



1

The dragon looked confused. This was not due to any expression that it could convey because its face was fixed in a metal mask. The confusion was visible from its hesitant movements. These were totally unexpected in a creature, which had, for many hundreds of years, never shown fear.

The man with the dragon showed no confusion. He was determined that none would be seen. The families from the first landing had said that more people would come and now they had arrived. They had said that they would arrive at the source and that was where they were. They had said that they would come in a ring-ship and that was also true. The machine now approaching him was not described but no description of their equipment was given so he assumed that they had known about it but had simply decided that a description was not necessary. This was his destiny and he strode forward with the dragon following.

The machine fled backwards. The noise from its engine increased, driving the tracks so fast that the man had to run to keep up. He made no attempt to overtake and the procession, machine man and dragon, soon arrived at the compound. The dragon now found itself surrounded by large numbers of machines. Several of these were almost its equal in bulk and height and, collectively, they represented a formidable foe.

“Don’t shoot it.” The voice of the mission director came over the public address system. “We want it alive”.

The drivers and labourers all slipped away and the man and his dragon stood motionless in the deserted compound. The confusion in the offices was such that it was several minutes before one of the ship’s officers emerged.

“On behalf of the Mission Director I welcome you. Under the terms of the amnesty you must surrender your weapons and you will be given food, shelter and employment.” He showed no intention of moving more than a few paces away from the door.

“I know of no amnesty and require none.” The man stood his ground. “My people have had no contact with the kingdoms for many generations. It is not my concern if you have been in conflict with them. I wish to see your Mission Director”.

The officer decided to concentrate on the practicalities. “What will the dragon do if you come inside?” He glanced around in an un-necessary gesture to show how much larger the dragon was than the door way through which they would go.

“The dragon will not move until I bid him to do so.”

“Bring him up.” The Mission Director’s voice came over the speakers again. Switching the microphone off he instructed the foreman, “You can’t move it so build a cage around it.”

Standing in the office the man looked out of place but unlike the others, he did not look uncomfortable. It was difficult to judge the age of these people, many of them looked neither young nor old. His clothes were simple but in good repair. The Director reasoned that with an animal like that to clear the way, moving through the dense undergrowth must be a lot easier. He had planned to leave all reception interviews to the personnel department but this was certainly an interesting one.

“What is your name?”

“My name Christian. There are few of us. We do not use clan names”.

“Which kingdom are you from?”

“We were expelled from the kingdoms at the time of the rebellion, just fifty years after the landing. We live at the metal mountain.”

The Director looked up in amazement. “A metal mountain. Pure metal? What metal?”

“The mountain is rock but in its heart there is pure boiling metal.”

“Where is it?” The Director asked immediately, thinking of pure metal flowing directly into moulds for shipment.

“It is a long way away. I started my journey when your ship arrived in orbit.”

At that point the interview ended. Christian was left making his offer of allegiance to the officer who had greeted him in the compound. He was assured that the offer would be conveyed to the Director. He was given an excellent meal and shown to a room with a comfortable bed. The

following day he was told that, in view of the number of applicants, he would have to wait some time to be seen. He was not aware of applying for anything but saw no harm in waiting.

In the compound the dragon did not move. It watched with mild interest as the cage was built. Heavy steel beams were brought and lifted into place with cranes. Welders worked through the night and the following day connecting them together.

By the second day Christian was becoming impatient and, when called to interview, demanded to know if his offer of allegiance had been accepted. The interviewer looked bored.

"I'm sorry sir. All I'm supposed to do is to find out what skills you have. Can you work with wood?"

"I do not work with wood."

The interviewer sighed. This was going to be a difficult one. He started his standard speech. "We can offer you an excellent life. You have seen how good our food is and how comfortable our accommodation is. When you earn some of our money you can buy things like this." He took a small radio out of his desk and turned it on. The music irritated Christian even more. With a glance he stopped it. Switching it on and off failed to cure the fault so it was replaced and another was produced. This time the plastic case was visibly melted. The interviewer finally realised what was happening.

"I see." he said, sounding shaken. "You can do what the girl can do. Just bear with me a second, sir, and I shall take you straight to the Director."

The Director smiled broadly. "You are most welcome. If you had told me about your ability we could have avoided the delay. Can you do as much as the girl?"

Christian ignored the question. "I must know. Do you accept my allegiance, and that of my people? Do you pardon us for any crimes against the state that were committed in the kingdoms?"

"Yes I accept you allegiance" The director was faintly amused.

"And the pardon?"

The Director only hesitated for a second. He had no idea what crimes they were but surely it would have no standing in law. "Yes, a full pardon is granted."

Christian breathed a long sigh of relief. "I shall tell my people." Looking through the window he could just see the dragon. The animal calmly bent the steelwork out of the way and sped away across the plain.

2

"You can hear her screaming from the corridor outside the infirmary." Smith knew that his reaction would be showing. He was trying to avoid eye contact. "The pain must be incredible. She always tried to look confident but she's so young."

"I think they're sedating her every time she starts." Gardiner sounded more detached.

"That won't do her any good will it? She'll just get worse."

"She won't recover." Gardiner tried to avoid saying what would happen. They both already knew that she was only just alive.

They had taken a corner table in the crowded cafeteria. Hundreds of people around them were hurrying to finish their meals. A mass of activity had started since the landing and ended months of boredom. As ship's officers they were the exception. Their workload was reduced so they could take time over their meal. And hear the screams. Nobody else in the room seemed to notice but Smith was sure he could hear them.

They both stood up. The captain had been arrested and when they tried to go in it would be obvious that they were part of it. But they had to try.

They walked into the infirmary trying to look as if they had the right to be there. It was not difficult to see where she was. A group of three guards stood by a closed door. It was briefly opened for a doctor to hurry in but they could not see how many other staff were already inside.

At that moment she screamed again. The sound was scarcely human. They heard her gasping for breath and the shouts of the nurses trying to control her.

Smith took the circlet out of his briefcase. When Angus had given it to him three days previously on the hillside it had looked the powerful artefact that it was. Now it looked ridiculous. He

was an officer standing in the infirmary with a child's toy. It caught the attention of one of the guards who noticed their uniforms.

"Ship's crew not allowed in this infirmary. Director's orders." He started towards them.

Gardiner replied instinctively. "We're not crew, we're officers. Use your eyes man." Before the man had the chance to say that officers were also excluded he went on. "Now stand aside, that's an order." They pushed past. Their lack of true authority over the guards was made up for by their superior height and obvious strength.

Entering they saw Lynella, just visible through the mass of doctors and nurses gathered around her. Quite suddenly she stopped screaming and there was a short silence while her breathing was checked. An almost imperceptible nod from one of the doctors said that she still lived.

One by one those by the bed looked up to see the two officers and the circlet.

"Who the hell are you and what is that? Guards!" The doctor turned back towards the bed.

The guards had already come in but they were no match for Gardiner who kept them back while Smith ran forward.

"Stand aside!"

His bluff did not work on the doctors. They took no notice and turned to face him.

He held up the circlet. "Put this on her."

The doctors ignored him. The guards were getting around Gardiner.

Suddenly Lynella's arm reached out. It was weak and shaking and reaching directly for the circlet with extraordinary speed. Smith knew that it was the only thing that she feared above all else, even above the field that was killing her, but he knew that it must look as if she wanted it. Her eyes were gaunt and her expression of eerie terror shocked all to silence. She was staring at the circlet, which was just beyond her reach. She tried to summon a last reserve of strength to sit up and take it. Her body stirred pathetically but she could not move. Her raised arm faltered and dropped. Finally she did the only thing she could. Before her eyes closed she drove power into the circlet. The power was weak; scarcely enough to cause a spark, but the residual blue glow was enough. The doctors saw it and stood back while he placed the ring around her head.

Instantly her body relaxed. Her breathing steadied. The doctor looked at Smith.

"It blocks the field from the fusion ring." He tried to explain. "It's too strong for her here in the hub."

"You're the expert are you? How come it doesn't affect anybody else?"

"That's what her power's about. It's something she can make for herself and she's getting it forced on her. It's too much for her to take. Don't forget she's never been in the source before."

This made it so obvious that even the guards realised what was going on. One of them stepped forward. This time his authority was clear, he had drawn his gun. "You're one of them. Sounds like you've spent quite some time with the natives. You must have been in this with the captain."

Smith and Gardiner were led away to be held at the discretion of the Mission Director.

The doctor had routine access to the cells to check the drunks so his presence was not questioned. He walked cautiously into the one where Smith being held. "She's not getting better".

"Every time she comes round she'll try to tear the circlet off, won't she?"

The doctor agreed.

"It was all we could think of. A full metal enclosure would keep it out but we couldn't see how that could be arranged. She needs to be moved away from the ship."

"I know, I've already asked. The Mission Director said that it would be a security risk".

"And you agree?"

The doctor refused to be drawn. "We'll try to arrange something to shield the whole room."

"That would be a good start." Smith was worried about openly trying to recruit help but he thought that this man offered some hope. "If you help us get her as far as the edge of the source at the bottom of the hills to the West we can get help from there."

The doctor said nothing. He did not agree but he did not refuse. Smith wondered if he realised what damage Lynella could do once she recovered with the circlet removed.

3

Lynella awoke to no pain. No circlet and no pain. Her memory of the last few days, or weeks, or however long it had been, was confused. She could remember the pain. She could remember the circlet and how it had, to some extent, eased the pain but, because of what it represented, she remembered fighting to remove it. In all this time she had not been able to think. To try to work out where she was and why she was anywhere at all when she should have been dead.

The room was curious. It seemed to have been turned on its side. The wall on her right side had a carpet, which was worn in places as if it had been walked on. There were two doors, one was horizontal and the other was the right way up to walk through. The lighting was in the left wall and also in the ceiling, clearly designed to be used either way up. The walls themselves were strange but she could at least identify them as being similar to the interior of the shuttle. A layer of metal mesh had been fixed to them and she realised that this was protecting her from the pain.

There were many machines in the room. Each had its own personality, which she could sense. They were a bit like the machines on the shuttle and she knew that she must not use her power on them. This was not a time for experiments, she was alive and wanted to stay that way.

A man walked into the room and ignored her. He looked at one of the nurses. "How is she?" "She seems to be a lot better since the doctor had the screening put in"

The doctor entered and the director turned to him. "So you think that she really could sense the field"

"That was the conclusion of my report"

"Yes, I have read your report. But is it true?"

"That was my conclusion".

The mission director looked round the room. "You were in the cells talking to them. I need loyalty, not clever theories. I think this is a fraud. Take the screening down, I want to see what happens."

Lynella sat bolt upright in the bed. "Who are you that you say this"?

He turned to face her and smiled slightly. "And who, exactly, are you now you are with us"

"I am the Princess Lynella of the Southern Kingdom and demand that you identify yourself"

He smiled broadly. "I am the Mission Director." He walked up and leaned over her. "And I have assumed delegated authority over your Southern Kingdom."

Lynella's reaction was immediate. She liked dealing with men who wore rings on their fingers. It took several seconds for the Mission Director to realise what was causing the pain. To some observers it seemed as if he did not believe it until he smelt his own burning flesh. What was certain was that he never told Lynella that she was a fraud again, not to her face.

Paul was in captivity again. He could see the guard on the door all the time. The medical staff were as pleasant as possible but, even as he recovered, he was not allowed to go through the door under any circumstances.

He knew exactly where he was. He had always admired the design of the ship, which enabled it to work both ways up. The artificial gravity of the rotation was now replaced by real gravity in a different direction, just like it had been during fitting out on earth's moon. Every last detail in the hospital and other key areas worked both ways. Elsewhere demountable panels needed moving but the ship had been able to remain operational with minimal interruption. Nobody had ever seriously expected to land the ship on anything again but the facility was there. His scheme for this landing had made very neat use of it. He saw his idea for the plan and his protection of the ship while it was in progress as his crowning achievement. Others might see it differently.

He could sense the pulses as the fusion reactor generated electricity for the ship's services. It was quite faint now they had landed and power was not needed for flight. He remembered how painful it had been in space, particularly when they had been accelerating into the hyperspace transit. The odd thing that he had found was that he seemed to be the only one who could feel it. Everybody had complained of nausea after the transit but he seemed to be the only one who had felt pain. He could feel some pain now. Perhaps it was because he had nothing to do to take his mind off it but he wondered if he was becoming more sensitive to it.

His summons was delivered by a uniformed guard while he was on an exercise machine. He made the man wait while he used the shower cubicle. This caused immense irritation and a flurry of anxious telephone calls. He always liked to start in the way he planned to continue.

Although he had often been at meetings with the Mission Director present and had even exchanged a few words in corridors this was the first time he had discussed anything with him in person. Two guards had escorted him out to the new buildings and the secretary had ushered him through and then, to his surprise, they all withdrew leaving him alone with the man.

"Come in Paul, sit down." The Director indicated an upright chair set back slightly from the back of his desk. There was clear irritation in his voice and no suggestion was made to use the comfortable chairs at the other end of the office.

"I see that you are recovering well." Paul knew that this was as far as he wanted the small talk to go. The Director looked at him seeming to hope that he would say something. The man obviously didn't know how to start. Paul couldn't help comparing him with the Abbot. In their ways they were very similar. Both were leaders who had floated to the surface of unsavoury pools. Neither was answerable to anybody and both abused their positions. Physically they were also of similar type, over-fed and under-worked. But that was where the comparison ended, the Director seemed to be struggling to start, the Abbot would have torn him apart by now. Paul smiled slightly at this thought. He decided to start.

"I understand that Lynella is also recovering. I wish to see her."

"You may not. You have more important things to concern you."

Paul ignored this attempt to divert him. "I understand that almost all of the ship's personnel saw us defend it. If you discipline me many of them will support me at an enquiry when we return to earth."

"Will they?" The Director was sitting perfectly still, looking straight at him. He made no pretence of lack of interest but showed no signs of concern. "Carry on." He gestured slightly with one hand.

Paul decided to state his case. "If you plan to continue to detain me I have the right to appeal at full disciplinary hearing before a panel of senior staff. If not, I should be allowed to resume my duties."

"A full hearing will be arranged. You will be provided with written confirmation shortly." This was an area where the Director knew where he was going. Organising committees was said to be his favourite occupation. "Do you have any other formal requests?"

Paul was slightly thrown by this and simply confirmed that he had no more.

"Then I have arranged for another party to join us for a discussion of what happened during the landing. A sort of informal preliminary hearing of your appeal." He looked pleased at this bureaucratic definition of the meeting and pushed a small buzzer on his desk. The secretary opened the door and the Abbot walked in.

He still wore a brown robe but it no longer looked homespun. Beneath it Paul glimpsed some modern shoes and a modern wristwatch completed the transformation. Paul's horrified look was met by a smile, which overflowed with confidence. The Abbot casually indicated the comfortable chairs and Paul and the Director obediently followed.

"I understand" the Abbot began, straight to the point, "that you have been claiming that my monastery attacked the Atlanta".

Paul stuttered and clenched his fist.

"This is a particularly invidious lie in view of the way in which we defended it. It is also an insult to our casualties, many of whom would have died without the expert medical attention provided by the Director".

Paul looked at the Director and said rather pathetically, "He did attack it, and if Lynella hadn't stopped him it would have crashed."

The Abbot simply shook his head condescendingly and looked at the Director. "I really think he believes it. Lynella must have found him very easy to work on and he drew your Captain into her scheme for her. She has made complete fools of them." He turned to Paul. "You find her very attractive don't you?"

"That comment is irrelevant. You attacked the ship."

The Abbot ignored him. He turned to the Director. "What are you going to do with this man?"

"He has a right to a hearing. Several staff member shall judge his conduct."

"Do you think that's wise? These matters are very sensitive; very important."

The Director was about to reply but Paul cut across him. "Who's running this place? Are you in charge or is he rewriting the rules for you?"

The Director seemed to hesitate but the Abbot continued smoothly. "Do your staff normally address you that way. You are the Director. I am surprised that you tolerate it."

The Director clearly felt that he should say something but could think of nothing. The Abbot continued.

"There is another issue; a very important issue that could have serious consequences for all of us. This man has been involved in heathen practices; exploring the old pathways, leading to the old God."

This time the Director was able to quote company policy, which permitted religious freedom but only as long as it did not affect other personnel.

"What have you done? What are these serious consequences?" He asked.

Paul replied that he had absolutely no idea at all what he was supposed to have done. His reply was so convincing that even the Abbot seemed to accept it and told Paul that his hearing was over and called the guard. As he was escorted out of the room Paul looked back to see the Abbot leaning towards the Director with a sheaf of papers. They were word processed and printed. The Abbot was wasting no time in using the shipload of new technology.

4

The steward admired the amber coloured liquid. It had been the only good outcome of the visit. The company had been terrible – the Abbot and his new associate, the Director. The declaration that they had brought was worse. But this whisky was excellent. Maria insisted on diluting it but it was still excellent.

It was a warm evening and he had retired to a terrace at the top of one of the castle towers. It had been one of Lynella's favourite places. Few people knew that it even existed and on this occasion only Maria knew he was there. He looked at her sitting on a stone step on the far side of the terrace, waiting. She was good at waiting. She had known for some time that Lynella was alive and had come out of her all devouring grief to wait. If Lynella took a lifetime to come back she would still wait.

She had seen him looking at her. "Is there something I can get you my lord?" She smiled with a beautiful open youthful smile.

"No thank you Maria." She smiled again. He liked her company and freely admitted it. It was not for conversation because she was a servant and you did not converse with servants. It was not even for her attractiveness, which was, by any standard, quite remarkable. It was for her openness and loyalty. While Lynella was absent she had attached her loyalty to him and nothing would change it.

"And I'm not your lord any more. Henry is your king."

"Yes my lord." This time he had to smile. "And is the Abbot my lord as well or is it the director?" This time he laughed openly.

Below him two carpenters were dismantling the staging in the courtyard. They worked happily with their new tools, their gifts. Everybody had had a gift; each one carefully selected, by the Abbot of course – even his whisky. He saw no real harm in it, even if it did debase his society by trying to buy it with items, which clearly held little value to the giver. Somebody had been given a small device which was making an awful noise which was supposed to be music. This was annoying but Maria had assured him that it would soon stop working. She got this sort of information from Angus. Since Angus had been banished nobody was supposed to see him so the steward had an unspoken agreement with Maria that she would give him the news without saying where it came from. In return he would send her on occasional errands well away from the castle to give her the chance for her meetings with him.

Even now the thought made him chuckle. They had marched in intending to collect Angus and his men. It was the first thing the Abbot had wanted. Henry had proudly told them that he had tried Angus and found him guilty. At this point the Abbot was about to rush down to the dungeon. When Henry said he had banished them the cleric had gone red with anger and, for a moment, looked as if he might take Henry instead.

And here he was. Henry was walking proudly across the courtyard of his new kingdom. A group of courtiers followed him. The carpenters stopped work and bowed low. A group of crew members from the ship that were lounging in the shade ignored him but this had little effect on the grandeur of his procession. He reached the far side of the courtyard and stopped to say a few words to a prince who was with him. And then he turned round and went back again. The carpenters resumed their work. They had seen him do this many times. As a puppet ruler he had little else to do.

The steward looked round to Maria and called.

"Yes my lord." It made them both smile again.

"Please go and make sure that the carpenters clear all the timberwork off the battlements before they go." She slipped away.

Just months ago it had been a super-human effort to build it. Just weeks ago it was their last line of defence against the dragons. He raised his glass and drank a good measure of the whisky. Now the defences were pathetic, an embarrassment. The slovenly crew in the courtyard with their guns made it all a joke. They insisted on staying even though the dragons had, as Lynella had predicted, turned back of their own accord as soon as the ship landed.

The steward's private terrace gave him a commanding view over the castle walls to the fields beyond. Since the dragons had gone the cattle had been returned and the cottages and fences had been rapidly repaired. The farm workers would be using the new machines that they had been given.

Maria was crossing the courtyard below him. The steward watched as she approached the carpenters. She started talking with them but soon one of the ship crew stood up and joined them. They were too far away to be heard but it was clear that the discussion was not going as expected. Soon after it ended Maria reappeared.

"They cannot do it my lord. They have been commanded to go to start work at the mines tomorrow."

"How can they do that? The mines are within the source."

"Apparently the high council will meet tomorrow morning to revise the compact. The man from the ship was surprised that we did not know about it."

He was glad about the alcohol. It calmed him, suppressed his anger.

"And how will they be rewarded for their work at the mines?"

"They will be paid double their normal wage. They are very pleased."

"Nothing in ship money?"

"No, we are not going to be permitted to have any ship money."

He had known about the prohibition on guns but this was, in many ways, worse. They were a minority on their own planet and this would make them a permanent underclass. This ship would go but others would come and they would be expected to serve each one as they came.

In his way he admired the Abbot, hated him but admired him. When Lynella had overcome so much and won the battle he had reversed it all by simply telling lies. The audacity was fantastic, the cunning was incredible, the timing and eloquence were perfect. This man would now seem to many to be their only hope. It wasn't a real hope; the man was completely self-serving he would soon become one of the invaders, like them but worse.

A large cross stood above the castle gate. The steward knew that it had been there for over a hundred years since the monks had asked them to put it there when they built the church in the village. They had seen no harm in it and had hardly noticed when the old ring that had stood there before had been removed. They both watched as the shadow of the cross in the setting sun faded from the wall of the keep.

"Does she follow the cross?" The old man asked.

"She knows very little of the old ways." Maria replied speaking so quietly that he could only just hear her. "She has not studied the books as I have. Her jewel may be strong enough for her to re-discover the ancient souls but the journey would not be easy without a guide.

He took one more gulp from his glass. Perhaps it was as well that the Abbot would never try to make peace with her. "You didn't answer my question." He asked again. "Does she follow the cross?"

All Maria would say was that she had no love for the monks or their teachings. He knew the real answer. The forces that had caused the old mages to move away from the cross would now be acting on Lynella so if she had not yet followed then she soon would.

5

Adam killed to eat. He killed rats and ate them and he killed people and ate the food they carried. He took no joy from this existence but he felt no remorse. His injuries were so severe that for some time he could not walk. He crawled around and among the coffins stacked in the catacomb and killed. Although he did not enjoy killing it gave him pleasure to have the gun that Smith had left him. It felt heavy and cold in his hand, in all his life he could think of nothing that had given him more joy to possess. Even his boat, which he had known to be better than any other in the village, had not been so good. Each day he counted the remaining ammunition and confirmed that there was plenty left from the generous supply he had been given. One day he killed a monk. He knew that the bullets were special and could penetrate a monk's aura. He saw the expression on the man's face when he killed him. It was more surprise than terror or pain.

When they searched for him he hid inside one of the coffins. He was not bothered by the decaying remains that he shared it with because he knew with complete certainty that the souls of the dead would accept that he was good and those he killed were evil. He wondered whether their souls might one day talk to him and reassure him even though they were in the monastery.

Slowly his wounds healed and he was able to move out to other parts of the caves.

6

Lynella's escape from captivity on the ship was remarkably simple. In many ways it is hard to see how the mission director could have made so many mistakes. He was an intelligent, if rather ineffectual, man with a good education in modern science. As such he should have understood the contents of the reports and, especially having quite literally had his finger burnt by Lynella's power, realised the implications and acted on them. He knew that she could induce magnetic fields in metals. It was even in his report back to earth. He could have worked out the destruction that she could cause. He also knew that she could sense the bracelets that Paul wore and use them to locate and free him. He knew that she could stop lead bullets in flight, it was in the reports and his own workshops had even made some ceramic ones to overcome the problem. The trouble was that knowing something is quite different from believing it and believing it is different again from having the confidence to demonstrate that belief to others. He did not have the confidence to give orders to his managers to take precautions against magic. His managers, in turn, although they had also seen the evidence, did not have the confidence to question this. For his part the Abbot never for one moment doubted that precautions had been taken and never thought it worth his while to check.

The director surveyed the wreckage. The heavy metal door of the pressure hull, which had been closed when the alarm sounded, lay open and distorted. Guns lay on the ground where they had been dropped. Each one showed signs of molten metal around the trigger mechanism, not major damage but just enough to make them useless. Scorched patches in the grass showed where bullets had fallen uselessly to the ground. A Jeep lay on its side where it had crashed when a wheel had been melted away. He turned and walked on up the road. Normally he would never let himself be seen walking because his style of management was such that he wanted all his staff to know that he was too busy to walk. On this occasion he simply walked on for a full mile to the crash site. How could he explain the loss of a shuttle? The shareholders would want to know.

They had escaped on horseback. This much did not surprise him, he had guessed that she was sending messages to her friends outside and had let it continue in the hope that they would come in and he could capture them. All of the opposition would have been tidied up and the Abbot would have been pleased. He couldn't understand then why he had been so keen to please the Abbot and now he couldn't understand why he was so scared to tell him what had happened. If anything it bothered him even more than the prospect of reporting the loss of the shuttle back to earth.

As soon as the shuttle had come down he had ordered all of the others back to base. He knew that the guns on the shuttle could knock her off her horse. He had seen her jerk backwards each time she stopped a bullet so the act of stopping a burst of heavy bullets would send her flying backwards and unable to protect the others. But he couldn't risk another shuttle. So he had let her go.

In his own time he would go after her. He would get his revenge on her later. For now he would get his revenge on the rest of her people. He would give a speech at the pilot's funeral. He would make sure that absolutely all of the crew were there. He would reassert his authority. He would bring them all round to understand that the native people had committed an atrocity and must all suffer for it. He would bring them round to understand that her people must all be made to work in the mines as forced labour.

Lynella had been expecting to see her friends, just a small number as they had been before. She knew that the few from the ship who had helped before would want to come along but now she found herself surrounded by a great crowd of people. She asked Paul who they were.

"They want to start a colony." He explained. "They don't want to stay with the director and they don't want to go back to earth with him".

She looked at them all. Angus had found enough horses for them, he had obviously known how many to expect. She saw the doctor who had been treating her.

"What's he doing here?"

"He wanted to come. We shall need a doctor."

She rode forward to where Angus was leading the column.

"Where are we going?"

"We shall go wherever you say." Suddenly she felt the weight of responsibility. She had much preferred Paul's style of reply. Angus saw her reaction.

"Adam knows a good place where he says we would be safe."

Nobody had mentioned Adam. Not since she had seen him lying in a pool of blood in the monastery. But Adam couldn't die; she had been foolish to think that he had. Adam would always be there, silent and unresponsive, but always there.

She turned to see him, he had only been a few feet away but she would never have noticed him without looking. She smiled at him with such warmth that even he showed a slight flicker of response.

"I thought you were dead." She said, choking slightly. "I grieved for you."

She tried to move closer to him but he moved away. He looked up, recognising her feelings but unwilling or unable to respond.

"We shall go to the place you know." She said, and he responded with a simple nod of his head.

They stopped briefly at the Southern castle. News of their escape had spread ahead of them and the crew members who had been staying at the castle had fled. They were not welcome but Henry did not feel able to close the castle gates on his cousin. However soon they found the Steward and Maria for an emotional reunion. He was too old to travel with them but there was no question of stopping her; she would not leave Lynella's side.

Knowing that the pursuit would not be far behind they could not stop for long. Soon they were riding east to the river. A day later they turned north, riding hard up the lake shore until they reached the tower. Continuing down the river they finally found the King Solomon on a mud bank at a sharp bend. The rigging was loose and the sails had some large tears where they had caught on overhanging trees but Adam had many companions with him from his village and they soon had the ship sailing down the river in good order.

7

The black cliffs towered over them, protecting them from the storm but also obliterating the faint moonlight, which penetrated the clouds [no moon]. Moving deeper into the bay they could see nothing beyond the pool of light from Paul's flashlight on the black water and the outline of the top of the cliffs which seemed to be almost directly above them. The sails hung limp against the spars but still their momentum took them slowly forwards. Suddenly Paul shouted and they all turned to see what appeared to be a wooden post in the water. Soon a second was visible beyond it and finally a third. The sound of the storm seemed to fade behind them as they drifted closer. The helmsman instinctively tried to steer away but they were moving so slowly that there was little response. A shapeless form clinging to the tallest post suddenly unfurled long wings to reveal itself as a gaunt

seabird which flew almost directly at them before disappearing into the gloom on the far side of the bay.

Corroding metal bands were now visible on the posts and finally a single remaining length of rotting rope revealed them to be the masts of a sunken ship. Adam looked intently at them as they slid by. Seeing telltale lines of ripples forming behind them as a current flowed past he shouted the command to drop the anchor.

The crew on the foredeck struggled to free it and dropped it over the side but, as they paid out the rope they could feel it sliding over smooth rocks and scarcely slowing their progress. Soon the masts of another sunken ship came into sight, this time the current seemed much stronger as it swirled around them.

Suddenly their own ship shuddered and they shone lights up to see the main mast caught on an overhanging rock. The hull was driven on by the current and they swung round, broadside on to the flow, and were pulled over until the water lapped up over the decks on the lower side. This gave the current further purchase and the mast scraped further across the rock and lower.

Across the deck everybody hung on to anything they could find and tried to climb away from the advancing water. Adam slammed down the remaining hatch and secured it.

Angus shouted at him "What about the people inside, let them out". Adam ignored him and also ignored the screams that came from below the hatch as those inside realised that they were trapped. Within moments the water was lapping against the fastenings as the ship was driven further over by the current, which now roared past it.

Finally a terrible scraping noise from the top of the mast told them that they were clearing the overhang. The ship shook itself free and rolled upright with only its deep keel preventing it from capsizing to the other side.

They found themselves in total blackness with no way of knowing where they were or even if they were still moving. As people on deck regained their footing flashlights were pointed out in all directions. One of them showed a narrow shelf of rock with a large carved stone bollard on it. Adam immediately took the end of one of the light ropes and dived into the water. Reaching the shelf he pulled in the heavy mooring line, which the crew had tied onto the loose end of his rope. With little time to spare he fixed it to the bollard where it soon snapped taut as the ship was drawn on by the current. The ship was now secure and a lighting sphere was taken up the mast for Lynella to illuminate.

The light revealed a large cavern. The rock ceiling high above them and the walls to either side looked as if they had been cut smooth. Similarly the shelf on which Adam was standing extended the full length of the cavern and looked man made. The entrance looked frighteningly low with overhanging rocks and a strong current beneath it. The current appeared to reduce through the length of the cavern seeming to dissipate through unseen vents. There was certainly no exit above water.

Adam looked at the damage to the top of the main mast. The spars for the topsail were hanging loose and broken and the sail itself was in shreds but this was of little consequence. If the ship was ever going to somehow be dragged out against the current the entire mast would have to be lowered so a repair would be easy.

Two hours later the ship was moored against the shelf, the decks and cabins had been cleared up after the effect of the storm and the sails hung out to dry. A watch had been detailed and everybody had eaten. The mood, however, was sombre as they could see little prospect of escape from the trap into which they had been drawn. Their only hope lay in the faint outline of a door in the wall behind the shelf. The entire crew was looking at Lynella as she stood in front of it.

Lynella was chasing. She knew where she was; the hills, the fields and the trees were all familiar. But she didn't know what she was chasing. It was ahead of her, just over the brow of the hill ahead of her, beyond the hedge that ran along the ridge. She was tired but she knew that she had chased it many times before and always caught it. Except once, and that had not been her fault, Henry had frightened it away. Now she was up at the top of the hill. Her legs ached but she had to carry on. She knew how it felt to catch it, to hold it, to feel it, to know it was hers. She knew that she didn't need it for long; there wasn't much to do. All she needed to do was to open a door. It was just a puppy, easy to catch and simple to hold. She could see it now.

Out of the corner of her eye, see a group of people who she barely knew staring at her. She could sense their fear, their fear that she might fail. The puppy had gone, it wasn't a puppy anyway,

it was a fully grown dog. It could run much faster than she could. She was going to let these people down. They would be trapped with no means of escape.

She would have to give up. There was one other way. It was the way Paul had used before. Last time he had needed his ship but now he had built a little machine that would help her catch it. He told her he could switch it on and she would suddenly see and be able to catch everything. But then the dog might never run again. She feared that even more than never catching it.

Maria sensed the problem. Nothing had happened. The silence grew. The whole crew's faith in the expedition was built on a faith in Lynella's power to help them. This was the first time many of them had seen it tested and nothing was happening. Maria could only do one thing. She screamed.

The dog heard the scream. It turned. This gave Lynella time, she was almost on it now. The grass felt firm and smooth. The dog still wanted to know who had screamed, who was trying to help her. It paused, but not for long enough. Just as she was about to touch it, it turned and was gone. The hedge was thick and full of thorns. She was struggling to get through to see where the dog had gone. She was angry now. She pushed past the thorns, ignoring the pain as they cut into her bare arms. The dog was in the distance. She knew that she was able to stop it. She focussed her power on its collar. It stopped in the face of a blinding light.

In the cavern lighting spheres high up in the roof suddenly blazed with the power of sunlight. One exploded. People all around screamed and ran for cover.

