable truth in the man's words.

It was full-sun, the moment the sun had just crested the horizon completely, when the group of seven set out into the east, following the brightening morning. Mist enveloped the ground, making it seem as if they were riding a golden pathway into the clouds.

The boy, who still had not spoken his name, sat before Hector in the saddle, drinking in the fresh breeze and the autumn splendor that was beginning to claim the countryside. A child of sooty city streets, he was transfixed by the sight of meadow wildflowers dried by the first signs of frost, of rolling fields that undulated in great waves like a grassy sea, of still-green trees along the roadway or in the distance, their leaves turning the color of fire.

Elysian castle lay to the southeast, across the Great River that bisected the western end of the Island from north to south. It stood perched atop high cliff walls that overlooked the southern seacoast ten miles away. On clear days the ocean was visible from its tallest towers, rolling gently to the leeward shores, in marked contrast to the angry, billowing breakers that battered the beaches in the north from whence Brann had come.

As they came within a league of the river, Anais and Hector exchanged a glance of confusion. The river was really a tidal estuary this far south, and roared grandly along its shores, swollen with the waters from the north sea joined by the runoff of every major river and stream on both sides of it. Its deep, abiding song could be heard for miles; now it was silent, the wind carrying no sound at all save the nervous twittering of birds and its own howl.

"The river was low the last time we crossed it, but I don't recall it being so quiet," Anais said, drawing

the woman's arm more tightly around his waist when she tilted alarmingly to one side.

"It is all but dry now," Brann said, his voice thin with strain. "There are places along it where there are nothing but great muddy pools in the midst of a waterless, rocky bed. I rode the eastern shore on my way to you, and when I passed the stone mill at Hope's Landing, the wheel was still."

"The heat of the star is drawing the seawater back into its grave," Hector said, pointing out a circling hawk to the boy.

"The shoreline in the north has receded by more than a league, Sir Hector," said the fisherman. "Elsewise the doors would never have been revealed."

As soon as the words left his lips the ground rumbled.

The soldiers spurred their mounts on. Even before the exodus, the Sleeping Child had made its presence felt in this manner, loosing tremors through the earth as if stretching in slumber that was coming to an end. Those tremors were growing stronger.

They rode the rest of the way to the river in silence. The bridge at Pryce's Crossing was the largest in the land, and loomed before them, its timbers dark against the morning sun, now halfway up the firmament of the sky.

"Did you bring any bread for the trolls, Hector?" Anais asked jokingly as they slowed to cross. Tradition had long held that a scrap of biscuit or bread be tossed into the river for good luck to assuage the legendary beasts that lived beneath the centuries-old structure.

"No," Hector said, smiling slightly. "We should be saving every last crumb now, Anais. After all, there is no point in surviving a cataclysm only to starve to death."

"The trolls sailed with the Second Fleet anyway," said Jarmon. The fresh air of the open country seemed to have lifted his spirits.

"That would explain why the prelate's wife was on your father's ship," said Anais.

"To call the prelate's wife a troll is an insult to trolls," said Jarmon.

The horses' hooves clattered over the wooden planks that spanned the all-but-dry riverbed, drowning out the sound of their voices. As they passed out of the westlands for the last time, they looked over the edge of the Pryce's Crossing bridge; they could see the rocky bottom, normally more than a man's height in depth, tiny tributaries still running defiantly through the stony bed, as if to prove that the river was not quite dead yet.

The sun had reached the pinnacle of the firmament when the towers of Elysian castle came into sight. As many times as they had seen it, the soldiers could not help but slow to a halt for a moment to take in the distant majesty of it, white marble still gleaming against the blue of the autumn sky atop the crags from which it rose like a beacon, triumphant.

Hector had been born in that palace, as had his mother before him. He watched in silence for a moment, then urged his mount forward, cantering with a speed that delighted his small passenger.

It was not long before melancholy returned. They rode through the endless apple orchards that had once surrounded the castle's lands, now sparse and bare. The trees of the lowlands, west from Kingston across the Wide Meadows to Anais's birthplace, Yliessan, the Enchanted Forest in the east, had been harvested quickly and brutally to provide wood for the exodus. Even the apple trees, whose flesh was

useless in the actual making of ships, had been stripped and used for chests, barrels, even firewood to stoke the forges that smelted steel for fittings, arrowheads, and thousands of other uses. Those few trees that remained bore a stunted crop, but it was worthy enough to merit a pause to be collected.

Harder to bear was the ride through Earthwood, the stone forest that had once led up to the base of the cliffs on which the palace stood. The ground from which the ancient trees had sprung was said to have been Living Stone, the pure element of earth left over from the Before-Time, the era prior to the first age of history, when the world was new. The seeds of the forest's trees had been scattered over the living earth, as the legend said, and had grown into mammoth redwoods, heveralts, and oaks, alive with magic. Those trees, their bark rich in shades of green, purple, vermilion, and gold, were as Living Stone themselves, and had never split or fallen in high wind, had never burned in fire, had never rotted with disease, but stood, stalwart and unchanging, their ancient saps coursing through their bark and leaves in an endless, mystical symphony of ages. Anais and Hector had spent their childhood in the stone forest, and so it was painful on a soul-deep level to see it razed to nothing more than broken stumps, its choice wood reaped to make hulls and masts and planks of ships that would not rot, nor burn, nor split in the high winds of a sea voyage.

Those ships bore our families to safety, Hector reminded himself as they passed the desolate forest ruin. *To safety.*

On the other side of Earthwood the ramparts of the castle walls could be seen, atop the three hundred steps that led up to them. Hector reined his horse to a halt, then looked to the others, observing the silent dismay on the face of the exhausted old fisherman.

"You needn't despair, Brann," he said reassuringly. "It's too much of a climb for most, now that the wagon-ramps are gone. Stay here, Jarmon, Anais. Cantha and I will return forthwith."

The two soldiers, one old, one young, inhaled deeply but said nothing.

