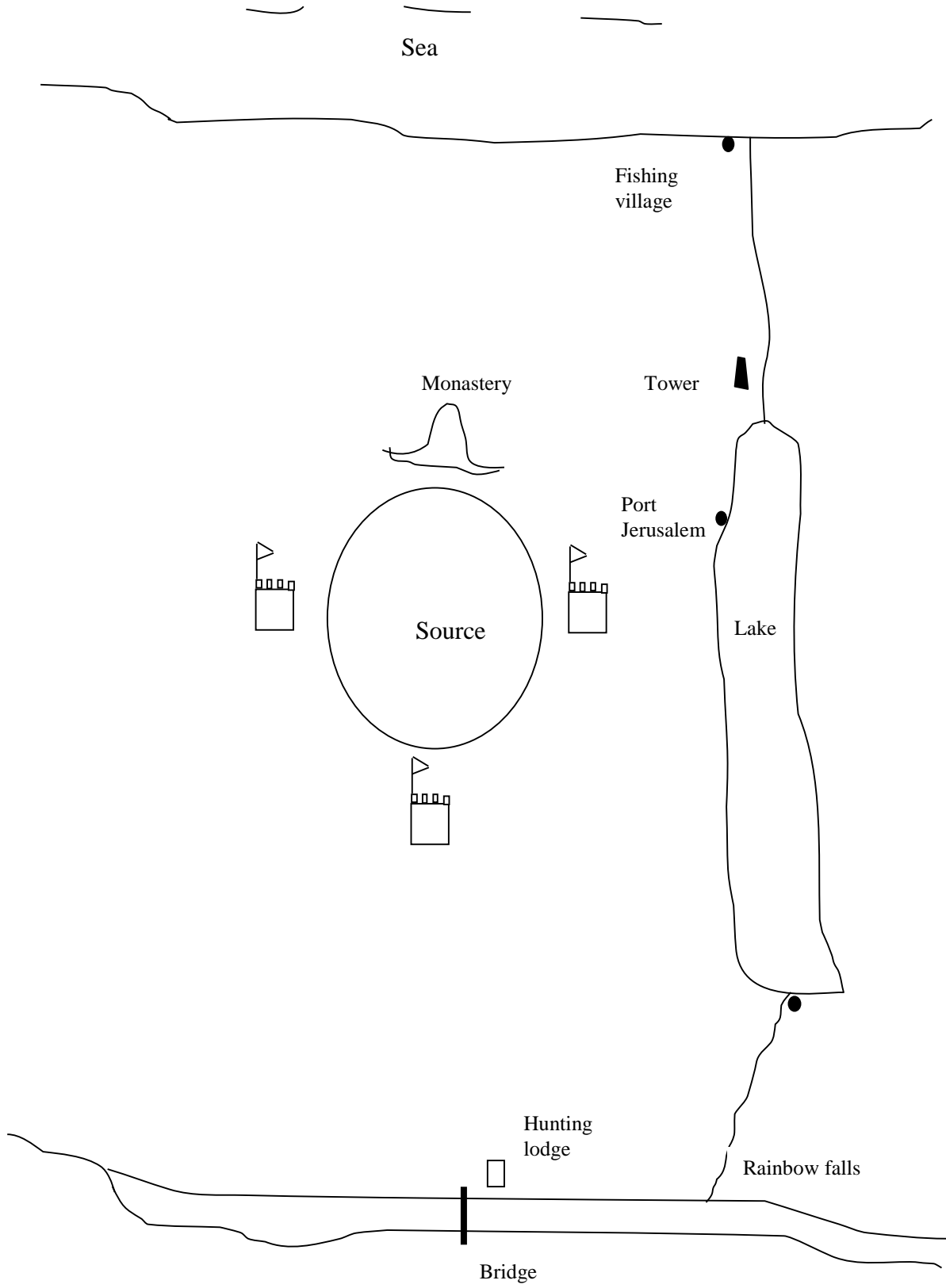


In the time of the great mages Lynella's early signs of special power would have earned her honour and respect. The new order is different. Distorted ideas put forward by the monks sowed the seeds of fear and suspicion which soon grows into hatred. Her only hope lies with the arrival of the ship in orbit and Paul, who comes to the kingdom with nothing to lose.

As the monks capture Paul and show their intention to destroy the ship Lynella and her few friends must act to save him, his ship, and the chance they bring of a future for the kingdom.

Now her power become an asset and she learns to use it to great effect but she must not be trapped by the arrogance which destroyed the powerful ones before.

Pete Claisse graduated in science from Oxford University and spent nine years working as an Engineer on some of the largest construction projects in Britain. He then took three years to obtain his doctorate in Engineering before moving into commercial research. He is now a University academic. As well as his writing he likes to design, build, and sail wooden boats.



## 1 Landing site

He walked up to it and kicked it. It didn't move so he looked more carefully. It wasn't just a square stone; it had been intricately carved with complex geometric patterns and had a metal ring inlaid into the top.

The bulldozer came towards him pouring out acid smoke as it ploughed away the grass, leaving deep tracks in the black earth. This was the first machine down from the mothership and the earthmoving foreman had decided to drive it himself. Paul ran towards it and shouted to him; "Leave that stone. Work around it."

"Who put it there?"

He shrugged.

The man was leaning out of the door of his cab looking down at him in the rain, "You mean somebody's been here already?" He paused to scratch his beard. "Uninhabited planet. That's what you said. Uninhabited."

"That's what we thought."

"Does anybody else know it's there?"

"I don't think so. The surveyors are so useless they missed it"

"What do you want to do with it?"

"Have a good look at it. Try to work out what it is."

He looked down with contempt "This isn't a bloody school trip. If the boss finds out about it, we'll all lose our bonus while they come and look." He sat back in the cab and slammed the door.

Paul turned away. The rusty blade of the huge machine scarcely shuddered as it pushed the stone away. It was soon buried in the pile of soil which would be moved by the fleet of dumpers that would be arriving when the shuttles had time to bring them down.

The site offices were prefabricated huts with faded paintwork and scratched windows. Paul's desk had arrived a few hours earlier and on its battered surface the smartly printed cover of his report that had been prepared in the ship's print room looked out of place. The content of the report was, of course, complete guesswork. From orbit the sensors could just about tell if there was a heat source as big as a steam train but, for almost everything else, all they had bothered to do was to look down with simple telescopes. The thick cloud cover obscured some areas, but the rest of it had looked clear enough.

[put back story later] The mission director had scarcely looked up when he had taken the report to his office.

"What's this about? I thought I told you not to waste time with the magnetic sensors. They're for the drives not the planet."

"We can land the ship."

The man looked up, suddenly diverted from the papers on his desk. His assistant was despatched to find the captain and first officer who arrived almost immediately.

"Your responsibility is down there, this is my ship." The captain was clearly annoyed by being summoned without notice.

Paul showed him the data.

"So what's causing this magnetic field?"

"Eddy currents in a liquid core, like on earth." He tried to sound as if he knew it. Nobody had time to ask how it could be so strong in just one place.

"Is the field strong enough? Can we land?" The mission director looked animated.

"Technically it looks as if it might be strong enough". The first officer replied. "We could check it and do some detailed investigation and analysis."

"It's either strong enough or not. I assume that it is. The shareholders will be delighted. We shall land and load all the ore directly onto this ship. This will be twice as fast as using the shuttles. Paul, this was your idea so making sure the landing field is safe enough for the captain

will be your responsibility.”[make more of a threat]

Now he had to try to find out who had put the marker stone in his landing field. He crossed the muddy compound to the deserted communication hut. Logging on to the terminal; he checked the duty rotas. Like everything else, they were in a mess. Arranging a three-day period in the following week during which he would not be missed was easy.

Setting out at first light, he drove through the gate and waved to the security guard. Rules about staying in the compound except when working had been forgotten when the site had been established. The guards were used to engineers who went out at all times to try to work in the quagmire of mud without being menaced by the earthmoving machines.

He skidded along the rutted haul road to the exact centre of the field where the stone had been, and stopped the jeep to look round. Enough trees had been cleared to see the distant hills that surrounded the flat area around the landing field. In some places they were lower giving hope of a valley beyond. He could see little of the terrain that he would have to cross to get to any of them, so he headed for the lowest point in the hills.

At first, the forest resembled the woods he had known at home, with ancient oak and beech trees blocking out the light and leaving the ground clear below them. They seemed to have been planted in lines; leaving clear straight paths for him to drive along. As he went further from the field, the familiar trees became less and less common and enormous thickets of giant ferns were too big to go around. He had to take the jeep through them, trying to avoid the thickest stems. In one of these thickets, he found the first crater.

He stopped and slowly realised what he was looking at. The ferns were thick and growing all round the rim and down the sides, hiding the shape at first, but he eventually saw that it was perfectly circular. At the bottom, they had covered almost all trace of what had happened but he could see the ground in the centre was far higher than at the edges. A meteorite or even a bomb could not have caused this. A giant ring-shaped object had crashed here, shaped just like the giant torus that encircled the mother ship and held her light speed fusion drive. This was far smaller. The mother ship was two miles across and this was only a fraction of the size.

The crater was obviously old; there were some ancient oak trees in the bottom that must have been growing there for hundreds of years. If the makers of the ship knew about fusion drives that long ago, where were they now? He felt slightly reassured; if they had ships, perhaps they had used them to leave. The planet was probably uninhabited after all.

Suddenly, he panicked and grabbed the instrument box from the back of the jeep and threw the lid open. With his heart racing, he switched the Geiger counter on and frantically pointed it at the crater. It recorded virtually no radiation at all. Absolutely nothing other than background. If the mother ship crashed the radioactivity would take thousands of years to decay. This had never been a fusion ship; it was ring shaped but flew without fusion.

Whoever built it had obviously known about the magnetic anomaly, but if they could build ships, surely they would have been able to locate it accurately enough to avoid crashing. He pictured them arriving at the planet and relying on the magnetic field to slow their descent but just accelerating, and finally realising that they were not going to stop in time. He looked for signs of the hub and saw nothing. The hub was the heaviest part of the mother ship; everything was there except the drive. If it crashed, the hub would make the deepest part of the crater and the giant struts that held it like spokes on a wheel would leave their own marks. Here there was none of this; what had crashed was just a ring.

Driving around the edge of the crater, his determination to find the builders of the ship overcame his fear. The terrain was flat and the jeep went across the open spaces quite easily; the difficulty was with the ferns which grew in thick patches. He saw more craters, several smaller ones but none larger than the first. All of them were the same shape. Had a whole fleet of these ring ships crashed here? Had the survivors from the crews carved the stone at the landing field?

Navigation in the jeep was easy. As he moved away, his compass pointed straight back to it the landing field. By the end of the day, he was close to the hills and, in the fading light, he

ate some food and lay down to sleep on the back seat.

Early next day, he came to an abrupt halt. A massive trench was barring his way, extending in each direction as far as he could see. It did not take him long to see what it was. A ring ship had crashed here, but it had not come straight down. It had come over the horizon and ploughed across the landscape for miles before stopping. The mother ship would never do that; it would break up on impact. He struggled to imagine the technology required to build one that would survive.

The jeep could not cross the trench so this was a good place to leave it. He parked it under some ferns to make it less conspicuous, put on his backpack, and climbed down into the trench and up the other side.

As he moved closer to the hills, he saw stone structures lying low to the ground. They were round and very large, some as big as the biggest craters he had seen. Moving cautiously towards them, he saw more marker stones like the one in the centre of the landing field forming a line across his path. Behind them there was a roadway paved with massive stones. Deep ruts in the stones marked the passage of innumerable metal wheels but he had no way of telling if the last one had been hours or centuries before. Just beyond the road there were the structures. Their massive size was all the more impressive because of their simplicity. They were circular troughs with surrounding walls rising a few feet above the ground. As he approached, he saw that they had been dug deep into the ground. They were full of debris; trees were growing through cracks in the stones, breaking them away and drawing the eye from the perfect shapes. There was, however, no mistaking what they had been built for. Each structure had held a ring ship. The ships had not been passing visitors; they had either been built here or, had come and stayed a very long time.

He moved slowly from one structure to the next; all were spread out between the hill and the line of marker stones. The first five were similar, of slightly different sizes; but the sixth was different, it had a ring ship in it. [drama] At least that was what he had to assume it was. It was totally unlike any ship he had ever seen before. As far as he could tell, it was simply a massive iron ring. It fitted neatly into the trough, a colossal lump of heavily rusted iron without any sign of any features on it at all. He found a large stone and dropped it on the surface, hearing no hollow ring but just a dull thud. This was thousands of tonnes of solid iron, far more than any drive he knew of could begin to move.

He [repeated] moved a short distance away from the structures and sat down with some food from his backpack to decide what to do next. What he had found was obviously significant but it probably did not represent a threat to anybody. All the company wanted to do was to get in, get the ore, and get out. If somebody wanted to start investigating this lot that was up to them but the people on his ship were not interested. If he just checked a bit further to confirm that the owners of the ringships had really gone, he could go back and get on with his job. He set off up the hills to get a view of the valley beyond. He would camp there for the night and, with luck, get most of the way back on the following day.

## 2 Young Lynella – the jewel

On the day Lynella was ten years old, the steward gave her the jewel. It was as big as a walnut and felt heavy and cold in her hand. It looked a dull red colour; but when she held it up to the window it had a golden glow. This might have come from the setting, which was itself gold, but in the sunlight she could see flecks of gold in the jewel itself.

“It came from the mountain” he said as she took it. “The mountain is full of jewels like this but few have the gold threads in them, they are the key.”

He showed her how to put a silk cord through the eyes in the setting and fix it around her head so it rested neatly in the middle of her forehead.

“You should try to see if you can use it. Your father could do some of the things you can do but he could not use a jewel.”

“What things?”

The steward smiled. “There’s no need to be shy about it, at least not with me. Your governess has told me. Just the other day she said she saw you lift a coin off the floor to save having to reach down for it.”

Lynella looked away. She didn’t know why she always tried to hide what she could do.

The steward continued. “One of the girls in that picture you like in the corridor is wearing this jewel. She looks as if she was about your age. You should try to see if you can find the pathways in it; but if you can you must promise me you won’t try to do anything with it until we have arranged for somebody to teach you how to use it safely.”

She asked who would teach her but the steward hesitated and never replied.

The picture fascinated her. It showed three girls sitting in a small window alcove looking out over a city. There were many pictures of the city; it had apparently been at the source but was gone now. This picture showed so many different things - lots of people and horses and even a great ringship in the sky. But what fascinated her most of all was at the edge of the window, a doll's house. It was far nicer than the one the carpenter had made for her to play with. The one in the picture looked like the wooden houses in the city outside. Everything was there: doors and windows and even little lights inside. The lights weren't just there; they were actually glowing.

In the corridor, next to the picture there was a door. It was an ordinary looking door but nobody ever used it. She tried to open it. It seemed to be locked. There was no keyhole or bolt. She turned the handle and pushed as hard as she could until her governess turned and scolded her. She didn't know why, but she was sure that the doll's house was in the room behind the door.

She never told anybody about the jewel. It was her secret with the steward. He was the steward of the castle and second only to her father, so she was sure she was meant to have it; but it looked so special, so precious, so deep. She would wake at first light on her own and quietly put it on without disturbing her governess in the next room. From the start she could see the patterns, she couldn't imagine how her father could have missed them. At first all she could see was pathways in all directions but then she could tell that somebody had been along them before and arranged them so they joined together reaching down. She tried to find the bottom but each time she went deeper it seemed harder to get out and left her drained and exhausted. But the jewel was soon part of her. She couldn't tell the steward about it. He might take it away until the teacher was found.

With the jewel it wasn't just easier to move things about, although they still often went off in the wrong direction, it also helped her see things. Under the polished veneer surface of the wooden dressing table opposite her bed she found she could see rings. Lots of them in patterns she couldn't understand. When she probed out from her room she could see more and more different patterns waiting for her to explore and understand. The power of it scared her. She

knew that she was seeing things that had not been seen for hundreds of years and nobody knew what they were. Even moving things with the jewel was frightening with its uncontrollable power.

One night, soon after the harvest, she waited until all the sounds of movement had gone quiet and crept out of her room. She didn't need a light, she could sense the walls around her from the patterns in them. Along the corridor everything looked so different. In-stead of rugs and wooden boards the floor was made up of pathways and nodes. In-stead of blocking her view, the walls seemed to help her understand what was behind them. Just ahead she could see the faint star light from the window illuminating the picture but as she crept towards it she sensed an image that fitted exactly with her jewel. It was the door. Each of the pathways she had found was precisely matched by one in the door. She found a mechanism behind the handle. She tried to control it, to take her time to see what it was and then just to give it the slightest push to make it work. Minutes passed. Standing alone and motionless she finally felt she could do it. A small pulse. No response. Now just a fraction more, she steadied herself with a hand on the carved door frame. With a loud click that echoed away down the corridor, the door was open. She stepped quickly through and tried to close it but she had damaged the intricate mechanism. [clarify and use 5 senses]

Standing in the room looking at the doll's house in her thin night-dress and bare feet in the cold room, she began to play. The two dolls that she had brought with her were her favourites; she thought that they looked like the girls in the picture. With beautiful porcelain faces and fine soft dresses, they went everywhere with her. She often spoke to them and now she was telling them about this wonderful new house. As she moved them from room to room, she found that, if she wanted it, the lights came on. They were minute glass spheres, each one hanging from two silver wires. They gave a good bright light; her dolls loved them.

Totally absorbed she never noticed her father come into the room. Finally, he touched her shoulder. She jumped up in fright and turned as he spoke, "Lynella, in God's name!"

"It's lovely, I want it for ever."

"You can't. I'm sorry, you don't understand."

"But I want it! Look, my dolls love it."

"I know but it's not good for you."

"I don't care, I want it!"

Saying this she turned back to it. The lights glowed more brightly than ever. They seemed to want to go out; something was trying to put her lights out. How would her dolls see? With a surge of anger, she pushed back to keep them alight. They were trying harder to go out now and she threw all of her energy into one enormous pulse. The jewel on her forehead flashed and the lights flashed with it. It took control; draining energy from her. Now the room was full of people, trying to take it off her forehead. In the ruins of their house, her two dolls lay twisted and broken; their shattered faces could never comfort her now.

She never saw her father after that. They told her he had died but would never say any more about it. It had just been an accident.

### 3

Lynella's mother removed the jewel and left her alone with her governess, but the governess left the castle the following day. The steward made sure the servants brought her food and clean clothing but they scarcely spoke to her. [move down]

Her energy returned slowly and two days later she was out of bed, finding the other children playing outside. As she approached they stopped what they were doing and gathered into a tight group against a wall. Her cousins Edward and Henry stood in the centre watching her walking across the empty courtyard. She stopped where they had left their frayed leather ball a few paces in front.

What's wrong? Why have you stopped the game?" They were so quiet she could hear them breathing. One of the younger boys in the middle looked as if she was about to reply but a hand went up to silence him.

She picked up the ball.

"We'll find another." Henry looked around to make sure the rest were with him.

"I didn't mean to hurt anybody".

"Neither shall we." He took just one step forwards. She dropped the ball and ran. When she was at the far side she turned to see them all watching her. She saw them re-start their game from an overlooking window alcove three floors above.

The castle was enormous and only one wing was lived in. Several doors from the area she knew appeared to lead away into other parts, but they were always locked. Choosing a time when she hoped there would be nobody about, she tried to probe one of the locks. Without her jewel she could see nothing apart from the vague outline of what appeared from the keyhole to be a simple mechanical catch. The next time she took a ring with her. It was just small enough to hold in the palm of her hand but still felt heavy in the bag on her shoulder. Holding it firmly on the door she pictured the parts that a key would move and used it to push against them. Hearing people in the distance she decided to ignore them and keep trying. With a faint click from the old worn mechanism the lock opened and she rushed through, slamming it shut just as the group appeared round the corner. She waited. The voices came closer. Some she recognised. But the footsteps never stopped. They hadn't seen or didn't care.

A long corridor led on with doors she couldn't open, dimly lit by high, narrow windows. The pathways and nodes were tantalisingly close but unreadable without her jewel. She even tried lying on the worn dusty carpet but being close to them made no difference.

At the far end there was another door with a keyhole. Completely alone, she took her time to try the ring in different places. This lock was less worn but by putting the ring directly below it, and pushing as hard as she could at anything that would move, she managed to make it open with a loud click.

Beyond was the old keep. Rough stone walls, uneven floor and smell of damp. But there were the signs that the mages had shaped it for themselves. Intricate glass lighting spheres hung down on golden wires. The doors had runes inlaid into the surface of the wood. She could sense the ancient power all around her. Ahead there were no windows but she could [sense] something drawing her on. The darkness closed in. She moved over to feel her way along a wall. The floor was sloping downwards. She heard water dripping ahead. The image became clearer and more familiar, but it was not by the wall. Moving away she stepped tentatively into the void, only to find herself going down into a pool of water. Soon it was up to her knees, but she ignored the cold as she was drawn into it. Each step was challenge on the rough floor. Slipping on loose stones in the darkness. The regular sound of the falling water was all around now, never changing, never stopping. She went on. Up to her waist with tendrils of unknown plants catching her dress, pulling her down. Deeper, until what was hers was immediately below her. She had to dive down to feel with her hands. The stones were piled up here but she knew where to reach. Moments



later she was gasping for breath, holding up a handful of them – but she knew which one was hers. Shivering by the side of the pool she used the lighting globes and saw the vast cavern carved into the rock.

The steward spent many hours telling her stories about the great age of the mages. He would send for her and read aloud from one of the books that were kept in the library. The stories were very exciting with heroic mages flying ships and fighting bravely for their kings. Somehow, however, they always had sad endings with the mages getting killed, going mad, or even betraying their kings. All the magic and the power that went with it never seemed to do any good in the end. Despite this, she enjoyed hearing the stories. They had bright pictures which she could see as she sat beside him, and they were written in a way which was easy for her to understand. She also had a sense of pride at being chosen by the steward to hear them. He was the most important man in the kingdom until her brother came of age and became the next king.

Now that she had shown beyond any doubt that she had some power, these sessions were organised on a more formal basis. The stories now only took part of the time. He insisted that they should look at the compact. It was several pages long and full of ideas she could not understand about what mages were and were not permitted to do.

When they were studying the section about the source, he took her to have a look at the markers. She had seen them on a few occasions before when they had travelled along the old road which ran along outside them but she had never paused to think about them; she just knew that nobody was allowed to cross them. Now they were sitting on the hillside looking at them, down across the crucibles. It was a hot summer day and a horse and cart was struggling along the road with a load of dressed stone. Passing the crucibles, it did not turn to go along the road to their Southern Kingdom; it was going all the way from west to East. The driver and his horse were suffering in the bright sunlight.

"Do you know why he has to go all the way round the source? It would be so much easier to go straight across."

Looking at him, puzzled by the obvious question she replied, "Because we're not allowed to, it's forbidden by the compact. Of course I know that."

"But do you know why it's forbidden?"

"Because otherwise we would have more battles and people would be killed."

"Do you know why?"

She stopped to think. He occasionally started with questions like this and never let them go until she at least guessed an answer.

"It's because that's where the ships could fly."

"Yes - I suppose so but why fight about it? Why not just fly the ships?"

"That's because mages always do fight, don't they? And one day there will be mages again won't there?"

By now, the cart was directly below them; they could see the white streaks on the horses' flanks. The driver saw them and waved as he urged the horse forward to the stream that crossed the road a mile further on. He never once looked towards the source.

Lynella's mother had forbidden her from using her power in any way at all. When she had asked the Steward about this, he had hesitated and then replied that she certainly should do nothing until she had learnt the rules in the compact. She had now learnt the rules and could recite them fluently, she waited for a good moment and asked, "Can I start learning how to use my power now?"

This time the hesitation was longer.

"I know I said you could when you had learnt the rules but I just don't think you're old enough yet."

"But I ought to learn sometime shouldn't I?"

"Yes, Yes you should. After all, what's the point in all this if you never learn?"

"So why don't I start now?"  
"Your mother doesn't want you to."

Two particular incidents had set the tone for this part of her life: the first summer festival after her fourteenth birthday and the visit by the monk a few months later.

## 4 The annual festival

The annual festival was a major event which was held at each of the castles in turn. With no cause for the High Council to meet, it was the only occasion when all the royal families gathered together. Now that she was sixteen, she would be permitted to mix freely with the sons of the other families, a prospect she looked forward to it with considerable hope mixed with a good measure of trepidation. These were people whom she had only seen previously at brief formal presentations. The steward had explained her position in his usual pragmatic way, "The idea was that you should be proud of what you are. When the last of the mages was gone everybody desperately wanted more to be born."

"So why don't I just tell them?" she had asked bemused.

"Times have changed. It's the monks; they have slowly changed the way we think about things. The great legends of the deeds of the mages are now seen as something to be ashamed about."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. Perhaps you will be lucky and find someone you can trust enough to tell. Perhaps things will change again and people will be glad to welcome you into their families."

Her memory of the festival itself was mixed and confused. After travelling to the Eastern Castle they had spent a day resting and getting ready. A brief visit to the town had increased Lynella's curiosity far more than it had satisfied it. In the small community near her own castle, she knew every face and every name. This town was so much larger that she couldn't imagine how anybody could even know all of the streets. There were crowds in all directions and enormous numbers of young children. The sights, sounds and smells confused her but, above all, she could not understand why it was so different. At home, the families were small and many of the houses were half-empty, but here there were new ones being built in every available space. The town seemed to be visibly bigger than it had been when the festival had last been in it three years previously. Their hosts had shown them round with considerable pride, insisting that they should sample the enormous range of produce that could be seen in the shops. At one point, she heard one of them say pointedly to the Steward, "It was a stupid antiquated system which was obviously leading nowhere. Look what we have achieved, just two generations after abandoning it."

She resolved to find out what this meant and, when they had returned to the castle, she went to the steward's room and knocked on the door.

"Come", came the steward's familiar shout from the room. "Hello my dear. Are you all right?"

"Quite all right, but nobody's telling me what's happened here. Why is it all so different?"

"And you heard them boasting about it didn't you? I thought that would trouble you. Sit down and we'll talk about it."

She sat in one of the large comfortable chairs and waited. The Steward refilled his ever-present wineglass, sat in a chair facing her, and asked directly, "Do you understand what the compact says about inter-marrying?"

"Yes, I think so"

"Well what it says is that the Royal families should not marry commoners. It's not a rule; we can't complain if someone else does it. It's just a suggestion."

"Are you saying that they don't obey it here?"

The steward lowered his glass as if to reply but said nothing. She continued, "I thought we all had to. Don't they want to have any mages? The compact promised us that if we waited long enough, we would have mages again."

"Yes, it did. It's just that was written hundreds of years ago. Then about 50 years ago, the Abbot at the time came round trying to persuade people to abandon it. I can remember it clearly. I was a young man then. He told us we could have large healthy families if we gave it up. As you can see he was right."

"Why didn't we give it up? Don't we trust the monks? "

"Because we could see the power was getting stronger in each generation. Your power is very strong." He stopped and drank slowly. "They do make excellent wine here. Yes, you are right. We don't trust the monks, well I don't. They have their limited power and they keep working on it and I don't think they want anybody else to have any."

"Does this mean I can't marry anyone from the Eastern Kingdom?"

"I don't know, I just don't know at all. Perhaps some of them have kept to the true lines. You ought to talk to your mother. She may know somebody from the Western kingdom."

They both knew that, since her father's death, this had become progressively more difficult. She let the conversation drift and decided to wait and see what the evening would bring.

The royal family of the Eastern Kingdom went to enormous lengths to impress their guests for the festival. Every inch of their Great Hall had been cleaned and polished for the occasion. The steward noted in passing that this would have been somewhat easier than achieving the same result in his own castle because this hall was noticeably smaller. Lynella, however, was overwhelmed by the noise of the crowd and the smell of the food which met her when she entered.

The meal seemed to last forever. She sat, looking out across the room at all of the strange faces, wondering who they were. Almost all of the other children had managed to sit in groups and were talking and laughing ever louder as the meal progressed. Lynella was between her mother, who just scolded her for not eating her food, and the steward who seemed to be finding it difficult not to fall asleep.

Finally it ended. The servants moved the tables away, and the real social event began. Lynella had seen this each year throughout her life. The girls were escorted across the room by their mothers and introduced to suitable families. Lynella's mother, however, refused to move and told her firmly to go away and not to interrupt a conversation with an elderly relative. Wandering aimlessly through the crowd, she saw the dancing start. The other girls wore all kinds of jewellery and this was flashing in the bright light from the many oil lamps hung from the rafters. She felt in her small leather purse for the comforting cool of her own big jewel.

She had guessed that this would happen but never quite been able to admit it. Her dreams of meeting new people were shattered. She had been looking forward to a new life in which she could be accepted as an ordinary person but now she stood out as the only person in the whole hall who was alone and she felt as if everybody was watching and pitying her. All of the groups around her seemed closed, impossible to enter. Without an introduction, she was not supposed to talk to anybody except the others from the Southern Kingdom, and they didn't want to talk to her. She finally sat down on a chair in a quiet corner and hoped that nobody would notice her and that next year things would be better. Her solitude was interrupted by two boys who had tired of the formal proceedings and, seeing a good looking girl sitting strangely alone, decided to investigate.

For James and his younger brother Marcus, the whole event was not very serious. They were part of the new generations of the Eastern Kingdom with some grandparents from royal families and some from other families and, in time, would expect to find partners in their own community. Standing a short distance away, they looked on in curiosity. James had seen Lynella before, "That's the Princess from the Southern Kingdom. I saw her trailing around the town earlier."

"What's she doing sitting there? She should have been launched into the thick of it by her mother."

"I saw her mother over the other side. I don't think they get on."

"So she's completely stuck," Marcus laughed. "Look at that, sticking to a load of stupid ancient conventions instead of having any fun."

"Don't laugh too much," James cautioned him. "I remember now, rumour has it that that one can do some tricks."

"How do you mean?"

"She's got some of the old powers."

"What? Like the old mages?"

"It's just what I heard."

They thought about this for a few moments until Marcus asked, "Do you think that she would mind if we went and talked to her. Perhaps she'd do some tricks for us."

He was already walking towards her before James could stop him. He started talking to Lynella and, after some hesitation; she joined in a conversation about the castle and all the work he had done preparing for the party. She was not sure whether this was really permitted but anything was better than sitting alone, being stared at. James was quieter than his brother and generally stood in the background, smiling appropriately and appreciating the warmth of Lynella's smiles that she gave in return. Eventually, Marcus found the chance to ask, "They were saying earlier that you have the old power. Could you show us?"

Lynella's heart sank. She suddenly looked serious and tried to duck the issue.

"Who said that?"

Marcus looked at James who made no move to respond.

"You said you'd heard it, didn't you?"

James replied to Lynella, "I think that my little brother's getting a bit mixed up. This is the first I'd heard about powers."

Marcus's face went red and he turned and replied, "You did. You said it just then when we were over there."

He turned to Lynella and asked directly, "Well, can you do tricks, move rings and things?"

Lynella was close to tears. James saw this and decided to cut in.

"Stop being rude. How dare you talk like that to a guest!" He smiled at Lynella. "My little brother was just leaving." His little brother made no move to leave so he was propelled towards the door with such force that he almost crashed into a servant entering with a tray of cakes. James and Lynella went to join the dancing. A number of people saw them and rushed over to tell her mother. Finding, however, total indifference to the situation, they left the couple to dance.

James was an excellent dancer. He was very quiet and scarcely spoke but he was obviously enjoying her company so she was happy to enjoy his. She knew his background but decided that she could worry about it on another occasion. When they tired of dancing, they walked out towards the courtyard to get some fresh air. They were met by Marcus and some of his friends. Lynella was dismayed to see her cousins, Edward and Henry, who appeared to be the centre of their attention.

Marcus looked defiant. "Show us some tricks."

"Go away and play somewhere else."

James felt as if he was trying to prevent the inevitable. He was enjoying being with Lynella. Why had he made that remark to the wretched boy? They were backing away from the taunts and soon found themselves in a corner, facing the group of about ten younger boys. Edward and Henry were now breaking all the steward's rules and telling the others about the incidents in the Southern Castle. They were obviously drunk and were enormously enjoying being the centre of attention. James was trying to field the questions.

"Won't any of the proper girls talk to you? She's strange." Marcus wouldn't give up when he knew he was winning.

Lynella knew that lying would offer her an easy escape. It would simply be her word against her cousins and they had no proof at all. James was obviously expecting her to deny the accusations although he did not actually know whether they were true. Lynella was struck by the loyalty he was showing by supporting her and had fleeting thoughts of what it would be like to have a partner like him. In the end, however, her pride took control. The steward had said that she was nearly a mage and he had said she should be proud of it. Suddenly she stepped forward and stood straight upright facing her tormentors.

"Enough." Her command brought silence. Seeing the signs, her cousins backed away. None of the others were at all impressed and the taunts continued. Thinking what would happen if her power could not produce any visible effect, Lynella panicked. She saw her duty as a mage to defend herself, never seeing the reality that, if nothing happened, her tormentors would do her

no harm and simply go and find something more interesting to do. In her mind, there were images of ancient battles in which the power of the mage was critical for survival. In that instant, she cursed herself for not practising the controlled use of her power. The stories of the rigors of the training of the mages had never seemed to be relevant to her own life. Nobody had ever encouraged her to train but nobody understood who or what she was.

A small boy was pulling at her dress and shouting, "Come on witch! Show us some tricks!" [use ellipsis .. ]

There might be a way out if she presented her powers as a sort of simple conjuring trick. She looked at the boy.

"If I show you a trick, will you leave us alone?"

The boy hesitated, confused at first, but then nodded.

"Will your friends leave us as well?"

The boy looked around. One by one, they nodded agreement and formed a circle around her to watch. She was not at all sure whether her trick would work but she hoped that, even if it failed, they might go anyway. She took two plain gold rings from her fingers and placed them on top of each other on the ground in front of her. Standing back slightly, she looked down at them and managed to make the top one jump up into the air slightly and hover for a few seconds before falling back down. It was not at all spectacular but the boys had to admit that it was a sort of a trick. They were just turning to leave when Edward shouted out, "She can do far better than that. Come on, let's have a proper show."

One of the other boys tried to calm him

"Be fair; it wasn't much but it was a trick."

A small group gathered around him but he managed to throw a coin towards Lynella. She did not see it come. It hit her on the head.

The crowd had changed. They were persecutors hunting for mages. She was in a corner. She could not flee but she knew how to defend herself. Her hand was already on the jewel. She grabbed it and held it against her forehead. Edward threw another coin. He threw it hard and accurately but it only made it halfway. The jewel flashed with blinding intensity. The outer rim of the coin disappeared into a glowing plasma. The remainder was driven straight back and through his head. It hit others and went on. In a shower of sparks it flew into a wall far behind them.

The report echoed round the courtyard. With it came the smell of ozone which follows a lightning strike. Edward collapsed slowly. His look of terror masked by blood pouring from his forehead. The castle guards shouted the alarm.

Lynella stood terrified as the crowd pulled back, carrying its dead. James remained still, unable to summon the courage to support her. Soon a group of guards formed around her, swords drawn, standing well back and watching for any movement. She had no idea what to do. Too terrified to speak, the drain of energy from her body had left her close to collapse.

The crowd was watching, waiting in silence for something to happen. Lynella looked at the ground, not daring to look back. The king of the Eastern Kingdom came out from the hall and spoke to the guard Captain but nobody tried to speak to Lynella. Nobody from her own castle came to help. She tried to form words to explain but could say nothing.

The silence was broken by a dog barking. Looking up to see where it was, her eye was caught by a girl standing just behind the ring of soldiers. As their glances met Lynella saw none of the hatred and anger she expected. All she could see was compassion mixed with admiration. Having seen the whole incident and realising that Lynella was not going to hurt anyone who did not attack her, the girl impulsively pushed forward past the soldiers, walking up to Lynella just in time to catch her as she fell.

The guard Captain seemed visibly relieved to find someone he could trust, who would stay in Lynella's room with her. Having helped Maria carry the limp body; he stopped only long enough to confirm that she was still breathing and withdrew. Maria hurried around with pillows to make her as comfortable as possible but soon found that there was nothing more to be done. When, many hours later, Lynella finally opened her eyes she saw Maria sitting motionless on the

window seat.

In a quiet voice Lynella asked Maria's name and then her age. They found they had the same ages. More silence followed.

"Are you all right?" Maria's question was hesitant.

Lynella smiled the smile of a friend. "I'm exhausted."

"Are you hungry?"

"That's a good idea."

They sent for food and slowly got to know each other. Neither of them had the courage to talk about the display of power that they had experienced.

The door opened and the guard announced, "The steward of the Southern Kingdom will see you now."

Maria looked worried but Lynella reassured her, "It's all right, he's a friend - my only real friend, I suppose, except my brother and he's too young to help."

The guards were hesitant, trying to be careful but at the same time trying not to appear aggressive towards the two girls. When they arrived at the steward's room, he was shouting at one of the senior castle servants, "Why wasn't I woken up? I should have been told! I don't care what she did; she's a royal Princess."

The servant looked terrified and backed away as the two girls entered. The steward looked at them as they walked across the room. He looked tired and unshaven, having obviously drunk excessively the night before. He was, however, in full command of the situation and noted with pleasure the obvious friendship between Lynella and her companion. Addressing, Maria he said, "You must be the girl who saved Princess Lynella from the crowd and looked after her. We really are grateful to you for what you have done."

Maria blushed and stammered, "I have done my best, Sir. Nobody else seemed to care."

"Yes, so I hear. The rest of the family don't want to know."

"None of them have even come to see us."

She paused and continued, "It's not as if she meant to hurt anybody. It was an accident. She was goaded into it."

Lynella added, "I couldn't help it. What's going to happen to me?"

"You'll be all right. I promise you we'll be able to sort this out. We could quote the old laws which were written to protect mages from just this sort of thing."