Lynella knew she had done something wrong. The dog was laughing at her. It was telling her that she should have been trained. She had had the chance when she had been young but she had refused. Now she was useless. She was not a mage, she was a fraud. It was a wolf now. Enormous, with long yellow fangs. It had stopped running away. It was almost on top of her. She started to sway and fall.

Two people caught her arms and held her. They were her friends. But she knew that all her friends were blind, they couldn't see the wolf. It was about to jump at her and they couldn't see it. It hesitated, just for an instant the gleaming red eyes turned slightly and looked to one side of her. And somebody met its gaze. Another presence, something she had only ever felt in enemies in the monastery. But this was a friend. The wolf turned and ran. It was only a puppy again now. It was in her arms, she felt the warmth of its soft fur. The door was open.

Old hinges creaked and Angus had to use all of his considerable strength to swing the door out until it almost blocked the narrow landing stage along the edge off the cavern. Inside all they could see was a plain square metal compartment. It was just slightly wider than the door and of similar depth and had small upholstered seats all around the edge. Above the seats a line of runes confirmed that it was an artefact of the mages. Lynella stepped inside and Paul followed. Without effort she closed the door.

He found himself sitting on one of the seats looking at her seated opposite, illuminated by the dim glow of a small sphere. They started to ascend.

At the top of the shaft Lynella opened the door and they saw daylight outside. They heard a hidden mechanism click into place to prevent the lift from falling when Lynella withdrew her power and she then relaxed and they walked out into the sunlight. They stood on a small metal platform high above the surface of the island. Looking down they could see that they were at the top of the massive pylon which had been visible from the ship. Extending above them there was a short mast supporting a ring which was about 20 feet across. The ring was held vertically on edge and Paul looked out across the sea in the direction of its axis. The air was clear and on the horizon he could just make out the line of hills along the coast that they had come from. A gap in the hills seemed to be divided by a single dark line.

"That's your tower. It's on a straight line that goes through the gap in the hills. It must point directly at the source. What does it do?"

Lynella looked hard at the ring above her and the tower on the horizon and pictured the source beyond the gap in the hills. As hard as she looked she could not imagine what the device had been built for.

"I don't know how it works" she replied, "but it's pointing directly at your ship."

They stood looking at it for some time and then they turned to look around to see if anything else was visible. On the far horizon in the opposite direction to the tower on the land a second single dark line showed the presence of another pylon.

Back on the landing stage they expected to see fear and confusion after their sudden departure. What they saw, however, was a calm and organised crew preparing to lower the masts.

“When you went,” Angus explained, “we knew for sure that this island has devices on it that were built by the mages. They must have had some way of getting out so Lynella can get us out.” He did not show the slightest doubt in Lynella’s ability to rescue them and had clearly conveyed this confidence to the others. Lynella realised that the trouble that she had experienced opening the door had only lasted for a few seconds and had hardly been noticed by anybody except Maria.

Soon they were back in the lift, this time they stopped half way up at the level of the surface of the island. When the door opened they smelt age and death. With the unseen locking mechanism in place Lynella could move the focus of her power to the lights. The scene was, in some ways, similar to the interior of the tower that they had seen months before but it was, in every respect, more extreme. The flowing beauty of the work of the mages could be seen in every part of it but the detail which made the tower a home for a family was absent. The signs of hurried departure which had been so evident in the tower were seen in this place as the remains of sudden death. Each ornate chair around the grand circular table contained the decayed and dried remains of a mage.

They walked around them in awed silence. Here were jewels which made the gem on Lynella’s forehead look like a child’s toy. But still that power had been defeated.

Lynella showed a humility that she had never felt before. “I thought that they had gone from the tower in such a hurry to fight at the source. They didn’t – they had already been defeated.”

Paul was equally awed but saw his own perspective. “Three hundred years ago your people had technology which may have been the most advanced that humans have ever seen. We have no means to create ships and pylons, or even a bridge like the ones you created with it. But in the space of a few hours, or even seconds, it was destroyed and you have lived with virtually no technology ever since.”

The main column supporting the pylon rose through the centre of the table. Around its perimeter a single ring of solid gold would once have been perfectly formed but was now buckled. The sealed environment had prevented accumulation of dust on the table but this only served to expose the scorch marks which radiated across its surface. Even the surface of the column showed signs of damage.

“We must know who did it.” Lynella stated without leaving room for questions. “The monastery hadn’t been started and anyway the power of their machine couldn’t begin to compare with this.”

“It would have been a war between mages.” He said. “Probably around the time of the final battle at the source and the compact. It would have been a battle like the ones Maria describes, almost everybody on both sides died.”

Lynella knew that this was wrong. “This was done after the compact.” She replied simply. “Nothing like this was built in the kingdoms and if they had been able to build one they would have and they would have used it in the final wars. There was no war between mages when this was destroyed.”

“So who was fighting?” Paul asked. The signs of a battle were plain to see.

“The Mages were fighting the only power that was stronger than they were.” She replied, sounding sure of her facts but also distressed by them. “They fought each-other until the compact rescued them from oblivion but then they fought their God and died. I am sure that the God survived, but the mages died.”

Paul felt the superiority of his background in a society based on machines which depended on scientific principles which had been analysed and understood. His God was not a medieval character who could be challenged. His God was conveniently distanced and sanitised. He held onto some fairly archaic ideas of the nature of evil but nothing like this.

Lynella sensed the size of the gap between their cultures. “I saw the personality of your power.”

He looked completely blank and she smiled at him.

“You helped me down at the door. I see now you don’t even know you did it.”

“What are you talking about? You can do the magic. I’m the one who does the machines.”

She walked over to one of the chairs. Lifting the heavy gold crown she found that the decomposed head started to come away with it but she pushed it casually out letting it fall on the floor. Paul felt nausea rising inside him and shuddered slightly but Lynella ignored it and placed the band on his head with one of its many jewels resting firmly against his forehead. The last thing he saw before collapsing was Lynella smiling again as her own jewel glowed.

Finally regaining consciousness he saw her again, but differently. The sensation was like a dream at first, he was aware of images moving around him and somehow knew what they were despite strange differences between what he was seeing and what he was familiar with. To his surprise he found that was actually aware that this world existed in parallel to the other world, rather than dreams which take the semblance of being the only reality. Cautiously reaching out he then found that he could interact with his surroundings. He inspected the room, seeing first the table and then the objects around it in this new perspective. Lynella was where he had seen her in the real world. Her expression was unsmiling and distant but, at the same time her mind was open. For the first time he saw her belong. She was alone, waiting patiently for him to be ready to follow her.

He reached out to her to find out what had happened and she explained how she had used the runes on the table as a gateway to the network and then reached out to draw him in. Looking again he was able to see his own body slumped in one of the chairs. Lynella reassured him that it had recovered and encouraged him to go to the threshold of the gateway to satisfy himself that he was free to go back. She knew he would not want to leave until he had explored some of the pathways that reached out in the other direction further into the network.

She waited as he tried to see what he could do in this new reality. He reached out to her and found that he could touch her, brushing her sleeve he saw it move in this reality but not in the other world. Remembering what Lynella had done in the monastery he located a small ring on the table and found that he was able to move it in both worlds and finally appreciated that Lynella had awakened a power in him that was similar to her own. He knew that if he had been able to see the ring he could have moved it without entering this world and, with practice, controlled its movement. The network would enable him to project that power at a distance and, like the computer networks he knew, to communicate.

She led him through pathways around the tower. Some of them were damaged but all were passable. In an instant they travelled to the top of the pylon and back. When he fell behind she slowed down and helped him, drawing his jewel towards hers. Every time she sensed it she realised how much stronger it was than hers. She realised that without it he would have no more power than she had had as a child.

They went down to the sea and looked at the mechanisms under the dock. They returned to the gold ring at the table. For all of the damage it had taken it was still immensely powerful. From this point he could begin to understand the purpose of the machine. It was part of a link that connected the source to another point. They could not tell what was at that other point. It was a point of exit. It could enter hyperspace to come out elsewhere in the universe. He could follow this but he saw that she was trying to lead him beyond this understanding. To understand where it would go if the power was even greater. Far greater than the power of the Atlanta. She knew his limits. She knew not to lead him to the point of destruction.

On the way back down he tried to help with the lift but his exhaustion was such that she could only just feel him there.

9

The shape of the island which concentrated the natural flow into the mouth of the cavern brought with it a vast amount of sea life. Adam quickly arranged nets over the side of the ship which provided an ample supply of edible fish. The nets also conveniently trapped quantities of driftwood to augment their dwindling supplies of cooking fuel. The following morning Lynella was sufficiently recovered to take Angus and Adam up with them in the lift to the surface of the island. Realising that the chamber that they had been in previously had no outside exits she guessed correctly that she should go to one floor above it.

When the lift door opened she was struck by the total contrast to what they had seen before. Here there was a small corridor with a relatively low ceiling and a number of ordinary doors to either

side. Inside the doors they found kitchens and store rooms. Although these were quite tidy it was clear that they had been abandoned by people who did not expect to return. At the end of the corridor they found an outside door secured with a conventional latch and through this a short flight of steps to ground level.

The island was covered with a mixture of coarse grass and bare rock. Measuring a few hundred feet in each direction it had a small rise in the centre with the pylon positioned at the top. There was no sign of any animal life but vast numbers of sea birds circled above them having been disturbed by their sudden appearance.

"We used to come out occasionally here to look at it." Adam said. "We knew that it was dangerous to go to the north side – boats that went there never came back."

Angus gave him a puzzled look. "We knew that the mages must have gone in that way because the cliffs are sheer all the way round. Since we had a mage on board I assumed that we would get out."

Lynella was shocked by this blind faith in her power but said nothing.

They made a quick tour of the island and confirmed what Adam had said about the cliffs. Angus commented on the lack of any catchment for rain water.

"They catch it on the roof at the base of the pylon." Paul said. "There's a big cistern in the top level of the building, it's full but I don't know if it's drinkable."

"How do you know that?" Adam asked in his usual direct manner. Paul found it difficult to answer. He had decided not to tell them about his new-found powers. Lynella had agreed to this. After a slight hesitation he replied that Lynella had told him.

Back on the ship they began to discuss how they were going to get out. They thought that if the Director was going to come after them he would probably have done so already. To be sure, they decided to set a lookout at the top of the pylon for a day or two to look for shuttles before leaving the safety of the island. After that they expected Lynella to get them out.

She explained how the mechanism worked and they easily located the cable which hooked onto the ship to tow them. She described the winch mechanism which was on an outcrop facing the cavern entrance and from the end of the landing stage they could just see it. They were, however, moving towards the impossible question. Having remained in the tower to work the mechanism, how was Lynella going to get onto the ship?

Angus provided the solution. A small boat would be built, not much more than a raft, just large enough for Lynella to sit in it. As the King Solomon was towed across the bay a rope would be paid out and this would be used to pull the small boat across when she was in it.

Before this could be done the critical operation was to lower the masts. With the rigging now almost entirely removed they stood bare above the ship. They had been made from tree trunks and rested on the keel at the bottom of the hold and were now held upright by the large timbers that secured them. The designers of the ship had never intended the masts to be lowered so no provision had been made to let them move at deck level. They would therefore have to be raised vertically out of the deck before lowering. Adam was in his element. The more impossible the task, the more he drove himself relentlessly towards solving it. Angus ran around after him doing his best to interpret Adam's gruff monosyllables and communicate them to the teams who would be required to hold the various ropes with which the operations would be controlled.

Paul and Lynella returned to the tower. A brief second visit to the servant's level enabled them to obtain sufficient furniture to be broken up and use to construct the small boat for Lynella's escape. After this they returned to the only remaining unexplored level which lay above the servants and just below the cistern.

The upper level was, as expected, the accommodation for the mages. Emerging from the lift they found dark wood panelling with the ever present runic symbols forming the basis of complex patterns in it. A small open hallway with doors on the outer wall surrounded the base of the pylon. Lynella was slightly surprised to see that the doors had handles but concluded that they must have been for the servants. On this occasion they were, however, all locked. Choosing one at random she tried to open it.

Sensing Paul trying to help her she drew confidence from him while, at the same time, helping him to see the mechanism of the lock and teaching him how to operate it. She found the experience of working in harmony with another individual almost similar to working with one of the monks' machines but without the underlying threat of entrapment. For the first time she sensed how lonely

she had been throughout her life as the only mage on the planet and felt great relief that her isolation had ended.

The lock, however, did not open.

She could sense Paul's confusion as he waited for her to decide what to do. She put in more power, thinking that the mechanism must simply have become stiff with age. Her jewels glowed but still the door did not open. She felt the now familiar surge of anger and humiliation and prepared to throw in a pulse of energy that would be sufficient to destroy the entire door if the lock would not respond. At the last moment she sensed Paul trying to persuade her to stop and, fearing that he had seen danger, she withdrew completely.

"All of the private cabins on the ship have different entry codes. If they didn't we would be continually walking into the wrong ones and nobody would have any privacy".

She had to adjust quickly to realise that he was talking to her with normal speech and work out what he was trying to say.

He tried to explain it another way and asked. "What did you do differently at this door from what you would have done at any of the other doors?"

"Nothing, what did you expect me to do?"

"I don't know, but they must all be different."

Lynella stood back and patiently tried to work on the problem. The doors had numerous runes carved into them. Trying to remember what she had read in the books in the tower she was able to recognise a few of them. They gave her some clues about the owners of the rooms, the type of power they had and, above all, the way they would fight. Gently probing the locks she thought that she could recognise the characters from the way they were programmed but she could still not find the key to opening them. Suddenly, from behind her, she heard old hinges protesting as a door opened. Turning she saw Paul laughing at her.

He swung the door wide open and stood back for her to enter, still smiling as she walked across.

She looked back defiantly. "I first opened a mage lock when I was ten years old".

"But you couldn't open these ones."

Looking at him she finally realised how he had done it. He was wearing the jewel that had belonged to one of the mages. She carefully took it from him and put it against her forehead in place of her own jewel that she had used since childhood. She was amazed how different it was, completely unfamiliar and larger and more complex than her own. She felt slightly unsafe using it and realised that it could draw her in and make her unable to return to her own. Opening locks was, however, one of the simplest things a mage could do and she could see how the perfect match between the jewel and the lock would have let her open the door with only the lightest contact.

The interior of the room was as Spartan as the chamber at the base with simple heavy furniture. There was a bed, which was neatly made, and the only other furniture was a desk and chair. The only concession to decoration was a single portrait of a woman with a child. They were not wearing jewels but from their bearing and the intensity with which they stared out of the picture they appeared to have the power to be mages.

The only item on the desk was a plain metal cylinder. Paul picked it up. "The two halves have been welded together." He observed. "You mages certainly have a way of doing things."

Lynella did not want to be drawn into discussing the extent to which Paul might be a mage so she simply asked what he thought it was.

"It looks like a message tube to me." He replied "The metal tube might just be a way of keeping it secure but more likely they had a way of shooting it back to the tower."

"He never had time to open it." Lynella noted sadly. "Or perhaps he wrote it and never had time to send it. Perhaps it was from the lady in the picture."

They decided to open it. Lynella took great care to do this with speed and precision and Paul was duly impressed. The note largely consisted of runes, clearly written in haste. The only word was "farewell" written near the bottom in what appeared to be a child's handwriting.

They went down to the main chamber. Paul could not bring himself to take them from the decayed corpses but Lynella seemed unconcerned and soon had them all. She took one to try. The mounting was similar to her own except that it was held in place with a gold chain rather than the simple silk cord that she was used to. It felt comfortable against her forehead and she sensed the now familiar presence of Paul communicating with her power and encouraging her to explore it. They knew that it had been created by the mages at the height of their power. She tried to take it off to go back to the jewel she knew but slowly it drew her in. Each time she thought of letting it go it always had something new to show her and she realised that Paul was not helping her – he seemed to be encouraging her to abandon the jewel that she had known since she was a child and risk something entirely new. Gradually her resistance collapsed and she began to see how great the power of the mages had been. The pathways in the tower which had seemed complex but passable now emerged in their true logical simplicity.

Briefly withdrawing from the network she replaced the necklace and bracelets that she was wearing with others she had taken from the same corpse. She showed no revulsion as she picked them off as if they were on a doll. She had no hesitation and immediately felt they had always belonged to her. The jewels in them glowed in response.

The jewels seemed very different but, in one way, easier to use. Everything in them was more ordered and regular than her own. She realised that they were intrinsically different. They contained none of the natural random pathways that she was used to. They were completely artificial, far newer than hers, which had come from earth in the first ship. It was as if she had been feeling her way forward in the dark and now she had a lamp. She could see where to go and the wolves of her terror of failure would never come near her.

They began to explore. Moving to the base of the pylon they found mechanisms which had seemed insignificant to Lynella before but could now be seen as distinct devices, each with its own purpose. Many of them were to defend the island. They tried to let their imagination run to picture who or what might have been able to attack it. Others controlled the systems of the tower itself to enable the mages to live in warmth and comfort. Finally there was the last and the biggest which was formed of a set of rings held in a three-dimensional pattern building up towards the pylon and its purpose was to deliver pulses of energy to the ring at the top. Again they could not picture what would fly through.

Now they travelled downward. Passing the dock the network continued down into the rock. In front of them was a portal which seemed to signify the end of the privacy of the tower. Beyond it they could see that the pathway continued. Very cautiously they approached, it was surrounded by a device unlike any they had seen before.

They stopped.

"It looks like a trap. We must disable it." Lynella said, knowing that Paul also sensed danger.

"How do we know?" Paul asked. "How do we know it's dangerous?"

"Maria has read about them in the books." She replied. "She showed me what she found in the books that were in the tower. That was how I knew what this network was when we found it and that is how I know that there are traps in it. That is also how I know that the jewels that we are wearing have the power to disable it."

Paul thought about this for a few moments. He tried to look around but the network was just blackness, a one-dimensional space in which one could see forwards and backwards but not to either side. In front of them there was this device and behind there was just a glimmer of where they had come from, apart from that there was just void. It was not even black, it had no substance at all.

"How can we see anything?" He asked. "How do we know we are seeing the trap clearly?"

"We can never know any more than we know how we see things in any other reality. God gives us the power to see both in the outside world and in the network." Paul made a mental note to explain a bit about modern science but realised that this was not the place for it.

"Have you ever been in a network before?" He asked, feeling progressively more nervous about her blind faith.

"Any machine like the ones in the tower or the monastery requires a connection between where the mage can see it and put power in and the point where the power is needed to do things. I have used them before but I have never been in a network before where they were all joined together. If there was a network in the tower I never found it because my old jewel was not strong enough". She surprised herself by referring to the jewel that she had treasured for so long and had

originally been strong enough for the founding families to travel through hyperspace as if it was a discarded toy.

Paul now sensed even more danger. They were using jewels that had last been used hundreds of years before by the people that made them and knew them and they were entering a network that they did not understand beyond knowing that it was dangerous.

“What happens if we get caught in the trap?” He asked.

Lynella paused to think and then simply said that she did not know. “We must go on though.” She said. “It is our destiny to rediscover the old ways of the mages. God gave us the means to see so we should look.”

“It didn’t do much good for the old mages.” Paul replied.

“That was because they were too proud. They fought for their pride to show that they were stronger and better than their rivals. We have no rivals.”

“This place is dead. Everybody who has been here before is dead. There will be no life on the other side of the trap. God created us in such a way that we all die but that does not mean that we should die now.”

Just as he said this they sensed life. As with the trap itself they had no idea how they sensed it but, as Lynella had said, they were beginning to accept this in the same way that they accepted seeing in the outside world without knowing how they did it. They both clearly sensed a being in the network beyond them and they both knew that the other had also sensed it.

“What is it?” he asked, assuming she would have no answer.

“Perhaps it is God calling us through.”

The reply confused him as he tried to dismiss it. What did he know about God? How did his God communicate? Was this a calling?

“What do you want?” He shouted, as much as he could shout in a place where he had no body, no mouth and not even any air.

A few seconds later they sensed the life again and this time it was clearly a calling. It seemed weak but it was calling from somewhere far away for them to come.

“Will the trap kill us?” He shouted again. He tried to think through what he knew about God. He knew that people claimed to have communicated with God, if nobody could communicate with Him why bother with Him at all. Here was a presence that was presumably both immortal and very powerful and could communicate. His thoughts were interrupted. The reply came but it was not clear. It seemed to still be calling and it seemed to say the trap was old, ineffective and harmless but there was an edge to the meaning. A feeling of desperation, a feeling that their lives were not important.

“Some Gods may need sacrifices.” He said. “Remember that if we die none of the others can escape without us.”

When they returned to the ship they saw at once that things had gone wrong. In place of the busy activity that they had seen before there were now just groups of people standing around. One mast had been lowered but it lay angled off to one side and nobody was attempting to move it. Angus came to meet them. Adam was nowhere to be seen.

“Thank God you’re back” Angus looked directly at Lynella. “They dropped it. It was some of the crew from Atlanta. Adam said he showed them how to fix the rope. I don’t know. Perhaps he did.”

Paul looked up at the ship. “I can’t see any damage. It’s just got to be straightened up. Nobody was hurt were they?”

“Nobody badly hurt. A few bruises and rope burns. No real damage to the ship either but it was very close. It almost came down on some of my people and they started shouting at the crew that lost it. Before I could do anything they were shouting insults and now they are refusing to work together”

“What can I do about it?” Lynella asked.

“Just talk to them.” Angus replied. “Just talk to them and they’ll do what you ask.”

Lynella didn’t believe him. She couldn’t accept her position as leader but she had to try. The idea of reasoning with them, discussing their concerns and helping with their fear of the future never occurred to her. This was what Paul and Angus had been expecting but they made no attempt to stop her when she threw her power into the lights and marched towards the first group of crew. The effect was immediate. She was amazed but never showed it in any way. The men stood up as she

approached. One man offered an excuse for stopping work. He explained that he had been taking a brief rest and would start again immediately. Others followed. Soon the mast was neatly secured and preparations were in progress to lower the second one. Lynella made no attempt to help. She positioned herself on the raised deck at the stern and did no more than to keep the lights on. She even let Paul provide much of the power for that.

The moment came for the King Solomon to be towed out of the cavern. Lynella went up to the control chamber and soon the cable became taut. The mechanism was silent and soon they heard the noise of the current rushing past the hull. They passed under the overhanging rock and out into the bright daylight. Ahead they saw the masts of the sunken ships. Very slowly they moved on, level with the masts and then beyond them to the centre of the bay.

Nobody saw the shuttle until it was just a mile away. Flying out of the sun close to the surface of the sea. They heard the roar of its engines and turned just in time to see it launch the missile. The crowd on the deck ran to the opposite side to jump. Paul, however, after his initial shock, found himself compelled to look at it. As he looked the shuttle seemed to move relative to the horizon but the missile remained in the exact same position it was flying directly towards him, he knew this but he was still unable to move. For a moment he seemed to be back in the tower with Lynella. When he was back the missile had veered off slightly, not enough to miss the ship but enough to hit it further along the deck.

The explosion threw the ship backwards throwing many of the terrified crew into the sea. Huge splinters flew out from the shattered deck beams flying into the survivors. The warhead was, however, designed to detonate fuel tanks and destroy control systems. In the large damp timbers of the old ship it caused considerable damage, but not enough to sink it.

Paul grabbed the rail but was still unable to move. He now stood almost alone on the deck. His friends in the water were shouting at him. The shuttle had flown past now and was circling to fire a second missile to finish the destruction of the ship. He turned, now he was compelled to look at the shuttle. High above him on the pylon the great ring at the top was turning. Below it a port had opened in the side of the tower and an ancient mechanism extended from it. Moments later the shuttle exploded and Paul collapsed on the deck.

11

The Mission Director was well trained to focus on objectives that would please his superiors. Realising that chasing after Lynella and the defectors would gain him little but the personal satisfaction he gave little further thought to the idea. When the loss of the second shuttle was reported to him he called the pursuers back to productive work and tried to forget about the incident.

His plans for the local population were pursued with his characteristic attention to detail and he was very pleased to find that they had the full support of the Abbot. Packed into Atlanta there was a large amount of pre-fabricated accommodation which had been intended for use by the mine operators. With the ship landed the miners preferred to remain in it so the Director had the buildings assembled for the natives. The orderly lines of huts were soon set up with water and electricity supplies and delegations were sent out to the kingdoms to explain how much better they were than the existing villages around the castles. Those who disagreed were discretely shot so the move was soon completed and the villages demolished to finish the job. He was reluctantly persuaded to leave the castles but went to some lengths to block all access to them and make them uninhabitable. In this way some five thousand people found themselves living in the encampment with token health and education provided. They knew that they were well outnumbered by those on the ship but had no opportunity to see how these others lived because of the fence and guards which had appeared around them "for their security". The Director now had his forced labour in place.

The survey had shown some particularly rich deposits which were too deep for strip mining and the miners from the hills beyond the Eastern Kingdom had experience of working in tunnels. Just a mile from the roar of the colossal bucket wheel excavators working the open faces a shaft was sunk and traditional wooden pit-head gear assembled over it. The ore from it was only a trickle in the flow but the Director felt satisfied that the price was being paid for the loss of the shuttles.

While he felt that Lynella was out of sight and should be out of mind he did worry that she might return and he devised what he thought was a fine plan to stop her. He knew that she had gone in the direction of the tower by the river so he persuaded Christian to send for some people from his village to keep watch from it. They were at first reluctant to get involved with machinery built by the mages but one of his more enterprising technicians went with them to help them and show them that they were actually very similar to some of the machines on the Atlanta.

12

The wind came steadily from the west and the King Solomon made excellent speed. They had drifted back into the cave after the attack and had decided that they had no choice but to stay there while they made the repairs. The driftwood and broken furniture that they had for the work was far from ideal but the old ship was seaworthy again.

Blowing against the current the breeze brought up a nasty chop of short steep waves which made most of those on the small brigantine feel unwell. Standing on the high deck at the stern, however, Adam felt nothing from the motion, only the remaining pain of his injuries. He held the wheel and steered for the next pylon. High above him the square topsails had been set and above them again a trusted crewman scanned the horizon for shuttles. Lynella remained in the cabin below ready to come out immediately if one was sighted.

Nobody from his fishing village had ever been beyond the island before, the main reason being that the fish kept close to the shore. They also feared the currents. The incessant flow that had trapped the ship in the island was getting stronger forcing Adam to set the helm further and further across in order to keep them on a heading that would take them to the pylon.

Captain Turner, Paul, and several others from Atlanta had been involved in the original mapping of the planet. They had been able to tell him that he was crossing a large bay two to three hundred miles across with the entrance so far away to the west that it almost formed a separate sea in its own right. Since the current was flowing out from the bay close to the South shore where he now was it made sense that it must flow in along the North shore. He had no idea what lay in the centre but Lynella had told him to head for the pylon so that was what he did.

"The current is being driven by two sources which are both far away." Paul had explained. "It is caused by the conflict between them. It flows around in a circle in the middle of the bay."

"Why should it do that?" Captain Turner asked. "They don't do things like that on earth."

"I think it's my magnetic anomalies again. That's why it gets stronger near the centre."

Sailing on past the pylon they made little progress because they had to steer almost directly into the current.

"Why don't you follow the current a bit? It will surely take us around to the far side of the bay". Lynella asked Adam as he struggled with the wheel.

Adam looked up startled. "Because you said so, of course".

"What did I say?"

"You said that we must follow the line of pylons because it must lead to a place that you would like to see on the far side of the bay." Lynella only vaguely remembered having made the suggestion. She had subsequently seen Angus and Captain Turner discussing what she had assumed to be the detailed plan.

"But what did Captain Turner, Paul and Angus say?" She asked.

"I don't listen to them. You are the Princess that I serve."

She quickly consulted the others and told Adam in person that he could follow the current. The ship rapidly gathered speed. Adam was able to use the power of the sails to steer them northwards to some extent while being swept well to the West of the pylons. Slowly the direction of the current changed, turning to the north and helping them in the direction they wanted to go.

They were now moving at great speed. On the eastern horizon they saw pylons sweep by. The water was becoming rough and they found themselves surfing down the face of enormous waves that seemed to be standing still in their path.

Lynella asked Adam if he knew what was happening. "The water must be shallow." He said. "These waves are result of a fast current flowing, like in a shallow river."

The waves became steeper and started breaking over the main deck. All but the crew were ordered to go below and the hatches were secured. Lynella remained on the raised stern deck, she was clear of the waves, but still had to hold onto the rail at the front of it with all her strength. A cascade of foaming water poured across the main deck, breaking against the bulkhead below her and streaming out over the side. The hardened experienced crew from Adam's village clung to the rigging as the waves flowed past them.

By now the current had turned towards the line of pylons, and Adam was setting a course away from the centre of the whirlpool; but the wind had dropped and the sails were having little effect. The ship was being drawn inwards.

"What will there be at the centre of this lot?" Captain Turner asked, looking nervously ahead.

"That pylon." Adam replied, his face as expressionless as always.

A pylon now stood about two miles away, it was almost possible to see the current curving around it but it was not possible to see what lay at its base.

"The current will have formed a sand bar around it." He continued. "Lynella will have to rescue us because the ship will break up on it in these waves."

Everybody turned to look at her. For an instant she closed her eyes, as if this would somehow help her to find a field that was not there.

"Your power always obeys you in time of need, my Lady." Adam almost showed sympathy beneath the respect and awe as he said this.

Lynella realised what he was saying. "My power is within my control." She replied. "But there is no field for me to use."

For the first time ever he saw an expression approaching fear pass across Adam's face but it soon passed. "God will help us." He said. "Men have been here before when the tower was built and god will help us to go where they went."

The waves were now beginning to break right up onto the stern deck. Riding down the face of one they had passed they crashed into the next. Wiping the water from his eyes Adam felt sand and knew that they could not go much further. Suddenly there was a sickening lurch and the ship seemed to be falling sideways over a waterfall.

They saw sand below them. Lynella clung to the rail as the ship leaned further and further over. In desperation she tried to visualise the ring in the base of the ship and drive power into it but she knew that there was no field to work on. They seemed to be moving in slow motion as they spun around the pylon, driven into the steep face of water that encircled it. She heard screams as those below realised that this was not just another wave. Slowly and inevitably they fell towards the sand. The crash came, timbers bent and the burst of noise from the hull itself drowned out the shouts from inside it.

Suddenly there was quiet. The ship seemed to sit motionless. Then it started to move very slowly, righting itself and settling into the sand. Adam looked across the deck and saw that his ship was still intact. He rushed to the rail and looked down at the hull. He saw the surface of the sand had yielded to let the ship sink in and soften the impact. The hull appeared undamaged. The sand was continuously boiling up from below to form small volcanoes that then spread out across the surface. These were relentlessly pushing the ship towards the pylon.

Soon the deck was crowded with people staring at the wall of water continuously revolving around them and the sand moving below them. A gust of wind made the rigging strain against the trapped hull and the sails were quickly lowered. The wall of water now lay 100 yards behind them with the pylon the same distance in front. A dock with mooring bollards could be seen around its base. Adam looked at these with relief, not because they needed to moor the ship, but because their presence seemed to show that it was a safe mooring and the sand would not crush them against it.

12

The ship turned itself to come alongside the dock, as if driven by some secret mechanism rather than the natural movement of the sand. Then, just as it came alongside, it stopped exactly as Adam had expected. By this time the crowd on the deck was quite calm, enjoying the spectacle without concern about how they would get out. They formed a pathway and stood to either side

waiting for Lynella to walk through and step onto the dock. She found herself walking, wanting to shout out to them that they were fools to trust her to rescue them again, but finding she was unable to do so. She walked in regal silence even pausing to acknowledge glances from some of them as she went through. Now she stepped onto the dock. A murmur went through the crowd. Somebody must have told them that she did not like being watched when she used her power. They all moved away, trying to look as if they had something else to do. With her new jewel, however, she had no difficulty in opening the door and working the lift inside it.

They glided up. There were no intermediate levels, she could sense the continuous featureless metal walls around them. The room at the top had virtually no decoration. Everything in it was clearly functional and showed that this was not a place to stay. It was just one part of a large machine and the only reason anybody would be expected to be in it would be to build it or maintain it. Nevertheless the table and chairs which surrounded the central mast were elegant in themselves and the runes on the table were beautiful to see as well as frightening to those who knew the power that they controlled. A spiral staircase led up from the room to a flat roof platform with a rail around it and the inevitable ring held high above them. Looking along its axis they saw the pylons to either side but apart from that the horizon was unbroken sea.

Lynella looked down at the ship in silence. From so high up its masts looked as if they hardly came above the deck. Paul stood behind her not knowing what to say.

"Why do they trust me so much?" She asked, finally putting her thoughts into words. "Adam is the worst. He would sail that ship straight into a rock if he thought that I wanted it. This isn't like the island, there doesn't seem to be anything here to get ships out."

"They must have got out somehow."

"Perhaps they never came here in sailing ships."

Paul had to agree that some other form of transport would have been needed to bring in the amount of metal needed to build the tower.