For all the years he had spent in the palace, the design and construction of the place had been a constant source of fascination to Hector. As he and his father's oldest friend hurriedly climbed the stone steps hewn from the rock, passing through the empty gardens and loggias that had long beautified the terraces leading to Elysian, they both unconsciously glanced back at the ramparts hidden beneath them. In its time, more than ten thousand soldiers were routinely garrisoned within the palisaded battlements that scored, in ascending rings, the crags on which the palace stood. That they had been hidden so decoratively was tribute to Vandemere, the king who had designed and built the place as a shining monument to a new era of peace, knowing all the while that war loomed, ever watchful, in the distance.

The king riding the hippogriff whose broken statue was now rubble in the dry fountain bed of Kingston's square.

Hector's grandfather.

"Did you know him, Cantha?" Hector asked as they hurried over the granite walkways past beds of dried flora and dying topiary. "Vandemere?"

"Aye." The Kith woman kept her eyes focused directly on the great doors that marked the side entrance of the palace, now unguarded. One stood slightly open, a testament to the completeness of the evacuation. In its time, never fewer than a score of soldiers held watch over those doors.

Through the towering hallways they ran, keeping their eyes fixed on the corridors ahead of them, rather than see the emptiness of the once beautiful stronghold. Their footsteps echoed through the cavernous rooms, bare and dull in the dark.

Hector knew this place blind; it was only the urgency he had heard in the fisherman's voice and the stirrings of a long-denied hope that prevented him from taking the time to stop and gaze one last time at the rooms, alcoves, and nooks he had loved from childhood. Most of the tapestries still lined the walls; much of the art remained in place, unmolested by the looters and thieves who had picked the rest of the countryside clean. There was something sacred about Elysian that kept it sacrosanct; a power that protected it, even with no king on the throne.

Entering the corridor that led to the Great Hall, Hector realized what it was.

In a way, there was a king on the throne still. Gwylliam had named Hector the king's shadow, born of the same bloodline, and therefore, in a way, the king had not left, not completely.

"This was a remarkable place to spend time as a child," Hector said, passing the doors to the nursery where his mother and her siblings had played while their parents held court. "There were so many alcoves to explore, so many places to hide. The palace guards were more than once called out to find me. I had made a nest beneath the drape of a pedestal in the Hall of History, and had fallen asleep in there. It was great fun—until I had a child of my own and Aidan started doing it." He drew deeper breath. "I still don't know where that boy and his mother could have been secreted that allowed us to miss them."

"In the City's necropolis," Cantha said, her eyes fixed on the enormous mahogany doors of the Great Hall before them. "In one of the crypts."

"Why do you think so?"

"They had the smell of death about them." The Kith woman grasped the massive brass handle. "They still do, but it be different now."

The dark, cavernous room revealed the throne from which the unmarried last king had held court, a wide marble chair with blue and gold giltwork channels running up the arms to the back. Hector walked the long carpet to the foot of the dais, mounted the steps quickly, and sat down unabashedly in the king's seat. He took a moment to look up at Vandemere's motto, inscribed for the ages on the wall directly before his eyes, where each subsequent king was bound to see it at every moment while enthroned:

HE WHOM ALL MEN SERVE BEARS THE GREATEST DUTY TO SERVE ALL MEN.

Then he stretched his hand out over the right arm of the throne.

"Traan der, singa ever monokran fri," he commanded softly, speaking in the tongue of the Ancient Seren, the mystical race of Firstborn beings born of the element of Ether, the first people of the Island. Come forth, in the name of the king.

The marble arm of the chair cracked open along a hidden fault, and split away. From beneath the dais a mechanical arm rose to an even height with the chair, the royal scepter of Serendair in its metallic grasp.

The symbol of state was simple in its design, a curved piece of dark wood the length of a man's thigh, gilt and inscribed with intricate runes. Beneath the golden overlay the thin striations of purple and green, gold and vermilion could still be vaguely made out, the colors of the stone trees in Earthwood, from which it had probably been harvested. Atop its splayed pinnacle a diamond the size of a child's fist was set; it gleamed dully in the darkness of the hall.

Hector stared at the scepter for a moment, encased within the mechanism of the king's design. Then he seized it, plucking it from the metal arm, pulling it free.

Cantha's dark eyes were watching with a gleam he had not seen before. He looked at her questioningly, inviting her to speak, and was surprised when she did. Cantha guarded her thoughts jealously.

"Had the crown passed to the first of Vandemere's children, rather than the last, this might have been a sight seen long ago; thee, Hector, on the throne as king."

Hector rose from the throne and started back out of the palace.

"I suppose that means I am foreordained to meet my end in this way, then," he said as they retraced their steps. "For if I had been king, I would not have left. You, however, Cantha, you and Jarmon, Anais, and Seviryam, would have been sent off with the others, to guard them in the new world, and live on. For that reason, and only that one, I am sorry that the line of succession did not fall to me."

The Kith woman said nothing.

They hurried from the palace in silence. At the brink of the battlements, Hector touched her arm.

"Tell me one thing, Cantha, now that the time for niceties is past, and there is nothing left to be gained in politeness," he said. "When you announced that the king of the Kith had decided you would stay behind as a representative of your race, I believe it was because you had volunteered to do so. You are my father's dearest friend. It was for him that you stayed with me, wasn't it?"

The Kith woman's eyes narrowed in displeasure. "MacQuieth would never have asked such a thing of me. Of anyone."

Hector smiled. "I know. But he didn't have to ask."

Cantha exhaled, frowning at him. Finally she assented.

"Nay," she said. "He did not have to ask. Aye, 'twas for him that I stayed, to stand with his son when he could not." She looked over the grassy fields, falling into shadows of gold as the sun began to set. "'Twas as good a choice of end as any."

"Thank you," Hector said. "For staying, and for telling me."

The Kith woman merely nodded.

"I have one more boon to ask of you," Hector said as they descended the stone steps. "We will part company now. To take the woman and child north with us would only slow us down, and end any chance they have to survive. Elysian is the highest point on the southern half of the Island. If any ground is to be spared by the sea, it would be here. Stay with them, Cantha, in these last days; keep them safe, especially the boy. We will leave you supplies, and you can scavenge the orchards for fruit. If we succeed in containing the sea, and you run short of stores, you can go back to the inn." Cantha nodded, and Hector took her elbow, drawing her to a halt for a moment. "If the wave comes, though, get to the highest ground you can. I'd advise you stay near the vizier's tower." He nodded behind them to the tallest of the palace's spires, where Graal, the king's adviser and seer, had once dwelt. Cantha nodded again.