Maria looked up, "A mage! You mean Lynella really is one?"

The steward was surprised by this reaction but continued, "Yes, as far as I can tell Lynella will have all of the powers of a true mage one day and there are old laws which protect mages from punishment when they use their power in self-defence. Of course, in the old days, they didn't get attacked anyway."

Seeing Maria's look and realising what had happened, he added, "That's why you helped her isn't it? You wanted to help the first of the new true mages."

Maria nodded so the steward continued, "Then you must return with us when we go home"

Maria nodded again as he asked, "Now tell me the whole story. You too, Lynella. I must know every detail."

## 5 The visitor from the monastery

The visitor from the monastery came a few months later.

"Tell me, what are those little buildings in the valley? Do they keep their cattle in them?"

"No sir, they live in them."

"But what happens if the dragons come back from the South? They are completely undefended."

"I don't know, Sir."

Brother Andrew looked down through the gaps in the trees. The castle looked substantial enough. Indeed, even from this distance and largely obscured by trees, it looked magnificent with its tall battlements and massive towers, but the other buildings would surely not withstand the dragons. He was still contemplating the matter as the two men passed through the dense lower forest.

Emerging onto the cleared farmland, he saw the keep, a short distance ahead. Around the smooth stone walls was a collection of chicken runs, pig sties and vegetable garden. A rotund and jovial looking middle aged man was standing outside it as they approached.

"Hail, strangers! It's a long time since we have seen visitors from the Holy Order. What brings you to the Southern Kingdom?"

The guard from the monastery took this gentle challenge with contempt. The man looked hopelessly unfit and was not even armed.

"Let us pass. We have come to see the Royal Family in the castle. We have been on the road for many days and do not wish to waste time here."

He started to push forward. The monk reached out and stopped him but before he did the man called out, "Angus!"

There was a sound of running and two young men appeared. The larger of the two was tall and very well built and carried a massive broadsword. He did not carry it in a military fashion but, from the way he held it up in front of him, he appeared well practised at using it. His companion was slightly smaller but was similarly armed and looked equally dangerous. They moved forward and the larger one asked, "Who are they, father?"

"I don't know, but anything from the monastery means trouble."

Brother Andrew looked on in despair. "I must apologise for my guard. We don't wish to offend anyone."

He glowered at his guard who glowered back but, none the less, stepped back a few paces. The older man facing him repeated his question.

"What is your business?"

"We would like an audience with your steward."

"What about?"

He silently cursed his guard. "We have come to offer help to a member of the Royal Family."

"And what help would that be?"

"We have come to offer assistance to the Princess Lynella. We understand that she was in difficulties at the recent festival."

This remark brought a moment of silence from the man facing him. They all knew about the incident at the festival. When the next question came, it showed far more genuine interest.

"How can you help her?"

"I have come to offer to take her for training with her power."

"Very well, you may proceed but please ensure that your companion behaves himself. My son Angus will escort you."

The guard looked up with disgust as they proceeded towards the castle.



Lynella sat looking out of one of the windows of an anteroom to the dining hall. Since her return from the festival, her life had been very different. Killing her most persistent tormentor had the obvious effect of driving all of the others away, so none of the other residents of the castle now spoke to her at all. Maria was, however, her salvation, always there to support her and very easy going, rapidly forming a circle of friends among the servants and guards. Angus was one of these and he had come to tell them about the visitor.

"The monk seemed harmless enough but the guard was rough. If there's one like that, there are probably lots of them - really grim"

"I don't know," Maria replied. "The trouble is that at the rate we're progressing, it'll take years to get anywhere"

Lynella looked round. "You see, I'm scared of hurting anyone else. I feel I can't learn without letting go but I don't dare."

"You should come out to the keep," Angus replied half seriously. "If we all shut ourselves inside, all you could hurt would be my father's chickens."

"I thought he had a pig," Maria added.

"Oh yes, you might hit the pig."

Lynella smiled. The thought of practising the use of her power in the company of some chickens and a pig appealed to her far more than the idea of these sinister sounding visitors.

"I don't want to go," she said. "Not now."

Brother Andrew could not fault the hospitality he had received. He had had some time to wash and rest and then an excellent meal. Now he was sitting at the table with some manuscripts in front of him. His presentation had gone well. He had described his scholarly learning and that of his fellow monks, which made them the only true source of guidance on training a mage. His description of the care and comfort which would be provided for the girl had been almost poetic. The steward had listened attentively and was warming to his case. All of the others, including the girl's mother, looked very keen on any plan to get rid of her. The girl herself was a stumbling block.

"I'm not going," she repeated.

"It really would be best for you," Brother Andrew replied smoothly.

"I'm still not going."

"Go on, go and learn how to control it," her mother butted in.

Brother Andrew followed this up. "It seems that your mother and the steward are going to send you. I'm sure that it's for the best."

Lynella searched desperately for friends but even the steward seemed undecided. Before she could stop it, the discussion moved forward and arrangements were being made. She was to depart with the monk in just three days. Brother Andrew insisted that a total training period of three years would be the minimum required. Everyone seemed so relieved to be getting rid of her that she held her head in her hands, and started to cry. This finally brought her some sympathy. Her mother looked genuinely concerned for her for the first time since the festival.

"It's all for the best," she said. "We all know there's no future for you carrying on the way you are here. We'll all miss you, but you must learn to use your power to help people, not hurt them."

"I don't want to go and live in a cave," Lynella replied. "I'm already learning how to control it. Maria's helping me."

"Maria will come with you," Brother Andrew assured her, "and we shall give her instruction on how she can assist you."

"Why do you want me to stay all of the time?" Lynella asked him. "Couldn't I go for a few days each month? There can't be that much to do."

"There is plenty for you to do. You will be busy all of the time."

"Doing what?"

Brother Andrew hesitated at this direct question.

"You would have lessons for much of the time and then as a member of our community..."

He hesitated again and Lynella cut in, "You're not saying that I would have to help in the kitchens or digging new caves, are you?" Even her family looked shocked at this.

"No, certainly not. You would be the most honoured member of our community, and would take part in activities totally fitting to your station."

"Doing what?"

"As I have said, we are experts on the control of power like yours. You would help us to extend our knowledge."

At this point, the steward became interested. "What do you want that for when you admit that you have no mages among you and all such practices are forbidden by the compact anyway?"

Brother Andrew smiled at him and tried to look reassuring. "All of our activities are aimed at innocent work permitted in the compact like the lights that you have here in this castle. Lynella would get practice at such things and, on her return, would be able to make your lights glow brightly at any time."

This caused a buzz of excitement and Lynella saw that her case looked lost. As the discussion continued, Lynella joined Maria at the back of the room.

"I could stop them if I wanted to," she said.

"How?" asked Maria.

"With my power, of course."

She was holding a ring in her hand. It was slightly larger than her fist and felt cool and heavy as she idly turned it over and over.

"If you did that, they'd send you away and never let you back. Anyway, monks have protection."

"What do you mean?"

"It's in some of the old stories. They developed devices to protect themselves."

Lynella wished, yet again, that she had taken as much time as Maria to study all of the detail in the stories. After a few seconds she asked, "Do you think that's what's in the little wooden box on the table?"

Maria stood up to see the box. It was made of dark polished wood with a fine silver inlay and looked similar to some illustrations she had seen in the old books.

"Yes I think it might be. How about that! He certainly came prepared."

"What does it do?"

"The stories aren't very clear, I don't think any of them were written by monks and nobody else seemed to know. They called the thing it set up, a protective aura."

"What? It protects him against anything I can do?"

"Apparently it protects him against almost anything that gets thrown at him: your rings or even arrows and swords and things."

"So there's nothing I can do to him at all?"

"Nothing at all. Only the most powerful mages could overcome the auras."

"How did they overcome them if they couldn't get through them?"

"They got inside them in some way, I think. Please don't try it. You'll only make things worse."

"No, don't worry. But I must ask the steward what he knows about it before I go." She smiled reassuringly at Maria and then turned to look more closely at the box.

"Please don't," Maria repeated, but she knew it was pointless. As quietly as they could, Maria and those around her moved away.

Brother Andrew was not looking at Lynella but, as soon as she probed the box, he knew what was happening and turned to face her. Years of careful practice had enabled him to establish his delicate mind link to the intricate mechanism and the clumsy intrusion was very unpleasant. Immediately, he set up his defensive aura and everything around him stopped moving. A housefly near his head fell to the ground with its wings frozen. Lynella's probe was thrown out, very firmly.

"I see that you can do more than I expected. You must learn not to do that. This will be

one of the first lessons you learn, how to avoid intruding on other individuals."

This comment to Lynella confused everyone else, so he explained, "Lynella was probing this device which I use for my defensive aura. It was a natural thing for an ignorant young girl to do and I have stopped her, but it emphasises the need for her training." He smiled patronisingly at Lynella. Comments were made about how they had at last found someone who could control her. Before anybody noticed, Lynella was standing wearing the jewel on her forehead. Brother Andrew turned to see her, alone at the far end of the room with the jewel already glowing gently.

"Where did you get that from?" He turned back to the others. "You never told me she could use a jewel."

"Do you challenge me?" Lynella's voice sounded distant. She was standing absolutely motionless with her feet slightly apart and her hands by her side. After a long silence, Brother Andrew replied, "I don't want to challenge you. I want to help you."

"Then leave me alone! Leave me here!"

"No, I can't do that. You need us and we need you."

"What if I refuse to go?"

"Then," he paused, "I must challenge you but I warn you that you will hurt yourself."

The jewel started to glow more brightly. Maria shouted, "Don't, Lynella!"

Some of the others at table started to move. As the glow increased, one of them stood up and moved towards the door. Others followed and fled in panic, leaving Lynella facing Brother Andrew across an almost empty room.

"I have had over thirty years of practice at this," he warned. "Why fight me?" Lynella scarcely heard him. She was blind to everything around her, except the mechanism in the box. Somehow she was able to sense the power in it. She could not make out any detail but was just able to discern a point to focus on. She pictured it as one of the rings she had been practising on and pushed at it. It seemed to give slightly but then rebounded on her, causing searing pain. Brother Andrew spoke again, "There, you see. You can't get through it. Why make a scene? Why not just come?"

Lynella was swaying. The jewel was dull now. She felt her mind being drawn into the aura. This was quite different from projecting power into it. This was a form of captivity in which Brother Andrew's aura would control her power. It seemed easy; there would be nothing to worry about. As he took control, she was able to feel his personality; she had the sense of a good man working for something he believed in. This gave her confidence. It was something he believed in with a total, blind and overpowering faith. Then, at last, the realisation came to her. He was not here to help her. He was here because he needed her for the plan. She would become a tool, like the box on the table, in a plan she knew nothing about. She would never become a mage this way. She must fight before the trap closed.

She found pathways like those in the jewel. But each one followed an exact geometric route. There was nothing beautiful about it like the jewel, it was just a machine with a job to do. Its job was to store energy in rings that were set all around it and the energy it was storing was hers. The jewel was now dark. She found herself watching Brother Andrew was leaning over the device. Her hands felt cold, even the pain in her head felt cold. She sensed somebody walking towards her, reaching out to her and holding her. She saw Maria looking at her, trusting her, believing in her. Believing in her power, her future.

Brother Andrew was caught off guard. By the time Lynella regained consciousness, he was on his way back to the monastery. The guard had collected the ruins of his device.

## 6 Meeting with Paul

"I'm bored with this and I've still got a headache!" Lynella's voice rang out across the Great Hall. "Every time that ship passes overhead, it gets worse."

As she finished speaking, one pair of fist sized iron rings resting on the table beside her flew up against the wall, sending shards of stone onto the floor. The old steward looked terrified. He had never seen her use her power like this before.

"We're doing all we can, as fast as possible. Please be patient for a bit longer," he replied.

"But how fast is 'as fast as possible'? Why can't we just go and ask them to fly it somewhere else? I know all about what the compact says about going to the source, but nobody ever thought this would happen when they wrote it."

The steward looked horrified. "Dear girl, after all that I have taught you!"

"I insist that you summon the High Council to change the compact. I know how long it takes but we've got to do something."

The meeting was at an end. He let her have the last word, and grabbed the large pitcher of wine with such speed that much of it spilled down his woollen cloak. He had thought that the heavy cloud would be enough to hide the castle and, if they found nothing, the aliens on the ship would get bored and go away. They were obviously not going and he had no idea what to do. He drank the last of the wine, and wished for peace and quiet and a clear sky with no ships in it.

She walked out through the anterooms to the courtyard. The rooms were beautiful, and she had loved the way the sun came through the windows to light up the patterns on the rugs. But today there was no sunshine; everything was dim and overcast. Across the courtyard to the stables even the horses seemed agitated and her own, a powerful grey mare, was no exception. She fought to control the animal as they crossed the drawbridge, and then drove it forward as they galloped along the great road that went in a perfect straight line across the farmlands to the Northern keep, which would soon be visible at the edge of the forest. The wind in her hair made her feel better; the sound of the hooves beating on the earth drove away the pain from her head, but the clouds still oppressed her.

The Captain of the keep saw her coming and, knowing who it was, dusted off the chaff which always seemed to get on his tunic when he fed his chickens, and belted on his sword. She would resent the escort that she had to have when she went to look at the crucibles near the source, but regulations were regulations so, as always, he would go.

The small party, the girl, the Captain, and his six men set out. The Captain allowed Angus to take Lynella well to the front. They set a brisk pace as the road rose out of the valley, curving only slightly with the contours of the land. Quite suddenly, as they came close to the highest point, Angus stopped his horse, calling out to Lynella as he did so.

"What is it?" she asked, coming to a halt beside him.

"I saw someone," he replied. "They ran into the forest."

By this time, the others had caught up. The Captain had heard his reply.

"Probably just a traveller," he suggested, "scared of soldiers."

"Not looking like that." Angus turned to face them. "I managed to get quite a good look at him. His clothes were close fitting, smooth and neat looking. He looked like a city man. From a very strange city that is."

Paul had heard the sound of the hooves on the stone flags. Metal on stone. The horses were shod. He ran into the undergrowth. Now there were voices, indistinct, far up the road. The horses had stopped. Nothing more, just distant conversation too far away to hear. "Why are you hiding here waiting for us? Planning something are you?"

He turned to see Angus looming over him, sword drawn.

"Stand up and come with us."

He stood and stumbled out to the road.

"Down there." Angus pointed with his sword.

As they approached, the Captain moved forward with two of his men, managing with

some difficulty to ensure that Lynella remained behind them.

"Only one as far we could tell." Angus reported. He leaned down to push Paul forward.

"What is your name?" the Captain asked with a suitable tone of authority. Paul looked up at him but found himself still unable to speak.

"If you're innocent, you have nothing to fear. Tell me your name"

"Perhaps he can't speak," Angus suggested.

"Perhaps he's from the ship and doesn't speak our language," Lynella added.

"The lady is right. I have come here on a ship". He finally replied in an accent they struggled to follow.

"Ask him how he landed while the ship is still up there. Ask him why he speaks our language. Ask him why they came, and how many of them there are on the ship" Lynella was still speaking when the Captain interrupted her to address Paul again.

"So what is your name?"

"My name is Paul Evans."

"At least, ask him why the ship gives me a headache and how long they plan to stay."

Paul couldn't help looking up and watching her move on her horse as it pulled restlessly on its bridle.

The Captain spoke to Lynella; "We must take this man to the steward. We have many questions to ask him and he may have many to ask us." Turning to Paul, he said, "You must come with us and explain yourself to the steward of this kingdom" Lynella smiled. She was going to enjoy watching this. The steward was going to have to do something now.

The Captain of the keep was unfortunately smaller than any of his men so it fell to him to share a horse with one of them so that the stranger could ride his own. Paul had not ridden a horse since childhood but he managed to get his foot in the stirrup and pull himself up without loss of dignity.

The sun was setting as they came to the edge of the plain, stopping briefly at the keep to rest the horses. They rode fast along the road to the castle. With no moons and few nearby stars, the darkness on this planet came suddenly and blanketed everything. Faint pinpricks of light ahead were all they had to guide them but still the soldiers drove the horses on, confidently finding the line of flagstones across the plain.

Flickering oil lamps hanging from the chains on either side of a drawbridge suddenly revealed a structure which appeared to be well maintained but seldom used. Entering the courtyard beyond they were met by men who helped him dismount and took the horses. The Captain spoke with one of them and hurried into the building ahead to announce their arrival.

Paul assumed that there would be a Great Hall and he was not disappointed. The room he was escorted into was beautifully decorated and similar to some he had seen in old castles on earth. Oil paintings and an assortment of swords, spears and shields hung from the high walls. Above a fireplace in the wall facing him, the largest of the pictures showed a single man, apparently unarmed, facing a large green dragon rearing up on two of its six legs. There were many doorways to either side and from one of these an old man entered. Lynella smiled broadly and said, "This is Paul Evans from the ship. He is here so you can explain to him why they have got to go away."

The man smiled absently at her and turned to the Captain.

"We think he really is from the ship, Sir. We found him by the road to the source. His clothing and accent seem very strange. He tried to hide from us."

"Oh I see," the man replied. He looked at Paul carefully, "I am the steward of this kingdom. Please excuse the Princess and be welcome here. It is true that your ship has caused certain difficulties and we should discuss them later. We should be honoured if you would be our guest here for the night."

Paul thanked him and accepted. Angus was assigned to show him to a room. They crossed to one of the doors. Its entire surface was metal; from the colour, he guessed it was copper or some form of brass. All of the upper half had been worked into a design which showed another dragon, this time confronted by a line of spears. Through the door, a corridor led to a

flight of stairs. Along another short corridor at the top of the stairs, he was shown to a room. Once inside, he found it pleasant, if a little cold. A bed, table and chairs all looked to be of relatively familiar design but were once again all made of metal, albeit with generous upholstery. The door was closed behind him but opened almost immediately for a maid who lit the fire and apologised for not having it ready for him. She returned with a bowl of water but then stood transfixed when she saw him using the electric razor from his backpack to take his first shave in two days.

Soon a footman came to escort him down to the dining room. Just two gold candelabra lit one end of a large table. The steward ushered him towards a chair next to Lynella.

"Permit me to introduce the royal family of the Southern Kingdom. You have, of course met the Princess Lynella. This is her cousin Henry, the Prince Regent and her mother. I am her great Uncle." Another girl, who seemed to be of similar age to Lynella, was not introduced.

After a moment of silence, Lynella's mother said a lengthy grace and they sat down. However the other girl remained standing behind Lynella's chair where she remained virtually motionless and silent throughout the meal.

Lynella turned to him, "Now, tell us all about your ship and why you came here."

"Let the gentleman enjoy his meal without all of your questions," her mother scolded her.

"Perhaps you could join me in my study afterwards?" The steward continued, "and perhaps Lynella might like to join us and hear your account?"

At that point, servants entered with soup. Paul was relieved to identify carrot and other familiar vegetables in it as it was served into his plate from a tureen, both of which appeared to be made of gold. He turned to see Lynella looking at him, "It would spoil this excellent meal to tell you the whole story just now." This earned him an approving look from her mother. Having said it, however, he could think of nothing else to make conversation. They ate in silence as a tender roast, served with a strong red wine, followed the soup.

After the meal, the steward took Paul to his study, and they sat in comfortable chairs by the fire while he explained why Lynella had said that they had to go away. The area around the landing field was apparently known as the source. This was where a Great War had been fought and it was marked by a single standing stone at the centre and a ring of similar stones around the perimeter, and it was absolutely forbidden for anyone to go there. This was why it was essential that they should leave, they were desecrating the memory of the fallen. The ship was, apparently, also upsetting the population even while it was in orbit and was not welcome.

The steward paused as a servant entered with fresh glasses and another bottle.

"It seems that we are giving the Princess a headache. We certainly have no wish to do that," Paul said, remembering her remark from earlier and trying to lighten the mood. To his surprise, the steward took him absolutely seriously, "Yes, she has experienced severe pain since your ship arrived. That was how we first noticed you were there"

He made no attempt to explain this before carrying on with his original subject. He emphasised that the ship would have to leave as soon as possible but indicated that, now he knew that the crew was human, he would welcome it if a few of them decided to stay, especially those who knew how to fly it. Paul could not possibly imagine what use a knowledge of nuclear engineering would be on the planet but made no comment. He tried to give a brief account of the mission, "We have only come here to mine ores. We do not plan to stay or to disturb your lives here. We have chosen a site which is special because it has something called a magnetic field which will enable our ship to land. This will mean that we can load the ore faster than carrying it up in our shuttle craft, and will mean that we can get away quicker."

The steward seemed to understand what he was saying so Paul went on to ask about the old ships that he had seen. The old man paused and Lynella took the opportunity to tell Paul about the other castles and the festivals. She was still describing the Eastern castle when her mother entered the room, "You are spending too much time in here Lynella, you must leave the men to their discussions"

Lynella ignored her and said to Paul, "Since you have to hurry back in the morning, there will be no time to look round the castle. Would you like to see a bit of it now?"

"Out of the question," her mother cut in.

"You can't stop me," Lynella replied

"Technically not, but the steward of the kingdom can. You may be able to call yourself an adult now but he can still stop you." She glared at the steward.

Paul felt uneasy as the steward looked from one to the other, before addressing the older lady. "In this matter, I must consider both the benefit of the Princess and that of the family." His soothing tone was met by a menacing scowl. "It may be somewhat unconventional for this visitor to be escorted around the castle by the Princess." He paused to think of suitable words. "But it would certainly bring considerable benefit to the family if she was to associate with a gentleman who can fly ships."

"You're saying we should let her just wander about with him?" the lady's voice carried a biting scorn which showed the signs of many years of use.

The steward was unconcerned. "Yes, in effect I am. You prevented her from meeting men from the other families and you even tried to send her to the monastery. I am not going to stop her. She is, as you said, an adult now."

Lynella grinned triumphantly as her mother left the room. She turned to Paul and, when asked again, he agreed to go. But they were not alone. The girl from the dining room followed them like a ghost. Lynella called her and introduced her as Maria. She smiled with a melting warmth but said nothing, withdrawing but never leaving.

The other rooms of the castle were cold and poorly lit but still magnificent. In each they found footmen and maids hurriedly lighting lamps. Finally, they found themselves on their own in a small anteroom with doors at both ends and a long window. The lanterns in the courtyard outside cast flickering shadows on the opposite wall. He suggested that they sit on a seat by the window and to his surprise, she accepted. "I'm sorry you've got to go back so soon. When can you come again?"

"I'll try and sort out the rota and come back in about four days."

"I have a little gift for you to take with you." Maria emerged from the shadows and passed her a soft leather purse. She carefully untied it produced four intricately decorated semi-circles made of a bright metal that looked like silver. She passed one of them to him and he held it up to the light to admire the workmanship. It felt heavy, hard and utterly cold. The patterns of the design on it resembled those he had seen on the marker stones. She smiled at him. "They're bracelets, it is a tradition that people here wear them"

"But how?" There was no sign of any way of joining them. The ends were plain and flat.

"Let me show you. Hold out your wrist"

He held it out. First, she produced a thin flexible strip of wood from the purse and wrapped it round his wrist. Then she took two of the semi-circles, placing them around it. Taking two more small strips of wood to hold against them, she held the two halves together with the ends pushed against each other. She then paused and concentrated on the ring. He felt a pulsing warmth from it. In a moment, she let go and he saw that the bracelet was now a continuous silver band with no sign of ever having been in two halves.

"How did you do that?" He asked

She touched her finger to his lips.

He might look a bit of a fool if someone found him in the fitters' shop cutting them off, but apart from that, they seemed harmless. He let her put another one on his other wrist in the vain hope that he might work out how she was doing it. When they were both on, he noticed scorch marks on the wood.

A few moments later, he glanced at his watch. It had stopped. The display was completely dark.

"Please don't tell the others about them," she said.

"Why not? You haven't stolen them for me, have you?"

"No. Just please keep them hidden for a bit."

She stood up and they walked slowly back to join her family.

The next morning, the sounds of the castle woke him early and he immediately felt the

strange metal bands round his wrists. In the early light, he was able to look at them more closely. There was absolutely no sign of how they were joined together. When he stood up and walked about they seemed to tremble slightly as if they noticed what he was doing. He pulled the sleeves of his shirt over them and went down to breakfast.[more]

The steward was already at the table. "Good morning, I hope you slept well."

"Very well thank you," Paul replied sleepily.

The steward went on, "I am glad to hear that you will be returning. I shall tell the other members of the High Council that you and your crew don't plan to remain permanently at the source, and I hope that a compromise may be reached."

Paul mused that if they never went into the source area then they would not notice the lack of five hundred thousand tonnes of titanium, zinc and other metals, and the environmental catastrophe that would be created by strip mining and smelting them. The idea of staying on this planet was, however, growing on him and the thought of the deception made him feel very uncomfortable.

Soon they went out to their horses. He looked up to the side of the courtyard and saw the window where they had been sitting the night before and wondered what the secrets were that were being kept from him.

The soldiers rode with them as far as the edge of the source. Paul then went on alone and on foot to find his jeep. He felt a sense of betrayal as he set out in defiance of their compact but Lynella seemed to understand his position and to know that he would return.

It was still early in the day and she liked to sit alone by the one remaining ship in the crucibles, so she asked the soldiers to move away up the hill and wait for her. On this occasion, she decided to climb over the low wall and sit right on the vast iron ring. The superstructure had been gone for generations so this was as close as she could get to imagining what they had been like to fly on. As the sun grew hotter, she daydreamed about the stories of the ancients. Then suddenly the pain was back in her head. The alien ship must be overhead. In a surge of anger she held her jewel to her forehead. She let her mind enter the iron below her and fought back. Now the searing torture that was engulfing her. The iron could absorb her anger and reduce the pain. She drove harder. Suddenly, she felt it move beneath her. It was rising up, trying to fly as it had for the ancient mages. She tried to hold on to the rusting surface, losing her concentration. It fell back with a crash that echoed across the valley [more].

On Atlanta, a technician cursed. The routine orbital adjustment manoeuvre [explain] had not worked as planned. An unusual pulse from the anomaly below meant that they would have to do it all again next time around or the Captain would start complaining that they were at the wrong altitude.



## 7 Paul returns to site

While Paul had been gone, chaos had spread across his site. An air of desperation had spread like wildfire. A drive in one of the big scraper units had failed and, rather than run it back down hill and empty it, the foreman had decided to try and push it up with two bulldozers and unload it on the spoil heap. Now it lay on its side, having skidded off the road. The cab was pointing almost straight up into the air. The oil had run out of the engine in front of it, splashed on the enormous tyre and spread out on the grass below. The articulated joint had been bent right back on itself as the weight of the load had driven it down into the earth. The steering ram on the side he could see had been forced in on itself and the hose had burst spraying the area with hydraulic oil. All of the structure around the joint was bent and buckled. The unit had been abandoned; the crew had simply tried to work the others harder to make up for lost time. The machines had worked faster, and with less care. Many of the setting out posts had been lost and a second unit was now stuck on the far side of the field, having moved out too far onto the bad ground.

"I don't care how long it takes to unload it. Dig it out by hand if you have to. I have arranged for a rough terrain crane to come down from the ship tomorrow to get it out." He looked at the foreman, wondering what would happen if he just refused.

"You're seriously going to try to get the fitters to mend that, are you? It's a write off!" The man was obviously too stupid to understand that, for the next two years, this plant was all they had. If he had been brighter, he would probably not have been on the planet in the first place.

"It's going back to the ship. They can fix it up there. You get the bloody thing back to the compound and let me worry about the rest." And worry he would. If he could not deliver this plant to the mines at the end of this site, he was in deep trouble.

They drove across to the other machine. The setting out engineers were working at replacing the posts that showed the outline of the site. Three concentric circles. The inner one was half a mile across and showed the extent of the great hole that they were digging for the hub. The other two were quite close together and two miles across. They marked out the trench that would take the torus.

The other machine was easier. It had moved off the area where they had removed the boggy topsoil but it was not on a haul road, so it could be unloaded where it was. It all seemed quite simple to him but the foreman was obviously not up to it.

## 8 Paul kidnapped

Across the flat, windy grassland he saw Lynella in the distance walking alone towards the invisible line that marked the edge of the source.

By the time he reached he she was waiting for him by one of the marker stones. "I've come back, just like I said I would, but I can't stay for too long. It was chaos back there."

"I would like you to meet some important men in this kingdom," she replied, sounding tense and turning to walk towards the crucibles, leaving him to follow a few paces behind.

He suddenly saw a group of people moving quickly towards him from one side. He guessed that they had stayed out of sight behind some bushes. They were behind him almost immediately, cutting off his retreat. He turned to face them and stopped in surprise. There were six of them. The steward was there but he was the odd one out. The other five were wearing brown hooded cloaks and had crucifixes hanging from chains around their necks.

The steward presented the leader of the party followed by the others, "I am so glad you could come. Let me introduce the Abbot of the Monastery of St Christopher and these fellow members of his order."

The Abbot was clearly different; his crucifix was more ornate and there was a total stillness around him; his robes were not moving in the wind and even the grass near his feet was perfectly still. The man stared at Paul with an intensity which might have terrified him but, on this occasion, it gave him a great inner strength.

"I am more pleased than you can imagine to meet you. My faith is very important to me and there are few on my ship who will share it with me. I hope that we can spend some time in prayer together." The Abbot's well-rehearsed stare faltered; even his aura now appeared uncertain. One of the other monks, an old and gentle looking man with a pleasant smile and a walking stick to rest on, replied, "It would please the Abbot greatly if you could come to the monastery with us. It is only a few days ride from here. You would find peace there for your prayers."

"Quite so" the Abbot added.

"Unfortunately, I cannot go that far today. As I was saying to Lynella, I have urgent duties to attend to. In a few months, though, my workload will drop off a lot and I would love to go." They did not look as if they had come all this way for this type of response.

"Perhaps, you could all come to the castle?" Lynella suggested.

"No," replied the Abbot and this time, his stare, directed at her, worked perfectly and she moved nervously across to stand next to the steward.

"You shall come to the monastery and repent your sins. The needs of your immortal soul are greater than the needs of your duties at the source." The monks moved towards him. Two of them were large and looked exceptionally fit. Horses were brought and Lynella and the Steward stood helplessly as he was ordered to mount one of them.

Paul had only arranged to be away for two days this time. He had to return; the consequences of dereliction of duty on this mission were loss of pay and imprisonment. Starting to sweat he reached into his backpack and pulled out his gun. He knew from his last visit that nobody would know what it was, and the Abbot just looked with amused interest as he loaded it.

"What is that?" He asked

"Watch," said Paul and he fired it at a small rock. The bang made the horses start and the rock flew backwards.

"This is a gun. It can kill you," he said pointing it at all of them.

"Now, let me go back to my ship." They all moved back, except for the Abbot who just sat on his horse, a look of confidence on his face.

"I mean it, I cannot let you take me prisoner." But the Abbot simply moved his horse to block Paul's path and prevent him from escaping. In complete panic, Paul fired at the Abbot's leg. He hoped that the wound would not be too severe but he had to get away. The leg jerked back but showed no sign of injury and, in front of it, suspended in the air, Paul saw a small black

object. The Abbot smiled and leant down to pick it up. The smile immediately left his face as he touched it. The bullet was almost red hot.

After a considerable argument, the Abbot had persuaded Lynella and the Steward to return home and, for the first hour Paul and the monks rode in silence. At last, he summoned the courage to try to find out what was going on. He moved up to ride beside the Abbot.

"What is it you want from me?" He asked.

"Your ship brings evil to us. We must exorcise the devil from your soul. Then you will work with us."

"I accept that the Devil is at work in our world. Events in my life have given me a clear picture of his influence, but what can I do about it? Taking me away from my work will simply get me into trouble and prevent me from doing anything to help you."

The Abbot paused, seeming unable to think of a reply.

They moved east following the marker stones at the edge of the source. Paul had seen the terrain from the ship but it was still difficult to work out where they were. To the left there was the edge of the forest. There was no sign of the familiar trees from earth. The giant ferns were a far paler green than any tree he knew and they formed a solid line, concealing all that lay beyond them. To the right, the steep hillside behind the crucibles had given way to rolling hills of coarse grassland. Gradually, the open country gave way to forest and it covered the land ahead. They were soon moving through a clearing where the ferns had been cut back to keep the road clear leaving a solid wall of dense growth to either side obscuring any view of the landscape.

After some time, he saw a horse and cart approaching them in the distance. Having seen the way in which the Abbot had forced the steward to leave him, Paul had no hopes of escape and simply watched with curiosity as they passed by.

In the middle of the day the party stopped to rest. Paul almost fell to the ground and only stood up with considerable difficulty.

"What's wrong with you? You've only been riding a horse! If you want anything to drink, come here." The Abbot looked at him with disdain. Paul decided that he was in no mood to argue so he staggered towards him. He was given an earthenware mug with water in it. He sat down on a fallen tree trunk and was joined by the older monk who had spoken to him earlier.

"I am Brother Andrew. You must accept that the road to salvation is often long and hard. But this road seems to be much harder for you than it is for us. Are you not used to travelling on horses?"

"No I'm not. You see, the world that I come from is completely different. Please go and persuade the Abbot that I can't do anything for him. Taking me away like this won't do anybody any good and will get me into a lot of trouble."

The old monk smiled at him in an understanding way. "I'm sure that it will all work out all right in the end. Perhaps he will go and talk to your superiors and explain to them about the needs of your soul. They must understand.... You say that you don't use horses. We know that you can fly ships. You mean to say that you go everywhere in them and don't need the horses?"

"No, we have things like cars and planes that you don't have here."

"What are they? Do they work in the same way as the ships?"

"If you want to find out how our machines work, I shall be happy to tell you some other time, but right now, I want to go back to my ship. If you really want me along for some sort of religious ceremony, let's get on with it."

"Saving your soul is not as simple as you think. I have been assigned to you as your mentor and it will take many hours of discussion and meditation. You must trust me to guide the discussion."

"Look, who says my soul needs saving anyway?"

"You have flown ships in direct and open violation of the compact."

"If that's a sin in your religion, then you are just going to have to accept that I didn't know about it. Anyway, the crew fly the ship, I don't have anything to do with it."

"You have much to understand. We are not fools. We saw you coming across the plain in a ship and you were the only one in it."

"That was just a jeep, not a ship. Now go and tell the Abbot that I frankly don't believe that he has the least interest in my soul and, if he wants technical information from me, this is a stupid way of getting it. None of it would be any use to him anyway."

Brother Andrew returned to the Abbot and a heated discussion followed. Soon, the horses were brought and they moved on in silence. They passed a few other travellers. One was clearly a messenger, riding a large horse with saddlebags but most were carrying farm produce on packhorses or in carts.

They continued until sunset and ate a meal in the fading light of the evening. The days on the planet were longer than earth-normal and Paul was too tired to contemplate escape before he lay down to sleep on a rough blanket. [this is a list – needs more interest... details of crucibles]

They set off again in the early morning and eventually emerged from the forest again. He saw another set of crucibles and a road could be seen leading up the hillside away from them. These crucibles were not as impressive as those of the Southern Kingdom were but they were still massive. All of them were empty.

They proceeded in silence for the rest of the day. After a few hours riding on the following morning, they could see a large hill ahead of them which Paul estimated was almost due north of the centre of the source. At the foot of the hill, there were just two stone crucibles. They were smaller than most of those he had seen before but he could see that one had a ship in it. They turned towards the hill, following a narrow path of well-worn flagstones which led around the edge of one of the crucibles and seemed to disappear into the trees at the foot of the hill. Moving into the trees, he saw a small paved clearing ahead with a group of men in it. There were some monks among them but most of them appeared to be servants and, when the party dismounted, some of these took the horses. Walking on, they turned sharply towards the hill and abruptly entered a cave.

The path was still smooth and paved and flickering lanterns revealed places where the rock had been cut back from it. In other places, there were carvings in the rock. Some of them were simple; others were highly ornate but all of them showed symbols of Christianity, crucifixes and figures of the Virgin Mary.

After a short distance, they came to a substantial stone doorway. The thick wooden door was opened as they approached.

"Take him to a cell to contemplate his sins." The Abbot addressed the two large monks who had been guarding him.

"What about that weapon he used? We have no auras to protect us from him."

"All right. Search him while I wait, but be quick." Paul's pack, jacket and the contents of his pockets were rapidly removed and he was thoroughly searched. The monks were particularly interested by the bracelets that Lynella had placed on his wrists and showed them to the Abbot. Soon satisfied that he was no longer a threat, they took him through the door. Collecting a lantern from a rack just inside, one of them lit it from a candle which was provided for the purpose and they went through a maze of dark corridors deep into the hill. Along some of them, strange spheres hung from the roof, reflecting the light from the lantern as they passed. Finally, Paul was pushed through a doorway. He heard the door slam shut and a rusty bolt being pushed home.

## 9 Paul meets the abbot

Slowly, as Paul's eyes adjusted, he realised that it was not completely dark. Above him, there was one of the glass spheres and it was glowing. By its dim light, he could see the limits of his cell which contained nothing but a straw mattress. It was hot and stifling; the only source of ventilation appeared to be a small grill in the door. He lay down in exhaustion and soon fell asleep.

He awoke to find that some food had been slid through a small hatch at the bottom of the door. It was only bread and cheese but it was fresh and tasted good and there was cool, clean water with it. After eating, he checked every inch of the cell but found that it had been roughly hewn out of solid rock and offered no chance of escape. By listening at the door, he could occasionally hear the sound of distant footsteps but apart from that, he could neither hear nor see anything.

Some time later, he became aware of a gentle humming noise which seemed to come out of the rock from all directions at the same time. The noise slowly built up and began to pulse with an increase and decrease of intensity every few seconds. As it pulsed, the brightness of the sphere above him pulsed with it. [needs metaphor] Over a period of a few minutes, it grew and then receded. Shortly after it had stopped, he heard his door being opened.

"The Abbot would like to see you. Please come this way." The guard looked almost friendly.