"What about the mooring rings?" he asked.

"Perhaps they are a trap to lure ships in." Lynella replied, ending the discussion.

They returned to the room and started work. Entering the network they found it to be as basic as the room. There were no junctions or diversions which might lead to a machine to get them out, just a simple pathway up to the ring and the mechanism that worked it and down to the base of the pylon. Further on downwards it came to another portal like the one at the island.

There had been little peace on the ship and no privacy so they had had no chance to discuss or even think about the presence they had found in the network. Now they felt unprepared, guilty that they had not realised that they would face the same choice again. This time, however, they were trapped and, however unlikely, they could only hope that some form of rescue could be found if they went through.

They stopped to examine the portal feeling hopelessly blind, not knowing what to look for and not even sure about how to see. Paul tried to rationalise how he could search but this was like a dream, it seemed to show him what it wanted him to see not what he wanted to look at, that was always just black amorphous void.

The presence was calling again, a sort of welcome, far louder than before.

"God is calling us". Lynella said, knowing that he would have heard it.

"Is it God or is it a devil?" He asked, knowing that this would annoy her but just trying to give himself more time.

Lynella gave him no reply but called out. "Can you rescue our ship?"

"Why does it need rescuing?" The reply was quite clear, not expressed as concepts or feeling, clearly spoken as words.

"It seems that your God can talk to us quite clearly now." Paul remarked, wondering if he could actually be overheard when saying it. "It's lucky he speaks our language."

Despite having been told about how they existed on earth Lynella was still dubious about the concept of different languages so his cynicism was lost on her. She quickly explained the problem and was told that, without any doubt, the presence could rescue them.

"You have said that you could rescue us but will you?" Paul shouted out.

Lynella shrank back with fear that this sort of remark would anger a God.

"You must make me a promise."

"We shall promise to worship you and obey you." Lynella cut in before Paul had a chance to reply.

“Sounds like the devil if it’s asking for deals.” Paul remarked.

“Why do you keep talking about the devil?” Lynella asked. “God asks for promises too”.

“It’s just that he seems to have been pretty active on this planet. You surely don’t blame God for the mess you are in?”

“No – we blame the ancient Mages and their pride.”

Just then the reply came. To Paul the tone seemed to have changed, as if getting a reply addressed to a God had made it talk like a God.

“And what about the other one who is with you? Will he also promise to obey me?”

Paul tried to rationalise. He was almost certain that this God was a fraud and had only just realised that Lynella thought that it was a God and decided to take advantage of it. He had no idea where this might lead – he knew plenty of stories of fraudulent religions which continued totally undiminished, and even strangely assisted by the advances of science. His profound scepticism was however just edged with a lingering doubt. He could not produce any convincing arguments to prove that this was not a God. If it was a benign God of the type found in modern religions that was fine but what about some of the malevolent ones from ancient religions or even the devil which still existed to some extent in modern religious ideas.

He knew that he had found a real sixth sense which enabled him to sense and do things in a way that had apparently never been known before. He also knew that most religions were based on the idea that true followers could communicate with the God in some special way which did not involve any of the five human senses. When somebody claimed to have seen God it was assumed that they had not actually seen with their eyes so possibly they had been using the sense that he had now found. He remembered colleague who had claimed to have seen God. He had found the comment about as interesting as if they had said that they had seen a stray dog and about as credible as if they had said that they had seen a dinosaur. Had he been too quick to judge them? Was he now seeing what they had already seen?

“Will he promise?” The question came again. To confuse him even more the presence now sounded female. He saw no rational reason why that should affect his dilemma but he did wonder if a female God would really have put up with being called “father” for two thousand years. Finally he had a strategy.

“I have faith in the God of the Christian religion.” He said

“All true Gods are the one God.”

This answer meant nothing to him but he decided to give his promise. At one level his argument was trivial. If, as he suspected, the presence was lying and was not his God then his promise had no weight. At another level he convinced himself that any being with enough power to hurt him would have no need to conceal their identity. The other possibility that this was really his God did occur to him briefly but he remembered promising to obey during endless church services as a child so this promise would then be nothing new.

They were being called through the portal. The presence was giving detailed instructions on how to check for traps.

“Can’t you find them for us?” Paul asked casually, making Lynella draw back in fear.

“I could but I am telling you to do it.” This reply struck Paul as rather un-God-like but he realised that remarking on it would cause pointless offence to Lynella.

Through the portal they came to the junction with the main highway of the network. It was as if they had come from a dark tunnel to see the vast open plane reaching out in either direction from them. In one direction they could sense the presence feeling that it was watching them while they could see nothing but the faint line of a horizon where the unknown material below them met the glowing void above them. To either side the black void was still there but, had the matter not had complicated overtones, Paul would have described their emerging at as a seemingly religious experience.

With revelation came fear. If they ventured out across the plane would they ever find their way back? Might they even reach a point where they did not want to go back. The presence anticipated this.

“Just come towards me a short distance. You will find the mechanism without difficulty and without losing sight of your portal. You will not join the souls of the dead.”

They moved slowly and nervously. Not knowing how they were controlling their movement they were somehow able to glide across the bright surface and soon, as expected, they found another small portal set into the ground.

Again the presence knew where they were.

“Open the portal in the same way as you opened the other one and you will find the mechanism immediately behind it.”

They soon saw how the mechanism worked. A large ring had been set in the sea bed a short distance from the tower and this could be used to pull the ring set in the hull of the ship and drag them free. The mechanism was more complex than the winch and cable at the island but the problem was the same – it required somebody to remain in the pylon to operate it.

“We should ask the God to see what we can do.” Paul remarked.

The God sounded surprised to be asked the question and asked “Why can’t you transport to the next pylon? It has a safe mooring – you are at the only one in quicksand. You could pick them up there.”

When asked what transporting was she did not reply in words but sent an image. Paul and Lynella recoiled in surprise to suddenly find themselves seeing a picture rather than understanding words. Paul kept trying to rationalise – he knew that he had not been hearing the words as sound and that they were somehow being sent to him down a network so if it could send words why not images as well. He was, however, now struggling not to see religion because the image showed a person above the surface of the sea. Their arms were outstretched and their whole body was surrounded with a glowing halo of light. The image was easily recognisable – this was an angel. He rationalised again – it was not a halo it was a ring. But what was a halo? Were religious people supposed to believe that they existed literally or were they just a convention used by painters to help people understand who was who in their pictures?

The God went on to give them some advice on what to do. Lynella would have to remain because Paul would not be able to rescue the ship and then Paul would have to contact her from the next pylon when they arrived so he could help her fly over. She then directed them to a cupboard set against the wall. They withdrew from the network and went over to look. Inside it they found a ring which seemed to be set in a sort of cloak woven from fine golden threads. Taking it out of the cupboard Lynella set it on the floor and cautiously stepped into the ring. Lifting it up she managed to get the cloak over her shoulders where it hung, held out by the ring like a tent looking cumbersome and faintly ridiculous.

“I think your God has a sense of humour.” Paul observed. “You are hardly going to fly across the sea in that.”

Almost as he said it she started to put some energy into the ring. It lifted slightly and the cloak below it formed into a glowing cocoon around her body, moulding to it and forming a translucent glowing sphere.

Seeing an angel Paul stepped back in amazement. Her feet were no longer on the floor and she looked down on him, smiling at first and then laughing as she saw his shock.

They replaced it carefully in the cupboard.

“I may be able to make myself look like an angel but do you think that I can really drag a whole ship through quicksand?”

Paul gave no reply but they both knew that the mechanism had been built to be used by mages who had been trained for years and had enough combined power to build the pylon. They had no proof that it could be used by one mage on their own – just an assurance from a God.

13

On the way down they agreed not to cause panic among the crew. Paul wondered if anything they said would really do this because Lynella was known to have doubts about her abilities even though they had always won through. Nevertheless they decided not to risk it. Stepping back out into the sunlight from the lift they found the crew experimenting with the raft to see if it could be used to move across the shifting sand. It was only being done in a casual fashion, almost as a game. Everybody assumed that Lynella would rescue them.

Night came and the crew slept. Adam only felt the need to set a minimal watch in such a deserted place. Before they went to sleep they could hear the sand scraping the hull as it flowed up past it. Adam had said that it was good because it would clean the barnacles off but Lynella had

visions of the planks being ground away until the sand came through and swallowed the ship and everybody in it.

The morning came and Lynella stepped off the ship alone and went back into the pylon. The wind was from the South so Paul asked Adam to get the crew to set as much sail as they could without risking turning the ship over as it sat in the sand.

After some time they began to feel pulses of force making the timbers around the great ring at the base of the hull creak as they took up the strain. The pulses came every few seconds and gradually increased in strength but the ship held fast and they died back.

Paul tried to picture Lynella at the top of the pylon. She had got past the trap and found the mechanism but had not been strong enough. She would know that the ship had not moved but what else would she do? Had she already collapsed. If she became too exhausted to get back through the portal what would happen?

The wind was rising and the ship started leaning dangerously. "It may drive waves right across here." Adam said. "It could be dangerous if we started to move this close to the pylon." His look almost described a scene with the ship being driven against the tower in the foaming water and destroyed. "We must take in some sail or the mast will break. It's not like setting sail with the boat in water." Almost as soon as he had said this the pulses came again. They were more erratic this time, some weak and some strong, sometimes almost a minute with none at all.

The crew started up the masts to lower sail but just at the peak of a gust of wind the force pulsed and the hull moved. It seemed to jump free. Paul thought that Lynella must have sensed that they were moving because the pulses came faster and they almost skated across the sand crashing into the wall of water around it.

Paul ran into the cabin on the stern deck and lowered the iron bar to hold the door. All of the rest of the crew were below battened hatches or up in the rigging. At one moment they were leaning into the water with the wind almost blowing the masts down into the massive whirlpool and then a pulse would come, pulling them outwards and upright but also down towards the ring in the sea bed.

One more violent gust from the ever increasing storm and they were free. Paul sensed the pulses stop and the ship start to turn it finally began to respond to the helm. He tried to open the door only to find the storm now blowing across the deck. Even as he struggled out the ship continued to turn with the full force now tearing the door from his hands and slamming it shut. Climbing up he could see Adam through the spray, hauling at the tiller bringing them round to face into the wind.

Turning around to look over the front of the ship he saw the pylon, the sand bar round its base scarcely visibly as the ship was blown further away. He pictured Lynella in the top of it, possibly still immersed in the network or maybe just managing to get herself out and lie back in the chair to recover. Above him the sails had lost the wind and were now flapping back and forth from side to side as the gale blew across them.

The ship was being driven backwards as the bulky cabin on the stern deck caught the force of the storm by the time he made his way across the deck. "We're safe now the ship has come head to wind." Adam shouted. "We can get the sails reefed and get ready to tack. Getting into the shelter of the next pylon will be difficult but we can do it."

The crew working the sails finally managed to secure them just as they came level and the massive bulk of the pylon loomed over them. Adam watched intently but did nothing. Paul shouted out in protest.

"We need some space." Adam shouted. "I know we have to get there but I cannot risk the ship."

As the men were climbing down the stays he turned the rudder sharply almost losing control as it dug into the water and threw the stern of the ship across. The sails quickly filled and they started to tack. Paul was alarmed to see the pylon quickly falling away behind them. Soon they went about turning into the storm and racing back upwind. They were now a hundred yards downwind of it but the ship still faltered as it passed the swirling eddies coming from it.

They tacked again and again, slowly gaining distance into the gale until at last they came so close under the pylon that Paul was sure that he could have touched it if he had been at the rail. They saw that it had a deck all around it with good mooring posts but they were moving so fast they could not stop. Adam appeared unconcerned. The ship swung around one more time to tack but this time it angled well away from the pylon. Suddenly as they came level Adam turned straight towards it and with perfect timing a crewman jumped down with a rope just as the front of the ship crashed into the stonework, hard enough to give him time but not enough to do damage. The ship

was moored in the shelter of the pylon with gusts blowing in from either side as the swirled around it.

Paul was quickly helped down onto the ledge. Waves breaking onto the opposite side of the landing stage sent streams of water around his feet but he was sheltered enough to go across to the door.

“We may have to wait.” He said. “I’m not sure that she can get here in this.”

“We cannot wait.” Adam said simply. “The storm is still rising.”

As he turned he saw crewmen lowering the sails. He knew that he could not let them down.

In the top of the pylon he found a room identical to the last. Feeling almost familiar with the surroundings he soon entered the network and, using the methods he had been taught to check for traps again, went out onto the highway. To his relief the presence quickly assured him that Lynella was safe and preparing to move. He asked what he should do.

“Put all the energy you have into the ring at the top of your pylon. You will sense when she approaches, you must guide her in.” She said it as if it was such a simple task.

“How do I do that?” He asked. “I’m not an experience mage. I have not idea how to work mechanisms like that.”

“You must pray, then I shall help.” Paul couldn’t help feeling that the reply was a little smug. Was this her way of bringing him into line? He had no choice – he would pray.

He moved back through the portal and back to the top of the pylon and, seeing no point in stopping to leave the virtual world for a few minutes, he went straight on up to the mechanism that worked the ring.

The pathway seemed to end in an incomprehensible mass of different devices most of which were completely unrecognisable to him. He stopped to try to think but he kept imagining the ship below him snatching at its mooring rope in the rising gale. First he pictured a gust catching it as it swung about and tearing the rope apart so the ship drifted away into the falling light. Then he pictured a violent eddy of wind spilling off the pylon and driving the ship forward to smash against the landing stage and break up into fragment of floating wreckage while the crew struggled to climb out. Either way he must hurry, Lynella would be waiting for him but he had no idea what to do. He was sure that she would have known but she was not with him and could not help.

The presence had told him to pray. Thinking back he wondered if he had ever prayed before in his life. Surely the act of repeating the words aloud was not real praying – he couldn’t do that anyway in the network and the presence must have know that. Praying must therefore be a personal process more related to asking questions of himself and exploring the limits of the conscious mind rather than reciting demands to and unknown stranger. In desperation he tried to delve into his mind and ask questions of himself. What logic could he see in the array in front of him? How could it be a part of the vast machine that seemed to circle this planet?

He pleaded for answers and, imperceptibly at first, they came. With a start he realised that he was beginning to see. His confidence, or he felt he should call it faith, grew and with it came revelations. Now he could see how to enter the devices and bring them to life. With this came an understanding of the philosophy of the mages: an absolute faith in the ability of their minds to work with what they found in this planet and step outside the bounds of time and space which had restricted all life that had come before.

Now he was in the machine, bringing it to life. The men on the deck of the Cleopatra looked up as a beam of pale blue light more powerful than any lighthouse they could imagine shone through the storm directly at the pylon where Lynella was.

Paul put his entire being into the light. Around it he could sense both Lynella and the presence in the network. He did not communicate with them in words, just images of systems and rituals from long ago which he drew from the God and showed to Lynella.

Now the angel flew into the storm, dancing around the light, sometimes in the beam, sometimes beside it. She was buffeted by the blasts of wind which threw her hair out in long strands around her head but seemed unable to touch the rest of her body cocooned in its sphere of pinpoints of light. At one moment she would look like a cluster of stars above the cylinder of light but a moment later she would be inside it blazing like a sun with her face framed by the halo of the ring.

On the ship the crew dropped to their knees in prayer. Holding on as best they could as the deck swayed in the storm the world around them seemed to disappear into insignificance as the angel came towards them. At one level they knew what was happening, they lived on the planet all their lives and knew about the power of mages. The mages had said that they were more powerful

than the Christian God and had demanded worship from the people. Their power had not been seen for hundreds of years and the Christian faith had shown itself to outlive the Mages but there had always been the possibility that they would return. To some this was a hope, to others it was a fear, but now it was a reality. To the fishermen on the boat they were not looking at an adolescent who had discovered how to work some machines, the knowledge passed down to them through the generations told them that they were seeing a supernatural being and they must worship it.

Paul could not see what he was doing in the real world but he knew what it must look like. He felt as if he was part of it, he was drawing information and power from others but he was an essential conduit, a link between God and man. His rational cynicism faded mainly because he made it fade, he felt that what he was doing was an act of faith and if he lost his faith it would all collapse and Lynella would fall to the sea and drown in the storm.

He had no idea how long Lynella took to transport, it could have been seconds or hours. Somehow he opened a door in the side of the room and closed it behind her when she came in. After that he let go and slowly felt his mind leave the network, holding on just long enough to get out before slipping into unconsciousness.

14

The director had been looking forward to the reply from earth. He had even kept a shuttle busy for several days placing satellites in orbit to detect it. The bullets spent six weeks in hyperspace and then it took up to a few weeks for them to be collected depending on how near the target the emerged. The reply to his first report had come through in good time and had been detected immediately because the ship was still in orbit. That reply had brought worrying news about political changes on earth but he was confident that his second report would guarantee him fame fortune and a place in history. He had, after all, reported first contact with native people and the potential of their technology.

His first reaction when the report came was to tell the Abbot and invite him for a drink in anticipation of the news that would come. His desire to impress this man was so strong that it troubled him at times, especially when his staff made thinly disguised comments. This time he ignored these worries, the man would surely be impressed by the praise from the great powers on earth.

They saw the shuttle land in the compound. The container was delivered by an officer who turned smartly and left the room after showing him the unbroken official seals. Secretly he always wished that they would salute him like their senior officers but he did not let his disappointment distract him. He fumbled slightly with the seals and looked up to see the Abbot smile in a way that might have been condescending. The man was holding out his hand. The director instinctively started to pass him the disc but quickly saw he only wanted the container. Another condescending smile as he looked at the complex container with its shining holographic seals.

"I shall admire the technology in this small item while you enter the codes." He walked back in a deliberate way and sat in the chair that was furthest from the director's desk. This was quite unnecessary because it would not have been possible for him to see the passwords from any of the chairs other than the one in which the director was sitting.

He started entering the passwords when he looked up to see the Abbot looking in great detail at the seals. "The company seal is a work of art isn't it." He commented with pride.

"These are not the seals of your company" the Abbot said.

"What are they?" He replied suddenly thinking that he had carelessly broken them without even looking at them.

"They are seals of the United States of America. It is written on them."

This was the new order, he should not be surprised, but he should have looked. Why did this man always see what he missed?

He used the last password to open the executive folder and displayed the leading message. The next thing he noticed was that the Abbot was standing beside him. He knew that he must have gone completely silent for so long that he had come over to investigate.

ALL CONTACT WITH NATIVE PEOPLES MUST CEASE IMMEDIATELY. MINING MAY ONLY CONTINUE WHERE THIS DOES NOT AFFECT LOCAL PEOPLES AND CULTURES IN ANY

WAY. AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT MUST BE DESPATCHED TO US WITHIN SEVEN DAYS WITH YOUR CONFIRMATION OF COMPLIANCE WITH THIS INSTRUCTION.

"You are shocked." The Abbot said, leaning close to him.

"We must pretend we haven't seen it." He replied quickly. "Never seen it. The disc was damaged. No. The bullet was lost in hyperspace. Something like that. Lost and destroyed." He was about to close it when the Abbot replied. "Wait, we must read the rest."

He felt slightly uneasy as the Abbot drew up a chair to read through the whole confidential folder with him; but the man's confident manner soon put him at ease. They read a long and detailed criticism of his handling of the contact. The document kept referring to the rules of contact for aliens. A committee had been formed as soon as the first light speed ship had been designed. Months had been spent drafting them and eight volumes had been produced, all carefully thought out to prevent everything from inter-galactic war to unwanted influences in folk music. He had ignored the contact rules knowing that the old company management was not interested in them.

The Abbot poured scorn on the message and he soon found himself joining in and regaining his confidence.

"You couldn't have done that." The Abbot was saying. "By the time you were informed Paul Evans had already made the contact and broken all the rules. These people don't understand the situation."

"We must reply and tell them all about it." He said. "Tell them what would happen if we let them all go back to the kingdoms." He reached for the intercom to summon an assistant.

The Abbot moved quickly. The only word he said was "Perhaps" and the movement of his arm was only slight but the effect was sufficient to stop the Director before he reached the button.

"Perhaps we should not be specific." He said. "Perhaps we should think very carefully what we tell them. The new town you have built for them." He paused while the Director realised that he was referring to the collection of huts his men had assembled. "Perhaps we should not mention that. But we should guard it more carefully. That's what they want isn't it, secure measures to prevent contact."

"I think they would want us to release them back to their towns." The Director said, before realising he was stating the obvious. The Abbot ignored him.

They started preparing a carefully worded reply promising compliance and lying by omission. The Director started a long section blaming Paul for what had happened, accusing him of mutiny and even attempted murder. The Abbot looked at it carefully.

"No." He said finally. "We must not tell them of any problems."

"But, as you said just now, they will find it all out when we get back."

"I have reconsidered. That is in a year's time." The Abbot replied with a broad smile. "Let's not worry about it yet."

During the next few days the report and the impact assessment were prepared. Their relationship with reality faded as they progressed.

15

The harbour breakwaters were massive and appeared to be in perfect condition with their smooth metal surface gleaming in the sunlight. Only the absence of working ships and the encroachment of the jungle on the city beyond showed that it had not been used for generations. Sailing around the end of the wall they saw the whole city. Wide boulevards fanned out from the port with great houses to either side. The jungle had taken hold with mature trees established in the roads and creeper obscuring the windows and hanging off the ornate balconies. The only structure which defeated it was the city wall which reached higher than the tallest house and encircled the whole city coming down to the harbour at either side.

"What on earth is that wall for?" Maria asked.

Captain Turner was standing next to her. "To defend the city of course." He replied

"What from?"

"Presumably dragons or other people or." His sentence tailed off as he realised what he was saying. Lynella had killed dragons on sight and the mages from this city had been much more powerful than she had been when she had done it. This close to the mountain the mage ships could

fly so no people could threaten them. Nobody could imagine any possible reason why the walls were needed.

There were wrecks in the harbour which looked as if they had simply been abandoned at their moorings. They lined many of the wharves and some lay in groups where they had been anchored in the open water. Many of them had masts still standing and, as with the wrecks at the island, these stood clear of the water with the remains of their standing rigging still on them. One clear channel lay between them leading to a length of open wharf which seemed to form an ideal mooring.

Adam ordered the anchor dropped and, as the cable came taut, the ship stopped in mid-channel. All except the crew had been so engrossed in looking at the city they never noticed him give the order and now Lynella turned to ask him why they had stopped.

"It's a trap." He replied in his usual tone which left no opening for discussion. "This ship will remain here until it's cleared."

There was no shortage of volunteers to row them down the channel in the ship's boat. She stood with Paul at the front while the four men rowed slowly forward and the crowd on the ship watched. Looking down through the clear water they soon found the start of an elaborate pathway for their power. Pausing in their plane only long enough to tell their crew to stop the boat and keep it in place they rested their physical bodies against the warm planking and descended to the gateway.

This was a place to live. The machines which it lived to serve were under the mountain behind it. Apart from the simple defence at the wharf which Lynella had disdainfully ignored, the power that was formed within it only provided the many domestic requirements of the houses. Even the gates in the wall at the far side of the city could be opened with the simplest possible command. They explored the houses, Lynella leading, rushing in to find the perfectly crafted devices made for the individual owners and show them to Paul as he followed her. She turned lights on and off as they went leaving their friends on the ship staring at the old buildings to see what would happen next. She even chose a house and showed him how they would live in it. She explained how they could use each room before moving on to explore the streets around it. He wanted her to stop, to leave things which could wait for another day but she rushed on to find more. He sensed her energy dwindling and shouted that she must stop. He pleaded with her to wait until their bodies were safely on land. Finally she listened and they returned. He had to remind her to disable the trap as they passed the wharf.

It was almost dark when they moored up and, with assurances from Lynella that it was safe, the crew wandered through the magnificent streets. They paused only to enjoy fruit from the many orchards which had survived well and even seeded some of the trees which had grown up in the streets. Beyond the streets, but still within the walls, they found areas fully grown with trees and realised that they must have been fields for crops. They crossed them to look up at the walls towering above them, but still nobody could work out why they were needed.

Their first meeting took place a few days later in the chamber of the city hall. Many of the streets and houses had been cleared and a start had been made on the fields. Angus felt awkward talking to the crowd but he seemed the only person prepared to speak for the people from the planet.

He started by explaining that he could not represent the views of all of them. He knew that some had come from Adam's village and he knew little of their backgrounds. For the people from the kingdoms, however, he knew that their great wish was to reclaim the land from the Director and set free the people who were imprisoned at the source. He was realistic. "We shall have to wait" he explained. "Our priority is to defend this place until the Atlanta goes".

The discussion moved on to the details of the defences. "We have two choices." Angus explained. "We either clear the land for crops inside the walls and risk a shuttle landing on it or we farm outside the walls." Since nobody knew what the walls were built to keep out nobody really knew the answer to this.

"The Director's got to explain the loss of two shuttles already." Captain Turner observed. "I don't think he'll risk another". In the end they decided to farm inside the walls.

The days were taken up with clearing the fields, sowing the crops was the highest priority. Fishing was also essential to provide food to go with the supplies they had brought with them and the fruit from the orchards. Exploring the town was a lower priority but they still found time driven

both by curiosity and also a desire to know what else there was that shared the protection of the walls.

Most of the town was built to the same opulent architectural style but, as they cleared more of the streets, they came across some buildings that looked older and more basic. Towards the eastern end of the harbour there was a group of cottages which looked as if they might have been built around a simple fishing port. Behind them there was an area which was completely overgrown. Realising that this would have been an area of garden they decided that it was not worth the effort of clearing so they worked around the edge and on the far side they found a church.

This was clearly another very old building. Clearing away the bushes and creeper they found walls and buttresses built out of roughly hewn stone. Many parts had been added and changed with finer materials but the basic building clearly dated back to soon after the original landing. The tower was old and solid and seemed to have been lowered to keep it well below the level of the city walls. A mage lock on the door made them suspicious so they continued clearing all the way round the outside before gathering to watch as Lynella opened it.

Inside, the sun pouring in through the windows revealed nothing that showed any connection to Christianity. All of the images were of the intricate circular patterns of the mages. There were no pews or altar, just numerous circular tables of different sizes surrounded with wooden rails and screens.

Looking more closely, however, they could see traces of the original purpose of the building. Some of the windows had stained glass which showed pictures of saints. At one point on the wall an inscription included a cross. It had been carefully worked into a new pattern but was still visible for what it was.

Paul and Lynella sat down at one of the tables and, almost without thinking, entered the network, expecting to find the now familiar pathways around the city. Suddenly the presence was talking to them.

“Where have you been? Why have you stayed away? You have been in the city for some days now but you have not found me.”

With a shock they realised that they had been taken directly to the main highways of the network. There had been no portal to warn them. They felt obliged to make excuses, pleading that they had been busy.

“Your faith is not something that you can forget about and pick up when you need it. Your God is demanding.”

Paul could not help questioning the way this was worded and to Lynella’s horror he asked directly.

“Are you God?”

After a pause in which they both wondered if the ground beneath them would open up and swallow them the reply came. “No – I am the prophet. I light the way for you to find God. Serving me is serving Him. Following me is following Him.”

Paul thought about this and decided that the scenario was becoming more familiar. History was populated with prophets, not Gods. In some ways the new revelation would make life easier because he could not take very seriously the idea of worshiping somebody who engaged in conversation. In other ways it made life more difficult because it was going to be far harder to find out if they were genuine. Nobody had managed to persuade many people that they were a genuine God since man had moved out of the caves. Prophets got far more credibility by only saying that they talked to God.

Paul noticed that while he had been trying to decide what to do nobody had been saying anything. Perhaps prophets needed a good flow of questions to be able to provide smart answers. Lynella obliged, first asking for forgiveness and then asking what the god demanded.

“First you must come to this mountain and reclaim the halls which are being desecrated by the dragons.”

Paul panicked. This whole business was interesting and had proved extremely useful in getting them away from the pylon. Now they were going to have to take it seriously. What was being demanded sounded extremely dangerous and nearly impossible. The idea of risking his life for something he did not really believe in did not appeal to him at all.

“You must come to this temple every day and receive more instruction.” The prophet added before telling them to leave the network and tell their comrades that they must also follow the ways of the god of the ancient mages.

Back in the former church they were just regaining their senses and looking around when the god sent a sign. High above them just below the rafters of the roof a great glowing ring appeared. It was so bright that they had to shield their eyes and it was so big that it was almost as wide as the church. It hung in space for almost a minute before vanishing and leaving no metal ring or any other trace behind it.

They had little trouble convincing the crew of the King Solomon to return to the ways of the old religion. The crew members from the Atlanta gathered later by the dockside. It was almost dark but still warm as they sat on the stones of a fallen building. Captain Turner had called the meeting but made no attempt to become the centre of attention. Paul knew that he formed a bridge between the two cultures, they all expected him to tell them what was happening. He told them all he knew.

"I can't help feeling that we might be like the primitive tribes that thought that they were seeing gods when the first saw explorers arrive with ships and guns."

"There's just one problem." The captain replied. "I'm not saying that I am convinced by anything that I have seen so far but I would like to feel that I could be convinced by something. A mind that is completely closed to new ideas might as well be dead."

"The ring in the church was just some sort of plasma." One of the officers cut in. "And the way she flew between the pylons was just some sort of magnetic levitation".

"But do you accept that the exact mechanisms went well beyond any science we know about?" Paul asked.

The officer agreed. The captain turned towards him. "Is there anything that could happen." He asked. "That would convince you that it had a supernatural cause. Or would you explain absolutely everything as being some unknown development of science."

Almost without thinking Paul looked down at a mooring ring near the man's feet. Focussing on it he made it move. The anchorage to the stone edge of the quay had rusted through and, having lifted slightly the ring moved to the edge and fell sending ripples across the still water of the harbour. Everybody looked at him, he could see fear in their expressions.

"Sorry – I shouldn't have done that." He said. "I don't know how I do it and I don't really know what makes me do it in the first place."

"Do you yourself think that there is a supernatural presence doing it?" The captain asked.

"What do you mean by supernatural."

"I mean some sort of independent intelligence. Not just your prophet in the network that could just be artificial intelligence, I mean the actual God that they talk about."

Paul didn't know.

16

A month later in the warm spring sunshine of a late afternoon Paul and Lynella stood in the middle of a partially cleared field. At one end men from Angus's village were felling the trees with axes. The first product from the workshop that the technicians from Atlanta had set up was a trailer. This was being used to haul the logs away to build fishing boats and fuel fires for heating and cooking. Finally Lynella was using her power to operate a winch and cable to haul the stumps out. The combination was effective, behind them and entire clear field had already been sown.

With their work done they walked back to the city. One street was now clear all the way from the fields to the docks. Most of the heavy stone paving had survived intact but where trees had broken through they had been cut down to level. Originally there must have been gardens with ornate trees to either side of the roadway. These had mainly only been cleared where they had grown against houses that were being used. This left an impression of an overgrown but still magnificent avenue. Some of the houses had partially collapsed but even in this state they still showed the grand proportions with which they had been built.

Soon they came to the workshop. Captain Turner greeted them at the door and asked them how the day had gone in the fields.

"Another good day". Paul replied. "Not far to go now". They knew that the people from Adam's village had only been able to bring a limited amount of seed corn with them. Some of the fields would have to wait until next year. Their few seeds of high yield crops from earth would take years to develop.

"It'll make a good start." The captain replied. "We'll just have to get used to eating fish for a little while."

"Or fruit from the forest."

The captain was less sure about this. The more he looked at the walls the less he liked the idea of sending his men outside them. He decided to change the subject. "Come and have a look at this." He said leading them into the workshop.

They had seen inside before but it never ceased to amaze them. The building had originally built for the use that it now had, the difference was the type of machine that was used. The two types now stood side by side. Ancient machines built by the Mages for mysterious purposes were standing next to small tools and electronics that had been secretly accumulated in the days before they escaped from Atlanta. The captain was showing them one of the former. It was a small metal sphere the size of an orange surrounded by six rings. The sphere and the rings all had bands of gold inlay etched with runes. They were arranged on a carved stone pedestal so that one person could stand in front of each of the rings and were connected together with a network of golden wires. Other plastic insulated wires led back to electronic instruments on a bench.

"I have checked the response of each of the rings." He said. "Each one is different, they were all set up so that six different people could power them and send that power into the sphere. The amazing thing is that the sphere in the centre has a response which is different from any of them. It's also different from anything else we have checked in here. We think that this machine was used to make jewels. The centre of the sphere is stone." He pointed to a small hole in the top of the sphere. "Their power was so strong that they if they put raw material down there into the middle of it they could get it hot enough to make a jewel."

Lynella pictured a child coming of age, starting to learn about their power. Six adults, probably the parents and their friends, would make rings for this machine and use it to create a jewel exactly to suit the child. She thought of her own jewel that she had stolen from the dead body on the island. Had that person stood here and watched it being made?