Jarmon had prepared the horses to leave as soon as Hector returned. As the men mounted, Hector heard a screech from below him.

"No," the child was screaming, struggling in Cantha's firm grasp. "No!" He turned to Hector, his eyes pleading. "No! Stay w'chyou! Stay w'chyou!"

The words echoed in Hector's mind; they were the same as the ones uttered by Aidan on the docks the day he bound his family over to his father for sailing.

Stay w'chyou! Da! Stay w'chyou!

His throat tightened, remembering Talthea, so strong and brave, dissolving into tears at the pain in their son's voice. He reached down and gently caressed the head of the writhing child, then nodded to Cantha. His last sight of the boy was seeing him struggling violently in her arms as she restrained him. He continued to kick and fight with a willfulness that finally collapsed into a visibly broken spirit once the horses were out of sight.

Just as Aidan had.

They rode north along the river now, following the mule road where barges had long traveled, laden with goods from the northern isles and distant ports that were traded at every crossing and village until the flat-bottomed boats finally reached Southport, the enormous city at the river's delta.

The rocks at the mule road's edge trembled as they passed; tremors in the north had intensified in strength and frequency, and viewing the sky above was now almost impossible through the mist. Patches of blue became fewer and farther between.

The men rode in silence. Each day that passed brought the mist down even more heavily, making first joking, then speaking, too weighty to bother with.

Finally they arrived in Hope's Landing, the largest mill town on the Great River, where the east-west thoroughfare had crossed. In its time Hope's Landing had been the heart of the river, a bustling city where the westlands met the east, with wagons lining up as far as the eye could see to unload grain for the mills, foodstuffs bound for markets in the south, and then were reloaded again with every kind of good imaginable from the barges. Now the city stood empty, the wheels of the great mills lodged in the mud or jammed by rocks where the water had once flowed freely.

Pratt's Mill had been the largest of all, spanning the river at its deepest and swiftest place. Bridges at one time had connected the east and west banks, with the mill between, an esplanade over which travelers could pass, observing the river's currents beneath them. The western span was gone, but the eastern bridge was still there, they noted, then rode past as the heat of the sun beat down from overhead, the only sign that it was now midday.

Just past the silent mill, where the roadway led off to the east, Hector signaled to the party to stop and let the horses graze. He scooped up a handful of smooth river stones, then beckoned to Anais, and together they walked to the banks of the Great River, dry now except for a thin stream that pooled and trickled in the wide riverbed.

"Remember when this river seemed a mile wide?" he mused, watching the water wend its way around the rocks and broken barrels that now lined its bed.

"Aye," Anais agreed. "'Twas death to fall in up here. That millstone ground day and night; if you took a tumble north of it, you'd be bread the next day."

"And now we could cross easily, with feet barely wet. It's as if the river never divided the Island at all." Hector examined the stones in his hand. "My father once said something to me that is finally taking hold in my mind." He fell silent for a moment, trying to remember the words correctly. "He was a Kinsman, one

of a brotherhood of soldiers whose patron was the wind, and thus had learned to pass through doors in the wind that would take him great distances in a short time. When I asked him by what magic this could happen, he said that it was not magic, but merely understanding that distance was an illusion.

“There are ties between us, Anais, all of us, friend and foe, that transcend what is normally seen as the space in the world. That distance, that space, is merely the threshold between one realm and another, one soul and another; a doorway, a bridge if you will. The stronger the connection between the two places, the smaller the threshold; the more easily crossed, anyway. The physical distance between the two becomes secondary. It was in making use of this that MacQuieth was able to win his greatest battle, his destruction of the fire demon, the F’dor Tsoltan. His hatred of that demon, and that primordial race, was a tie that could not be outrun. There was not enough space in the world to keep them apart.” He sighed deeply. “I believe it is also the reason that my family is only as far away as my next breath, that I can see them in my dreams, see them as they are now, not as a memory. Why you dream of the World Tree, and the place where you were born.”

Anais nodded, and they stood in companionable silence for a while, watching the trickling stream.

“How does the weather appear to be taking shape for the next few days?” Hector asked finally, tossing a stone into what was left of the water.

“Aside from the likelihood of catastrophic destruction, it looks to be a fine week,” Anais answered jokingly. “Why do you ask?”

Hector lobbed another pebble into the stream. “I just wanted to know how you would fare on your journey, if you would be dry or sodden with rain.”

Anais’s face lost its smile. “Journey?”

Hector exhaled and nodded. “I’m sending you home now, Anais. There is no need for you to go on with us from here. Either we will prevail in this undertaking or we will fail, but your being with us will not make that difference. The dreams you are having of Yliessan is Sagia calling to you to come home. If the World Tree is beckoning to you, it would be wrong to keep you from her.”

His friend’s silver eyes reflected sadness and understanding in the same gleam.

“I have come to accept many things I could not have fathomed would be possible a year ago, Hector, many tragic and horrific things, but until this moment, it had never occurred to me that I might not meet my end at your side.”

Hector tossed the rest of the stones into the riverbed and wiped the grit from his hand on his shirt.

“We have lived in each other’s company all our lives, Anais, and lived well,” he said, his voice steady. “There is no need to die in each other’s company, as long as we die well.”

Anais turned away.

“Perhaps if Seviryum was right, or you prevail, we will not die at all,” he said.

“Perhaps,” Hector said. “But go home anyway.”

Beneath their feet the ground rumbled, stronger than before, as if in confirmation.

On the way back to camp, Hector stopped his friend one last time.

“Know that wherever we are when the end comes, you will be with me, Anais,” he said simply.

The Liringlas knight smiled. “Beyond the end, Hector. Not even death can separate you from me.” He clapped his friend’s shoulder. “You still owe me a night of very expensive drinking.”

Once Anais had gone, the days and nights ran together.

In the distance, the sky had begun to glow yellow through the mist above the northern isles. The rumblings had increased in sound and frequency, making the men nervous and edgy without respite. Sleep seemed a luxury that they could ill afford, and yet exhaustion threatened to drive them off course, bleary-eyed in the dense fog.