Soon, he saw a brighter light emerging from a doorway ahead and was taken in. The room had clean straight walls hung with oil paintings. He was shown to a comfortable chair facing the Abbot who was behind a large, beautifully carved writing table. The room was lit by two ornate oil lamps hung from brackets to either side. Glass globes hung from the ceiling but these were not lit.

"I hope that you have now considered the needs of your soul, and will be more helpful with me than you were with Brother Andrew."

"It so happens that I have indeed considered the needs of my soul and would still actually appreciate an opportunity to pray here; that is, if you do pray. This is a monastery, isn't it?"

The Abbot replied in a firm but level voice, "There are many things that you do not understand about our Lord, and the first is that you should show due respect and deference to those whom he has chosen to speak his word. You see that I have an aura?"

"Yes, it's a bit obvious isn't it?"

"Then you must realise that it is a sign from God and shows that I have been chosen by Him. Since the time our landing on this planet, there have been just a few in each generation who have been chosen in this way and they have become the senior members of this order and held in respect by all."

"Looks more like some kind of Psi power being used to control a high frequency electromagnetic field to me. Very clever how it stopped the bullet but not a lot to do with religion. Is that what you use to make the lights work?" He looked up at one of the unlit globes and added "When they do. Come to think of it, it's just a variant on the trick Lynella must have used to put these bracelets on - is she supposed to be Holy too?"

Once again, the Abbot kept his voice level, only showing his anger in his eyes. "Brother Andrew will see to the needs of your soul and ensure that you study the ways of obedience in due course, but for now the Lord has given me strength to suffer your irreverence in order to pursue his work. Tell me about Psi power and electromagnetic fields."

"I keep telling you that I can't help you. You probably know more about Psi power than anybody back home and I don't know anything at all about it, except that nobody has ever proved that it actually exists. I suppose I could teach you some basic electromagnetism but it would take hundreds of years to develop the technology to build a ship like ours here and I don't know how most of it works anyway."

The Abbot looked at him carefully, and methodically rearranged some of the papers on

his desk, pausing to read a few lines of the neatly handwritten text. Paul looked back and wondered if the interview techniques taught in management studies had been invented by a man like this. He was not fooled. The Abbot had no more important business. Trying unsuccessfully to sound somewhat bored, the Abbott continued, "You were saying that I know about this thing you call Psi."

"You seem to use it for your aura."

"My aura is a miracle given to me by the Lord. Is that what you call Psi?"

"No, quite the opposite. It's a way of describing things that are not miracles but cannot yet be explained by science."

The Abbot looked pleased. "So if you can't explain it, how do you know that it's not a miracle?"

Paul paused. He had a point. "My religion is based on faith, a sort of instinctive understanding. If your power came from it, I would know. Anyway, how do you explain Lynella's powers?"

"Lynella is using the ancient powers of evil which have been forbidden by the compact for generations and were believed to have died out with their perpetrators."

"Who says that she is evil and you are good?"

"The powers of evil killed and maimed thousands of innocents in the wars of the great mages. Your faith will show you the good and the evil."

He looked at the floor and replied almost apologetically, "That's just the point. It doesn't tell me what you're telling me".

Carefully leaning back in his chair and folding his arms, the Abbot gave Paul his full attention. "Why were you chosen to be sent on this mission? What special skills do you have?"

"I wasn't sent. The regulations said that nobody should leave the site. I broke them. I saw a marker stone and decided to investigate to see if the beings that made it were still here."

The abbot smiled. "Yes, I can see you breaking regulations. But I actually wanted to know who sent you to this planet."

"Nobody sent me that time either. I just wanted to get away. There were a lot of risks but it looked like a great opportunity with good pay. You see this is the first ship from earth every to go to another planet. Hyperspace travel was only discovered five years ago." He suddenly stopped. "Except... except how did your families get here?"

"Our families were brought here by the power of their faith. What were you running away from? What regulations was it this time?"

"I am not a criminal. I wasn't running from the law."

Above the desk one of the glass spheres began to glow, pulsing slightly as before. By the light of the oil lamps Paul noticed two fine wires leading from the top of it.

"So that power you are using for the lights. That can't be used for your ships can it? Is that what you think I can do for you? Make it powerful enough. You have no idea."

"What were you running from? Was it another girl, like the princess?" He leaned forward looking Paul straight in the eye. "An enraged family, father and brothers? She should be warned."

"No, you can't threaten me with that. I was the one who should have been enraged. Why are you so keen to make ships fly? Where do you want to go? The magnetic lift system will only work over the anomaly at the source. You can't use it to fly around this planet. Our ship has to use regular jet engines to speed up or slow down in orbit."

"It is the duty of every person of our faith to be a pilgrim. We must all strive to be pilgrims even if it cannot be done for many generations. But now the time may be near."

"Where do you want to go on this pilgrimage? Where are the shrines?"

"Jerusalem of course. Has the earth forgotten?"

## 10 Captain turner arrives at site

George Henry Turner III came from the nearest anybody had ever been to a spacefaring family. His father and his grandfather had worked for NASA and he wore his immaculate white overall with the Stars and Stripes and the NASA emblem on it with pride. The Mission Director scowled at it. Captain Turner scowled back at the space on the wall where the presidential emblem had been. The large Great River Mining company logo made him angry every time he saw it. He remembered the bitter day when he had been told that hyperspace technology had moved forward so fast that his ship would be out of date as soon as they finished building it. He still couldn't accept the idea of selling it like a used car.

"The first piling rig is working well," the Director announced. "How soon will the rest be ready?"

"They'll be ready by the end of the week, just like I told you. I'll give your man Evans that much. He may be a patronising jerk, but he certainly did some good design work on them. How is he getting on down there?"

"He's gone"

"He can't have. He's the only one there with any idea. This isn't a helicopter, you know. You can't just land it in a field. It's over a hundred thousand tonnes of very delicate spacecraft."

"You have accepted that you can't find anything wrong with his calculations and landing will halve our time here, so let's get to the point. Do you know where the piles have got to go?"

"Of course I do. I did the drawings showing the support points for the ship, didn't I?"

"Right. I want you to go down there and make sure they go there."

"No way. I'm not going down into that lot. Anyway, what happened to him?"

"We don't know and it's none of your business anyway. The point is that in exactly six months from today, your precious ship is going down there, whether you like it or not, and if you don't go down there to get it right, then it will just be too bad, won't it?"

George remembered the first time he had met the Director. They had been in this same cabin, only he had been behind the desk. The Director had walked in and spelled out what was going to happen, and added that the Captain's cabin was now going to be the owner's cabin. He hated these meetings every time, but every time there was nothing he could do about it.

He left the room with as much dignity as he could manage, walked to the end of the corridor and looked out of the viewing port. The planet below was a mass of swirling clouds and did not look at all inviting. It was difficult to watch any part of it for any length of time because the rotation of the ship made it appear to turn around every 40 seconds. [This rotation was sufficient to give the effect of normal earth gravity at the outer edge of the cylindrical hub of the ship]. He stood watching for some time, looking at the storms clouds below.

He took the lift up to the shuttle bay, holding on to the grab rails to counter the gyroscopic forces that pulled him across it and the progressive weightlessness as he moved towards the centre of the hub.

"Good morning, Captain," his officer on watch in the bay greeted him.

"I'm going down to the planet." It hurt to say it. Time and again he had reassured his crew that none of them would have to leave their ship. The officer looked shocked but made no reply.

"Shuttle 25 is prepared for flight. Sir. Depart in 5 minutes"

Descending through the clouds, he saw the rich green of the forest below him with the great circular scar of the landing field now clearly visible. The shuttle hovered over some clear ground and finally came to rest near some site huts. He looked out of the window in horror. He had seen the mud on the landing gear of the shuttles in the mother ship but never, in his worst nightmares, had he imagined it was as bad as this. The other shuttles were scattered around in no particular order. One was even leaning at a dangerous angle, almost down to its belly in the mud. The whole area was covered in massive deep ruts with pools of water in the bottom.

Just as the door opened, there was a crashing thump which made the ground shake. He looked up to see where it had come from. Another followed it. Every three seconds, it came and now he could see the pile driver driving the test piles on the far side of the compound. It looked like some great medieval monster hanging from the hook of the crane. The great piston rose slowly up and fell with a crash to rise up again in a cloud of black diesel smoke as the machine fired. Underneath it was the pile. They had no concrete and not much steel, so it was timber, most the trunk of a massive oak tree. Each time the piston fell, it was driven less than an inch into the ground but, as he watched it, he could see it slowly moving down. He could see now that this crazy scheme might just work, but that was just one pile. They had to drive ten thousand of them and they had just six months to do it.

He walked over to the site huts and opened the door to the one with "WORKS MANAGER" painted on the door in irregular letters. Inside, he saw a large man sitting behind a desk eating some stale looking sandwiches.

"Hello, you're the ship's Captain aren't you?"

"I am Captain Turner."

"What the hell are you doing down here? I thought that you lot refused to come down?"

"Did you?"

"I was told that a new site manager was coming on the shuttle."

"That's me. I've got to run this site from now on"

"Says who?"

"The Mission Director."

He paused to drink what appeared to be weak coffee from a chipped mug.

"If that's the case, I wish you joy. Wait till you see the idiots I've been given to do the job."

"I'll bring some of my own men. At any time I can spare about 50. They may not be experienced in this type of work but most of them helped build that ship up there."



## 11 Data bullet launch

"Attention all personnel on the ship. This is the Mission Director. At noon on Thursday; that is in exactly 48 hours from now, we are going to launch the first data bullet back to earth. Because of the strong magnetic fields in this part of space, using the accelerators to launch it will jolt the ship with 5 g moving to ship north for 5 seconds. Then we shall have to get it back into its proper orbit by pulsing the drive over the anomaly using 2 g to ship south the next minute or so. Everything must be secured, and I mean everything. If anybody lands up in the sort of bloody shambles that happened all over the ship when we came here, the full cost of the damage will be deducted from their pay. Is that clear?"

All personal messages for earth must be in the ship network for optical encoding by 18.00 today. I remind you that any messages containing technical information and any longer than 5 kilobytes will not be sent. Thank you for your attention."

The Director switched off the microphone and looked up at the Division Heads seated around the large mahogany veneered table in the conference room. "Ok, so now I need to finalise the report to the main board. I want you to have your detailed reports ready for me to read by tonight and I want a verbal update now so I can write the summary. We'll work round the table." He looked at the head of the survey division seated on his left.

"I've roughed out a summary - I'll read it out. Surveying is proceeding exceptionally well. We have now drilled 200 boreholes in an area of five square miles just north of the landing field. The results confirm the aerial survey results and confirm that there is sufficient high-grade ore there for a full cargo. We are especially pleased with the high potential yield of platinum."

The head of mining looked up. "Sounds all right, but I've got nothing. They're using all our men to prepare the landing site."

"OK but make it sound a bit more positive. This lot's for the shareholders. We can put in a bit about those plant modifications you did to suit the terrain," the Director replied.

It was now the turn of the ore processing division. "We can tell them that we're well on with doubling the capacity of the processing plant to cope with the extra load. It really is going to make a hell of a difference not having to put it all in shuttles."

"That sounds a bit better. Anything from personnel?"

"Nothing apart from a few injuries at the landing site and you said not to mention them." came the reply. "I presume that we're not going to tell them about Paul. Did I tell you that we've now found out that he cleared off for a few days once before, but managed to cover it up?"

"Don't worry about that. We can get along fine without him and I'll sort him out if and when he comes back. Now then, Mr First Officer, anything to report about the ship?"

The First Officer looked up sharply. "In the absence of the Captain, I can report on his behalf that all systems appear to be in full working order. However scheduled checking for the bullet launch has not been possible since all the teams were sent down to the planet."

He paused and the mission director looked up from the papers he had been scanning.

"Anything else?"

"The hydrogen separation plant at the landing site is now in full operation with air from the planet, so we are self-sufficient in shuttle fuel. We have been unable to find any major errors in Paul Evans's calculations for landing the ship."

"That's more like it."

At 10 AM on the day of the launch, the bullet was fully prepared. It consisted of a series of large powerful rare-earth magnets with a small detector and navigation coils around the perimeter, and a small pod in the centre which contained the navigation computer and the precious optical data discs. It was a cylindrical device measuring two feet across and it was placed in the launch tube which extended the full height of the axis of the hub in the exact centre of the ship.

At 11.55 AM, the Mission Director was sitting in the padded seat in the centre of the

control room. He had fastened his inertial restraint webbing and was looking at the bank of seven monitor screens in front of him. Six of them showed images from cameras on the outside of the ship. Some had the planet in the background as a large disc of green, blue and grey clouds.

The last screen carried a large NASA logo and the message: DATA BULLET LAUNCH SEQUENCE. COUNTDOWN MINUS FIVE MINUTES. This screen was repeated on monitors throughout the ship. He made a mental note to ensure that the logo was removed next time the programme was used and looked around the room feeling bored.

At the other side of the room, Captain Turner was studying the screen in front of him and looking nervously at the officer sitting next to him. There were many more screens with seats facing them, but several of these were empty.

FINAL COUNTDOWN 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1. Big numbers on every main screen. Deuterium plasma was accelerated simultaneously from six sources on the side of the ring and focused on a stream already in it. The resulting fusion drove the particles around the ring and threw the bullet up the launch tube and the ship recoiled towards the planet.

SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH. BULLET ENTERED HYPERSPACE AT 12 - 00 - 04.6  
PREPARING ORBITAL CORRECTION SEQUENCE

But then it froze. Three seconds. Another. Nothing moved.

"What the hell does that mean?" the Mission Director shouted.

"System's down!"

"Can't we fire manually?"

"No trajectory calculated."

"You must have planned. You spend your life doing it."

"No chance. Been fixing your bloody pile drivers."

Silence - except for the sound of typing at keyboards. The flight officer looked up.

"Elliptical orbit. Clear the planet but in the ionosphere for about 5 minutes".

The director looked at the screen showing the hub. The planet looked bigger, threatening.

The Captain reached for the microphone in front of him.

"This is the Captain. There has been an orbital correction failure but we are not, I repeat not, in severe danger. We shall, however, be spending a few minutes in transit in the ionosphere so you must remain safe in your seats because it could be bumpy. We may also have to fire the altitude jets to correct our orbit when we are clear." He switched the microphone off. "I wish I believed that."

The planet filled the whole of the screen. They were shuddering. Shaking images on the cameras showing glowing trails of ionic gas streaming behind ship. The spokes were glowing. Angry patches of red on the leading edges. Spreading towards the hub. Then they were rolling, side over side. They were thrown against their seats. The cameras showed the planet sweeping past.

"Look at the top screen. The roll is spreading the heat." The Captain shouted. "We might make it!"

As quickly as it had started, it was over. They were drifting free in orbit.

[Five miles below, Lynella screamed in pain. ]

## 12 High council meeting

It was a warm humid night. The Southern Castle had an air of festival. Throughout the day, groups had been arriving from the kingdoms and the monastery, and the courtyard was full of the retainers. A footman appeared at the door to the Great Hall and walked towards a barrel of ale that had been set up near the stables.

"Any word on what's happening?" A young soldier asked, sitting on the ground, close enough to the barrel to fill his tankard without standing up.

"Nothing yet. Looks like it's going to be a long one. They've just called for some more to eat. You've got yourselves well set out here. Where did you find the ale?"

"The steward left word that we could have some from the cellar. This stuff's excellent. Just because it's a meeting of the High Council and not a real festival doesn't mean that we can't have some fun."

The footman sat down next to him and poured himself a drink. Noticing the crest of the Southern Kingdom on the soldier's tunic, he asked, "Did you see what happened to the ship?"

"Yes, it was a sight to see. Looked just like a huge shooting star, even in the sunlight. I could even see the ring shape quite clearly like a great wheel with a big axel in the middle. Pity the poor folk inside it."

"Apparently, they're supposed to be all right"

"How have they worked that out?"

"The Abbot say's that he's been talking to the man he's taken prisoner, says that if the damage had been bad enough to hurt anybody, the whole thing would have fallen apart. He seems to have been really helpful. Everybody's angry with the Abbot for keeping him, and I must admit I can't see what's supposed to be wrong with him."

"He actually stayed here for a couple of days; seemed really friendly." The soldier replied, looking around to see who was listening. "Princess Lynella's really upset; word is that she likes him a lot. Mind you, there's nothing anybody can do about the Abbot" [explain why]

"If they all vote against him, he's got to release the man. But he's saying that he's holding the man for his own good - something to do with saving his soul and it is up to him to decide how long he has to stay."

The soldier paused, drank deeply from his tankard and shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't seem right to me, but I suppose he is an alien after all and there's nothing anybody like us can do about it, anyway. I'm just worried about Princess Lynella, I was in the castle courtyard a couple of minutes before we saw the ship and I heard her scream. I ran over and she had collapsed on the ground. She looked really bad, there was a lot of blood, she must have cut herself when she fell. Her maid Maria took her inside but nobody knows quite what had happened."

Returning to the High Council chamber, the footman saw that little progress had been made. He nodded silently to the other servants and took his place standing against the wall. Looking around, he could see that many of the plates which had been brought in, laden with the best food that could be found in the Kingdom, had scarcely been touched.

The chamber was magnificent, with ornately carved stone walls and a beautiful roof formed of intricate metal arches. On three sides, the seats were reserved for the royalty of the three kingdoms. The footman had always found it amusing to see the slight resentment on the faces of the Abbot and his monks at having to sit at seats which had obviously been added later on the remaining side.

The Council members looked worried and angry. Their anger was directed at the Abbot. The steward of the Southern Kingdom was speaking in a manner which made him seem quite unlike the mild personality that they all knew so well.

"What he has told you is correct. I did tell him that we would remove the ship by force if they did not go but I never in my wildest dreams imagined that we would do it. The powers to fly

our ships have been lost and are, in any event, forbidden by the compact."

The King of the Eastern Kingdom looked up in surprise

"Why did you do it then?"

"These people seem quite determined to get what they have come for and I thought that, if they felt a little less secure up there, then they might go away sooner and not come back."

The Abbot cut in, "That's a lie. You have been experimenting with ships. You have been violating the compact"

"That is not true. You know it isn't." The steward stared back in anger

"Then, how come your Princess Lynella could put marker bracelets on him then?" This remark had the desired effect. Everyone in the chamber looked stunned and turned to look at the Princess. To their surprise, she stood up and answered in a calm, clear voice, without a trace of apology.

"You know that I possess some of the old powers. It's nothing that I am ashamed of. I have actually looked at the wording of the compact in the original text and it specifically permits marker bracelets." She looked around for sympathy and added, "I admit that I never told him what they meant. I see them as a token of friendship and I stand by that, whatever you may say about him being evil. You must let him go."

"You should remember this," the Abbot said, ignoring her pleas. "I shall soon be putting a proposal to this Council that we take all measures in our power to destroy the ship and the evil people who came with it. Any person who fails to aid the Council in their properly agreed business is banished from the area of the Three Kingdoms for life."

"I'm sure that we can reach a compromise," The steward reassured her. "And just ask the ship to leave."

Lynella looked around. The leaders of the other two kingdoms did not look nearly so sure and their votes would be critical. She felt isolated and unwelcome. She stood up and walked to the door. As soon as she was through it, she stopped and turned. Looking around the chamber in angry frustration, she noticed that the Abbot was wearing a conspicuous ring on one of his fingers. She focused on it briefly and intensely. The Abbot jumped up and cried out in pain as the ring glowed red. By the time he realised what had happened, she had closed the door and gone.

In her rooms, Lynella opened the window to listen to the music coming up from the courtyard. Looking down, she saw the lanterns hanging around the walls, the group of musicians by the gate and the large area in front of them, which was being cleared for dancing. Smiling, she turned to Maria and said, "Let's go and join the party. If you could lend me some clothes that won't stand out and I put my hair up, not too many people will recognise me. Too bad if they do. I don't care what anybody thinks."

Moving into the courtyard, she suddenly hesitated as she saw the scene in front of her. The party was rapidly getting out of control. Over a hundred people had now arrived and more beer had been brought from the cellar. A large fire had been lit near the stables. She dreaded to think what they were burning on it but the carcass of a pig over the shoulder of one of the men near it was obviously what was going to be cooked on it. Seeing all of this, Maria looked at her with concern.

Lynella leaned towards her and said quietly, "Not my problem tonight." Grabbing her hand, she rushed into the crowd.

"Head for the eastern tower. I think my friends are over there," Maria shouted back.

They pushed and stumbled, trying to get through the dancers but the pace of the music was increasing and they were swept up by it. Suppressing the urge to tell them to stand aside for the Princess, and the stronger urge to flee in terror from the unfamiliar sensation of the press of the crowd, Lynella moved with the music. It never stopped, and as each dance moved into the next, she felt herself being swept along; soon losing sight of Maria.

Suddenly, she found herself under a lantern face to face with one of the footmen who normally served her at table. He recognised her and looked shocked. Smiling broadly, she

looked at him and said, "If you don't tell, I won't either."

"You must go," he stammered

"Don't be silly. It's only a dance"

"You don't understand. You are in danger. You must come with me"

Sensing that he was serious, she followed him, pushing through the crowd towards the eastern tower. By it, she saw a small group of people and recognised Maria and some of her friends.

"Thank God, we've found you" said Maria.

"Why? What on earth is wrong?"

A footman replied, "I have been serving in the meeting and heard what has happened. They have approved a resolution to attack the ship."

"So, I'm going to have to stay out of the way for a bit. That's not the end of the world. What makes you say that I'm in danger."

"The point is that they haven't banished you. They have summoned you. They sent men to your rooms and found you had gone. Now they think that you have fled from the castle and have sent men out to look outside. Luckily, nobody ever thought that you would be down here."

"So what if they find me?"

"You should see it in there. The Abbot's got the Kings from the Eastern and Western Kingdoms absolutely terrified. He's got them to approve a resolution placing you in his custody."

Lynella was shocked into silence. Finally, she looked around the small group.

"Will you help me?" she asked. They nodded in agreement.

"Will you help me free Paul Evans?" This time, they paused and looked at each other nervously before slowly agreeing.

The moved around towards the castle gate. Some of the Abbot's men were standing under a pair of lanterns hanging from chains next to them, checking everybody who was leaving.

"That does it. We're stuck," said Maria.

"Don't you believe it," Lynella replied. She stood looking at the lanterns. The Abbot's men saw her. Her friends tried to pull her back but she stayed, not moving. Suddenly the lanterns fell, crashing onto the flagstones and spraying burning oil. The men shouted and ran as their tunics burst into flames. Lynella led her friends out through the gate, melted links of the chains still hanging above them.

## 13 Flight from castle

Lynella stumbled and fell. They had been running for too long. They were past the farms now and the ground was rough with a mass of fallen branches in the coarse grass, catching her feet in the dark. She couldn't go on. But then they saw the riders again. Silhouettes against the fire. Gathered on a ridge.

Some of them turned. "Perhaps they'll go back to help." Angus said.

"We should help. We should be there. If the stables have caught it may spread to the armoury."

Angus helped her to stand up again. "They would imprison us for arson. Except you. They would send you off with the abbot."

The riders were moving, spreading to form a line, leaving the fire, coming after them.

Angus led them up, away from the bottom in the valley. There was the faint outline trees ahead.

"It's thick enough" He said. "We can't make it to the forest but I've been round this copse a few years ago and there's nowhere for a horse to get in."

Minutes later they were in it, pushing through the undergrowth as it tore at their clothes and skin.

They could hear the riders now. Calling to each other to keep the line.

Then they stopped.

"What now? We're at the forest." The voice seemed almost on top of them.

They heard more horses.

"They could be in there. We have orders to catch them".

Another horse – moving fast. "I have been around it Sir. It is just a copse but a big one. It would take a hundred men to search it."

"Very well. We shall return tomorrow with more men and search the whole area. Let's go and help those fools with the fire."

They hear horses riding away.

"Don't move." Angus whispered. They waited. Half an hour later they heard more horses leave.

"There may still be another. Be silent." Angus ordered. "We stay here for the night."

Lynella awoke with first light, hearing the others already moving about. They fell silent when she approached. She looked at each in turn. There were nine of them, including Maria. She knew Angus and was especially pleased that her old friend James from the Eastern Kingdom was with them. From his uniform she, had seen that he was now a soldier.

Except for Maria, the rest were basically strangers, although she knew some of them by sight as soldiers who worked with Angus. The two youngest of these looked extremely nervous. They were looking at her. They had followed her. Now they expected her to lead. Trying to clear her head she said, "I know you all gave your word last night to help me free him but we had all had a lot to drink so..." she paused trying to think how to say it without causing offence. "There will be no loss of honour if any of you decide to go back. You won't have been missed yet. It must be chaos back there with all of the clearing up."

There was silence so she went on, "You must understand that you have honoured me by your willingness to come but some of you may have families to support and we may be gone a long time. We may even be banished for life. These troubles are mine and there is no need for you to get involved."

One of the young soldiers was quick to reply, "No that's just the point. Didn't you feel the mood at the party? Everybody there wanted to welcome the strangers from the ship and the changes they would bring. Our communities are dying out; this may be our only hope. It's only the Abbot who wants things to stay the same but you seem to be the only person who is prepared to stand up to him."

"I don't feel as if I can stand up to anybody right now, but I suppose you may be right. I don't remember ever deciding to do it but I seem to have been swept along."

The discussion broke up into groups and a few minutes later, a girl came over to Lynella and said that she, and two of the men, wished to return. They decided that the best way was for the others to move on for an hour or two so that they were well away, in case the three were seen returning to the castle. With an unspoken consensus, they decided to leave any further discussions about their long-term plans until the groups were separated.

They climbed fast, into the forest. Soon, they had a commanding view across the valley below to the Southern mountains. Suddenly, Maria shouted out and pointed down. Riders were coming across the fields, heading straight for the copse. Most of them were wearing monks' cloaks.

"How do they know where to go?" asked Maria

"Look!" said one of the soldiers. Running through the long grass ahead of the riders was a pack of dogs, vast creatures, the size of small ponies, loping through the tall grass, tails outstretched, racing ahead of the horses.

Three figures ran out from the copse. They could make out the girl now. Blonde hair streaming behind, hands waving. The riders stopped, conferring, the dogs hesitating, turning. Then riders moved forward, distant shouts carried on the breeze. The dogs were running again, forwards, urged on. The three had no time to turn.

Lynella watched with stunned horror. Soon the dogs were gathered up to be put back on the scent. But they had lost interest. Crimson bloodstains covered their massive jaws. They milled around, sated, their work done.

Angus broke the silence. "Our best chance is to move up into the thicker forest where they won't be able to ride the horses. Then they can only move as fast as we can."

Lynella looked up at the hills rising into the distance. "Have you got any idea what's up there?"

"Afraid not. I don't think anybody has been this way for years. The track is in the valley down there. There shouldn't be anything too bad. Let's move."

They climbed fast, moving further south and higher into the hills, driven on by the fear of the dogs. It soon became clear that she was by far the weakest member of the group. Her sheltered life in the castle had left her soft and unfit. Nobody was in good shape. They had been on the move for most of the previous night and were hungry, thirsty and exhausted. Nevertheless, they found the energy to help her up and to climb further into the forest.

This far from the source, there was no sign of terran plants. All of the vegetation was native to the planet. It was not, however, the thick lush ferns from the lowlands. Here, there were tall trees with straight smooth trunks. There was no possibility of climbing them. They had a hard flat surface which reflected the sunlight in the few places where it penetrated the canopy above. Between the trees, the ground was covered with smaller versions of the same plant. Standing about twice the height of a man, their hard leathery foliage with vicious spikes on it was densely packed around the full length of their thin trunks.

"Keep going." Angus told them. "Find some branches, use them as clubs to clear a pathway but make sure you fill it in behind us to stop the dogs and horses."

Finally, they came to a stream and stopped to drink and wash the cuts that now covered their arms and legs. They were swelling up and the skin around them was turning red. Angus said the poison would wear off, but nobody was going to be able to go much further.

"Try going up the stream. It may throw off the dogs." He didn't sound convinced.

"Why not try going down it a bit. They won't be expecting that," Maria suggested.

They heard the dogs barking in the distance and ran down the stream towards the valley. After a short distance it flowed into a deep-sided ravine, and suddenly they saw a bridge across it in front of them. It was a massive structure, built with long sections of thick tree trunks which had been laid across the width of the gully. The bridge was incomplete and, when they stopped,

they could hear logs being worked on the road above.

"God knows who's building this. Nobody lives anywhere near," Angus mumbled.

"I doubt they'll kill us but when they work out which way we went, the dogs will, so let's risk it," Lynella replied.

They ran up the bank. There was a clear, wide road, the trees cut and gone, the undergrowth freshly cleared. Then they looked across the bridge and saw its builder. It was standing in front of a pile of logs. As they watched, it picked one up, lifting with the strength of ten men. It needed no saws and chisels. It cut the log in its enormous mouth. Massive sharp teeth tore through the hard wood. The head and body were covered with huge metallic scales.

They looked on in stunned disbelief. They had never seen any before but they all knew what it was. All of the castles were full of pictures and tapestries of them. It stood on four massive legs and was using two more to hold the trunk that it was working. Suddenly, it looked up and saw them and was obviously as frightened as they were. Its roar was so loud that the earth seemed to shake. Moments later, several more appeared, advancing across the bridge. The smell hit them, blood, not rotten and putrid but fresh, raw, metallic. They turned to flee, but saw that the road ended after a few yards.

They started moving back. Angus shouted, "Look into their eyes, Lynella. You have the powers of a mage."

Now she remembered. Stories told to every child on their mother's knee, the story of the Blue Dragons, how in ancient times they terrorised the colony but the great mages had killed them by just looking them in the eye.

Lynella looked up. Yellow eyes glowed on the top of long thin heads. Great leathery upper and lower eyelids blinked continuously. Then she saw it. Around the eyes, the metal which covered their scales was formed into a continuous ring.

She focused on the leading dragon. It looked back at her for an instant and then let out a piercing screech and fell back, one eye now black and ruined.

Two groups stopped and looked at each other. The dragons had reached the end of the bridge but were going no further. The humans had their backs to a wall of thick forest. They heard barking. The dogs ran up the edge of the ravine, following their scent, right into the middle of the group of dragons. One jumped up, grabbing a scaled leg in its huge bloody jaw. The dragon tore its throat out.

A man emerged on a horse, following the dogs. He looked at one of the dragons. The dragon stepped back, hesitated. But there was no screech of pain, the man could not hurt it. It moved forward again, fast on four powerful legs. A single foreleg descended on the horse's neck, tearing off its head.



## 14 Adam – and the bridge

She knew she had to run. Run away from the soldiers, the dogs and the dragons. But she was empty, in that instant her energy had been drained. She kept running. But the outline of the trees was fading. She was being carried, trying to hold on as her limp body seemed to be slipping from a man's arms – Angus's arms.

"I won't let you fall. We'll stop soon."

They stopped. Listened to the sounds of the forest. No pursuit. They ran again. Steadier this time. The light was fading. They stopped running, moving around preparing as best they could to spend a second night in the open. Laying her on a bed of dry leaves.

She looked at the group who had come with her. Angus seemed happy enough. She thought he would have gone along with any adventure to take him away from the routine and regulations of life in the keep with his father.

James was looking a lot less comfortable. His uniform was already dirty and torn and he looked as exhausted as she was. He had changed a lot in the four years since the festival and had grown a small beard. He looked down at her, "What will your family think?"

"They won't care," she replied. "What about yours?"

"With a bit of luck, they'll assume I've gone with the Abbot."

"What about your officer in the army?"

"I am the officer," he smiled, "and my commander is back at the Eastern Castle."

They gathered wood for a fire. One of the men she didn't recognise had caught some rabbits and was quietly preparing them for cooking. As she watched, she saw that not a movement was wasted as he used his long scarred fingers and small hunting knife to skin and clean the meat.

"Where are you from?" she asked. "I am honoured that you are risking your life for me. Why have you come with me?"

"My name is Adam," he replied, "and when I tell you where I have come from, you will see why I have come."

Adam spoke while he cooked the meat. He came from a fishing village on the coast far to the north of the monastery. He had lived a quiet life until the time when he had sailed back towards the coast and seen crowds of people on the quayside in the harbour. They were standing in groups all along the old stone jetty. They were tall and wore brown tunics with hoods to protect them from the cold wind. He had never seen so many people before; he had heard stories of crowds in the great kingdoms away to the south but had never been there. He was worried at first but they looked peaceful and, as he came closer, he saw that they all wore crucifixes on chains that hung down the front of their tunics. He saw that they were like the itinerant preacher who passed through the village in spring, taking time to explain passages from the Scripture before moving on. Now he was joyful and hurried to tie up his boat and fetch his wife and child to see these messengers of God.

Adam interrupted his story to take some of the meat which now looked well cooked. The others joined him.

"Lucky it's rabbit," Maria said cheerfully "The Princess can't eat most of the animals around here"

"It was not luck," he replied without emotion. "I leave nothing to luck"

They ate the rest of the meal in silence. When they finished, he continued with his story.

The people of the village had all stood in silence on the open ground in front of the cottages. There were too many of them to fit into the little chapel at the top of the cliff, so the leader of the visitors stood on the upturned hull of a boat which had been pulled up for repair. He started with some prayers. They were simple prayers that they all knew. His accent was strong but they could follow it and, ignoring the cold wind, they knelt on the coarse grass and shingle and prayed with him. After the prayers, they sang a hymn. The sound of so many people singing together inspired Adam. It seemed to fill the whole bay with the power and glory of God. Then

the man began to preach. He explained that he was the Abbot of a great monastery near the kingdoms. He spoke about the history they knew of the Age of the Mages and the compact that came after. He explained that during that time the original Gospel from earth had become weak and confused. This was why the monastery had been founded and, in the few generations since its foundation, they had rediscovered the true meaning of that gospel.

This was all welcome news to Adam. He was keen to learn this new meaning. He knew that the village was so old that it had been built soon after the landing, long before the compact, and had not been affected by the wars. He could not quite see how the gospel they had always known could have become confused by events that passed them by, but he was sure that this would become clear soon. With so many followers, this must be a very wise man.

The Abbot spoke at length about the depth of the new understanding they had discovered. Behind him, the grey cottages with their tiny windows were huddled around the single street which wound up the hill. Compared to their dull mediocrity, this glowing message with its promise of celebration and happiness offered a release from an existence which, when looked at in these terms, had little to offer. Adam reached out for his wife's hand and held it, his strong fingers wrapped around hers, sharing the vision of this bright future. But now the Abbot was moving on.

The new learning was so important that it must be taken to all people. Even to Jerusalem. When he said this, the crowd stood motionless. What did he mean? Jerusalem was on earth. The word "Crusade" came into his speech with all of the images of daring and adventure that went with it. Finally, his full plan became clear. He was going to build a ship and, in some way that was not very clear, he was going to fly it back to earth as a missionary. He had not come to this village to enlighten the people. He had come to enlist them to build sailing ships which he needed to carry ore from his mines.

After that, there had been no safety. The man of God was wrong, however impossible this was. Quite apart from the practical difficulty of how they would survive this additional burden when life was already hard, Adam knew that what was to be done was simply wrong.

Day followed day and slowly conflict emerged. First there were secret meetings; difficult with a man billeted in every cottage. Then there were questions, arguments, and finally protest met with awful retribution.

He had no more to say. They could see that, for a man of normally few words, his telling had been a considerable effort.

"Does anybody know what's ahead of us?" Lynella broke the silence.

"The canyon," Adam replied. "It cannot be crossed."

"It's a massive deep river canyon," Angus explained. "It is some way ahead and runs so far to either side that we can't go round it. We'll have to find a way to cross it"

"We can't." Adam insisted. "We should turn back."

"We must cross it," Angus said. "If we don't, the Abbot and some of his monks will use their auras to get past the dragons and catch up with us. He'll kill us and take Lynella and force her to help with his scheme to attack Paul's ship."

They sat in silence, unable to contradict him.

"The dragons must have crossed it," James said suddenly.

"And if they can, we can," Maria added.

The following day, they moved on, keeping in the forest a short distance to one side of the road. In the early afternoon, they came to the canyon. They had little warning; the land simply disappeared into a sheer drop. Angus was the first to reach it and he signalled to the others to join him. They stood in silent awe; the bottom was so far below them that almost no light reached it and few details could be seen. The far side looked impossibly distant. Beyond it was the untamed land with the legendary monsters which had been cleared from the lands of the three kingdoms.

They could not begin to imagine how the dragons crossed and even Angus was about to give up hope, when Maria spotted something reflecting the sunlight away to their left towards the

road. They all turned to look and, as they watched, the sunlight flashed from a point at their own level but near the centre of the canyon. They moved slowly along the cliff edge towards it, and soon began to see a fine metallic line, extending out from the point where the road ended. Then they came to some old structures.

In an area in front of them, arranged in a precise pattern to either side of the road, hundreds of massive stones had been set into the ground. Each one had a metallic blue wire, as thick as a man's finger, fixed to it. They moved forward, and finally saw that the wires all led off towards the canyon, where they were twisted together to form a cable, which swayed gently in the wind as it stretched out into the distance to the far side.

"We can't cross it," Adam said. "We should have turned back." The rest of the party looked despondently around. They could not even see the end of the cable very easily because it had sunk through the road into the ground and now came out of the cliff, fully six feet below the level at which they were standing.

"The dragons obviously came this way," Angus said, looking at deep scratch marks in the flagstones of the road's surface, over an area extending well back from the edge, "And we shouldn't have to wait long to see one cross."

Concealed among the stones, they watched as the first dragon appeared. Stopping short of the bridge, it started scratching at the stones it was standing on. Slowly, the purpose of this ritual became apparent. Its razor sharp claws had extended. From resembling daggers, they had become long curved swords with deeply serrated cutting edges. Using these for purchase, it moved easily down onto the cable, gripping it securely and moving out across the canyon.