17

Their evening meal was, as predicted, fish. Maria insisted on preparing all their food. Lynella was well aware that in this small community everybody needed to help and nobody should be spending their time as a servant to another. Maria, however, insisted that she should do it and everybody else refused to ask her to do other work. After the meal she quietly cleared the plates knowing that Lynella would walk across the fields and climb the steps to the top of the wall above the gate.

They were quite alone on the wall, it was so high that nobody had thought it worth the effort of keeping watch from it. They stood looking out across the forest at the mountain. The remains of a road led straight towards it from the gate below them. The road was heavily overgrown and would be difficult to go along it. Occasionally dragons could be seen on it. Wisps of steam rose from the bare rock summit of the mountain and even from this distance she could sense that it had a field that was even stronger than the source, which would make it easy for ring ships to fly. They had no rings ships and going on foot would be hard and dangerous. Despite all of this Lynella knew that she must go. The books said that Christian's people lived in a village near the mountain but she was sure that they would not help her.

From ground level the road looked even more dangerous than it had from the top of the walls. The paved surface could only be seen in small areas between the trees that had grown up through it and to either side was impenetrable forest. Glimpses of the stone showed, however, that this had once been a major highway. The paved surface had been wide and it had ruts in it which had been worn down by the wheels of thousands of carts and carriages.

Lynella turned back to close the gate. Through it she saw the crowd gathered on the neatly cleared field. Every one of them had volunteered to come but she was sure that they were secretly relieved to be left behind the security of the walls which towered up above them, higher than the tallest trees.

They moved on in single file. Soon they were out of sight of even those who had climbed to the top of the wall. They carried radios but knew that the people in the city could not even open the gate, let alone help them.

At the front of the line Angus moved forward at a steady pace cutting a path through the undergrowth. He carried a gun and had used some of their limited supply of ammunition to practice with it but would still be reluctant to use it. He was massively built and looked as if he had been born to fight with a sword. Like all of the others who had come he had simply refused to be left behind.

Paul followed behind Angus. He knew that, as the only person from earth, his stamina would be put to the test. He carried a gun but also kept his jewel ready. He had trained hard and knew that his power was now quite strong.

Almost as soon as they were through the gate he sensed movement in the forest. He could not see it and first thought that it was just fear working on his imagination. Without having to say a word, he could see that Lynella had also sensed it. He looked back quickly but not before James caught his eye. James was immediately in front of Lynella and now also turned to see her. Seeing her expression he looked around ever more cautiously. He was young but he was now an experienced soldier and well practiced with his automatic rifle.

Maria followed Lynella. Her knowledge of the history of the mages in the kingdoms was of little use in this land. She felt helpless and lost but she knew that she had to come and nobody had even tried to stop her. She heard nothing from behind her but knew that Adam would be there behind them. He was carrying a gun but she thought that he could probably kill a dragon with his knife. She was sure that he would try if Lynella was threatened.

Lynella's mind was being probed through her jewel. Pulses would come into it and jump back in confusion. She longed to stop so she could concentrate and call out to them but knew that they must find some open ground before nightfall.

They moved steadily uphill. Periodically they heard noises of branches braking away to either side. They would stop briefly to listen but they always went on. On the brow of the hill they found the ruins of a tower. Trees had grown up in the ruin but they could not conceal the distorted remains of thick metal walls and charred stone and timber. They stopped briefly to look at it. It had been smaller than the tower at the source but still a formidable structure to suffer such complete devastation.

Eventually, after several hours, Angus turned to Paul. "Where do you think we should stop?"

Paul knew that the question was meant to see how far he could go with his heavy pack in the heat of the day. He replied that he was doing well but he sounded breathless.

"Let's hope for open ground in the next valley". Angus's reply seemed optimistic. Paul saw no point in telling him about their unseen company. Angus already knew that the dragons were out there.

At the top of the next hill they found the ruins of another tower but no view or break from the trees. The canopy was continuous above them, only letting in shafts of sunlight. In places the road became difficult to follow and Angus had to go ahead to look for signs of the stone surface reappearing from the debris on the forest floor. They were wasting more and more time and making little progress.

In early afternoon the suddenly emerged into a small clear space where a large tree had fallen. Looking along it Angus saw a dragon. As he looked it vanished into the trees but he had time to see that it was different from any he had seen before. It was slightly smaller, meaning that it might be a younger one. He suddenly realised why this made it so different, it had no metal mask. This meant that mages could not hurt it with their power. He quickly told the others and their caution turned to fear, but it was too late to go back before dark.

The gap in the trees gave them a chance to look across the valley and, directly opposite, they saw a tower which appeared to be undamaged. Angus took one look and said that it was too far away to reach before dark but they had no option so they moved on.

In the last light of the day they crossed a crumbling stone bridge in the bottom of the valley and started up the far side. Angus could no longer see to cut a clear path. They moved closer together but still the sharp leaves of the ferns tore at their clothing and cut into exposed skin. All around them now they could hear the dragons. They dared not use flashlights for fear of attracting attention although none of them really thought that the dragons could not find them. For some reason the dragons were waiting.

Eventually they almost stumbled into a solid line of dragons across the road. The faint outlines could only just be seen but the smell was overpowering and they could hear each breath and see sudden reflections of starlight on their scales. They stopped and staggered back but the dragons did not move. Suddenly Maria found that the creeper she had fallen against was covering a smooth wall. Lynella was soon able to find the door and they tore the undergrowth away from it as she opened it. Rushing inside they could hear the beasts breathing behind them. As Lynella put power into the lights they found themselves in a comfortable room.

The chairs had been untouched for hundreds of years. Everywhere the mages went they left their rooms sealed with mage locks so nothing decayed. Nobody knew whether they were leaving them ready for their return or for use by others who might come after them. They smelt dry and dusty. One of the soldiers asked Lynella if they could sit down.

"I'm sure there aren't any traps." She replied, having already explored the pathways. "I don't know if the owners would have wanted us to be in this place but since we're using their rooms we might as well use their chairs." She sat down and tried to picture the mages who had built the tower. She wanted to know where they were going and, above all, why they were going there.

Soon they were sitting round the table in the centre of the room eating some of the food they had brought with them. They had found plates in a cupboard and even some cutlery. They were all wondering if the dragons would let them through to carry on in the morning.

"I don't know what they're doing. It was as if they were talking to me in a foreign language." Paul explained. "I'm sure they were trying to communicate with me like they do with Christian but nothing got through."

"Only one of them communicated with Christian." Maria corrected him. "And none of us saw him do it, we just heard about it. We don't know what he could say to it, it may have just been simple ideas like telling a dog to come or stay". She asked Lynella what she had heard.

"They didn't even try to talk to me." Lynella replied. "I just got an image of total confusion and frustration."

"I got that when I used my jewel." Paul observed. Lynella had worn hers all the time.

After the meal they went up to the roof of the tower. It was just level with the top of the trees. Looking out in the starlight Angus found that they were not at the brow of the hill and he could not see the mountain. "They must have had something at the mountain that could destroy these towers." He remarked. "They couldn't get this one because it was out of sight. That must be why the city had such thick walls."

Far below them they could see the starlight glistening on the dragons' scales. Outside the metal walls of the tower they could hear them again. They were crowding all around the tower, packed tightly among the trees. When Paul and Lynella looked down they started moving around, pushing forwards against the walls of the tower. Then one roared with a deep resonance that spread across the forest. Others joined it and soon the whole tower seemed to be shaking with the noise. Everybody on the roof shrank back from the edge. Now they could hear the claws scratching at the walls.

"Can you scare them off? Is your power with your new jewel strong enough to fight this number" Angus asked Lynella.

"Why? They can't get in. It's something we're doing that is making them do this." She stopped to think for a few seconds and then, remembering what Paul had said, she took off her jewel. Angus reacted with alarm when she passed it to Paul and went to look down at the dragons without it. He tried to pull her back but there was no need. Quite suddenly the noise subsided.

She stood spellbound looking at them for several minutes. They were still moving around but the motion was more deliberate. The older ones with the metallic masks were moving back. Younger ones that just looked like indistinct black shapes were moving forward. They all gathered immediately below her and fell silent. Finally she withdrew and the dragons went quietly into the edge of the forest.

Paul woke in the night to the sound of dragons fighting outside. Even through the thick metal walls he could tell that this was no play or mock battle, this was dragons, young dragons he thought, fighting to kill. The next thing he noticed was that Lynella was not there. He used his own power to turn on the lights and saw she was nowhere in the room. He shouted out her name only to have Maria reply from the corridor and ask what was wrong. Lighting a lamp he saw her jewels lying in a discarded pile on the floor.

In panic they ran up to the roof and looked down. They could only see vague shapes moving fast in the trees outside the door but they could hear it clearly. Quietness interrupted by roars of anger followed by breaking branches as they charged through the undergrowth and the clash as they met. They could even hear the claws tearing at flesh and roaring, now of pain, as the attack pressed home.

"Paul!" Maria had called his name. She stood beside him holding a lighting sphere above her head in both hands.

"I can't, you might get hurt if it explodes." One look from her told him that he must. He poured energy into the sphere and the scene below was floodlit.

Seconds later Maria screamed Lynella's name. The scream seemed to hang in the air, even the fight below went silent and then the sphere exploded.

Maria knew that Paul had been unable to look down while lighting the sphere. "She was down there." She said, ignoring the pain from the burning glass which has come down all over her.

"We must go out." Paul shouted.

"No." she replied, much quieter now. "We cannot go out. You know that she broke the sphere, you didn't."

"Was she hurt?"

"She was hurt. The old ones were holding her back with their claws. They are as sharp as swords and they had cut through her night clothes and we could see the blood. But we could see that she was not feeling her pain, she was feeling the pain of one of the young dragons that was fighting. If we went out they would kill us and they might kill her."

They watched helplessly until the forest eventually fell silent. Finally daylight came and they saw that the dragons had gone. The body of a young male lay on the ground. It had terrible injuries across its back and legs and had been killed by a single final slash that had torn its throat out with such power that it had almost severed its head.

Adam inspected it carefully. "It had been very badly injured in its battle with its rival." He said. "But the rival did not kill it. This final blow was from another, a strong adult."

"The loser was killed quickly to prevent a slow death." Maria said. "That would be what the dragons would do." They searched for Lynella knowing that if they found her it would be because she had been killed and left behind. All morning they went back and forth around the tower and the undergrowth in a wide circle around it, but they did not find her. It was easy to see from the tracks that the dragons had departed along the road towards the mountain.

Soon after mid-day they drifted despondently back into the tower to eat. There were decisions to be made.

Paul made the first suggestion. "I suggest we give up searching here, they obviously took her with them. I can't see any point in wasting two days going back to the city to get more people, we need to go after them."

"When do we go?" James asked. "There should be another tower a day's walk from here. I don't want to spend too many nights in the open with the dragons and we won't reach it before dark. But I don't want to wait until morning. If only we had more ammunition it would be worth going back for more men." But he knew that they already had more than a fair share of the city's limited supplies of bullets that might have to last them for months or even years.

Maria was shocked by the idea of a slaughter. "They haven't killed Lynella, I am sure of it. She can talk to them. We mustn't kill them unless we have to. They could have killed us on the road yesterday but they didn't."

"There seem to be two ways to deal with them." Paul said. "The mages used their jewels which meant that they could not talk to them but they could protect themselves from them, or at least the older ones. Christian had no jewel and he talked to them. It could be that there simply were no jewels in Christian's village but I don't think that was it. I think it was a choice and Lynella seems to have made that choice as well."

"What about you?" Maria asked.

"I'm not good enough at using my power to be able to talk to them." Paul replied. "Remember I only just started at it. That's one of the reasons they were so confused yesterday. Besides which." He continued. "Somebody has got to carry on using a jewel to open the city gate when we get back. It can't be opened without one. That's why Christian's people never got in. We don't want to be standing in the jungle waving our arms to try to get somebody to come round in a boat to pick us up from a beach."

"Couldn't you carry it with you and just use it when you needed it?" Angus asked.

"I don't think a mage could." Maria replied. "A mage's contact with a jewel is too deep. If it was replaced with contact of another sort it might not be possible to find it again."

While they were talking Adam had stood up and was collecting his pack. He said nothing but made it clear that he was going on whether the others came or not.

"Stay close together." Angus said as he collected up his sword. "If they come towards us we'll try not to annoy them. We'll back off if necessary and find a way round."

Moving on they had no trouble seeing which way the dragons had gone. The whole group of them had clearly gone straight along the road towards the mountain, tearing out the undergrowth as they went. This made progress fasted and they soon reached the crest of the next hill but this only revealed another valley full of featureless forest. They could see the line of the road cutting through it and still no sign of any dragons anywhere near them. Another stone bridge took them across the stream at the bottom and, by late afternoon they were well up the far side. Darkness came quickly and they had to stop to make camp before reaching the summit.

"There's no point in carrying on up because we won't see anything anyway". Angus had observed and they found a place where there was a reasonable gap between the trees slightly back from the road and started to prepare a camp for the night.

Adam, as always, started to scout around and within a minute he was back and asking them all to keep quiet. In the silence they heard a twig break down in the valley, and then another. Then they heard a startled bird take flight from the bush not far from them. They slowly moved together and gathered up the packs that they had put down. Another branch snapped and they heard the distinct noise of a heavy footfall as it broke through. Gradually they became aware of the smell of rotting flesh and knew that there were dragons behind them. They ran back to the road and on up the hill. Adam looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the silhouette of a giant adult in starlight on the road behind them. It was not hurrying but it was steadily following them.

"Go steady." Adam shouted. They aren't attacking.." They slowed slightly. Adam glanced back but wasn't sure whether the dragons were catching up.

In the darkness they tripped over the broken branches, falling onto the rough ground before scrambling back to their feet to continue. Each time they looked back the dragons seemed closer and they ignored Adam's advice and rushed on as fast as they could go.

"We can't go on forever." Angus shouted. We've got to stop and face them. Paul started to turn, ready to use his jewel and try to focus on the vague shape in the darkness behind them.

Adam almost ran into him. "Keep going." He shouted. "We're almost at the top." He pushed him forward leaving him little choice but to carry on running.

Suddenly they emerged at the top of the hill. Angus was at the front and shouted out in surprise. The others joined him. They were looking down on the lights of a town. There were streets of houses with lights in the windows just a short distance away. Almost directly in front of them there were fields full of crops.

They heard a noise behind them. The dragons had not stopped. The road was smooth now and they ran headlong towards the town. The dragon was still following at a distance.

"We can't lead this thing into the town – there's no wall round it." Angus said, but realised almost immediately that the dragons must have been there before.

Clear of the forest the moonlight illuminated the road showing the gentle curve as it sloped down towards the long street through the town [no moon]. Looking back they saw that the dragons behind them seemed to be holding back. The surface was clear and firm and they found themselves gaining confidence as they walked along it. They were discussing what the inn would be like when they noticed what looked like a large black lump in the middle of the road just beyond the last house.

As they moved closer the lump began to move and slowly stood up to reveal itself as a large dragon.

"It's on guard duty." Angus said. "I'm not surprised they don't need a wall if they can persuade the dragons to be guards."

"Is it going to stop us?" Maria asked, but nobody knew the answer. Angus's hand moved instinctively to the hilt of his sword but he knew that with the dragons behind them and, almost certainly, more around the town there would be little point in fighting with it.

They walked steadily towards the dragon as if showing confidence would persuade it to let them past. Nobody managed any conversation and Angus looked around to see if their fear was showing. Adam was as expressionless as always. James seemed to be marching with a measured stride with his gun held low but ready. Then he noticed Paul. He was staring intently at the ground just in front of his feet as he shuffled along.

Angus was about to grab his shoulder and get him to straighten up when he saw Maria looking at him. "Don't distract him." She said urgently. "He's trying to keep them out. If they get in and start talking to him he won't be able to use his jewel any more. We've already lost one full mage. Just think of it, she gave up the power to cross the universe just to live like the people in this mean little town."

"But if he lets them talk to him he could stop them attacking us."

"Of course they won't attack us." Maria stopped as if shocked by the bluntness of her own reply. When Angus showed no reaction she continued. "They saw the globe above the tower. They know that one of us can use power but they don't know which one. They want that person and until they find out who it is we're all safe."

They were now just yards from the dragon in front of them and the ones behind were closing up. They grouped together around Paul. Maria could see the gold bands and knew that he held his own jewel in one of his clenched fists and Lynella's in the other. Finding him with these might mean death, she didn't know.

People were now emerging from the town. Armed with swords and spears they only looked marginally less threatening than the dragons. They charged up the road and came to a halt by the dragon who dutifully stepped aside. There was a short pause while they realised that the group that had arrived was small and showed no sign of attacking. Slowly a rather stout man pushed through to the front of the group. He looked old but strong and held his sword in front of him, menacing them as he spoke.

"When we received the message from Christian we sent more people to the source. That was all that you asked for. Why have you come here? What do you want with us now?" He stopped talking and for a moment Angus thought that the man was staring at him before he realised that his gaze was directed at the large dragon just behind him. "We would also like to know." he went on. "Why one of you is shutting out the dragons from his mind. If you don't talk to them you can't expect them to be friendly."

"Perhaps some of them are mages with jewels." An old man shouted from within the group. "Remember that we first came here to get away from the mages. We should kill them before they start killing us and our dragons."

Maria wished that Lynella was with them as she tried to think of a way out. "We have no mages with us." She said, trying to sound convincing.

"Where are you going?" the man asked.

"We are trying to find a girl who went off with the dragons. We don't know why she went. We think that they may have taken her to the mountain."

"Why were you here in the first place?"

"We fled from the source. We were pursued and took a ship. This was the first land we came to."

This reply shocked the whole group and the questions stopped. Finally the man invited them to come into the town for food and rest and told them that he would explain where the dragons had gone with Lynella.

The town was a little better than Maria had anticipated but had none of the grand buildings of the towns in the kingdoms. It seemed to have a solid and quite substantial town hall but even this looked very functional. There was a small church with a tower and a conspicuous Christian cross on it. The inn, when they came to it, looked comfortable and when they went in they were shown to a table next to a good fire. The room was full of customers when they arrived but the fat man quickly cleared them away leaving the small group to have their meal on their own. They could hear the other customers talking in another room but they said little themselves. After some minutes of this silence, punctuated only by their thanks to the servers who brought them food and drink, the fat man

came in. Maria grinned briefly to Angus as they both confirmed their suspicions that he had been listening at the door.

He started to explain what would be happening to Lynella. The young dragon who was to learn to communicate with her would have already been selected. This dragon would remain with her throughout her life and would not defend itself with metal on its scales until she died. The bond between person and dragon would dominate the lives of both. The process of learning to communicate with a dragon and developing the bond apparently took some time and, having been through the process himself, the man spoke of it with awe. He explained that she would come to the town when she was ready and he offered to let them stay in the town until she came. Alternatively, he suggested, she would be quite safe travelling to meet them alone with her dragon to defend her.

“It would be quite safe for her if you moved on as soon as you want to.” He explained, seeming more enthusiastic about this idea than having them stay in the town. “But the other one of you who has some power will want to stay.” He waited for a response to this comment but when none came he asked hopefully. “Which one of you is it that has the power. The dragons were sure that they could sense it and a person always knows when that happens.”

“We are not all from this planet.” Maria replied. “You know that there is a ship from earth at the source. Some of us are from the ship. If a person comes from earth they may not respond to the dragons in the same way.”

This revelation had the desired effect of stopping his questions while he tried to work out the implications of what had been said. Maria took advantage of the pause to explain that they had had a long journey and suggest that they should continue the discussion in the morning.

In the privacy of an upstairs room in the inn they still spoke in whispers for fear of being overheard.

“That was a clever way to stop his questions just then.” Angus said to Maria. “But all he needs to do now is to ask which of us is from earth.”

“What does he actually want?” James asked.

“He wants to know if any of us are mages.” Angus replied. “And when he’s killed them he wants to get the rest of us out of the way, well away from his town and the mountain.”

19

In the morning they emerged with the best plan they could think of to prevent this. The pretence of hospitality was gone. They were taken the town hall with an escort of armed men and dragons. It soon became clear that their captors had compared notes and realised that one of them had to be a mage if they were planning to open the gates to get back into the city. The first direct question was the one they expected and they replied that all of them except Maria and Adam were from earth. After some discussion all the others were led out one at a time for a group of dragons to see which ones responded to attempts to communicate. When Paul’s turn came he found himself facing the dragons remembering what Maria had told him. “You can keep them out.” she had said “their communication with any person but the one they are bonded to is weak – just keep your mind blank”. He could not do this so he stood in the town square facing the dragons rehearsing everything he knew about the design of the fusion reactors on a spaceship. He had practiced it for much of the night and worked his way steadily through it. At first the dragons seemed to be watching him closely but slowly, one by one, he lost the audience for his silent lecture.

When they had all been tested and nothing had been found Angus started his prepared speech. He tried to convince them that Lynella had been injured and that they must go to the mountain. He explained that none of them had any power at all and that Lynella had lit the globe above the tower. He was still talking when the fat man interrupted.

“Enough.” He said. “You have made it clear that you want to go to the mountain. That is absolutely forbidden. If we let you go you will surely try to go there to take your friend away. Tell me.” He continued. “Why did you come here in the first place? Where are you going? Why not stay in the old city of the mages?”

The old man who had shouted out the night before spoke in a more measured way this time. “The dragons are not all there is under the mountain.” he said as the room fell silent. “There are the ancient machines that the mages left there, locked up and probably still working. Why else would

these people have come in this direction? You can see the mountain from the city, they knew they were going there. Why don't we search their packs."

The crowd started to come forward but they were met by gunfire. Using their precious bullets with care James and Adam only fired two shots. Hearing the noise and seeing two men suddenly fall to the ground the crowd turned to run in panic. As they drew back the route to the doorway was open and Adam ran through and his companions followed. Outside they met the dragons which had heard the guns and were charging towards the door. This time James and Adam stood back and Paul went forward. He had not been at all sure of this part of the plan but with the dragons in front of him he had no trouble in driving power into his jewel and on to the leading dragons. The effect was far greater than could have been achieved with bullets. Some of the oldest of them had been alive in the age of the mages but even the younger ones had deep memories of terror of the power of a mage. The younger dragons without metal on their scales knew that they could not be hurt but they were caught in the headlong flight of the larger animals.

The streets were deserted as they fled from the town. Looking around they thought that they saw movement behind some of the partly closed shutters but, as they had hoped, nobody had time to set an ambush for them with cross-bows.

Beyond the narrow streets the land was clear and flat. The open fields felt far safer than the forest and seemed to extend ahead of them all the way to the base of the mountain. Soon they saw the unmistakable profile of a tower in the distance offering them safe refuge for the night. Soon after this the attack came.

The townsfolk had horses. They also seemed to have practiced moving in formation with the dragons. They came up at enormous speed straight up the road from the town. Almost fifty horsemen with swords held high with the same number of dragons with them.

"I can't do anything." Paul shouted as he lay in the grass and looked at them through the telescopic sight on his rifle. "All young ones, no metal at all."

"Any bows or cross-bows" Adam asked.

Paul looked at the group thundering towards them. "I see bows. We've got to stop them out of range"

"Not yet." Angus shouted. "They're only short bows and every bullet must hit. The dragons are in front, go for dragons."

James fired the first shot near the centre of the line. For a moment nothing seemed to happen and then one of the leading dragons fell sideways with blood pouring from its head. The effect on the horsemen behind it was catastrophic as they charged into the great falling body. Several of them were thrown to the ground. Angus and Paul fired at either end of the line bringing down two more dragons and many more horsemen. The rest of the dragons were closing fast. Their huge teeth and scimitar like claws on their front legs reached forwards as they used their four other massive legs to charge forward in great bounds. Only a hundred yards away they closed ranks to fill the gaps left by the three who fell and then, quite suddenly numbers of them turned, causing chaos in the line.

Angus gave a great cheer. "The bonded ones have turned." He shouted.

As they turned to help their fallen human companions the dragons were completely oblivious of the damage they caused to the rest of the line of horsemen behind them and more fell.

20

Lynella awoke to the absolute darkness of a deep cave. She sensed the dragons all around her, most of them were asleep but some combined to send her a thought which was intended to reassure her. She was told that soon she could light one of the lamps which they kept for the humans who were blind in the dark and needed them to move around the caves. The images were not exact, the dragons didn't know exactly what a lamp was. They didn't even know why the humans needed the lamps, but she was able to work out the meaning. She longed for the light so she could see to run away if one of them came too close. A single careless step by any one of them could crush her.

Words came to her mind. "You are safe. This is our home." Only Star could send words Star was the young dragon who had been chosen to bond with her. She soon found that all of the words first came from her own mind, during the bonding process she was teaching Star the use of

words. With the other dragons there were only the images which were often slow and difficult to understand.

She was lying on a straw bed which was hard and uncomfortable. The smell of the dragons was overpowering. The heat was also intense this close to the core of the mountain. She thought of the clean comfortable beds in the house in the city and wondered why she had come. In her half-awake state she let these thoughts slip out through the mind shield that she was learning to use and found herself smothered by wave after wave of simple reassuring thoughts which could not comprehend her images of the city but conveyed with absolute certainty the message that she had been right to choose to come. Within this there was the shadow of doubt. She had been a mage once, an enemy. But now she was with them and the past was forgotten.

She was not really aware of having made the choice. Her memory of the night when she had walked out of the tower was not clear, her mind seemed to have almost been taken over for some of it. She remembered riding on Star's back through the forest and into the mountain.

Lynella waited and tried to stop the dragons from sensing her fears. They started to move but still she was not told where the lamp was. Perhaps they were looking for it. She knew that their eyesight was far better than hers and they could see where they were going. They were also guided by a strong sense of smell. She should not worry, they would not crush her.

Then she heard one coming towards her. It was slowly getting closer, she could hear the massive footfalls and smell its breath. Suddenly she felt something touch her shoulder and she panicked. She was no longer learning to live with the dragons. She was a mage, jewel or no jewel. She threw her power outwards in all directions. Just as the older dragons began to feel pain she contacted a circuit and began to explore it. She found lighting globes and suddenly the chamber was lit with a blinding light. She saw that she was in a great hall surrounded by long forgotten relics of mages who had built it. The furniture had obviously been destroyed long before by the lumbering dragons but she saw a glimpse of pictures on the walls, covered in cobwebs. Looming over her she saw star. Star had moved up with great care and gentleness but now she was terrified and lurched forward crushing Lynella's shoulder.

Lynella saw the dragons rear up towards the high ornate ceiling searching round for her but the sudden pain made her break her contact and the lights went out again so she could only imagine where they were when they came down. Through her pain she could sense jumbled feelings of terror and anger. She tried to call out to them to say that she had not meant to hurt them but their minds were closed. She heard them charging around the room and realised that after the flash of bright light they could not see and were crashing into each other and the walls. She tried to move away but Star's weight was pinning her to the floor. She tried to plead with Star, forming words to describe how easily she could be crushed. There was no response so she formed images of her own body and tried to show her limbs broken and bleeding. The more she concentrated on it the more she became terrified by the pictures she was creating in her mind but she managed to send them out in short powerful bursts. She started to get a response, complete confusion. Star could not accept that her chosen partner could be one of the hated mages. She was terrified about what would happen to her and whether she would be hated too. But she was also strangely terrified about what would happen to Lynella.

One of the large dragons crashed into Star but she held firm and stopped the blow from driving her down onto Lynella. Star stood up, slowly and carefully placing her feet on either side of the frail body below her. Another dragon rushed across the room but she braced herself and again held firm.

Free to move Lynella used her one good arm to push herself up onto her feet and ran. She paused only long enough to send one final image of warmth and thanks to Star as she felt her way along the wall searching for an opening. Just beside her she heard a fight as two dragons tore into each other. A powerful tail crashed into her back sending her flying forwards to land hard on the floor. She staggered to her feet and found the wall again. She had no idea how long it was or where it went but she moved on desperately along it.

The noise behind her subsided slightly and she sensed that the dragons' eyes had readjusted to the dark and they were starting to band together again. Thoughts came through strongly now, thoughts of her, finding her, and killing her. She sensed a small amount of dissent but it was overpowered by images of chasing her and tearing her apart.

Now she felt her way through a door into a corridor which was even darker than the room behind her. She ran, heedless of what she might run into, blindly hoping that she might run through

an opening too small for the dragons. But the corridor was wide and she heard them behind her. She crashed into a wall that curved around in front of her falling onto her injured shoulder and trying not to cry out in pain. She lay for an instant of silence but the dragons could smell her blood as they charged forward. She reached out with her power to anything she could find. She sensed a lock and drove her mind into it. The lock opened and she used all of her remaining energy to push at the point in the wall where she knew that the door must be but it would not move. A dragon charged at her and she turned to blind it and it fell dying against the wall, its massive bulk pushing the door open as it fell. She rushed through the opening and was just able to slam the door behind her as the next dragon crashed into it.

She found herself in complete darkness. Through the door she heard the dragons roaring in anger as they tried to break through. She ran her hands across the smooth metal surface until she found a small opening panel. She felt secure but betrayed. She had made the decision to form a bond with them and now they wanted to attack her. She opened the panel and tried to communicate with them by sending an image of herself with Star outside in the sunshine. Seeing the small opening the dragons rushed against the door even harder. She could hear them come and then feel it shudder as they hit it. Their long sharp claws came right through as they tried to tear the door out from its opening. Each time she tried harder to send her message and finally she had a response but it was nothing but hatred and anger. She tried to send special images to Star but even then the response was hatred. Finally Star sent an image of what she could see outside the door. In the near darkness the dragons were still trying to break the door, but not so hard now, they knew it was hopeless. Most of them had now gathered around the large mass in the middle of the corridor.

This was one of the oldest and most respected dragons and Lynella had killed it, instantly and almost casually, when closing the door. Now some of them moved away and soon they came back struggling under the weight of enormous boulders. The last attempts to open the door stopped as the first boulders were piled against it. There was just the slightest trace of pity in Stars last message before the link was broken by the growing pile of stone which would fill the entire corridor up to the ceiling where it passed the doorway.

Lynella sat in the darkness for minutes which became hours. She thought back to the events which had brought her to the room. She thought about how she had walked out from the security of the tower to trust her life to the dragons. She had made a decision, the same decision that a group of mages had made hundreds of years before, a decision to reject the powers of being a mage. She had been ready to accept the persuasive messages from the dragons because she admired Christian and his people for what they were. They were not as powerful as the mages but they were at peace. The mages had destroyed themselves, wrecked the city, and almost killed everybody on the planet. Christian's people had lived at peace through that time and remained at peace ever since. She longed for the security of Christian's community as much as she feared for her future as a mage.

But they had rejected her. They must have known that she was a mage when she went to them and all she had done was to react like a mage. She tried to think why they had done it, why they had not thought about her and made allowances. Slowly she realised that she kept thinking about them in the same way she thought about Christian, as people, not animals. They were not people and did not react like people for the simple reason that, despite their powers of communication, they were nowhere near as intelligent as people. Because they lived for hundreds of years and had good memories the dragons always seemed wise in the stories but in reality they were only making simple deductions from what they had seen or been told. The more she thought about it the more she came to despise the dragons. She, as a full mage, would not be beaten by dragons who were scarcely more intelligent than dogs. She would never again reject her heritage.

She quickly lit the room and stood up. She knew immediately that she was looking at a part of the last and finest work of the mages on the planet. The dragons had not been there and it was as tidy as when the mages had left it and it revealed the perfect detail of their work. Unlike the bare and functional rooms in the pylons it was elegantly furnished. Several armchairs were gathered around a low table and to one side a single upright chair faced a wooden desk with ornate metal inlay. There was a rug on the floor showing faded images of men on horses and pictures on the wall showed intense faces through layers of dust. A first glance might have made her think that the room was a place for rest and relaxation but it was circular and the low table was at the exact centre so there could be little doubt that it had another use. Before exploring it she sensed another door in the

opposite wall and decided to investigate. She worked hard to convince herself that this was just mild curiosity and she was not worried that the dragons could trap her for long enough to be a problem.

The door opened onto a smaller room with a bed in it. This room had been well sealed and there was no dust so despite the passage of so much time the bed looked very comfortable and inviting. There was a small alcove and in it she found a metal basin with a gold tap above it. Turning the tap produced a good flow of cool clear water. While she surely would not need it, she was relieved to find a supply of drinking water. She felt tired and resolved that the simple tricks of the animals outside would not deprive her of the chance of a good rest to make up for her interrupted night in their cave. She carefully washed her cuts and bruises and lay down on the soft bed.

21

With no daylight to guide her she had no idea how long she slept for but she woke feeling that her energy was restored and, although very stiff, even her shoulder felt better. She found clean clothes in a cupboard and washed again and drank from the tap. Dismissing slight pangs of hunger she started a methodical search through the two rooms. There were no more doors. A search of the bedroom revealed nothing but more clothing and some jewellery which, while attractive, gave no response to her power. Although it was inert to her power she felt more comfortable wearing the necklace as she finished her search and sat down in front of the table.