When at last the sea could be heard in the distance and splashing fire could be seen far away above the horizon, they determined they were near enough to Dry Cove and made camp for what they decided was the last time. Hector stirred the remains of their stores in a pot above their fire while the old fisherman and Jarmon tended to the horses before sitting down to a last meal at rest.

“Brann,” Hector said, trying to break the awkward silence with conversation, “have you lived in Dry Cove all your life?”

The old man shook his head. “No. I was born there, but I had not been back until recently.”

“Oh?” Jarmon asked, setting down his tankard. “That’s odd for a fishing village, isn’t it? It seems that most families in such places remain there for generations.”

Brann nodded. “True. But long ago, I had the chance to leave, and I took it. I traveled the wide world, doing a variety of things, but my birthplace has never been far from my mind. When it became apparent that the Child was awakening, I wanted nothing more than to return home, to help in any way that I could.”

“You do know the chances that we can do anything at all, let alone save your village, are very small?” Jarmon said seriously. “This is a fool’s errand.”

“No, it’s not,” Hector said quickly, seeing the light in the fisherman’s eyes dim slightly. “It is a slim chance. But it is a chance, nonetheless. Trying is never foolish.”

“That is all I ask, so that my people might live.” Brann mumbled, drawing his rough burlap blanket over his shoulders and settling down to sleep.

When the old man’s breathing signaled he had fallen into the deepest part of slumber, Jarmon took a well-used wallet of smoking blend from his pack and tamped nearly the last of it into his pipe.

Beneath them the earth trembled. It seemed to Hector that the quakes were lasting longer, and it was undeniable that they were coming more frequently. Anais had observed, just before he rode east, that even Seviryum would have been hard pressed to ignore it.

Hector looked up into the dark sky, missing the stars. “You and me, Jarmon; we are the last ones left,” he mused, watching the clouds of thickening haze race along in the dark sky on the twisting wind.

“And Brann,” the guard said, blowing out a great ring of smoke that blended with the mist around them.

“And Brann. Perhaps you should be kinder to him—he is obviously terrified of you.”

The old guard smiled. "Good." He leaned forward over the fire coals. "I trust no one any more, Hector, especially those too stupid or selfish to have taken the chance they were given and now want to be saved in the last hour. Better that they fear me. They have reason to."

Hector turned the scepter of the king in his hands. "You needn't be on guard against him, Brann. The king's scepter is formed of an ancient element of power; it rings true in the hand of the one who holds it. I would be able to discern if the old fisherman was lying, and thus far he has told us nothing but the truth."

Jarmon shrugged. "What does it matter anyway?" he said nonchalantly. "You and he are the only ones who remain with something to lose." Hector signaled for him to explain, but the old guard just shrugged again.

"You say you believe that the glory is in the trying," Jarmon said, puffing contentedly on his pipe. "But in truth, you fear failure. You have all along—as if there was anything you could do to ward it off. This situation was doomed to failure from the beginning, Hector, but only you struggled with that. The rest of us are followers, not leaders. We know that even in inevitable failure, there is glory. In the end, to a soldier it matters not what the outcome of the battle is. What matters is how he fought, whether he stood his ground nobly, or whether, in the face of death, he faltered. A soldier does not decide who to fight, or when, or where. Deciding to remain behind with you was the only real choice I have ever made. It's a choice I do not regret.

"You have struggled in silence with the king's decision to leave you behind, and with our decisions to remain with you. You could cease that and live out your days in some semblance of peace if you were not born to lead. Unlike you, I know my opinion of His Majesty's decision doesn't matter. How I live between now and the end—that is what matters."

Hector stared out into the darkness. "I stand in the shadow of the king. I am of his line; I am his regent, named so that his power over the land would hold sway. His responsibilities are mine now. If I let go of them, then I have failed."

"Don't deceive yourself, lad," Jarmon said seriously, automatically stowing the wallet where it had come from. "The king's power that mattered left when he left—the Sleeping Child began its rise as his ship crested the horizon and sailed out of sight of Serendair. While I don't deny that his claim to the throne is in place because you are here, in the end it will mean nothing. The power that once reigned this land undisputed is broken. The protection it proffered is all but gone. There are holes in it, Hector, gaping holes that were once solid in the king's time, and that of all the rulers before him; an iron-strong dominion that is now rusted and pitted. You cannot plug those holes, no matter how much you struggle to. It's already been decided. You try to protect the Island in its last days by virtue of your vow, but your authority does not mean anything."

He took the pipe from his mouth and looked directly at the younger man. "But that doesn't mean your sacrifice was not worthy. You may never achieve greatness in itself, but when one has been groomed for greatness, to surrender the chance to prove it, now there's a sacrifice. On the word of your king to yield, give way in a battle you felt you could win, that's the most terrible sacrifice. It dwarfs all others." Jarmon settled down into a pile of leaves by the fire. "Except perhaps for having to serve sandbag duty."

On that last night Hector dreamed, as he always did, of Talthea and the children. The rocky ground beneath his ear burned with the rising heat from the north, making his night visions dark and misty where once they had been clear.

In his dreams he was holding his daughter, playing with his son, basking in quiet contentment with his wife

when he felt a shadow beckon to him. When he looked up, the shade that was summoning him took form. It was the specter of a long-dead king, a forebear he had never known. The headless statue, broken in pieces in Kingston Square, whole once more. His grandfather.

Vandemere.

Wordlessly the king beckoned to him again. Hector looked down to find his arms empty, his wife and son gone.

He followed the shade of the king through a green glade of primeval beauty, back through Time itself. In this dream he trod the path of history, unspooling it in reverse as he walked deep into the silent forest through a veil of sweet mist.

All around him the world turned, undoing what had gone before as it did. The present, the third age in which history was now marked, unwound before his eyes. He could see the fleets returning to the docks from which they had been launched in anticipation of the second cataclysm, watched the disassembly of the new empire into the broken one that was the result of the Seren War, and the war itself. He saw bloody fields strewn with broken bodies turn green again, saw the ages slipping by, unhurried, remaking history as Time passed in reverse.

Hector looked ahead; the shade of the king was farther away now, disappearing into the mist.