Other dragons followed but soon they were clear, and Angus could start to plan. He was holding a short length of the wire in his hands. He had found it in a crevice in one of the anchor stones. It appeared to be a loose end which had been cut off when the structure was built. "What exactly is it that you can do with bits of metal. Can you make things?"

Lynella looked helplessly at it and replied, "I don't really know. Everybody used to think that I only used my power to annoy them. I suppose they were right but, with all that and the restrictions placed by the compact, it meant that I never really sat down to work it out. The only person who seemed interested in finding out about it was the Abbot. I suppose it doesn't matter who knows now but my power is stronger than they think."

Angus was listening carefully and the others had gathered round; even Adam joined them. She paused and then said quietly and deliberately, "A few weeks ago, I lifted the ship at the edge of the source out of its crucible - just a bit but I could have gone further. I now have many of the powers of a full mage."

This admission stopped the conversation.

Angus brought them back to the immediate problem, "Then surely you can get us across that canyon." He tried to sound positive but he felt that he was completely out of his depth. "Let's start from the beginning. What can you do with this?"

Angus bent the wire into a loop and placed it on the ground. They watched in awe as Lynella made it glow and finally it became so hot that the ends melted together. "I know that it's a ring but I can't make it fly this far from the source. I think that I might be able to, if we made another one."

The beginnings of a plan were forming in her mind. He fetched more wire and, when she had made it into a ring, she placed it above the other. By using her power on both of them, she managed to make the top one fly up high in the air. It drifted over to one side and came down in the canyon. They heard it hit the rocks far below.

"Can't you control the direction it goes in?" Angus didn't even dare to look over the edge to try and see it.

"Not when I do it like that, but I think that I might be able to do something a bit different. Could you bend one around the cable itself?"

This was not an easy task but, with one of the soldiers holding his feet, Angus managed to reach out and bend the wire into place. As soon as he let go, it slid off down the smooth cable and came to rest near the lowest point at the centre of the canyon.

"That wasn't much use was it. You should have held it in place"

"And wait for you to burn holes in my hands?"

"No, hold it with a stick or something. I can't possibly get it hot enough that far away"

Angus finally managed to get a second wire into place and held it while Lynella welded it into a ring. Now, she tried to picture the outside surface of the cable as a series of rings around it. This was not easy because it was an unfamiliar shape but she let her mind explore it. She backed off temporarily and took the jewel from its leather purse and placed it on her forehead.

The jewel lifted the mist which had been clouding her image of the cable and formed a conduit for her to use her power on it. The ring shot off along it and hit the loose wire in the centre with a crash and continued across. Looking up and seeing some dragons who had not yet reached the far side, Angus grabbed her shoulder. The contact was broken with a flash like lightning. Lynella collapsed on the ground. It had been too late for the dragons. They landed with dull thumps on the rocks as Angus turned to see the girl motionless on the ground.

Kneeling at Lynella's side and cradling her head in her arms Maria could feel that she was still breathing. Angus started to move towards them but was met with a glare that mixed fear with anger and told him very clearly to keep his distance.

"How bad is she?" he asked

"She'll survive but she's badly stunned. That was an idiotic thing to do. Surely you knew about breaking contact while a mage is working?"

Angus had not known but he didn't dare admit it. Until two days before, he had been nothing more than a soldier in the guard. Nevertheless, he felt totally responsible and paced about uneasily trying to avoid Adam's gaze until Maria started to get ready to move.

They carried Lynella into the forest to hide until she recovered and regained her strength. Soon they were pushing through the massive native ferns but suddenly, these gave way to a small stand of magnificent oak trees. Beneath the trees, they saw the ruins of a small but substantially built stone structure. Finely carved window surrounds were set in thick walls which were still standing on three sides. The timber roof had almost disappeared and trees had established themselves in some cracks in the flagstone floor. The party settled into a protected corner to nurse Lynella and wait for her to regain consciousness. Her only sign of injury was a small burn mark on her forehead but her face was pale and her breathing rapid and light.

Finally opening her eyes, Lynella looked up and saw the carvings on the wall in front of her in the fading evening light. Carved in relief along the ancient cornice were horses and hounds and, ahead of them, a dragon. She stared straight up and suddenly said, "We're in the hunting lodge"

Maria looked down at her and, rearranging a blanket under her head to make it comfortable, said gently, "Don't worry. You'll be all right"

"What did she actually say?" James asked.

"I couldn't understand it. I don't think she's fully come round yet," Maria replied but Lynella cut her short, "I am awake and we are in the hunting lodge"

"What hunting lodge?"

In a soft monotone, Lynella started to recite the story that had been passed down to all full members of the three gifted families since the Age of the Mages.

"At the time of the landfall, when the three families and their retainers founded the great city at the source, there were dragons roaming freely across the land. They could not be killed with arrows, only by the bravest men who threw spears into the soft flesh under their necks. They caused great terror and damage and only a few were ever killed by the heroes of the first generation. Finally, after many years, a mage looked one in the eye and found that he could kill it." She paused for a moment and added, "That's what I did back at the ravine." After a short silence, she continued, "Soon all of the dragons in the lands as far as the canyon were killed and, for many generations, the city grew large and prosperous. There were, however, some nobles who wished to show that they were as brave as the first generation. They commissioned a number of the most powerful mages of the time to build a bridge to enable them to hunt the dragons that they had seen on the far side of the canyon. It took ten years and the most

phenomenal power from the mages but it was built."

"That's what it was," Maria added.

"Yes, I didn't realise it when I saw it because nobody ever comes up here and we always thought that it would look like an ordinary bridge."

"Anyway, this hunting lodge was built for the nobles to wait in while they hung out animal carcasses to lure a dragon across the bridge. Once the dragon crossed, the hunt began. The hunters refused to have a mage with them so if the dragon turned, many were killed. It was almost a hundred years later that the last of the dragons learned that they should never cross the bridge and the hunting stopped."

"What happened then?" Maria asked.

"I suppose you could say that, without dragons to fight, the nobles all started fighting each other until, in the final battle, all of the mages were killed fighting for them. Luckily, the dragons live for a very long time and have good memories so, since the compact, none have ever crossed the bridge and come to the kingdoms. Until now, that is."

"And you're the only mage who can kill them."

"That's right, and they've banished me."

They had no food and little water so Adam went to hunt for game. This was plentiful in the area and soon they were preparing to light a fire and looking forward to the fresh roast meat.

[Sitting up, she saw her companions. They were eating horse apples. She remembered what her teachers had said. Only common people ate them. She shuddered at the thought. She was only supposed to eat from plants and animals that had come from earth, the terran ones, not the tough-skinned native species. They would make her sick.

"We have some bread for you to eat when you're ready." She turned to see Maria had been watching her. "There will be enough for you. We can eat the horse apples"

She managed to smile. "Thank you, Maria. I can always depend on you.]"

"Won't the dragons smell the cooking?" Lynella asked. "Then they'll know we're here."

"I was assuming that they already did. They seem to have left us alone ever since we met them at the ravine," Angus replied.

"I'm not sure. I have no idea what their plans are. They're quite intelligent and they know about mages. I saw one with scars around its eyes. If you'd had a scar for hundreds of years, you would have had plenty of time to think about it. I wish I knew why they decided to cross the bridge again."

"It's just as well they did cross, and it's just as well they are still here."

"What do you mean?" Maria asked.

"Because if or when they do go away, the Abbot's men will be right behind them looking for us with the dogs."

This reply underlined the growing uncertainty about their future. Some of the sense of gloom which it cast was cleared by Adam who pointed up at the trees and said, "I don't know anything about dragons and kings but the wind is blowing out across the canyon away from the bridge so, they won't smell the cooking anyway."

Angus quickly started the cooking fire.

The dragons never came and Lynella slowly regained her strength. After two days, she felt better than she had for weeks and soon began to realise why. Their flight from the dogs had driven them far to the south. The ship's orbit no longer took it directly overhead and the routine orbital corrections over the source were now not far above the horizon and caused her much less pain. When she was fit enough, Angus took her out towards the bridge to see what was happening.

Crouching in the undergrowth with the wind in their faces, they watched as a dragon came towards them along the road and crossed the bridge. At the centre, it stepped carefully over the two loose rings which Lynella had put around the cable. Arriving safely on the far side, it soon

disappeared from sight. During the day, almost a hundred more followed it. In the early evening, they were just about to move away when a small group, which had passed them and was about to cross the bridge, suddenly stopped and looked back. They seemed to hesitate and some of them took a few paces back along the road, seeming to be drawn back to the north. Angus prepared to run but Lynella shook her head and stayed put.

When the dragons finally crossed, she said, "That explains it. I just felt the power from the ship and they must be able to feel it like I can. That's why they crossed in the first place. They were drawn to it because it signalled a change."

Angus thought about this. "And now they're going back because you've shown them that there's at least one mage about to threaten them."

"So what I've done is to frighten the dragons away, so it's all clear for the Abbot's dogs to hunt us down."

"We'll be all right when we cross the bridge."

"I've been thinking about that. Adam may be right. We can only flee for so long. We've got to go to the monastery and that's in the opposite direction."

Angus did not reply so she continued, "It's not just to try to rescue Paul. It's for everybody. Even the dragons have realised that the arrival of the ship has changed everything and if we don't stop the Abbot from fighting against the men from the ship, it will mean we'll have wars again."

Angus tried, yet again, to picture the practicalities of getting past the Abbot to the monastery, over 100 miles away on the far side of the source. Completely preoccupied with this thought, he mumbled, "Let's get back to the others and talk about it," and stood up. He found himself staring straight at a dragon coming up the road towards him. The dragon let out a roar and Angus ducked and ran, with Lynella close behind him.

Reaching the ruined lodge a few minutes later, they warned the others and the whole group crouched out of sight behind the remaining walls. All seemed quiet for some time and they were beginning to think that any pursuit would have lost them. Then they realised that the dragons had no need to hurry. Moving slowly forward, a single dragon approached them with its nose to the ground, following the scent. A group of over 20 more followed.

Lynella did not hesitate. She stood up and looked at the leading dragon. Standing in front of the terrifying creature, she looked hopelessly small and defenceless. This time, however, she knew what to expect and put all of her power into its eye. The dragon collapsed but the others ran forward so she moved to the next. Within a few seconds, there were four dragons on the ground and the others turned and fled.

Inspecting the four, Angus saw that they were dead. Lynella was either getting more powerful or getting better at using her power. He also saw that one of them had light but very fresh wounds from arrows and swords. There had obviously been a fight with some of the Abbot's men within the last few hours and not far away. If the last of the dragons did not cross that night, they would be gone early in the morning and this encounter would make them hurry all the more.

Lynella just seemed shocked by what she had done. She stood looking at the four magnificent animals with the grotesquely burnt holes which went into their heads where their eye sockets had been. Eventually, Maria put a hand around her shoulder and led her away to the lodge.

[She could see that this had formed by their blinking while in the metallic mist and realised that this was what she must use.

The blue metallic sheen on their scales came from standing near to the natural furnace in the heart of a mountain where a lake of metal boiled continuously. They stood in great pain and let the mist from it settle on them to form an armour on their scales as strong as any that a man could make.]

## 15 Crossing the bridge

The road was now silent. The ancient flagstones had been cleared of undergrowth by the army of dragons which had moved along it. The unbroken surface could be seen extending in a perfect straight line into the distance across the valley to the North. As they watched, a single horseman rode over the brow of the hill beyond and looked out towards them. Being well hidden by the undergrowth, they knew that he could not see them but they also knew that he could be sure that they were somewhere ahead of him. More horsemen came into sight and, with them, the first of the dogs.

"Look at the number of them!" Angus said, "They must have sent for help from the monastery." Several more packs of dogs appeared, spread well out to either side of the road. "There's no way we could leave the road without being followed, I wonder if they know how close they are to the bridge."

"Perhaps they don't even know the bridge is here," Lynella suggested.

"It's hardly mentioned in any of the books I've seen," Maria replied. "None of them said where it was."

"I'd heard of it in the hunting stories but never knew where it was".

"Let's hope they don't know," Angus said. "Then they'll stop in the valley because they won't want to move at night."

"Why not?" Lynella asked. "They must have torches."

"Because they need to see to get the monks with auras to the front if they meet any dragons," Angus explained, "and if they think that we can't get away, they won't bother hurrying too much."

As the light faded, they saw that Angus had been right. A collection of campfires could be seen in the valley and they could hear the distant barking of the dogs when they were fed. It was now apparent that they had no choice but to cross the bridge. At least Lynella could protect them from the dragons on the far side. On this side, there would be no escape from the dogs.

Working in silence, the soldiers made a harness from leather straps and belts. Lynella concentrated her power on the cable, and the closed ring looped around the centre of it, and managed to make the ring come close enough to her to be held in place with a branch from a tree. Looping the harness through the ring, they found that it was amply strong enough to hold a person's weight.

The sound of metal hitting metal told Angus that he had reached the centre and the ring above him had hit the loose ring on the cable. The slide down had been easy and the harness felt reasonably secure. Using his lantern to signal to Lynella to start driving him up to the far side he made a silent prayer that she should be able to control his movement. There was no going back. Her power was the only way off the cable. If she failed, he would be trapped there until he became archery practice for the Abbot's men.

He felt the ring start to move. It slid up a bit but then dropped back. He wanted to call out to see what had happened, but dared not shout for fear of attracting the attention of the watchmen at the camp in the valley.

"It's much harder to move it with his weight on it," Lynella said to Maria as she looked up from the cable.

"Can you do it?"

"I think I moved him a bit that time. I'll try again."

Putting more power into it, she saw Angus's lantern disappearing rapidly towards the far side of the canyon. Angus felt the far more rapid movement with relief, knowing that Lynella did have the power to get him to the far side. Using the pre-arranged signal, he covered the light to show that he was close but, although he slowed down to some extent, he hit the rock hard and dropped the lantern, before catching hold of a bush to prevent himself sliding back. Lynella heard the impact and, looking up, saw the lantern falling and instinctively called his name. Her shout echoed back and forth across the canyon and was followed by his reply. Hearing all this, Maria

and the others looked anxiously towards the camp in the valley, but saw no sign of approaching lights.

"We're going to have to do better than that," Maria said. "I couldn't cross like that."

"I couldn't see," Lynella replied. "Once I start putting power into the wire, I can't really see anything outside it"

James looked at her. "What, you mean you can see things inside it?"

"Well, I can't exactly see anything, but somehow I know what's there."

"What is there?" Maria asked.

"There's my power flowing around in it and I can feel the effect of the source on it and sometimes even the ship when it comes over."

"You mean you can see things outside the wire from inside it? Why couldn't you see where Angus was?"

"I don't know. I suppose I could see where he was but not where the canyon wall was."

They soon realised what had to be done. When they had recovered the loop with the harness on it, they used a new length of wire to fix another loop beyond it and sent it over to Angus with a note on it asking him to hold it against the rock. To complete the picture, they set another loop against the rock on their side. Letting her mind reach fully into the cable, Lynella could now see all that she needed to.

The first sign of dawn was showing when the last of the party finally climbed clear of the bridge. Looking around in the spreading light, they saw that this country beyond the canyon was truly different from the land of the kingdoms from where they had come. Beneath their feet there was no sign of the soft green grass which grew at the edge of the forest they knew. Here, the small native yellow spiked plants were so dense that they left clear footprints as they broke when trodden on. These human footprints looked small and insignificant, relative to the massive marks left by the passage of the dragons.

The sun rose over the mountains and soon reached the point where it shone directly along the canyon from the east. For a few minutes, the deep shadow, which would remain at the bottom for the rest of the day, was dispelled. Standing on a small outcrop of rock, they looked down to see what had been below them as they had crossed in the night. The jagged rock of the canyon sides cast long shadows across the cliffs and crevices far below them. Finally, for a brief instant, the sun reached the point where it shone on the bubbling liquid at the very bottom.

Looking up, they saw the area of standing stones which secured the cables of this end of the bridge. What had just seemed to be rough ground in the night could now be seen as an area where all plant life had been torn up by the claws of hundreds of dragons, preparing to grip the cable as they crossed. There were no footprints to either side; they had evidently come from the south and gone straight across without straying from their path. Seeing this, the human party followed the track back for a short distance, until they came to the edge of the plateau which formed the rim of the canyon. A forest of pure native trees spread into the distance before them. The clearing in which they were standing formed the end of a wide roadway which had been cut straight through it, leading away from the canyon, exactly matching the road on the other side in all respects except for its plain earth surface. Away in the valley they could see the dragons, not moving towards them but no longer fleeing. Not a threat for the moment but certain to be one soon.

Returning to the bridge, they saw that the Abbot's men had reached the far side - small figures in the distance, looking out at the vast canyon and the single cable that crossed it. Within moments, the party was seen. There was a flurry of activity; horsemen came and went. Large groups came up and stood staring at the great barrier beyond them. Lynella knew that one of them must be the Abbot himself and delighted in the frustration that this would be causing him.

Soon, they saw wooden structures appearing on the far side, poles fastened with vine ropes reaching out above the cable. Through the heat of the day men and horses worked without stopping and the structure grew. They began to realise that this was the only place they could defend. Three of the men went into the forest and returned with game, fruit and water. The



others assembled a simple shelter between two of the standing stones. For most of the time, however, they just waited while their attackers prepared and Lynella slept and regained her strength to be able to stop them.

Evening came and, once again, the sun shone directly into the canyon. On the far side, the distant noise of the building of the structure continued; the constant sound of tools cutting wood interspersed with the shouts of the men using them. The construction now reached down to the cable and was starting to spread along it, hanging from it like an ever-growing birdcage. As it took shape, they could see that it formed a walkway leading down to the cable and then extending along beneath it.

During the day, the dragons had moved a short distance up the road towards them and were now just over a mile away.

"Do it now!" Angus said as they all stood looking at the bridge. Three days had passed and the Abbot's structure now extended almost half way across. The men working on it could be heard as they struggled to hold on to the swaying poles as they built on and out. Sometimes, one let his attention stray for a vital second and fell helpless into the gloom below but always another came to take his place.

Lynella could now see how many of them were on it, but saw no other choice. Closing her mind to everything else, she focused on the cable and soon sensed the full extent of it. In the middle, the three complete rings hung motionless, just beyond the reach of those on the structure. With one simple and uncontrolled burst of energy, she threw one of the rings towards the far canyon wall. By the time it crashed into the rock, it had cut through every piece of timber and rope that lay in its path.

Cut from its support, the complex assembly seemed to shake itself free as the effect of its release rippled along it. It snaked downwards, until it began to feel the effect of its remaining restraint at the canyon edge and then described a lazy arc, before smashing against the wall and breaking up. Lynella watched spellbound as about thirty men were thrown clear and began to fall. Their dark brown clothing stood out in stark contrast to the pale rock sliding past behind them and finally showed large stains of red as their bodies broke up on the jagged outcrops.

Collapsing to her knees and looking at Angus, she asked in a faint voice, "What have I done to them?"

Unable to divert his eyes from the unfolding scene, he spoke his reply to the void in front of him. "It had to be done," he said. "It was the only way to make sure they don't try again."

Horsemen appeared on the far side and dismounted to look at the carnage below them. Slowly a solid rank of figures formed, stretching a considerable distance along the rim, all looking down. As they looked, patches of red spread across the black pools in the gloom at the very bottom.

Turning to look around, Angus saw that the dragons, who had been moving slowly forward every day, were now coming onto the narrow plateau on which he and his friends were standing. As the men turned, the two massive beasts at the front of the column reared up, lashing out with their sabre-like claws. Having done so, however, they did not move forward. Both had large ugly scars around their eyes. The human group backed away, towards one side of the clearing. Seeing them go, the dragons moved quickly up to the bridge, only to stop again when they saw the people on the far side. Those at the front clearly had no intention to cross but the whole column was moving so the clearing slowly filled with them.

As they reached the edge of the clearing, the humans saw that they were not being pursued. Turning to look across the canyon, they saw a group of thirty archers stand in line along the rim above the bridge. They raised their bows and shot arrows into the air and, as these arced out and began to fall, each one could be seen to have a crucifix attached to it. Then, all of the Abbot's men retreated rapidly out of sight.

Turning back to watch the dragons, they saw that many seemed to be about to return south but a few formed a line facing them. None of the dragons in the line showed any sign of

burning around their eyes and they were slowly edging forward, their mouths open, showing massive double rows of razor sharp teeth. Holding onto Maria for support, Lynella focused her power on the eyes of each the eight nearest her, in rapid succession, trying to limit the damage so that she did not kill them. As the pain hit them, they roared in terror and charged back through the group behind them, climbing over all in their path and tearing into them with their claws. Soon, a large group of dragons was in turmoil and some twenty of them raced onto the bridge, while the remainder fled back to the South.

A few moments later, those on the bridge reached the far side and met the last of the Abbot's men. As Lynella and her friends listened, the sound of a distant battle on the far side of the bridge could be heard for several hours. The shouts and screams of men mixed with the roar of the dragons continued until eventually, for the first time in days, a complete and total silence descended on the clearing.

They now occupied themselves hunting for food and rebuilding the remains of their shelter which had been trampled by the dragons. All the time they were watching to see if any dragons would return across the bridge but, eventually, it became apparent that none would.

"What's your guess about what happened over there?" Lynella asked as they finally sat down to talk. As usual Angus replied for the rest of the group, "I think that the Abbot's men must have killed all that went across. Either that or made them flee into the forest. Anyway, they don't seem to be coming back this way."

"What do you think the Abbot's doing?"

"My guess is that he'll pack up and go home. He's lost a lot of men and he's probably worked out that he won't get you this way."

Without thinking, Lynella replied, "Since he knows that I'll try and rescue Paul anyway, chasing after me was a waste of time to start with."

Angus found nothing strange in her assumption. "He's probably worked that out. I think he saw it as a pleasant hunting expedition. He never expected any battles."

Maria grinned. "Well, now he's fought against a mage and learnt his lesson, those dragons must have almost finished him off."

Angus smiled back, "I hope so," without any real conviction.

As the sun began to set, it shone directly into the canyon again. They all stood in silence, looking at the bodies below them.

"They didn't deserve to have the dragons as well," Lynella said quietly. "This was enough, more than enough."

"They deserved all they got, I just feel sorry for the dragons," Maria replied.

"But what did these men do?"

"They would have been willing enough to make you attack the ship."

"All I want to do is to rescue Paul, so he can help his friends," Lynella replied.

## 16 Town by the lake

The smoke from the fire rose vertically into the evening air. The last bones of the two birds, which had made their best meal for days, were still just visible in the ashes. They knew that the smoke would be visible for miles but they didn't care because they were sure that nobody was looking. The silence of the end of the battle had remained and was now so complete that the few words that they had exchanged had been whispered to avoid intruding into it. Even the unending native forest seemed to be standing in hushed respect for the power of this newly emerging mage who had come through her first testing.

The mage herself sat staring out across the canyon, trying to make sense of her strange new world. In her mind, she saw her room in the castle. The soft low-backed chair would be standing, as always, near the end of the bed. What would be happening there now? The embroidered sheets on the bed would not have been disturbed; nothing would have been moved. She had been running for almost a week. Would anybody have missed her? For the last several years, she had had little contact with anybody except the steward and the friends who were with her now. If the others knew that she had won a battle, would they care? Now she pictured the Great Hall where the evening meal would be in progress. If they knew that she was sitting on the thorny grass and preparing to sleep under a crude brush shelter, would they care about that? She had told them that she was a mage and would win great battles but now she had done it, she realised that they would show little interest. They would be far more concerned about the account the Abbot would give of the damage she had caused.

Her mind moved on to think of Paul. She pictured him in a cell in the monastery. From their brief meetings, she knew so little about him but he would certainly care about what she had done.

Finally, her attention returned to those around her. They looked ragged and exhausted, sitting among the stones. She imagined that each one of them must be wondering if they could ever return to what they had left behind. Looking around the group, she found that she caught the eye of one of the soldiers. He looked away, but she felt as if she had to say something.

"Was this what you expected when you decided to come with me?" she asked.

Everyone saw his smile and listened to his reply. "This was one of the greatest contests a mage has ever faced - I never expected to see anything like it. Now I have been part of it." Then, guessing what was troubling her, he added, "I shall follow you wherever you go."

Crossing back over the bridge on the following day, they found the huge carcasses of the dragons and, nearby, almost a hundred fresh graves of the men they had killed. It was clear that the Abbot had retreated straight down the ancient road back to the Southern Kingdom and the source. He would soon be spreading graphic and highly embellished accounts of the events of the last few days which would spread like wildfire and make Lynella and her friends unwelcome throughout the three kingdoms. This road back home was, therefore, not an option.

Angus sat down and looked at the dense forest of needle-sharp native trees to either side of the clearing. "Are you sure you can make it through that?" he asked Lynella.

"I've got to. If I don't, I'll get caught and end up having to help destroy the ship."

"It's over 100 miles and there aren't any roads the way we'll have to go" he went on. "We could just hide near here and wait and see. The Abbot won't come back, will he?"

"No. I must go and find Paul," she insisted. "I know I don't know much about him but I trust him and, if we free him, he should be able to warn his friends in the ship."

"That's not the only reason you want to see him, is it?" Angus laughed.

Lynella looked down at the grass in front of her to avoid eye contact. "I know I'd like him to stay here, but he must warn his ship first. Perhaps his friends on it could help us stop the Abbot from causing any more destruction."

It only remained for them to decide whether to go through the lands of the more populated Eastern Kingdom or the more traditional Western Kingdom. Their chances of detection were lower in the west but they would have to try to buy provisions.

"What about James? Won't he be recognised?" Maria asked. "We both come from the Eastern Kingdom but I've been away from it for years. He's been living there."

"I've travelled around the Kingdom before," James replied. "People sometimes recognise me but there's nothing wrong with that."

"You mean you can just go where you like?" Lynella found the idea hard to believe. "Just go when you want to?"

"We all do it. Nobody stops us. It's how we are"

"That'll make it far easier for us," Angus concluded. "Just travel through, no questions and no trouble."

The hunting lodge was a short distance to the east so they used the path they had cut to it to give them a start into the forest. Seeing the ruin and remembering their time there, just a few days before, brought home to Lynella her complete change of position in the party. She was now the undisputed figurehead and leader, whether she liked it or not. On consideration, she did not at all, so she started to make a point of referring all decisions to Angus because she knew that his skills would be far more use than hers on the journey. He had already noticed a number of terran fruit trees around the lodge. Lynella was still finding it very difficult to eat any of the forest fruits and realised that this would be her last taste of familiar food for some time.

Angus decided that the easiest initial route would be due east, along the edge of the canyon for a few miles. This proved to be much easier to travel through than the thicker forest further back, and they made good progress during the afternoon. Towards evening, however, they began to hear a roar of rushing water from ahead and they soon came to a deep gorge with a fast flowing river. It poured over a high waterfall down to the base of the canyon, creating a spectacular rainbow as the setting sun shone on the mist and spray which came up from it.

Lynella felt as if she should know about this river. After all it was within the lands assigned to her father's kingdom, under the terms of the compact. She was sure that it would be shown on maps which were kept in the castle but nobody would have looked at them for years. They were all so obsessed with their little political tricks that they never looked at the world outside. If nothing else, the arrival of this ship was changing that. Looking up at Angus, she asked, "Where does it go?"

"I don't know. I've heard rumours of a big river out here, but I've never met anybody who's actually been here."

Lynella started laughing. "Just think of it! All those people just a week's journey from here and never even heard of it! No wonder they're impressed with the Abbot."

Angus looked puzzled.

"Don't you see?" she went on. "He's the only one who's been doing anything apart from watching it all fall apart." She paused, noticing that, as always, the whole party was listening. "Trouble is," she went on, "he's doing all the wrong things."

"This river goes in roughly the right direction, so we should make quite good time if we follow it," Angus replied.

Moving northeast, in high spirits, through the low scrub alongside the river, they found themselves climbing into the foothills of the Eastern Mountains. They were concerned that this was leading them too far east, away from the source but, even as they climbed, the forest to either side of them showed no sign of thinning. The men took turns to lead the way, cutting a path through the bushes and pushing the vicious thorns away to one side. Progress through the forest itself would have been virtually impossible.

For two days, they continued upwards, pausing only to rest and eat. Lynella felt herself weakening as her diet changed, because there was no sign of any plants or game from earth in this area. She kept up the pace, unsure whether she was finally getting used to this different food or whether she was simply driving herself forward to get to Paul. Finally, the ground began to level off. They could see a gap in the hills ahead. The river became wider and slower and the forest opened out to meadows to either side. Without doubt, the meadows were farmed; there were fences and tracks and, in the distance, houses.

"Who are they?" Lynella asked. "We're still within the lands of my family's kingdom but these are not my family's subjects."

"They're certainly not that," Angus replied. "I've no idea who they are"

"Are they outlaws?" Maria asked nervously

"They look pretty settled," he reassured her. "They've obviously been here for at least a generation."

Moving onwards, they came to a road. At first, they hid and watched but they soon saw people on it, wearing simple clothes, similar to their own so they decided to risk walking along it. Quite soon, they came to a town spread across a hillside ahead of them. The river could be seen flowing fast down the hill to one side of the town, white water showing clearly as it tumbled down the rocky slope.

There were no walls or palisades so they simply walked on through the town. The fields ended quite abruptly as if the houses had been packed together for protection, despite the lack of a wall. Between them, there were short narrow winding streets which looked barely wide enough for the passage of a horse and cart. The houses were wooden but looked well kept except that everything looked dirty, with a thin film of black dust over it. There were a number of people all going about their business. They looked friendly enough but took little notice of the newcomers. Turning a corner, Angus noticed a flag which could be seen across the roof of the building in front of him.

"That explains a lot," he said pointing it out to the others. "Look whose flag that is. They all looked up and, as the wind caught it, saw the new broken chain insignia of the Eastern Kingdom.

"These are my father's lands. How have they come here?" Lynella asked.

"Looks like they just came," Angus replied. "No idea why, this land's not much good for farming."

"Nor have I," James looked worried. "I never knew anybody lived this far away from the city and I don't think many other people know about it."

Just then, they emerged from the end of the street into the town square. On the far side of the square was a lake. It was by far the largest expanse of water that any of them had seen. The far shore was beyond the horizon.

The flag could now be seen to be flying from the mast of a large sailing ship which was rounding the end of the harbour wall. In the total calm, it was being towed by two cutters with a dozen oarsmen in each. Lynella stood spellbound, watching the scene until, finally, the ship came alongside the wharf. Almost as soon as it was secure, a line of carts appeared along a road which followed the lake shore. Each one contained quantities of crumbling black rock. Lynella was about to ask about it, when Angus realised how conspicuous they must be as the only spectators without a job to do.

"Come on. We can't stand here all day," he said, trying to sound casual in case anybody was listening. He turned and led the way into an inn on the far side of the square.

The inn looked adequate from the outside and on the inside, it was clean and warm. They were able to find a table for all seven of them and ordered food and drink.

"What was that they were going to load onto the ship?" Lynella asked finally when she thought that nobody would be listening.

"Ore for smelting into metal I think," Angus replied.

"But there's masses of that everywhere around the source. Why come all the way up here for it?" Lynella asked.

"No idea, seems daft to me," Angus replied.

They sat in silence as the landlord served the drinks. "Have you come in on the ship?" he asked, trying to make some conversation.

"No we just came round by land and just happened to arrive when it did," Angus replied, hoping that there was a road that they could have come along.

"That's a bad journey. You'll be needing a good meal then," the landlord replied with a smile, leaving them with their drinks.

The answer to their question about the ore came soon. As darkness fell, they saw powerful lights come on outside the window. Lighting spheres were hanging from the lower spars of the ship. Lynella went pale and said in a nervous whisper; "They're from the monastery."

They stared at the lights. The crew of the boat were climbing along the rigging, securing them in place while, below them, men were already at work, shovelling the ore down the hatches in the deck. When they had completed their work, the crew assembled on deck and then walked down the gangplank to the wharf. Once again, Angus had to get Lynella and the others to look away, to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Most of the party were just confused so Lynella explained what the lights meant, "Do you remember when I was young and the monk came to visit, he had a thing with him that gave him his aura? That's the only way to make lighting globes glow unless you're a mage. And so," she continued, "Since I'm the only mage, they must be monks. That means the Abbot sent them."

At that point, the landlord returned with the food. The lights on the ship were so powerful; they shone through the window, illuminating the table. "We like the lights when the ship comes," he said. "Mind, we're not used to them out here. If you've come round from Port Jerusalem, you must have seen hundreds of them." He hurried off to serve the crew from the ship who had just entered.

"What and where is Port Jerusalem?" Lynella asked.

"Never heard of it," James replied.

"Must be where the ship takes the ore," Angus suggested. "Must be quite close to the monastery," he added, "given that the road is apparently so bad, do you think they'd take us along?" They ate in silence contemplating this idea.

When the landlord took the drinks to the ship's crew, he asked. "Have you bought any news? We heard there was some trouble at the Council." A tall man with a luxuriant grey moustache and a broad smile replied, "Yes I have all of the news, but it's a long story and we're hungry."

The landlord replied, "I'll get your food right away Captain," and hurried off to prepare their meals.

An hour later, when he had eaten his meal, the Captain started getting ready to tell his story. He moved a chair near to the large stone fireplace while the men with him arranged chairs and benches around him.

"Looks like it's going to be a bit of a show," Angus said.

"I think the Captain is going to enjoy it, even if nobody else does." Maria added.

"Yes, he does look as if he likes being important," Lynella concluded.

They found themselves joining in and moving their benches into the group. Large numbers of people were now packing into the inn and buying drinks and soon Lynella and her party were surrounded by an impenetrable crowd, all drinking and waiting for the show to begin. The oil lamps were smoking badly and cast little light on the back of the room but all of the front area was well lit by the ship lights shining through the open doorway. Finally the Captain picked up his heavy pewter mug and banged it on the table for silence. He had obviously forgotten that it was not quite empty because some of the beer in it splashed out over his hand and, as the crowd fell silent, some of them started laughing.

"I have serious news of terrible events and you would listen to it," he said in an angry voice and the laughter subsided. This distraction subdued, he started in a more relaxed, but nevertheless formal, tone, "As Captain of the King Solomon, I bring you news which was sent out by the Abbot himself just in time to reach us before we sailed from Port Jerusalem."

"The Abbot's message told that, after an interval of hundreds of years, there is once again a powerful mage on this planet." This remark brought complete silence. He went on, "And that mage has started to use force to oppose the Council of the Kingdoms." The speaker stopped and looked around his amazed audience, enjoying their rapt attention until, at last, the landlord asked, "How does he know?"

"I shall now tell you the full account of how this mage used her sorcerous powers to kill some hundreds of men serving the Abbot, while he was upholding a decision of the Council.

Landlord, some more ale while I continue."

The landlord took his mug and refilled it. There was no sign that he intended to pay for this drink. His story started with an account of how the space ship, which they all knew was orbiting the planet, was sending men down and violating the source and, quite soon, would try to land there. He then described the Council meeting at which it was agreed that every person should be required to give all possible assistance to the Abbot in his efforts to destroy the ship when it tried to land. "But," he went on, "The one person who could have helped more than any other refused to do so. The Abbot knew of a Princess of the Southern Kingdom who had some power which would have helped him but, when he asked her to do so, she fled to the south causing considerable damage as she went."

"We know about her," someone shouted from the crowd.

"She was called Lynella," another added. "It must be the same one. She killed her cousin at our castle four years ago at the festival."

The Captain used this interruption to drain his tankard and ask for another refill. At this cue, many others did the same and, while the rest of the party sat in conspicuous silence in the mass of conversation, Angus managed to talk to one of the men who had seen the incident at the Eastern Castle.

"How did she kill him?" he asked.

"With a coin. She threw it so hard, it went straight through him."

"Why did she do it. Was she provoked?"

"Never," the reply was spoken without a trace of doubt; "She was a guest at our castle. If it hadn't been for some antiquated law about mages, we would have dealt with her then. Hanging would have been too good for her." The man went off to get his drink, leaving Angus with his memories of Lynella defending herself against the hostile crowd, and Maria showing herself to be better than the rest. The Captain continued, "When she fled, the mage caused a great fire at the Southern Castle. The castle was crowded for the Council meeting and twenty died in the blaze which consumed the stables and the armoury. Many of those who died were bravely helping to prevent the fire from reaching the keep. Others perished when the horses bolted from the stables."

The shock of this news hit Lynella like a blow to the stomach. She felt sick and faint. She could have killed her friends; she had no idea. She wanted to cry but could not. The crowd was already pushing her up against Maria and now she found herself leaning on her for support. The Captain was speaking again, describing how as soon as the fire was under control, the Abbot had quickly assembled the pursuit.

"In valiant combat," he went on, "these men managed to kill three of the rebel party but all finally perished when facing the power of the mage." Lynella remembered her three friends dying, unarmed, trying to return home and the dragons killing the Abbot's men in the ravine.

A question from the audience interrupted her thoughts "How did she kill them?"

"She can kill on sight," he replied.

"Last time, she did it with a coin," the man who had seen the incident at the festival cut in.

The Captain paused but only for an instant. Angus wondered if he actually knew how they had died. "She has no need of coins or other material components any more. Thunderbolts materialise at her command."

An old man slowly stood up. Obviously holding him in respect, the crowd fell silent. "I have read all of the books from the old times. The ancient mages couldn't do anything like that."

There was a sudden awkward silence until someone called out; "She must have help from that ship up there."

However implausible this might be, the Captain was happy to go along with it. He agreed that it was probably the answer and promised to report the man's great insight back to the Abbot. He then went on to tell in great detail of how the Abbot had, in just four days, managed to assemble an army of four hundred men and set off in pursuit. This army was to be protected by a group of monks with protective auras. Apparently, his audience already knew how these could

be used for other purposes and they were not surprised that they were expected to work against the thunderbolts. He told how people had ridden through many nights to get there from the monastery and the Eastern Kingdom. It appeared that few, if any, from the Western or Southern Kingdoms had joined.

Once again, the proceedings stopped for the Captain to satisfy his thirst. Angus managed to talk to the same man again.