She cleared the dust from the surface of the table, meticulously working at it until the entire surface was polished. Slowly revealing the patterns of circles and runes she relaxed, feeling certain that, even without a jewel, she could use the machines to take control of the entire complex. It pleased her to feel how easily she could control her power as she entered the first pathway using the large gold ring on her side of the table. As if taking cautious steps into a darkened room full of fine ornaments she felt her way forwards. She felt her way around and soon found the links to the other rings set into the table. This device could link the power of mages in a way which was so simple and elegant that she carefully memorised its design so she could make one for herself later. In this moment of hesitation she lost her concentration. Now she was fighting the wolf of her own self-doubt and staring at a table with nothing more than strange patterns on it. She felt for the jewellery she had put on but it was cold and unresponding; she had nothing to help her. She realised that the wolf could kill her. Access to the network was her only chance of survival. The wolf sat glaring at her with unblinking yellow eyes. Then she realised that it could not attack. There was no crowd waiting for her. Nobody except her would know if it took her an hour to work the device. She stared back and it turned and ran.

Now she started to look for ways forward along the pathway to take her into the main parts of the machine. The next portal was easy to find and she realised that she could have gone directly to it using the solitary ring in the centre of the table. Being alone, this would be the proper way to enter so she moved her focus to the centre ring before moving on. Sensing some minor pathways to either side she ignored them and she progressed proudly towards the core. She felt sure that she would soon find the highway where she could communicate with the prophet and ask the God to help her. She was, after all, in the mountain where the God had told her to go. Suddenly her world exploded. She sensed a blinding flash which shot through her eyes to every part of her body as she convulsed in pain. Within seconds she fell unconscious but the power of the trap continued to weaken her as her body slumped and she lay on the hard cold floor.

She awoke in darkness knowing that the room was warm but feeling cold in every part of her body. The trap had drained her energy and she was scarcely able to pull herself back up onto the chair. She felt hungry to the point of wondering if she could eat even if she had any food. The walls seemed to loom out of the darkness, closing in on her.

In desperation she worked the lock on the door, letting it swing inwards. A few small rocks rolled into the room and she fell to the floor again as one crashed into her chair. Once again she struggled up, crawling to the opening, clambering onto the lowest rocks. Seeing a faint light she felt a glimmer of hope until she realised that she was looking through a tiny gap in a pile of rocks that extended far along the corridor. She pictured the dragons at the end of it, hearing the sound of her opening the door that she had used to stop them. They would be mocking her, however much she despised them they would still mock her.

Fighting back feelings of self pity she struggled to her feet and managed to make the globe give a faint light. Painfully slowly she searched every inch of the walls of the two rooms, pausing only to drink from the tap as she checked the wall around it. She found nothing, no exit and no other pathways to communicate.

Finally, letting the room go dark again to conserve her last energy, she entered the pathway from the device on the table and moved slowly forwards towards the trap. She could see no sign of where it was ahead of her and knew that if she was caught by it again she would never recover. Still she edged forwards. Then she noticed one of the paths that lead off to the side so she risked finding other traps and moved down it, only to find another room, similar to the one she was in, at the end of it. She found no sign of the highway and no machines or anything else to help her, just another abandoned room. The next side opening revealed the same, another simple link to let the mages talk to each other without entering the main machine. She tried to remember how many entrances she had passed before she reached the trap but knew that she had never even counted them. Venturing forwards she found another useless connection. In her mind she could see that she would be drawn on to look down these dead-end pathways until she was finally taken by the trap. She hesitated but then the fatalism of the mage took control and she went on. She had lost count of how many entrances she had looked at when she found one that seemed to have no room at the end of it. The pathway was long, faint and unclear but she managed to move through it not knowing if she was travelling towards the highway or away from it. In places it was difficult to know which way to go, some routes seemed to go off to the side but she went on forwards. Suddenly she felt her body shudder. A trap had gone off but she realised that she was still conscious to know it. This trap must have been weakened by the passage of so much time and it was so distant it had not hurt her.

The route grew clearer, new opening appeared to either side. Gradually she found that the area she was in seemed familiar. Wondering if she was dreaming she recognised the city. She drifted onwards and found herself at her house but Paul was not there, she had no idea where he was but she knew he would not have returned. She touched many of the mechanisms but knew that, even if she had the energy, working them would not help her. In despair she returned but, as she came back she sensed a faint presence in the network.

It seemed like an illusion, it was not the prophet. It felt more familiar and less threatening. She felt as if Paul was with her. She sensed his shock as he recognised her. Wondering if she was talking with a ghost she sent an image of the room and the rocks at the door. He was drawing her forwards, up the main pathway and then off along a scarcely discernible track to one side. She wondered if this was just some elaborate trap that was feeding itself from her imagination but she went on. They came out in a room with a large round table in it and she felt she was being told to wait, holding her presence in the device in the table. She waited, not knowing if it was real but desperately trying to maintain the link through the fragile network. Suddenly she felt a powerful shock and wondered if it was a trap. Then she felt energy pouring down towards her and realised that her jewel had been placed in the device.

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Quickly her mind cleared and she flashed back through the pathways that had seemed so dark and confusing. The original trap now looked clear and simple and she was soon past it and into the great machine in the mountain. She realised that Paul was with her as its complex systems opened up to her. She knew where the highway was but made no special effort to go towards it. She was a mage again and too proud to seek help. But now Paul was drawing her back and she knew that he was right. However much she could use her jewel her body was still trapped in the room and fading fast.

They finally stopped to talk. She described her journey into the mountain and showed him how she was imprisoned. She showed him how they would be able to lever the rocks away to free her and, while trying not to seem too desperate, she asked him to hurry. But then he started showing images to her. He moved straight to their fight with the dragons and showed them fleeing to the tower. Now they were inside and secure, but then he showed her images of what could be seen from the high windows. Hundreds of dragons had gathered at the tower and more seemed to be arriving all the time. Smarting from their defeat they looked determined to even the score. She

asked him if he still had his gun but he explained, they had guns but few bullets, nowhere near enough to fight the army of dragons.

"This mountain is a weapon." The words came through to Paul with such strength that he wondered for an instant whether it was human speech from someone else in the room. He asked how she knew. The reply came stronger still, proud, forceful and distant.

"Do not ask questions. I know. Follow me."

Paul was shocked and confused. "Who is that?" He asked. "Is that still you Lynella, are you all right?"

There was a delay of some seconds before he heard the much softer voice he knew. "Yes, it's me. Something happened when we went past the trap. Suddenly I knew so much. It came to my memory. I know all the pathways around the mountain. I can take you to the biggest rings at the lowest levels that draw energy from the core. I can show you where the pylons were made. I can take you to the galleries where the ships are made. I can show you where they were launched from for the exodus." Paul noticed a slight bitterness in her voice as she said this but he did not interrupt as she continued. "I can show you the close range weapons in the outer galleries".

"What can they do?" he asked, picturing the dragons outside the tower.

Suddenly he was looking down on the plain from an observation tower high up the mountain. He could see the cultivated fields around the village and, as the image moved across he saw the tower where he was. But there were no dragons by it. The image kept moving and now he saw the city and realised why he had not seen dragons by his tower. The harbour was full of ships, even twenty miles away he could see the tall masts standing out against the blue sea beyond. He wanted to ask a question but the image was still moving. He saw a glimpse of a brass telescope on a ledge and then he was looking through it, hunting for movement in the forest. It scanned back and forth trying to follow paths through the trees and then, suddenly, off to one side he saw movement. There was a blinding flash which was so powerful the telescope swung away wildly as the holder staggered back. The image now focussed back on where the movement had been. Over a small area the trees and scrub were burning fiercely and in the centre there were charred bodies. Paul looked carefully to see the shape of dragons but then he realised that he was looking at something different. He was looking at the corpses of a group of people. He felt sick and tried to look away, but the image would not move.

"Who were they?" he asked.

"The Lord Mage of the eagle and his personal guard." She replied, in a cold voice.

"How can you know these things. How did you form those images from so long ago?"

"I have that memory, it was given to me by God. Let me show you how useful my enlightenment will be. I shall show you the other weapons."

Paul had little time to worry about what was happening to Lynella. Once again he was looking out from the top of the mountain but this time the scene was quite different. A battle was in progress. An army of hundreds of men was moving towards the mountain, overpowering defenders who were trying to hold the road. The attackers had occupied a tower and their archers were shooting from the upper levels with devastating effect against the men below them. He could see that this had been the last line of defence, the mountain would surely soon fall. He could see the men in heavy armour below him so clearly he felt he could hear the clash of swords and smell the sweat and blood as they fell.

A ring ship flew out from the mountain to attack the tower. Archers on the precarious wooden platforms on the iron rings shot a flight of arrows. Several of the soldiers in the tower had been taken by surprise and their bodies slumped forward with the wooden shafts embedded in their chests and blood pouring out down the stone walls. But the attackers also had ships and these came up fast, angling for position for the attack. With a single deafening crash two ships met and their mages died. The others weaved and dodged away round the mountain.

The archers in the tower were replaced and the assault continued. A flash from the close range weapon he had seen before seemed to stop the momentum for a moment but then he saw that mages in the tower had turned it back on itself and he heard the gallery explode far below and the battle with swords continued.

Then he sensed a feeling which overpowered the visual images. He sensed an enormous work that had been completed just in time. With it he sensed a fear based on the knowledge that this was to be the last chance. This was to be the fulfilment of their greatest work. With this they would live or die.

The flash came. At first he thought it was similar to the one he had just seen but then he saw the blasted stump that had been a tower seconds before. The surge of joy and power was so strong he could feel himself straining for more. The image moved to another tower, further away. Another flash and this was gone. The feeling was even stronger now, the need to destroy. The image moved to another tower and this was also reduced to a shattered ruin.

In his rational self he suddenly realised that he was seeing the images of the mind that was controlling the weapon, the line of sight that he saw was directing the beam from the heart of the mountain.

Destruction rained on the plain below him. Each time the need to kill grew stronger. The range grew longer and still towers fell. There were many other targets, the ring ships returned and the attackers were thrown from the sky. Remnants of the army and even dragons died until at last the city came into view. Virtually without thinking energy was drawn from every possible system and the most powerful beam of all was fired. Within the mountain mages collapsed and died but the city walls stood and protected the houses beyond them. Some ships in the outer harbour burst into flames but that was all.

The image faded leaving a void as if the mind that had created it had obliterated all trace of what followed. Paul could scarcely detect Lynella's presence. She seemed to have been subsumed by the God. He thought of stories of religious trances in which people surrendered themselves completely to God.

"What can we do?" He asked. "How much longer can you survive?"

The reply came, cold and firm. "We can attack the dragons."

"How?"

"You can see them. You can be the eyes of the weapon."

"But we have no power. I know from what I saw of the abbot's machine that it takes the power of many people to fight with a machine like this."

Paul sensed confusion at this remark as if she had forgotten who the abbot was. The effort of reaching into her own memory rather than drawing images from the machine brought forward Lynella's personality and he was relieved to hear a reply in a tone that sounded far more familiar.

"The abbot's machine was different. This one is far more complex. It can draw power from the planet's field rather than just working against it."

"So why did people die in the mountain when the weapon was used against the city?" This time the reply was firm again but it conveyed with it an overpowering grief. "It was too fast. The machine moved too fast. No, that's wrong, I moved too fast. They had no time to recover from when the attack was driven back. There was no energy left in the rings so they gave from their minds. And they died for it, for no purpose at all. I killed them."

Paul saw confused glimpses of an image of grand hall with the inevitable large circular table in the centre. At the table were mages in their gilded chairs with their jewels glowing but, among them, several where the light was gone. Servants had gathered around but any who saw the faces below the lifeless jewels knew that there was no hope. Now she was talking again.

"I know that we are weak but we can still draw power into the base rings and then we can use it to free you from the tower. It is the only hope."

"But what about the dragons in the mountain?" Paul asked. "Are there weapons that can drive them out?"

There was no reply so he asked. "Can you drive them out the way you drove the men out from the monastery?"

By now he sensed that the two minds were working more closely because there was little delay before the reply came. "There are loose rings that can be used. This machine has not been used that way before because we have never had an enemy within the mountain but it can be done."

They sensed loss as they withdrew from the machine, almost as if saying a temporary farewell to the mind inside it. Soon they were out of it and they broke their contact. Paul hurried down to his companions and gave them a rapid explanation of what was happening. Not waiting for questions he went straight back up. Lynella just had time to drink some water. This only seemed to make her hunger worse as she hurried back.

In the network again they soon regained contact. Through the portal Lynella drove her mind far into the machine, moving quickly so Paul had no chance to urge her to show caution. Soon they were drawing power into the lowest rings. The images were with them again, practical guidance showing methods and pathways. As ancient mechanisms were brought to life Paul sensed

numerous personalities within the circuits, but the link to Lynella was through the single powerful presence from before. "We shall start within the mountain." She said. "And clear the filthy animals from the fine halls of our home."

They had no way of knowing what damage they did. They were working from a knowledge of the layout of the rooms and corridors from hundreds of years before. Rings tore themselves out from machines and flew down the ancient corridors. In places they felt resistance but there was no way of knowing whether they had killed a dragon or simply broken furniture. In places they were stopped by solid rock and Paul felt the jolt of pain as their energy shot back into the machine. Soon every room and corridor had been traversed.

"It is done." The cold voice was strong now, but even as it said this a spark of other knowledge appeared to dispute it. The presence was clearly bemused and drew back as six rings were gathered into one place and their deadly pattern was woven as it had been in the monastery. First two of them began to orbit around each other and then the others were added, each to a new orbit. As the system began to rotate Paul sensed the curiosity of the presence in the machine. When the pattern began to move and its lethal efficiency was shown he sensed respect. He could also tell that Lynella was using her control of it to guide it so that, where possible, it drove the dragons out rather than trapping and killing them.

When the rings had done their work the rooms in the mountain fell silent but far below them the power was continuing to build. One after another the massive rings began to hum with energy until the pulses could be felt through the core of the mountain.

22

Paul was watching through the windows of the tower. He waited until he saw the shattered column of dragons appear along the road from the mountain. As they came closer he saw how effective the rings had been. Some had blood pouring from wounds, one had a front leg missing and another seemed to have lost its entire tail.

Seeing them the dragons at the tower appeared to falter but soon there were horsemen among them and they held firm. Paul looked carefully and found a group of standing well clear of the tower. Near the top of the mountain a massive metal door slid open for the first time in three hundred years. The signal was sent and the blast shook the ground. For a moment he was blinded but then he saw only scorched remains where dragons and men had been. He felt an urge to fire again but his rational self knew what this would do to Lynella so he watched in silence as the terrified army below him turned to flee towards the village.

Suddenly he heard a noise. He knew that he should know what it was but as hard as he tried he could not place it. There was an explosion and the tower shook. He heard breaking glass and shouts of terror from below him. Finally he realised what was happening and looked up to see a shuttle banking in a turn high over the mountain. Instantly he sent the signal again and the weapon fired at it. As the fireball fell to the ground he realised he had fired too quickly. He tried to ask Lynella if she was hurt.

The reply was totally alien to him "What are you asking?"

"Who ARE you?"

"I am Tiana. I am the prophet. Through me you communicate with God. Who are you?"

His confusion and terror grew through a long silence. He was distracted. Below him he could see his companions moving out towards the mountain. He had no way to warn them about what they might find. But he himself had no way to know what they would find. Unless he asked.

"What will my companions find in your mountain? Will they find Lynella?"

"So that is her name. Lynella, who came through my traps to find me after all this time. What does she look like?"

The attempt at conversation only increased Paul's sense of terror.

"LET HER GO" He almost shouted out loud as he sent the demand.

"I did not trap her." Tiana replied. "She came in of her own free will".

"But she never meant to stay".

The argument continued with Tiana refusing to give any clue about who or what she was. Finally Paul made an offer. "If I show you who Lynella is will you at least show me who you are?" As an afterthought he added that he would also show who he was.

The offer was accepted and he projected images of Lynella as he liked to think of her, laughing, walking, running in the halls of her Southern castle and the fields around it. He showed a glimpse of her using her power to light a room but was asked for more sight of the open air and the sky. He insisted on some information in return.

While keen to gain advantage by gleaning information in return he found Tiana also keen to tell her story while he was prepared to listen. The images he saw were constructed with detail which showed years of rehearsal. He could feel the emotion running through them.

He was looking out over a brightly lit hall packed with rows of mages wearing fine clothes and their jewels. From his viewpoint there could be no doubt that he was above them, this was the leader looking down on her subjects. They were angry. Their pride would not let them shout or speak out of turn but their expressions could not be mistaken. Looking at the front row he saw the same faces he had seen in the mountain after the weapon had been used against the city and the village. Among them there were empty chairs, each with a jewel taken from the dead. An elderly man was standing and in measured tones he was saying that she could no longer be accepted as their leader. For what she had done she could not even be accepted among them. The images became less clear as he continued to speak; at times her concentration was broken by the terror of what was being described. By using the assembled power of the other mages in the community she was to be forced to do what all mages dreaded. She was to have her mind driven so far into their machine that she could never escape. She was banished to the void between the living and the dead.

From this point he realised that the images changed and were now seen through the eyes of others and shown to her by their contact with the machine. He could see the passage of time as some of the faces he recognised grew older. He also sensed a feeling that they were concealing something from her. They were sustaining her physical body but not letting her find out what they were doing. He saw the images they gave her but they became increasingly mundane, and he sensed the growing tension as they refused to show her their work.

While Paul's mind retained the link his eyes remained fixed on his companions disappearing along the road to the mountain. Now something intruded into his consciousness to he saw the image and it interrupted the flow to the extent that Tiana also saw it. The dragons had returned and were pouring past the tower intent on revenge.

"We must fire again" Tiana said.

"But that will weaken Lynella still more". He replied. But he knew that it had to be done. Tiana reassured him that it would not affect Lynella. Paul tried to believe her as he looked down and gave the signal. One moment there was a column of dragons and horsemen chasing his friends and the next moment the front of the group had been obliterated and the others were in confusion. The shot echoed across the valley and the surge of power and excitement swept through him, but this time he could contain it.

Immediately he was shown the next image. The viewer was standing on a high platform in a large brightly lit circular cavern. The walls had been cut out from solid rock. Around the edge he could see the enormous bulk of a ring and Paul realised that this must be one of the main power rings in the base of the mountain. The platform and a series of wooden steps had been built to enable people to climb over it to reach the door. All across the floor of the room there was a mass of machinery and in the centre there were large spheres. He recognised them immediately as sealed ships for space travel. Looking up he saw the base of the shaft which had been cut to launch them. The mages were all gathered around it looking up at the viewer. He knew that they were letting Tiana see them and they were smiling and laughing about it. Before leaving, however, they showed her one final terrible image.

This time the viewer was standing high up on the mountain looking down on the plain below where an army of dragons had gathered. They had been drawn by the surge of power as ships had been launched. The viewer was almost alone, there was only one mage with him. The others had gone, just these two remained and between them lay the body of a woman. This was Tiana's body which had been sustained as the source of her human existence. As it fell she prepared her self for oblivion. As it crashed against the rocks below she watched in horror as the dragons tore it apart too shocked to think of the consequences of being able to see it. The image ended abruptly as the

viewer withdrew, never realising that her mind had survived in the void. By the time the last two mages made contact with the machine again she was ready. Unprepared and unsuspecting they were easy prey for her final revenge. She had no idea where their bodies were when they collapsed but she was certain that they were dead.

Paul could sense that what he had seen had been rehearsed innumerable times. He was prepared to believe that the story was true but it did not prove anything.

“So you are now an artificial intelligence in a big network which controls the artillery on the mountain.” He replied, trying to sound detached. “How does that make you a prophet?”

“A prophet is somebody who brings knowledge of God.” She replied. “After the great mages had gone I gained that knowledge.”

New images appeared. Paul knew that the battle outside would not wait but his entire exchange with Tiana would only take a few seconds of the time of the outside world and it might give him an understanding that would help. He even thought that he might find God in the way Tiana had and he should do this because he might die before reaching safety.

The first images showed more destruction. Not all of the mages had left the planet. Others had been in the pylons helping to guide the ships and hoping to make the journey in the future. These were not the most powerful mages and they were completely unprepared so, with her all-encompassing rage, Tiana killed them in a single blast. She knew that Paul had seen the destruction and also explained that those in the tower by the source had sensed the destruction and left the network just before she could kill them.

After the destruction came darkness. She knew that she must contain her anger and not destroy the network itself. Deep down she was aware that the machines had sufficient power to rupture the planet itself but she could control her anger and resign herself to the darkness. In the network there was no time, there was not a present or a future but at one point in the void there was a light and at another she had considered the light in every aspect and detail and needed to know what it was.

She tried to compare it to her God but found that she knew too little to do this. Hers was an old religion. It was not as old as the one it had replaced but it was still old enough to have become victim to rituals and power and leave little time for true understanding.

Tiana saw images of the light. It represented a single point of complexity in the void and, as she studied it she found it communicating with her. The images stopped, Paul sensed that she was unable to explain what happened next.

“So you found something in the network that communicates. What makes that a God?”

“What is your definition of a God?” She asked, reminding him of the captain’s argument that nobody should be so arrogant that they would never acknowledge a higher being however compelling the evidence.

“A God is a creator.” He replied. “A creator of the world and the life on it. They are not part of it but they created it.”

“There can never be proof about who created the world but would you believe in a God that can create life, a God that can overcome death.”

He thought about the promise of eternal life which was so central to the religious teaching he had known. Then he thought of Tiana; as far as he was concerned she was just artificial intelligence.

“You have eternal life.” He agreed. “And back on earth they have never been able to make artificial intelligence which is truly sentient, aware of its own immortality as you are. But that does not prove that it took a God to do it.”

Suddenly he found himself standing in a room. Sunlight was pouring in the windows to show all of the elegance and fine detail he recognised as work of the mages. Looking around the room he saw a large table and on the far side, in the shadow, there were two men. One of them was standing and walking towards him. Now the man was standing Paul could see his bearing and his clothes; there was no doubt in his mind, this was a mage from the ancient times.

“Who are you?” The man asked.

Paul was so shocked it took him a few moments to reply. He introduced himself and asked who the man and his companion were. Somehow he thought that he recognised them.

The man bowed and introduced himself. He was a Lord Mage and he went on to introduce his companion. He held out his hand and shook Paul’s with a firm positive grip.

While he was doing this Paul suddenly realised who they were. These were the two Mages that Tiana had killed. He had no doubt she had killed them but now he could see them, hear them, feel them and almost smell them. They were as real as he was.

“Were you not killed by the Lady Tiana.?” He asked directly.

“We were.” The man replied. “But our God is a forgiving God and in the same way that he forgave Tiana for killing our companions and resurrected her he also forgave us for killing Tiana and resurrected us.”

“Is Tiana with you?”

“No” The man shook his head slowly. “She killed us and many more after she was resurrected. She cannot live with us. She must remain in purgatory, neither in this world or the other.”

He was shown around the palace, meeting many people. Many were servants but some were Mages and they all seemed to be completely real. Paul kept trying to tell himself that it was a dream but he could not; all his senses were telling him it was real. He walked through magnificent halls opening onto beautiful gardens with glimpses of a whole city beyond them. He even shared a meal with them and enjoyed fine meat and wine until he could eat and drink no more after it, quite without warning, it ended. He was back with Tiana in the network.

“Now you have seen the other end of the network.” She was saying. “Now you must believe in our God. Before you return to your world I shall show you what happened to me.”

The images moved on. Tiana went to the remaining mages on the planet as a prophet and preached to them about their God and the new life she had been given. They listened to her preaching but they knew her as a murderess and set traps around the mountain to keep her in protect themselves from her. Without access to the mountain they were isolated from their God and the main source of their power. She could still communicate with them but only weakly and over the years she could tell that activity in the network faded. Each new generation became more isolated and finally the monastery was formed to challenge and destroy the mage’s religion and she was forgotten by mortal men.

23

Paul knew that they could not fire at the dragons again without killing Lynella. Looking through the windows of the tower he could see that the dragons had been driven well back toward the village. His comrades were out of sight, they would be almost at the mountain by now. He had no choice, he opened the door and ran. A year of living on the planet had left him fitter than he had been on earth but the heat from the sun in the clear sky was intense and the mountain lay about two miles ahead. The flagstones on the road had been lifted by roots and now the dragons had torn many of them loose, leaving him to pick his way through the debris. He came to the point where the dragons’ last charge had been stopped and one lay dead, oozing blood onto the road and forcing him to push through the scrub to one side. Soon the road began to climb towards the mountain and he had to pause to get his breath. He looked behind him and, well beyond the tower he could see a dust cloud. The dragons would be coming back and this time there was nothing to stop them. He ran on, struggling up the slope as fast as he could with his pack and his rifle.

Near the mountain there was forest. Almost as soon as he was in it he knew that there were dragons nearby. He could hear them, he could even smell them. They must have been left behind in the flight from the mountain, he hoped that they might be injured. For some minutes he felt sure that they were watching him from either side, keeping level as they had done on the road from the city. The trees provided welcome shade and, despite his exhaustion, he managed to continue running, even slightly faster, driven on by the hope of reaching the mountain entrance before they closed in. Then, what had been a clear path a moment before, was suddenly blocked. The beast stood motionless, just yards in front of him, its front legs barely clear of the ground but its claws fully extended. The sulphurous smell of the beast’s breath almost made him choke. A barrage of thoughts came into his mind.

“Surrender”. They were saying it so loud, so close that he could not mistake it. “Surrender or die”.

He was standing still now. Very slowly he started to raise his rifle, he was sure that they would not know what it was. But he could hear them moving in from all around him, too many and too close.

He tried to reply. "What would you do to me?" but the response was confused. Then he realised that the dragon in front of him was not communicating, it was an older one with metal on its scales. For a few moments he had thought of surrendering to it but now he saw his opportunity. Letting go of his rifle with one hand he brought his jewel up to his forehead and drove his power into its eyes. As soon as he did it he ran, straight past the animal before it fell.

The confusion and terror created by the jewel gave him just a few seconds of advantage. This was just long enough for him to turn and raise his rifle. He saw the first dragon climbing over the body. It was a smaller one, young enough not to be hurt by his power. It was digging its claws into the dead flesh as it struggled to get past. He aimed at its head and fired. It collapsed, balancing for a second before falling away from him on top of its comrades behind it.

He ran, not even daring to look behind him. Then he could see the opening in the rock face ahead of him. There was a small clearing in front of it with several dead dragons in it but it was too far away. He could hear a dragon just behind him and jumped to one side as it struck. Its claw tore through his sleeve and grazed arm but he managed to move away to the side of the road. It had gone past him now, blocking his way while others came up behind. He raised his gun again but before he could fire he heard a shot from the mountain, more followed in rapid succession. He ran on. He knew that the dragons would re-group again but he just made it through the great door. As he locked it he heard a crash from the outside followed by a roar of frustration.

"We came out when we heard your shot. We didn't know you were coming." Angus said.

He explained that he had had to come because Lynella could not help him to shoot at the dragons again. "I must try to talk to her." He said.

"We don't know where she is. We have been looking but this place is enormous, we could search for weeks."

"Find me a door that the dragons never opened." Paul asked. "Then I may be able to find her in the network again."

The first two doors with mage locks revealed tidy rooms but no sign of the type of rings that were in the images that he had seen from Lynella. In the third, however, he found a table exactly like the one he had seen. Soon he was in the network, moving forward carefully, unsure whether his jewel would protect him from the trap. Quickly he found the side branches and the rooms at the end of them. Moving through them he could find no signs of life. He knew that she was weak, perhaps she was resting. He could not think of her collapsed on the floor, or worse. He kept looking, finding all of the rooms he could, going back to them in turn to try again, but still he found no sign. In the end he had no choice, he came out of the network briefly to warn his friends and ask for what little help they could give.

"If you see my body shudder badly," he said, not really knowing what effect the trap would have, "pull me away, break up the table and the ring or something"

Cautiously he went into the network again, and forward past the openings. He was watching out but had no real idea what it would look like. Then his jewel seemed to take charge, it pointed him towards the mechanism and seemed to lock into it, fixing it in place. He carried on forwards and then, suddenly, he sensed Tiana in front of him. He welcomed her as a friend, but gave her no time to talk. He asked urgently for help and she gave him directions, both in the network and in the caves. He took her with him past the trap and into the ring in the room with Lynella. They waited for several minutes, sending out all of the time, asking for any type of response but if one came it was too faint for them to detect. Leaving Tiana he came out into the outer world and led the group far into the mountain. They went through the old hall where the dragons had lived. He recognised it from Lynella's images but now, rather than coming alive with the roars of the beasts, it held only carcasses slowly oozing blood to form pools on the stone floor. Finally they came to the corridor that the dragons had piled full of boulders.

Many of the boulders were far too big for the men to move but they soon found that prizing out some of the smaller ones caused the pile to settle away from the ceiling enough for Paul to squeeze through. This was a slow and dangerous process and it was several hours before he came to the door and climbed down into the room. Lynella was unconscious but breathing steadily and it took them another hour to move her gently back past the boulders and make her comfortable on a bed in another room. Just as they had done this Paul smelt freshly cooking meat. Having eaten

nothing but dried meat and bread for the last two days he rushed to find out what was being prepared. Adam was sitting by a fire with large steaks arranged above it.

“What’s that?” Paul asked. “I had no idea there were animals that big for us to hunt in here.”

Adam gave no reply and, looking up at one of the dead dragons that had fallen nearby Paul realised what it was. The thought horrified him.

“We can’t.” He said. “We can’t do that.”

“Why not.” Adam replied. “They would eat us. The meat is still fresh so we should eat well while we can and preserve some of it for later.”

“But they aren’t just animals, they can talk and think like people.” Paul said, but he already knew that he had lost the argument.

“If the ones outside had got you they wouldn’t have thought like any people I know. They would have eaten you.” Adam picked up a piece from near the centre, inspected it carefully and took a bite from it. He held the next piece out to Paul. It looked succulent and smelt good so finally he succumbed and found that it was good to eat with a taste that reminded him of pork.

Lynella’s power recovered rapidly when her ring was returned but it took her several days before she could walk. The rest of the party spent the time exploring some of the rooms and corridors. They found the ways up to the viewing platforms up on the mountain side. They saw the dragons waiting for them among the trees below. Great numbers of them had gathered and they could be seen in groups out on the plain towards the village and on the road back to the city. After a few minutes they were seen and the beasts started roaring at them. They charged at the main door again and again and reached up to try to climb the sheer rock face below the platform.

Inside it became clear that the dragons had only occupied a small part of the complex. This was the part that had been built around a long natural cave that led into the boiling pools in the heart of the mountain. Within this part they found a large number of carcasses and soon it was filled with a putrid stench which made them stay in other areas and keep the doors closed.

They found living areas, kitchens, dining areas and everything that would have been needed by a community that they guessed must have been several hundred people. Paul found the main doors easy to open. There were others that seemed more complex. Fearing that they might have traps he left these undisturbed until Lynella could help him.

When she was fit enough Lynella wanted to see every detail of what they had found. Then, with Paul helping her, she tried to open one of the other doors which, she was sure, lead down to the machines and the ringships. Very quickly they discovered that it was like the doors in the tower, it could only be opened with certain specific jewels.

Paul quickly worked out their problem. “They would have set it so any of the mages could get through.” He said. “But all but two of them went off in the ships. Tiana killed the last two but nobody knows where their bodies are.”

“We haven’t found and sign of human remains. Which means that the dragons probably ate them.” Angus observed.

As a last resort Paul and Lynella contacted Tiana.

“Why do you want to find the ships?” She asked. “I could show you how to get through the doors but it is only a ship and I have shown you exactly what it looks like. You are not ready for the ships.”

They knew that Tiana was driven by her fear of renewed isolation so there was no point in trying to persuade her. They tried another approach. “Could we have an open ring ship, just to get back to the city so we can bring some more people.” She was finally persuaded when they showed her some images of the dragons on the road.

She showed them where to find the right door and they found that the lock had been adjusted to suit their jewels.

The door opened onto a lift. They went down a long way and came out in a cavern which contained several ring ships. The ring ships were basically iron rings but they had substantial wooden structures on them with seats for the mages who used them and even a cabin for passengers. In the ceiling of the cavern there was a wide inclined shaft for the ships to fly out.

Emerging into the sunlight they saw the dragons gathered below them and in the distance the village and its surrounding farms looked peaceful. Near the mountain Lynella found it easy to control the ring and they flew slowly towards the city. Beneath them the shattered towers on each hilltop stood in a line along their path and ahead the walls of the city rose up massive and defiant.

Nearing the city the field grew weaker but they knew that it lay close enough to the mountain for them to reach it.

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After having had to navigate the shaft at the mountain they found it easy to land in an open square near the houses that had been re-occupied. The crowd rushed out and greeted them but the welcome was subdued and quickly Captain Turner pushed through. "We have to go back." he said. "They are using the people from the kingdoms as forced labour. The conditions are terrible. We must get them out."