He started to run, and as he did, the unspooling history sped back faster and faster. From the Seren War back to the racial wars that preceded it, the coming of the races of man to Serendair in the Second Age, Time hurried crazily backward. He called to the king, or tried, but no sound came out in this drowsy place, the misty vale of cool, rich green.

Racing now, compelled to find out the purpose of this visitation or command, he barely noticed when the Second Age slipped back to the First, the Day of the Gods, when the Elder races walked the earth. From the corner of his eye Hector saw the first cataclysm reverse itself, saw the waters that had covered much of the island recede, the star rise back into the sky, saw the Vault of the Underworld where the F'dor had once been imprisoned sealed shut again, containing once more the formless spirits that, upon its rupturing, had escaped and taken human hosts, like Tsoltan, the one his father had vanquished.

With each undone event, the world through which he ran grew greener, newer, more peaceful, more alive. It was in watching the turning back of Time that Hector began to realize how much of the magic had been gone from the world he had known, how much it had been present at one time, long before, when the world was new.

As the First Age melted away into the Before-Time, the prehistory, he saw the birth of the primordial races that sprang from the five elements themselves—the dragons, great wyrms born of living earth; the Kith, Cantha's race, children of the wind; the Mythlin, water-beings who were the forebears of humans, building the beautiful undersea city of Tartechor; the Seren, the first of the races born, descended of the stars; and the F'dor, formless demons sprung from ancient fire, destructive and chaotic, sealed by the four other races into the Vault to spare the earth from obliteration at their hands.

He saw the primeval world, glorious and unspoiled, and quiet. And even that slipped from his view as he watched; the land disappeared into the sea as the wind died away, leaving the surface of the world burning with fire, until it was nothing more than a piece of a glowing star that had broken off and streaked across the heavens on its own. That glowing ball sped backward, joining the burning body from which it had come.

Leaving nothing around him but starry darkness and the shade of the long-dead king.

Finally the shadow of Vandemere turned around and stared at him sadly.

What, Grandfather? Hector asked, no sound coming from his lips, but echoing nonetheless in the dark void around them. *What is it you are trying to show me?*

Eternity, the king said. His voice did not sound, but Hector heard the word anyway.

What of eternity? Hector asked, struggling to breathe in the heavy mist of the dark void.

The king's shadow began to fade.

There is no time in eternity. Vandemere's voice echoed in the emptiness. *In staying behind, you fought to give them more time. Instead, you should be fighting to keep from losing eternity.*

Hector woke with a start.

The ground beneath his head was splitting apart, a great fissure ripping the Earth asunder.

In a heartbeat he was on his feet, grasping the startled fisherman next to him and dragging the old man back from the brink of the chasm as Jarmon made a dive to untie the horses.

A roar like thunder shivered the scorched trees around them, and the fisherman shouted something that Hector could not hear. They backed away, pulling the frightened beasts with all their strength, running blindly north into the fire-colored mist, until the ground beneath their feet stopped shaking, settling into a seething rumble that did not cease.

"You all right, Brann?" Hector asked, trying to settle the roan and failing; the animal whinnied in fear and danced in place, her ears back and eyes wild.

The old man's eyes were as glassy as the horse's, but he nodded anyway.

"The Awakening—it's coming," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the rumbling ground.

"There is no more time for sleep, Sir Hector. We are not that far away; if we hurry, we will be in Dry Cove before morning. Let us make haste, I beg you! My people await rescue."

"Your people are fools if they haven't quit the village by now, old man," Jarmon muttered. "The heat is searing from here. If they be closer, they have already cooked in the belching fire."

Hector took the trembling fisherman by the shoulders and helped him mount.

"We go," he said. "We will stop no more until we are there, or we are in the Afterlife."

Through the lowlands that had once been the towns and villages near the Great River's mouth they rode, the air thick with black smoke that obscured their vision of anything but the riverbed.

The horses, ridden ceaselessly and deprived of frequent stops for fresh water, began to show signs of faltering. When Brann's mount finally collapsed into a quivering mass on the mule road, Jarmon pulled the fisherman, gray of face from exhaustion and fear, behind him in the saddle and spurred his own mount onward.

"Sorry, Rosie, old girl," he muttered, patting the animal's neck. His hand was covered with flecks of

sweat and horse sputum. "It will soon end, and then you can rest."

Finally the sound of the sea crashing in the distance broke through the screaming wind.

"Here! We are here!" Brann whispered, tugging roughly on Jarmon's sleeve. "The sea has drawn back a goodly distance, but you can hear it still."

Hector reined the roan to a halt. Off to the north sparks of molten flame, like iridescent fireflies, shot haphazardly into the wind above the sea, swirling in menacing patterns against the blackening sky. He strained to see through the smoke, and thought he made out the silhouettes of shacks and docks, charred timbers blending into the darkness.

They dismounted, abandoning the horses at the shoreline, and waded into the wet sand, every now and then passing what was probably once a body, now buried beneath a thick coating of ash.

Hector glanced at Brann, but the fisherman's gaze did not waver; rather, the old man shielded his eyes, trying to peer through the gray and black fog to where he had seen what he thought were the doors to the mammoth mine.

"This way," the fisherman said, his voice stronger now. "It was just north of that failed land bridge, past the tip of the peninsula, where once the water met on three sides."

As if to punctuate his words, the sandy ground shook violently.

"Lead onward," Hector shouted, following the fisherman into the sand bed.

Blindly they made their way across the tidal wasteland, where the sea had once swelled to the land, now nothing but a desert of ocean sand. The sea's retreat had laid bare the bones of ships, broken reefs, shells of every imaginable kind, broken and jagged in the wet grit where the water once broke against the shore.

A plume of fire shot into the black sky in the near distance, then fell heavily back into the sea.

Over the broken land bridge for a mile, then another, and another, the three men limped hurriedly across the wet sand, burning now through their boots. Finally, when they reached a place where the smoke blackened the air almost completely, Brann stopped near a small, intact fishing boat wedged in the seabed, dropped to his knees, and pointed beneath the low-hanging smoke down into the distance.

"There," he whispered.

Hector crouched down and followed the old man's arthritic finger with eyes that burned from the heat and ash.

At first he could see nothing save for the endless sand and black smoke. But after a moment, his eyes adjusted, and his breath caught in his raw throat.