"What did the Princess look like?" he asked, deciding to risk this approach despite an apprehensive glance from Lynella.

"She was a young girl with long hair," the man replied.

"I have heard that she was silver blonde," he said.

"Yes, her hair was so fair, it glowed with the radiance of her power," the man looked pleased at his attempt to emulate the Captain's style and went to get more ale. Angus sat down again next to Lynella. Her hair had darkened, as she became an adult. With a good measure of the black dust that pervaded every corner of this town, it was almost black.

The Captain's story now moved on to the battle at the bridge. "There is, at that place," he went on, "A bridge across a wide canyon. This bridge was built by the ancient mages and is formed by a single cable which was sufficient for them to cross. Many brave men moved out from the protection of the auras and tried to get across but all died when this mage turned on them." The total fabrication in this story surprised Angus and, once again, he wondered if the Captain knew that it was not true. He went on to describe how Lynella's party had crossed the bridge and a battle with the Abbot's men had followed. He told of heroic deeds and great bravery and how, finally, the Abbot had forced her back across the bridge.

"Where's the mage now?" this question from the audience caused a ripple of unease.

"She is on the far side of the bridge."

"How do we know that she won't come over again?"

"The Abbot is sure that she will not return. She has no reason to. He has decided to use other means to stop the space ship from landing. He no longer needs her help." Most of the audience did not look convinced. Angus, however, concluded that this was a correct report of the Abbot's position.

The questions continued. "How many are with her?"

"As far as can be seen, only six remain"

"Surely, they will come over soon to get supplies?"

"No, the Abbot saw the remains of their cooking fires when he pursued them. They are living off the forest."

"We can't risk it. We should go to Port Jerusalem for protection." This comment brought general agreement.

"No", the Captain was emphatic; "You must remain. The ore from the mines is necessary to combat the space ship."

"Why should we stay here? We could start a mine somewhere else"

The Captain sensed he was losing the argument. He raised his voice. "The ore from these hills is better than any that can be mined anywhere else. There will be no sanctuary for you at Port Jerusalem. She will not come. Stay here."

The old man was standing again. "If what you say is true about her getting help from the ship, she will want to be at the source when it lands. Since she cannot go through the Southern Kingdom, her best route will be to follow the river up from the rainbow falls, come through this town and on round to Port Jerusalem." Few of the audience knew enough about the area to confirm this but they all trusted him. The Captain could not think of a reply. A new voice broke the silence, a small boy. "I saw them"

"Don't be silly. Keep quiet!" Lynella guessed this was his mother.

"I did, I saw seven strangers come in today along the river"

Others confirmed that strangers had been seen. Angus tensed, ready for the worst. Lynella looked out of the door and began to focus on one of the lights.

The man whom Angus had spoken to, cut in. "The Princess has silver blonde glowing



hair. We couldn't miss her."

Angus relaxed slightly and saw Lynella now staring out through the door, seemingly oblivious to everything around her. He was about to shake her when Maria pulled him away and said in a loud whisper, "The lights." He was totally confused. The old man was speaking again, "Who told you that?"

"I saw her, years ago, at the Eastern Castle"

"Well, you may have forgotten. Where are these strangers?"

The boy shouted, "There!" and pointed directly at Lynella. Her long hair was now held back by the silk cord, the end of which was covered by her hands held tight to her forehead. Her clothes were dirty and torn, her skin was cut and bruised but, from the poise of her bearing and the intensity of her concentration, there could be little doubt that she was no ordinary traveller. Without turning or dropping her eyes for an instant, she gracefully stood up. Men were moving towards her. She felt trapped, isolated, persecuted and finally angry.

Her hands fell away in a fluid movement revealing the jewel, raw power welling inside, bursting out in flash, exploding two of the lighting globes on the ship. The fragments flew high in the air burning men on the deck as they fell. Nobody dared to move.

"Yes, I am the mage." Her voice was cool and steady. "I have the power of the ancients. Step aside." This was bluff; rings could not fly free this far from the source. She had no power to hurt them but, fearing thunderbolts, the crowd moved away spilling out into the square. Soon the party of seven was alone in the inn, facing the terrified crowd who were pushing up close to the ship in the hope of protection in the monk's aura.

"What do we do now?" Maria asked.

"I don't think there's any reason to rush," Angus said. "Those stories about thunderbolts have done the trick."

They talked through all the different ways they could think of to get away from the town and on to the other end of the lake.

"What's happened?" Maria cut in. "Look out there!"

They looked out and saw that the crowd had fallen silent and were all looking up past the inn at the road into the square. There was a scream, soon followed by many more. They rushed out into the square to see what was happening. The screaming stopped. Many in the crowd were pointing at them, behind them. They turned. Standing just a few paces away, at the entrance to the street, was a dragon. Its enormous bulk almost filled the space between the houses, dwarfing the windows and doors to either side. Noticing the new prey which had appeared in front of it, the dragon lowered its head, opening its jaws, ready to strike. Lynella summoned all of her power and drove it into the huge eyes barely an arm's length away from her own.

The dragon collapsed, falling sideways smashing through the wooden front of a building, while still blocking the street. As it fell, others could be seen pushing up behind it, starting to climb over even as it came down in a cloud of dust. The crowd at the ship were running in all directions to get away, while Lynella and her party drew back to take their place. The lights went out as the monk on the ship abandoned his post and fled with the others.

"Run for the ship!" Angus shouted. In the darkness, they tried to remember where the gangway was and ran for it.

"Can you give us some light?" Angus asked Lynella. By sending power up into the area of the spheres, she was able to make some of them glow sufficiently to guide her party up onto the deck. The lights went out again.

"They'll find us by smell," Maria said.

"No, feel the wind" Angus replied "It's blowing straight towards us."

"Can you put the lights on again and get them?" Angus asked Lynella.

"No, I can't do two things at once."

"Cast off the ropes," Adam said with a voice of command and the others followed him as he worked on untying the thick hemp from the mooring bollards on the ship.

They could see the faint outline of several dragons in the square. They had followed the

scent up to the gangplank, but then broke it away with their claws, dropping it into the lake. They prowled up and down, knowing that their prey was close, tearing at everything they came across with their massive teeth. Time and again they searched along the wharf and Adam had to leave the ropes and wait in silence for them to pass. The smell of their putrid breath blew across the ship, but Lynella could never see them clearly enough to attack.

Eventually, the ropes came free and the loose ends fell into the water. Lynella and the others sat down and relaxed slightly, preparing to wait until first light. Their peace was broken by a crash from the far side of the ship, followed by a scraping sound and another crash. They rushed over to see the ship was hitting the wall on the far side of the harbour. The wind was increasing and it was being dragged along the stonework towards the entrance.

## 17 Sailing up the lake

The dragons had ensured that their departure went virtually unnoticed by those in the town. The wind had blown them a few hundred yards out into the lake and then died away. Far from the lights of town, it was a very dark night.

"Could you give us a bit of light again?" Angus asked, "Not too much, in case we get noticed."

Lynella looked up towards the spheres above her and, as they glowed slightly, she was able to pinpoint one of them to give a reasonable light. They were on a large, open deck with the three masts spaced out along it and the open hatches between them. Several handcarts with ore in them had been abandoned in different places. The only cabin was a large box-like structure at the stern. The door was open and she went in, lighting up a sphere inside it as she went.

"You've left us in the dark out here," Angus shouted.

"I can only make them work if I look at them," she replied. "Come and have a look at this lot."

The cabin contained a single comfortable chair, with a metal ring about a yard across, set on a low stand in front of it. Above the larger ring, there were a number of smaller ones set at various angles with wires coiled through them. In the centre, there was a small platform which was empty. Maria followed Angus through the door. "It's for a mage who's not really a mage," she said.

"Talk sense, Maria," Angus scolded her. "We haven't got time to play games. Do you know what it is?"

"It powers the lights. It's like the one in the Southern Castle."

"That's just a ring set in the floor," Lynella said.

"And Lynella can't work it, anyway," Angus added. "Is this lot any use to us?"

"I could have worked it if I'd wanted to." Lynella contradicted him, "I just didn't want to get stuck in there, running lights all day. I haven't a clue about this lot though. What goes in the middle there?" She pointed at a small empty platform.

"That's where his box of tricks that he uses for his aura goes," Maria said. "I think that the rest of it must be a machine for a monk to do what a mage does. Like I said, it's for a monk with a little bit of power to do what a real mage can do."

"You mean it builds up his power?" Lynella asked.

"That's my guess. It obviously does run the lights. Look at the cables coming out of the bottom. They must go out to the spheres."

Lynella looked at the curious construction with the rings. The more she looked at it, the more form it seemed to have. Without thinking, she found herself sitting in the chair.

"What are you doing?" Angus asked.

"I'm going to make the lights work."

"I thought you said that this was set up for a monk, not a mage?"

"Anything a monk can do, I can do better." She let her mind explore the device. "Give me a minute or two, I'll have to let the light in here go out while I work on it." Each ring was perfectly positioned to give and take power with its neighbour. She could put far more power into this than the simple set up in the Southern Castle.

At first, she just explored it. She sensed the ring on its stand and the wires leading from it. It was easy to follow the wires to lights all over the ship but, beneath it all, there was something unexpected. In the bottom of the ship, there was one of the massive iron rings from the crucibles. She explored it briefly. It was nothing like as big as the ones by the road from the Southern Castle to the source, but it was still big. Deciding that it was harmless, she started to put some power into the system. At first, it was quite controlled. The lights came on all over the ship, dimly at first but getting brighter. Then she found herself being drawn into it. One of the lights exploded.

"Back off!" Angus shouted but she was too far into the machine to notice. He started to reach out to her.

"Keep off her!" Maria stopped him. "Remember what happened at the bridge!"

Lynella felt herself losing control. It seemed so natural to let her whole mind flow in where it would be powerful and free. She was slipping in and out of reality but, in one last moment of sanity, she saw a way out. Driving all of the energy down into the huge ring beneath her, she was able to drain the whole system above it and escape. Even this far from the source, the effect of it was sufficiently strong for the surge of energy in the base ring to cause the ship to lurch violently upwards, before dropping down and sending waves out across the lake and rocking violently. The handcarts could be heard sliding around and crashing into everything that lay in their path.

"Is anybody hurt?" Lynella asked at last, putting the light back on in the cabin to see the rest of the party looking shocked as they regained their balance. Nobody could think of a reply. "I had to do that to get out. Help me to get these rings off the top so it won't happen again."

As they worked, Lynella found herself trying to make mental notes of the positions of the rings. She felt as if a part of her was being taken away. Angus saw this and threw the smaller ones into the lake. Soon, they had steady lights throughout the ship. They found that the only other cabins were down a companionway at the other end of it. They were very cramped. One contained six hammocks, evidently for the crew, and the other appeared to be for the Captain. A quick search revealed some swords which Angus immediately removed. Apart from these cabins, the entire hull was occupied by the cargo hold.

The wind was starting to get up again. It was catching the monk's cabin and blowing the ship along backwards. They gathered back in with Lynella, feeling helpless. Only Adam remained outside pacing up and down the deck. "If we're going to get to the other end of the lake, we're going to have to sail it," he called in through the doorway, before turning away again.

Angus chased after him. "We don't know how."

"Clear the rubbish away," he said, kicking one of the handcarts as he paced past it, "and put the jib up first to turn her off the wind."

"What's a jib?" Angus asked, "We've none of us ever even seen sailing ships before."

Adam had reached the other end of the deck. He pointed upwards and turned to walk back.

"Adam seems to know something about sailing," Angus informed the others back in the monk's cabin. "Can somebody try to talk to him?"

"I've never got through to him so far," Maria replied, "But he does seem to have come alive a bit"

The dawn revealed an ominous looking summer squall building up behind them to the southwest. Ahead, the rocky slopes of the mountains came right down to the lake. Even the tree cover was sparse among the debris and boulders which lined the shore. With a substantial reach, the wind, when it came, was blowing up large waves which were breaking against the rocks. The deck had been cleared, the handcarts thrown over the rail and the hatch lids closed and secured. Angus and James were looking at the two jibs that they had raised.

"Pull them in harder!" Adam shouted down. He was standing on the deck above the monk's cabin, wrestling with the ship's wheel.

They braced themselves against the rail, and hauled on the rope with all of their considerable strength. The blocks creaked in protest; the corner of the sail came in; the ship heeled slightly.

Angus ran back to Adam, "That's the first time I've put a sail up. That should get us there, shouldn't it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Adam gave no reply, but continued staring at the rocky shore with intense concentration. Angus followed his gaze, looking at the features of the desolate landscape they were passing.

"We're still getting closer," he said.

"That's what I said," Adam replied. Although the two jibs had turned the ship and Adam

was holding it on a heading away from the shore, it was riding high in the water with its holds empty and was being blown sideways towards the rocks faster than the two small sails could get it away.

"Raise it!" Adam said, pointing at a sail on a boom swinging back and forth across the deck in front of him, with the temporary lighting globes swinging crazily beneath it. Angus hesitated, but could see no other option. Climbing up the mast, he started to venture out along the boom to remove the lights before untying the sail itself. Each time the ship rocked, he found himself swinging out towards the edge, only to be snatched back as the ropes came taut. Each time he had to hang on to the nearest rope and hope that it was secure enough to prevent him from being thrown off. The lamps were held by a seemingly endless number of fine strings around the boom, with knots that had pulled too tight to unfasten. Using his knife, he finally cut strings and wires alike, letting the globes fall to smash on the deck or disappear without trace into the foaming waves.

As the wind stiffened, the ship was gathering speed, moving now almost parallel to the coast. As it moved away from the end of the lake, the far shore grew more distant and the waves, gathering power across this ever-increasing reach, made it corkscrew violently as they battered into it.

Angus now turned his attention to the rig itself, unable to make any sense at all of the mass of ropes, sail and spars that he was balanced on. He looked up at Adam, just a few yards away on the deck behind him, but in another world with his feet on the solid timber planking, holding onto the wheel. Adam looked at him with his usual distant expression, but said nothing. Angus held his knife to a rope that was wrapped around the boom and looked up again to see Adam give an almost imperceptible nod and a puzzled shrug of the shoulders.

Seeing the rocks ever closer, he decided to risk it. The rope was tight and parted with a snap and rapidly unravelled in both directions. One corner of the sail came free and caught the wind which instantly snatched the rest out over the side. Immediately finding that one of the spars he was sitting on was fixed to the top of the sail, he leaned away just in time for it to be dragged out wildly away from him. The next roll of the ship brought it back, leaving him no choice but to jump clear as it came, skidding across the deck to land in the pile of broken glass under the rail.

Progress with raising the sail was virtually impossible until Adam turned the ship into the wind, drawing the mass of wet canvas off the rigging and leaving it flapping above their heads. They were now lying dead in the water and being blown backwards towards the rocks. Angus was bleeding badly but he refused all offers of help as he and his five companions skidded in the blood and glass on the deck, hauling on the ropes under Adam's impassive stare. The noise of the waves breaking against the rocks grew louder as they struggled to work faster. Finally, as the massive sail was fully raised, Adam turned the ship and they slowly gathered speed.

They were now very close to the rocks and could see every detail of the deep cracks and razor sharp outcrops between them. Large sea birds were gathered on them, flying off in turn to pluck fish from the surf. Angus looked up to see Adam staring ahead with fierce concentration. Angus now saw it too, a patch of white water well out from the shore. As he watched; one of the birds came down and, rather than taking a fish from it, landed.

"It's a line of rocks out from the shore," Adam shouted. "I can't get her round in time"

Moving at enormous speed, driving a huge bow wave before them the ship bore down on the line of rocks in seconds. Holding onto the rail, they waited for the inevitable crash to come but suddenly, at the last instant, they felt a smooth lifting as they were raised almost clear of the water to land, with the masts almost horizontal, on the other side.

A wall of water flooded across the deck, breaking against the monk's cabin and pouring over the side. As the masts rose back into the air, Adam fought the helm round to a course into the deep water clear of the rocks. Five soaked bodies hung onto the rail in stunned silence.

"That cleared the blood and glass away," Adam observed almost casually.

"Where's Lynella? She must have gone over!" Angus shouted, leaping up to look at the water racing past.

"No, she did it!" Maria cut in.

"Did what?" Adam asked.

"Took us over the rocks;" Maria continued. "She saved us!"

"Oh I see," Adam continued in his casual tone. "That's why we heeled so much. We were lifted up. Very clever."

Before he could finish his discourse, all of the others were rushing into the monk's cabin. A great deal of water had gone in through the open door and was still flowing out, taking carpets and cushions with it. The chair was apparently fixed, for it remained in position. Lynella lay motionless in it with the jewel hanging lifeless on her forehead. Running to her side, Maria reached out for her. "She's breathing," she said. "She must have put everything into the ring but she's still breathing."

Minutes later, with the squall passing over, Angus confronted Adam, "When I cut that rope, that thing almost killed me."

"The gaff you mean. Yes, it was very dangerous cutting it free while on the boom."

Angus went white with anger, "But you never warned me!"

"The life of one man is not important," Adam replied calmly. "We must get Lynella to the monastery."

Angus started to rush forward and stopped in mid stride. He was confronted by something that could not be understood in any of the terms of reference by which he had lived his life so far.

Five miles above him, the officer on the watch on the American Confederation space ship Atlanta studied the readout on the magnetic pulse from a region remote from the centre of the anomaly, and came to the same conclusion.

Soon, the next squall was building up on the horizon. "This one's going to be bigger. Reef it in!" Adam shouted. With difficulty, Angus managed to find out from him that this would involve several of them climbing out along the boom again, to take the sail in to the level of a line of ties that could be seen hanging from it.

This time, the boom was even worse. Climbing on top was no longer possible with the sail up; the only foothold was a single precarious rope rigged below it. Adam watched as they climbed out into position. With the sail full, there was no deck below them, only foaming water.

"Hold on well if we get a gust off the mountain!"

The only person who could actually hear Adam's remark was Lynella, who was standing just outside the cabin, watching the three men struggle into position.

"What will happen if we do get a gust off the mountain?" she asked, not wishing to know.

"The boom will go across to the other side," he replied calmly, "Very quickly," confirming Lynella's suspicion that Angus was better off not knowing. She hurried forward to help Maria lower the sail for reefing.

The gust came faster than expected and, by the time Angus returned to the deck, he had been up to the waist in water several times as the ship heeled. The experience left him drained and shaking. Looking up at the straining rig, he saw the topsails neatly furled on their spars clear above the sail he had been working on. He felt a strong respect for the men who had worked those sails on ships like this. He realised that Adam was one of their number.

## 18 Find the tower

The day brought many more squalls, driving them north at good speed. Adam steered them up the centre of the lake; the water was clear blue and appeared to be deep. Angus began to feel comfortable with the sure and powerful motion of the ship. Lynella was, however, soon feeling intense pain as they moved under the orbit of the Atlanta.

By mid afternoon, they saw a small group of houses on the western shore. These were at the end of a road which led over the ridge behind them and on westward to the Eastern Kingdom and, ultimately, the source. Just as they were passing this, Lynella felt as if her mind was about to explode as Atlanta's orbit passed directly above them. Something within her wanted to fight back. The thought of Paul being associated with this alien intrusion was difficult to cope with. She had the power to fight it and, as a mage, she felt drawn to do so.

During the afternoon, the wind steadied. They released the reefs and set the main sail on the forward mast to maintain their speed. Once again, Angus found himself climbing along a boom but this time he moved with greater confidence, taking time to remove the lighting spheres without breaking them. He passed them down to Lynella who, seeing no other place to put them, arranged them in a pile by the rail and secured them with some ropes.

To the east, the barren rocks at the base of the mountain continued uninterrupted by any sign of habitation. With the last of the daylight, they saw another settlement on the western shore. This was a small town built around a harbour. A cart full of the black ore could be seen moving slowly up the hillside, behind a pair of heavy horses away to the north-west.

"That must be Port Jerusalem," Angus said. "It's where the ore gets unloaded for the monastery."

"We're not going in there, are we?" Lynella asked.

"We don't seem to be."

"You mean you haven't discussed it with Adam?"

"He doesn't discuss," Angus replied. "He just does things. You know what he's like"

"He seems to know what he's doing."

"Looks like it. If I go and ask him to go in somewhere, he'll probably just walk off and leave me to steer."

They watched and waited as the darkness grew. Lynella went up onto the upper deck with Adam. She stood beside him for a few moments and then asked, "Can I help with some lights?"

"Not now, thank you, Lynella," he smiled. She had never seen him smile before. "It would shine in my eyes," he explained.

"What about when we come close to the shore?"

"Then I shall want to light the shore, not the ship, that's the trouble"

"Not too much trouble," she replied and smiled back. "Let me know when," and slipped away before a puzzled Adam had a chance to reply.

The churning bow wave showed luminous in the faint starlight. Behind them, the lights of Port Jerusalem were disappearing from sight. In front was almost total blackness. Standing virtually motionless at the helm, Adam was watching and listening. Lynella stood leaning against the forward mast, facing towards him, holding a single sphere in her outstretched arms. In the pool of light from its faint glow, they could see her long dishevelled hair and her tired eyes looking intently into it. Gradually, they began to hear the sound of breaking waves from the East. Adam asked for light and Lynella's sphere flew straight up high in the air and then, for a few seconds, burned so brightly that it illuminated the entire landscape. They saw that the lake was getting narrower; both banks could be seen, to the east, the jagged rocks and to the west, the forest now came almost to the water's edge.

"How many times can you do that?" Adam asked.

Lynella replied from the darkness, "I have four spheres here. It was easy for me to do." Her face emerged out of the darkness in the light of the next sphere. "I'm ready again now."

After some more tense waiting, Adam called for more light and for some of the sails to be lowered. As the lake narrowed, the waves became smaller and gradually the party relaxed as they realised that running aground would mean nothing more than waiting for first light and swimming to the shore. They spread out along the rail to stare into the night in front of them and wait. Hearing a faint noise well above her, Maria looked up to see a star briefly obscured as something passed in front of it. She shouted. Lynella sent a light up just in time to show them dense forest just yards away, reaching out, almost touching the mast. Adam steered away but the far bank was now close and the trees were blotting out even the dim light of the stars.

A few minutes later, Adam called for the last light. It revealed a small bay to the west with a break in the forest and, standing on the bank, a massive black tower. The forest had encroached towards it, and small trees and creepers were growing up around it but none of them came near to challenging its domination of the scene. He steered straight towards it and the ship ran gently aground.



## 19 In the tower

Close inspection showed the tower to be made of metal, which had blackened with age. If the mages who had crafted it had seen the state of their creation they would have been appalled. It seemed that every traveller, hunter, and outlaw in the land had tried to gain entry. The only features on the smooth, black and immensely hard surface were the fine lines of joints which had been made with such precision that they were scarcely visible in the early morning sunlight filtering through the trees. Each of these had been attacked with a large variety of different implements leaving scars ranging from fine chisel marks to indentations from the impact of whole tree trunks. The destruction was not limited to the easily accessible base; the damage could be seen extending up the full height of the tower, above the top of the tallest trees. The rotting remains of ladders and trestles littered the ground below it.

Now it was Angus's turn to walk around it, looking on with awe at its strength, and greed for what lay within. Looking at the joints, he saw that they formed a regular pattern over the tower, except for one location where they outlined a shape which could be a doorway. This had not escaped the attention of his predecessors; virtually the entire surface of the area had been scraped, broken or abraded away. He looked in vain for signs of a keyhole or handle until, finally, his hunger diverted him and he set out into the forest to look for food.

Sitting around the small cooking fire, finishing off his meal, he started to make plans. They needed to get to the monastery and get inside. If it were still possible, surprise would be a big asset. The Abbot would certainly soon hear of their departure in the ship. He might even get reports of sightings of the lights that Lynella had used in the night. He might be setting out even now, with packs of dogs to hunt them down, or did he believe the stories they had heard about Lynella being able to kill on sight? Angus doubted it. The ship would soon be found and would show the hunters exactly where to start. He looked up at Adam who had, unusually, decided to join them.

"Can we get the ship away from here?"

Adam looked up and paused, unused to being addressed in company.

"It would be very good if we could," Lynella added reassuringly.

He finally replied, "Yes, that's the mouth of a river out there"

"So if we can get it out into the middle, the current will push it on downstream?" Angus guessed.

Adam nodded. "If we rig a line to the far bank with some pulleys on it, we should be able to pull her off."

"Even if it takes a few hours, it'll be worth it," Angus concluded.

Now, Lynella found herself walking around the tower. With her slight build, she could not contribute to the work in the river. She was glad of this because she felt drawn towards the tower. It was obviously from the age of the mages and all of the relics had meaning for her. As always, she felt an overpowering sense of sadness at the way the very power of the mages had contained the seeds of their own destruction. Without thinking, she easily unlocked the door and went inside to look.

Inside was the dwelling of a family. Abandoned in haste to go and die. A purity of form that could never be repeated in the kingdoms as they prepared for the return of the Great Mages. Runes that flowed across the surface of gold, still glowing, untouched by time, accepting her without demanding. Here were clues to what she was, clues to what she should never be. Pictures showed the owners, standing proud of what they were, but with the sadness that showed they knew that they had gone too far.

She went up, from floor to floor. Bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, all domestic in their form but pure to their heritage in their detail. Finally, at the top, a gallery bright with the light from the ports that had opened for her. Now she could see the world the tower commanded. Far below, she saw her friends moving the ship with ropes and pulleys. Small figures looking up in astonishment.

To the west, the tower dominated a break in the ridge, separating the valley of the lake from the land beyond. The plain extended to the horizon across the source. Far to the west, she knew that the Abbot was waiting for her in the monastery under the hill.

Standing motionless as the spaceship passed over the landscape, she felt the pain, diminished as they had moved south, but still intrusive. Finally it was gone, but her sense of peace at its departure was short lived. A pulse came from the west, soon followed by another. More came, faltering at first as if learning their place, but growing to a steady confident rhythm. This was a machine like the one on the sailing ship, calling out to draw her in. She longed to call out and respond to it but knew that the minds inside it would hear her call and tell the Abbot where to send his dogs. A few minutes later it was gone, but the message it sent was clear to those who could sense it. This was far more power than was needed for light and comfort. The Abbot was preparing to fight.

Finally sending the King Solomon on its way, Angus hurried back to the tower. Having seen Lynella inside, the open door came as no surprise. The room inside looked opulent but surprisingly ordinary. Globes around the wall shed a pleasant light, illuminating a large central table covered with papers, pens, a few plates and even some toys. Chairs were spread around it in disarray. A decanter and glasses stood on a tray on a sideboard, bright stains showing that the contents had been left to evaporate out. Several pairs of shoes lay in a pile to one side of the door. The passage of several hundred years showed little effect inside this perfectly sealed environment.

There were, however, small features which stood out from the mundane. Decorations carved into wood and etched into glass and metal showed the telltale form of runic symbols. What seemed at first to be an area of metal inlaid around the perimeter of the table was, on closer inspection, a very thick gold ring which was totally covered in the runes. Careful inspection showed that these symbols pervaded every feature of the room, seeming to flow from one to the next.

The creators of it all looked down from stylised portraits hanging on the panelled walls. Each one was shown facing directly at the viewer, with a glowing jewel on their forehead as if the artist hoped that some measure of their living power could be immortalised in their image. Feeling intimidated and intrusive in the presence of these haunting mages, Angus crossed the room to the ornate curved staircase.

On the next floor, he found Lynella and Maria in a room surrounded by books. Lynella looked so different from the girl he had seen that morning that he thought for a moment that one of the ancient owners had returned to defend the tower. She was sitting in a comfortable chair, looking at a book which was largely illuminated by the jewel on her forehead. Her hair, which had been dirty and tangled in the morning, now shone where it was held back by the cord holding the jewel, and then flowed down over her shoulders. Her torn clothes, which had become such a familiar sight, had been replaced with a long black dress with a high collar in the style seen in the portraits. In all of the years he had known her, he had never seen her look so completely in her element. Maria was sitting in an upright chair at a small table covered in books and also looked clean and comfortable. She mumbled a welcome to him without taking her eyes off the text in front of her.

He walked across to see what they were reading. Looking over her shoulder, he saw why Lynella was so interested in what she had found. On the page in front of her, a single rune was drawn and, with it, what appeared to be an explanation of its meaning. Noticing his curiosity, she turned the book away slightly to make it clear that he should not be privileged to see more than a glimpse of its contents. Maria's book was a history of battles. He knew that she had read about them since childhood but could see that this account was totally different from the graphically illustrated volumes which were kept in the castles. This was a technical description of each manoeuvre, detailing the powers used and the effect they had, and was clearly intended for practical use.

The evening meal became an almost formal occasion at the grand table in the lower room. All except Adam, who kept looking nervously at the door, had borrowed to some extent

from the supplies of good clean clothing. The table was cleared and silver cutlery laid. Fruit and game from the forest was served on porcelain plates decorated with gold patterns.

"We must decide how long to stay here," Angus finally said in a pause in the conversation about the day's work, and the intricate pump which drew water into the tower.

"I could stay here for months," Lynella replied, "but we've got to get moving and get Paul out."

"We could risk a few days if studying the books will help you a lot"

"No, there's no point. They don't tell me about the machines. The Abbot was testing his this morning; I could feel it."

"Can't you find a book that tells you about them?" James asked

"No, they weren't built when this tower was used. Nobody needed them with powerful mages around."

"They're a way for people with a little bit of power to do more with it," Maria added.

Lynella tried to explain some more, "In the time of the mages, all they had were the little things they use to make their defensive auras. That thing on the King Solomon was a much bigger version of one of them and it meant that a monk with very little power could run the lights."

"What does the one in the monastery do?" Angus asked.

"That does a lot more than run lights," Lynella replied. "It felt as if it had enough power to fly ring-ships."

"How do you think it gets all that power?"

"I am sure that there are lots of monks all feeding into it at the same time."

"So it's even more powerful than you are?"

"No," she replied in a matter of fact way. "I am sure that I am more powerful than it is. I can lift bigger ring-ships than it can"

Angus was surprised by this reply. "Then, can't you fight it?"

"Yes, I could" this reply was plain and factual as before but slightly distant. "But remember that in straight mind contests between mages, they both died on every occasion." She paused. "Some of the greatest mages were trapped by lesser ones as part of a power play. Now this machine is trying to draw me in."

## 20 Into the monastery

Setting off on the following day, Lynella had no trouble telling them which direction to go. Every few hours, she would feel the pulses starting and ask Angus to call a halt while she concentrated. Each time it was clearer, stronger, more demanding. She felt that it was the only living thing that had ever penetrated the invisible barriers around her. The power was developing and moving towards it made it ever harder to resist. She yearned to call back, to open her mind to it, to become part of it. The dogs were the key to her defence. She concentrated on the thought that one small signal just might be able to tell them which way to go, and that would be the end.

They could tell that they were moving closer to the source, even without Lynella to tell them that the field was growing stronger. After the first few days, they could see the difference all around. Over the years, the monks had established a substantial area of terran vegetation almost on the same scale as those at the castles. Around the edges of these areas, the species always mixed. One moment they would be fighting through the featureless, thorny native trees, only to emerge into the shade of a magnificent oak. Despite knowing where they were going, it was reassuring to see the familiar trees again.

When they finally emerged from the forest, the difference between this place and the three kingdoms became apparent. Ahead of them was a vast area of featureless rectangular fields. There were no lanes, barns or crofts. Maria looked across the whole area.

"Where do they all live?" She asked. "I always thought they had a village but never let anybody see it."

"They must all live under the hill, womenfolk, children, the lot," Lynella replied.

"That should make it easier to get in," Angus observed hopefully. "Look over there at the herds of cattle. They must keep the gate on this side open all night for the herders."

"What, just walk in and pretend we live there?" Maria asked.

"No, I was assuming that we would have to do something about the guards," Angus replied. "If we were going to try that one, it would be easier during the day. I think that we ought to watch them for a day to see how many come out. If it's more than a few hundred, we might get away with it. The trouble would be that it would be difficult to take any weapons in, without being noticed."

They moved up to higher ground and had a clear view of all of the farmland and could just see the pathway leading into the hill at the far side. They could not, however, find a vantage point from which they could see the gate itself. This was not good enough for Adam, who went across the exposed farmland and hid near the gate to watch it during the night.

"Do you think that they would see the smoke if we cooked them?" Maria enquired; looking at the two rabbits that had been caught in the snares.

"I think that we should risk it," Angus replied, "we haven't had a decent meal for days now. It'll help us try to work out what to do. I suppose he might still be out there and come back tonight."

The dawn had come and gone. Over a hundred men were working in the fields below them but Adam had not returned. They cooked the rabbits and ate them in silence. As they finished, Lynella spoke to the group.

"I still have no idea what to do if we can get in. It must go for miles in there. I could find the machine in there, but even if I don't get drawn into it, I have no idea how to find Paul. Perhaps I should go in alone?"

"No, we've come this far and we're not going to let you down now," Maria replied.

Another day came and went, and there was still no sign of Adam.

"We'll give him one more day and then we go in anyway," Angus said. "There obviously aren't enough of them to slip in during the evening without being recognised, so we shall have to try at night."

When they did try to enter, they found the door wide open and no sign of a guard. They

had watched a couple of herders who just seemed to wander in without any challenge at all.

"Perhaps they don't have a guard," Maria suggested. "After all, as far as I know, nobody has tried to get in for at least a hundred years. Nobody in their right mind would want to."

"There's only one way to find out," Angus observed.

The door had no guard, and the corridors beyond were deserted. The lantern that they took from the rack just inside, gave a good light and they moved forward in single file, very aware of how conspicuous they would be if anybody saw them with their swords.

They saw a lighting sphere and it was a challenge for Lynella. It was a beacon; its glow was only just visible and it scarcely provided any illumination for the corridor and it called out to her to use her power. She knew that she could make it as bright as she liked and she longed to try, but she also knew that this might summon the dogs. She concentrated on other things, anything to take her mind off it as she passed it, and wished, yet again, that she had taken more time to learn to use and control her magic. The next sphere was easier and, as the corridor stretched endlessly into the hill, each one became easier still.

They were obviously passing along a main thoroughfare of the residential area for the community that supported the monastery. It was wide with smooth, finely crafted stone walls containing numerous entrances to doorways and other corridors on each side. There were two shallow parallel grooves in the floor which had been made by the passage of carts with metal rims on their wheels, taking supplies to the monks.

Finally, they came to an archway. There were beautifully carved figures and even altars at either side, but still no guards. Beyond it, the light from the spheres was brighter.

Angus looked at Lynella. "This is it then. I suppose we just go in and start looking. He's bound to be in this part."

"What about the guards?" Lynella asked

"What guards? There don't seem to be any."

"They must have known we were coming."

"I don't know," Angus paused. "Perhaps there are several factions and the one which took Adam prisoner doesn't set the guards. Perhaps he never got here. I know it seems pretty unlikely but what are the options? If they are waiting for us, they won't give up waiting for months so there's no point in going back. Anyway, if they are waiting, they'll know we're here by now."

They continued into the brighter light, carrying on in the same direction, until they came to a large cavern which was filled with the diffuse blue light. As they moved, forward they saw the machine and stopped, spellbound by its size and complexity.

A single iron ring, the size of one of the ships in the crucibles, formed the base. Above it, in a seemingly random pattern, were thousands of smaller rings, all held in place in a massive wooden structure. Winding through the rings were cables which had wires wound tightly round them, throughout their length. Around the outside of the base ring were the ornate wooden chairs for the monks who had sufficient power to contribute to the machine. They could see that a few of these chairs were occupied by monks who were totally engrossed in the machine and never looked up. The power going in was sufficient to make the machine hum gently and, looking up to the top of it, they saw the cables extending out of it to feed energy to the lighting spheres.

It was clear that the machine was continually being extended; partially completed timberwork could be seen in several places and hoists with pulleys were being used to place more rings on it.

## 21 Into the machine

The Abbot looked around with an air of calm authority. He was standing at the front of a gallery, overlooking the machine in the hall below. To one side of him, twenty armed monastery servants were drawn up in two ranks, standing to attention with military precision. Their swords and chain mail reflected the dull glow from the lighting spheres in the corridor behind. Stepping back, he turned to address the small group of senior monks who were standing in the corridor.

"Now you may see why we need armed guards. For the first time since its founding, our monastery faces an armed incursion." He spoke with authority, but quietly to avoid being heard in the cavern above the gentle hum of the machine.

"Why did we let them get this far?" Brother Andrew asked. "Their presence desecrates the heart of our sanctuary."

"You are a wise man and your contribution to our work and our faith has been enormous. In our troubled world, however, sometimes we must make decisions based on the aspects of practical reality of which you have less experience than some of us."

Brother Andrew had often wondered if it was his ability not to react to remarks of this type which maintained his position of favour with the Abbot, despite his advancing years. The Abbot was continuing, "The presence of armed men and the possibility of a disturbance in the servants' areas would have caused unnecessary alarm. Such things could spread rumours out of all proportion to the threat that these people pose."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"The Princess Lynella has power. If she can be persuaded to work with us, her support could be critical as we defend this planet from this present menace and ultimately embark on our crusade."

Brother Andrew shook his head. "She hates you. Surely she will never work with you?" He had forgiven her for the loss of his ability to contact the machine but he could not forget.

"She has little control over her powers. Let us see what she does in the face of her first real challenge." As the Abbot replied, he led the group to a dark corner of the gallery, from which they could observe the party below without being seen. Turning to the senior guard as he passed, he said, "Take your men below and be ready to move on my command."

Below, having finally recovered from the shock of seeing the great device, Lynella turned to Angus, "To think that all the time he was being so sanctimonious about the compact at the High Council meeting, he was building this."

"Don't let's worry about that for now. Let's find Paul first. I imagine that he is being held near here. We probably need another corridor leading from this hall."