The messenger was Adam's brother. They looked so alike that until they stood together it was difficult to tell them apart. It also became apparent that they were similar in more ways than appearance. He greeted Adam with nothing more than a brief nod. The story he told of his journey clearly left out more than it described. He had avoided capture when a force of heavily armed men from the ship backed up by some of the Abbot's soldiers had arrived. The village had been surrounded in the middle of the night and the attackers used Jeeps and shuttles to ensure that nobody got out. Precisely how he had got through was not clear but, when pressed, he confirmed that he had killed at least five men. He had also obtained a gun which he still had with him.

He had followed the convoy of prisoners back to the source and watched as they were taken into the camp. He had continued to watch for many days, hiding among the massive spoil heaps from the opencast mine which now extended past the camp for miles, almost all the way from the ship to the monastery at the Northern edge of the source. Each morning he had watched as everybody was forced out of the huts and herded towards the single ramshackle shaft head at the edge of the compound. All of them went down, men and women, old and young. The ore was taken out by an electric hoist which was operated by two of the guards and loaded directly into lorries that took it away. Well into the evening, they emerged. All were visibly totally exhausted and the able bodied had to help those who could not walk on their own and, as he had seen on two separate occasions, carry the dead.

Finally he had managed to approach the fence without being seen by the guards. The people inside had quickly fetched the Steward. The old man had looked at him with a burning intensity and told him that he must go. He must not stop and he must not try to help. He should go immediately and find Lynella, no matter how long it took, and tell her to come.

As the crowd listened to his story they could tell how much he had wanted to try to go in and rescue them but he knew that he needed help and he knew that Lynella was the only person who could give it. The soldiers had wrecked all of the fishing boats back at the village so he had to spend several days on the exposed beach rebuilding one from scavenged timbers from the whole fleet. Finally he had set sail. He knew that Adam had gone North so he sailed North West so he could work East along the far coast and search for where they had landed. Fortunately this kept him well clear of the pylons and the whirlpool.

It took just two days to prepare the King Solomon for the return journey across the sea to the kingdoms. Almost half the people in the city crowded back on and they set sail in the early evening. They sailed East along the coast, taking advantage of the current which flowed strongly around the end of the vast bay. It swirled past the rocky outcrops at the headlands and drove them on across the sandy bays. Soon it was dark and the starlight was too faint even to see across the ship. The people from earth longed for a moon to see by but Adam stood alone and apparently unconcerned at the wheel, confidently steering them onwards. At dawn he insisted that they moor under a tall headland rather than risk being seen in the open in daylight. By the time they emerged the following evening the wind was strengthening from the North. The sea was also rougher but Adam insisted that his crew went up the masts to set the topsails and they sped forwards into the darkness, following the coast around as it turned back West and the full force of the ever increasing gale came at them broadside on.

Paul and Lynella could do nothing so they stood at the rail at the side of the raised stern deck, holding on and watching the foaming water speed past below them. In front of them the main deck was frequently awash as the boat heeled over and smashed into the waves. Still Adam insisted on keeping full sail and the crew swore and struggled to keep them trimmed.

Adam rarely spoke to his crew, his orders, when they were needed, were often given by abrupt hand signals but, just as first light of dawn came on the horizon he shouted a succession of commands. At this point even the hardened crew looked visibly scared but they only hesitated for a moment before running back to the masts to take the ropes.

Suddenly Adam turned the wheel hard and the ship swung round. The crew strained and one of the enormous mainsails swung across and with one sail set to each side and the gale behind them they flew forwards towards the coast.

Lynella looked ahead and saw white water boiling up in front of them. She shouted out to Adam.

“Hold on” he shouted back.

Even if he had wanted to say more he could not have. They shot forwards into a wall of water which broke so high that it came right across the main deck and up and across the stern deck. They held on, waiting for the crash as the ship hit the rocks, but it never came. They went through another wave and another and then the water became calmer. The light increased and they could see land to either side. They were in the river.

“It boils up when the current meets the wind over the bar.” Adam explained calmly. “The current is strong just now”.

They could see now that the current was strong, but no match for the ship as it sped forwards with the gale behind it. The crew were now continuously struggling with the sails as the river twisted and turned through the foothills of the Eastern mountains. They sailed on all day, keeping close to the forested banks to stay out of sight of shuttles.

“Can we land at the tower?” Lynella asked. “It would be a good place to set out from.”

Adam agreed with a slight nod of his head and before long it came into sight, the top levels high above the trees in the far distance.

With no moon night came suddenly but Adam showed no sign of wanting to stop. Lynella fetched a small supply of lighting globes that had been kept on the ship but Paul warned her that, with shuttles in constant use, they would be seen from the mine. Even now they could see the distant orange glow of the arc lights far away at the edge of the source. Adam was achieving the near impossible, with only the feel of the current and a distant memory of having sailed down the river to go by, he was judging the bends and rushing on under full sail. Suddenly they heard noises from above them and looked up to see an overhanging tree brushing past the mast almost dislodging crew members who were setting the topsails. Lynella went up to Adam and asked him to stop. He obeyed as quickly as he could, giving orders for the sails to be lowered, but it was too late. The ship crashed hard into the next tree, heeling over to an alarming angle and jarring to a halt as the stays strained under the load.

Never losing his cool Adam immediately had the anchor lowered and, as soon as the current drove the ship out from under the tree, it was held in mid river. But many of the men who had been up the mast had been injured and others were in the water shouting to be rescued. In the darkness no help could be given so Lynella picked up one of the globes. Almost without hesitation she drove it high in the air and lit the whole area with its bright blue glow. It stayed up for almost a minute, long enough for lines to be thrown to the men in the water and rescuers to climb up the rigging.

The ship was quickly restored to order. Lines were taken to trees on the shore and teams on the windlass took the load on them, swinging the vessel in close to the bank where it would be less visible when daylight came. The injured were treated and a meal was prepared, only Paul remained on the raised stern deck watching for a shuttle. Below him he could hear the murmur of voices and the sound of the current swirling past the hull. All around him he could hear the night creatures in the forest. Over this he listened for the faint sound of a shuttle, not with its engines roaring for take off but with them at a bare minimum for glide. He was sure that it would come in over the forest to try to see the masts in silhouette against the water in the starlight. It would come without lights so all he could look for was a small pattern of stars being obscured by its stubby wings. At one point he thought that he might have seen one but he couldn't be sure.

Lynella walked quietly to his side. “Have you seen one? Why would he risk another when we have destroyed three already?”

“Never under-estimate the director, not with the abbot to help him.” He replied, still looking intently at the night sky. “We must sleep up here tonight with our jewels ready. They may attack at first light.”

“All right, we sleep here, but now go down and get something to eat.”

No attack came during the night or early morning but when he awoke Paul was sure that he could sense dragons in the forest. They were keeping out of sight but he knew that if any of the crew tried to set out on land they would be waiting. Setting his jewel to one side he projected an image of the abbot and his monastery with a single word. "EVIL".

All that came back was confusion but mixed in with it there were images of Christian, who was clearly their leader. He tried to ask where Christian was but the only response was hatred of him as a mage. There was not even much fear, the dragons seemed to have complete confidence that Christian would defeat him and let them chase down any survivors.

While the crew repaired the rigging and prepared to make sail his companions joined him on deck. "What do we know about the people from the village?" He asked Maria. "When we were there they never challenged us at all and Christian may be more powerful than the ones we met."

"They cannot use jewels at all." Maria replied. "You will always win against them in open combat."

"What if they are using some of the monk's machines?"

"That may be what they are planning." Maria agreed. "It would be dangerous but you should still win."

"What the abbot doesn't know." Lynella added. "Is that we have different jewels now. He may have the message from the village that we are two mages now but he will not know that my jewel is far, far more powerful."

Captain Turner looked intently at the forest. "Would he risk ground troops with rifles this far out?"

"Not unless they get on well with dragons." Paul replied. "But we had better stay inside just in case."

As they went in they talked about the dragons. Nobody knew why the beasts seemed so confident.

The sails were set and the ship got under way, moving neatly away from the bank just far enough to make progress upstream. Lookouts on the mastheads watched for shuttles overhead and any signs of activity in the forest below. The river turned slightly eastwards and they sped along a wide reach with the snow covered peaks of the mountains ahead of them. Then it turned and once again they saw the tower ahead of them, much closer now. Adam glanced at it and guessed that it would take them just a few more hours to reach it. He never noticed that a small port had opened just above the windows at the top level. The beam caught the ship broadside on as it went about, burning straight through the heavy planking, breaking it clean in half. The weight of the masts brought the two ends crashing over, throwing survivors into the water.

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Lynella and her companions were in the cabin high on the stern of the ship. The blast threw them forwards against the bulkhead, knocking their breath out and leaving them stunned with no idea what had happened. Before they had a chance to get clear the whole cabin was driven down into the water by the weight of the mast with such force that it broke straight through the planks. With the weight of the massive iron ring in the remaining part of the hull pulling it down it quickly flooded. The rich furnishings had been torn loose and now floated up, jamming against people and walls. Angus struggled to his feet to find himself caught between the legs of a table. Looking around him he could see others trapped by it as well and, on the far side, he could see the door. Using his enormous strength he threw the table at the door and smashed it open. Pushing it out with a chair after it he turned to see Paul and Lynella just standing up. The water level was rising fast and he pushed them through the door, followed by Maria and the others. By the time they were all out the cabin had almost disappeared below the water.

Lynella emerged to see the devastation around her. The hull below the cabin had taken the full force of the blast and most of those who had been in it had been thrown out into the water. The mast had been driven outward towards the river bank and many of them were clinging to the shrouds and other bits of broken rigging. The topsail spars seemed to be embedded into the mud, holding the mast and the parts of the ship still fixed to it and preventing them from being swept down by the strong current.

As they watched they saw those already in the water working their way along the mast to the bank. Lynella hesitated so Paul went first, jumping into the water and grabbing the ropes as he was swept past them. Maria followed but Angus waited until last, seeing all of the others safely away while he clung onto the ship's rail as it slowly submerged. Moving in single file they struggled along the mast to the bank where crew members reached out to help them up onto dry land.

Finally there were no more signs of life in the river. The group on the bank were in a terrible state, many had broken bones and some had had entire limbs torn off in the blast and were just clinging to life while their friends tried to staunch the bleeding. On the far side of the river, on the mud bank on the inside of the bend, they could see others who had been near the front of the ship. They tried shouting to them but could not hear the replies, nobody had any radios with them. They could see that the others were in no better state. For an hour they tried to help the badly injured but there was little they could do for them. A few more people emerged through the undergrowth along the bank having managed to swim to the shore further down river. They reported having seen many bodies floating with them in the debris after the blast.

Adam was one of the last to appear. Having been at the helm on the rear deck he had taken the full force of the blast and been thrown well across the river, but once again he seemed indestructible. He arrived carrying an injured man who must have weighed far more than his own body weight. Having left his charge with Maria he took no time to rest and went out immediately to hunt for food. Minutes after he had gone he came rushing back and called to Paul to come up the valley side. From just a few yards up they could see movement in the trees above the survivors on the other side of the river. He could not see any detail without binoculars but he could see a bulldozer which appeared to be clearing a route through the forest for a line of jeeps behind it. Using the telescopic sight on his rifle he saw it more clearly. With only a moment's hesitation he took aim and fired. He saw the driver of the bulldozer fall down as he was hit and the jeeps disappeared rapidly over the brow of the hill. He shouted down to the riverbank and they ran just as the men from the jeeps opened fire.

On their side of the river the cover was far thinner because they were on a steep slope which seemed to go right on up to the mountains behind. They climbed as fast as they could, resting for seconds behind bushes and low scrub. Soon they had the advantage of height and, even with just three rifles between them, they were able to keep the men on the far bank pinned down. The survivors on the far side had taken cover and were able to fire a few shots but they were too low to see their enemy.

They went on, climbing when they could, carrying the injured until eventually they found some large boulders and took cover behind them. The firing stopped and an uneasy silence hung over the valley. They were now high enough to see right across the low hills opposite and could even make out the outline of the mine at the source beyond them. Suddenly they saw a shuttle approaching. It flew low over the hills and stopped above the river. Lynella drove her power into it but nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" Angus asked. "Quick, get down."

The missile exploded against the boulder and large parts of it were blasted away. Rock fragments flew across the hillside.

"It's not Lynella's fault." Paul shouted "It's the shuttle, they've given it protection. Lynella's power can't touch it." In a futile gesture he stood up and fired his rifle at it.

The second missile shot away most of the rest of the boulder. Rifle shots rang out from the far side of the river, pinning them down as the shuttle took aim again. Paul saw that Lynella was kneeling up with the jewel on her forehead shining so brightly that the light was even reflecting off the hull of the shuttle.

"You can't do anything" he shouted "get down"

The shuttle was about to fire when the surface of the river below it erupted throwing out enormous waves in all directions. The next moment he saw the tail of the shuttle thrown upwards. The missile flew off harmlessly down the valley. The shuttle lurched back and forth and lost height. In its place the iron ring from the base of the ship hung motionless. Without thinking he put his jewel to his forehead and helped drive it on upwards.

One part of him saw the shuttle crash into the river but on another plane he was seeing images of more shuttles coming and only one way to stop them. He was being probed for information. She wanted details from plans he had drawn up long before. Lynella had a detailed mental image of the field above the source and he was mapping locations onto it. The ring flew

slowly over the hills. The men in the jeeps stared up in disbelief but it flew on. It flew out across the plane and, with awful precision, crashed into the hydrogen separation plant.

Paul was totally drained of energy. He was barely conscious of hearing the explosion in the distance and then counting. He knew that he should count to five, five seconds for the heat from the blast at the separation plant to penetrate the super-cooled liquid in the storage tanks. The second explosion was so loud it seemed to shake the stones around him even at a distance of forty miles. He felt ashamed of himself, he had designed the tank farm and his colleagues had built it. Some of them would have died. Then he felt strangely pleased. He had positioned the farm far enough away from the mother ship that this explosion would not have breached the hull. The director had poured scorn on him for wasting resources by designing it so far away. The damage would be enough to ground the shuttles for some time but no more than that. The plant would be re-built and then the ship could still take off and go. He realised that he had planned the attack sub-consciously long before. He wondered how long ago Lynella had found out about it through the linking of their minds. He was barely aware of his body being carried up the slope and away from the shattered boulder which now offered virtually no remaining cover.

Across the river the survivors who had been pinned down near the river bank shouted out in defiance and charged up the slope behind them. The soldiers around the bulldozer seemed to have been mesmerised by the explosions and were taken completely by surprise. Even with only three working guns between them the attackers quickly overcame them, hitting them with sticks and stones and wresting their guns from them before they had a chance to fire.

Adam and Angus watched them moving about on the hill-top, tying up their captives and searching the jeeps for supplies. Then, looking slightly downstream, they saw a vast army of dragons moving forward, concealed by the shape of the hills at the bend in the river. Adam took careful aim and shot one of the dragons. Risking fire from any of the director's men still loose on the far bank he then stood out from the cover of the boulder and waved his arms, shouting and pointing as clearly as he could at the dragons. On the far bank they took cover when they heard the shot and then looked on in bemusement at his signalling. Eventually he gave up.

"I hope they have a lot of ammunition." He said. "There's a whole army of dragons."

"They'll need more than that." Angus replied. "Look at the tower."

The port had opened again. It was well out of range of the rifles so there was nothing at all that they could do. The people opposite had found medical supplies and were all concentrating on treating their many wounded. Angus moved his party around the enormous boulder that they were sheltering behind to give them cover just in case they were the target but they knew what would happen. The dragons started their charge. Just as the men heard the dragons the cone of blinding blue fire flashed out and the fuel tanks on the vehicles exploded even as those around them were falling to the ground. Exactly on cue the dragons reached the open ground and they charged up the slope with scarcely a shot fired.

Angus watched in helpless silence until the battle was over. "The people in the tower can command the dragons perfectly." He said. "And they didn't hesitate to kill some of the Director's men."

"They'll know where we are." Adam replied. "We must move far away, as fast as possible."

All through the evening and the night they struggled up the slope into the mountains. They tried to move South as well as East so that they would get a clear view across the tower to the source. Seeing their comrades killed left them completely demoralised despite the defeat of the shuttle and the explosions at the source. Now they were fleeing for their lives from an enemy that could just as easily be in front of them as behind. Paul was semi-conscious and staggered on with then help of another man. Lynella was still completely unconscious so Angus carried her. The loose stone on the slope made any movement difficult but they managed to keep moving slowly onward. At first light they saw that they were in a barren landscape of loose scree with rocky outcrops. They had a clear view of the ground for a good distance below them and Angus judged it safe to stop and rest. The tower was now almost directly below them, commanding the only route through from the river valley to the source. Beyond it they could see the clear outline of Atlanta in the distance and could even make out the scar on the landscape where the hydrogen plant had been.

The dragons seemed to be moving gradually towards the tower, spreading out along the river bank as they went. Some of them crossed the river, swimming easily across using their powerful tails to drive them forwards. They gathered opposite the tower but showed no sign of climbing up the slope. Angus could not tell if they simply did not know where he was or if they just knew that he

would have to come down when his food ran out. Adam managed to trap a couple of birds and even found some wood for a fire to cook them but they had little meat on them to share round. Eventually after another full day of waiting Lynella started to regain consciousness.

When she awoke she wanted to know everything about what had happened. She kept asking questions. She asked Paul why she had been unable to use her power on the shuttle and was not satisfied until he had described exactly what an atomic bomb was, why they gave off electromagnetic pulses, and why the shuttles had been designed so they could be hardened against them and used to support a nuclear attack. Finally she made him try to work out whether it would have been possible to harden the tower against them. He could see no way it could have been done in a way which could not be seen.

Lynella stood up to get a clear view of the valley below. Angus was about to warn her about possible snipers remaining in the forest opposite but something about her look made him hesitate. She had assumed the leadership of the group in a way he had not seen before. He glanced at Paul and saw that he was also looking anxiously out from the cover of the boulder. To their horror a single shot rang out and Lynella's body jerked backwards. Maria rushed forwards but before she had moved more than a single pace Paul held his hand out to stop her. Lynella's jewel had flashed. Two flashes in as many seconds. Now a scream rang out, not from her but echoing up the valley from below. It was short, the lone soldier's cry was cut short. The first flash had stopped his bullet and the second had made his gun explode in his hands. Paul remembered having calculated that the ceramic bullets would be inaccurate at long range. He had discussed it with the men in the workshop on the ship where they were made. This explained why the sniper had not used them but once again he could only conclude that this was another part of his plan of attack that Lynella had found out from him without waiting for him to tell her.

The valley fell silent. Lynella stood motionless, only the steady rhythm of the changing glow in her jewel showed that she was still concentrating on the scene below her. Paul merged almost imperceptibly into the field of her power and found that she was probing the tower below them. With all of the ports closed she had no way of getting past the outer metal walls but she worked carefully across the entire surface. Those inside could be in no doubt about the challenge that she offered. No response came.

Lynella walked slowly and deliberately out in front of the boulder and beacons to Maria to come to her side. With great care she started to walk down the slope. Maria watched out for a safe path and had to guide her because she never let her concentration on the tower lapse for an instant. Gradually the rest of the party realised that they would have to follow. Paul was quickly ushered to the front to walk next to Lynella. Angus moved up to help him because he also kept his eyes fixed on the tower.

The dragons at the bottom of the slope fell quietly into a single line, drawn up along the bank of the river. There were over a hundred of them, all facing directly at the small party of humans moving very slowly towards them. Even though he was using his jewel Paul still sensed that they were sending a message. It had no words, it took the form of an aura that hung over the base of the valley, an aura of destruction and doom. To the very edge, towards the route back down the river to the sea there was an impression of peace but directly below them lay nothing but blackness.

They moved so slowly that an hour later they were still looking down at the tower. They all knew that the trial of strength would take place when they came below the level of the ports at the top of it. They walked in complete silence, each one engrossed in their own thoughts. The dragons below them were ready to charge. If they saw any sign of victory for their masters they would finish off survivors in minutes.

Paul kept his power merged with Lynella's. He knew that by this time the enemy in the tower would have had the chance to study the power radiating from their jewels. They would not see what they expected, the jewels that they faced could deliver destruction with an intensity not seen on this planet for hundreds of years. They would know this, there were many of them and they had the machinery to help them but they would be worried.

They came level with the top of the tower. They were close enough to see the enormous unblinking eyes of the dragons staring at them. They could even hear the rippling water of the river as it flowed behind them. Soon they stopped, close enough to smell the sulphurous breath of the dragons blown towards them on the gentle breeze but not too close to stop them seeing in through their high ports on the tower when they opened. Forming into a group they stood motionless, ignoring the heat of the mid-day sun.

Lynella's jewel had kept up the steady pulsing all the way down the slope but now it suddenly stopped.

Paul reached out to her with his mind, expecting to sense her resolve and know what plans she was forming. He found confusion.

"It's all a pretence. A bluff. I can't possibly stop the beam. I couldn't even light a globe." Her thoughts came through as a complete jumble. She was trying to see her way through the turmoil and find the thread to her power. Her mind was full of images of having betrayed her friends, of leading them out into danger with no hope of protecting them. She was Lynella, the ordinary person who had once been able to use her power but that was all over. He tried to tell her that it was her choice. She wasn't listening.

He concentrated on his own jewel, making it pulse brightly, even projecting a taunt at the tower. But they had seen the weakness, the port was opening, sliding silently back to reveal the mechanism inside. He was so close he could see the individual rings and wires as the blue glow built up within them. In a fraction of a second the energy grew and he drew on every reserve of his own, his jewel flashed and the glow faltered. But it did not stop and the beam drove out causing an explosion of pain as it drove all his energy and much more back into the jewel. In that instant of time before he lost consciousness he was aware of something of terrible strength that came from Lynella. It was not just a flash. It was an explosion, it was an outpouring of hatred and anger focussed through the jewel to a searing intensity. The bulk of the tower protected the machines at the source but way above the circuits on satellites were destroyed. The beam was driven back with such ferocity that the entire mechanism was destroyed together with the structure around it leaving nothing more than a smouldering ruin.

Lynella could not stop. Just as they turned to flee she killed dragons, pouring out indiscriminate destruction. The remains of a bulldozer on the hill opposite exploded. Even her friends felt one final wave of terror as she started to turn before she collapsed into Maria's arms.

25

The steward looked out of the window of his house. Calling it a house was actually a generous description because it was just a couple of rooms in the end of one of the temporary accommodation blocks at the encampment. It had been raining and the rain was running down the partition wall. The roof should have been sealed where the next unit joined onto the one he was in but nobody had bothered to do it when the structure had been set up. The water gathered in pools on the floor and was slowly working its way across to his feet. He thought about the castle with and his warm dry study now lying half ruined, blocked off and deserted but despite all this he was happy. He had just heard the explosion. It would have been difficult to miss. His window had rattled violently and almost blown in on him and the flash had lit up the whole valley and even seemed to make the low grey clouds glow white for an instant. What he could have missed, but was very glad he had not, was the ring. Just for an instant before the crash he was sure he had seen it in the distance and it gave him great reassurance. It was a clear signal that Lynella and her friends were coming back. He had been too old to go with her but he had been sure she would return and now she was coming and this hell on earth that was a mining camp would soon come to an end.

Soon the miners started to reappear from the shaft. He was too old for manual work so he had been condemned just to watch. Each day the remnants of the four proud kingdoms became less. Less in number as they were killed by endless accidents but also less in spirit as they lost their identity, forgot about their homes and gave up hope. For him the worst tragedy was the way that his planet had been subdued entirely by its own internal conflicts. The monks, Lynella, and Christian and his village had all had the power to stop the intruders but they had been too busy fighting each other. It was the story of the last battles of the mages all over again but worse.

Today, however, it was different. They had heard the explosion and he soon told them about the ring. There was better news to come. The guards were careless and casual and quite convinced that the local people would never understand anything technical. They were openly discussing the fact that the fuel supply for the shuttles had been destroyed and even better than that they were worried. They knew that the ring could have hit the mother ship, their only way of getting home.

They were nervous, always looking out at the horizon where the ring had come from and talking on their little communicators to try to get some reassuring news.

They took their revenge by making the evening meal even worse than normal. There were scraps of meat from some indistinguishable animal and buckets of fruit that the women had been permitted to gather from native plants in the forest. For the steward and the other former royals this was almost impossible to eat. He saw Henry looking weak and sick. Since he had been unceremoniously rounded up after the loss of the second shuttle he had slowly lost weight and his thin shirt now seemed to hang off the bones of his shoulders. The news that Lynella was likely to arrive and rescue them did nothing to raise his spirits.

The next day was an anti-climax. After all the excitement the men still had to go down the mine and when they re-emerged nothing had happened. The guards had a reassuring message from the Director that "everything was under control" and marched about with renewed confidence. One more day and the next signal came.

The camp was close to the centre of the source and the top of the tower was normally just visible through the gap in the hills. They heard a second explosion that was far more distant than the first but carried no shock wave. The guards' communicators stopped working which alarmed them. Then one of the men noticed that the top of the tower had gone. They all climbed on the roofs to look. Normally the guards would have stopped this but they were too distracted to bother. Somebody suggested that the trees might have grown up to hide it but, although nobody could remember checking that it had still been there for several months past, it was obvious to the steward that it had just gone.

He was tempted to open his last bottle of whisky. He remembered being given the bottles by the Mission Director as a bribe to make him accept the new order. The days of bribes were long gone and just one last bottle remained. He didn't open it, he felt he ought to keep it. Maria had told him how the tower had been built with thick solid metal walls. There was no way Lynella could have destroyed it with the power she had when she left. He was going to need the whisky later when he found out what was happening. He had just made this decision when there was a sharp knock at the door and a guard entered.

"Come with me".

He eyed the guard suspiciously.

"Why?"

The guard looked resigned. Even on this planet there were limits and he could not physically drag the old man along.

"The Mission Director wants to see you."

The steward smiled. His thoughts did not go directly to the possibility of more whisky but the idea did occur to him. He stood up, dusted himself down, and prepared to follow the guard.

It was the first time he had been out of the compound for months and he was shocked to see the barren wilderness of spoil heaps that they drove through. Arriving at the compound he saw a dragon standing absolutely motionless in the centre of a large open space to one side of the car park. He had never met Christian before and was interested to see what one of the legendary outcasts would look like.

As soon as he entered the room he could see what had happened. The Director had a problem and his immediate reaction was to call a meeting. The steward had never heard of all of the books full of theories of problem solving that the Director had studied but he had seen it done often enough. This was a meeting to pass out blame and to prepare the ground for passing out more blame if things got worse. The steward had the impression that he had been brought along as a repository of last resort, to be blamed if nobody more influential could be made to take it.

Nobody wanted to be there.

The steward could immediately recognise Christian. He had never seen the man before but he was one of few who did not come from the ship and he was also first in line to get the blame. The Director was working on him.

"You told me the tower had all powerful weapons in it. You agreed to stop her coming through that way. I respected your people and gave them privileges and you have let us down."

Christian was having none of it. His patience with the Director had been wearing thin for some weeks and now he had lost a number of good friends and was angry. He reminded the Director that he had never offered to use the tower for defence. His people would have been reluctant to use devices built by Mages and not very good when they did use them.

“You said that you had done things to your shuttles so Lynella could not stop them. You said that the powers of my people were of interest but probably little use.” This was true and the Director knew it. The Abbot, however, sitting next to the Director and also looking worried, did not. He said nothing and let the man solve his own problems.

Next the Director turned on a man in uniform at the far end of the table. The steward’s eyesight was not what it had once been but he could just read the name badge which read “Acting Captain”. It made sense to him, Captain Turner had gone with Lynella. He remembered the Captain from when they had been introduced when they had stopped briefly at the castle. He had been polite and pleasant and showed genuine concern for those staying behind. The Director was in full flow:

“We need to know where they are. We need shuttles. Why are the fuel tanks of Atlanta empty?”

“They fuel was all used during the landing. For safety reasons we left them empty until they need to be filled for take-off.”

The steward was shocked that he was being permitted to hear this discussion. The Director must have such a low opinion of him that he thought him quite unable to use information of any type. He remembered the brave fisherman he had sent out to take the message to Lynella about the mining camp. He was reassured. If the man had been caught this would not be happening. The Director had moved on.

“And none of the satellites are working?”

“No. They failed when the tower was destroyed.”

“Why were they so badly made?”

The man looked resigned. The steward pictured him with a personality similar to the Captain, professional and very competent and polite but with little time for fools. “I shall file a report to the mission administration to determine responsibility for the specification.” That was all he said, no mention of any attempt to repair them. The director went red with anger. The Steward fought to suppress a smile. Lynella had certainly done something this time. Nobody had a clue where she was.

There was a moment of complete silence. Nobody dared say anything. The Director looked at his secretary and she swiftly produced a box of cigars. He carefully chose one and made a point of offering one to the Abbot. Nobody else was offered and the Abbot refused so the Director lit his cigar while everybody else patiently watched and waited to see what he would do next. He turned to the Abbot.

“Can you stop her?” He asked bluntly. “You stopped her last time and protected the ship while it was landing.”

The steward wondered if the Director still genuinely believed this. On this occasion he had to say it, that was understood. But did he still believe it after he had been told the truth many times? It looked as if he did.

“No.” The Abbot replied simply. “Our machines were almost completely destroyed defending your ship and many of our people died. You have given us no help in rebuilding our machine and so we have made little progress.”

“So this time you can do nothing to stop her attacking Atlanta.”

The Abbot waved his hand to clear away a cloud of cigar smoke that was moving towards him and asked. “Do you really think she wants to destroy Atlanta? She could have done it last time if she had wanted. The ring she sent at the fuel plant – it could have done so much damage it would have taken you years to repair it.”

“She just threw that ring at the source.” The Director replied. “The fuel plant was a lucky hit. She would have hit the ship if she could. How could she control it?”

The Abbot looked at Christian and then at the Steward himself. They were unlikely allies to help him try to explain to the Director the massive gap in his understanding of the powers of a Mage.

At that moment the door was thrown open and a man rushed in. Seeing the meeting he immediately slowed down and walked across to the Director’s secretary as discretely as possible. It was a pointless effort. All eyes were on him as he whispered to the secretary and she wrote what he said on the pad of paper that she had ready for the purpose and handed it to the Director. The Director stood and rushed out of the meeting dropping cigar ash on the secretary’s hair as he went.

The paper remained on the table. The Abbot grabbed it before the secretary could reclaim it. He then pushed her roughly out of the way and rushed after the Director.

The Acting Captain looked up. “Come on Janice, are you going to tell us what it said?”

She brushed the ash out of her hair and looked uncertain for a moment before looking up. "Ship in orbit" she said.

26

Admiral Charles Sydney paced the bridge of His Majesty's vessel Unicorn and admired the view of the Atlanta below him. He remembered his visit to see the great ship under construction ten years previously. He had been impressed by the size of it. The bridge could easily fit twenty men in comfort as opposed to his own which was just three paces from end to end. He had also been impressed by the revolutionary design but the Engineers with him had been less so. They had eagerly inspected every part of it and had gone home determined to do better. In this they had succeeded, and the result was the Unicorn. Scarcely bigger than one of Atlanta's shuttles he knew that she was a speedboat when compared to the lumbering hulk below her.

The image that he was seeing was not real. The thick cloud cover that seemed to be a permanent feature of this planet prevented that but the data from the wide array of sensors was so cleverly combined by the display unit that it was almost impossible to tell.

He could see the extent of the mine and a very obvious scar from an explosion between it and Atlanta. He wondered what had exploded and whether it had been an accident. He was also puzzled by lines of huts in a compound to one side of the mine. His sensors showed large numbers of people in them. His last message from his friend Captain Turner had been tense with hints of more to say that could not go on the data bullet and be seen by the company.

The reports he had seen, privately from the captain and confirmed by the company documents, had said that there were people already on the planet but little else except for vague hints about their use of magnetic fields.

"Shall we move on to have a look at the rest of it sir?" The first officer always seemed to be implying that they were on a vast battleship with thousands of men under their command rather than just 20 in this tiny ship.

"Yes, move on right away." He replied instantly without a second thought. His ship was capable of real exploration through hyperspace to other universes but the politicians had said that he had to sort this planet out before he could go. He had been there for half an hour and was already impatient to get back and prepare for some real work.

The rest of the planet revealed little: a second magnetic anomaly that appeared useless for landing ships because it had a mountain in the middle and some quite large towers that looked old. The sensors showed few people far from Atlanta except for a village near the mountain.

His instructions from his superiors were simple: find out what is going on and make sure that it won't affect us either directly or by upsetting the voters and then come home as soon as possible. This was already proving more difficult than he had expected because there appeared to be no radio signals at all coming from the planet and when he had called there had been no reply. The two communication satellites appeared to be dead and they were an obvious place to start his investigation. Within a few minutes they were loading one of them into the cargo bay.