They were standing on what appeared to be a great ridge in the seabed, a towering wall that led down into a crevasse a thousand or more feet deep, at the bottom of which the remnants of seawater pooled. Hector followed the perimeter with his eyes, and could not see its beginning, nor its end. The depression seemed to stretch to the horizon; the cliff wall beneath them made the seabed seem as if they were standing in a vast meadow atop a mountain. Whatever the actual dimensions of the ancient mine, it was clear that a man could not see all of it at once even in clear air; it stretched out beneath the sand, hidden for millennia by the sea, into the place to which the water had retreated. He finally now understood Brann's insistence that enough of the sea could be diverted into such a mammoth space that at least a

part of the Island might be spared.

“Where are the doors?” he shouted over the thundering roar that came forth from within the sea to the north.

“At the bottom,” Brann shouted in return, struggling to remain upright in the burning wind.

“Can we scale the cliff face, Hector?” Jarmon asked, looking for a foothold and finding none. “If we fall from this height there will be no stopping; ’twill be a quick end at least.”

“There looks to be a path of a sort, or at least a place where the cliff wall slants,” Hector said, ducking again so that he could see more clearly.

Brann was eyeing the sky nervously. “We must hurry!” he urged as liquid fire shot aloft again, spewing ash and making the ground lurch beneath their feet. He scurried over the rim and began sliding down the wall that Hector had indicated, followed a moment later by the two soldiers.

Down into the crevasse, running and slipping they ran, falling, sliding on knees or even on their backs, only to rise, driven by necessity and the imminence of the Awakening. The seabed was thick here, like rock beneath the sand, but absent of the debris that they had seen in the higher ground at the shoreline.

Finally, when they had fallen far enough down to have descended a small mountain, they found themselves at the base of a sheer cliff wall, their feet wet in the dregs of the sea that had covered this place a short time before, staring up at a solid wall of rock.

The wind howled and shrieked above them, but stayed at the level of the sea, venturing down into the canyon only long enough to whip sand into their eyes. “Where are the doors?” Hector asked again, his voice quieter in the near silence.

Brann pointed to a towering slab to the north. “There,” he said, in a trembling tone.

Crawling now, the three men made their way over the scattered rock of the seafloor, scaling outcroppings, climbing over dips and hollows, until at last they stood where the fisherman had indicated.

Above them towered what appeared to be two massive slabs of solid earth, smooth as granite and white as the rest of the sea sand. There was a slash of thin darkness between them; otherwise they appeared in no way different from the rest of the rocky undersea hills.

Beneath their feet the ground trembled again, more violently than before. The winds atop the canyon screamed, rising into an atonal wail that fell, discordant. Distant fire shot into the sky, turning the clouds the color of blood.

From his pack Hector drew forth the scepter. It glowed brightly in his hand, the gilt shaft shining beneath the diamond, which sparkled almost menacingly.

Before them the slabs of stone seemed to soften. The three men watched, transfixed, as the sand that had covered them for time uncounted began to slide away, pooling at the base, revealing towering doors of titanic size bound in brass, with massive handles jutting from plates of the same metal, a strange keyhole in the rightmost one. The gigantic doors were inscribed with ancient glyphs and wards, countersigns and runes the like of which Hector had never seen before.

Brann was watching the northern sky nervously over his shoulder. “Make haste, sir knight,” he urged.

Hector stared at the ancient key in his hand. It appeared different somehow than it had been a moment

before; the dark shaft of once living wood that he thought was the branch of a stone tree now more closely resembled a bone, the diamond perched atop it on the rim of where a joint would connect. Carefully he held it next to the keyhole, trying to ascertain the angle which would fit it.

“Viden, singa ever monokran fri,” he said. Open, in the name of the king.

The glyphs on the doors glowed with life.

The gilding began to fall from the scepter’s shaft, sliding off in sandy golden flakes.

Hector pushed the key into the lock and slowly turned it counterclockwise.

Beneath his hand he more felt than heard an echoing thud. Ever so slightly the crack between the stone doors widened. Hector pushed on the rightmost of the two, but could only cause it to move infinitesimally. He attempted to look inside. He could see very little.

The darkness was devouring in its depth. Gingerly Hector pushed the door open a little farther, straining against the wedge of sand that had built up at the door’s base over the ages. Brann took up a place beside him, adding the remains of his strength to the effort.

Behind him the flares of fire from the Awakening rose suddenly higher, burning more intensely, casting shadows into the black cavern beyond the doors. Hector peered through the crack.

The immensity of the place was more than Hector could fathom. From the small vista he had gained there seemed to be no border to it, no walls below limiting it to edges, but rather was more like opening a door into the night sky, or the depths of the universe.

“Again, sir knight,” Brann whispered, pale with exertion. “We must open it wider. Hurry; there is no time left.”

Jarmon leaned with all his strength against the door as well. With a groan that made Hector shudder, the rightmost of the two doors swung farther into the endless darkness.

Hector looked in again. At first he saw nothing, as before. Then, at the most distant edge of his vision, he thought he could make out tiny flames, perhaps remnants of the mine fires that could still be burning thousands of years later. But when those flames began to move, he felt suddenly weak, dizzy, as his head was assaulted from within by the cacophony of a thousand rushing voices, cackling and screeching with delight.

Like fire on pine, the living flames began to sweep down distant ledges within the mammoth pit, some nearer, some farther, all dashing toward the door, churning the air with the destructive chaos of mayhem.

Hector, his head throbbing now with the gleeful screaming that was drawing rapidly closer, could only watch in horror as the fire swelled, burning intensely, a legion of individual flames scrambling down the dark walls toward the doors.

His mind reeled for a moment as the sickening realization of what they had done crashed down on him. Time stood still as the truth thundered around his ears, louder than the tremors from the Sleeping Child.

He had just broken the one barrier that separated life from void, that stood between the earth and its destruction, and more.

That threatened even the existence of the Afterlife.

“My God,” he whispered, his hand slick with sweat. “My sweet God! Jarmon—This is the Vault! We’ve opened the Vault of the Underworld!”

Jarmon’s guttural curse was lost in the sound of oncoming destruction and the orgiastic screaming of the approaching fire demons, long entombed, now rushing toward freedom.