They moved around the edge of the cavern, keeping in the shadows and looking for other doors. They found one almost immediately but it was securely barred from the other side and Lynella did not dare to use her power on the latch for fear of being detected. As they moved on, they could see that, on the far side of the machine, there was a single chair that was set above and slightly back from the others. The five steps that led up to it were wide and richly carpeted and the chair itself was beautifully carved with a tall back with golden statuettes of eagles at either side. Lynella was drawn to it. She longed to control the power that emanated from it. She stopped to look at it. It was unoccupied and the lighting was very low so she could easily get to it without being seen.

Finding several other doors which were also barred, they arrived back at the doorway where they had come in.

"We're going to have to force a door and do it quickly. This must be a trap. It's amazing that we haven't already been attacked."

"The one on the far side would be the best. That must lead towards the central part of the monastery," Lynella suggested.

They moved around and, while her companions tried, without success, to cut at the wood with their knives, Lynella found herself slowly walking towards the chair.

Looking down from above, the Abbot smiled. "There she goes. If she goes willingly, she may cross a frontier into a world from which she cannot escape."

Below him, Angus suddenly saw what was happening. Grabbing her arm, he stopped her, "Where are you going? You can't do that. It's too risky!"

"It's the only way. I think that I've known all along that I would have to. All these weeks when it has been calling to me in and I have been fighting against being drawn into it, I've known that I would have to fight it at some stage. If I can control the machine, we can get what we want. If not, we might as well give up. You can't open those doors without my power to help you."

"What happens if you get drawn into it?"

"You stay with me and watch. If I look as if I'm losing control or fainting or something, drag me away. That will break the contact."

Angus was not convinced but he had to admit that there was no real alternative. Ascending the steps, Lynella suddenly felt conscious of her dirty, tattered clothes and subconsciously tried to straighten them as best she could. This was a throne from which a kingdom could be controlled and she was the person to control it. It was as if it had been built for her. She reached the top before analysing this last thought in any detail. Looking from above, the Abbot had noticed her gesture with satisfaction.

Lynella felt secure and comfortable sitting in the chair and, resting her hands and elbows on the arms, she closed her mind to the world around her and started gently probing the machine. Each of the thousands of rings could develop its own field and be detected as a separate entity. She let her mind probe deep into the centre of the machine to rings which had been hidden from sight for a generation, and then back to the outer surface to the newer structures. Each individual ring, except for the old ship in the base, was small and had taken little power to create; the power of the whole came from the sheer number of them.

Her mind wandered aimlessly through the complex pathways, just exploring a dimension that had never before been open to her. Eventually, remembering the urgency of her task, she started looking for patterns to understand the purpose of the machine. Moving her mind around its outside, she found small regions of more powerful fields where the monks were sitting. Studying one of these regions she found that it extended upwards and, looking more closely, she noticed that the cables which extended through the machine formed pathways for the energy to be channelled upwards and towards the centre. The wires wound around them permitted direct contact with the cables to see the flow within them.

The regions in front of each of the chairs were each based on sets of six main rings which were used to deliver the power to the machine. Examining each of these sets in detail, she found that they had individual field patterns which gave her an insight into the individuals that created them. Remembering what she could of the monks in the chairs, she compared their images in the machine with those in the outside world and felt more comfortable seeing them through their power.

Suddenly, the order and symmetry of the whole structure became apparent to her. Each of the thousands of rings had a definite purpose. The machine could channel the effort of many with little power and combine it to be stored in the massive ring below or fed out from the top. She began to feel the pull of the rings near her; they were hers and were calling out to her to become part of the machine rather than just an observer.

Knowing that it was all part of trap made no difference to her. This was just one more step that had to be taken in the hope that her power was strong enough. There was no way of knowing what would be involved or how it could be done, but she was sure that if she fought for control of the machine and won, then she would be able to rescue Paul. Slowly she let her mind take control of the rings in front of her.

Angus positioned himself so that he could see Lynella. He set the two soldiers to work on the door behind them, slowly cutting away at the wood around the hinges. It was made of oak and appeared to be exceptionally thick, but he could think of nothing else that could be done. Maria and James were positioned against the wall, a short distance to either side of the door, watching for the attack that seemed inevitable. After several minutes, however, nothing had

happened. Finally, one of the monks got up from his chair at the machine, and left the room giving no indication of being aware of anything other than his usual routine.

"She has started to move in. We must attack now. It will be easy to co-ordinate our movement, the surge of power will make the lights bright." The monk had moved quickly, once out of sight of the intruders and was now standing before the Abbot. Turning towards the senior guard, the Abbot said, "It is essential that you take that man who is standing close to her, before he has a chance to break her contact. Be ready to move in a few minutes."

Lynella was first to sense the attack an instant before the lights blazed and the gentle hum of the machine rose to a roar which echoed around the cavern. She found herself trapped in the machine and unable to escape to reality and break the link. At the same time, a vicious battle started on the floor below her. The monastery guards rushed in and attacked Angus as he ran towards the steps up to the chair. Drawing his sword, he was well able to defend himself but found that he was being forced back towards the door and away from Lynella. The months of survival in hostile areas had left him and his party far more agile with their swords than their attackers, but they were heavily outnumbered. Falling back towards the door, they formed into a semi-circle around it and fought for their survival. Soon, however, they found that the intensity of the assault slackened, as the guards were content simply to contain them.

Lynella tried to focus her power and create a route for escape but she found that her tiredness, combined with her lack of practice, meant that every effort dissolved into the absorbing mass of the machine. Despite having known that it was going to happen, she felt desperately betrayed by the other identities in the machine with whom she felt that she had been so close. In a fit of rage, she gave up hope of escaping, picked the strongest of them, and attacked. In an instant, she released a surge of power, using energy she had never known she could draw from. Within seconds one of the monks lay dead in his chair, his six rings melted into a glowing pool on the floor of the chamber.

Sensing what had happened, the other monks cut their contact with the machine and the lights went out. The darkness was complete; there was no other source of light of any type in the cavern. The noise from the machine had also stopped and there was a moment of total silence, followed by a terrified scream as Angus's sword made contact as he thrust it towards the place where he had last seen a monastery guard. Not stopping to finish the fight, he withdrew his sword and charged towards Lynella's chair, sending guards who lay in his path staggering in all directions. Rapidly becoming disoriented, however, he soon crashed into another chair and had no idea in which direction to turn. The Abbot's voice rang out, "Re-make contact", and then after a pause, "We must have lights."

One monk tentatively tried to obey. Within the machine, he sensed an enormous and chaotic power an instant before dying as the whole section of the machine closest to him was destroyed.

The surge of power caused a sudden flash of the lights, so intense that many of the spheres exploded, showering those below with molten fragments. Ignoring the pain as several landed on him, Angus saw the direction to move in and ran towards the steps. By the time he reached them it was totally dark again and he was forced to feel his way up. Feeling for Lynella's hand, he found it gripping the arm of the chair so powerfully that he dared not prize it loose for fear of breaking her fingers. Pausing for an instant, he heard her deep, rasping breathing and felt the sweat on her hand as she poured energy into the machine. He reached out and slapped her face to try and break the contact. When this failed he tried again and again, shouting at her in desperation to try and get a response. Seeing lanterns moving on the far side of the room, he knew that he would soon have to leave her to defend himself and he grabbed her shoulders and shook her violently. Lynella gasped and looked up at him with a frighteningly distant smile which showed no trace of recognition.

He shouted again, "Lynella, wake up!"

The reply came, "Go!"

"You must come with me."

"Go, now." This time her voice was stronger and showed signs of anger.



"Break the contact. You don't need the machine."

"I shall make you go."

As she said this, an iron ring, as heavy as a man, flew out of the machine, passing close above his head. He ducked instinctively as it flew around the room and passed above where his head had been moments before. He was forced down the steps as the ring went lower. Screams rang out as it hit people on other sides, tearing through flesh, but never being deflected from its path. Finally, it orbited round the machine just above floor level, preventing any further contact with the girl, gathering speed. With the speed came a persistent howling noise.

A number of lanterns had now been lit and everyone in the hall saw the blur of motion and fled from it, friend and foe alike. The monks produced heavy keys to open doors and avoid having to cross to the one opposite. The ring seemed to sense that its prey was escaping and spiralled outwards in pursuit, killing the slowest. Angus saw the door open and rushed towards it, gathering Maria and James with him as he went. They ran forward, trying to keep near the walls to avoid being recognised in the dim light.

The ring sparked as iron hit stone when it reached the outer wall and, the floor cleared, it moved upwards, reducing the heavy wooden gallery to a shower of splinters moments after the Abbot and his entourage had fled from it. Spiralling up to the roof it hovered momentarily above the centre of the machine and settled down towards the floor behind Lynella's chair. Then, in one final burst of energy, it shot out of the door behind her, decimating the fleeing crowd, crashing through the outer doors of the monastery and flying out across the plain to the source.

Standing near the wall, Angus was covered in blood as the ring passed straight down the centre of the corridor. With so many dead, nobody showed any interest in him as he ran towards the light showing through the broken doors.

Chaotic surges of energy now swept through the power lines to all parts of the monastery. Lighting globes flashed brightly before bursting, metal objects flew about and numerous small rings flew down the corridors, leaving dead and injured behind them. Panicking in the unaccustomed darkness, the occupants fled outside into the early dawn, carrying their casualties. Angus and his party were swept along with them.

## 22 Paul escapes

Paul lay in his bed listening to the hum. It had become part of his life. It was almost like being on ship but easier to live with. On ship, when the fusion ring was firing, the high frequency drive permeated every part of the structure and every person in it. It was alien and inhuman and almost everybody needed headache cures after a major manoeuvre. This hum in the monastery was totally different. It was human. When he had finally persuaded the Abbot to let him see the machine, he had seen why. His amazed reaction to it seemed to have been the final proof that he had nothing immediate to offer from his knowledge of technology. After that, his life had been much easier. His assumed future as a potential hostage was bleak but the present was quite comfortable.

The hum had become louder and the lights had come on brightly. It was strange to think of this power coming from people. It seemed cruel for them to have to sit there pouring it in, almost as if they were beasts of burden doing the work for others. They never complained though; they all said that they enjoyed it. Once they had been trained and learned how to stop it assuming control, it was almost like a special social occasion. They could apparently communicate with each other through the machine in a way that let them share thoughts and concepts with total clarity. It also helped them develop and control their strange defensive auras. They seemed contented with their lot.

He looked around his cell. He now had a small but comfortable bed and a desk and chair. On the desk were the books which he had been able to borrow from the library. They clearly found the comments that he made about them sufficiently interesting to make it worthwhile giving them to him. His only difficulty was trying not to show how much he treasured them. The stories of ancient mages, wars and dragons were so incredible that, just a few months ago, he would have dismissed them as fiction. Seeing Lynella's magic, however, had convinced him of the truth of them and made every detail a challenge to fit into the puzzle of this planet.

He looked sleepily at his watch and realised something was wrong. The lights had come on more brightly than ever but it was still the middle of the night. Next to his watch, the bracelet on his wrist was now a familiar sight. Its ancient runes made an interesting contrast with the digital display. He smiled as he remembered what he had read about marker bracelets. He was wearing bracelets which identified him as one of the senior followers of a powerful mage, and Lynella was the mage. She certainly had a fine sense of humour; it was easy to see why the steward had gone grey trying to look after her.

At that moment, the light went out completely. This disoriented him. It had never gone out before; it had become the one familiar object which was always there, night and day. Several times he had piled up the furniture but he could not reach it. He could only stare at its glassy surface and try to understand how it worked but each time he had given up, no wiser than before. It just glowed. He looked up but the darkness was so intense, he could not even be sure he was looking in the right direction. Then, as Lynella launched her second attack, it flashed on so brightly that he instinctively turned his head away. This action saved his face from injury because the globe exploded, throwing fragments in all directions.

Shaking his head to get the hot embers out of his hair, he jumped up out of bed. The bed covers had protected him from most of the burning and now he shook them out, fearing fire. In the event, the contents of his cell were not sufficiently combustible for this so he soon collected his thoughts and tried to decide what to do next. Something had gone badly wrong with the machine, but he was locked in his cell so all he could do was to get dressed and wait.

The sounds from outside grew louder. He heard screams in the distance and then running and shouting which he judged to be in the main corridor, which he knew was about 50 yards away. Next, he heard the crash as the ring burst out through the main doors and then the sounds of the mayhem which it caused in the corridor.

Moments later, the bracelets on his wrists came to life. At first, it was as if a wave of energy had passed through them on its way around the monastery. It seemed to pause just for

an instant before moving on. Then it came back, pausing longer this time. Next time it came back it stayed. The humming vibration of the machine could now be felt in the bracelets and they grew warm to the touch. The books had said that they were a means for a mage to communicate some of their power to others. Obviously, Lynella was out there somewhere and wanted him to move. Using a combination of the vague descriptions of the old books and his knowledge of the electromagnetism on which the power was based, he started to experiment. He held his wrists out in front of him, not knowing what to expect. The air between them started to glow. Pausing momentarily to consider the commercial implications of fluorescent lights without the tubes, he used the light to move towards the door.

Each time he moved his wrists, there seemed to be a slight drag to get them moving and then they seemed to have a slight inertia when he stopped them; the faster he moved, the stronger the effect. He tried swinging his arm back and then hitting it against the door. It made a small dent and the humming of the ring seemed to change pitch slightly and grow stronger. Next time he swung it against the door, it showed less drag when he started it moving and then moved faster and made a large dent in the door. The pitch changed again and the power grew. He stopped to think; this was a lot of power but he was going to be very lucky not to end up with broken wrists. Next time he hit with the bracelet, he was careful to move it in an arc so that, if the lock broke, it would follow the opening door as it swung on its hinges. Slowly gaining confidence, he hit it several more times, getting faster and more accurate with his aim, until eventually the lock broke and the door swung open.

The door swung back against the wall with a crash, revealing that the corridor was in total darkness. As he tried to recover his balance, he soon discovered that the bracelets were still trying to move as if he was still using them to break out. Each time he moved them forward, they gathered momentum. He ended up sitting on the floor just outside the door, his hands placed on the floor, unable to move. Waves of power were still surging around him, and occasionally the spheres above him flashed on and off and the hum in the bracelets pulsed as they passed by. There was no sign of any guards, just noises as people fled along the main corridor.

Using the bracelets with the assistance of a mage was clearly a skill that should be practised before it was used in anger. He knew that he had to find some way of telling Lynella that he had finished what he was doing and wanted freedom of movement. From the chaos around him, he formed an image of Lynella in combat with another power and pictured a mortal battle between two great mages. He had no comprehension of the actual battle that she was fighting against herself and the seduction of the machine, but his image gave him the patience that he needed to compete for a small part of her attention.

He slowly raised his hands and held them in front of him. There was no light and the force on the bracelets persisted. Touching the bracelets together caused a spark at the point of contact and the force decreased. More contact between them managed to get more response in that the force stopped and the light started working again between them. Standing up, he walked the few paces into the guardroom where several corridors met. The devastation was appalling. One of the guards lay dead, blood seeping out of a wound on the side of his head and there was more blood on the floor which must have come from injuries caused to others as they fled. Having never seen anything worse than a minor car crash, Paul was overwhelmed. He was violently sick and had to turn away while he recovered.

The cause of it all was nowhere to be seen. The dead guard had not even drawn his sword to defend himself. Picturing all kinds of dragons stalking the empty tunnels looking for survivors, Paul retreated to his cell and held his hands well apart, extinguishing the light.

The force on his bracelets started again. This time it was a steady pull back towards the guardroom. Resisting it, he banged them together several times. The light between them flickered and then the light in the guardroom did the same. Lynella obviously wanted him to go there. Perhaps she didn't know about the dragons. He resisted. Everything went quiet around him for a few seconds; he heard the last few stragglers moving in the main corridor as he waited for something to happen. He felt a brief rush of air in front of him and sensed movement. Cowering, he brought his hands up to defend himself. The light came on and he saw a small

ring, not much bigger than his bracelets, floating in the space in front of him.

As an offering, it looked small and insignificant, dull grey and motionless against dull grey walls. As a weapon, its deadly effectiveness was given away by the dried blood which clung to its inner surfaces. Again, he had to pause and consider what was being sent to him and how he should use it. Lynella's powers were not unbounded. While just holding it in stasis was an achievement, he doubted whether she could find out much about the environment around it. She had presumably been able to send it to him because she knew his position from his marker bracelets. If it was to go anywhere and do anything, he would have to learn how to use it. Stepping forward, he saw runes covering the surface. He guessed that this must mean that Lynella could identify its field in some way. This was how she located it and moved it around.

Taking hold of it, he found that the field held it fixed in space. Remembering the effect of touching his bracelets together he touched one of them against the ring. Obediently it fell to the floor. He picked it up and, apart from being warm to the touch; it felt like any other ordinary metal object. Putting it down, he moved his wrists around. The light between them was working but the ring did not move. He tapped his bracelets together in frustration. This was a powerful weapon; he had seen that it could kill but he had no idea how to use it.

It moved very slowly at first, just spontaneously lifting itself off the floor and circling round him. Then it moved faster and faster, until it was a blur of motion. When he moved, it moved with him. To check that he could do it, he touched his bracelets together once and it stopped. Three more times and it started again; three more and the orbit grew larger. At last, he had a weapon to fight with and he moved out along the corridor to escape.

Setting out along the centre of the deserted passageway, he moved confidently with the ring in a wide orbit around him. The light from the bracelets revealed more scenes of random killing and destruction. Noises in the distance made him believe that other rings were still at work in other parts of the monastery. He could only hope that they were being controlled to keep away from him because, as the victims had found, there was no defence against them.

Rounding a bend in the corridor, he saw movement and crouched instinctively towards the wall, forgetting the protective ring. As the metal hit the stone, the energy in it was dissipated in a massive spark which arced back to the bracelets, leaving him staggering back in pain. Learning again the limitations of his power, he moved away from the wall to recover. When he tried to start the ring moving again, he found that its movement was more hesitant and less controlled than before. He guessed correctly that Lynella had suffered more than he had when he had misused the power he had obtained from her. The thought of the consequences of this on the outcome of her other battles made him decide to carry the ring in a pocket and only use it if he needed it.

This time he moved forward with considerable caution, following the wall in darkness. He saw a lantern ahead and a small group of people loading an injured man onto a stretcher. He heard the sound of running feet and an armed man with a blazing torch arrived shouting, "Get back!"

"What from... Where?"

"Get back from under the power lines!"

He grabbed one of them and threw him back towards the wall.

"What power lines?"

"The things up there that go to the lights."

The group started to move.

"The rings are flying under them. Keep away from underneath them and move out"

He ran on towards Paul to spread his message. As he passed, he shouted, "Get moving. Outside."

Paul started to obey but, at that instant, one of the rings came along the corridor. As it approached, the whistling noise it made suddenly stopped and it paused in mid air just in front of them. The soldier grabbed at it. It would not move.

"Come on. Help me!"

Paul pretended to help as best he could as the guard tried to take the ring. He wanted to

tell him that it was only one of thousands in the machine that could probably be used if needed but knew that his accent would betray him. After struggling for a few moments, the guard looked up.

"Hey you're..."

Before he had a chance to finish his sentence, Paul ran. As he ran, he tapped his bracelets together. He heard the guard running after him and then a cry of pain. He turned. The ring had followed him and was in stasis again, but now it had fresh blood on it. The guard had been in its path and now lay on his back, dead. His chest had been torn open by the ring as it passed straight through his body. Paul had no idea how Lynella had known that his signal was intended for the second ring, rather than the one he was carrying but decided that carrying two might cause confusion. When he had moved a few yards away from the ring that was in stasis, it moved away.

Hoping that the group with the injured man had not seen what had happened, he moved towards them. They scarcely looked up as he passed by and soon he reached the main corridor. Pausing at the entrance, he saw the lights flash on for a few seconds before a ring flew past. There were only a few people to be seen and they were well clear of the track under the power line. Looking towards the centre of the monastery he saw little activity, just small groups gathering up the last of the injured to carry them out. No noises could be heard from the main hall. Looking in the other direction, he saw monks who appeared to be co-ordinating the evacuation. As he watched, he saw that small groups were being despatched to search every room. Nobody was fleeing in panic any more; this was an organised total evacuation. The Abbot clearly wanted everybody out before he counter-attacked. Paul wanted to try to tell Lynella what was happening, but he judged his chances of reaching her without being seen to be slim and, as he waited, he felt a strong pull on his bracelets towards the entrance. She obviously wanted him out and had given him the means to get there.

After the lighting spheres had gone out again, the only illumination came from the lanterns. The width of the corridor was just visible from where he was and he could see points of light extending into the distance. The question of what happened when his ring encountered one of the monks' defensive auras troubled him but did not stop him.

The first that the monks ahead of him knew of his approach was the whistling sound of the ring.

"Defend!" Those with auras knew exactly what to do on this command and moved forward to protect the others.

"At last one comes slowly enough for us to be prepared." The reply sounded confident. Paul heard this exchange but did not doubt the superiority of Lynella's power. He moved forward towards the lights.

"It's the prisoner! He must not get through!" On this command, some monks moved out towards the centre of the corridor.

The encounter, when it came, was inconclusive. The ring could not penetrate the auras but they could, equally, not move into its path. The monks all pushed forward and Paul found himself retreating slowly as the ring was pushed back and held him in the centre of its orbit. Seeing himself surviving only as long as it took the guards to get organised and throw their swords at him, he realised that he had no method for controlling the ring, other than stopping it completely. Luckily, however, the guards seemed only to follow actions that they had been trained in, so, for some time, the whole group moved slowly along the corridor.

Paul's only hope was that Lynella would sense his failure and respond to it. As always, her response, when it came, was totally unexpected. Suddenly feeling a large metal object in his back, he turned in fright to see a ring about four feet across, with six smaller rings resting on it, evenly spaced around the circumference. He was just able to let it past, without having his own ring touch the wall. Falling back slightly as it approached, the monks watched as it stopped in the gap between them and Paul. Gradually the first ring lifted off and started to orbit, spiralling out from the carrier, gaining speed as it went. It was followed by a second and soon they were both filling the width of the corridor and moving too fast to be seen. The monks tried pushing at

them with their auras but the central ring was held absolutely firmly in place. Seeing that it was no longer needed, Paul stopped the motion of his own ring.

The new rings were powerful but the entire system was all at a single level and two of the guards started to duck under it. The next two rings anticipated this and moved slightly upwards, before moving into elliptical orbits which took them close to the floor and ceiling, as well as the walls on either side. The two guards found their path blocked and started to move towards the remaining gaps at the edges near the floor. The sophisticated symmetry of the completed pattern made Paul stand in awe of the intelligence which controlled it. The final two rings flew in figure of eight orbits, threading through the carrier and completing the barrier. Looking back helplessly to their commanders, the two guards could move no further. They realised too late what was going to happen. With a surge of energy that made the lights pulse, the entire pattern started to rotate, gathering speed at a rate faster than the eye could follow. The two guards had no time to move, cry out, or, Paul hoped, feel pain.

Even the all-pervading death that he had seen since escaping from his cell had not begun to prepare him for this. He stared in disbelief at the floor where they had been. There was simply nothing there. A few pathetic fragments, spread across the floor and even clinging to the walls were all that remained of the two lives that had existed a few moments before. His senses were overpowered, the smell made him feel physically sick and he felt his body swaying. He could see that even the monks who were used to the brutality of the planet were not prepared for this. Their masks of self-confidence evaporated as they looked in horror at the appalling beauty of the monster they faced. When the lights blazed on with the next power surge, Paul saw the terror in their eyes as they struggled to maintain their auras.

The larger ring shot forward with a power far greater than anything they could withstand. The auras imploded with a flash of blue light and Paul found himself alone. He watched as the small rings, having killed their enemies, landed back on the carrier, and it returned to Lynella. He wondered if she realised what she had done. Walking forward and gasping for breath as he choked on the sights and smells that he encountered, he tried to fix in his mind an image of the playful girl in the Southern Castle.

Approaching the outer door, he saw a group of injured men and women who were struggling with another stretcher. None of them recognised him and, by helping them, he was able to pass unnoticed out of the entrance cave into the daylight. As they emerged, fresh stretcher-bearers took over and led them out of the trees at the base of the hill.

The scene in front of him showed the strength of the organisation of the monastery. Across the open ground around the crucible and up to the edge of the source, ordered groups were forming. The injured that he had seen, clearly only formed a small proportion of the population and were being directed towards a makeshift treatment centre on the western side. Paul followed his small group, waiting for the moment when he would be required to speak and his accent would give him away.

As the injured were taken away, he found himself standing alone, wondering what to do next.

"Are you all right?" The kindly enquiry came from an elderly lady who was approaching him with a worried expression.

He just looked at her.

"Don't worry. We all feel like that. Why don't you sit down over here?"

She led him in silence to one side and, having cleared the space, turned her attention to the next group of wounded who were approaching. Seeing his chance, Paul slipped away. Moving purposefully through the crowds, nobody challenged him until he was close to the edge of the source. He was spotted, but far too late. He was easily able to cross the line of marker stones and his pursuers stood helplessly, bound by the compact, as he ran along the path Lynella had created for him leading directly towards the landing field.

From his vantage point on the side of the hill, the Abbot saw his escape, cursed, and resolved to teach his guards to limit their observation of the compact when it interfered with their duty. From his vantage point further up the hill, Angus also saw his escape and resolved to be

there to help him when he returned, as he surely would.

## 23 Work on site

The pile driver lay on its side in the precise centre of the compound. The wire rope fixed to the end of it stretched up into the darkness to where the lights of the shuttle could be seen and the dull roar of its engines heard. The two fitters on either side were fixing the filler caps to the tanks of diesel fuel and oil which would be sufficient to drive piles for the next 12 hours. Standing back, they each gave the all clear to the officer who spoke into his communicator, "Shuttle 15, you are clear to lift"

"Lifting now. Back with the last one in fifteen minutes," came the clear reply as the rope pulled tight and the pile driver swung away across the site.

Below him, the pilot could see the twenty sets of floodlights around each of the piling gantries. Ten of them were stretched out in a long arc around the edge of the landing field, placing piles to support the torus. His destination, however, was one of the gantries grouped in the centre where the hub would land. As he approached it, the piling ganger reached out and caught the nylon rope hanging below the driver, to guide it onto the pile but the pilot's skill was such that it dropped neatly into place with little help. The ganger unhooked the lifting rope and signalled to the shuttle, which moved on to the next rig. The piling gang opened the fuel and oil valves and connected the piston to the winch at the top of the gantry. Raising the piston to the top of its stroke, they let it fall. On cold days it sometimes took several attempts to get the driver to fire but this was a warm night and it went first time. Each of the twenty machines fired every three seconds, creating a strange rolling rhythm which echoed out across the forest.

Having delivered the last driver for fuelling, the pilot flew north to collect some tree trunks for machining down into piles. The season had been changing and the cloud cover which had been almost continual since their arrival on the planet was less frequent now. Quite often, he was sure that he could see lights far away from the site but he was under strict orders never to fly over to them. The Mission Director had made it quite clear that any evidence that the original survey showing the planet to be uninhabited was incorrect would be most unwelcome. Their job was to mine the minerals and get out.

He arrived at the area that was being cleared for the mine. Since the earthmoving for the landing field had been completed, all of the plant was working at clearing the overburden. He could see lines of headlights moving out towards the spoil heaps. Ahead of the earthmoving, the forest was being cut, "This is shuttle 15 come to collect some timber."

His call on the radio was answered with a flashing signal light which guided him towards one of the logging gangs who had cut a trunk which was large and straight enough and had chains already looped around it for the lift.

A few minutes later, with the trunk securely suspended below the shuttle, his routine was interrupted by a radio message; "This is Atlanta calling on all channels. There is a significant magnetic disturbance from north of the landing field. Stand by for emergency evacuation if seismic activity occurs."

He could see no sign of any disturbance affecting the lights below him but, following set emergency procedures, he flew clear of the worksite and dropped the trunk. Turning the shuttle, he then flew to a holding position above the mine compound. He could see headlights converging from all directions below him as he called to the duty officer on planet, "This is shuttle 15 on station above the mine."

Looking north, he was sure that he could see even more lights than normal, way beyond the areas where ship personnel were permitted to go, but knew that this could not be discussed on the radio. Listening to the radio, he heard more and more shuttles report in with their position as they stood by to evacuate but he could still see no sign of any difficulty below him.

Looking up again, he saw a dark red glowing streak appear across the forest. It flashed in from due north and seemed to embed itself in one of the spoil heaps surrounding the mine, sending a small shower of earth into the air.

"This is Atlanta. Magnetic activity is decreasing. We shall be over your horizon and



unable to check the field for the next forty minutes. Remain on evacuation alert for this period."

With nothing to do, he watched as the number of lights in the distance slowly increased, until they were obscured by the light of dawn.

Standing in Captain Turner's office at noon that day, he gave a full account of what he had seen. As he had expected, the Captain was very interested but gave him strict orders not to discuss the matter with anyone else.

Two hours later, the Captain was standing in front of an area of recently disturbed earth on the side of the mine spoil heap. He was watching an excavator digging into the heap. It was not working very efficiently because a member of the ship's crew was driving it but it did not have to dig very far.

The driver swivelled the machine to face him and signalled to him to have a look in the hole. He ran forward to look and saw the surface of a smooth metal object. Backing away, he signalled to the driver to dig around it and soon watched it being dragged clear. Checking it with a Geiger counter, he found no trace of radioactivity.

"Let's clean it up a bit and have a look."

The few chosen crew members he had brought with him moved quickly on his command and dug the remaining earth clear of it. The ring could now be seen to be perfectly formed and undamaged.

"Cutting that path through the forest didn't even damage the surface."

The officer's remark led to the obvious conclusion. The Captain stated it, "If this spoil heap hadn't been here, it would have reached the landing field."

"And carved a hole through everything in the way," the officer added.

Looking closely, they found runes in the surface of the ring, which just confirmed their conclusion that it was artificial.

"We're going to take it back on the shuttle," the Captain ordered. "I want it put behind my office and securely covered, I don't want the Director using my ship to start a bloody war about this."

The loading operation was almost complete when the sentries heard movement in the forest. Looking down the path formed by the ring, they saw Paul. His clothes were torn and he looked pale, but he seemed to be fit and he called out to them when they saw him.

## 24 Paul back at site

Captain Turner welcomed him into the office, "Come in Paul. I'm sorry you had to wait so long but I think that we have a lot to discuss and I wanted a chance to hear it all without being interrupted."

If shipshape meant anything, the site office was shipshape. When it had been Paul's office, the walls had been off white and spattered with mud from where he had shaken his boots off. They were now clean and newly painted in brilliant white. An outer office had been built and nothing as dirty as muddy boots ever penetrated this inner sanctum to offend the owner of the spotless carpet. The rhythm of the pile drivers was the only reminder of the world outside.

The computer terminal was set on a table to one side and surrounded by neat files of printout. The room was, however, dominated by a magnificent mahogany desk with an equally imposing chair behind it, finished in leather and more mahogany. Paul was surprised to see that the ship's Captain was not, however, using it. He was sitting in one of two comfortable chairs arranged around a low table in front of the desk. In keeping with the shipshape office, this had a bottle of brandy and two gleaming glasses on it. The Captain gestured for him to sit in the other chair and poured him a large measure.

Paul had appreciated the clear afternoon to wash, change, eat and gather his thoughts before this interview. Their brief ride back in the shuttle had been, by mutual consent, silent. He raised his glass and sipped a first taste from it but offered no verbal reply. The Captain continued, "I just checked the records, I see that you were away for three days in week 30 and then went off again in week 32. That was 16 weeks ago."

Paul finally spoke, "I can explain it. I was only trying to protect the ship. Does the Director know?"

"He knows you were gone but he doesn't know you're back. As you can see, I've got my own men down here now."

"So I see."

Paul had not returned the glass to the table; he was slowly rotating it in his fingers and the gleam was being replaced with fingerprints. His hands were sweating. They both knew that if the Director found him, he would be imprisoned on the ship and his chances of surviving the return journey would be slim. He asked the obvious question, "Will you protect me?"

"I will if I can. I could probably hide you on the ship but there's no way I could arrange for you to get a share when we get back."

"No, I don't want to go back."

"You what? Come on. All alone?"

"You're not going to believe this but there are people out there."

This remark stopped the conversation dead. The Captain knocked his drink back in one, poured himself another and placed the glass carefully on the table. Paul began to tell him the whole story of what he had seen in the Southern Kingdom and later in the monastery. The Captain frequently stopped him to question the detail. He quickly decided that Paul was telling the truth and they discussed numerous theories to explain the presence of the people on the planet and the origins of their strange powers. Several ideas about where they had come from, why and how, were proposed, considered and dismissed.

The bottle was less than half full when the steward came in to serve dinner. The Captain changed the subject while he was in the room.

"That design you did for the pile drivers was really ugly but they've done a hell of a job."

"How are you doing on the programme?"

"Just about on target. When we first got here, we were horrified by what was being done but when we looked into it in detail, we found it was all like the design for the pile drivers."

Paul looked puzzled, "Very cryptic, George, but what do you mean by that?"

"It was a mess but I think you would have completed it more or less on time."

"You mean it wasn't beautiful but it worked?"

"Couldn't have put it better myself."

Paul felt quietly satisfied and proud of what he had done.

The Captain grinned and continued, "In fact that could well be the story of your life."

Paul felt much less satisfied. The steward laughed as he left the room and closed the door behind him.

"Not any more," Paul replied.

"You mean it's beautiful now or it doesn't work any more?"

"Both." He paused. "Yes, that's it, both. I need help to make it work again."

The Captain looked puzzled, "How do you mean?"

"I want help to rescue Lynella. I'm sure she's still in there."

"You really expect me to risk everything so you can chase after the girl? Pretty bloody ironic isn't it? You waste six months good drinking time telling us you'll never trust one again and now this."

"It wasn't her fault."

"It never is."

"Always has been with me. Anyway, this one's different."

"They always are."

"You ever met one who could fling half a ton of iron forty miles?"

"I have to admit you've got me there. Mind you there was this one..."

"Look, George, seriously, I am sure that she risked her life to get me out."

George did not look convinced.

"And if we don't do something either she or the Abbot could attack Atlanta."

"OK, I'll think about it. You just lie low while I try to sort things out."

## 25 Lynella senses the ship

Sensing Paul's escape, Lynella knew that the time had eventually come when she must face the real challenge. At one level, it was very simple; the machine must be destroyed. It was a threat to the kingdoms and a threat to Paul's ship. She was exhausted but if she worked carefully, she could cause damage that would take at least a generation to repair. The Abbot had tried to trap her but she had broken through and now had complete control.

Looking, analysing and understanding were all part of the necessary preparation. The correct key rings must be selected for destruction. Drifting through the pathways, she slowly explored every detail. She must know it before she could kill it. Letting her mind move down, she explored the single massive iron ring in the base of the machine that was used to store energy until it was needed. Moving up to the level at which she was sitting, she looked carefully at each of the nodes in front of the other chairs. Two of these were destroyed with the monks who occupied them dead, presumably still slumped in the chairs behind them. Each of the others was slightly different to match the personality that worked with it. In places, she could detect elements of ruined former nodes which had been built over but still showed traces of the many minds which had been subjugated in the creation of what she must now destroy entirely.

She moved further up still, to the base of the power cables and out to every part of the monastery. With little effort, rings could be moved along the corridors but with no other life present there was little point in this so she returned to the centre.

Time lost all meaning as she went back along every pathway. There could be no harm in spending a few minutes looking. This was, after all, what had drawn her in from the far side of the Kingdoms.

Suddenly, an alien energy interrupted her solitude. The familiar feeling of the ship manoeuvring as it passed over the source was amplified by her heightened senses in the machine and now, with all else silent, dominated. As the only living mage, her authority should be respected, not interrupted. The ship was gone now but it would be back within the hour and she would be ready. The time passed slowly but, now she felt she had a purpose, she was content with her task of preparing. When the Atlanta was next over the source, she was ready to respond. The next pulse from Atlanta's fusion ring was met with a massive surge from the planet which totally reversed the planned orbital correction. A further attempted correction, a few seconds later, achieved little except to signal to Lynella that she was not un-noticed.

Lynella now rose to the challenge. Nagging doubts about the real nature of the trap set by the Abbot were swept aside. This was just to be her demonstration of power, a brief gesture of freedom before an inevitable period of captivity by the Abbot when she had destroyed the machine. In the next orbit, the ship's pulse was stronger but, with increased confidence and pride, Lynella's reply was also stronger. She decided to play again and next time she reversed the pulse from the machine causing a substantial over-correction by the ship.

The technician on Atlanta looked at the figures and called the duty officer on the intercom, "Sorry about this, sir. I can't get it right today"

"What's the problem?"

"I know it sounds stupid, but the planet seems to be fighting back."

"Perhaps the field is just turbulent, today. We're only five seconds out. We could leave it for a few hours."

"With your permission, sir, I suggest we miss one and then continue with small pulses just to try to find out what's going on down there."

"OK. Keep me informed."

The officer started drafting a report for the Captain. In just nine weeks time, they were scheduled to land. All variations in the field strength were of critical interest.

## 26 Paul held at site

875 MESSAGES 865 UNREAD

He looked at the screen with mild amusement. Was this a record? Paul had been away for 16 weeks but the electronic mail had just kept on coming. His name had not been deleted from anything. Was this deliberate or was it just typical inefficiency? The Captain seemed to know about it, hence his obvious amusement when he mentioned the mailbox. The numbers on the ship were so large that a few deaths had been inevitable during the months of their journey. When this occurred, the name was normally removed fairly quickly. His name was very definitely still there. The first screen full of message headings was visible; each one had an icon to show its category.

Selecting CATEGORIZE he saw:

LANDING MANAGEMENT 157

SHIP MANAGEMENT 153

ENGINEERING 117

PERSONAL 85

CHURCH GROUP 73

PERSONNEL OFFICE 53

GENERAL BULLETIN 43

MANAGEMENT BULLETIN 35

Starting from the top seemed as good a place as any. He opened the LANDING MANAGEMENT folder and looked at the most recent entry. It was the minutes of a meeting. At the top of the document, he was noted as absent and, in a typical act of mindless bureaucracy, the secretary was actioned to find out why. Presumably this had happened 16 times at the weekly meetings. He resolved to help the unfortunate secretary and started to enter a reply:

PAUL EVANS WAS UNFORTUNATELY DETAINED FOR A PROLONGED DISCUSSION ON ENGINEERING AND THEOLOGY WITH AN EVIL ABBOT.