From the outside the satellite looked undamaged. Working in full protective clothing the Chief Engineer removed a panel in the outer casing to expose the circuit boards. Seeing no sign of a fault he carefully removed the first board and installed it in his circuit tester. He looked up at the captain without speaking.

"Any ideas." The admiral asked, growing slightly impatient.

The Engineer looked down at his tester again and then finally spoke.

"This board has been totally destroyed by an electromagnetic pulse."

He didn't need to say any more. They all knew that the only source of a pulse strong enough to destroy a satellite was a nuclear explosion.

The admiral ordered a detailed radiation scan of the entire planet. Several hours later they had found nothing and he knew that he was wasting time.

The Unicorn entered the atmosphere at speed and glowed red briefly before deploying long swept wings and gliding towards the source. Stopping over an area where the trees had been cut to low stumps it hovered briefly before landing. The entire process took less than five minutes and it took some time for a ragged convoy of Jeeps to arrive from the Atlanta. By the time they arrived

the hatch of the Unicorn was open and a ramp that had folded out and reached down to the ground. A white Ensign was flying from a small mast which clipped to the handrail. The admiral took considerable pride in this. It had been his own skills that had brought this ship to the Navy, rather than the air force and he had personally insisted that, even though they had paint that would survive atmospheric entry, the Navy did not paint its flags onto the side of its ships.

Scanning the welcoming party he saw no sign of his friend Captain Turner or anybody else in anything resembling the uniform of a ship's crew. A large crowd was gathering, all dressed in working clothes except for a single over-weight man near the centre who was wearing an utterly incongruous and rather creased business suit. He stepped through the hatch in his immaculate navy uniform and waited while the fat man staggered up the ramp. In the distance he could see the imposing bulk of the outer ring of the Atlanta looming over the landscape. He was not impressed by it; he knew that the weapons on his own ship could destroy it at any time with ease.

The director knew instinctively what to do. Having walked up the slender ramp he just stopped a few feet short of the captain and said.

"Welcome to our planet."

The admiral was standing to one side ready to welcome him onboard the ship but he did not move. The captain tried saying. "Welcome to his majesty's vessel Unicorn. I am admiral Sydney and I assume that you are the Mission Director from the Atlanta."

"Yes, I am the Director, and how can I help you?"

"We have been sent to help you with your dealings with the people who we understand were on the planet when you arrived."

The Director knew he was winning. "Thank you for your concern but we do not require assistance. The local people are prospering. Would you like use to take you to them to see?"

The admiral made one last try. "Perhaps you would like to come inside to discuss arrangements. Then perhaps you could come in our ship while we visit the main sites"

It was pointless. He was told that the company had set up excellent offices which would be far better for the discussion and that there were many places to visit where it would be impossible for his ship to land however advanced it was. The admiral and three crew members were escorted to one of the jeeps for their tour.

As the jeeps pulled away a siren sounded on the Unicorn warning the remaining crowd to stand back. The ship took off gracefully and flew low over the Atlanta before powering back up into orbit. The Director was not in the same Jeep as the captain so he could curse loudly without fear of being heard.

When they reached the offices the visitors were escorted into the board room and refreshments were served. Nobody was able to tell them exactly when the planning meeting would be except that it would be "soon". The admiral was growing more and more impatient when eventually a large number of people entered the room. He was relieved to see one of them in ship's uniform but worried that he did not recognise the man. Another of the men wore a brown robe and had a large gold crucifix hanging from a chain round his neck.

The introductions started around the table. The heads of mining, process plant and personnel all seemed nervous and were clearly under instructions to say as little as possible. Next came the man with the crucifix who calmly introduced himself as the Abbot of the monastery of Saint Christopher. Admiral Sydney said nothing but could not help staring at the man in amazement. If he was typical of the local population this was certainly not a case of dealing with primitive people. Finally it came to the man in uniform who introduced himself as the Acting Captain.

"I had hoped to see Captain Turner. He is an old friend." Admiral Sydney's remark was intended to be light conversation to start the meeting but it was met with an icy reply from the Director who informed him that Mr Turner had deserted his ship and was no longer a captain. While all eyes were on the visitors the Acting Captain briefly shook his head.

The Director came directly to business. "I offered to take you to see the local people. One of them is here as you can see and you can also see that he does not require your assistance. How many more do you wish to see?"

The admiral had a prepared speech and he thought that this was the best time to use it. "Your reports of contact with other people caused great interest on earth and considerable concern about their welfare. I have been instructed to delay my other duties to investigate the matter fully and to rectify any problems so that they can be reassured."

"And what are these pressing other duties?" the director asked with a tone of blatant sarcasm.

"The Unicorn is capable of deep hyperspace transits. It can be navigated to other portals and I shall be investigating what lies beyond them." This information was intended to impress and it achieved it, even with the director, but not for long. He moved on.

"So you intend to inspect us and tell us what to do?"

"Yes." The admiral replied simply. "And I would like to start right away."

"And what if we disagree about what should be done?"

"We have brought clear guidelines that have been agreed by our governments so there should be no disagreements."

"This is ridiculous." The director stood up abruptly causing his chair to slam to the floor behind him. "You come here in your little ship with your rules from earth and try to tell us, the people who have studied this planet for over a year, how to run it. We run it how it should be run and you should go back to earth and tell them. "Or," he added after a pause he thought long enough to be menacing, "perhaps your ship should return without you."

The admiral had had enough. "His majesty would consider it an acceptable outcome if your mission was eliminated entirely and the local population was left without further disturbance until more appropriate contact can be arranged."

The Director was not impressed. He walked towards the door saying that he had more important business to attend to. When the officers of the Atlanta did not show signs of following him he added. "Move along captain, we don't want to waste time on this man and his ridiculous threats. We scanned these men for radios and they don't have any so the crew of the Unicorn don't even know where we are and they wouldn't risk killing their admiral." As he approached the door he told the security guards not to let the visitors leave. He was disappointed to see that this appeared unnecessary as they were still sitting, apparently unconcerned, at the far end of the table.

The daylight was fading outside but, glancing out of a window, the acting captain saw a bright glow high in the sky, which cast a strange red light across the valley. At first he mistook it for the sunset but then realised what it was.

"The ship's coming in again, much faster, it looks as if it's burning up."

The Director looked out of the window as the glow grew even brighter and turned with a satisfied smile.

"That's the end of that then. We regret the loss of the rest of your crew."

He did not, however get a reply or any reaction at all. The crew members of the Unicorn simply looked back at him.

The glow grew brighter still.

"I'm amazed it hasn't broken up yet. but..." he stopped mid sentence. Although the light was now almost too strong to look at the sleek shape of the Unicorn could now be seen with its wings scarcely deployed.

It was impossible to look at it now, it was far too bright. There was no sound yet, that would follow well behind it.

Nobody moved in the room, they each cast bright shadows against the wall as the light poured in through the windows. Over the next few seconds the shadows fell as the ship came closer on its trajectory to pass close overhead. Then it was gone and the sonic booms came one after another as they echoed off the higher levels of the atmosphere. Only the crew members of the Unicorn thought to look across to see the glow recede and the sudden burst of orange flame as their ship blasted its way back into orbit after completing its dive.

Now the room started to fill with smoke and panic followed as everybody near the door rushed to escape. Admiral Sydney finally stood up but he walked in the opposite direction to the end wall of the office which was where the smoke was actually coming from. When he reached it he placed his hand cautiously on it checking that it was not too hot to touch. Satisfied that he would not get burnt he pushed it away from him and the whole end of the transportable building fell outwards onto the ground. The floor and ceiling sagged but not sufficiently to prevent him and his crew members walking out across the fallen wall. They looked briefly back at the ends of the structure which had been exposed by the laser cut and at the panicked occupants inside before walking round to the car park to wait by the Jeeps for their tour.

The car park had been made with black dusty quarry waste but beyond it there was a small area of grass which had grown up where the forest had been cleared. Some larger rocks had rolled onto it but it was largely unspoilt and the office workers had used some oil drums and rough planks to form benches and tables. Admiral Sydney and his three companions soon decided to sit on the

benches while they waited. From where they were sitting their view was blocked in all directions by the offices, the bulk of the Atlanta and spoil heaps from the mine. None of these were of particular interest but the grass itself was some of the first native plant life they had seen so the admiral leaned down and with unexpected difficulty managed to pull up a handful of it to look at.

"If this is anything to go by this is a tough planet." He remarked. "It's so tough I'm amazed anything can eat it."

"If something does eat this it probably eats people as an appetiser." He remarked as he tried unsuccessfully to break some of it.

At that moment the office door on the other side of the car park swung open and the Abbot walked out of it. Seeing them he closed the door and walked very quickly past the Jeeps towards them.

"I am very pleased you have come." He said, slightly out of breath, "We, the people of this planet, have been misled by the Director and his crew. He told us that he had the authority of the government of earth but you now tell us that he has not. You must help us."

The Admiral looked at him suspiciously and offered him a seat on the bench. The Abbot refused. "No, I can't stay here. I must go to tell the people that they should not obey the Director's men because they are not the real power from earth."

"Nobody should be obeying anybody except their own leaders but please don't use us as an excuse to start a sort of civil war."

"There already is a war. Where do you think your friend Captain Turner is?"

The Abbot jumped into one of the Jeeps but could not see how to start it. The admiral patiently helped him and guided him as he reversed it out of the parking space, scraping along the side of the one next to it as he went.

"Don't try that on earth." He advised.

"I have seen how to drive these things and I shall soon be as good as you are." The abbot shouted back to him as he ran into another car on the far side of the car park. "I have many skills and can soon learn this".

At that moment the Director ran out of the offices with a security guard. Grabbing a gun from the guard he fired into the air shouting to the abbot to stop the car.

The abbot ignored him. Taking deliberate aim the Director shouted again but the abbot was still intent on manoeuvring the car. The Director fired a second shot in front of the jeep which hit one of the picnic tables throwing splinters into the air. Still he was ignored. The jeep was now almost clear and the Director fired straight at him. Admiral Sydney saw the man's body jerk back as the shot was fired and first assumed he had been hit but then he saw him drive off apparently uninjured as the bullet rattled off the mudguard and fell to the ground. He remembered some of the stories he had been told about the people on this planet.

"It seems that he does have many skills." The admiral observed.

The Director briefly pointed the gun towards the picnic tables again but when the admiral simply looked at him with contempt he passed it back to the guard and went back into the offices.

"What do we do about your friend and his civil war?" His officer asked in a voice that betrayed far more fear than he had.

"Let's just wait for the tour shall we? I am looking forward to it. It should be interesting." The officer said nothing. He could see why this man had been chosen to explore the voids of hyperspace.

A full two hours later the Director emerged again and saw the visitors still sitting at their table apparently just talking about the planet and a variety of different grasses and weeds they had found in the picnic area.

"Where would you like to go?"

"First I would like to meet some more of the local population and then I understand that you have had a small civil war so a visit to the main battle sites would be of interest."

"The abbot was lying. We have been mining, not fighting. Shall I show you the mine?"

"What has captain Turner been doing then?"

"He has deserted. I have no idea where he is or what he is doing."

"So what happened to your satellites?"

"Nothing has happened to our satellites."

"The one we looked at had been burned out. Are you sure that was just a mining accident?"

The Director made no reply and went to his jeep and they drove off towards the huddled encampment he had built for the local population. His fears about not being able to explain what they would find there were never realised. It was deserted.

They walked around the squalid huts together looking at the signs of a hasty departure. The admiral could see that the director was as surprised as he was. He was also horrified by what he saw.

“It is appalling that they were kept in a compound like this. I shall report this in detail back to earth.”

The director simply observed that if he was instructed to release them it would be pointless. The surrounding area was covered in piles of mine waste leaving no clear lines of sight and no signs of tracks to show where the people had gone.

27

The steward had been taking a few moments of rest after lunch. The few moments had possibly extended somewhat longer than they might have in the past but he was old now and in this dismal camp nothing of interest ever happened. The meeting a few days before had been the only event to punctuate his life in months until today that was. Now he was awakened by the sound of gunfire. This was not just single shots that he heard occasionally as the camp guards shot local birds and animals to add interest to their diet, this was sustained fire from automatic weapons. He jumped up and stumbled to the door. Leaning on the damp frame and slowly getting his bearings he looked down the muddy road that ran through the centre of the camp. In front of him the camp guards had formed rough a line facing solid ranks of soldiers marching towards them. He stared at the soldiers in complete disbelief. They were in full plate armour, marching with slow but perfect discipline. The guards were firing repeated bursts at the soldiers but none of the bullets were having any effect. He could actually see them clattering off the plate armour and falling to the ground. Looking more closely he saw monks within the ranks, with each volley of shots they had to be supported by the men around them as they absorbed the momentum with their auras. More guards were running to join the line bringing more ammunition and guns with them but still they had no effect as the soldiers advanced up the road at a very slow walking pace.

Suddenly, after the most intensive gunfire he had heard, the line seemed to break apart. Each man was standing aside to reveal the rank behind him. But the rank behind was cross-bow men, and the steward had to jump rapidly back through the door as the bolts flew past him. When he looked out again most of the guards had fallen. One man was screaming with pain as he fell onto the step directly in front of the steward. Blood was pouring out into the mud from a wound in his leg. Some were still standing and firing their guns but the ranks had closed again and the bullets were having no effect. The soldiers were closing now, the first rank drew their swords and were almost on the gunmen when they turned to flee. It was too late. The rank broke again and the cross-bow men brought down the last of the guards.

Now there was a rush of activity. Monastery servants rushed forwards from behind the monks. One came splashing through the mud to the Steward's doorway.

“Can we help you along sir or will you be able to walk?”

“Why? Where are we going?” the Steward asked bemused.

“To the monastery sir. We have been told to tell you that you will be free to leave at any time and you can stay here or go somewhere else if you want to but we suggest you may want to be our guests for a few days.”

He saw that a small crowd had gathered around the doorway. Everybody else was as unsure as he was and they were looking to him for leadership. He looked around as he considered his position. The dead guards were being cleared away but they would soon be missed.

“Yes – we shall go with you.” He said in a clear voice so all the crowd could hear. “The monastery will be the only possible safe place where we could spend the next few days. And it couldn't be worse than here could it?”

The evacuation took place with incredible speed. It took only ten minutes for all of the workers to get out of the mine and just a few minutes after that they had formed a long column and

were heading out past the spoil heaps. Dozens of carts had been brought for those unable to walk fast enough and the Steward reluctantly climbed into one.

It was just five miles due North to the monastery, first along a track surfaced with the mine waste and then suddenly emerging onto an ancient flagged road through the forest. They covered the distance in less than two hours and were soon streaming past the high walls of the crucibles by the entrance to the monastery.

The steward was now looking around with intense interest. He had never been in the monastery before. He had heard Paul and Lynella's account of it and was trying to see the features they had described. He was still in the cart, moving along a wide corridor which led straight in from the door and he was sure would take them directly to the main cavern with the machine in it. In places there was virtually no light and the driver just let the cart ride forward along the ruts in the floor. At some junctions there were lanterns, at others dimly lit spheres and at one a bright electric light sowed the way. He was amazed by the distance they were travelling into the mountain and was trying to see ahead past the bulk of the driver sitting on a raised seat in front of him when the cart suddenly veered to the right almost throwing him off his seat. Looking out he could see why. To the left there was an enormous void reaching up and down as far as he could see. This was the great cavern and Lynella had demolished the supports to the floor so completely that none of it remained except the narrow ledge which formed the roadway they were using to get past. He heard the cart wheels clatter over wooden boards and knew they were on a platform where even the last edge of the rock had gone.

Holding tightly to the side of the cart he looked right down into the void below them and saw lights. These were not candles or even dim lighting globes. These were arc-lights. Looking more closely he saw the unmistakable shape of some bright yellow machines pouring out black smoke as their engines roared. Between them he could see vast new columns reaching up towards him. The abbot was re-building his machine and he had stolen enough machinery from the mine to let him do it very rapidly indeed.

Now the cart turned sharply to the right again into another corridor and he knew that he was in the area used by the servants and this was where he and his people would be living for some time.

The cart finally stopped by opposite the entrance to an intersecting corridor and the driver jumped down and helped the steward out, fetching out a walking stick and making sure that he did not trip on the ruts in the rock floor. Just a few yards walk took them to a set of doorways opening off to each side. The doors had metal latches and a ventilation grille at the bottom which showed signs of rust but when the driver opened the first one the room inside looked clean and dry. The steward was shown in and the first thing he noticed was a small fire burning in a grate on the far side with the smoke curling away into a recess in the rock above it. The rest of the room looked comfortable and he thought that the lack of daylight was a small price to pay for the use of it and protection from the Director.

Within a day he had found his way around and in the dining area he met many of the people he knew from the Southern castle. Henry was full of grand plans to re-establish the Kingdom but seemed unable to persuade anybody to follow him out from the safety of the monastery. Apart from him almost everybody seemed prepared to spend some time recovering from the exhaustion of working the mine and near starvation in the camp. It was clear that the abbot was keeping to his word; the guards would not let them go back into the main cavern or the monks' quarters beyond it but they were free to explore whole of the monastery servants' area or leave by the door leading to the farms to the North.

Three days later the steward received an invitation to see the Abbot. The wording was polite but gave little scope for discussion, he was invited to meet the Abbot and a servant would be available to show him the way and help him to get there. He was very impressed by the way the note had been printed out. The Abbot had clearly helped himself to some office machinery as well as his machines in the cavern.

His office was exactly how Paul had described it. The large desk, book-cases and pictures on the wall looked as if they had been carefully maintained by several generations of Abbots. The great changes to the planet outside could only be seen by the smallest detail. Neatly arranged between two stacks of folders on one of the book cases there was a small digital clock. A small brightly coloured cube on the desk had rows of buttons and a display of numbers on the top. Nothing else seemed out of place and the overall effect of these two small items seemed to the steward to

be a perfect example of how the new technology could be used selectively where it fitted in best. The Abbot also seemed pleased with his choices and was pushing the buttons on the cube so intently he took little notice of the steward when he walked in. Perhaps this was simply intended to put the steward off balance but it did not achieve it. Without waiting for an invitation he instructed the servant to draw him up a chair facing the desk and sat down, dismissing the man and asking him to close the door. This neatly deprived the Abbot of his chance to make his guest wait for the interview to begin and left the steward to open the conversation with profuse compliments about his accommodation.

The Abbot finally put his cube to one side and after a brief welcome he came straight to his point.

“What are you going to do about Lynella?”

“Do about her?”

“Yes do about her. Somebody must and you are probably the only person that can. That’s the main reason I brought you here.”

“So you brought me here did you? I thought that I was invited.”

The Abbot smiled. He had been told that the steward was in his dotage but he clearly wasn’t. The old man seemed to have lost a lot of weight while he was in the mining camp but this had not affected his sharp mind. He was pleased that he had not decided to do business with Henry. This man was not a fool like the Director.

His smile seemed to serve as an apology. He reached down into a drawer of his desk and took out a bottle of whisky. Next he produced two glasses. These were not the ugly type that seemed to appear in unlimited supply from Atlanta but fine cut glass from the glass-blowers of the Eastern Kingdom. Somewhat to the steward’s disappointment he added water from an earthenware jug to the good measures he poured into the glasses.

“Let’s start from the beginning.” He said, taking sip from his glass. “We have never spoken before but we know much about each other. In the past we were adversaries but now we have common cause.”

“Is that what you said to the Director when you persuaded him to take your side?”

Again the Abbot smiled. “No, he was too stupid to realise I had ever been his adversary.”

“And what about me?”

“I am not asking you to believe in me. I am just going to put it to you that if we work together we shall be powerful enough to achieve what we both want.”

The abbot paused for another very small sip. The Steward wondered if this was all to pretend to be sociable and the man actually disliked whisky. He drained his own glass and returned it to the desk.

“What do you think our objectives are?” He asked.

“I think that we both want to go back to how we were before the Atlanta arrived. We know that to be impossible so we want to go as far as we can towards it.”

The steward thought about this while the abbot refilled his glass. He was amazed how quickly the man had changed direction for a second time and abandoned his new friends on the ship. “What about Paul and what about Lynella and the way she has become a mage? Can you accept that?”

“Accepting a few new people to live on the planet is possibly a good thing for us all. With Lynella we might have a problem because, as a mage, she will soon rediscover the ways of the old religion and may already have done so. I have prayed for guidance on this matter and now accept that we should not challenge her and her followers by force.” To the stewards surprise he also drained his glass and added. “We can live together and see this ship go and be better prepared for the next one.”

Waiting for the steward to consider this analysis he added. “The history records that most of her type left the planet long ago. Perhaps she will follow.”

28

Admiral Sydney sat opposite his first officer at the dining table in his ship. The ship only had one dining table and it could seat all twenty crew but they had returned late and dined alone. A map

was displayed on the screen at the end of the room and they were using the console to identify what they could.

"It's just a complete mess." The Admiral observed. "We've got about five factions here, all fighting each other. It could take years to sort out."

"Two of them just joined together when the survivors from those castles just went into the monastery. If two could join perhaps the rest might see sense."

"You fancy yourself as an administrator of empire don't you? We have this ship that can destroy anything it likes so if we used it carefully we could impose a lasting peace."

The officer didn't reply. He was placing question marks by both the walled town and the village by the mountain. The idea of sorting it all out did rather appeal to him but he knew that the Admiral was already very impatient to leave.

"Do you think captain Turner is in one of them?"

"He might be but I think the battle that they just had was closer to the Atlanta." The officer moved the cursor across the map and wrote "tower (recently destroyed)"

The Admiral looked up from his meal. "If we found him and got a report from him we could at least have some sort of result. But that might take weeks."

After they had looked at the map the officer switched the screen to a picture of a dragon that they had taken during their latest landing. The beast was looking directly up at the camera and was showing anger or pain from the effect of the ship's drives. The result was a terrifying display of teeth and claws.

29

The director watched as the instruments recorded the departure of the Unicorn. During her brief stay of just one week there had been many changes on his planet and none of them had been good. Before the ship had come the idea of having to beg for permission to remain and finish loading a full cargo would have seemed absurd. Now he found himself having had to agree to keep all his men within the area of the source at all times and never go outside it for any reason. The groups outside had been told not to come in but they had also been given hope and persuaded to stop fighting among themselves.

On the other hand seeing the size of the ring in the wreckage of the hydrogen separation plant had scared him. When they had started to uncover it he had assumed that the excavator would easily lift it out like the one that had come from the monastery. In the end three cranes had tried to lift it and failed so it had just been left in place for the new plant to be built around it. Construction work was already starting. They could not fly the Atlanta without hydrogen and their return home would be delayed until the new plant was built. With the orders from the Unicorn and a bit of luck Lynella and her friends would leave him alone to finish it and go away.

One thing he was sure of was that the Unicorn would not come back. Admiral Sydney had other places to go and would make absolutely sure that the story he told when he got back convinced everybody that the planet could look after itself for a few years. With even more luck the next ship would not arrive until after the Atlanta had gone.

Captain Turner's meeting with his old friend the admiral had been a great pleasure to both of them and he knew the outcome was right. When the Unicorn had finally found them camping in the foothills of the Eastern mountains they had been hungry and many of them had injuries from the destruction of the King Solomon. Realising that it was not another shuttle they had cautiously ventured out from their hiding places and as soon as the two friends recognised each other they knew they were safe. It had taken two days of intensive discussion and a journey to the city and the village by the mountain and several to the monastery for the senior officer to make his decision. The city was to be abandoned as soon as the harvest was completed. The people from the kingdoms must stay in the kingdoms and the deserters from the Atlanta could stay with them. None of them took up the offer to return to earth on the Unicorn because they were unsure what reception they would get.

Lynella was back home in the castle where she had been born and was slowly recovering. At first everything seemed familiar. Most of the castle servants had returned and they had quickly cleared up the mess left by the Director's men and were completing the last of the repairs and getting

back into their old routine. There were some changes. Paul and several others from the Atlanta had moved in and were using their machines to help rebuild the village but this did not trouble her. Her problems came when she felt strong enough to use her jewels again. Suddenly the castle was far more complicated than she had ever known it to be. When she walked along corridors in the old parts she could sense pathways running beneath and around her and finally as her recovery progressed she found the doors. She showed them to Paul.

He had walked past the plain looking walls many times but when he was shown the place to look he could just sense them using his own jewel. "You never found them with your old jewel." He said, running his finger over the stone to try to feel some sign of the place where it would open. "They must be locks that were made later and only respond to the artificial stones."

"We should leave them alone." Lynella responded immediately. "The last people that had the power to open them used it to cause nothing but death and misery. Whatever is in there; we don't need it."

Paul said nothing but he knew it would never happen. The temptation was there. They could open the door and use what lay behind it. To pretend that it was not there and that they could live in peace without it had been impossible before and would be impossible in the future.

That evening he discussed it with the others. They were sitting on one of the castle terraces looking out over the fields and across to the hills around the source. Their discussion was, as usual, about what the Director might be doing and whether he would attack them.

"The Admiral told us to stay away from the city, the mountain and the pylons because he didn't want us using the machines." Captain Turner said, looking at Paul. "If you go in and find similar machines right here you may be sticking to the orders he gave but not the intention of them. Keeping us clear of the dragons and the village by the mountain was not his main idea. It was the machines he wanted us kept away from."

"What if we just used them to see what is happening?" Angus asked. "When you used the machine in the mountain it let you see all around. If you used this one it might let you see what they are doing at the source?"

"If they are building bombs or making chemicals it will be in the workshops right inside the ship." The Captain replied. "No chance of finding anything out with a thing like a telescope. All we would see is whether or not he tidies up after the mining is finished".

The discussion ended as a meal was served. The Unicorn had left them plenty of food to see them through to the next harvest. The evening was warm and they enjoyed some wine which had been missed when the castle had been looted.

The harvest was approaching and people had to be selected to return to the city to get what they could from the crops they had sown where they had cleared the fields. The Admiral's decision had been quite clear. Despite the effort they had put in clearing it no more crops were to be grown on the land. Nobody was allowed to use any of the machines and nobody could stay. Captain Turner insisted on going to make sure the orders were obeyed. He also wanted to watch over the small harvest from the area they had sown with seed from earth and to make sure that it was saved as seed-corn.

A ship had been found. The Cleopatra, A sister-ship to the King Solomon, had been used to transport ore from the Eastern mountains for smelting in the furnaces beside the monastery. With everybody in the monastery working on reconstructing the machine and lifting the existing rings back into place no new ones were being cast so the ship was laying idle. Adam was the natural choice to sail it particularly for the hazardous voyage down the river and the even harder part of taking the ship back up afterwards. The only other people on the ship would be a small crew from Adam's village who could sail the ship and then gather the harvest when they arrived. Captain Turner was pleased with this arrangement. He had grown to admire Adam and the way he did his work quietly and efficiently without complaining. Having little time for casual conversation or executive privileges he looked forward to a quiet and uneventful trip in which he would do his full share of the manual work.

The ship seemed pleasantly familiar when they arrived at the dock at Port Jerusalem. A neat line of empty carts was arranged along the stone quay and when the harbour master showed them on board they found the hold had been emptied and cleaned out.

"You keep her in excellent order." Captain Turner remarked as they toured the deck.

"We were told that you had an important mission." The harbour master replied. "But please take extra care to return it in good shape."

On the far side of the harbour there was a large slipway and they could see the first few ribs rising from a substantial keel for a new ship. "We went down the river to try to recover some timbers from the King Solomon but there was virtually nothing left. Even the ring was missing." He added.

They prepared to sail. The mooring ropes were slipped the harbour cutter towed them out into the channel. The crew started to climb up to set the sails and Captain Turner went to follow them.

"No." Adam shouted.

Everybody stopped and looked round. "You stay and work on deck. You know how to sail space ships, not sailing ships."

He quickly stood aside to let the next man past him and went forward to help stow the mooring lines.

Sailing in daylight the river was marginally less treacherous. With a strong current flowing the shot past the ruins of the tower. Each time they turned a sharp bend the sails had to be completely re-set to catch all the wind and give them steerage way in the current. They scarcely noticed the charred timbers on the bank where the King Solomon had sunk as they struggled with hauling in the ropes.

Three hours later he was close to exhaustion when another command rang out. "Captain Turner to the after deck."

He looked up surprised and then started across the deck. He had not realised how unfit he had been. Space travel was not good for a man of his age even with a gym for regular exercise. With the motion of the ship he only just managed to climb the steps to where Adam was standing. Determined to do what he could he finally stood up on the raised deck and asked: "What would you like me to do? I don't think I could steer it."

"Sit down." Adam said simply, pointing to a raised hatch lid. "You have done enough."

He thanked him sat down and watched the crew working below him and the river ahead. When he sat down he realised how exhausted he really was. The sweat was running into his eyes. When he wiped them clear he could see the sea through the trees. Soon the river widened out and they met the first of the waves. Around the final bend he saw beaches to either side, the waves breaking on the sand bar ahead of them and out on the horizon the island with the pylon standing in the centre of it with the ring at the top and a small circle of sky visible through it. The crew rushed to make final adjustments to the rigging and held onto the landlines.

They ran into the waves at full speed, each one bigger than the last. Soon they were breaking over the deck and the spray blew up, soaking him as he held on to the rim of the hatch with both hands. As the next one came he lowered his head to protect his face and then looked up to see the men below him who had taken the full force of it. He looked up further and saw the island. He though he could see that the ring had turned and he was now looking at the side of it. They were on the bar now and the waves were breaking over them. The next one caught him by surprise as he looked at the tower. With the salt stinging in his eyes he could see nothing for as the ship lurched and then finally drove free. When he looked up again the pylon seemed the same as it had before with the ring back where it had started.

"Are you hurt?" Adam was asking.

"No." He replied and explained what he thought he had seen. He said that he had only seen it for a second and his eyes had not been clear but Adam would take no chances. He put the helm hard across and they sailed west along the coast. They continued past Adam's village so close that the crew could wave to their families who all rushed out in surprise. They had no time to stop and continued until the island and its pylon were both well below the horizon before turning north out to sea.

"We go carefully." Adam said. "It seems that we may have neighbours who can do more than we thought."

Making good speed they saw the mountain in the afternoon of the following day. Soon the coast below it came into view and they lay at anchor for the night in a sheltered bay.

"The dragons have never been known to swim." One of the crew remarked hopefully but Adam still set a full watch prepared to make sail at the first sign of activity on the shore. In the morning they saw nothing specific but all shared a feeling of being watched from the forest so they set a course several miles offshore with the coast just a faint line in the distance. By mid-morning the walls of the city could be seen rising above everything around them. Soon they were approaching the harbour mouth. Taking no chances Adam dropped anchor and launched the ship's boat. Using

ropes tied to the remains of the masts of the sunken ships they carefully hauled the Cleopatra through gaps between them to avoid traps in the clear channel to the dockside.

They reached the quay near a warehouse which had collapsed spreading rubble across the space in front of it. They could see nothing particular that had changed since they were last there but still approached each fallen stone carefully, checking all around it before moving past it. Once they had moored the ship they set out into the city, working through all of the buildings that had been used while they lived there. Captain Turner checked the workshop in great detail. In their hurry to leave they had left some of his precious electronics in it together with the old machines. He switched on some of the sensors but found nothing. Finally they went out into the fields where the crops had grown up well and were ready for harvesting. In all of this they found nothing that showed any sign of interference. The gate into the forest was still securely closed and there were no dragons and no signs of traps. Standing on the top of the wall he could see the mountain. It always looked somewhat menacing but there was no sign of any movement on it.

"Perhaps I was just imaging it." He said as they gathered for their evening meal. "Perhaps I never saw it properly. I only had a few seconds before the wave hit us. Surely if anybody was working the old machines they would have done something here were there are so many of them."

"I don't take you for a fool and I am sure that nobody else here does either." Adam replied. "We shall finish our work as quickly as we can, take no risks and leave here as soon as possible."

The work in the fields was hard and the captain again realised that he would never have the stamina of the men from the planet. He tried using one of the long scythes they had brought with them but was soon exhausted while the others around him steadily progressed across the field. They used a threshing machine that they had made at the castle and brought with them. None of the crew of the Atlanta had actually seen the machinery inside a combine harvester so they had had to guess how much of it should work. When they started using it he soon found that he was kept fully employed adjusting and repairing it. To do this he kept going back to the workshop to find bits of wood and metal that could be made into parts for it.

Each time he went into the workshop he looked at the mages' machines to try to work out a bit more about what they were used for. They had already photographed them but actually seeing them was far more helpful. Perhaps, he thought to himself, when more ships arrive and this place becomes an organised colony I can come back here with some proper equipment and make sense of it all. But the admiral's orders were clear. For now he could do nothing but look at it and he certainly could not take any of it back with him.