The soldiers seized the door handle and together they pulled on it with all their strength. They succeeded in dragging the door shut most of the way, but they were able to close it only as far as was possible with the obstacle of the fisherman’s body in the way.

Brann had interposed himself in the doorway, straddling the threshold.

Jarmon reached over to shove the old man out of the way. “Move, you fool!” he shouted. And gagged in pain when his arm was crushed against the door, so that it was clasped in a withering grip.

They looked at the old man. His face had hardened, had become an almost translucent mask of undisguised delight. Its wrinkled skin now was tight over a feral smile, above which a pair of dark eyes gleamed, their edges rimmed in the color of blood.

“I,” Brann said softly. “I am what the winds forewarned you of, Sir Hector. I am what comes.”

“No,” Hector whispered raggedly. “You—you—”

The demon in the old man’s body clucked disapprovingly, though his smile sparkled with amusement. “Now, now, Sir Hector,” he said with exaggerated politeness. “This is a historic moment, one to savor! Let us not spoil it with recriminations, shall we?” He let go of Jarmon’s arm.

The soldiers dragged on the heavy door again, but the F’dor only wedged himself in tighter, preventing it from closing with a strength that was growing by the moment. Hector pulled with all his might, but only managed to strip the skin from his sweating palms against the hot metal handles.

Jarmon stepped back angrily and drew his sword, but the fisherman merely gestured at him. Dark fire exploded from his fingers and licked the weapon; the blade grew molten in Jarmon’s hand, melting away in a river of liquid steel. It drew a scream of agony from the guard, who fell heavily away into the sand.

“The scepter—” Hector choked.

“Would help you to discern the truth?” the demon asked solicitously, glancing at his approaching fellows, who were drawing nearer now. “Indeed, you were not wrong. Everything I told you was the truth. My people *have* lived at the sea’s edge for a very long time; we *are* frail in body, though we are strong in spirit. Without a host, or someone to give us aid, we could never open the door alone. And I was most sincere when I assured you that none of my people would dream of touching the scepter; for one of our kind to touch an object of Living Stone crowned with a diamond would be certain death. That’s why we needed you; we thank you for your service.”

“Blessed ground,” Hector whispered, pulling futilely at the door and fighting off the screaming voices that swelled inside his head. “The inn is blessed ground—”

“I never broached the inn,” said the F’dor. “Nor the palace, if you recall. No, Sir Hector, I never crossed the threshold of either place; you met me at the crossroads and left me at the foot of the castle. Kind of you.” The demon laughed again. “And what I told you of my life was the truth as well. Long ago I had the chance to leave my birthplace—that was in the old days, during the first cataclysm, when the star first ruptured the Vault. Many of us escaped before it was sealed again, only to have been hunted throughout history, having to flee from host to host, hiding, biding our time. But now, once again, we will

be out in the world, thanks to you, Sir Hector. You wished to rescue whomever you could from the cataclysm, and here you are! You have spared an entire race from captivity! And not only have you freed us from the Vault, but our master—the one who has long watched the doors, waiting for this day—you will be his host! What could be more edifying than that?”

The fire in the demon’s eyes matched the intensity of that in the sky.

“When the old fisherman rowed out in his little boat to examine what the retreat of the sea had revealed, I was waiting, formless. I had come home when I heard of the upcoming Awakening, just as I said I had.” The demon sighed. “A younger, stronger host might have been preferable, but one takes what one is offered in the advent of cataclysm. Isn’t truth a marvelous thing? The art is in telling it so that it is interpreted the way one wishes to have it heard.

“Finally, I told you that we would be eternally grateful, sir knight. And we are. We are. Eternally.”

Jarmon rose shakily to his feet and met Hector’s eye.

“Hector,” he said quietly, “open the door.”

In his dizziness, the words rang clear. Hector’s gaze narrowed a moment, then widened slightly with understanding.

With the last of his strength, he threw himself against the rightmost door of the Vault, shoving it open even farther than it had been before. His head all but split from the frenzied screaming of the demonic horde that was virtually within reach of the door; he tried to avert his eyes from the horror of the sight, but found his gaze dragged to the approaching fire that burned black with excitement as it rushed forward to freedom.

At the same moment, Jarmon threw himself into Brann and locked his arms around his knees. The frail form of the demon’s host buckled in the strong arms of the guard and the momentum thrust both of them over the threshold and into the Vault.

Which gave Hector just enough time to drag the mammoth door shut before the multitude of F’dor that had been sealed away since the First Age crossed the threshold into the material world.

He pulled the key from the hole and tossed it behind him. Then he wrapped his arms through the huge brass handles, holding on with all the leverage he could muster as the gleaming doors darkened and settled back into lifeless stone once more.

Hector’s mind buckled under the screaming he could hear and feel beyond those doors. The stone shook terrifyingly as the demons pounded from the other side, causing tremors that shook his entire body. He bowed his head, both to brace the closure and to try to drown out the horrifying sounds that scratched his ears. Within the demonic screeches of fury he thought he could hear Jarmon’s voice rise in similar tone, the unmistakable sound of agony of body and soul ringing harshly in it.

As he clutched at the burning doors that seared the flesh from his chest and face, the sky turned white above him.

With a thundering bellow that cracked the vault of the heavens, the Sleeping Child awoke in the depths of the sea and rose in fiery rage to the sky.

The sound of the screaming on the other side of the door faded in the roar of the inferno behind him. All he could feel now was searing heat, heat that baked his body to the core from behind, and radiated through the stone doors before him, as molten volcanic fire rained down, sealing him eternally in an

ossified shell to the brass handles.

As he passed over the threshold of death, from life to Afterlife, Hector finally saw what his father had told him of, and what he had relayed to Anais. Just beyond his sight, closer than the air of his last breath, and at the same time a half world away, he could see his friend in the branches of the World Tree, could see his father in knee-deep surf, standing vigil, Talthea and Aidan behind him on the shore, the baby in her arms. MacQuieth's eyes were on him, watching him from the other side of the earth, the other side of Time.

As his spirit fled his body, dissipating and expanding to the farthest reaches of the universe at the same time, Hector willed himself to hold for a moment to the invisible tether, paused long enough to breathe a final kiss on his wife and children, to whisper in his father's ear across the threshold over which they were bound to each other by love.