Feeling no concern at all for his own welfare, he was about to send it but decided not to it at the last minute, in case it caused trouble for the Captain. Skimming through some of the other documents confirmed what he had been told about the landing. Everything was going ahead. Thousands of details concerning the landing field and modifications to the ship had been attended to. Some fluctuations in the field from the planet had been noted with concern but, following an age-old tradition, the committee had called for more information and done nothing. Requests to send men out from the landing site to find out more had been rejected by the Mission Director himself as being economically unjustifiable.

Looking under SHIP MANAGEMENT, he was shocked when he found out about the launch of the data bullet. Much of the technical information was unintelligible to him. He was a construction Engineer, not a flight Engineer. He only received the documents for information because of his involvement in the landing. As he read, however, two conclusions were apparent. The first was that the ship had only survived the incident by pure luck. The second was that some of the repairs were not possible until it landed. They were committed to landing; faster-than-light travel for the journey home would not be possible until the repairs were completed. He started to plough through the rest of the folder but was interrupted by a prompt telling him that six messages had just arrived in the general bulletin category. He was about to dismiss the prompt when he thought that the normal general bulletins, warnings about fire drills and commendations for worthy crew members, never came in numbers. He decided to look.

The first message was short:

RETURN DATA BULLET CAPTURE COMPLETED. DATA UNLOAD COMMENCED. He moved quickly to the next to find the news from earth:

TREATY ENDS BLOCKADE. INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FORCES WASHINGTON TO BACK DOWN.

[edit]

The bulletin went on to describe how the treaty was bringing prosperity, as industries were re-opened. He smiled inwardly as he thought about the many friends he had seen suffering, and how much better their lives would be. There would be food in the shops again and the cities would be cleaned up. Families would be re-united as the borders opened. With this, his thoughts switched back from the picture of his friends to the memory that he had been trying to keep out of his mind for the ten years of isolation. Not knowing what to hope, he looked at the last entries in the PERSONAL folder.

Two new messages at the end of the list had only been there a few seconds. He sat looking at the icons for several minutes, not daring to look at the text. Finally he saw what he had hoped for with such an unerring determination that he now almost dreaded. His children would be at the spaceport when the ship returned. They would welcome him as a hero and start a new life with him, trying to make up for the ten missing years.

He sat silently, his mind in turmoil, for some minutes. The image of him being landed as a prisoner with no money and no hope came to him with complete clarity. He could see it in detail: the glaring sun, the cameras, the crowds, and the expression on his children's faces. They would have no warning; there was no question of attempting another data bullet launch after the last fiasco.

A new message flashed up in the LANDING MANAGEMENT folder. Without thinking, he opened it. It was the message about the new, and far stronger, pulses from the planet. For a technical report, it was very strongly worded. Phrases such as "unjustifiable risk to the ship" and "must be eliminated at all cost" should not have been there. The writer was clearly scared. His report was highly unprofessional. It did, however, guarantee Paul a job for the immediate future.

As expected, he soon received a message from the Captain asking him to prepare a written report on everything he knew about the pulses and bring it to a meeting the following day. Since he was suspended without pay, he felt a momentary resentment at being asked to work. This resentment was, however, soon forgotten as he set to work and felt he was part of the team again. He wrote in great detail about everything he knew but had to conclude that he did not know what had caused the pulses. He could not see why Lynella would have done it and he was sure that she would have destroyed the machine so the Abbot could not have done it either.

Two young officers were present at the meeting. He knew them by sight; everybody knew them by sight. They were almost a head and shoulders taller than the rest of the crew and powerful with it. Smith was normally to be seen weight training in the gym. Gardiner was equally fit and was in the medical team. They had read the report and moved directly to planning an attack.

"You must have some idea what caused it," The Captain said. He was looking intently at Paul as if he might be able to read more from his expression than he could hear from his reply.

"I suppose she must have done it, given she was in complete control just a few hours before."

"What was this control?" One of the junior officers asked, sounding unconvinced. "We found those bits rather hard to follow, magic and all that."

"I have just reported what I saw," Paul replied.

"You don't think it was some sort of battle for control of the machine?" The Captain asked, showing himself prepared to take the information at face value.

"No, the Abbot and his men were all camped outside, trying to work out what had happened."

"So why did she do it?"

Paul smiled at him hopelessly. "Don't ask me about women, especially Lynella. I suppose I think I know her quite well but remember that I only ever spent a couple of days with her."

At this point Gardiner decided that Paul's story was no longer credible. "You say she has magical powers. You ask us to believe it?" His tone was condescending so Paul slowly and deliberately held out his wrists.

The Captain had not seen the marker bracelets before. Paul had not told him about them

but had mentioned them in the report. A few dry printed sentences had not, however, prepared the Captain for what he saw. In the cold, bright, environment of the office, they stood out as defiant beacons of another culture. The mysterious flow of the runes seemed to ripple slightly as he looked at them. One of the young officers moved to touch one of them. Paul nodded his assent and the man slowly turned it around. There was no sign of the joints which had been closed when the rings were formed. They were far too small to have ever passed over his hands. As if this was not enough to convince the officer, he was sure that he could feel energy in them. It might have been the feel of the perfect runes on the shining surface but it sent a shiver through him and he jumped back.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked, trying to resist the temptation to mimic the man's earlier condescension.

"OK, I'll believe you now"

"Come to think of it, I might be able to do better," Paul said, starting to enjoy himself. "The books said that when a lot of power passes through marker bracelets sometimes," his voice trailed off, "I think I know how to do it if it will."

He turned the light off and held his wrists out. A dull blue glow hung between them. By its light, Paul saw three shocked faces trying to come to terms with a new reality. The discussion began to move forward on a very practical level. Arrangements were made to use the ship's workshops to manufacture ceramic bullets. These could be made with fibre reinforced composites and would be unaffected by the magnetic fields in the monks' auras.

"What am I going to tell them?" Smith asked.

"Just tell them the Captain wants them," Paul replied and the Captain nodded to confirm it.

Finally, Paul brought the discussion around to his status.

"We agreed that I would probably be locked up if the Director found me," he said. "I need to know where I stand, and I think that these men should know as well if they are going to work with me."

"What do you want? Do you still plan to stay here?" the Captain asked.

"No, it's different now," Paul replied.

"You mean the pulses give you security? I wouldn't rely on that too much. OK the new pulses are so strong that we need to sort them out, but the Director would say that we could do it without you if we wanted to."

"No, I mean my position's different." The Captain and the two junior officers looked surprised. Paul told them about his family and was amazed by their interest. The officers' mess was a place where everybody told the story of their life sooner or later. As a frequent guest, Paul remembered many times when, in the cold light of the following day, he wondered how they had had the patience to listen to his troubles. Now he saw unexpectedly serious and genuine concern.

The Captain listened and when Paul had finished, he said carefully and deliberately, "I am not Director of this mission but as Captain I still have considerable power. I can promise you this. If or when we manage to complete this mission, I shall use all of that power to ensure that you return as a free man with your proper share of the bonus. We all know that you ignored the Director's strict orders when you left the landing field. I accept, however, that you did it to help the ship and we are better off because you did." He looked around before continuing, "I am now ordering these two officers to accept your leadership."

## 27 Lynella held by abbot

The Abbot's final strategy of retreating and waiting had paid off. For some hours, cautious attempts to re-enter the monastery had been met with more flying rings. Their movement had, however, become progressively more erratic and finally ceased. The monks and their servants had moved back in and taken Lynella's unconscious body from the chair to where it now lay, in a small cell.

Awakening in severe pain, she opened her eyes and saw a lighting globe above her. It was glowing dimly and illuminating the rough walls carved from the rock. Realising the extent of her failure and, wanting to destroy the only thing she could, she tried to focus her power on the globe. The effect was quite unlike anything she had felt before. The power seemed to reflect back onto her and made her feel as if an overwhelming force was stopping her. At the same time, she felt burning pain on her forehead. Reaching up to remove the source of the pain, she felt a heavy iron band around her head. When she tried to pull it off, she found that it was secured by a network of fine metal chains which encompassed her head and held it in position. Running her fingers around the band, she felt runes on it. For the first time since her childhood, she found that even the simplest uses of her power were now impossible. Thinking back, she realised that she had actually seen a device before like the one that was on her head. It was displayed in the hall of the castle where she lived and had been used on a mage who had been captured in one of the great battles for the source. It had remained on his head to the end of his life and beyond. His skull was still inside it.

The door opened and the Abbot entered with two other men. Lynella was pleased to see that both of the other men wore bandages. The Abbot was not, however, visibly injured. He asked her, "Can you hear me?"

She nodded her head painfully. The band felt enormously heavy.

"You have killed more than twenty people, injured over a hundred and caused substantial damage to this monastery. If you were not a Princess from a royal house, you would be executed for it."

Lynella made no reply. The comment did, however, give her some hope that Angus had escaped. If he had been captured, the Abbot would have been certain that her family would not find out whatever he did. The Abbot continued, "You will be tried before the monastery Council who will establish the full details of what you did. I must, however, have immediate answers to some questions. I need to know how you attacked the ship."

This achieved an immediate response. "I never attacked the ship."

"You did, and I want to know how."

"Why would I attack the ship?"

"I don't know. I assume you had an argument with Mr Evans."

"I never saw him." She stopped to think. She shouldn't be giving information away. She decided to meet a question with a question and added, "Why not ask him?"

The Abbot replied, "We have a number of unidentified dead who were badly mutilated by your rings. He will be one of them." He had intended to shock Lynella but saw no reaction. She knew that Paul had gone through the outer door and took this reply as a good indication that he had escaped. The Abbot repeated his question, "Why did you attack the ship?"

In truth Lynella didn't really know why she had attacked the ship. She could hardly say she had done it because it gave her a headache while she was trying to face up to something she could not do. She tried another question, "How do you know what I did?"

"Our monks felt the strength of your pulse and the reply from the ship. Now tell me why you did it."

"I don't know."

The Abbot looked at his aides in exasperation.

"Just tell me then. Will you help us to attack it?"



"How can I with this on my head?"

"We would take it off you."

The thought of further access to the machine gave her a quick flash of hope followed by an overwhelming sense of terror when she thought about the reality of what had happened to her. She just said, "No, never," and closed her eyes.

## 28 Paul Smith and Gardener to monastery

Paul parked the jeep a short distance inside the line of marker stones at the edge of the source. Having decided that surprise was impossible, they were not concerned when a lookout on the hillside ran into the monastery when he saw them.

"They've seen the jeep. Are you sure they won't take it?" Smith asked.

"Quite sure," Paul replied. "Let's get these packs together and get moving."

The walk to the clearing took about five minutes. When they arrived, Paul was amazed at the efficiency with which the monks had cleaned up the effects of Lynella's attack. There was not a single sign of the makeshift camp through which he had escaped just four days previously. The clearing was empty as they approached it but, just as they arrived, the Abbot appeared along the path from the monastery door accompanied by at least fifty men. They wore gleaming armour and drew up in ranks. A number of monks formed a line in front of them, facing the three men from the ship and their guns.

Smith looked at the primitive armour and weapons and asked Paul quietly, "What do we do now?"

The Abbot heard the question and, seeing it as a sign of weakness, replied, "Your weapons don't work against our auras. There is nothing you can do."

Paul sensed that time was not on his side. The line of men was slowly moving forward towards him. Despite everything, however, the idea of shooting defenceless men appalled him.

"We demand the release of the Princess Lynella," he shouted. "Our weapons have ceramic bullets. Your auras will not stop them." The monks were getting close still looking confident. Paul looked at his companions. "They haven't a clue what a ceramic is. We can't just shoot them."

The monks were just a few yards away now, moving fast with the swordsmen close behind. Paul shouted, "Stop!" in a last desperate attempt but finally opened fire.

They aimed low but many of the bullets ricocheted off the flagstones to cause injuries in the ranks behind. With this and the injuries to the monks at the front, the three short bursts of automatic weapon fire caused appalling damage. The soldiers kept advancing, as if willing themselves to believe that it could not be happening. The line of fallen men in front of them slowed them slightly but did not stop them. Finally, as the swords came close, Paul had to raise his gun and shoot straight at them, leaving lines of holes in their armour. At last the attack faltered, and, dragging their injured with them, the entire troop fled back into the monastery. Paul and the officers moved back a short distance and just watched.

"That was unreal," Smith said, looking very pale. "They were like zombies. Why didn't they stop coming at us?"

"They've never seen anything that the monks couldn't stop." Paul replied. "This is a metal rich planet. Everything is made of it." Paul looked at him but Smith was not listening. His face was now pure white and he looked as if he were about to collapse. Paul realised that the last few weeks had given him a preparation that these men had never experienced. Even in that short time, he had grown hardened to the sights which would once have left him stunned.

It took the two big officers several minutes to prepare themselves to move again. The clearing was now deserted and, when they went up the short path and through the cave to the monastery doors, they found them closed. Massive new timbers had been fitted to replace those Lynella had broken. In the centre of one of the doors, there was a small observation hole.

"Keep away from the hole," Paul ordered. "Remember they have crossbows."

They stood either side of it and, once again, Paul felt compelled to try to save life.

"Let us in," he demanded in a vain attempt to avoid bloodshed. Knowing that this would not work, he shouted, "Stand back from the door. We are going to blow it up."

"They won't do that either, will they?" Smith added helplessly as he placed the explosives against the door. They stood well back and watched the explosion. Soon, they heard coughing and saw a small group emerge through the smoke inside the doorway to tend to the injured.

"I guessed right about the ventilation system," Paul said, watching the smoke go into the doorway. "No idea where it comes out but it must be up on the hill somewhere." While saying this, he was pulling tear gas canisters out of his pack. Having done so, however, he decided to wait again. He realised that this would give the monks more time to prepare but he could not bring himself to attack the men who were working with the casualties. Taking care not to become targets for crossbows fired from the entrance, they watched and waited. The dead and injured were taken away and even the remains of the door were removed. No guard was posted. The open doorway was deserted. The faint glow of lights could be seen far within but the entrance looked dark and dangerous. They put on masks, fired the gas in, waited for it to circulate and ran as far as the first major intersection.

## 29 Machine destroyed

Adam stood in the doorway. The door was closed and, judging from the build up of rust on the hinges, had not been used for some time. He was standing pressed against the rough stone where it curved round from the walls of the main corridor towards the old door. He felt calm but not safe. The gas was blowing down the corridor and not mixing with the dead stale air where he stood.

Safety, however, was a thought from another life in another time. Safety was in his village. Even when storms came racing over the horizon, catching him desperately trying to recover his fishing nets, he felt safe. Safety was a clear and certain knowledge of his surroundings, his family, his village and his God. As the waves came higher, towering over his boat with their tops blown into a sheet of spray, he knew that his God was watching him. Others from the village had perished in storms and it might be his turn now but only if God intended it and there would be a good purpose even in death. He would be safe in God's hands.

He looked out into the corridor at the three men. He knew that they were intruders but he didn't want to trust them. He wanted to be sure that they would not take him prisoner. Two days in a cell had seemed like a lifetime. Next time, Lynella would not be able to create the chaos in which he had escaped. He had seen where she was, a powerless prisoner herself now. He called out, "Why have you come here?"

He could hear them talking quietly to each other but they did not reply. He called again, "I am no friend of the Abbot. I may be able to help you. Why have you come here?"

This time the reply came in a strange accent: "We are friends of the Princess Lynella."

Adam could only think of one person who was a friend of Lynella and might have an accent like that. She had mentioned his name on many occasions.

"Are you Paul?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then I shall take you to Lynella."

Adam emerged into the corridor. His tall gaunt figure and tattered clothing did nothing to inspire confidence in the officers but Paul could see from his manner that he was not from the monastery and decided to risk trusting him. Paul gave him a gas mask and, quickly realising its purpose, he put it on. A few seconds later, saying nothing, he set off. They followed a few paces behind and soon saw that he had the instincts of a hunter, carrying his weight on the balls of his feet and constantly looking for danger at every turn.

"I think he knows where he's going. My cell was somewhere around here," Paul said to his companions, his voice so low that he assumed that Adam would not hear it. He was wrong. Adam froze, turned and stared at him. They stood in silence before Adam turned again and carried on even faster than before. At the next intersection, he stopped, raised his gas mask and smelled the air. Replacing the mask, he signalled to Paul to move forward and pointed up the corridor. Paul fired more gas canisters and they soon heard violent coughing ahead and Angus set off again. As they moved, the lighting globes seemed to be getting dimmer, and they finally flickered and went out.

"The gas must have got to the men at the machine," Paul remarked, getting out a torch from his pack. Adam saw the torch and immediately moved to take it. Paul handed it to him and showed him how to switch it on and off. When he switched it on, Paul saw something almost resembling a smile pass across his weathered features before he sped off, flicking the torch on and off as he went.

Suddenly they stopped outside a door and Adam pointed to it. Paul tried the handle but it was locked. It was not very thick and one of the officers stepped forward and shot out the lock. Throwing in a gas canister, they soon heard coughing and moved in.

The only occupant of the room was a guard who sat helplessly wheezing on a simple chair. Looking around, Paul saw that the room was a cell very similar to the one in which he had

been imprisoned.

Adam said, "This was her cell," and, turning to the guard, he asked, "Where have they taken her?"

The man was coughing so violently; he could not say anything. Adam tore off his mask and pushed it up against the man's face. A few moments later, he had recovered enough to say, "I don't know"

As far as anybody could see, Adam felt no need to breathe. His concentration was completely focused on the guard. Drawing a knife from his belt, he leaned down and, without apparent concern or effort, drove it deep into the man's leg. Blood poured from the wound, running down over his boot in a rivulet onto the floor. The two officers looked on in horror as he withdrew the knife and held it up to the man's face.

"Where have they taken her?" Adam repeated.

This time the man replied, "They have gone down to the lower level to get away from the gas."

Replacing his mask Adam hurried out of the door and on down the corridor. Paul and the officers had no choice but to follow him and leave the guard to fend for himself. Soon they stopped at another locked door. This was far heavier and Smith quickly produced some explosives. The report from the blast echoed down the corridor as they hurried through and started down some narrow steps. Emerging at the bottom, they saw that this part of the monastery was far older than the higher level. The walls were rough and damp and the corridor was narrow. Adam was running now, seeming not to notice the danger. There was no gas at this level and the others stayed further behind him, looking anxiously to either side. The corridor opened out into a large open space with a high ceiling and Adam ran in shining his torch up a wide, straight aisle between high structures to either side. Too late he saw the powerful beam illuminate four crossbow men waiting for him.

Adam said nothing, no cry of pain or shout for help. He fell to the floor and the torch rolled away to the side. Gardiner quickly realised that the crossbows would take time to re-load and shone his own torch, revealing the four men frozen like rabbits in the beam which was so much more powerful than the lights they knew. Smith took quick aim and shot two of them before the others turned and ran. More people could be seen behind them. Recognising Lynella immediately, Paul shouted, "Careful" but this was not necessary as further shots were fired accurately to either side of her.

Terrified by the sound of the gunfire and the wounding of the men around her, Lynella ran with them, even though they were no longer holding her.

"Lynella, stop!" Paul called out.

She hesitated and moved on again.

Paul was running towards her. He shouted to her, "It's me, Paul."

Finally, she stopped; standing alone with her blonde hair and long dress illuminated by Gardiner's torch in sharp silhouette against the dark beyond.

Paul ran up and pulled her to one side, just in time to avoid another volley of crossbow bolts fired wildly towards them. Smith stayed back to help Adam. Gardiner quickly caught up with Paul and Lynella and they all crowded into a small alcove off the main aisle.

Paul looked at Lynella. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm all right"

Paul suddenly saw the band around her head reflecting the torchlight.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It blocks my power," she replied brushing back her hair to reveal the network of chains that held it. "The Abbot put it there."

Paul looked to see how it was secured. They could now hear voices and running feet coming towards them from the entrance.

"Please take it off so I can help you," Lynella pleaded.

"I don't think there's time for that yet. We've got to go," Gardiner cut in.

"I think it's worth it if we can do it quickly," Paul replied. Lynella knelt down in front of him

and hung her head down. Using pliers that had been brought for wiring the detonators, he started cutting the fine chains.

Smith found Adam in a pool of blood in a narrow gap between the high stacks. He leaned down towards him and saw at least two crossbow bolts embedded in his leg and one in his shoulder.

"Leave me." Adam spoke quietly but firmly.

Smith reached for his arm but Adam drew his knife.

"Leave me", he repeated, "Rescue Lynella".

"Come on, you'll be all right." Smith tried to sound reassuring but the knife moved closer to his throat. The space was so narrow that there was no way past it.

He drew his handgun. Adam cowered back until he saw it was a gift. Smith showed him the safety catch and gave him the gun. Adam looked up slowly, "Thank you, I shall look after it," he said. "Leave me here and, one day, I shall find you again and return it to you." Unable to think of a reply Smith ran to the others firing a volley of shots as he went.

Lynella started to look up when he arrived but Paul placed a steadying hand on the back of her head to hold it still while he worked on the chains.

A volley of crossbow bolts crashed into the stack above them and Smith leaned cautiously into the aisle to reply with more gunfire. "Get a move on," he shouted "They're almost on us."

Paul was never diverted from his task and cut the last chain and lifted the ring away. Lynella looked up and a blaze of light from spheres way above them illuminated the entire area. With this, the running stopped and there was a sudden silence.

The spheres hung from chains on a framework of massive timbers. Each member had been formed from a whole trunk of a mature tree and met with others, in joints held together with thick iron bands. The whole structure was saturated with water; it ran down the trunks, flowing off them onto others and then falling in enormous droplets which glowed with reflected light until they fell out of sight. Around the water, lichen grew, spreading across the wood to the rusty iron, and hanging down in motionless tendrils.

The beams were arranged as bracing for massive uprights shoring up the rock, which formed the roof of this vast natural cathedral. Sections had fallen with unknown consequences on the sanctity below but the remainder stood, much of it broken free from the parent rock and supported by the structure built below it.

Damage could be seen, with some timbers bent to breaking point, splitting at the edges and opening up deep cracks along their lengths, iron bands snapped or dislodged. Some smaller members had failed completely, spreading disorder throughout the structure.

Climbing up revealed that the timbers formed a circle of enormous trestles, supporting the roof from the rock floor. In the centre of the circle, an ornately carved altar, green with the slime that formed on everything at this level but nevertheless so magnificent as to be avoided by the trestle builders. Not so the surrounding structures. Fragments of broken stone lay across the floor where they had been removed. Their contents were now in crude heaps covered with pale green corrosion. Some of the copper containers had broken open and their contents could be seen as it spilled out. They were all coffins. Stacked high.

"What the hell is it all?" Smith asked.

"The timbers must support the machine at the next level," Paul replied. "Must have built too much and started to go through the floor into the catacomb down here." After a moment's thought, he added, "Probably dug out too much rock as well. Not much of that level looks natural like this; mostly been mined out when needed."

They climbed a step higher to get a clear view of the entrance, only to see heavily armed soldiers standing motionless, looking up at the lights. Nobody moved. Within the silence, an almost subliminal pulsing began to grow. At first it could have been mistaken for the sound of dripping water, but it was too regular, too confident. Growing to fill the entire cavern, it had no origin and no limit; it came from everywhere and stopped nowhere. Every one of the thousands of metal objects in the cavern was moving fractionally in perfect synchronism. Even the power of the lights was changing marginally with each cycle.

A scream broke the silence. Starting from high above, it echoed back and forth, seeming almost to grow rather than fade in time. It still lingered in the air as a report like a gunshot came from the roof. A section of rock the size of a horse broke free and fell lazily through the support structure, leaving shattered timbers in its path. In that instant, Paul realised what was happening. Jumping down, he saw Lynella laying on her back on the floor. Her eyes were open but they saw nothing but the machine. He picked her up and the lights went out; the contact was broken. With a stifled cry and a deep shudder, her body fell limp. Smith and Gardiner had also jumped down with him and they ran. A rock fell behind them, broken fragments flying in all directions.

Reaching the entrance to the cavern, they kept running. The rock seemed to be waiting for a great collapse that never came. The sound of falling boulders faded behind them. Climbing the stairs, they met others also fleeing and for the second time, Paul found himself escaping from the monastery in the midst of a mass flight of all who lived inside it. Emerging into the daylight, they fired shots into the air to clear a path through the crowd back to the edge of the source.

## 30 Escape in shuttle

Paul placed Lynella's limp body on the back seat of the Jeep. The three men crowded round her as Gardiner checked her breathing and pulse.

"I think she'll come round OK," he said, "but we ought to get her to the medics as quickly as we can"

"We'd better get out of here fast anyway," Smith added looking back at the crowd beyond the marker stones. "I think they're about to see if we're in range of their crossbows."

They set off with Smith driving, trying to avoid the worst of the rough ground, while Paul held Lynella as comfortably as possible in the back seat. They were soon well out of sight in the forest, following the tracks they had left leading back to the landing site.

"Hold it!" Paul shouted.

Smith slowed down. "What's wrong? Is she coming round?"

"Not yet but we shouldn't be taking her this way"

"What do you mean?" Gardiner looked at him. "She needs a doctor and that's this way."

"Yes but she shouldn't be here" By this time, they had stopped and both officers were looking at Paul. "Their religion is all about not going beyond those stones back there. If she comes round and finds where we've taken her, she may get mad or crack up."

"You mean we should go back?" Smith stopped the engine.

"No, not back there. There should be some cover a mile or two east."

"What a waste of time. One bit of forest looks like any other. How's she going to know where she is?"

"She'll know. What you saw back in the monastery was only the start of what she can do."

Gardiner finally conceded that it was not worth the risk and they turned and soon left the source again, a few miles from the monastery. Crossing the marker stones and the road as fast as possible and hoping not to be seen by the Abbot's lookouts on the hills, they made camp out of sight in an area of dense forest overlooking the road.

Gardiner helped Paul arrange the girl comfortably on a blanket. Her breathing was steady now. "I guess we couldn't have kept her there anyway," he checked his watch. "Let's call the Captain and let him know where we are."

"Is it OK to use the radio?"

"Fine, Atlanta'll have gone below the horizon five minutes ago."

On the radio Captain Turner listened to a detailed account of events in the monastery.

"What do you want us to do?" Smith asked. "If you send out a couple of hundred men, we'll show them the way in and blow it up."

"You can't," Paul cut in. "It'd be a massacre."

"They're trying to kill us. They're going to fire a ring at our ship."

"We're the ones who shouldn't be here"

"We won't do it anyway," the Captain observed, "because of the number of our men we might lose. Wait there and let me know what the girl says when she wakes up."

The officers went out to each side to keep watch, leaving Paul to look after her. Soon she opened her eyes.

"What happened?"

"I broke your contact with the machine."

"Why?"

"You were going to make the roof collapse and bury us."

"You stopped me destroying it?"

"I stopped you destroying yourself, and us. What about us?"

"Who gave you the right to do that? I knew what I was doing."

"I thought," he paused. "It's done now, right or wrong. Now we know all about it, can't we get the High Council to stop the Abbot?"



"It'd take weeks to get back to my family and they wouldn't believe me anyway. Can't some of your friends go in with your weapons and destroy him."

"No. We won't do that. We could get you back quickly though."

"How?"

"In one of our small ships, the shuttles."

"Nobody can fly ships outside the source."

"We can."

"Can we?" Gardiner had come back to the camp "The Mission Director's got rules that say we can't"

"We could find Angus and the other men," Lynella said. "They were with me when we went in. They saw it. They would be believed."

"We'd be OK so long as we didn't fly while Atlanta could see us on radar," Smith joined in. "Let's call the Captain and ask."

Captain Turner was easily persuaded. His concern for the Mission Director's rules appeared to be fading. "Stay there," he told them. "I'll send a shuttle as soon as I can."

Smith and Gardiner went back out to keep watch. Paul and Lynella started telling each other about what had happened since their time together at the Southern Castle.

"You really wanted to destroy the machine and die, didn't you?"

"I had to destroy it. I should have. Mages always die."

"What, you mean in the books?"

"They all died in the last battle."

The sound of dogs in the distance interrupted them. Smith went forward to investigate and they soon realised that the dogs were moving slowly towards them, in front of a large number of the Abbot's men. The Abbot had learned fast; these were not foot soldiers in armour with swords. Each man carried a crossbow and they were moving forward cautiously, using all of the available cover.

"Fire in the air to slow them down," Paul said. Switching the radio on again, he found he was unable to talk because of the sound of the gunfire.

The shuttle pilot had been listening on the open channel "This is shuttle 25. What the hell was that?"

"We're in trouble. Where are you?" Paul asked.

"With you in 3 minutes."

The gunfire had scared away the dogs but it had been met by ever increasing numbers of crossbow bolts. The bolts were fired indiscriminately in their direction. The soldiers continued to press forward.

"They have been told to kill," Lynella said. "If your ship doesn't come, they will kill us all. He no longer wants me alive."

The shuttle had looked small when docking with Atlanta but, looming over them, it now looked enormous. The landing jets threw dust in all directions as it settled on the road.

"You're going to have to put this on," Paul held out the circlet to Lynella.

She looked horrified. He put it on her head. "The slightest use of your power inside that thing would wreck it."

"He's right. You must," Gardiner confirmed.

She said nothing but left the circlet in place.

They watched for the door to open, wondering how they would avoid the bolts which were now clattering against the pressure hull. The door did not open but, as they watched, they saw the loading ramp come down.

"Good idea!" Paul shouted into the radio as they leapt into the jeep. Keeping their heads down they drove out onto the road and up the ramp at speed. Before it had even started to close, they lifted off.

They took Lynella forward into the cockpit. Paul looked at her nervously but she smiled back.

"Can I sit here?" she asked, settling into the co-pilot's seat without waiting for a reply.

Looking out through the window she immediately gave the pilot directions to find Angus's camp. When they landed she stood regally in the doorway before her stunned companions.

They had to wait for Atlanta to orbit before they could fly again and they spent the time helping Angus and the others pack up the camp. Soon they were moving again. Sweeping over the sparsely populated Western castle, they saw a few poorly tended fields with the old castle crumbling slowly at their centre. A few minutes later, the Southern Castle came in sight and the pilot prepared to land in an open field, well away from the buildings.

"Why are we landing here?" Lynella asked.

"Why not?" Paul replied. "We don't want to frighten everybody. It won't take long to walk to the castle. They'll probably come and get us"

"I don't want to be collected up, like some sort of vagrant," Lynella replied. "Land in the courtyard."

"It would be much too dangerous. They'd be terrified," the pilot replied.

"Land in the courtyard!" Lynella instructed him. He ignored her but Paul and Angus soon noticed that she had removed the circlet from her head. The image on a display screen in front of her condensed into a spot in the centre and then began to move around. The pilot looked on in alarm.

"OK," Paul cut in quickly.

Approaching the castle, Paul saw frantic activity around the walls. The trees, undergrowth and creepers were being cut back, revealing the decaying stonework. Masons were working from ladders, filling in the gaps where stones and mortar had fallen away. Carpenters were assembling protective screens and complex catapult weapons behind the battlements at the top of the walls.

"I thought you said they weren't expecting us to attack them," Smith said to Paul.

"They're not," Lynella replied. "They're preparing to defend themselves against the dragons."

The officers from the ship looked on in amazement. "It's all in my report," Paul said. "I haven't actually seen one but I've seen plenty of descriptions in the books in the monastery."

"The dragons are coming to see your ship," Lynella added.

At this the Paul and the officers looked completely blank. Angus explained, "They can sense the field from your ship and they are drawn towards it."

Smith took a moment to absorb this but finally asked, "If they're going to come and see us, how big are they?"

"About twenty feet high and very nasty," Paul looked at him. "I never thought they would come near us."

"I'll tell the Captain."

"Don't worry. I can kill them," Lynella reassured him.

"According to the books, she can," Paul added.

"I'll tell him that, too."

As they moved closer, they could see the ruins of the burnt out stables.

"What burned the stables?" Paul asked. "The dragons can't set fire to things, can they?"

"No, I don't think the dragons have been here yet," Lynella replied. "I burned the stables."

"I think I ought to tell him that as well," Smith added, looking at Paul.

"It was an accident," Lynella replied.

The shuttlecraft was now manoeuvring above the courtyard. The people below had stopped work and were looking up in amazement.

The pilot switched on an external speaker and spoke into a microphone. "Nobody's going to get hurt. Please clear the courtyard, so we can land."

This announcement seemed to have little effect on the crowd below and some of them were gathering up crossbows and aiming them up at the shuttle. Seeing how it worked, Lynella took the microphone.

"This is the Princess Lynella speaking. I am returning to rescue you from the many dangers you face. I have been to the...." Paul took the microphone from her. "No need for a

speech. We've got to land."

Hearing this exchange, the tense expressions below them eased slightly and the courtyard was cleared. The shuttle occupied almost the entire space and, as it descended, the noise of the jets echoed off the walls and the dust flew up in a cloud over most of the castle. When the pilot stopped the engines, he went to open the door.

"Wait!" Lynella said. "We don't want to get covered in dust"

They waited for several minutes. The dust settled and, most importantly for Lynella, a crowd gathered as people emerged from alcoves and doorways to look at this incredible arrival. Some of the young men ventured up to touch the landing gear but most stood and watched and waited. The door opened and the crowd pushed back as the steps descended. Lynella stepped out through the narrow opening and stood facing them.

Making the most of her moment of glory, she stood in silence for some time looking for eye contact with her many relatives in the crowd. Seeing her cousin Henry wearing the insignia of the commander of the army threw her for a second but she held his gaze and soon regained her confidence. She then started a long and well-embroidered account of events since her departure during the Council meeting. When she described her first encounter with the dragons in the forest by the road to the bridge, the steward interrupted her; "You really used your power on it, in the true mage fashion?"

Angus was standing awkwardly in the small space behind her but he was able to reply, "I can confirm, sir, that she wounded it. I can also confirm that on many later occasions, she killed dragons." At this point, the crowd warmed to her and listened politely to the rest of her story.

The pilot was happy to wait, as the radar on Atlanta would not detect his craft. He was interested to see Lynella flinch slightly as his instruments detected the ship rising above the horizon. He pointed this out to the other officers and they saw signs of her pain growing as it came closer and receding as it moved away.

Lynella finished her story, asking the steward to convene the High Council again to prevent the Abbot from attacking Atlanta as it landed. He seemed to have aged visibly during her absence and Lynella thought she saw him glance momentarily to Henry as if seeking confirmation. She was relieved to see him agree.

## 31 Hunting dragons

Riding out to hunt the dragons in the early morning of the following day, Angus was at the head of the column. Despite not being an officer, he had been given this privilege due to his experience of supporting a mage in battle. The pennant of the Southern Kingdom snapped in the breeze as it flew from a hunting spear held upright on the pommel of his saddle. Its emblem of the advancing dragon facing a line of spears reminded him of the fear they had always felt about facing the dragons before they had a mage. At his side, Henry rode uneasily, in command, but clearly unhappy about having to concede privileges to Lynella's friends. Well behind them near the centre of the column, Lynella herself was flanked by the steward and her brother the Prince Regent. Angus found himself experiencing the dangerous, divided loyalty between mage and monarch which had been common in the history he knew. He hoped that he would never be asked to choose one over the other.

Almost every member of the Royal Family and a large proportion of the soldiers at their command had joined the hunt. They believed that Lynella had the power to protect them and were looking forward to the spectacle. The early sunlight glistened on their armour and weapons beneath their brightly coloured cloaks. Paul rode near the back of the column, feeling self-conscious in his green uniform. He was carrying a high velocity rifle.

Lynella and Angus recognised landmarks that they had seen under very different circumstances in their flight from the Council. Passing the farms surrounding the castle, they were soon on the valley road which led up to a few homesteads and on south to the bridge. While they had been away, the homesteads had all been abandoned as the population had fled to the safety of the castle. Near one of them, they saw the remains of some farm animals, torn apart to the extent that it was impossible to see what they had been. The head of a carthorse was lying in a mass of dried blood and skin and Paul thought that he could make out the shape of the leg of a cow. In the heat of the day, a strong putrid smell surrounded the area and clouds of insects had gathered. The horses in the column flattened their ears back and some tried to bolt, leaving their riders struggling to control them.

"Why were they left here?" Paul asked the soldier riding next to him as they passed the carnage.

"Not enough room in the castle," the man replied. "Only good animals allowed in; those ones would have been old or lame." He looked at the wreckage of the small vegetable garden. Even the building itself had not escaped damage. Windows and doors had been torn off and lay broken on the ground. "They won't move on until they have killed everything in this area. Then they will come down to the Castle."

Soon after that, they saw their first dragon and, unusually, it was alone near the road, a quarter of a mile ahead of them. The column halted and formed a line across the road. Paul was impressed with the discipline; the officers shouted orders and, when the dragon looked up from the carcass it was eating, it was faced with a solid rank of spears and shields, with Lynella at the centre. Seeing this obvious prey, the dragon charged, its head low and its long claws digging deep into the soft ground. At a range of about a hundred yards, Lynella focused her power on it and, rearing up and throwing its head high in the air, let out a shriek that echoed along the valley, before turning and fleeing. The soldiers cheered but Henry was asking Lynella, "Couldn't you kill it?"

"Yes, but it's better to frighten it so it will spread fear to the others."

"You should have killed it." Turning away, he shouted out the commands for an advance.

"We should stay here and be ready for them," Lynella said. "If we form a column, I can't defend it"

Henry took no notice of her; one of the other officers turned to her, "We are in charge of this unit. We know what we're doing. We've been fighting these dragons for some time now and if we want advice, we'll ask for it. Now get back into the column."