The harvest went well. With no way to dry the grain they had to rely on good weather because any dampness would have made it grow mould and rot rapidly in the hold of the ship. After succession of sunny days they had almost completed harvesting the fields. The barns were full and the threshing machine was working all day. The machine was working well enough, although he was sure that he could build a better one for future years. In the meanwhile he was still kept busy with minor repairs. It was late afternoon of a long hot day when he went into the workshop and started work at one of the benches. When he stopped to look round to see where he had put his drill he thought he saw movement on the far side of the room. He went over to check and saw that one of the ancient machines was moving. A large ring was slowly rotating. He had noticed before that it was on a bearing and could spin quite feely with just a small push to start it but he had never seen it move before. Thinking that it might have been started by a gust of wind or magnetism from his drill he decided to stop it and see if it would start again. When he placed his hand on it he felt it slow down at first and then it trembled slightly as if protesting, pushing forward in tiny pulses. A lifetime working with normal electrical machines made him instinctively try to stop it to make it safe. As he did so a sudden pulse of energy went through it giving him an electric shock and making the ring spin much faster than before.

He ran out to the fields to find Adam who, seeing the ring spinning even faster and now humming loudly, said "I thought you saw correctly the first time, we must finish our work and leave as quickly as possible. There is a mage at work and this place will not be safe for us to stay." Other men from the village made the sign of the circle with their hands to appease the old God. Working through the evening and on into the night they loaded the grain they had into the ship and as fast as they could but they could see that things were happening around them. Machines were starting up, lights were going on and off, the city was coming to life around the workshop.

"Don't touch any of it." Captain Turner said. "Don't tell it anything more about where we are."

At the dockside they found an old hand operated crane. It looked very ordinary so they started to turn it around to help load the grain but as soon as they did it turned back and started to turn round and round. They realised what they had done and quickly moved away from it but it was too late. The whole sky lit up with a blinding flash. They felt the heat from it on their skin but, to their amazement, saw no damage.

Checking around they saw that just the very tops of the ship's masts had been scorched but everything else had been protected by the city walls. Soon smoke was blowing through the streets and they ran to try to find the fire, eventually realising that it was the forest outside that was burning.

The beam flashed again and this time they saw another flash out to sea. The first pylon was firing at them but it was not strong enough to do damage. Adam called his men together.

"It cannot hurt us here." He said. "That is what the walls were built for."

"What happens when we sail?" One of the men asked.

"It will not know where we are." He replied, and then paused to think before adding. "But we shall have to take the ring out of the ship."

When they started work they soon realised how long this was going to take. The whole structure had been built around the ring and it was almost as wide as the hull. Getting it out would involve removing planking and beams right across the width of the deck between the masts, and then rigging a derrick to lift the ring onto its edge and then far enough up to slide the ship away from beneath it. Before they could start most of the cargo of grain would need to be unloaded. The ring formed almost all of the ballast so they would have to replace it with stones from the collapsed buildings. These would take up more space so there would only be just enough remaining to fit the grain back in.

They soon stopped worrying about disturbing the machines around them. Whoever or whatever it was that was controlling them had found them but failed to destroy them. There were occasional flashes from the mountain but the city walls provided good protection.

Both Adam and the Captain were confident that removing the ring would prevent them from being detected provided they sailed out of the harbour at night without lights. Some of the crew seemed less sure so Adam decided to make quite certain.

At one end of the harbour there was a shed with a number of small fishing boats still in it. The planks had dried out so the seams in the hulls needed re-caulking but apart from that they were ready for use. On a cloudy night Adam sailed calmly out of the harbour returning a few hours later having both checked the safety and also caught a good load of fish.

30

In the Southern Castle Lynella was growing more anxious as the winter closed in and the ship did not return. She felt the activity at the mountain, not in a direct way that she could understand, just as a feeling that the steady rhythm of the planet was being disturbed.

Paul could feel nothing directly but sensed Lynella's growing tension. Her health was now good and, with a combination its fine halls and some new technology, the castle was a comfortable place to live. Nevertheless as the weeks went by she grew more and more distracted. It was therefore of little surprise to him when he went looking for her, late one evening as the first of the winter blizzards blew down across the source from the Eastern mountains, he found one of the doors open.

Delaying just a minute to tell Angus where he was going he followed he through. The steady glow of the lighting globes revealed a room which was, as expected, in many ways similar to the rooms in the dragons' mountain. He crossed quickly to a door in the far wall, opening it to find Lynella sitting at an ornate table clearly already exploring far into the network. There were other chairs at the table so he joined her, soon seeing the logic of the patterns of rings and opening the gateway to join her. From her reaction she had clearly been expecting him, a light echo of her presence came back to him showing him which way to go and urging him to hurry.

The pathway was long but easy to travel because he knew that she had gone ahead and disabled any traps. He caught up with her at the tower by the river. The damage to the top had been massive and all the pathways to the machinery were blocked but they were not looking for reasons to stay. Slowly now they ventured out into the main routes that led along the line of pylons

across the sea. Paul wanted to pause to check in the opposite direction towards the source but Lynella would not delay, from here the chaos was easy to detect.

They moved forward to the island and the pylons. Paul had spent hours trying to visualise how the circuits within the machines and the pathways between them managed to mimic the workings of the human mind well enough for him to sense and communicate with others through them. He had tried to explain to the others what the sensation was like. The only conclusion they came to was that it was dangerous. He was letting part of his consciousness out of his control. If the link was broken he would suffer and might not get out. If he let his mind go too far in he could get trapped like Tiana. Her immortality had little to offer within the machines.

"I have been waiting for you." He knew it was her. How a voice could be recognisable when he never actually heard it he did not know but somehow it was quite clear.

She had met them far out from the mountain and the machines in it that supported her conscious existence. Their way to the city was blocked but she did not seem hostile so they did not know if this was deliberate.

"We came to see what was happening." Lynella replied. "We sensed that something was going on and came to have a look."

"Oh, so that's the only reason you came is it? You never thought to come back and see if you could help me after all the help I gave you."

The thought that she was a real person who might be visited like an old friend had never occurred to them. To them she was a nightmare creation, an image of a person but not a human being. Added to that she happily admitted to killing the two mages before they could leave.

"We never thought.." Lynella started tentatively.

"No you didn't think did you." She snapped back.

"What was it that you wanted help with?" Paul asked, hoping that all she might have been after was a sort of social visit.

Tiana started replaying the images of the final battle of the mage wars. After the first few minutes Paul and Lynella were impatient to know where it was leading but still amazed by the detail of the scenes. Seeing them again without the real battles going on around him Paul started to analyse what they were. These were actual images that Tiana had seen at a time when she was very closely linked to the machine. Somehow they had been stored in far more complete detail than would have been possible for a human brain. Since she now existed in the machine she was able to replay them at will. There would have been few new images to replace them. The machine had no eyes, the only new images would have come from the eyes or memory of others linking to it. That meant that there had been nothing for three hundred years and now just him or Lynella.

"It was not my fault." She was saying now. "I was asked to be their leader, the node through which the power would flow. Keeping control was almost impossible, it had never been done before. Yet they blamed me, only me, and punished me in such a cruel way."

"They made you immortal." Lynella cut in. "Surely they will all be dead by now. At least you are alive."

"Life is touching, seeing, hearing. I know and I can feel but that is all I have. That leaves me to think, over and over through generations of mortal life and what I think about is revenge."

"You can't take your revenge on the dead."

"They may still be alive. They have gone through a portal and time will be different. They may have died within seconds of our time but they may still live."

"So that is what you want help with." Paul replied, wondering what had happened to the Unicorn when it entered a portal. "One of our ships is going through a portal but it couldn't possible carry your great machine and anyway there are thousands of portals and it could never find the right one."

"There is a ship in the mountain. I have showed it to you. I could travel in it but it would take two mages to fly it. I could have gone with them, the last two could have taken me but they would not."

And so you killed them, he thought. He had the feeling that during this exchange she was advancing towards them. Her approach before had always been tentative and seeming desperate. Now she had come well out from the mountain and was moving confidently along the pathway. Could they pass? He wondered. What was the pathway anyway? Some sort of complex circuit linked together by wires running under the sea along the line of pylons. What would happen if they did pass? Might they change places? He drew back but she just came forward faster.

“You would be asking a lot from us.” He said, feeling that he had to make excuses. “We would go on a very dangerous journey to try to take somebody else’s revenge on people we never knew.”

“Meet them now.” She replied, standing aside. He had always assumed that she was alone but now a sudden crowd seemed to surge past her, as if mocking his doubt that people could pass. He saw that they were mages with rings encrusted with huge jewels. They came charging towards him but he sensed immediately that they were not complete personalities like Tiana. They were not stopping because they had no free will to make them stop. They were fragments of memory, real in many respects, but not sentient. He held his ground and felt them brush past, fading as they went. The fragments were, as Tiana had said, very vivid and gave him an immediate picture of who they were and what they had been before.

Lynella was still beside him. “Who were they?” she asked.

“They were the hundred, all but the two that I killed.”

“But they weren’t people like you.” Paul interrupted. “Those were just copies of images that were in the machine that you have assembled together and can move about. They must have been left there when the mages used the machine but the personalities themselves were not trapped like you.”

Suddenly he thought it through. Tiana, totally isolated from living beings and also from the souls that had passed through to the end of the highway, she had searched through the machine to see what she could find. Piecing together the fragments she had tried to make constructs to cushion her isolation or possibly just targets for her hatred.

They were retreating back past the pylons as Tiana strode on towards them, not seeming to hurry but not giving them time to stop and look around. Still Paul could not work it out. If she could come this far and work the machines how was it that nobody in the kingdoms knew she was there. At the rate she was moving anybody using the lights in the castle should have seen her.

They reached the stump of the tower. For one terrible moment Paul thought that they would miss the turn to take them back to the castle and end up trapped at the source. Then he saw it and they hurried into it. Tiana had stopped at the tower.

“Who did this ?” She asked.

“I did.” Lynella replied.

Tiana stopped as if to absorb this information.

“How come you have not been here before ?” Paul asked.

“You don’t understand what you did, do you?”

“What I did. I haven’t done anything to this tower.”

“No, what you did to release me.” Paul was completely confused but Tiana went on to explain, slowly revealing his terrible mistake. When the mages had driven her into the machine they had trapped Tiana by setting locks around her to prevent her from roaming around the planet. Like all of the mage locks the key was a jewel and they made sure that she had no contact with jewels. It was his bad luck that he had been the one to link a jewel to the network when he had been in the tower trying to help Lynella trapped in the mountain.

“I managed to copy it.” She was saying. It has taken some time to make it work and now I am just finding out what I can do.”

31

Back in the castle it was, as always, difficult to describe to the others the way in which a personality could interact on the network. For many of them the whole event was something close to a dream which Paul and Lynella had shared; a story which could be enjoyed and then forgotten. The old steward was sitting quietly by the fire and everybody had assumed that he was asleep until he started to speak.

“Some years ago.” He started, waiting a moment for everybody to stop and listen. “We lived here in the castle and the greatest threat we could imagine was an attack from the dragons. We feared them but thought that we could just about defend ourselves. Next we found out what the monks could do but we also found Lynella was a mage so although we were worried about them too we thought we were safe. After that the Atlanta came and defeated us and the dragons but

eventually the Unicorn came and we returned home and thought we were safe. Now we have Tiana and I fear her more than I feared any of the others. She is releasing the power that destroyed this planet before and she has the fear and anger to use it.”

The steward had clearly considered his analysis at length and seemed relieved to have shared it with them. He looked at them one by one across the rim of his glass to gauge their reaction. As far as he could judge they all took him seriously. Any remaining doubt ended when the globe above them started to pulse with light. Paul and Lynella exchanged glances to confirm that neither of them were controlling it. They knew who it was but the presence was so faint that they could not detect it. The display lasted for less than a minute, rising in intensity and then fading slowly away. At its peak the pulses seemed to tremble showing a whole spectrum of colours. The effect was beautiful, showing hints of uncontrolled power and chaos that would follow from it.

Early next morning a jeep pulled up at the castle gate. A simple white flag had been tied to the aerial. It came very slowly because the captain of the Northern keep was escorting it on horseback. Looking down from the high castle windows Paul could see that he appeared unhurt and even relaxed so they went down with more curiosity than fear to meet the visitors.

The jeep was being driven by one of the Atlanta’s officers and his passenger was the acting captain. The greetings from captain Turner and the officers who had left the ship with him were sincere if somewhat subdued. The visitor made a very few brief complimentary comments about the castle and how fine it looked and then came straight to the point.

“What do you know about the old ship that flew in last night.”

“What ship?” Paul asked immediately.

“Good. So it wasn’t you. I didn’t believe it would be and we managed to persuade the Director to leave it to us to find out. Were those great stone things at the end of your road to the source full of big iron rings last time you looked?”

“What? You mean the crucibles? No. One was empty, that was the one we used to protect you when you brought the Atlanta down.”

The acting captain smiled. He was well aware of the two different versions of events on that day. Unlike the director, however, he was more inclined to believe the radar trace than the skilful persuasion of the Abbot.

“There are two empty now.” He said simply. The missing one flew around in a few crazy loops last night and landed about a mile north of us. It scared the hell out of us.”

Nobody could reply to this. They stood in shocked silence.

“It’s worse than that.” He went on. “While they were doing it the field strength itself went up and down. Unless we find out what is doing it; it won’t ever be safe to take off.”

“We didn’t do it.” Lynella replied. “But we know who did.”

“Who are they then. Is it the monks or something to do with that man and his dragon.”

“No.” Lynella replied again. “It’s somebody who died over 300 years ago.”

At the city the work on the Cleopatra progressed well. The firing from the mountain continued but it seemed to the crew that whoever or whatever was controlling it had lost interest. It was now almost routine, there would be occasional flashes that lit up the night sky and every three days a blast that scorched the forest a bit more. The machines around the harbour continued to move from time to time at random but rarely responded to being moved during the work. Captain Turned was suspicious that something worse was being planned but Adam continued to sail about in his fishing boat at night without problems.

Paul and Lynella went back into the network. This time there was no need to travel, Tiana was at the entrance to meet them. She had grown in strength and confidence as she spread her image through the every part of the systems established by the mages at the height of their power.

“Why did you move the old ship? It is of no interest to you; it can’t leave the atmosphere”. Lynella asked as soon as contact was made.

“You won’t forget about me this time will you.” She replied, clearly enjoying the exchange. “There is something alien at the source. I can sense it and I decided to make sure that it knew I was here.”

“How did you change the planet’s field?” Paul’s question caused confusion as she required explanations to understand his unfamiliar language. In the end it emerged that she had little idea what she had done; all of which was making her more determined to try it again.

“When are your friends going to sail back from the city?” She asked suddenly.

“We don’t know.” Lynella replied. “We are worried about them. We don’t know why they have been so long. We don’t know what had happened to them.”

“They are still very busy. What are they doing?”

“They only went to harvest the crops.” Lynella felt she was being drawn into giving information away but was so glad to hear that they were still alive and working she decided to risk it. “Where are they working?”

“Down by the docks, they keep using the cranes.”

“Perhaps something has gone wrong with their ship.” She suggested.

“Perhaps.” Tiana replied and was gone.

32

The officers from the Atlanta were back three days later explaining that the director was completely unconvinced. This time they brought an electronics technician with them.

“Of course he is not convinced. He doesn’t believe any of it.” Paul replied. “That’s how we escaped so easily.”

“It gives us a big problem.” The captain replied. “He is saying that you are breaking the truce set up by the Unicorn. The ringship moved again last night and the field keeps changing and he says that if you don’t stop he will come here and stop you.”

The discussion made little progress. The visitors claimed to believe them and seemed sincere with their problem but had absolutely no solutions to offer.

“There is nothing to see.” Lynella said. “We just sit there and look as if we are daydreaming. If you tried to get us out to find out what we are doing we would be badly injured when the link was broken but all you would see would be us collapsing unconscious on the floor. Not much proof of anything we are saying.”

This was, however, the only possible thing they had to show to support their story so the whole group gathered in the old room below the castle. The three strangers were positioned carefully on the opposite side of the table between a pair of guards so they could not interfere.

It seemed strange to be entering the network with so many people watching but Lynella had no trouble with the demonstration because she knew that there would be absolutely nothing to see to show what she was doing.

In the room there were several palace retainers, some of the crew members from Atlanta who had defected and some guards as well as the visitors. The room was large and enough chairs had been brought for them all but, with some unspoken agreement they remained silent. At first they studied the ornate furnishings and, in particular, the inlaid gold patterns in the table but soon their attention began to waver and some even fell asleep.

Paul and Lynella tried to keep their voyage as short as possible but as soon as Tiana met them she was determined to hold their attention for as long as she could. She started on a long list of exactly which machines had been used at the city and suddenly stopped and said.

“I could find the right gate.”

Paul took a moment to realise what she was saying.

“How?”

“One of the mages just told me where they were going to go.”

“Those mages can’t tell you things – they just feed back what you tell them. They only exist as part of you.”

Immediately she was gone and was replaced. The personality was not so bold as Tiana – to Lynella it seemed to have much in common with what Tiana had been when they had first found her.

“Who are you?” She asked.

“I am the Lord of the island.” The reply seemed to have taken a supreme effort to produce but it was not the actions of a puppet mouthing the words of its master. This was an individual, broken free of the flickering mass that they had seen before.

“The Lord of the island departed with the ships.”

This time the reply was slow to come. "I am an image of the one who left. That makes me no greater but no less and not even identical. I am shaped by my experience as they will be by theirs if they are still living."

"How old are you?" Paul asked.

"For me the concept of time is complex. My memories are spread through different ages but I have not existed through them. I have been a visitor who has sometimes seen others but only rarely been seen by them as you see me now."

"How many others are there like you? Do all the hundred now have free will?"

His responses seemed to gain clarity with every word. "Freedom is an illusion. There are some who can do what I am doing but none of us are free any more than the lady Tiana of the mountain halls who can do so much that I cannot do. Even you in the physical world, you just exist within different limits to ours but you still have limits to your actions."

As soon as they were out of the network they knew that they must return. Early the next day that were back in the room, glad that the visitors had gone.

For something as strange as the network Paul found it difficult to say how it seemed more strange than normal but somehow, as soon as he entered, he was sure that it was. It was as if he had been in the boat that he normally sailed on the sea was now in an ocean of thick oil. If he stopped to look he saw everything as it should be, the waves were still there and even the gulls but getting through the entrance, something he scarcely even remembered doing before, now took a significant effort. In the distance he could see Tiana looking at him. She was moving freely looking in from normality at him and Lynella beside him struggling to reach her. Suddenly she seemed to reach out and he felt that she was using all her power. For an instant he was sure that it was a trap but then he realised that her target lay back where he had come from. There was an explosion and huge waves came past him but then the water was clear.

Regaining his balance he asked her what it was.

"I don't know." She replied. "But it is not all. There are many changes happening in the network that I cannot explain."

"Are you sure it isn't the mages finding their old powers." Lynella asked.

"I know them." She replied, leaving no room for doubt. "Remember that I knew them in your world as well. I know that they are changing but I knew what they were before and I know what they are becoming. The presence that I just destroyed was alien."

Paul took quick note of her easy assumption of her ability to destroy a presence in the network but saw no sign of hostility from her. He knew that neither he nor Lynella could project any power at all when away from their jewels.

She tried to explain what the alien presence was in the network. She seemed helpful and cooperative and they tried together to work out what was happening. Her explanations were difficult to follow but all centred on the words un-natural and alien.

She stopped and seemed to tense. "I must withdraw". She said suddenly. She started quickly back towards the stump of the tower.

Paul and Lynella were confused and discussed whether to follow. They agreed to go cautiously and check for traps.

At the tower they could see her in the distance but she was too far away to call out so they looked around carefully and followed. Almost as soon as they were past the junction with the pathway to the source Paul realised that this had been an error. He could now feel the alien presence and it was behind him.

Turning he saw a person. It was not a presence, it was a person. It was not floating on the sea where he was it was walking through it. It was not even a person of this planet, they were wearing clothes from earth, from an era long after the original families had left. Now he saw it was a man, young and fit and walking towards him. Soon he was joined by a woman. Also young and very attractive. Looking even closer, their clothing reminded him of pictures he had seen of his grandparents when they had been young.

"Can you see them". He asked Lynella nervously, wondering if they were some sort of construct of the network that only he could sense.

She did not need to reply. Her total attention was fixed on them.

"They came here two generations ago. He said. Where did they land? Where are their bodies. How are they here?" He kept asking questions as if somehow the answers would be given.

"We must try to go back." Lynella said, but showed no sigh of moving forward.

The couple had stopped now. They were close enough to see their faces clearly and to his horror Paul thought he recognised them. His mind raced through his recollection of the ship's company, friends and family from home, everybody he knew but he could not place them.

"You will not be permitted to return." The man spoke with an elegant clarity.

Once again Paul looked at Lynella. This was the worst nightmare. It was what had happened to Tiana. With no free will their bodies would be fit for nothing except death. Unless, he suddenly thought in a moment of desperation, these people with their strange alien powers could take them over. Their minds might be permitted to pass through the end of the highway but it would be little comfort to join the souls of the dead.

Tiana had come back and was now with them. Having feared her just minutes before they now welcomed her.

"Now you have seen them." She said, sounding as frightened as they were. "There are more than these two but they all use the same power."

The guard in the castle basement was pleased that he had been given the privileged but simple assignment of making sure nobody entered the room while Paul and Lynella were in the network. He would look in occasionally but thought it better to stay outside most of the time and had found himself a chair which he had positioned in the corridor by the door. He was just about to sit down when he smelled smoke. Running in he saw the two motionless figures at the table and the smoke pouring out from underneath it. Throwing one of the empty chairs away from it he dived under and saw a small black box fixed to the underneath of the table which seemed to have melted in places and was burning with small flames charring the wood above it. Using his dagger he prised the box loose and pushed it across the stone floor. As the smoke cleared he scraped away the hot charred surface to make sure the table would not burn and climbed out to look at the box. Seeing that it was no longer burning he turned to Lynella. She coughed slightly in the clearing smoke but was still in the network and unaware of what had happened. Seeing no more fire he ran for help, kicking the smouldering remains of the box into the corridor as he went.

"Is it part of the gateway to the network?" He asked Angus as people ran to help from all directions.

Angus picked it up and looked at it. It was still hot but he needed to know. His mind raced. Might he have to call the monks to try to replace it? In the room Paul and Lynella had still not moved. Did they know what had happened? Did they need to know?

At that moment the two officers from the Atlanta arrived. "It's got electronic circuits". Smith said, leaning over to look at it. "They must have put it there when they came from the Atlanta. I knew we shouldn't have trusted them."

"What did it do?" Angus asked.

They looked at it more carefully, exchanging quick remarks when they identified the burned out components. Soon they were able to tell him it was a transmitter. It recorded activity at the gateway and let them spy on it from the ship.

33

Paul and Lynella were retreating. What terrified them was that they were retreating away from their means of escape, hurrying back with Tiana towards the mountain. She seemed to run back and then pause by each junction just long enough for shadowy forms to emerge from the pathways and rush on ahead of her. The aliens had not attacked them, they just seemed to fear nothing and pressed on ahead driving everything away in front of them.

At last they fell back towards the great machines. Tiana drew energy from them and the retreat stopped. Paul and Lynella let their minds into and through the rooms and levels feeling comfort and energy flow from them as they went.

"Now we are like Tiana" Paul thought and felt as if an icy wind had blown through him. He tried to rationalise his position. He was a practical engineer and proud of it. He could believe that somehow the gateway enabled people with special natural skills to transmit the data that defined their sentient being into this network. Artificial intelligence was common on earth, although it had become clear that the routes the development had taken for several generations past were leading

them to a dead end before they could achieve real sentience. Now he knew that his whole mind was in the network he paused to wonder what was in his body. Could it be a copy so he could end up with two different futures as was happening to the mages Tiana had re-created? He moved quickly on. A battle was coming, how would it be fought. Thinking of networks his mind immediately turned to computer viruses. But these were images of a human brain which was not like the computers with their vulnerabilities. This battle would be fought with pure energy. The networks that lost would be burned out, like a computer in a lightning strike.

He could see the pathway they had come along. There was now a whole crowd of people gathering at the invisible line that Tiana had drawn. He moved closer, standing with Tiana and Lynella and the ranks of ancient mages. He kept reminding himself that none of them existed in the physical reality of the world outside but it made little difference because he knew that he could die in either reality.

“Who are they?” He asked Tiana as they stared across the divide.

“They are your people I am sure.” She replied.

Before he could reply they struck. All moving in unison they threw their energy forwards, making the mountain itself shudder as the machine took up the shock. In an instant he sensed it. This was not a continuous flow of energy, it was pulses. He knew those pulses, he had felt them in every transit. This energy was not drawn from the boiling magnetic magma in the planet, this was drawn from the fusion reactor on Atlanta. Somebody had powered up the fusion ring and was driving power into the network from it.

“Yes, they must be from a ship. They power is from a ship.” He replied as they recovered from the blast. “But I still don’t know who they are.”

Now he looked more closely their costumes were outlandish. The couple he had seen before were dressed from one generation but the whole crowd looked as if they came from a fancy dress party with some wearing clothes from almost every period of history, even Roman, and some dressed as characters from fairy stories.

They pushed forward forcing Tiana to withdraw even further into the mountain. She stood her ground in the first of the great halls.

Tiana was gathering the mages. Paul and Lynella did what they could as she threw power from the rings in the lower halls back at the invaders. Their faces showed no sign of surprise or even anger as they fell back towards the doorway to re-group.

The next time they attacked it was worse. The pulsing energy seemed to fill the whole hall as they drove through it with a force that could not be stopped. Many of the mages seemed to collapse under the weight of it but Paul, Lynella and Tiana and the more self willed mages fled down a pathway at the other end.

“This goes to the core of the machine.” Tiana shouted. “There is no way out from there”

They turned. Drawing from the image of her ring Lynella struck with a massive burst of energy. For a moment their attackers seemed to be driven right out of the network but seconds later they were regrouping. Lynella could scarcely move as they fled on towards the core.

They looked up and Tiana had gone. Instinctively they knew where she would go and they went after her down to the highway of the network. Emerging into the void they saw her in the distance and knew that she was near the end of it. In an instant they were next to her as she crossed the boundary to meet the souls of the dead.

The ancient mages stood before them in a massive angry crowd. She was pleading with them.

“Kill me and you will all die.” She shouted. “All has changed. The fabric of the network is threatened. You must come with me into the void to defend it.”

One of the mages she had killed shouted back. “In the void you rule and you will kill our souls.”

“I shall leave this place.” She replied quickly. “I am almost prepared. My companions will take me through the portal in the last ship.”

Paul and Lynella felt the crowd suddenly focus on them. “We shall go.” Lynella confirmed. “There is no place for us here any more.”

Still the crowd stood its ground accusing her of trying to trick them into changing the order which had stood for so many generations and let them live on in peace. They made fire with their hands and threw it towards her in waves of pure energy, driving her back to the void.

But in the void there was chaos. The invaders in their many costumes had driven forward to the boundary without enough energy to cross it and others were piling into them from behind. They scarcely seemed to notice as Paul, Lynella and Tania pushed back through them.

The highway was changing now. Cracks were appearing in the surface and its whole structure was falling apart as the mechanisms that sustained it started to fail. The boundary itself wavered and fell.

Suddenly the tide of movement changed. The souls of the dead charged through clearing all in their path. Paul saw a Roman soldier fighting with his short sword suddenly stop as if to wait for instructions only to be thrown to the ground by the attackers and vanish.

Following the advancing army they emerged into the halls in the mountain. Here they met a Viking fighting desperately with long sword and round shield. In the instant before he fell Paul recognised him as an actor from a film he had seen long ago and he suddenly realised that they were constructs of the computer on the Atlanta. To make them real it had simply drawn from the images it had in memory, mainly films.

Passing the tower again they turned towards the source. They found the interface. Paul knew where he was – he was at the exact centre of the source. On the surface directly above this node of the network the ancient mages had built a city. Under the terms of the compact they had destroyed the city but they had left a single stone with runes carved into it to mark the node. He remembered how the stone had first made him realise that they would find other people on the planet. He also remembered how the excavator has so easily removed it and they had tried to forget it.

Now he was examining the interface. It was a perfect piece of Engineering linking the old with the new. He knew the man who would have built it; a brilliant hardware technician with the patience to explore the fine filaments in the node and link them in turn to the hard wiring of the computer; finally programming it when the data from the radio link came in from the gateway in the castle. It formed a far stronger link than his ring of piles that supported the structure. It was an open doorway intended to let the ship control the last unexplored part of the planet. But a doorway could be used in either direction. He went through and the souls of a thousand mages followed him.

The programmer saw his screen go blank. Thinking it was a simple system fault he tried to re-start his programme. Seconds later he saw a simple message. "Do you ever pray?" There were no icons or other messages on the screen. He knew that the entire system had gone. Next he heard the pulse of the fusion reactor falter and die and he knew that it would never start again. In its place different lives took hold; lives that knew immortality.

34

To see the ship with his own eyes was a shock to him despite the images of it that Tiana had briefly shown it to him when she had told him what had happened to her. It had one similarity to the ancient one he had seen in the Southern castle in that it was a sealed sphere intended for use outside the atmosphere. That one had been the first one ever made. It had been made on earth and had come to this planet. Judging by what that old ship had been capable of Paul knew that this one could go much further. He had no idea where that might be but he knew that hyperspace transits could be described as skimming the surface of another dimension. Nobody knew what happened if you went right in but the mages must have known once or they would not have gone.

Many of the metal objects that he had seen so far on this planet had been remarkable for their size but the metals in them had been familiar. The old ship had been copper and the ring-ships were iron. This ship was different. As if to tease anybody who opened the mage locks and found it a small table and chair had been left close to it. They were quite small but, when he tried to move the table, he only just managed to drag it across the smooth stone floor. The dull black metal was far heavier than any known in nature, and probably far stronger. Nobody on earth could make metal like this.

He pictured the entire fleet of ships departing one by one until only the last one remained. Then the last two mages would have stood where he was preparing to leave only to be stopped by Tiana at the last minute and killed.

They were in a cavern that was well below the one that held the ring ships used for atmospheric flight. This ship was much smaller than the old one in the castle. The door was not visible but that did not worry him, with months of practice he could easily detect the lock. As it was he felt that Lynella would like to open it so he stood back while she walked slowly around, as amazed as he was at what they had found. In silence she opened the door.

Inside there were just two couches, formed in dark wood with padded leather seats. As they climbed into them he saw that the inside of the ship seemed to be formed of a single vast jewel. He saw Lynella's jewel glow and a section in front of her shone back in response. He realised that his own jewel was doing the same. Now he could sense with the eyes of the ship, he could think with its mind and Lynella's, working as one. The ship was crowded, both couches were occupied and the mind was complete but he knew that for this one journey it would have to carry one more individual. Tiana seemed to have to squeeze her way into the system pushing all before her as she poured into every last part of the available space for her whole being and all her memories.

The door had closed and they were flying high above the mountain. He wanted to know how they had flown out from the chamber, he scanned below and saw the tunnel in the rock face. He had felt no movement and heard nothing. He started to look around, he could see the molten pool in the volcano below him, the old city on the coast and the endless forest around them. He looked more carefully and saw people in the village. He was interrupted by Lynella and Tiana. They must start.

Each pylon came to life as they flew through the rings. At one point he was sure that he could see the Cleopatra racing home under full sail. They were still not sure of themselves, going carefully, learning about this world and its systems. Almost as soon as they were clear of the last ring on the pylon on the island the ruins of the tower flashed by beneath them causing them a moment's panic as they missed its controlling influence on their trajectory. They had travelled hundreds of miles in a few seconds but, in the ship, it seemed normal, they had felt no movement. Now they were at the source. The vast bulk of the Atlanta was still there. Soon the crew would accept that they must start farms because they would have to live on the planet for years until another ship would come. A glance in the distance showed the Southern castle with its village beneath the walls.

Their journey back was almost a minute to take them around the planet and back to the volcano. He could sense Tiana's joy as her dream was finally being realised. She was urging them on, pushing him Lynella and the ship to break free from the planet.

Each orbit was more precise than the one before and soon they were ready to go further, beyond the source. They flew straight out of the atmosphere. Turning for the return he used the sensors to locate the line of rings below them. They came down over the volcano concentrating hard as they just made it through the ring on the first pylon. But there was no going back, they flew out of the atmosphere again as they went over the source.

Soon they could control this next stage. Each orbit more precise than the last. Three minds and a machine in the ship came together and knew that they were ready. The ring on the island flashed with lightning as they went through, entering hyperspace seconds later. Paul sensed the sudden rift in reality but then he knew that this was completely different from the jumps made in fusion ships. A fusion ship went through hyperspace without and observable time in transit. Nobody ever sensed being in it. You pointed and went. In this ship Paul could sense being in the different reality. The eyes of the ship knew how to see it. Tiana started to draw from the memory she had taken from the mages recognising different horizons which came and went.

For an instant they emerged to see a green planet but only stayed long enough to transmit their brief message before disappearing back into the void. Thousands of portals stretched out in all directions but they passed them all by until finally they reached the one where the mages had gone 300 years before.