It's done, Father. You can cease waiting; go back to living now.

His last conscious thought was one of ironic amusement. As the sea poured in, sealing the entrance to the Vault once more beneath its depths, his body remained behind, fired into clay, forming the lock that barred the doors, vigilant to the end in death as he had been in life.

The key of living earth lay behind him, buried in the sand of the ocean floor, just out of reach for all eternity.

“Apple, Canfa, peez.”

The daughter of the wind looked down solemnly into the earnest little human face. Then she smiled in spite of herself. She reached easily into the gnarled branches of the stunted tree that were beyond the length of his spindly arms and plucked a hard red fruit, and handed it to the boy.

She glanced to her left, where the woman sat on the ground of the decimated orchard, absently eating the apple she had been given a moment before and staring dully at Cantha's silver mare grazing on autumn grass nearby.

A deathly stillness fell, like the slamming of a door.

The winds, howling in fury as they had been for weeks uncounted, died down into utter silence.

And Cantha knew.

She stood frozen for a moment in the vast emptiness of a world without moving air, poised on the brink of cataclysm. And just before the winds began to scream, she seized the child by the back of the shirt and lifted him through the heavy air, bearing him to the horse as the apple fell from his hand to the ground.

She was dragging the startled woman to her feet and heaving her onto the horse as well when the sky turned white. She had mounted and was spurring the beast when the horizon to the northwest erupted in a plume of fire that shot into the sky like a spark from a candle caught by the wind, then spread over the bottom of the melting clouds, filling them with light, painful in intensity. Cantha uttered a single guttural command to the horse and galloped off, clutching the woman and the boy before her.

Even at the southern tip of the Island they could feel the tremors, could see the earth shuddering beneath the horse's hooves. Cantha could feel the child's sides heave, thought he might be wailing, but whatever sound he made was drowned in the horrifying lament of the winds. She prayed to those winds now to

speed her way, to facilitate her path and her pace, but there was no answer.

At the foot of the battlements she pulled the humans from the horse's back, slashed the saddle girdings, and turned it loose, silently wishing it Godspeed. Then she seized the woman by the hand and tucked the boy beneath her arm as she began the daunting climb up the steps of the rock face.

She was halfway up, her muscles buckling in exertion, when the winds swelled, rampant, heavy with ash and debris. They whipped around her, dragging the air from her lungs, threatening her balance. Finally she had to let go of the woman lest she lose her grip on the boy.

"Climb!" Cantha shouted to the woman, but the woman merely stopped, rigid, where she was. Cantha urged her again, and again, pushing her futilely, finally abandoning her, running blindly up the steps as the sky turned black above her.

Through the dark halls and up the tower steps, two at a time, Cantha carried the child, in her arms now, clinging around her neck. The tower shuddered beneath them, swaying in the gale, the stone walls that had stood for five hundred years, stalwart, unmoving, buffeted by the winds of hurricanes and of war, trembling around them.

Finally they reached the pinnacle of the topmost tower, the dusty room lined with bookshelves and jars that had once been the abode of the royal vizier. Cantha, spent, set the boy down, took his hand, and ran through the study, throwing open the doors that already banged in the wind, running heedlessly through the shards of broken glass scattered across the stone floor, up the final flight of wooden steps, and pushed open the trapdoor to the utmost top of the parapets. She held tight to the boy as they stepped out onto the platform from which the vizier had once communed with the lightning, and stared down at the world below her.

Across the wide meadows and broken forests that surrounded Elysian dust was gathering in great spiral devils, loose earth driven upward by the chaos of the winds. In the distance she could see the silver horse running, galloping free, saddled no more. She looked around for the woman, but could not see the battlement steps.

Beside her she felt the boy move; she looked down to see him pointing north.

A wall of water the height of the tower was coming, dark gray in the distance, sweeping ahead of it a conundrum of debris that had once been towns and cities, bridges and mills.

It was but the forewave.

Behind it the real wave hovered, the crest of which Cantha could not see, rising to meet the dark sky.

Shaking, she reached down and lifted the child to her shoulders, mostly to give him as much height as possible, but also to avoid having to see again the expression in his eyes. Her own gaze was riveted on the vertical sea as it swelled forward across the Island, swallowing the river, the fields, the broken orchard as she watched. Just before it took the tower, sweeping forth to rejoin itself at the southern coast, she thought of the legends of enclaves of Lirin who had lived along the shore at the time of the first cataclysm, whose lands had been subsumed when the Child first fell to earth. The lore told of how they had transformed, once children of the sky, now children of the sea, coming to live in underwater caves and grottoes, building entire civilizations in the sheltering sands of the ocean, hiding in the guardian reefs, breathing beneath the waves. *If such a fairy tale be possible, may it be possible for thee, child,* she thought, patting the leg that dangled over her shoulder.

All light was blotted out in a roaring rush of gray-blue fury.

“Hold thy breath, child,” Cantha said.

From the aft deck of the *Stormrider*, Seviryum watched the fire rise in the distance. The Island was so far away now, here at the edge of the Icefields at the southern end of the world, that at first he barely noticed; the Awakening resembled little more than a glorious slash of color brought on by the sunset. But as the clouds began to burn at the horizon, and the sea winds died at the same moment, he knew what he was beholding.

He was unable to tear his eyes away as the fire blazed, a white-hot streak in the distance brighter than the sun. And then, oblivious to the crew and passengers around him, staring east as well, he bowed his head and gave in to grief as the fire faded and disappeared into the sea.

The wave swelled to the outer edges of the Island, spilling over the charred land, swallowing the High Reaches in the north all the way down to the southeastern corner. It poured over what had once been great rolling fields and forests, largely blackened now or swollen with gleaming lava, all the way to Yliessan, where it seemed to hover for a moment above Sagia, her boughs adorned with flowers, sheltering the children of the sky who had sought final refuge there. Then it crashed down, meeting the sea at the land's edge on all sides.

As the tide rose to an even height, taking in the overflow, the crest of the waves closed above the Island, the first birthplace of Time, swallowing it from sight.

And then peace returned.

Hot vapor covered the sea, making it appear as calm and still as a misty morning.