Most of the troops began to re-form the column but Angus and his squad were not moving

towards the front. Henry repeated his order.

"With your permission, Sir," Angus started but Henry interrupted him. "No, we are not going to discuss it."

Looking at Lynella shaking her head, Angus hesitated and, responding to some unseen command, six of Henry's men drew their swords and moved forward to disarm him. "You will be disciplined for cowardice," the commander was saying as Lynella watched in shock.

At that moment, they heard shouts and turned to see large numbers of dragons moving towards them. They showed slight signs of hesitation but were still moving at a good speed. The soldiers were in confusion but managed to form a rough line. Lynella concentrated on preparing herself to use her power to its fullest extent on the leading dragon.

"Kill the first six dragons!" Henry shouted in her ear, grabbing her attention, breaking her concentration. Slowly she realised that this was an order. She was being ordered to use her power. The power of a mage was the most important part of their existence and using it drained fundamental energy from their being. This man who was going to discipline Angus was now ordering her to open up her mind and deliver from it. Feeling an overwhelming sense of anger and injustice, she felt that, by all rights, she should let the dragons come.

Seeing them getting closer with no sign of a response from Lynella, Henry shouted again "Do it now! Kill them!" She finally resolved to use her power but found that, with the turmoil in her mind, she could not find the essential thread to do it. The soldiers were all now shouting at her. Her mind raced back to the times when she had used her power, back to her childhood when she had first begun to explore it. She tried to fix on some essential way in which she must have initiated it but there was simply nothing there. The jewel was on her forehead but it was cold and lifeless. She felt cold to the core, as if the sunshine was drawing heat out of her rather than warming her. The sweat on her forehead made the jewel slip and she fumbled and almost dropped it.

Four dragons had raced ahead of the rest and were less than fifty yards away. All signs of caution were now gone. They were charging at full speed with their powerful jaws already open, showing double lines of enormous teeth. Lynella felt small and helpless. She was floating in an unreal state, trying to reach out for something solid to hold onto. There was nothing there; she could not even imagine how she had ever begun to use her power. She felt a complete fraud. Her jewel felt cold and repulsive.

Suddenly, she heard a loud bang. She looked up to see if it was something the dragons had done and saw that one of their heads had been jerked to one side. A second bang and it was down, its head falling to the ground and the momentum of its body driving its shoulders forward to break its neck and almost turn it completely over. Another bang and another and two more were down, large holes beside their eyes spurting blood. The fourth was slowing, just feet away from her. One last bang and it too fell. The other dragons further back were turning in flight.

In the confusion that followed, everybody seemed to ignore her. Looking around for the source of the noise, she caught sight of Paul holding his rifle. He was now the centre of attention.

## 32 Landing brought forward

"Shouldn't we tell the Mission Director?"

Captain Turner looked at Smith and Gardiner across the desk. He hated politics and the complications that came with it. He thought of himself as a simple, straightforward man who had become Captain because he was good at doing the work required of him. He knew that his real reason for not approaching the Director was the man's ability to manipulate situations against people. This situation would become something that the Captain had created and the Director must now help him to clear up. His help would come in the form of a few unhelpful orders and passing the problem back.

"He'd only tell us to try to take control of the monastery," he replied, "and probably the Southern Castle too"

Smith thought about this for a minute "We'd lose a lot of men. They'd be ready for us next time"

"And kill a lot of them as well," the Captain continued. "There's no way we could justify that either." He looked up at the two young men, knowing that he was asking them to risk their careers and even, possibly, their liberty for this. "Hopefully, this High Council Lynella talked about will meet and get the Abbot to stop whatever he's doing." He paused. "Do you really think that he could damage this ship?"

"It all looked so strange. It's difficult to judge. We never actually saw him do anything except run a few lights. And there is the argument that Lynella's just as powerful as the machine so, if he can do it, she can stop him."

"That's another very good reason for not telling the Director," the Captain concluded. "He would be bound to do something to make an enemy of her or Paul so they'd be fighting us instead of fighting the Abbot."

"Do you want us to try to keep a watch on them?" Gardiner asked.

"We can't risk another shuttle flight out. Just keep in contact with Paul by radio. Have a quiet word with that shuttle pilot to make sure he's not going to start spreading stories."

The meeting ended and the Captain was alone. As had happened many times he thought about the news from earth. With the blockade lifted, things would be very different. Perhaps the men like the Mission Director, who had floated to the top during the blockade, would sink again. If they didn't, he could always get out, just take his money and go away somewhere, anywhere, just away.

An alerting beep sounded from his terminal and a message came up on the screen from the Mission Director: "Meeting at 14.00. Please attend." He looked at it in utter fury. Not a word about what the meeting was to be about, no check to see what had to be cancelled, just a summons to fly up in a shuttle and see him. The man even seemed to have the power to frighten him. He had a lurking fear that the Director might have found out about the shuttle flight to the castle. It annoyed him intensely that this man could make him feel like a school boy caught stealing apples.

Arriving at the meeting he felt things looked marginally better. All of the division heads were there. Perhaps somebody else would get the interfering instructions. They sat and waited, exchanging snatches of whispered conversation. By the time the Director emerged, ten minutes late as always, it was clear that nobody knew what this was about.

He strode into the room, clutching a pile of paper copies which he passed around the table. The Captain saw with dread that it was his latest status report.

"Could you give us a quick verbal summary of this report?"

The Captain, at least, felt confident he could handle this question. No idea where it was leading but at least his house was in order. He was even slightly ahead of programme. He was going to have time to clear up the landing field and even sort out a passable road round it before the landing. He explained this carefully and precisely.

"What's the road for?" The Director was asking.

"Maintenance vehicles and things."

"What things?"

"Possibly fire tenders."

"Are you expecting a fire? You never mentioned it as a possibility in your earlier reports. Do you have any idea how much it is costing to keep this ship here? Has it ever dawned on you to work out the cost of paying two thousand five hundred men?"

"The landing date is fixed. We're not wasting time down there." As he said this, he knew what was coming. He should have seen it; he cursed himself for saying so much in his report.

"Well, I am going to un-fix it. If you're ready two weeks early, we land two weeks early." The Captain hardly even heard what was said. The division heads were confirming that it was possible. He tried to think of some good reason to tell the Director why they could not land early. As it was he did nothing. Seeing his discomfort the Director grinned at him, "There you go, see what positive management can do. A good man in an organisation would have suggested it himself." This comment made Captain Turner feel a little better. He liked things that were black and white with no shades of grey. If landing before the Council Meeting did lead to the loss of the ship, at least it would get rid of the Director. The thought of running for the escape pods and leaving him behind brought the trace of a smile to his face. Seeing this, the Director suddenly looked restless.

Back at his office, Captain Turner waited for Atlanta to drop below the horizon and called Paul on the radio. When informed of events, Paul replied very quietly, "She's lost her power"

"How do you mean, lost her power?"

"I saw it in the books but never thought about it much. Sometimes they just do."

"When did it happen?"

"A few hours ago."

"How long does it last? We may be relying on her to protect us."

"Apparently, it varies. Can be years."

"Can't the Council Meeting be brought forward?"

"No."

"We'll just have to do what we can. You try to help her get sorted out. I'll see what I can do here."

He worked fast with his plans. Soon, programmers were working on the ship control software to allow for field variations and fitters were assembling weapon systems on the shuttles.

### 33 Minstrel at castle

The big mare was close to exhaustion as it galloped towards the castle, late that night. The old minstrel who rode it was also near collapse but was almost refused entry. His mellow music and the mystical images in his tales of the Ancients normally assured him a warm welcome. These were, however, not normal times. The hastily repaired drawbridge now stood raised above a newly cleared moat. A nervous guard was of the firm opinion that the visitor should have waited until dawn. A shouted conversation finally convinced him, however, that this was no ordinary visit. The old man was confused and spoke in a way which made the guard wonder if he was drifting into one of his more popular stories. The difference was that, this time, nothing could mask genuine fear in his voice. What he had seen had terrified him to the point that he had come to the only place he knew where people would listen to him. He had travelled to every corner of the land from the coastal villages in the far north to the mountains in the south and told stories to all who would listen. This time, his story was for only one person. The guard was persuaded to let him enter and to send word to the mage Princess Lynella to ask if she would permit him to see her.

Gathering around the dying glow of a fire in the steward's study, Lynella, Paul, and the steward listened. He had arrived at the monastery a few days after Lynella's battle and capture. The community had been frightened but had been told that Lynella had attacked the ship and would soon be joining them.

"She would never have attacked the ship." This comment from the steward brought an embarrassed silence.

"It was a sort of a mistake, I think." Paul had never dared to ask about it.

Lynella looked intently at the last small flame on a charred log in the fireplace. "It was anger. I meant to destroy the machine. I couldn't do it. I had become part of it." She stopped for some time, then turned and looked at Paul before continuing, "It was just anger. The ship was there so I attacked it." She looked up, remembering that the minstrel was there.

"I am honoured by your account of this, my lady, and shall guard it in the closest confidence," he assured her.

"The ship was not damaged," Paul added.

The minstrel continued with his story. He was only allowed into the monastery on the understanding that he did nothing upset the Abbot. They were generous people, especially the Abbot himself on the rare occasions when he came to listen to the songs, so the minstrel had said nothing and listened. Paul's attack had caused far less upset to those who lived in the monastery but it had provoked a far stronger reaction from the Abbot. Military discipline had been imposed throughout and large numbers of guards with crossbows were now positioned inside and outside the main doors. Everybody was required to keep a weapon by them as they slept and be ready for a summons to the defence. The pace of work on the machine had also been greatly increased. The lights now pulsed strongly at all times of day and the humming noise was loud enough to be heard in all areas. Rumours of the shuttle flight, which had been seen by a large number of soldiers, spread rapidly. Strong denials by the Abbot did nothing to stop them.

Having provided entertainment for the usual three evenings, the minstrel had prepared to move on. He had already decided to go to the Southern Castle but decided not to say so. Declaring that he intended to travel to the Eastern Castle, he was surprised that he was not allowed to leave by the direct route, out of the main entrance facing the source. Being escorted out of the northern door and advised to travel across country left him driven by his unending curiosity to investigate. Travelling around to a vantage point on a nearby hill, he had watched and waited. In the early dawn of the following day, before any ordinary folk were out, he had seen the iron ship in the crucible in front of the monastery rise into the air and move around for several minutes before descending back into place.

Seeing how shocked his audience was to hear this final piece of news, the minstrel raised himself unsteadily to his feet and, with a nodded consent from the steward, left the room.



Lynella was close to tears, "I could have stopped him. Both times I could have stopped him. Now I can't do anything."

"Do we really know that he's going to attack Atlanta?" Paul asked, trying to sound hopeful. "When I spoke to him he was talking about a crusade to earth."

"But you told him that the Holy Land had been destroyed" the Steward reminded him.

"That's no reason to attack the ship."

The old man looked at him with great intensity. "Think about him. Think about who he is and what he wants. We have known him for a long time. All he seeks is power. To keep his power he must have a war or a crusade, otherwise his people may see the enemy within. His crusade was only a means to keep control of them, and try to get control of us in the kingdoms. Now he has no crusade he needs a war."

"He will lose power if the ship lands," Paul observed.

"And if he destroys it he will have a great victory which will make him popular. Look at history. We have records of the history of earth before our ancestors came here. There were many like him, and there have been many on this planet since we came."

Paul thought about this. "There were more on earth after you left. In many wars they killed millions. This man needs enemies."

Paul left soon after and reported the minstrel's story of the Abbot's success in flying his ring ship to Captain Turner. The reply was pessimistic, "There's no way any weapons we put on the shuttles could stop anything that size."

"We're going to have to ask the Mission Director to delay the landing"

"He won't do that. He'll make us suffer for not telling him earlier and then start a very bloody battle storming the monastery"

"We'll have to tell him eventually."

"If we do, it'll be at the very last moment."

## 34 Angus banished

Early the following morning, Henry summoned Angus to the Great Hall to face the charge of cowardice. Maria escorted Paul up to one of the galleries, where a considerable number of the castle residents had gathered to watch. He was fascinated by her detailed description of the formalities of the High Council and how each member had their own seat, which would be handed on to a successor when they died. She seemed to know the history of every last ornament and carving on each one of them.

Most of the royal family gathered in their customary seats but Henry joined some of his officers in the seats facing them which, for the sessions of the High Council, would be reserved for the Eastern Kingdom. Much of the main chamber was empty, but this did nothing to relieve Angus's fears as he entered in silence and took his place at a single chair in the centre.

"What's going to happen?" Paul asked quietly

"We don't know. There's been nothing like this for over a hundred years."

Henry stood and read from a prepared script: "This court martial is assembled to consider a matter of military discipline. These officers will decide the matter and their decision will be final. You are charged with cowardice. You refused my order to return to the head of the column." He went on to describe every last detail of the battle with the dragons, before reaching his conclusion and asking Angus if he had anything to say.

The big man was lost for words and just said, "She wanted me to stay."

"Is that all you have to say?" Henry was pressing him as Angus looked to Lynella for support. Under Henry's gaze and without her power, she could think of nothing to say.

"The Princess can't help you. She can't even manage the tricks she used to murder my brother any more." He was leaning forward, eager to savour his victory. "While you have been away," he continued, "we have been fighting to defend your homeland. There will be many more battles to fight and examples must be made of any who display cowardice."

"Hasn't he noticed that I can shoot the dragons?" Paul asked in a whisper.

"Hasn't he noticed that Angus was never a coward?" Maria replied.

The proceedings moved on. "You may have thought that you were serving a mage," Henry was saying, "but look at her. She can't do anything any more." Lynella was looking progressively more uncomfortable. The officers soon started a brief private discussion and announced that Angus was to be banished.

Hearing the news Lynella withdrew into a world of her own, remaining in her room and permitting only Maria to enter when absolutely necessary. She ignored the messages Paul sent in, asking to see her, to help, to encourage or just to be with her. Her reply was always the same. She was no longer a mage, she had let down her friends and had no wish to see anybody.

Paul managed to persuade Maria to let him know where Angus had gone. Because of the presence of the dragons, his banishment only effectively excluded him from the castle. There was nobody to even try to exclude him from the kingdom so he had camped near the northern keep. Riding out, Paul found him slightly more at ease outside the castle but still totally despondent.

"What can I do, now I have been banished?" he asked, sitting on the grass near his small tent. Paul had no more ideas than he did. They discussed the past at length, but had no good plans for the future.

After this Paul found himself, as expected, inactive. He considered returning to the landing field but there seemed to be no point in it, even if the Captain would permit it. He had become a helpless spectator as the landing drew nearer. After a day with plenty of rest and good food, he felt fit and ready but could think of nothing he could do to help. Lacking any other ideas, he began the work he had originally wanted to do before the Council Meeting. In his pack, he had a set of instruments which he had brought with him from the shuttle. These consisted of electric field generators and detectors. His original plan had been to work with them with Lynella, to help her develop her skills in the use of her power. Without her help, he decided to investigate

her artefacts. Sending word via Maria, he was able to obtain the jewel and the circlet with an ease that surprised him. He was shocked to hear that Lynella had completely lost interest in them. The only other thing he required was a lighting globe which was easily obtained from a corridor in the old part of the castle.

Starting with the lighting globe, he saw exactly what he was expecting. The wire leading into it contained two copper conductors, wrapped in what looked like paper based insulation. Connecting them to a simple power supply, he was, however, surprised to find that nothing happened. This, at last, was something that he felt he could usefully work on. Clearing a table, he spread out all of his test equipment and placed the globe in front of it. Close inspection showed that the globe was a sealed glass sphere, containing what appeared to be an opaque gas. The only irregularity on the surface was the hole where the wire entered which, he guessed, had also been used to blow the glass and pump the gas in. Working steadily, he set about the most comprehensive set of electrical tests he could manage. Some time later, after many attempts, he was amazed to find that he had managed to make it glow with a complex high frequency pulsed signal from his field generator. Moving on to the jewel and the circlet, he found that these responded to exactly the same signal: the circlet absorbed it and the jewel amplified it. Reporting back on the radio, he found considerable interest in his discovery. "You know we can tune the ring on the ship to produce that pulse sequence," the captain observed.

"What good would that do?"

"It might re-awaken her power."

"She's not a machine. If someone goes deaf, shouting at them won't cure them."

"Yes, I hear all that but if there's any hope, we'll give it a try"

"If it does anything, it might do more harm than good."

"I'm sorry but we've got to try it. There's an orbital correction due this evening but I'll get them to let it drift and do a bigger one in the morning." There was a pause while the Captain checked the data on his terminal "That will be at 10.43, so be ready."

Paul found Maria in the courtyard. She had been out to see Angus, and was in a hurry to get inside before too many people saw her. As they walked through a side door, he told her what the Captain was planning. She stopped and looked at him, "What will it do?"

"I don't know."

"Can't you stop him?"

He shook his head.

"What can we do about it?"

"Just warn her and be there ready if it gets through to her"

Lynella, as expected, ignored their warning, saying that she had lost her power so it would not affect her. Paul had to wait outside her door when the time came. Half a minute before the pulse was due, he stood up from the window seat and prepared to go in.

As the pulse came, Maria called to him to come in. Entering cautiously, he saw Lynella in a chair.

"She's fainted" Maria said

He looked at her. "She doesn't look too bad. We'll just have to wait until she comes round to see what happened." Once again, he found himself checking her breathing and pulse as her body slowly recovered its equilibrium.

A few minutes later, Lynella opened her eyes to see Paul and Maria looking at her. She was just about to tell them to leave when she remembered what had happened and stopped, not daring to hope that her power could have returned. Very cautiously, she looked at a small ring and, focusing on it, found herself able to make it move. She looked at Paul, "What happened to me. What was it that you did?"

"I didn't do it. They did it on my ship"

"You mean that they can do that to me as well as the pain I get all of the time. Why did you let them?"

"I tried to stop them, they wouldn't let me. You wouldn't let me near you"

"What good would that have done?"

"I could have put something around you to keep the field out."

"How could you do that?" Maria asked.

"With some chain mail."

During the next few hours they searched for all of the fine chain mail they could find and assembled it as a canopy around Lynella. For the first time since the ship's arrival, its pulses could not reach her.

## 35 Find original ship

A short corridor led to the old keep. Although some of the lighting globes were missing, Lynella lit the others with nothing more than a casual glance. Remembering back to their brief contact before his imprisonment, Paul could sense the extent of the change that had taken place within her. His logical mind identified it as the beginnings of the arrogance which was the weakness of all the mages in the books he had read in the monastery. At another level, he found it strangely attractive. This young girl who had seemed to be playing games with him when they had first met, had taken well to the sudden maturity that had come to her from the trials she had faced.

Lynella was walking faster now, keeping just ahead of him. She turned and smiled at him for an instant before moving on confidently, guiding them further into the maze of old corridors. Finally she paused at a door which opened of its own accord in front of her when she looked at it.

Through the door, he found himself standing at the side of a large metal sphere more than ten yards across. The surface was copper coloured with numerous deep scratches and faint traces of green corrosion. At intervals across it, there were signs of joints but, running his finger across one, he could tell that they had been welded together, using the power of some ancient mage. Lynella was watching him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Guess," she replied. She was leaning against the wall now, looking pleased with herself.

Paul was completely thrown by this reply. "Are you teasing me?" he asked.

"No, you're the only man in this castle who doesn't tease me, so I would never do that," she paused. "Except the old steward, I suppose. He never teased me."

"So, why have I got to guess?"

"When I put the marker bracelets on you, I thought that you must have power because you came from space. Now, I see your power is in your knowledge of machines. I want you to demonstrate your power."

Paul looked up at the sphere. He could see a thickening of the metal around the centre of it, half way up. This was simple; it was a ship, not much of a test in working that out. Then he thought again. This was a ship with a sealed atmosphere. In all the books he had seen in the monastery, no mention had been made of flying very high. There was no need for it in battle. There had only been one occasion when they had needed that.

"This ship came from earth." He saw her nod her head but even as he said it, he found this idea incredible. It meant that these people had come here without help. It meant that at a time when the rest of the world was using sailing ships, a group had flown off and made a hyperspace transit. She was smiling, obviously pleased with his answer. "How did it get here?" he asked, "Surely it can't fly this far from the source"

"They dragged it here after the war," Lynella replied, "and rolled it some of the way. All the mages were dead. They couldn't even fly it to the edge of the source. It took years but they were determined to have it, even if they couldn't get in." She walked up to it and touched it. "Nobody has been inside it since then," she was saying. "It has a mage lock."

She walked round to one side, pausing at intervals to concentrate on it.

"I always thought that the opening would be on this side, but I could never quite be sure."

"You've always known the ship was here?"

"Yes. I used to come here years ago. The lock on the door to this room doesn't take much power to open. I used to think that nobody knew I was here but I expect that they were watching to see if I could open the globe so they could steal what's inside it"

Soon, she found what she was searching for and, as she looked at it, a small door began to swing open in the metal surface. Paul looked in amazement as the opening revealed the metal to be almost a foot thick.

"Please wait there and use your gun to stop anybody who tries to get in," Lynella said as

she climbed in head first through the small hole. This was not easy in the formal dress that she had worn for the evening meal but she soon disappeared, leaving Paul standing outside leaning against the globe holding his gun.

A few minutes later, nobody had come and Paul had decided that he was probably wasting his time. He called out, "How long are you going to be?"

There was no reply but, moments later, the metal he was leaning against seemed to come alive, giving off a gentle humming noise. He turned in surprise as Lynella called out, "You can come in now."

"What about guarding the door?"

"Come in and I'll close it."

The interior was formed of a series of wooden platforms at different levels. In the sealed environment, nothing had faded and the wood still glowed with dark polish. All around the outer surface were bunks. From what Paul could see, there must have been over a hundred of them in all. [space for animals (foals) and plants] Outside them, the copper wall was highly polished and was emitting a soft light which diffused throughout the ship. Ascending the steep steps in front of him, he saw Lynella sitting on the edge of one of three couches at the centre of the globe.

She was wearing the jewel which was glowing gently on her forehead but this was not all. A matching stone was held at her throat by a short necklace while others from the set decorated an elaborate head-dress.

"Welcome to my true home." She smiled at him. Before he had a chance to reply, the bracelets on his wrists started to pull him forward. He stumbled slightly and they eased off enough for him to gain his balance.

"What now?" he asked, almost knowing the answer as she guided him carefully forward and down at her side. Her face looked proud and almost distant, framed by the ancient jewels. Her body was thin and slightly scarred but had grown strong and agile. Her touch was hesitant and sensual.

Hours later, Lynella was sleeping and he rose quietly and began to look around. The thick metal at the equator of the sphere was exposed at this level, revealing simple runic patterns. The heraldic devices of the three families were woven into the symbols in front of the couches. He imagined each couch occupied by a great patriarch during the flight. Had it been a patriarch or possibly a matriarch? Whoever it had been, their combined power had been so great that it had been able to produce a field intensity sufficient for hyperspace inversion. Between the three of them, they had done as much as the entire fusion ring on Atlanta. Had they known what would happen?

## 36 Landing countdown

The Director looked at the screen with satisfaction. The Great River Mining Company logo was displayed in full colour; the NASA logo was conspicuously absent. This software had been written over the last three months and owed nothing to NASA. That was very satisfying but the message itself was unsettling. It read:

LANDING SEQUENCE. TOUCHDOWN IN 14 HOURS 30 MINUTES.

He was very uncomfortable and expected it to become progressively worse. In four months, he had grown used to the ship and the way it worked. The floors were slightly curved but this could only be seen in the corridors. Apart from that, everything had seemed reassuringly solid. This was all about to change. Throughout the previous day, he had felt the pull of the planet slowly build up, as their orbital velocity decreased. While they had been passing over the anomaly, the ring had been fired to maintain their orbit. At other times, there had been the deafening roar of the altitude jets burning vast amounts of precious hydrogen and oxygen that had been brought up by the shuttles. Then finally, they had tipped the ring to use the curve of the field to stop over the centre of the anomaly where they now sat, in an eerie quiet with just the gentle hum of the ring. He felt the pull of the planet as strong as the pull towards the floor. The mountings on the equipment strained as everything tried to move towards the corner of the room. ROTATIONAL FIRING SEQUENCE COMMENCING...PREPARE TO LOSE INTERNAL GRAVITY.

This was the part he had been dreading. He had never heard these jets before. The ship had been rotating when he had arrived and had done so ever since. Now it was going to stop. The jets were mounted on the outside of the rim and scarcely audible but, over the next fifteen minutes, the effect was quite as bad as he expected. He felt completely disoriented; the floor was no longer the floor. The deceleration forces pulled him in yet another direction, leaving his senses completely confused. Finally they stopped. Down was towards the planet now and that was the way it was going to remain for the next year. He thought of the mining crew in comfort on the planet. All non-essential personnel had been sent down. They had camped a mile away from the landing field. That was how far away you had to be, to be safe, if the altitude jets were fired near the surface.

Captain Turner felt nostalgic. This was how the control room had been while they had been building the torus. That was in the good old days when right was right and wrong was wrong, the President was in charge and the likes of the Mission Director were never allowed anywhere near the ship. At least the man looked uncomfortable. He insisted on staying so he would have to live with it.

SHIP ROTATION ARRESTED. COMMENCING DESCENT.

They felt the lift from the ring ease fractionally and they were on their way down.

"I still don't see why you can't go down a bit faster. This is painfully slow." The Mission Director was looking more and more uncomfortable.

"I am the Captain of this ship and I decide how fast we go. If we go any faster we may not be able to stop." The Captain was beginning to enjoy this. Being an experienced spacer had its joys, even in this crazy organisation.

TOUCHDOWN IN 4 HOURS. ATMOSPHERIC ENTRY IN ONE HOUR. PREPARING TO CLOSE PRESSURE HULL DOORS ON TORUS.

They looked at the screens. Slowly, the familiar red glow of each of the radiant coolers disappeared from view behind the massive doors. Those doors and their seals had never been tested. If any of the atmosphere got into the ring, there would be a catastrophic loss of power. Now he could see the small maintenance floats carrying his men out to check them. He watched intently as each seal was checked with the ultrasonic probes. This was the first time anybody had been able to go near the ring since the ship had started rotating and, even now, the men looked clumsy working in the unfamiliar gravity of the planet. Many of them knew the structure

intimately but all of their training was based on zero gravity work.

RING TEMPERATURE 300 DEGREES AND RISING. CONFIRM ALL INSPECTION PERSONNEL CLEAR OF DOORS.

"Is that the last one clear?" the Captain looked at the First Officer who was systematically checking the screens.

"All clear. Let's see what it looks like"

The Captain entered the all clear on his keyboard.

NITROGEN COOLING SYSTEM ACTIVATED

Liquid nitrogen flowed out from the massive tanks in the hub along pipes in the spokes. When it reached the ring, it vaporised and blew out of vents on its outside.

"Here we go!"

The First Officer could see the beginnings of a vapour cloud forming, as the nitrogen dispersed into the outer rim of the atmosphere. Slowly the screens went white as the cloud swirled and spread and enveloped the ship in an eerie cocoon.

The Abbot looked out from his vantage point in the upper levels of the monastery. Below him in the valley, he could see the great circular scar of the completed landing field and the enormous tented city near it. He had been watching the ship since dawn, when the red glow on the ring had been clearly visible against the dark sky. Then the first rays of the sun had let him see the sheer size of his enemy for the first time. Even thirty miles away, there was no mistaking the power of it.

"We shall have to go under it and get it from below. We know where it has got to go, so it should not be difficult." He looked down at the ancient ship in its crucible at the edge of the plain below him. "We must begin."

The message was passed down and a gentle hum came up from the depths of the hill beneath him. A hundred trained minds focused on the device that had been their lives' work, each entity moving within its intricate networks seeking out others. As they met, they combined; gradually building, each with little power in their own right, but combining into a whole whose power exceeded the sum of its components. Slowly, the hum coalesced into pulses which surged through the channels and emerged into the growing daylight to flow into the iron ring. In the ring, it flowed around and around, pulsing ever more strongly now it had an avenue to escape and show its raw energy.

Captain Turner felt the ship lurch and felt fear flow through him, Paul must have been right. He reached for the microphone and switched to the intercom channel.

"Paul, what the hell is going on?"

Paul looked around him. He too had been watching the ship from a hill at the edge of the source. He had seen the nitrogen cooling cut in on sequence and been quietly amazed by the cloud it formed. But now he could hear the distant roar of the altitude jets and he could see great plumes like dragons tails emerge from the bottom of the cloud, burning their last few reserves of hydrogen. For the Captain to dare to talk to a listed deserter on open intercom, they must be in serious trouble. He looked at Lynella. She was still sleeping under her web of electrical shielding as the soldiers quietly prepared a meal.

"What's happened? Nothing to do with us."

"Severe distortion in the anomaly, pulsing, coming from the north."

"It's the monastery."

"This is Atlanta to shuttle craft on planet. We're going to have to go in. You heard what's happened. Take it out."

Eight shuttlecraft took off from the compound and flew north. Within the hill, a slight tremor was felt as their missiles exploded in the earth but the pulse never faltered. The ring was now slowly rising out of the crucible. A missile exploded on it but it just rocked slightly and continued upward.

"This is Shuttle Leader to Atlanta. The ring is out and moving towards the landing field.



We are unable to stop it. I repeat, unable to stop it."

Paul looked at Lynella who had risen and was standing by him, obviously in severe pain. "We're going to have to try," she said, her fear showing in her eyes.

They moved quickly down to the ship which they had prepared the night before, and climbed onto the small wooden platform they had attached to the ship with ropes. Lynella let her mind flow down into the ring. It was easier now because it was a way of deadening the pain. Paul looked on helplessly as she began to pour more and more into it.

"Hold on tight, Atlanta. We're going to make it worse before we can make it better"

"We can feel you now," came the reply, as fresh tails appeared from the bottom of the cloud and the noise of the jets grew louder.

Lynella was lying prone on the platform, her small body shaking as the energy was drained from it into the iron below. The ring began to lift, moving tentatively and swaying slightly as it rose. The jewels on her head and neck came to life, colours coursing through them. A cheer came up from the soldiers on the hillside. With increased confidence, she threw the rest of herself into the ring and began to explore it in a way which had not been done since the time of the Ancients. She found the pathways of purer metal which had been created at the time of the casting to enable her to set up eddy currents to control their flight. The knowledge that Paul had been able to give her about magnets, and the time she had spent exploring the rings on the globe helped her and she found herself able to control the swaying.

"That's high enough. Now move towards the centre."

Paul's instructions sounded as if they came from a different existence, but she knew that they were necessary. She was blind to everything except the ring. Within the ring her senses were growing keener and clearer. The other fields were no longer the blinding pain which pervaded her senses. Using the ring they could be seen with great clarity. Beneath her, she felt the reassuring but complex presence of the planet which she had been able to sense throughout her life and which now supported her. Ahead, she could sense a second field with its slow menacing pulse and above it, the third, far stronger with its searing, unnatural, high frequency.

"How much more hydrogen have we got now?" The Mission Director looked drawn and terrified. His only consolation was knowing that he would not be the only one to die if the ship crashed. There would be no survivors within thirty miles of the crash site.

The First Officer checked his screen. "About five minutes. If the ship below us is not removed by then we go down on top of it."

"And you think that Paul Evans can do that? Where the hell has he been all this time? Why was I not told? You say these ships work by magic? You seriously expect me to believe it? I'm going to sort this out once and for all when we get down."

"If we're alive." Having thus ended the conversation in the control room, the Captain switched the microphone on.

"OK Paul. We have you both on radar. The other guy is almost directly below us now and you are about ten miles south. As far as I can see from the strength of the signal, you are definitely bigger than him. Are you going for a direct collision? You should be able to get rid of him that way"

Paul looked ahead "I would if I could hit him. Your vapour cloud is coming down all over the place; I can't see a thing over there. Lynella seems to be able to tell exactly which direction to go, but she can't tell exactly how high he is."

The Captain looked at his screen. "I can cut the cooling for a few minutes. If you don't get him by then we're down anyway."

The mist cleared from the ship and, over the next few minutes, it dispersed from the plain below it. Paul could now see the whole picture in the clear morning light. The camp in the forest with the deep ruts between the lines of tents. The fearful crowd who had been drawn to look to the sky by the sound of the altitude jets. The dull grey ring floating above the landing field and slowly rising towards his ship. Seen in the context of the features of the landscape, the great

vessel dwarfed all below it. It was slowly descending. There was no visible sign of the struggle for its survival. The altitude jets could be heard but, without the vapour to show them, the burning hydrogen could not be seen. They were a menace quite as deadly as the ring below them.

## 37 Battle at landing

Lynella was conscious of the speed of their flight and the battle that lay ahead. As her mind finally assumed total control of the ring, she formed images that were quite different from those which Paul saw. There was a great city spread across the plain in front of her with tall graceful towers and spires built from gleaming metal. The city had no wall or palisade for its defence but the towers had balconies at the highest level, and archers on them were launching volley after volley of arrows from their long bows. Through the arrows came the ships. On each ring, there was a solid platform, surrounded by thick shields to protect the mages inside them. Across the city, she could see, in places, the devastation that was caused when one of the rings hit a tower. The terrified defenders were thrown into the air to crash to their death some distance away. But the rings were not aiming to hit the towers; the arrows were a mere nuisance. This was a battle between ships. It was a battle of despair for the mages knew that few, if any, of them would survive this final encounter. Forming the image of the whole plain, Lynella could now see the defending ships moving towards the attacking fleet. The great crash rang out as the first two ships hit and the smaller of the two broke, killing the mind inside it in an instant. The victorious ship showed no visible damage but it seemed to falter and fall below the others that were pressing home the attack. The realisation of what had happened left her with a cold dread of what lay ahead. The ring had not broken but great fractures had formed, blocking the current and throwing the mind out of many of the intricate circuits inside it. This left the mage crippled and unable to control his final descent to a crash that few survived.

The Abbot looked out at the scene that was now revealed. The ring below the Atlanta was now being drawn up towards it with increasing speed, but not fast enough to avoid the newcomer. He gave the command to take avoiding action.

Captain Turner watched as the monitors showed the temperature in the drive rising rapidly towards criticality.

Paul saw the ring in front of him move away and felt the jolt as they passed over the landing field and under the ship. The fields within the anomaly were complex. In places they combined in ways which would enable a ship to gain height. Finding these had taken weeks of surveying. Lynella never paused to think, she was at one with the fields and knew exactly where to go. She could sense all of the moves that she could make and prepared her next attack. By reaching to the limit of her senses, she could even detect the changes in the other ring so, when it moved away, she was ready for it. She knew now that she could do it and she drove all thought of the fate of her predecessors from her mind.

The watching crowds all knew that the end was coming. They could see each attack growing closer, but they had no idea what would happen. The ships met with a crash that echoed across the valley. The smaller one broke in half and a bolt of lightning flew from it directly into the hill to the North.

## 38 Report sent to earth

Three hundred feet above the muddy ground, on the curved side of the hub, well above the roots of the spokes, the construction crew had cut through the ties securing a construction access hatch. The delicate hard vacuum seals had been broken, and the waiting shuttlecraft had carried the gleaming metal away, leaving a large dark hole behind them. Further crews had worked with enormous care; and their precious charge was passed out to a second shuttle which was already hovering, waiting to carry it down to the new executive suite which had been built a mile away, just beyond the bulky torus. Now Captain Turner sat before that charge. The unblemished veneered surface of the boardroom table had been polished to the point where the victorious smile on the face of the mission director, who sat opposite, could be seen in it in every detail.

The nervous personnel officer sat next to him and, on an unspoken command in the form of an almost imperceptible nod of the head from his superior, the officer spoke into the microphone.

"The mission director is going to permit you to know the exact contents of the executive summary of the report which he is sending to earth in the data bullet". His words were carried through a network of patches to sufficient loudspeakers and headphones to ensure that every individual who had arrived on the ship could hear him clearly. He continued, "As soon as he has finished speaking the data bullet will be launched".

One of the director's attractive personal assistants picked up the microphone and placed it carefully on the table in front of him. "This report is being sent with great urgency to head office on earth to report a major discovery which will generate significant returns for the Great River Mining Company. On this planet company personnel working under my direction have discovered the basis of a totally new technology which can control very powerful electromagnetic fields. These field are as powerful as those generated by the fusion ring on our ship but require no major plant to control them."

Captain Turner looked up wearily. The strain of uncertainty could be seen on his face. He knew that it was in the power of this man to cast him at will in the role of hero or villain.

The director continued "A detailed account of the discovery is given in the body of my report. There is some involvement of persons who are not ship personnel and have been discovered on the planet living in primitive conditions. These persons are descended from the crew of a ship which must have left earth some time ago. Details of their journey are not yet known. Under the terms of the powers given to me by government they will be subdued as necessary and subject to the same regulations as ship personnel.

"In addition to this our mining operations are proceeding well. The ship has landed safely on planet. A minor incident caused injuries to Engineer Paul Evans and one individual from the local population but they are both recovering in the ship's hospital."

The bullet itself lay in a shaft which had been specially excavated below the center of the hub to enable it to reach inversion velocity, from a planet surface launch.

The final countdown sequence showed on the screens and captain Turner struggled to suppress his anger. The un-necessary, and potentially disastrous, consequences of overloading the piles and the hull supports resting on them were not his most serious concern. The bullet entered hyperspace from within the planetary atmosphere. In less than a second it did more damage to that atmosphere than three centuries of uncontrolled industrialization had achieved on earth.

Two seconds later the shock wave reached the ground. Reinforced glass in windows, and good quality ear defenders, ensured that ship personnel sustained no injuries or major discomfort. In the forest and the kingdoms beyond it the situation was totally different. People and animals were terrified and ancient buildings were damaged.

The wave did, however, just penetrated sufficiently to cause the smoke from the director's cigar to move perceptibly, as it curled across the room. Below it a small piece of glowing ash was shaken off the end of the cigar and, before he was able to sweep it away, it burnt and ugly black scar into the surface of the table.